made of stone
by tyrellis

Summary

Keep your head down. Don't talk to the others. Stay in your cell, don't yell, don't tell anyone how angry you are. Comply in their training exercises, excel in the arena. Don't scream when they plunge needles into you, don't cry, don't beg for your mamá. You take everything they give you and you make yourself stronger.

After five months' imprisonment, Lance is finally rescued from the galra's grip - but something about him has changed. In fact, almost everything has changed, and the paladins do not know how to reverse it, and truly get their friend back. Is it possible? And does Lance even care enough to cooperate?

Notes

i know...starting another klance fic when i've already got a multichap going... it's very typical behaviour...

anyway! i went into this wanting to write a corrupt!lance fic and instead...got this. i decided
to use the dark lance tag since that felt a lot more fitting. lance hasn't been implanted with a bug or is dealing with mind control, he's just incredibly traumatised which i think will become very clear as you read this. please take the warnings into consideration! i always forget something to tag, so just be careful if any of the above warnings are at all triggering! although we only read about lance whilst he's captured for a little bit, the torture that went on during that time is brought up very often in the rest of the fic.

warnings aside, i want to say that this fic was ultimately inspired by an Actual corrupt!lance au, Free Falling by dealio (ao3) / bluebilots (tumblr) ! our stories are v different in terms of plot but some things (which will be clear if u read both haha) were 100% inspired (borrowed?) from this fic! i would defs recommend reading it, since it incorporates a lot of rly interesting elements that i havent touched ! so go check it out!

hope u enjoy! title from daughter's made of stone

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EDIT 5/5/18: for reasons explained in chap 14 a/n, i've decided that as a cis person i should use she/her pronouns for pidge, regardless of my personal interpretation of pidge's gender. therefore i've gone thru the entire document and changed pidge's pronouns from the very start. if i miss anything or u have any questions, feel free to comment!

See the end of the work for more notes
remade

Underneath the skin there's a human
Buried deep within there's a human
And despite everything I'm still human
But I think I'm dying here.
**Human**, Daughter

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Facing down opponents in the arena is nothing like Shiro ever said it was. Maybe because Shiro didn't talk about it much. All that could be garnered from his few words about the subject was that it was a scary place, that it had changed Shiro forever, turned him into a weapon.

Lance feels the same.

How many times has he done this, now? Every day, one galra gladiator after another, *days on end*. Time runs together. Sometimes they don't let him sleep. Sometimes they put him on drugs till he's hysterical. Others he's trapped on a table surrounded by druids, losing and regaining consciousness every two seconds. He doesn't know anything anymore, except survival. Keep your head down. Don't talk to the others. Stay in your cell, don't yell, don't tell anyone how angry you are. Comply in their training exercises, excel in the arena. Don't scream when they plunge needles into you, don't cry, don't beg for your mamá. You take everything they give you and you make yourself stronger. Every drug dose, every cut up limb, every fight becomes another layer of steel over his body, a layer of ice freezing his heart. Nothing matters any more so long as he keeps fighting.

Keeps fighting, and eventually, someone will come for him.

Someone *has* to.

He doesn't know how long he's been here. He forgets fear, and kindness. Rocks live where his blood used to flow, he has no feeling of anything. Is he in pain? Is he hurt? Is that blood, or did they give him new clothes? No, it's blood, it comes off on his hands. Why can't he feel it? What are they doing to him?

Making him better. Making it so he can fight.

Shiro spoke as though the arena was terrifying, but Lance stands there a champion against every gladiator they throw at him. He doesn't mean to start killing them. He'd knock them out cold and leave them be, but then the gladiators turned to monsters before his eyes and suddenly Lance had blood all over his hands.

Has it. He doesn't get out of these fights injury-free. Sometimes the galra will pour ethanol over him to check he still *can* feel, and it's those moments that he really thinks he's in hell, buffeted on all sides by blazing fires. In those moments his head clear and he thinks *what am I doing here* but then they run water over him and the pain dies down and Lance forgets himself.

He dreams in black and white, old film reels. One of his sisters was a film buff, the type to collect any classic in any fancy way she could. She'd rope Lance into her viewing sessions, mostly because he *let* her. She doesn't show up in his dreams. Maybe she's sitting beside him, watching also, critiquing aloud so her phone will write it down for her, *this scene uses too much shaky-cam, the protagonist is very unsympathetic, not sure what the theme here is meant to be except lose*
everything and give up hope.

The thought of her doesn't prompt sadness. It feels like a waste, to feel that, to miss her, to miss anyone. Missing people doesn't help him here.

Nothing but compliance helps him.

He keeps complying.

He didn't used to. That's what he'll tell everyone, when he gets out. At first, he screamed and shoved and kicked his legs, and he struggled against his bonds, he yanked his arm when they tried to stick needles in it, he refused a weapon and refused to fight in the ring.

But none of that was his decision.

Now, he lets them lay him on the table. They've already removed one of his legs mid-thigh to make way for a galra prosthetic. It's fancier than Shiro's arm. If you didn't know it was there, you wouldn't be able to see that it's any different from Lance's old leg.

It is, it's far better, and it looks like they're kitting out his other leg, too. They restrain him, thick heavy chains, and something different, a cleaner, shinier metal around his enhanced leg. Another cocktail of drugs in his neck, but he stays conscious. The machines they use are refined - what is essentially a huge pizza cutter slices his other leg cleanly, mid-thigh just like the other, and they get to work installing the prosthetic.

They also explore. Is that the right way to word it? They've discovered the effect fire has on human skin, and they're burning something into his left arm. They prick at his stomach with knives, seeing how many tiny cuts will lead to a gashed open gut. They run a knife down his lips to his chin, slicing open the flesh, parting the cut to dig deeper.

Nothing hurts. Just another day in the druids' room, Lance is used to it, he's a little tired of it. Give him his leg and let him be off with it; he's bored of sitting and watching the world fuzz in and out of focus. Today, bubbles appear in his vision, shimmering around the druids working on him, leaving their mouths when they speak. They turn green, pink, blue. Lance's heart feels too heavy for his body, and his body feels hollowed out completely, as though he is a person-shaped balloon and only these restraints keep him from flying into the air.

His thoughts, though clear, turn slow and sticky in his head, hard to concentrate on any one thing. He follows the druid working on his lips, bubbles escaping her lips and ears, the crest of her hood, how strange she looks, how similar. If Haggar is Altean, does that mean all druids are? Or was it just her? Lance doesn't know. He just knows she looks familiar. They all do. How long has he been here? Long enough to start recognising his doctors.

What he doesn't recognise: the flash of red that sweeps through the room. A pause, then another. Instruments are dropped and picked up again. Too late, sound bursts; an alarm, off-beat with the flashing, but Lance thinks it's just the drugs.

The druids, after a moment, keep working, and Lance assumes it's all the drugs.

They work fast, they plug in all the tiny wires and morph the prosthetic and his flesh into one, but he can tell they're missing something and getting frustrated. Someone yanks on his right leg, points at something.

Bubbles are flying around the room, irridescent and carefree, Lance thinks if he goes still enough he will rise along with them.
He closes his eyes, and when he opens them again - five seconds or ten minutes or three hours later - he's being carried somewhere. Which is a little unusual. Even if he's unconscious, they'll just drag him along the floor, or force their smaller, weaker alien prisoners to try and haul him along. Maybe it's to do with his legs. The one they were working on still isn't quite right - maybe they need to carry him somewhere else, where they have the right equipment.

Every few minutes, Lance catches the alarm still going, but it's drowned out with bubbles and wild colours sparking out the ceiling. He shuts his eyes again, only because the combination of the bubbles and the colours are excrutiatingly loud and he needs to block them out, and when he opens them again, he is facing Shiro.

And then the healing pod door closes on him, and the world finally stills.

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Is he different when the doors open and he steps back out? He doesn't feel different. Maybe he looks different. The healing pod can't prevent scars, and Lance knows he has a fuck ton from the galra. They shaved the sides of his hair every now and then but he never got to check a mirror. He's better- stronger from all the fights. Is that it?

Everyone looks...kind of the same, except more worried. Hunk is in tears and so is Pidge and Shiro and Allura and-

Uh, they're all in tears. Even Keith is wet-eyed, and Lance can't comprehend it.

He asks, "Did they fix my leg?"

Hunk whispers, "Lance."

"They were having trouble with it," Lance clarifies. "I think they were missing a piece?"

"Lance," Shiro says, and Lance looks at them all for a moment before checking himself, stretching his leg out just a little to better admire the prosthetic. Something *is* wrong - it looks like his leg, but it's also visibly *not*. The outlines of it remain purple, every gear and screw transparent, the same white as the cryo suit he wears.

"So something is wrong," he says. "Do you know what it is? Is it gonna impair my abilities or just look weird?"

"Lance-" Allura says, but she's cut off when Hunk rushes forward and hugs him.

...Right. Hunk is his best friend. His main man. That'd be bearable, but everyone takes this opportunity to dogpile onto him, even Keith pressing a hand against his shoulder and smiling, and it's...*weird*. Waste, it's a waste of time. This...emotion. Lance has questions he wants answered, and he knows they'll have the same for him. Isn't that more important?

"Can I get a mirror?" he asks when they let go, and despite looking concerned, they try to laugh and do the whole *typical Lance* thing, but he doesn't pay attention. At least Shiro understands, and makes way for him to brush through the others to a wall-length mirror set up on the wall behind the pods.

He does look different. The galra gave him an undercut so that they could dig a little into the back of his neck, and he can hear some of the others gasping as they seen the scars from that. His face is...blank. Eyes still blue, features still sharp. The cut from his last visit to the doctor has become a thick scar across his lips; he has two parallel gashes on his right cheekbone; a thin incision all
round his neck. The cryo suit doesn't offer much for what scars live elsewhere, but he can see the bulk of his body is a little broader. Muscle where it didn't exist before. The unfinished left leg purple at all its edges.

Turning back, he nods to the others, and starts heading out the room.

"Where are you going?" Allura asks, hurrying to his side and taking his arm. Her hand is so human in comparison to the galras'. "You're still unwell!"

"I feel fine," Lance says, and her features drop.

"But- even with a healing pod, the, the drugs that were in your system- the leg- you should be in agony!"

Lance shrugs. "I think they got rid of that," and continues down the corridor to the dining room.

"What," Keith says, at his other side, "what do you mean?"

"Pain," Lance says. "I don't feel anything anymore."

Allura halts. "You don't- what?"

He keeps walking, and Keith grabs his arm to stop him but Lance just wrenches it out his grip.

"Lance, are you okay?" Hunk asks, drifting a pace behind them.

"Where are we going?" says Pidge.

"What did they do to you, Lance?" Shiro asks, sounding so heartbroken that Lance can't believe they're both products of the same environment. How did Shiro keep sane? Why is he so...feeling?

But he doesn't bother replying until they reach the dining room. He sits at the head, since he's apparently the most important topic, and the other fan out on either side of him, Shiro and Hunk closest to him, Pidge sticking out on the end and Coran at his shoulder.


"I think they got rid of it," Lance says. "It didn't serve them, and there were other kinds of torture, so they just got rid of the ability."

"To feel pain?"

"Anything."

They all stare at him, but Lance has nothing more to say. It's just a theory; he could be wrong.

"...Maybe you should go back in cryo."

"What for? I feel fine."

"You just said you can't feel anything."

"The healing pod let me out."

Allura tries to speak against it, but Shiro asks, "Lance, what happened to you? What did they...do?"

"New legs," Lance says, "they injected me a lot, but I think most of it was temporary. I trained a
"The arena," Shiro repeats, white-faced.

"Took your title," he says. "Sorry, buddy."

"You- the Champion?"

Lance shrugs. "It was that or die, and I figured someone'd still want me around."

Shiro closes his eyes, and Keith puts a hand on his shoulder, darting worried glances from Shiro to Lance and back again. Hunk is still leaking tears. Pidge seems thoroughly shaken. Is it that horrifying?

"Lance...do you know how much time has passed?" Allura asks.

He shakes his head. "No idea," he says.

"Five phoebs," she says, and it takes a moment for him to dig out the translations of Altean time words before he can realise what that means.

"Huh," he says, and looks over their outfits. Shiro and Keith are back as the black and red paladins respectively, and Allura's still in her pink outfit, which can only mean she's still piloting Blue. "What have you been doing? Have you dealt with Lotor yet? I never saw him there. I think. I...don't know."

"Yes, we've...been dealing with him. We haven't taken him down, but we've hampered his team. We've also been coordinating with the Blades of Marmora to free and protect more planets, and it took a while for everyone to settle into their lions..."

"We were looking for you," Keith says, rushed, and Lance frowns and looks over at him. "Between all that. We never stopped looking."

"Okay," Lance says, and thinks maybe he should be happy at this news or bitter about how long it took, but it feels like none of that matters. "Did someone look after Kaltenecker?"

"I did," Hunk says, "he's fine."

"Cool."

Pidge speaks up: "Are you going to...tell us anything that happened?"

"Pidge," Shiro says.

"I don't remember a lot," Lance says. "I think they went through a lot of the classic torture techniques, but once I stopped feeling anything they kind of became useless. They had to pour ethanol on my wounds to get me to feel anything, I remember that."

They all collectively flinch.

"Sometimes they'd use quintessence to heal me so they could keep, like, digging into me, but...only rarely." Lance shrugs. "Guess they had a lot of ground to cover."

"And...how was the arena?" Shiro asks delicately.

"It got kind of boring after a while."
They all keep staring at him. He gets it, he's changed. But it's just so...quiet. They all seem to be expecting something of him, a joke or a smile or a hug, but Lance can only stare blankly. He doesn't remember his old self. He killed it in the arena along with all those other galra warriors. That Lance is gone just as surely as they are.

Five months, huh? That's not so bad. Time was so slippery, Lance could've been underwater for years and he wouldn't have realised. He almost wishes they'd waited a little longer. Just enough for his leg to fuse with his flesh properly. It's not an issue now, but he's no doubt that problems will crop up in the future because of it.

"...Maybe you need some rest," Allura suggests gently. "You've been through quite the ordeal."

"Yeah," Lance murmurs. "I guess so."

"I'll walk you-" Hunk says, and Keith has also stood up as if to join them. The two of them exchange looks, nodding, and Keith sits back down.

"Whatever," Lance says, and gets up and leaves.

Hunk trails after him. "Hey, buddy," he says as the door slides shut behind them. "I hope you're not mad at us. We didn't mean to take so long- everything happens so much, you know! We were doing everything, breaking into galra bases and stealing info and trying to find you, but they had nothing on you anywhere. We were really lucky that we stormed that base and f-" Hunk takes a deep breath, and when Lance glances over he realises he's near tears. "Found you," he finishes with a wobbly smile, and Lance's brows furrow.

"Found me how?"

"Uh- well, Allura can fight druids, so she went to hold them off, and, uh, found you...getting your leg put in. But it was done wrong. And your guts were spilling out and they were burning something galran onto your arm and slicing up your lips and-!"

"Oh," Lance says. "Yeah, I was so high at that point. I couldn't hear shit."

Everything Lance says just seems to distress Hunk further.

"Look, dude, if you're mad at us-"

"I'm not mad," Lance interrupts. "I just don't really care. I dunno, dude."

"...Oh."

"Yeah," Lance says. "See you later." He presses a button and his bedroom door slides open, everything inside it still and quiet. He doesn't look back as it shuts, and he goes to his bed, pulls off the cryo suit and jumps into the best in his boxers, falling asleep instantaneously.


At least he sleeps.

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There is nothing to do in the castle. The day after Lance is rescued, they're found and pursued by some of his old doctors, but they're clearly weakened by something, maybe Allura's attack on them the day previous, they can never quite catch up, and after the castle hurls only a few ion beams
their way their ship lilts just enough for Allura to wormhole them out of there. They all huddle round him, asking if he's okay, if it was scary, if he needs a moment.

He doesn't. He thought it was sort of obvious, and it must become clear as he raises his brows at him and they slowly return to their previous activities. Apparently the rescue mission meant the castle had taken quite a beating, and everyone, not just Coran, is on clean up duty. Allura is dusting down the control room when she turns to him with a fake smile.

"You know, Lance," she says, gently as if speaking too loud might cause him to crack like an egg, "if you're looking for something to do, we finally filled the pool up. Since everyone's busy, you'll have quite a lot of time to yourself down there!"

He's on the metal protrusion at the front of the main control console, watching her flit from one paladin chair to another, wiping them down before pressing a button to return them to the floor. Coran passed through a while back, talking about their weakened defence systems, but no one else has come by since.

"Sure," he says, since it seems she wants him out the way. "Which way?"

Though her smile doesn't falter, her left brow drops and yanks itself back up again; she says, "Oh, if you just follow the main corridor, it's the third lift on the right."

"Cool," he replies, gets up, and leaves, and as the doors shut behind him, he can hear her sigh. No one is around as he goes to his room and changes out his clothes, taking a moment to eye himself in the mirror. It's not a pretty sight, but every inch of him is a sign of a survivor. Of a fighter. Someone dangerous, someone you don't want to touch.

That galra did that to him. For him.

He knows he shouldn't think that way. There's no denying it's the truth.

He pulls on the blue swim trunks from months ago. They still fit, but they're tighter than before. Grabbing a towel, he leaves, and the wander down to the pool is again entirely undisturbed. Lance wonders if everyone is avoiding him, or if they really are that spread out across the castle.

Probably avoiding him. They seemed so distressed the night before, and no one could quite meet his eyes this morning, as if he unnerved them, as if maybe he even scared them.

They look at him in a way they never did Shiro, even though it sounds like Lance and Shiro had very similar experiences. Tortured, experimented on, put in the arena, limbs replaced. So why have they come out so different? What did the galra do to Lance that they didn't to Shiro, but allowed him to still retain some sense of self, of life? How has Lance lost that? Why?

Because he had to survive. Everyone has to sacrifice something in the fight for survival, so he gave up everything he didn't need: humour and idiocy and patience for other people's stupidity. He is still himself. Can they all see that? Is that what scares them?

Or maybe they think he is someone new, someone they don't know. Maybe they regret rescuing him, expending so many resources on this. He can't feel Red in the back of his mind anymore; she faded out not long after he was taken. So he can't even pilot the red lion, or even the blue, and Lance has no doubt Keith and Allura are doing a terrific job of it anyway, so where does that leave Lance?

Floating face-up in the pool, apparently. If he closes his eyes, it almost feels like he did back in his prison, light as air, barely held down by the restraints on his wrists and ankles. He is back on the
table, his doctors poking and cracking open his bones, refilling them with concrete and sealing them shut to see if he hits any harder. There are holes in his neck and his arms and his hips from past injections, he is dizzy, heavy, lazy, messy. He hits with rabid precision or he faints at the sight of blood. He jumps higher and moves faster, he slumps, he stumbles, he crawls. He dreams up a world that doesn't exist.

They cut off limbs like felling trees and plant newer, stronger seeds in his weeping wounds. They pluck his eyeballs from his head and replace them with pure glass. His lips cut off to make room for a grim set of sharp teeth. His ears amped up a thousand times, he hears cries for help from systems away.

He fights, he fights, he keeps fighting and keeps complying.

Nothing scares him anymore.

Isn't that what he always wanted?

He can't remember anymore. He knows bits and pieces of his five phoeb in galra imprisonment; he does not know his past self's desires.

He knows, factually, that the water is there, and holding him up, keeping him afloat, even his legs. It doesn't feel like it. It feels as though he floats on air itself, and the air is neither too hot nor cold, and when he turns round and breathes in, his eyes don't burn, his throat barely chokes. Still, he turns back over so he can breathe easy, pushes absentmindedly off the wall he has drifted towards. The water then rushes over his arms, his chest, but he can only feel the slight weight of it, the pull as it returns back to itself.

The water has always reminded him of home: rain during the storms, the waves at Varadero, puddles in the sunshine. Now it reminds him of a different kind of home, being drugged-up with the druids, and isn't that ten kinds of fucked up?

But it feels like comfort.

"Lance?"

He'd almost enjoyed not being able to hear in those last few moments. No one to yell at him or scream. The world filtered into something easier to understand and contain; he could trust his body to find the threats for him.

"Lance?"

He didn't have to bother with words; his actions spoke for themselves, and gradually, people would stop trying to engage with him. That sounded like real peace.

"Lance!"

Upon opening his eyes, he discovers Keith at the very edge of the pool, jacket off and the neck of his t-shirt in his hand, as if he intends to rip off his clothes and jump into the pool after Lance.

"Hey, man," Lance says.

"Lance," Keith murmurs, and lets out a huge sigh, balling up his jacket and holding it like a teddy in his arms. "I thought you were- I thought you- thought something had happened, you weren't responding, o-or saying anything-"
"I was thinking about home," Lance says, and Keith's features freeze, then turn soft, his eyebrows pulling up as he kneels at the edge of the water.

"If you...want to talk about anything-" Keith tries, but Lance just raises a brow.

"Don't you hate me?" Lance asks.

"What- no! That was you! You hated me and you made up that rivalry and- and forgot we had a bonding moment and everything!"

Wow, he really seems worked up about this. Lance moves so he's no longer floating in the water, but submerged up to his chest. "Maybe," Lance says. "I guess that sounds like me."

Keith rubs his lips together, looking utterly lost. "So...you're okay?"

"I'm not drowning," Lance says, "or already dead."

"So...you are okay."

"I don't know why you care," Lance says. "I thought everyone was avoiding me."

"No! We've just been busy! You don't understand, rescuing took up all our resources- we had to use the Blades as a distraction and Coran was doing everything he could with the castle, half our lions were almost wrecked-" "Then why did you bother?" Lance asks, and starts slowly taking strokes down the length of the pool, keeping his head above water so he can hear Keith speaking. "You had five paladins, and Coran works the castle. You have the Blades, you were apparently making progress with Lotor. So why bother coming back for me? There's no place for me. You wasted a fuck ton of resources looking for me. And you have no idea what the galra have done to me. They were tracking us through Shiro's arm, right? How do you know they won't do the same with my legs? What makes you think it's safe, keeping me around? You have no idea what they've done to me."

"Lance," Keith says, eyes wide and brows high, gaping just a little. He doesn't look scared...horrified, maybe. "What- of course we would look for you, you're part of the team, you're our friend-"

"This isn't a fucking sports day at school," Lance says, the words echoing eerily in his memory, "this is a war. You have your best pilots and your best leader, you have backup, and you had leads. Sometimes you make sacrifices along the way."

"You weren't a sacrifice we were willing to make."

Lance speeds up a little bit, then glances again back to Keith. His knees are teetering on the pool's edge, probably getting wet as Lance moves and the water ripples out from him. "That's not how you win wars."

"Why are you- why do you care so much about this war thing?" Keith asks, and Lance scowls.

"Because we're in a war."

"Yes, but- it doesn't have to be as terrible as you make it out. We don't have to sacrifice anything we don't want to."

"And what did you lose, by coming after me?" Lance asks, and sits up on the ledge beside Keith.
Keith doesn't answer, because he's too busy staring at Lance's arm. His left arm, the one that was burned with galran words. Lance asks, "Do you know what it says?"

"No... The Blades haven't taught me a lot of the language yet." Keith reaches a hand up to trace it, eyes wide. "Did it hurt?"

"No," Lance says. "It was only yesterday they did it."

"Yester-" Keith says, and frowns. "Lance, you were in the healing pod for a week."

"Oh... A week ago, then."

Silence reigns as Keith stares, and stares, and stares. Lance doesn't stare back, just watches the water rush and ripple as he kicks his heels against the wall. He already knows what Keith is looking at. The scars. There are so many scars. He has a ton about his gut, because they were obsessed with cutting him open and checking out his insides, not to mention the little party they had with it a week ago, apparently. He has a square of scars over his heart, scars lining his ribs, flog marks on his back, burns there, too, laser beam marks littered about his arms, his legs, everywhere. Half of it just for fun.

"Did...none of this hurt?" Keith asks, voice hollow and lips trembling just a little.

"No," Lance says. "It was a gradual thing. So I must've felt some of it, but...I don't remember."

"And you can't feel anything now."

"Nope," and pops the 'p'.

"Can you feel the water?"

Lance shakes his head.

"My hand?"

He's still touching Lance's arm.

"I can feel the weight of it, but not...temperature or pressure or anything."

Keith seems incredibly unnerved. "There has to be someone we can go to about this," he says. "We can't- there has to be something we can do."

"It's a good thing," Lance says, and Keith's mouth drops open. "If I can't feel pain then I'm not distracted by it, or muscle exhaustion, or even the weather. I can keep going regardless of the conditions around me."

"A good thing," Keith says, agape.

"I can keep fighting," he continues, because that's what's important. "So long as I keep fighting, I'm fine."

"Fighting," Keith repeats, quieter. "...You fought in the arena, like Shiro?"

"Mnhm. The doctors- druids cooked up a lot of bad guys to compete after Shiro disappeared. They wouldn't give me a gun at first, so I had to learn hand-to-hand. They made me train for hours. When I started winning they let me have a rifle. But that took a long time."
"But they gave you Shiro's title?"

"There was a... A mini version, of the monster we fought on the Balmera. It had killed every person it faced. I fought it three times, and I almost died the first time. But the second time I did some damage, and I killed it the third time. I think it managed to focus all its lasers into one and shoot my leg off, under the knee, so that's when they decided to replace my legs."

"Lance...how can you tell me all this? When Shiro talked about it- I mean, he couldn't. He kept getting flashbacks, he couldn't...talk about it like you do."

Keith's eyes are heartbroken. Windows to the soul, indeed, Keith's eyes reveal the fire burning in his heart, smouldering, puttering, confused.

"It's not scary," Lance says. "Nothing is scary anymore." The conversation suddenly feels boring, Lance impatient - Keith keeps looking sad, and Lance isn't used to that, he's used to exhausted prisoners, frightened opponents, tormenting doctors. He wants to escape, and at least while swimming as fast as he can, he can pretend he's escaping. If he shuts his eyes, the world around him is his to create. This isn't a swimming pool on a castleship, it's the still ocean off Varadero, and he is free, and he is gone.

He has always been a good swimmer - one of his few talents, although it fell flat at flight school - but now he's even better. His legs push him faster and his arms are stronger to pull him through the water, he hurtles off one end of the pool and surfaces halfway along it. Exhaustion doesn't touch him. Nothing can. He pushes harder and harder, faster and faster. This is what he's good for, now - pushing himself to the limit.

Whenever he glances up for breath, Keith is still there.

What is he doing...? Pretending to clean, Lance thinks. Keeping an eye on Lance, in probability. Allura said he'd be left alone, but she must've pretty instantly realised her mistake and decided to send someone to check on him. Who knows what he could do?

Swim a lot, apparently. He hadn't fought for a few days before his left leg's surgery, they were prepping him, or trying out drugs, or...something... And apparently he's been locked up in cryo for a week, and it feels good to exert his strength, feel that power thrum through his muscles again. He has to keep pushing. If he reaches a breaking point, then what's the point of him? Endurance can't have a breaking point.

He stops opening his eyes when he takes a breath after a while. It's always just Keith, pretending not to stare, but all of them, quite obviously gaping at him. Hunk is the one calling his name.

He slows down and asks, "What's up."
"Uh," Hunk says, somehow thrown off-guard at Lance replying, "it's dinner time."

Lance is tempted to blow it off, but in reality he knows he needs food if he wants to stay strong. "Sure," he says, and swims over to the ledge and hauls himself out in one smooth movement. They all keep staring, this sad and heartbroken gaze trailing over Lance's body, at the ugly scars, the new muscle, the mess of it all. Lance finds himself very impatient indeed, grinding his teeth before pointing: "They tried to cut my heart open, but they stopped pretty quickly when they realised I was dying. I got all these in a fight with a mini-version of the monster on the Balmera. These were just for fun. I tried to escape a couple times, so I got shot a lot. They found whipping really fun. They also liked burning galran words onto me, to show that they really owned me or something, but I don't know what any of it means. These are just to see how deeply into my face they could cut. This was to differentiate the flesh of my lip from the rest of my face. They used a garrotte with a razor edge to choke me to see what would happen. The legs came after-"

"Stop," Hunk chokes out, and Lance rolls his eyes.

"You obviously wanted to know."

"That's horrible," Allura says, barely. "But Lance, have you any idea how long you've been swimming?"

"Well, if it's dinner time...six vargas, give or take?"

"Yes. You need to come to dinner immediately, dry off, just- relax. Rest yourself. There's no reason to work so hard, now."

"We're in a war, princess. We have to be in top condition."

Allura blinks furiously, unable to speak, and Shiro comes forward and places a hand on Lance's shoulder. "Lance," he says, "I understand you've been through something terrible, but please remember that we are not the galra. We're not going to force you to train constantly, or anything like that, to earn your keep. You're our friend, and you need rest. You don't have to overexert yourself like this."

"I wasn't overexerting anything," Lance counters, statuesque beneath the hand.

"Six hours, Lance! We haven't even trained that long."

"Not here. The galra didn't really give a fuck, though."

"...How are you not exhausted."

"Can't feel anything, dude. Exhaustion included."

"Do you even feel hungry?"

Lance shakes his head. "But if I want to keep fighting, I need to eat, so."

"You're not with the galra anymore. You don't need to keep fighting."

Lance pulls away from Shiro's grip, grabs the towel he brought down, and starts drying off. "Fuck," he says, "did we even get captured by the same alien race."

"Lance-" Keith hisses, but Coran keeps him back.

"Maybe we should leave," Allura says diplomatically. "We'll make sure dinner is ready when you
two return."

And so all but Lance and Shiro recede from the room, Keith looking back the whole time and Coran ushering everyone through the door, Pidge hurrying through it, Hunk teary-eyed at Lance.

"I know it's not easy-" Shiro says, and Lance stops him.

"I don't care, Shiro," he says, and Shiro crosses his arms. "It's probably because they didn't know you were going to be a paladin of Voltron when they had you. And essentially, they got me in return for losing you, which is a pretty shitty deal, so they made it so I could never participate in Voltron again."

"But- of course you can-"

"I lost the connection to Red. I think that was their aim, whatever they did to stop me from feeling stuff, it cut off my connection to her."

Shiro's eyes widen, his gaze drifting as he processes Lance's words. Lance uses the lull to dry off completely, tossing the towel over his shoulder and making to leave, Shiro trailing him. "Is that possible?" Shiro asks. "You should tell Allura and Coran - they'll know if that's happened before. Lance...this whole...not feeling' thing could have a lot of consequences you might not have realised yet. Maybe exercising for hours without being tired sounds like a boon, but you could really overwork yourself, you could forget to eat, or sleep, or..."

"Probably," Lance says.

"You're not worried?"

"I don't really care."

"Why-" Shiro stops himself, shaking his head as he walks alongside Lance. His hands twist together and he darts looks over, but it takes a long time for him to finally ask, "Please, Lance, tell me how this happened. What is it they did to you that caused this? Do you remember? Have you any idea?"

"I think it was all the drugs," Lance says. "They shot me up pretty regularly. I don't know what with, they changed it every time. I was high when you guys got me... It altered my hearing and-everything, really. I didn't realise it was a rescue. I thought they were moving rooms to get the right equipment. They also might've dug into my brain, but I can't remember."

Looking a bit shaken, Shiro nods. "They probably did," he admits. "Although it might be worth doing a blood test or- something, see if there's anything there that could help."

"Whatever."

They reach Lance's room, and Shiro stays outside as he changes, then when he emerges Shiro says, "You know, Keith was with you almost the entire time."

"Bit weird," Lance says. "Weren't there repairs to do?"

"He was worried about you."

"Cute."

"...Really, Lance. He's been worried sick over you."
"Why?"

"Because he cares for you... Look, just...go easy on him."

Lance shrugs just as they enter the dining room, where everyone is sitting round plates of food goo, leaning in and whispering all hushed right up until the doors shut behind them.

"Lance! Shiro! You joined us!" Allura says, like it's the best thing to ever happen to her.

"Of course," Shiro says, and sits by Pidge, leaving Lance to sit with Keith. "Lance just had to change."

Lance nods, and starts eating, and as if that was a signal, everyone does so too. Then they talk as if the world is normal. It's almost amusing, but Lance doesn't smile or laugh, just listens in case anything is important. They escaped to a fairly distant system with very little activity in their area; they plan to alert the Blades of their presence, and start looking for nearby planets in distress. The castleship is still in need of some repairs, and Coran thinks they might need to visit some junkyards or malls to pick up what they need.

They don't refer to Lance, don't ask him his plans or try and figure out where he fits in all this. He's glad. He doesn't think there'll be an easy answer. Maybe he'll just help from the ship, like Coran. Maybe Hunk'll teach him how to be a mechanic, and he'll do manual labour whilst everyone's off fighting. Maybe they'll try and get him on the ground. He'd be most useful there. No one's as long-range as him; put the other five on the ground and hide him in the hills, and he could do serious damage. Now that he knows hand-to-hand, he'd be good even at the fore.

The only thing he can do for them is fight. He's useless elsewhere. He is a blunt knife; he can kill, but he has no point.

Not anymore.

--

After dinner comes sleep, classic films of his childhood playing in black-and-white: the telenovela of his sister dumping her boyfriend because she fell in love with his ex; the silent comedy of he and his brothers trying to sneak past their sleeping parents to the kitchen for midnight treats; the futuristic sci-fi where he learns to fly a rocketship into space. The tiniest ache wells up in the depths of his chest, but by morning, it is gone, and when he joins the others, he is sentenced to the clean up crew.

No more mishaps like yesterday, where swimming for six hours is apparently something to gawp at.

It's fine. He works with Hunk most of the time, since he's the expert, and they take a few breaks and Hunk tries to joke with him but time just passes, sometimes Lance has to stretch out his muscles just so they don't get too restless. He does as Hunk asks, drifts from himself, until he's needed again. But he's not needed again. Yes, the others ask him to do things and yes, they sometimes ask if he's okay, what he's staring at, is he hungry thirsty tired in pain and then they catch themselves and say have some water anyway.

It all just...fades away. Even sitting down for dinner, their faces become blurs, their words slick together into nothing, even the food he's eating dissipates before him. His legs are humming, his body thrumming, his veins thumping with need; he has to get to the training deck. He's not stupid enough to just go, though. The others have already expressed their disapproval at him doing
anything remotely physical; he needs to sneak in when everyone else is asleep.

He just has to get through this...but how? He can't keep track of them. The world is a white screen, he moves the fork up and down and he eats and drinks but none of it feels real. He tastes, sees, feels nothing. Is this his life outside Galra imprisonment? Is it really preferable? At least back there, he could fight and fight and win. Even high off his ass on drugs he didn't know, he had something.

There are no restraints holding him down anymore. He floats, he flies, he disappears into the sky. He has no substance.

And he comes back to himself on the training deck. He checks outside, but the lights are all dark, so he presumes everyone is in bed.

With that at rest, Lance focuses, and looks for the weapons. It doesn't take long; there's a door opposite him, and when he opens it, he finds a long, narrow room with two dummies wearing plain white armour, and racks of different weapons. Lance first puts on the armour; a black undersuit like the paladin uniform, but the shoulders are white, and the armour also. Then he faces the weapons.

The sword he chooses is a little longer than Keith's bayard; long and thick, double-edged and sharp, a sure weight in his left hand. The gun he picks, a rifle like his old bayard, is certain in his right. Dual-wielding like this was a gift the Galra gave him; he could've never done it before.

Now, he excels. Stepping out onto the deck, he calls for the training to begin, and a gladiator drops out and starts fighting him.

Badly. Lance stops, frowns, and asks the next level up. And again. Again. Level five is alright. Level ten gives him some trouble. Level fifteen keeps him preoccupied more than five minutes.

Level twenty he starts to burn, and he grins, and starts using the sword.

Fighting is natural to him now. Strange to think it wasn't before. He side steps and leaps and charges and shoots, he wins, he kills, he keeps winning. He barely breaks a sweat for the first varga. These gladiators are like children, it is funny to think a single one of these once took down his entire team.

Funny to think he could ever be scared of something like this.

He doesn't know what level he's at when he has to really start working; when it's multiple gladiators, all the time, swarming him, he gets one down and another pops out, and he relishes this challenge, finally something worth conquering around here-

"End training session!"

And they drop beneath the floor, and when the room clears, Lance sees Keith in the doorway, eyes wide, fixated on Lance. Takes in his stand, his face, his weapons. Catch on the sword.

"What," Keith says, and comes in properly, the door sealing behind him, "are you doing here?"

Lance doesn't dignify that with an answer, just blows some of the steam off his rifle.

"It's the middle of the night."

"Night doesn't exist in space."
"It exists in a time-regulated castleship."

"Not on galran ones."

Keith’s stare goes incredulous for a half-second before turning incredibly sad. He moves closer, and Lance wonders at how he ever saw this boy as a threat. He is so soft, in his boxers and t-shirt and socks. His hair is in a messy bun, his brows upturned, hands bare.

_He cares about you._

And _he’s_ the one who's half-galran - does he know nothing of weakness?

"Lance, come on," Keith says. "Go to bed. Or see Kaltenecker. Or- something!"

"I need to fight, Keith," Lance says. "It's the only thing I'm good for."

"That's _not_ true-"

"I need to do it. I'm not leaving here."

Keith keeps coming closer. "Lance, what _happened_ to you? You can just talk to us. Explain- you don't have to...do all this."


"There- there has to be _more_."

"There isn't anything more."

Lance is getting bored; Keith seems to be getting desperate; he says, "Fight me instead."

And Lance eyes him up and down. Keith is strong, and a good martial artist, no doubting it. But he's shorter than Lance by a few inches, now, his shoulders naturally not quite as broad. His preferred weapons are a single sword and a shield; he doesn't know how to use long-range weapons at all.

_He's nothing._

Lance asks, "Do you really think you're much of a challenge?"

"You never won a spar against me."

Lance snorts. "Maybe. But I'm not that person anymore."

This makes Keith's face fall; eye Lance up and down in retaliation. What does he see? Someone bigger and stronger than before. An opponent with two weapons, not to mention hand-to-hand skills. Someone Keith thinks he knows. _That_ is a grave error.

"Let me try," voice soft, cheeks pink. Lance sees this, and immediately comes to a revelation.

"Oh," he says dispassionately. "Were you in love with him?"

Pink to red. _"Who?"_ Keith says.

"The old me. Before I was taken. Were you? Is that why you care so much?" And it is, Lance sees it in his lowered eyes, his flushed cheeks. He can see it in their past interactions, whatever Lance
remembers of them: Keith's reminding him about the bonding moment they'd shared, teasing him, eyes wide when Lance backed him up as the black paladin.

"So what if I am?"

He's too hopeful. "I'm not that Lance anymore," he says, and hopes Keith realises he means it. "He's dead, Keith. I killed him with the rest of them."

"Don't be stupid," Keith says, but his voice is a little shaky. "You're still you."

"You don't know who I am anymore." But Keith is shaking is head, so Lance says, "You want to fight? Then let's fight. Get your armour and your weapons. I'll wait."

His armour will be back in his room, but even wearing the plain armour Lance wears, Keith only has to clench his fist by his thigh for his bayard to appear and shift into a sword. He raises his left arm to call up the shield, then stands opposite Lance, knees bent, ready to run, hide, charge.

He doesn't have a chance. This poor boy, Lance almost thinks, in love with what Lance used to be. Thinking, perhaps, he can change him back to that.

He has no idea, does he?

Well, Lance is about to show him. It isn't even hard. He entertains Keith ten, fifteen minutes, just because it's fun, interesting to fight another human again. To see Keith's galra side come out, in bits and pieces, tiny manoeuvres, the way he moves. Perhaps he's been spending more time with the Blades, learning how they fight. Perhaps it was always natural to him. Lance can't remember.

Wearing the white armour, it becomes easy to forget that it's Keith he's fighting, despite the bayard. He is just another gladiator in the ring, and Lance has to win. His prisoner's rags cling like film to him, the weapons heavy in his hands, but he needs them, and he needs to win this next fight. Some galra general, if Lance can take them down he'll get a reprieve. He just has to keep fighting. It isn't hard. It isn't. Hunger, thirst, pain? It glances off him. He exists without restrictions. This galra is fast and angry and skilled, but Lance is better.

He's better, now. More than better, he's the best, he's so good they remembered Shiro and then they forgot him, and passed that title to Lance. He is the Champion now, and he will win no matter what.

He has to win.

It's the only thing he can do these days.

A sword hits the armour on his arm, Lance laughs. It slices his unprotected hip, it doesn't hurt. A shield shoves against his chest, Lance doesn't stop advancing. He keeps going and going and going, until his opponent is on the floor and Lance has the gun poised up their neck, ready to take the shot.

"Stop it!" they beg, and Lance laughs again. It is so good when they beg, he loves hearing it. He feels power like never before. "Just- stop! Get off me! Lance, I swear to god."

"This is what you deserve," Lance tells this galran gladiator who really thought he could achieve what countless druid creations could not. "You knew this would happen."

Finger on the trigger, Lance is grabbed from behind, and the shot goes off inches above his opponent's head.
Suddenly, a cacophony of noise; colour splashes into the world, his opponent turning from shimmery white to black and pink and red. Several people are grabbing him, and he yanks out of their grip before someone is able to take his arms and fling a pair of handcuffs on him. Lance only has to kick his leg back against them for them to break, and then the voices yell out again, screaming.

His opponent has not moved from the floor. Maybe, Lance realises, the galra do not want him to kill the general after all.

Stilling, Lance asks, "I thought I was supposed to kill him."

The first voice says, "What? No, Lance-"

"There is no room for weakness in the empire. If he can't defeat me, why are you keeping him alive? I can kill him. It was arrogance that made him come into the ring."

The hands loosen. The voice says, "Oh, I think he's... He's back with the galra. He doesn't realise it's us."

"He doesn't?" says another.

"Do you want me to kill him or not? It's easy. He fights like a little child. He is of no use to anyone like that."

A figure kneels beside him. "Lance," they say, "do you know where you are?"

Thousands of galra aliens roar from the stands. A group of galra stand at his back, discussing the situation. The general sits up on his elbow but says nothing.

"I'm in the ring," Lance says. "Aren't I?" Or is he on a cocktail of drugs, the chemicals spinning this world before him?

"No," the voice confirms. "You're in the Castle of Lions, with your fellow paladins. You're on the training deck. You just tried to kill Keith."

That does sound something like the drugs would cook up. "Right," he says dryly. "I see. So the paladins really did come and rescue me? And now they're all here worried about me? And I guess Keith really was in love with me, huh?" He rolls his eyes. "Just tell me what drugs I'm on and leave me alone."

"Lance, please. This isn't a- hallucination, or, or the result of drugs, or anything- we got you off that ship, don't you remember?" He does, actually. And that does sound a lot like Allura - looks like her, too, her hair wild and fluffy from being asleep, still in her nightgown with a navy blue robe on top. Her mice sit on her shoulders, wide-eyed.

Shiro stands to his other side, white-faced, looking near tears, and when he turns around, Pidge and Hunk are huddled together behind him, staring.

And that is Keith, laid out on the floor, covered in bullet marks and slices up his armour. He looks absolutely terrified.

Lance did this. When he looks down, he has injuries, too; his chest plate cracked open, a mark on his shoulder armour, deep cuts on his unarmoured hips. Keith did all that, presumably trying to slow Lance down, but Lance can't feel pain; he is able to keep going.
"I thought...I was in the ring," Lance says. "If I don't kill my opponent, they don't let me sleep. Or they punish me- I can't remember. I was supposed to kill him."

"You're not there anymore," Shiro says, rough and ragged, kneeling down. "Lance? Okay? You're not there anymore. You don't have to- play by their rules anymore."

"What do I do instead?" Lance asks, staring at his hands. The weapons he was wielding have vanished somehow. "I don't know who I was before this."

"You're still you," Shiro says, unknowingly echoing Keith's words from before, but Lance can only shake his head, speak what he knows in whatever heart left he has to be true:

"No I'm not," he whispers, and looks up. Keith is slowly moving to kneel on the ground, watching him. If Keith is in love with him, he's probably heartbroken now. Lance would feel bad, but he can't. He can't. He is empty, he watches Keith stand and stumble and Shiro's head whips up but Coran darts forward and grabs him.

"The infirmary, I think," he says, leading Keith out. "For both of you! Come on, now, chop chop!"

"Come on, Lance," Shiro says, getting up, and helping Lance up, too. Whatever Keith did makes it difficult to walk without Shiro grabbing his arm and pulling it over his shoulders. "You two...go to bed, okay? We'll all deal with this in the morning." Hunk and Pidge dart glances at them and nod, slowly departing in the opposite direction. After only a few yards, Hunk has to double over, and Pidge wraps her arm around him as they walk away.

Allura, at least, trails after them.

"How'd you know?" Lance asks. "What was happening, I mean."


"Huh."

The walk to the infirmary seems short; they enter and undress, Coran prepping the pods whilst Allura gets them their cryosuits, and Shiro stands before them, watching them both with sad eyes. He looks at Keith's injuries, winces, looks at Lance's scars, flinches. He has to close his eyes as they pull on the cryosuits, hiding their pain from view. Lance would feel sorry for him, but he can't. He can only stare vacantly at everyone else's pain, the subject, the spectator. Keith gives him one last look before he goes into the pod, brows pulled, eyes big, confused, scared.

Lance doesn't look at anyone as they lock him in.

He dreams. Old film reels. A tragic lovestory.
adjustment

Chapter Summary

keith attempts to adjust, but the galra do not make it easy for any of them

Chapter Notes

this whole fic is now alternatively summarised: the old lance cant answer the phone right now. why? oh! cause he's dead!

uhh i didn't do this last time but a big shoutout to my darling darling angel friendri who's looked over both of these chapters for me and gave me some precious help! they're radical and basically a humanities version of pidge, so u should check them out!

finally. i also didn't say this last time but i Am a white scots gal w very limited knowledge of cuba (and, tbh, america in general), so if anything i write is too stereotypical/racist/whatever, please call me out! im trying and im doing some research etc but there's only sm u can learn online. its not rly an issue here but it'll begin to pop up a lot more.

oh also apparently there's discourse for lance's surname. i hc lance as purely cuban/south american w like. maybe one very distant european relative, so i went with a cuban surname.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I can't help but love you
Even though I try not to.
War of Hearts, Ruelle.

--

Falling in love with Lance was...not what Keith ever expected. Going to flight academy was always the dream, the goal, first cultivated by his father then encouraged by Shiro, and Keith was good at it - more than good, he was the best fighter pilot in school. He was too good. He had to leave.

Not before someone caught his eye. And how couldn't Lance catch his eye? Loud and funny and always surrounded by friends, Hunk and Pidge and nameless, countless others who all went on big excursions to the city on the weekends and spent an hour saying goodbye before every summer. Not a great pilot. Cocky. Made bad jokes. Fucking hated Keith...but he was handsome and tall and Keith was into it, okay? And he never stopped being into it. All that time in the desert and that crush never waned, and then Lance was the key to the blue lion, to everything, and suddenly they were trapped in the same castle for months on end, mourning everything from leaving home to Shiro disappearing.
And they would talk, sometimes. Maybe Keith would cradle Lance in his arms, maybe Lance would curb his impulsive tendencies. Maybe they'd work together as more than a team: as a leader, and his right-hand man. Maybe Lance would knock on his door and offer to sacrifice his place in Voltron; maybe Keith would see, stunned, how much Lance had grown, and how little he'd grown in comparison.

Maybe Keith would fall in love. With what a good friend Lance was; the way he made decisions; his precision in sharpshooting. How, the second Keith expressed doubt in leading, he came to his side and stood by him. How was Keith supposed to ignore that? How was, when they found Shiro prone by Zarkon's near-deathbed, Keith supposed to keep his eye on everyone, on Shiro and on Kuron and the rest of his team; on the druids, on Allura trying to fight them, on her being overwhelmed; on Lance, Lance trying to stay on the edge and shoot what he could, Lance being found, Lance being taken?

What the fuck was he supposed to do?

The galra kill Kuron, and they take Lance, and Shiro is brought out of his coma and quickly assumes leadership once more. The world goes a little more back to normal, and a little further out of wack. They lose more than a person when they lose Lance; they lose the beating heart of Voltron, they lose their humour, their compassion. Everyone's tempers are that little bit shorter; everyone frustrated with how long the search is taking. Suddenly, taking on enemies, hunting down Lotor, and liberating planets is a chore, they fight about doing these things, argue about whether it's worth it. They spend more time tracking down galra stations and taking them down, searching for any hint, any sign at all that Lance is alive, that they have him somewhere.

But there's nothing.

It takes them five fucking months.

Keith didn't think there was much left of his heart to break.

--

"I've found him!" Allura reports hurriedly, something crashing on her side, and the world freezes. "He was with the druids, they were- I-"

She breaks off, the sound of her whip hurtling across a room, and more cries from her side.

"What is it?" Keith demands, running his sword through the galra bots swarming him. "How is he?!!"

Allura lets out a yell, and then her comms still. "Bad," she says. "Quiznak, he looks bad. Coran, have a pod prepped and ready for him. I'm going to grab him and run, okay? I don't think-" She breaks off a bit, hissing under her breath. "I'm not sure how long he'll last."

Keith shuts his eyes, keeps fighting. The plan is working. They found Lance. Pidge and Shiro are rescuing as many prisoners as possible; Keith and Hunk are causing a distraction. Allura went to keep the druids off their backs, but she found Lance as well.

It's destruction all around them. Keith can barely tell galra soldier apart from galra bot. Hunk has his gun out and is just mowing down opponents, and Keith is keeping his ground, letting soldiers converge on him before he slices them apart. Their lions are waiting at the hangar; Pidge and Shiro are calling down pods as they need them, loading prisoners away and launching them back to the ship. It sounds like they're doing okay, for the most part; whenever a fight breaks out, Shiro seems...
to take care of it.

Keith just needs to focus. The ship isn't huge; it won't take Allura more than five minutes to run back to Blue and get to the castle, assuming no one else gets in the way.

Assuming Lance isn't already dead.

"Stay with me," Allura is whispering desperately. "Lance, please, can you hear me? Can you see me? Can you say something, please?"

But he doesn't say anything, and Allura signals when she's gotten Lance onto Blue, and Pidge hangs back a few seconds to grab info off the ship, and then Hunk and Keith are fighting their way back to the lions, they get to the ship, Coran wormholes them out that system.

Lance is already in a pod when Keith gets there. He and Hunk are last to arrive, apparently, and missed the whole gory story. Allura's armour is covered in red blood; her hands are shaking. Shiro has blood on him, too, and there are a pile of rags on the flood, red, brown, black.

The cryosuit is painfully white against Lance's skin; blood trickles out beneath a cuff. He looks terrible; red seeps through the suit across his stomach; he has scars and horrible blood on his face; his hair is shaved into an undercut, neat and tidy and strange. He looks...taller.

"It was horrible," says Allura quietly. "They were cutting up his stomach. Burning his shoulder. Slicing his lip open. And..."

His leg. His left one, to be precise.

"What..." Keith whispers.

"They were missing a piece, or something," Allura says, clutching at the ends of her undone hair. "It hasn't been put in right. They- it's both his legs. They cut off both his legs."

For a moment, they all stare; then Allura becomes hysterical, she bursts into sobs just as Coran flies into the room and straight to her, collecting her in his arms. "It's alright, princess," he soothes, as the rest of them watch, hollowed out. "You found him, you brought him back. He's safe now. Oh, you did a wonderful job, princess."

He looks at them all, eyes serious, and begins to escort Allura from the room.

"Both his legs," Hunk says, and promptly starts sobbing. It hurts in a guttural way; Hunk is such a beacon of positivity and joy for them all, he's nothing but kind and funny and clever, and here he is, weeping, hands in tight fists, at the state of his best friend. "H-h-he used to s-swim, what's he g-

"My arm still worked in water, remember?" Shiro says, voice low in an effort to hide how close it is to breaking. "It'll be fine. He's going to be fine."

No he's not. Keith sees it in Shiro's eyes, in Lance's everything. You don't get tortured by the galra for five months and come back fine.

"We took too long," Pidge suddenly says, eyes watery, tears falling as she speaks. "If we- if we were f-faster, maybe he wouldn't- wouldn't-"

"Pidge, shh, don't-" But it's too late, she's crying also, and Shiro bundles Pidge in one arm and Hunk in the other, trying to soothe them.
Keith sidesteps them, gets right up to the glass of the pod. Lance has always been handsome. Now he looks...different. Softened in sleep. Hardened by torture. Keith puts a hand on the glass, wishes it didn't exist so he could press his hand right up to Lance's heart, check it's still beating himself. They spent so long searching for him, and here he is...changed.

But Keith still loves him. All that time, searching for him, it only grew stronger. Keith would stare at the stars at night and force himself not to cry, thinking about Lance, about how much he missed him and needed him. Lance would return to them unharmed, and Keith would take his face in his hands to check there was absolutely no damage done at all, and Lance would smile and say, *aw, you were worried?* and Keith would shut him up with a kiss.

And Lance would kiss back, because Lance would love him too. All that hatred and the rivalry bullshit and everything he said to Keith- it was just a *cover*, right, he liked Keith the whole time, too, he *loved* Keith, too, and-

"Keith," Shiro says, and Keith realises Pidge and Hunk have left. "Keith, you did a good job. We got him back."

Keith sees his reflection in the glass. He is crying, too.

"It's okay, Keith. We rescued him."

But did they? How do they know he's okay? What if he ends up in a coma, what if he comes out and he's *different*?

Shiro tugs him away from the pod, and Keith wishes he *didn't* have a heart, it splinters and cracks with every thought. It prompts more tears from his eyes, too many, *far* too many.

Shiro pulls him in, too, rests his chin on Keith's hair and lets him weep, whispers, "I know, I know, I know," and Keith wonders *what* he knows, if it's that Keith is in love with Lance. It probably is.

Keith leaves in that moment, but he comes back that night, and he barely sleeps, and he stays all day, all night, all day, he waits, he sleeps, he sits in front of Lance and tries not to cry as much as he wants to.

No one actually discourages him, except Shiro a couple times. As each day crawls forward, the others inevitably join him: Hunk first, Shiro slithers in, Pidge brings a game and doesn't play it, Allura hunches down by Hunk, Coran stands solemnly at the back.

A week. And the seventh day, Lance steps out the pod, unbothered, unhurried, unafraid.

And changed, just as Keith feared- *worse*. So much worse, because he doesn't *care* about anything. It isn't the same Lance.

But it is. And he is taller, and broader, and sharper, and meaner, and he leaves the room without fuss and he sits at the table and he speaks so casually of being tortured, of being put into the ring and becoming the new Champion-

And Hunk walks him back to the room, comes back in tears.

And he is different.

--

Keith never expected he'd be scared of Lance. It seemed impossible - big stupid Lance with his
dumb jokes and goofy grin who only shot at the enemy and couldn't do much harm beyond that? Warm tall Lance with that gentle smile and those soft blue eyes, trying to make Keith laugh, trying to make Keith believe in himself?

Lance. Strong and serious and never completely there, eyes drifting, lips sealed straight. He swims for six hours at a devastating pace and he mows down waves of gladiators and he points his gun at Keith's neck, and he never smiles.

Except to laugh at them.

Keith slashing him with his bayard was funny to him. Keith begging for his life was funny to him. And suddenly, Keith was more terrified that he'd ever been in his life - hasn't Keith faced multiple near-death scenarios at this point? So why was it Lance that got his heart pumping in a way nothing else had? Keith thought he was going to take the shot. He did take the shot, he was just yanked back by Shiro and Allura before the bullet could take off towards Keith's throat.

He could be dead.

Stepping out the healing pod, still woozy, he thinks to himself, I could be dead.

He stumbles towards Shiro, who holds him tight for a moment, puts a hand on his shoulder and just looks sadly at him. Then his gaze rises, and shifts, and all of them turn and watch Lance descending from the pod.

He doesn't trip, or fall. He isn't fazed at all. He looks straight through them, goes statuesque as Coran takes a brave step forward and starts fussing about him, undoing the cryosuit down Lance's chest so he can check the hips wounds. They haven't scarred, not like the rest of him. Keith hadn't known what to say on the poolside, struck dumb, stricken. What was there to say? Lance, what the fuck? Lance, who did this to you? Lance, why don't you care at all?

He's taller than Keith remembers. Bigger, too, he says he fought in the arena and it shows. Hurts, a little, to look at him, and be able to see the old Lance superimposed over him, a little shorter, a little thinner, clean-skinned, bright-eyed, always smiling.

Keith doesn't want to be afraid of him, but there'd been no recognition in his eyes as he'd towered over Keith, just cold, dark blankness, the last remnants of a cruel smile. Maybe Keith couldn't be afraid of Lance, but this new stranger was a terror.

Is a terror. He looks over at Keith, eyes him up and down and tilts his head. No remorse, no guilt over what he'd done. Lance stares for a while and then he looks away again, back into nothing.

"Well, then," Coran says, smiling as best as he can even though his age and experience weigh heavily in his eyes. "Looks like you two are both back to normal! Why don't you go get changed and we'll have a nice big breakfast!"

Shiro's holding Keith's sleep clothes from last night; Hunk has Lance's jeans and top. Keith is reluctant to change with everyone watching, but he does it only because they are all looking at Lance as he strips out the cryo suit, yanks his jeans up, a little tighter than before, pulls on a shirt that stretches across his chest.

Keith just has to pull a t-shirt and socks on.

"Hunk," Shiro says after a moment, "why don't you go walk Lance to his room? We'll have breakfast ready when you come back."
No one misses the sharp glance Lance hurls at Shiro, before striding out the room, not waiting for Hunk, not looking back. Hunk goes after him anyway, shooting them all a nervous look as he goes. They all watch for a moment before Shiro has to stop and let out a sigh.

"Keith?" Pidge says, stepping forward a little. "You okay?"

"Uh," Keith says, since the answer is no. "Uh, I don't know." Pidge reaches out a hand, but Keith finds himself recoiling, stepping around her and the others and saying, "I'll just go to my room," and leaving.

Turmoil haunts his every step. What are they all going to do now? It's pretty obvious that Lance doesn't give a fuck about anything, not them, not himself, not their mission against the galra... What did they do him? Apart from torture him out of his fucking mind, since that seems to be what happened. Indoctrinated with this fighting bullshit, so that he'll wake in the middle of the night and start mauling gladiators on the training deck. Equipped him with those legs that let him swim for so many hours.

Keith doesn't want to get overly sentimental, but he is in fucking love with this guy. Person. Stranger inhabiting Lance's strange body. This is breaking his fucking heart.

He's catching up to Lance and Hunk; they've slowed down, stopped altogether.

Hunk says, "I'm just saying, if you want to talk-"

"Talk about what," Lance demands, and even Keith winces as he turns a corner and sees the two of the standing there, watching each other. "Do you want me to tell you what it was like? Do you want me to tell you that I fought them and I screamed at them and I refused to cooperate? Because I did! And look what it fucking got me! So maybe I just started complying instead! Maybe it was easier to go train with them when the alternative was getting beat up in the arena and getting covered with fucking ethanol because nothing else fucking hurt! Is that what you want to hear? That I gave in? That I let them change me? Of fucking course I did."

"No, Lance," Hunk says, sounding as heartbroken as Keith feels. "I just- if you wanted to talk about what was going on with everyone, o-or how you felt-

"I don't feel things," Lance says sharply. "Okay? You all better start realising that. I don't feel anything."

He steps back, and Keith realises he was right in front of his door the whole time. It closes behind him, and Hunk's gaze drops to his feet, and his shoulders start shaking.

"Hunk," Keith says, hurrying over. "Hunk, don't- he's just in a weird place. It isn't your fault."

"He's my best friend," Hunk says. "What am I supposed to do? I can't help him. He doesn't want our help."

"There has to be something," Keith says, although he isn't sure there is. "To help him, or... Once things have calmed down, Coran and Allura will probably run some tests, see what's different. We'll take it from there."

Hunk sniffs. "I thought," he says, "that when he came back, everything would be okay again. I thought maybe he'd be happy to be back, or upset we took so long, o-or...but this is..."

"Totally different," Keith murmurs. "It's like he's a new person."
"I don't know what to do," Hunk says, hanging his head as more tears fall. "I don't know what to do about anything."

Then he reaches forward blindly, and Keith hesitates- considers it- Hunk keeps crying, and so Keith rushes up to meet him, holding him tight as Hunk buries his face in his shoulder.

"We'll figure it out," Keith says, tears rising easily to the surface. He hides them in Hunk's chest, prays Hunk won't notice the damp patch he leaves behind. Is it pathetic of them to weep like this, knowing Lance is one wall away? But he feels like a million miles away- feels like he's quadrants and systems and whole galaxies away from them, from who he used to be. "We'll figure it out," he says, as if there could possibly be a way to fix whatever's gone wrong in Lance's head, his heart, his body.

You have no idea what they've done to me.

And they don't.

What are they supposed to do with that?

Sniffing a few more times, Hunk finally lets go, puffy-eyed. "You should go change," he says with an almost-smile. "I'll go get breakfast ready, okay?"

"Yeah," Keith says, swiping at his eyes. "See you in a bit."

Hunk pads back up the hall, and Keith wanders further in till he reaches his own room, bare and cold and useless. He doesn't shower immediately. He sits on his bed, puts his head in his hands, and tries to process.

Lance was awake in the middle of the night to fight bots on the training deck. When Keith confronted him, he acted like it was an itch to scratch, like he couldn't exist if he wasn't fighting, and thinking back, it does make sense - Lance had seemed restless during dinner, growing less and less focused till no one could rouse him from whatever state he was in. He ate until dinner was gone and he sat until they all got up and with some minor pushing, he returned to his room. How long did he wait to leave again? How long was he there, smashing robots to pieces? He had injuries, did he really not feel any of them? He pushed on regardless. When he fought Keith, when Keith wounded him, he pushed on regardless, like a robot, like- something more than that, something bigger.

Lance almost killed him. Isn't that fucking bizarre to say? Lance Hernandez, the boy he's in love with, the jokester of the team, the clown, tried and very nearly succeeded in killing Keith.

But he didn't mean to. He thought he was in the ring, thought Keith was just another opponent, forgot, apparently, that he'd been rescued at all. The idea was so surreal to him that he thought he was on drugs. Keith hadn't known what to say; heart still seized up in fear, he could only lie there and listen as Lance realised what he'd almost done.

He didn't even apologise.

Keith curls up, tucks his knees up to his chest to keep his heart locked inside his ribs, it feels like it might fall out. He is so...sad. About this, about everything, he wants to go to the training deck and fight and feel like himself again, but- what if Lance appears again? Some kind of avenging angel, untouchable and all-powerful, the kind that doesn't care about the destruction it wreaks. Golden-skinned and blue-eyed, he is sort of like an angel. Holy. He will not listen to them, he doesn't have to anymore, and he doesn't care about them either.
He doesn't care about any of them. Not even Hunk, his best friend. Not even Shiro, his supposed hero, his leader.

Not even Keith.

Who he nearly shot.

He can't live like this. There's no processing the fact that the boy- man- stranger you're in love with is suddenly- a stranger! A stranger who wants only to kill and make himself stronger. Lance lost something of himself when he was kidnapped; it seems like Lance lost almost all of himself. The only thing Keith recognises is his rifle. Everything else - his speech, his gait, even the way he looks - is all different. All one, two, a thousand steps out of reality.

Wrong.

He doesn't go to breakfast that morning.

--

Once Lance is awake, it doesn't take long to finish up the ship repairs. All they need is- something important, forgive Keith if he hasn't been listening to the chat at the dining table these days. It's too difficult to take his eyes off Lance, avenging angel robot Lance who doesn't pay attention either. He helps Hunk with the repairs, and Allura's mice report that he still gets up in the middle of the night to swim, that he'll find a desolate corridor and practise his fighting techniques even without an opponent.

"Maybe I should spar with him," Shiro mutters to Keith one day as they're preparing a visit to some junkyard planet for the part. Coran, Hunk, and Pidge are all suited up to go down and visit, and are double checking that their pod is good to go down in the hangar. Allura's overseeing them, making sure they have the right currency or other goods to trade, potentially making a checklist of other things for Coran to pick up if they must.

Shiro, Keith, and Lance are in the control room, waiting. Lance asked to go down with them, said he was sick of the castleship, but Allura had been firm, and now Lance is pacing by the windows, fists clenched.

Keith and Shiro sit by the wall, watching him. "Is that a good idea?" Keith asks.

"More of an even field," Shiro says, changing his hand briefly into its sharp point. "Two weapons."

"Yeah," Keith mumbles. "But still- he might lose his head again. If he tried to kill you-"

"I think I can handle it," Shiro says, and they both eye him up some more. "Although...if they call him the Champion now..."

"Do you think he's better than you?"

"I think he has two legs that are just as deadly as this," Shiro says, tapping his hand, "and I think he can use a gun, whereas I can't. And he can fight through pain and exhaustion and... We don't know the extent of things. I think not feeling anything is going to cause a lot of problems in the long term."

"Yeah," Keith sighs. "But in a one-on-one fight, it's...advantageous."

"I think I should do it," Shiro says, eyes fixed on Lance's restless form. "I don't think it's good for
him, keeping him cooped up like this...but I don't know what else to do. I keep asking Allura and Coran to run tests, but they say we need to wait for him to settle in, or they think it might remind him of being with the galra... I don't know what the right answer is here."

Keith nods, even though the hopelessness in Shiro's voice makes that horrible pit in his heart even worse. "We should probably just wait, if that's what they think... I mean, they know more than us about this...stuff."

"Right," Shiro mutters. "How are you doing, though? After...everything. You've been pretty gloomy, you know."

"I know," Keith says. "It's just...you know what it is."

"Yeah. How is... Are you okay? It must've been...scary."

"Yeah, I mean... It's not like I can do anything about it."

"Still feel the same way?"

"Pretty much."

Shiro nods, and squeezes Keith's shoulder. "It gets better, you know."

Doubtful, but Keith doesn't say so. He can't see how this ends well. Something awful is going to happen, he just knows it, and Lance is going to get hurt and he's not even going to care and it's going to make Keith do something stupid, make him care too much, and someone is definitely going to get their heart broken.

That person being Keith, as he's the only one out of the two of them who has one.

Then Lance hurls his fist at the window and lets out an impatient growl.

"Lance?" Shiro says, springing up and hurrying over. "What is it, buddy?"

Keith follows, a little behind.

"I have to fight," Lance says, curling and uncurling his hands into fists. "I have to fight! I have to!"

"Okay!" Shiro says, raising his hands a little. "Okay, you can fight. We'll spar together, how does that sound?"

"Will we?" Lance demands. "Because I've been locked out the training deck since that night."

Shiro winces, and Keith bites his lip at the fury in Lance's eyes. "It was a precaution," Shiro says, and Lance rolls his eyes. "Look, I'll go change, okay? I'll meet you there. Keith..."

"I'll go with him," Keith says, like a fucking idiot, and just shrugs as Lance turns his back and Shiro stares at him. "See you in a bit."

"Alright. I won't be long."

Shiro heads up to the bridge to get his uniform, and Keith follows after Lance, who's striding out the door down the corridor, to the training deck. He's a fast walker, his longer legs push him along the corridor so quick that Keith has to resort to a light jog to keep up. It's...embarrassing. Or at least it would be, if Lance didn't become capable of these things whilst in fucking galra imprisonment. Still, when Lance realises he can't keep up he tosses out a smirk to Keith, an almost-laugh,
mocking him. And it hurts.

It hurts a lot.

Keith has to ignore it. They make it the training deck, and Keith hovers on the edges as Lance suits up in the black-and-white armour, and takes forever to choose a weapon.

"What's Shiro's bayard?" he finally asks, hovering his hands over a pair of thin, lengthy daggers.

"Uh," Keith said, surprised and then immediately gutted to remember how Lance never got the chance to see it. "A war scythe."

Lance moves away from the daggers, reaching further up, to where long spears line the racks. He picks one out and balances it in his hands, puts it back and takes off a heavier one. The spear is made from what seems to be metal, and the sword topping it is thick and sharp.

"Okay," Lance says, leaving the sideroom, doors snapping shut behind him, and he moves into the centre of the room, feeling the spear in his hands, twirling it before him then around him, jabbing forward just as Shiro enters.

"Oh," Shiro says, suited up in his black paladin uniform, bayard materialising in his hand. "I thought you liked guns?"

"I can handle any weapon," Lance says, and Keith shares a glance with Shiro. "Snipers are a speciality."

"...Okay!" Shiro says. "Uh. Cool. I'm, uh, ready, if you want to start..."

Shiro places himself opposite Lance, and Keith sinks down the wall, hands on the floor in case he needs to spring up and stop them. Lance starts moving, circling Shiro, who responds in turn, both of them staring each other down. Shiro's bayard is long and heavy, the blade at the end heavy, Shiro's hands place at the bottom and midway up the pole. Lance holds his spear so that his hands are equidistant from the ends of the pole, face solemn, ready to strike.

Shiro's patience is endless. Lance sees that, and after a moment, he strikes. Shiro blocks with the pole, swings the hammer round to take a hit, but Lance rolls and dodges out the way, spinning and taking another hit at Shiro, connecting against his shoulder. Shiro hisses, but keeps going, blocking strike after jab after hit, dodging, rolling, lying flat against the floor and shoving Lance's foot off him with his prosthetic hand, jumping up again, they keep going and going and going and Lance is so good, too good, Shiro is obviously struggling and Lance won't stop.

"Lance," Shiro says, blocking another weighty hit from Lance, bending his knees for strength, "do you know who I am?"

"You're my opponent," Lance says, pushing hard enough for Shiro to take a step back.

"What's my name, Lance?"

"You don't get a name."

"Look at me, Lance. It's Shiro. Your leader?" Shiro tries, but Lance just pulls away and jumps back a few steps, enough for Shiro to take a breath before he twists round with his spear and jabs it directly into Shiro's armour. "Lance, it's me!"

"Shiro-" Keith tries.
"Don't. Let me talk to him."

But what he can say? Nothing gets through to Lance, not when he's fighting like this. Words can't explain it. He's so focused and intense, a cohesive fighting machine, it's like the galra stripped him of everything else just to give him this gift. Maybe that was their whole... Idea. Maybe it was inevitable that the paladins would get Lance back; and they made it so when that happened, he would be... more than useless. A burden on them. He can't fly Blue or Red, and he isn't good at mechanics like Hunk or clever with tech like Pidge, he doesn't know how an Altean castleship works like Coran, and he can't even be himself, can't make them all laugh like before, can't bring them together like that.

He's tense and and uncaring and if he goes too long without fighting he's edgy, and it's wrong, and it's creating this rift between them all and him, and Keith feels so torn, and is this what they wanted? Was this their plan to tear Voltron apart?

Is it working?

Watching Shiro struggle to remain in control of the situation, it can only feel like yes. But what else can they do? Stick Lance in cryo when they don't need him, like some kind of winter soldier? Let him swim all day and fight gladiators on the deck all night? Wait, and keep waiting? Let him settle in? Run tests on him? What kind of tests? What if the results aren't what they want? What if they posit something none of them want to think: that Lance has fundamentally changed on a level he can't turn back from? What if there's no coming back from this?

What are they supposed to do?

"Paladins!" calls a voice, and then the lights are flashing red, and this, somehow, is enough to discombobulate Lance, for him to stagger back and halt. "We are being attacked on the ground! I repeat, we are being attacked on the ground! We are not yet sure how the galra found us here, but Coran, Hunk, and Pidge need tactical support! Paladins, to the bridge!" Shiro and Keith are already heading up when Allura adds, "Lance, to me!"

Keith still has to change, so he's swift as he tugs on his undersuit and pulls on his armour, then follows Shiro to the chutes to their lions, and Allura nods at them as they hop in.

As they go, they hear again, "Lance, where are you? Come to the control room!"

Keith can only bite his lip as they're sped along to their lions, and once they're out, Keith realises the exact scale of what's happened. Were the galra always here or were they tipped off? Because not only are there soldiers on the ground; there's a great big battleship coming the castle's way, and Keith checks behind just to make sure Allura's brought the barrier up.

Shiro pops up on his dash, but he's not speaking directly to Keith. Instead, he talks to Coran, who comes through in Keith's helmet: "Okay, Coran, what's your status? You have it?"

"We have obtained the part, but I suspect some foul play! The galra have found us, and our pod has been destroyed."

"How did that-?"

"Is it possible for someone to come and pick us up? Or perhaps send another pod?"

"Okay, I'll come down. I'll-"

"Shiro!" Keith says, as a pod sails from the castle towards the planet. "Shiro, I think Lance got to
the pods."

"He- what?"

Allura pops up alongside Shiro, hands in her hair. "Yes, he got to the pods! I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen to me! What matters is that this gives the others a way out; Shiro and Keith, distract the battleship until the others come back and we can form Voltron. The faster we do this, the less danger Lance will be in. There's no doubt in my mind that the galra are here to reclaim him."

Keith nods, following her orders, but a thought rolls round his mind regardless: do the galra want Lance back or not? It seemed so obvious to Keith that he was meant to arrive to them like this, unfinished and unwieldy, perhaps some kind of sleeper agent, but according to Allura they want him back. Unless she's theorising. Unless it's a coincidence, unless they just want to get at Voltron as a whole.

He darts left as the battleship tries to blast him, speeding forward and jumping up on the ship, running along it as its cannons try and get him. He doesn't even need to worry about this; he's done it so often, now, searching galra stations for Lance. His instincts carry him where he needs to be, until Coran comes on the comms saying, "Lance won't leave with us! He's engaging the galra!"

And Keith makes a decision.

"Get in the pod," he says, "I'll get him!"

"What? No, keep fighting - I'll stay with him."

"Allura needs you to look after the castle so she can pilot Blue! I'll go down and pick him up, okay?"

"Keith-" Shiro says, flashing up on his screen, but he takes one look at Keith's face and backs down. "Alright. Be fast, okay?"

"Keith-" Shiro says, flashing up on his screen, but he takes one look at Keith's face and backs down. "Alright. Be fast, okay?"

"Okay," Keith says, and flies round the battleship and heads down to the coordinates popping up on his dash. How could he not fly down, hearing that? Maybe it's a stupid idea - maybe it'd be better if Coran says, but as Keith enters the atmosphere, he can already see the pod flying up to the ship, and Keith hovers as he descends, spots the galra in the middle of this junkyard marketplace, converging on something. Someone.

Lance can't survive that many galrans. He can't.

Keith parks at the nearest area possible, jumps out, and starts running. The galra on the edge don't even notice him, so he takes out at least three with the element of surprise, and starts slashing through to Lance, who, when Keith finally gets close enough to see him, is just cleaving through galra with the spear. It's magnificent and gory and horrible - soldiers slice at him with their own weapons, shoot at him with their blasters, but Lance is graceful and quick and unfeeling, dodges a bullet, doesn't even flinch when one grazes his side and red stains the armour.

He keeps going.

Keith helps, and somehow, Lance is able to distinguish between him and the other galra, and they end up fighting back-to-back, Lance taking out double the opponents while Keith uses his shield to cover them both, when he's able. Somehow...it works. Dropships come in from time to time, the fighting lasts a least a half-hour, just wave upon wave of galra fighting towards them, trying to grab Lance, trying to knock him out, but Lance will not be touched. The crowd thins until there are no
galra left, just a circle of corpses around Lance and Keith, and Lance is brushing blood off his uncovered chin with a smile.

"Come on," Keith says, panting a little and staring wide-eyed at this bloody circle as he carefully steps around the bodies til he's free of it. Lance gives them no such respect. "Just get in my lion. We weren't supposed to take this long."

Lance goes, satisfied with himself, covered in blood, although how much is galra and how much is his own is impossible to determine. Keith didn't sustain too many injuries, but he has a shield; Lance doesn't bother with those these days. He just stands behind Keith's seat, crossing his arms over the back of it and leaning his head down, watching out the window as Keith fires up the engines and joins the others.

"I missed Red," Lance says after a few minutes of blasting and dodging have passed. Keith doesn't have the time to spare a glance up to him, but he can see Lance in the reflection of the window, reaching along to touch the wall. "It wasn't Blue I was connected with. It was still Red... She missed me. She was upset."

"I know," Keith says. "I could feel it, when she let me in."

"How long did it take? For her to let you in?"

"A couple months," Keith says, glancing back for only a tick. Lance isn't looking at him, he has a strange expression on, like he wants to feel this nostalgia, or sadness, but cannot. Turning back, Keith realises a laser is coming his way, too late for him to dodge it, and Hunk barrels in front of him with a grin and a I got you, buddy.

"A couple months," Lance repeats, returning his attention to the sky. "I must've stopped feeling then."

Keith blinks rapidly, and finally understands what Lance is getting at. "Oh?" he says. "Two months...? That's..." Not a lot of time. What did they do to him?

"Uh, Allura?" Coran says, safely in the castle it seems. "I'm being contacted by the enemy ship. Should I open communications?"

"Do it," Allura says. "I want to see what they have to say."

"Alright," Coran says. "Sharing the link now."

Coran opens the communication link, and it pops up on Keith's screen, and Lance, pressed against the back of Keith's pilot chair, goes rigid.

"Give back the boy," the druid demands, and at once, everything goes still: every lion freezes, both ships stop their attacks. "Give him back, and we will end our assault."

"We refuse," Coran says instantly. "We will not give him back to you! You might as well run away now before we-"

"Coran," Allura says. "Why do you want him back in the first place?"

The druid sniffs, and Lance's fingers at Keith's shoulder turn white. "We had...experiments," she says. "He has some uses yet to be unlocked."

Lance's hand flies off the chair and hurls against the wall; he turns away, fists clenched. "Lance,"
Keith murmurs, but he doesn't listen to him.

He listens to the druid: "Lance," she says, as if tasting the word, as if trying it out the very first time. "Come back to us. It is not hard. We will give you whatever you need: better quarters, a feast for every meal, men and women as you like. We will not do much. Some ideas. Experiments. We still had so much to teach you. You had so much to learn."

Lance doesn't turn around, but he breathes heavily, loud enough Keith can hear, ragged and uncertain.

"And you will fight," she says, and that seems to be the key, Lance coming to kneel by Keith's side, one leg bent forward. "We can put you in the ring, or wherever you want. You will have incessant enemies. We would not hold you back."

"Stop it!" Allura cries. "Coran, end the transmission!"

"I can't!" Coran says. "Something's blocking it!"

"What," Lance says, "what would you do to me?"

"Nothing terrible. All we've done is made you stronger - are you not the best fighter, now? We saw you on the planet. You killed so many, with such skill. Aren't you invincible? Pain, exhaustion, hunger, thirst...they do not touch you. And they take you seriously, now, don't they? They have to."

"They have to," Lance murmurs, eyes dazed when Keith turns to stare at him.

"Lance," he says, reaching down to take Lance's wrist in his hand, as if, if Lance wanted to leave, Keith could hold him back by pure resolve alone. "What are you thinking? You don't want to go back there! Look at what they did to you! They hurt you!"

"They made me stronger," Lance says.

"They killed your soul! Lance- didn't you want to leave? How much time did you spend, wishing you were rescued?"

"Some..." Lance considers it, eyes going distant and vague. "Months. I don't know. Remember. Time was- time is- I don't know how long it was."

"But you wanted to leave, didn't you? They hurt you. They took away Red from you."

"They...did..."

"But we gave back so much more!" the druid says, clearly agitated. "And we will give you so much more. Take the red lion- come find us. We will help you again."

"Help me...but what about Keith? And Red?"

"There are always more experiments to be done."

"...No," Lance says, and the druid freezes as she realises she said the wrong thing. "No, I won't let them get hurt. I won't do it."

"Then we'll leave them alone."

"No. No! I won't do it! I'm not going back! I'm not! Leave us alone! I won't go back!"
"Lance- Lance, calm down-"

"Then perhaps you will like this addition," the druid says, her thin lips curled into a horrible smile. Keith tries to calm Lance down, but he is raging, and terrified, he shakes but he still tries to reach the screen, fist raised as if to smash it. "We haven't tried this before. We implemented it in other ways many times, however. Do you remember? I don't think you will. You didn't like it very much."

She presses a button on something, and as if by magic - and it very well may be - a shiver runs up Lance's legs to be specific, they both glow purple with electricity crackling up them- and then-up the rest of Lance- Keith can't explain it, Lance just drops and starts screaming, his body spasming, electricity running down every limb.

"Keith? Keith, what's happening?!" shouts Allura. "Coran, shut that comm off!"

"He- she- I don't know!" Keith cries.

"I can only shut the comms if I power down the whole castle," Coran says. "You'll have to cover me until I power up again."

"Do it," Allura says, and after a moment, the castle lights go out, the barrier drops, and the druid, cackling, drops off the screen. Outside the window, the battleship resumes shooting. "Keith, what is going on?"

"She- it's like, long-distance electrocution or something!" Keith has to shout to be heard over Lance, and as blood trickles from his lip, Keith realises too late he needs to put something in his mouth. "Shit," he mutters, "shit, shit, shit." He rummages around the floor, the various shelves built into the lion, and finally comes away with a strip of leather he wraps round Lance's head like a gag. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he says as tears run down Lance's face, his eyes shut but his expression all torn up. "It's for your own good, I'm sorry, I'm sorry-"

"What is it, Keith?! Long distance electrocution?"

"It's exactly how it sounds!" Keith shouts, wondering if he needs to tie Lance down or if it's better to leave him like this, jerking to and fro in such obvious agony. "It came from his legs, I don't know! I don't know what to do! He's in pain! A lot of pain, I don't-"

"Keith, calm down," Shiro says. "Just breathe, take a moment, evaluate the situation-"

And then it stops, and Keith is on his knees again, ripping the leather from Lance's mouth. "Lance?" he says. "Lance, are you okay?"

His eyes open slowly, wet and anguished. "Keith," he says, and he sounds so much like his old self that Keith's eyes go wide in shock. "Keith, I'm s-sorry, sorry I... I..."

"Lance, what's- what happened, what are you..."

"Should've," Lance says, gasping, "should've done better... They w-wanted...weapon... Didn't...resist..."

He coughs, more blood drips from his lips. Keith's hands hover about Lance, uncertain where to touch, if he can, if it's okay. "Resist? What weapon? We have a weapon?"

"M-make..."
The electricity crackles up again, and Lance breaks off in another scream, and Keith fumbles with the leather, feels wetness on his cheeks.

No. He can't cry about this. The druids are in that ship, right? Keith just has to deal with the ship. Then maybe Lance won't be in so much pain.

He apologises once more, gets in the pilot seat, and takes in the scene. Everyone else is fighting; the castleship is still dark. Keith joins the fray; the moment he does so, Shiro calls for Voltron, and like that, it is easy to call the sword to arms and fight the battleship properly. Lance, lying, spasmimg, on the floor, is tossed from side to side as Keith moves; Keith can't do anything but keep whispering that he's sorry, than do his best to slice open the galra ship down the centre, but it's only Hunk, with the huge gun blasting at the front of the ship til it stops moving, that breaks Lance free of it.

"Report to the castle, now!" Allura demands of them, the castleship finally back on and protected. Keith asks Red to take them back and she complies, and he sits by Lance, bloody, bruised, heaving. Takes the leather out and tosses it to the side, grabs Lance's shoulders and tries to haul him up a little. It's harder than before. Lance is heavier, and Keith is still a little scared that he's going to have another fit, but he remains still, near-lifeless in Keith's arms. He doesn't try to speak again, he doesn't move. His body trembles every now and then, like the shakes after an earthquake. Keith is too scared to move him any further. For a second there, he had almost sounded like...himself.

What weapon do they want? How does Lance know about it, and what did they do that made him tell them? It's not Voltron, is it? Is it some special ability the galra didn't know about? Is it something else?

Is he ever going to sit up and speak like himself again? Was it a one-off, or was it because he was in so much pain?

...Pain. Pain he professes he doesn't feel. Is that what it takes? Electric shocks or ethanol on open wounds? Is that how the old Lance comes back?

It can't be. It can't be, but Keith has no time to think on it: Red has landed in her hangar, and the jaw is bursting open.

"Keith?" calls Coran, his voice echoing quietly inside Red. "Keith, are you alright?"

"I need-" Keith calls, and his voice cracks as he looks down at Lance, black-and-white armour, awash with red blood. He's bleeding from somewhere, he's still in pain, he's... "I need help! I can't-can't-"

Coran rushes in to help, and by both of them pulling an arm around their shoulders each, they manage to stand and bring Lance up with them, supporting him round the waist, feet dragging. Coran is hurt too, actually - he has a bandage wrapped around his left arm, and Keith realises the others must've engaged with the galra before taking off in Lance's pod; Coran wasn't wearing any armour, either.

Shiro, standing outside Red with the others, sees this, and rushes forward to take Coran's place. Hunk only needs to see Lance, beaten, bloodied, before he, too, comes forward and trades a look with Keith. Keith is reluctant to let go; Lance is warm and comforting and injured by his side, but Hunk hasn't been hurt at all. He and Shiro will take Lance to the infirmary faster than Keith can.

So he lets go, and Hunk takes his place.
They start a quick walk to the infirmary, all seven of them, and Allura falls into place by Keith, asking, "What in Altea happened there? Was he hurt?"

"Worse than that," Keith says, loud enough that they all can hear him. "You heard what she said on the comms? I think they must've- tortured him with electrocution. And...somehow, they managed to do something to his legs, that let them do that to him from a distance. I- I didn't know what to do, I tried to gag him so he wouldn't bite his tongue, but- but I didn't want to hurt him, o-or tie him up like they did to him, a-and-"

"It's alright, Keith," Allura says, trying to infuse her words with warmth and reassurance, but her brows are tilted up, her hands wringing together in worry. "You did your best. There was no way for us to predict such a thing. Lance never mentioned it..."

"Princess," Shiro says, "we can't possibly put him in another pod. It's- that's the third time in only a week or so. It can't be healthy."

Allura nods sternly. "It isn't. Especially since he was in so long the first time... We'll just have to treat him normally."

"And...I think it might be time for some tests. If- if there was a way we could've known about this, if we had only had a look at him-"

"I know, Shiro!" Allura says as Keith's eyes go wide. He hadn't even considered that, but yes - if they'd run tests on him, on his legs, if they'd known this was a possibility then perhaps it would never have happened. "I know. I'll speak to Coran once Lance is bandaged up. Alright?"

"...Yes, princess. Thank you."

The rest of the hurry is quiet. In the infirmary, Coran and Hunk carefully lay Lance on one of the beds, and Shiro shoos them over to Allura to double check their minor injuries are being cared for. Keith can only watch as Shiro takes off Lance's armour, peels off the undersuit, and stares.

He has another gut wound.

"How the hell," Keith says, wide-eyed and fingers clenched. Looking at Lance's body is hard enough without this. "He was fighting- he- fuck."

"I knew this would happen," Shiro mutters, searching the shelves till he pulls out a cloth and runs it under the taps. "I knew this was exactly what this 'not feeling' thing would cause - Lance fighting regardless of potentially fatal wounds. Aggravated by electrocution!" He shakes his head and starts wiping the blood from the wound. He has several others: a bullet wound on his shoulder, some grazes across his arms and hips, a stab wound along his thigh.

"Is he gonna be alright?" Hunk asks, voice small as he pads over. Unharmed, he has been watching the whole exchange in silence. "It sounded bad, Keith. It sounded really, really bad." He takes a deep breath, and Keith has no doubt he's near tears again.

"It was bad," Keith says, looking over to see Pidge watching, white-faced, as Shiro goes over every wound with the wet cloth. Allura has cut open Coran's sleeve and is dabbing the wound there with a strange balm, but even she glances over for a moment and bites her lip. "For a moment, he...he spoke to me. And he sounded like himself."

"He did?" Shiro asks sharply.

"What did he say?" Pidge asks, coming to stand by Hunk. "When?"
"Between getting electrocuted. He said...something about a weapon. I couldn't make it out. He was having difficulty speaking, but...he couldn't resist something, uh, and he said there was a weapon, and he should've done better... I- is there a weapon? I don't... I don't know what he meant."

"...Did he mean Voltron?" Hunk asks, frowning. "Because, uh, the galra already know about that."

"I know that! I thought, maybe something to do with the bayards? Or...something...?"

"I don't know what it could be," Allura says. "I can't think of any weapons he'd know about that none of us would."

"He also said 'make', just...on its own. Maybe he agreed to help them make a weapon?"

Allura nods slowly. "That'd make more sense... Well, we'll wait until he's awake and healed. Until then, I'll hold off on any tests... I want to make sure I have his consent to proceed with them."

"...What do we do now?" Hunk asks.

"Someone will have to watch over Lance-"

"I'll do it," Keith says instantly, and Allura gives a wonky kind of smile to him, sad and pleased and a little pitying all at once.

"Yes," she says, "alright. I need to have a look at your injuries, anyway."

"We should go wash up," Shiro says, looking at the others. "Maybe make some dinner. If you boys are tired, I could try..."

Hunk shakes his head, patting Shiro's shoulders. "Very kind of you, space dad, but I don't think it would be good of us to leave you alone in the kitchen."

"...I cook, you direct?"

"Much better. Coran?" Hunk says.

"I think I'll just have a wee sit, eh?" Coran says. "Haven't been in a bit of action like that for, goodness, who knows!" Hunk nods and smiles, and they all kindly ignore the age lining Coran's eyes, the way they fix on Lance and how his smile to immediately drops at the sight of him.

"Right," Pidge says. "Uh, I'll just..."

"Why don't you look over our comm system?" Allura suggests. "In fact, I'll go with you. We need to check nothing was damaged in the attack."

Pidge hesitates, eyes stuck on Lance, before nodding.

"Coran? Can you handle Lance and Keith's injuries?"

"Of course, princess. On you go, all of you! Make us a stunning dinner, yes?"

Hunk just laughs, waving Coran off, sparing one last look at Lance as his humour fades, and heads out. Shiro ruffles Keith's hair and goes; Pidge goes up to Lance's side and squeezes his hand before following. Allura, with a quick, sweeping look, hurries off.

"Alright, boys," Coran says, going to the sink and washing his hands. "Bit of a shock attack today, wasn't it? That junkyard is full of ruffians. Must've seen our paladin outfits and contacted the galra
to let them know we were there! At least I got the part, though."

"Yeah," Keith says, lingering from a moment before going to Lance's side, leaning against the bed and looking down at him. "It was...a lot."

"I hope you boys are alright," Coran says softly, picking up the cream Allura was using and sitting on the edge of Lance's bed, dabbing down the wounds. "Why don't you try and clean your injuries while I patch him up?"

Keith nods, discards some more of his armour, peels off the chest of his undersuit, and does as requested. He can't help watching Coran, incredibly tender as he salves the wounds, and wonder at the relationship between him and Lance. Coran has always existed in the background, useful, it's true, but mostly goofy, used too many Altean words to ever really make sense. But something must've happened. Maybe Lance talked to Coran about things no one else heard about. Coran treats Lance as if he were his own son.

It makes Keith's heart hurt acutely, so he focuses back on his own wounds, grits his teeth as he pads warm, wet cloth down on them. Thank god there aren't many; not like Lance. A few nicks and grazes, in comparison. It still hurts like hell.

It doesn't take long, though. Keith eventually just stands and watches as Coran carefully wraps bandages around Lance's wounds, ties them and cuts them off gently, tugging just a little to check they're tight enough. Lance sleeps regardless, and Keith wonders what really knocked him unconscious: did the electricity fuck him up? Or was he bleeding out from the gut wound? Is it something else, that Lance can't feel and therefore can't tell them about?

"There you go," Coran murmurs to Lance, brushes his hair back against his head and flattens his lips into an almost-smile. It makes him look so unbearably sad that Keith has to look away; wonder if Coran had any family of his own. A wife, or husband? Parents? Children? Is this his makeshift family? Did he lose everything when he lost Altea?

He must've. And then he was stuck with them. A bunch of strange aliens who rarely took him seriously or valued his contributions enough. God, as if Keith didn't already feel enough like shit.

"Thanks, Coran," Keith says finally. "For, um. Doing this. And everything. I know we don't say it enough..."

Coran lets go of Lance and washes his hands, then approaches Keith with the cream and a happier smile on his face. "Oh, it's no worry, young lad! I am the castle adviser, I needn't be thanked for doing my job!"

"But you went out there and fought without any armour on, or- um. Just. Thank you. I know Lance would appreciate it." Hopefully. Old Lance would, the Lance between electrocutions would.

"Coran says, "I know," and starts dabbing at Keith's cleaned wounds as well, and Keith leans back against Lance's bed and shuts his eyes, squeezes his eyes every time the pain nips at him, and remains quiet. He wonders about the others: making dinner despite their exhaustion, looking over the comms system for errors or faults. Still working so hard to help Lance, to heal him. All this time, did they really think they could just charge in, grab him, look after him a little and he'd be okay? Shiro wasn't even a paladin when he was taken and look what they did to him. He still hasn't recovered. Keith thinks perhaps he never will.

And nor will Lance. He'd stood there on the deck, said you don't know who I am, and Keith hadn't, and thinks maybe he won't ever again. Old Lance can't coexist with all this...horror he's faced. It
has to affect him somehow. If they do reverse this...issue; if Lance ever feels again, he won't be who he used to be.

But Keith thinks he would still love him. Every time he looks into the eyes of this strange Lance, bearing down to kill him or back-to-back fighting with him, Keith thinks *I love him anyway*.

He stays in the infirmary all day. They bring him food intermittently, hang around to check on Lance. He falls asleep, eventually, on a seat by the bed, head by Lance's arm.

Nightmares dance the hours away; fighting galra, fighting Lance, fighting with his own useless heart about its recent decisions. In these nightmares, Lance kisses him slow and sweet before blowing his head off.

Chapter End Notes

:^)

i Love.....feedback....and Hunk <3 u.u
lance reawakens, and once again he is different

i do need to inform u all its 2.21am and my first night back at uni and i am drunk so. ijm sorry ? i wrote this all sober. obiously. um. if i fucked up the formatting its bc. im still lowkey drunk. my ears r ringing hardcore.

otherwise again. if im being Bad abt cuba pls tell me

i listened to a lot of sufjan stevens writing this. like . put him on youtube and watch him go. u will end up in his xmas music at one point. accept itl. enjoy it. also. hey. headcanon city am i right

The world is filled with
The lives of people who try to define
The lines that find you
Can anyone save you?
In Transit, Mark Hoppus

Back on the table again, Lance awakens in comfort. He doesn't open his eyes; no need to alert his captors he's awake before he absolutely needs to. It feels...reassuring to be back here. Lance isn't sure what he was doing the past few days - no doubt fighting and killing and getting shot up into a daze - but it feels a little like he went on a holiday to nowhere, he disappeared from the world for a while, into warm, safe whiteness, but now he has returned to exactly where he needs to be.

At least he cannot feel anymore. Being on this table is much more bearable when the nick of needles in his throat isn't a bother, when he cannot feel the rush of drugs hunting through his veins for thoughts and senses to contort. It's almost fun, to watch them experiment with him, fitting out his leg and seeing which slashes are lethal, which aren't, how long they can prod at something until it does become lethal, whether they can change it, whether it's better the way it is.

Slowly, voices begin to fade in, soft and quiet, just out of earshot. The whispers drift in and out Lance's ears, the timbre, the words, the meaning of it all lost on him. It doesn't matter. The druids will do as they like to him; he has no say in anything that happens these days. He lives, he breathes, he fights, he wins, he sleeps, sometimes.

Like this, he drifts, just another wave in the expansive, unending ocean, waiting for its turn to come ashore...except no one comes to wake him. Usually, after a while, they will realise he is
awake; that his breathing patterns have changed, that his eyes are no longer going crazy under his lids...but there is nothing.

So Lance opens his eyes, and then goes rigid. This...isn't his galra prison cell. This is the infirmary on the castleship, as far as he can remember. The same white walls and healing pods lining the sides, the same soft bed, the same people... It must be the drugs. Lance hasn't had ones so delusional in...

He doesn't know. Memory doesn't exist here, and it's probably a good thing. Better to not know all the things they do to him. One day he might finally have nightmares, and it'll probably be horrible to relive everything that happened.

The druids are in this delusion too. It is like a skin that paints everything in the room Voltron-coloured - his doctors' room is the infirmary, the druids are the paladins, his friends, and whatever torture device a druid is holding seems to be Allura with a holographic tablet. They look at him, now, and rush to his side.

"Is he awake?" a druid shaped like Hunk asks. "Is he okay? Lance, buddy? Are you alright?"

"Lance?" the one with the device says. "How are you feeling?"

Maybe the delusion includes sound too. He doesn't reply, just lies down and waits. The druids have stopped asking him questions, now. They just come up with theories and enact them upon Lance to see if they are false or not; whatever he has to say about his body is unimportant.

"...Lance?" the Shiro-shaped druid asks. "Are you alright?"

"Maybe he can't hear us," the Pidge one suggests.

"He did say something about not being able to hear when we rescued him, but that was because he was drugged up," the Shiro druid says. "Unless it's a continual thing...? But..."

What are they talking about?

"Maybe it's due to the electrocution," Allura-druid says, frowning and peering down at him. "I've never encountered something like this, I don't know the correct protocol... Coran?"

"I'm sorry, princess," and another druid approaches...and there have never been more than four druids crowded round his bedside at once, and here are six of them, splayed around his bed, watching him. "I haven't dealt with this either."

"Alright. Anyone else?"

"I haven't dealt with it," Shiro-druid says, "but I know some of the effects. On humans, that is. I think mostly it's just pain, um, and confusion... Memory loss... That kind of thing."

Allura-druid nods. "Maybe that's all this is," she says, and looks down at him. "Lance, do you know what we're saying? Do you know where you are?"

They all look so expectant; they clearly want an answer. "I-I'm in the druids' room," he says, and their faces all fall. "You put me on drugs... I'm having a hallucination, I-I think." His voice shakes. He can't help it. Whatever they've done to him during this holiday he's had has rendered him unusually nervous; his hands tremor, his heart feels too heavy in his chest, knotted up with anxiety and some strange fear he has for the druids and no one else.
"Okay," Allura-druid says after taking a deep breath. "Lance, you're not with the druids anymore. We, the paladins and I, rescued you from their grip approximately two movements ago. Yesterday, you went planet-side - against my word, might I add - and ended up battling the galra. Keith and you proceeded back to the castle in the red lion, but you were... Suffered... The druids found some way to enact electrocution on you remotely. Do you remember any of this?"

"That can't be true," Lance says, his eyes going a little wide, his heart pounding. He shifts up a little so he's not lying down on the bed, squeezing the pillow between his back and the wall. He hates feeling like this. Hates feeling at all - hadn't they got rid of this? "None of that happened. I'm still on the ship. Y-you're just trying to trick me... I don't believe you."

"Lance," Shiro-druid now says. "We are not the druids. You aren't on any drugs. We are not a hallucination."

"You are a pipe dream. I'm never getting out of here."

"Lance," comes another voice, Keith. He is the closest to Lance, sitting in a chair right by the bedside. His hair is all mussed up, his eyes a little purple. Why would Lance hallucinate Keith like this, instead of neat and tidy like always? "We fought three days ago. You tried to kill me because you thought you were back in the ring. Do you remember that?"

He shakes his head slowly.

"It'll be the electrocution," Hunk says finally. "It must've gotten to his brain. That's why he can't remember."

"The druid said," Keith adds, and Lance tenses at the mention of her, "that she'd electrocuted him before, and she asked if he remembered, and said he probably wouldn't. Remember? When she was on the comms?"

"I remember," Allura says, and Pidge is nodding thoughtfully.

"Maybe it's on purpose," Pidge says. "If Lance can't feel anything, he can't feel pain - therefore by electrocuting him to the extent that he can't remember it, they're essentially hiding his biggest weakness from him...and us."

"Except now we know," Allura says. "Lance, do you believe us yet?"

"I...don't know," he says, surveying the room once more - and it does look just like the infirmary, and those do look like his friends, except tired, and...injured, Lance realises, Coran is wearing a sleeveless vest because of bandages around his upper left arm, and Pidge is standing a little awkwardly, as though she might have a leg injury of some sort, and Keith has the tip of a bandage peeking out from beneath his t-shirt.

And Lance is injured, too, although he doesn't know how. He relaxes his muscles for a moment then tenses up again, feeling his body out, except it doesn't quite work like that. There is no pain - except for some bleak, hollow thing caged in his ribs - but there is the tightening and loosening of bandages, up his right thigh, across his stomach, on his shoulder.

"Maybe," he says finally, and Hunk manages a supportive if a little weak smile. They aren't druids, just his friends. This isn't his old doctors' room. It is the infirmary. If they say they rescued him... If he and Keith fought, if there was some fight with the galra yesterday and they've all come out bearing injuries...except... "Why aren't I in a healing pod? If I was injured?"

"You've already been in twice this movement," Allura explains. "Excessive use of a healing pod
can lead to...some detrimental side effects."

Which is a perfectly reasonable explanation. Still, Lance can't help but feel on edge, half-certain that this is some elaborate trick the druids are playing on him, maybe an experiment in how far the human brain can go in search of hope, how satisfying it would be to crush it...

"How are you feeling?" Shiro asks. "You've been through a lot."

"I don't feel anything," Lance says, robotic, but that's not quite true. "I don't remember anything since..." Since when? Time blurs into one. "I don't know."

"That's okay," Coran says softly. "I'm sure you'll figure it out soon enough."

But will he? Every time a memory comes close to the surface, Lance somehow chases it away. It's like trying to get out a tiny breadcrumb from a drink; it just keeps escaping.

"You should shower," Allura says. "But be careful, and come back so we can redress your wounds." And then: "That goes for everyone! Keith?"

Keith stands and nods. Hunk hesitates, exchanges a few looks, and waits till Lance is up and walking, and then Lance's eyes go wide as he sees something he couldn't from beneath the infirmary blanket.

His other leg is a prosthetic. Not only that- it's broken. "What did they do to my leg?" he demands furiously, first to Hunk, then to Pidge who's hovering by the door, Keith behind her. "What the fuck did they- was it you? Is that why it's broken?"

Hunk's jaw drops, and he stares wide-eyed at Lance's leg and back up to his face. "Buddy," he says, "it was replaced before you got here. When we rescued you, the galra were putting it in."

"When you rescued me?" Lance repeats. "No, no, why would they do it with the second leg? Nothing was broken, i-it was a minor accident, they wouldn't take off the whole-"

"What accident?" Keith asks, hand tight on Pidge's shoulder. "What happened?"

"I-I don't know, I was in the ring? Against a, a big animal, it bent my leg in half and the bone came through, but- but it was fine! It's not like I felt it- they could've fixed it- why did they- why- both-"

"I don't understand," says Hunk slowly. "Your leg was already different when we picked you up, and you were fine with it. What changed?"

"He doesn't remember," says Pidge. "He doesn't remember us picking him up, so why would he remember getting his leg replaced?"

"Paladins?" calls Allura, coming back down the hallway. "What's happening? Is everything alright?"

"Lance forgot he had another prosthetic," says Pidge, gesturing to Lance and how he keeps staring at his leg. "He's...freaking out."

"I'm not freaking out," Lance says lowly. "This doesn't make sense. Why would they put in another one? D-did I do something wrong? It wasn't even blasted off, there was no need... What did they want... Why would they..."

"Maybe they just wanted symmetry," Pidge says, and Lance makes a low, horrified noise. He
cannot stifle it; it feels like whatever old, rotten fears he had of the druids is all coming to the surface, escaping him in violent ways.

"Maybe it was for your balance," Hunk says. "To keep you evenly matched?"

Lance just shakes his head, unable to tear his eyes from the glowing purple of every screw and bolt and edge of this, this thing they gave him, it's okay with his right leg, at least there was a reason, at least it works, but this one... This isn't Lance. This isn't anything of his. It's- it's-

It's an abomination. Lance doesn't want it. He scrambles his suit off, ignoring the way Hunk goes whoa dude and Pidge jumps back a step, he falls against the edge of the bed and feels out the end of the prosthetic. Midway up his thigh, just like the other one. He digs his fingers against this edge, and starts yanking.

"What are you doing?" Keith asks, sounding shocked, but Lance doesn't look up, just pulls harder.

"I don't want this," he says, breathing heavily. "I don't want this fucking thing!"

"Buddy- buddy, stop," Hunk says, coming to his side and trying to pry his hands away, but Lance elbows him in the gut and his grip loosens till Lance can knock him away. "Lance, come on! Your leg works fine!"

"But it won't!" Lance says, digging the heels of his hands against the edge and trying to push. "It's going to fucking break!"

Keith is at his other side, trying to stop him, and Pidge is yelling for the others, Coran and Allura and Shiro, and trying to grab his leg to stop him.

"Lance, just calm down!" Pidge says, hopping back again as he tries to kick her. "I can have a look at your leg and see if I can fix it! Don't-"

"Lance? Lance!" Shiro says, running in after Allura and taking the scene in. Lance continues to heave, yanking as hard as he can, but it won't give. It won't fucking give. What the fuck does he need to do? Get a huge fucking pizza cutter and saw it off? Get an actual saw and use that? "I thought you wanted those legs!"

Lance finally glances up at him. Shiro's just in front of him, still taking in the situation, but staring hard at Lance, frowning. "No," he says. "No, it doesn't make sense. They didn't do it right. It's fucking broken-"

"It still works," Shiro says, crouching down so their faces are level. "It's just as good are your other leg. Just as strong and fast and advanced. Isn't it?"

Looking round, everyone is nodding, still somewhat fearful of what Lance will do.

"It won't do you, or anyone else, any good trying to get rid of that. Do you really want to lose it?"

"It makes me...stronger," Lance says, and Shiro nods. "And faster. Better."

"Right," Shiro says, and Lance lets go.

"Right," Lance echoes, and finally stills. Hunk stares at him for a moment, examines his face and his broken grip on his leg, and lets go of Lance's arm. Pidge drops his leg and steps back, hovering near Shiro, and Keith is sending Shiro an indeterminable look as he, too, lets go.
Allura and Coran stand to the side, silent.

"Right," Lance says again, quietly. "What were we doing again?"

"Showering," Allura says, watching him with careful eyes. "Then you were going to come back and have your wounds redressed."

Lance peers down, still dressed only in his underwear. His stomach is wrapped up in bandages. His shoulder, his thigh... "Right."

And as suddenly as his panic had begun, it departs, and Lance does so too. Steps out of the cryo suit and walks out, leaving the rest of them quiet and watchful in his wake.

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They want to run tests on him. They don't say it to his face, but he knows. Keeps walking into rooms where Allura and Shiro are talking and then they'll go silent, staring at Lance with weird, fake smiles plastered on to hide their true intentions. They want to experiment on him. How is he supposed to trust them?

He can't. He can't.

He won't.

So his leg is fucking broken, but at least it works as well as his other one. He keeps glimpsing it as he walks, as he fights, as he eats, rotten and ragged and purple. Incorrect. Unfinished. At least it works, he tells himself, but he fucking hates it, sees it and almost panics every time. Why? How? When? Why can't he remember? They say they rescued him. Why? How? When? Why can't he remember?

They say he got hurt so badly it impacted his memory, but he thought that only happened when he was stuck with the galra. What are they doing to him?

What's happening to him?

What's happening to everyone? No one will speak to him. They're scared of him. Maybe they should be. They say he almost killed Keith.

Maybe he did. He doesn't remember.

Hours pass in a daze. Lance is too preoccupied feeling out his injuries and the gaps in his memory, of which there are so many, trying to figure how he got from the table in the druids' room to here, surrounded by his supposed friends who whisper as he walks by and ask him not to go on the training deck unsupervised. What has he done that's made them so anxious around him?

He ends up laying on his bed for hours, the world a blur around him. Time doesn't exist, the walls to his room don't exist, the bed he's lying on doesn't exist. It's just him and his thoughts, whatever he can conjure of them, trying to understand and consistently failing. Nothing makes sense. How long was he gone? They haven't told him. Didn't they miss him? Weren't they worried about him?

Does he even care? Some sliver of himself buried deep in his rotten ribs wants to say yes, but Lance can't find it. He no longer knows himself. He's not sure he ever did. All he remembers are flashes of his childhood and long, lingering fears from his imprisonment, moments of pain and seconds of fighting, of winning, of beating opponents nonstop.
Who was he before that? Was he like this or was he different? Who was he when he was rescued? Was he like this or was he different?

Every time he drifts into something resembling sleep, all he gets are greyscale memories that don't make sense. Water glittering in the heavy summer heat. A girl with a face like his laughing, head thrown back. People he used to know jostling around him as they watch Keith take flight in a sim. These memories pass over him like waves in the ocean, cresting over him and his mind, past clarity, through comprehension. Names are peeled from his brain like the rotten skin of a carrot and tossed in the rubbish. Ages and faces, degrees of importance... Lance has nothing to define himself except the here and now, but he doesn't know the here and now. His bones shake inside his skin like an earthquake passing through. His whole body is tired, Lance can see it when he raises a hand and it shakes.

He knows he should feel tired.

All he feels is confused.

He is dragged back to reality by repeated knocking on his door, and just as Lance hears it, he turns his face to the door and it slides open, and Hunk comes in.

"Hey, dude," he says a little awkwardly, hanging back in the door. "It's time for dinner."

"...Right," Lance says at length, and sits up, eyes catching on his leg as he swings them over the side of his bed. If it weren't for the purple in the cracks, you wouldn't even know it wasn't his own leg. It's that realistic. But it's broken. All of him, broken.

"Are you alright, buddy?" Hunk asks, and takes careful steps inside, the door cautiously closing.

"I'm fine," Lance says, but Hunk clearly doesn't believe him; gently sits on his bed, a foot of space between them. Hunk glances nervously at him, then his leg.

"It must be a shock," Hunk says, then winces, and Lance just frowns at him, brows knit, nothing to say. Hunk tries again: "It was a big surprise to us all, when we, uh, saw. You seemed cool with it. When you came out the pod, it was the first thing you asked about. If your leg was alright."

"I knew?" Lance asks.

Hunk nods. "Allura- she found you being operated on by the druids. She said you were drugged up, but still conscious. You knew your leg was being amputated and replaced. So...I guess that's why you weren't so, uh...freaked out by it."

"I'm not freaked out," Lance mutters. "It just doesn't make any sense." He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath. It does make sense. Why improve one leg then leave the other a weakling beside it? That's stupid. Lance knows that. Still. "How did I forget? What happened?"

"Uh..." Hunk blows out a breath, frowning. "It's been a hell of a week. Uh, you came back and, uh...you swam for six hours straight and you and Keith had a spar and you ended up almost killing him; Coran, Pidge, and I went planet side to pick up some junk but you followed us and got in a fight with galra. Keith picked you up in his lion, but the druids were on a battleship and contacted us. Whatever the druids did to your legs...it made it possible for them to electrocute you over long distances. That's...what happened. They shocked you. Twice."

Lance's gaze drops back to his leg. He can't remember any of that, or any electric shocks. Ever. Did the galra do that to him a lot? Is that why his memory is so holey, so loose and empty? Because they did that to him? "Did they do it often?"
"They...implied so, yeah."

"...Who am I?" he says, the words falling hollow off his tongue. "I don't know who I used to be. I don't know who I am. I don't remember anything."

"You remember me, right? Hunk, your best buddy?" Hunk's smile is sweet and hopeful and heartbreaking. The truth is...yes. Lance knows, factually, Hunk is his best friend. He can even point to specific, unblemished memories of them spending time together, chatting about life, crying about all the dumb shit they couldn't avoid. But the feeling, the connection is gone.

"I know that," Lance says.

"And Pidge? Our comms officer?"

"I remember that too."

"And your family, back in Cuba? All your brothers and sisters? Mom and Dad? Niece and nephew?"

Lance closes his eyes, faces like his, pointy features like his and blue eyes like his, all wash over him. Voices, always in Spanish, his own name, Leandro, like his mother called him. "I know them," Lance says. "I think. Some of them. I don't know their names."

Lance doesn't look over, but he hears Hunk take a deep, shuddering breath. "Alright," he says, his voice a little higher-pitched. "Well, you've got your mom, Sophia, remember?"

"Sophia," Lance says, the word tasting familiar. "Like my rifle."

"Right. You named it after her. Your dad is Alejandro."

"Leandro," Lance murmurs. "That's my name."

"Yeah. Your oldest sister, Solana?"

And again, Hunk says the name and Lance repeats it, and faces appear like reflections in the water, almost whole, almost perfect. Lacking substance. Realised as illusions the second Lance digs deeper. He has three older sisters and two older brothers and parents and two grandparents and a niece and a nephew, and, Hunk adds quietly, a dead brother, Federico.

Lance doesn't remember him.

It makes him sick. Hunk says these people are important to him, and Lance knows that, he sees himself sitting alone before a window of stars missing them, having hours-long phone calls with them from the garrison, sitting round the table for dominoes, laughing and commenting on those playing. Some of the faces are blurry and instead of words they speak only air, but at least Lance knows they're there. He doesn't remember any brother named Federico, doesn't remember a family gathering at a restaurant and getting so drunk Federico had to haul him home.

"Guys?" It's Pidge, peeking her head into the room. "Dinner?"

"Right," Hunk says, standing. "You good, Lance?"

Of course he isn't. He probably won't be again. Stuck, he asks, "Did you know him? Federico."

Hunk's face is so soft and open; so easily unveils every heartbroken thought he is having. Regardless, he nods, and says, "Yeah. I met him a few times."
"And we were close."

"Best buddies, Lance."

Lance nods, and stands with Hunk, slowly leaving the room with him and Pidge on either side. "You have to remember that," Lance says, staring blankly ahead as they walk the corridors to the dining room. "Since I don't."

"Okay, dude," Hunk says, his voice a little high-pitched again, and he takes another deep, wobbly breath and exhales slowly. Lance doesn't look up to see the expression on his face; probably something sad. As they walk, Pidge and Hunk exchange looks around him, but he doesn't pay attention to see what they're talking about. They just stay quiet as they reach the dining table, Allura sitting at the head and Shiro, Keith, and Coran lined up on one end.

Lance, Hunk, and Pidge take the seats opposite, and start eating.

This time, Hunk seems determined to involve Lance in conversation: when Allura carefully asks why they took so long, Hunk says, "Lance and I were just talking about his family, weren't we, buddy?"

And he nods. "Uh, yeah," he says.

Hunk and Allura seem to be communicating in silence. Shiro and Keith are watching them, and Coran just focuses on his food, glancing up so often to look at Lance. Pidge picks at her space goo, doesn't say much. "What were they like?" Allura finally asks, and Lance frowns.

"My mother," he starts, and stops, feeling wrong. "My mamá was- is called Sophia. I named my gun after her." He looks to Hunk for confirmation, who nods, so he keeps going. "She...was a nurse-? A doctor. My dad is called Alejandro. I was named after him. He worked...in..." He looks again to Hunk.

"Business," Hunk supplies, smile wavering just at the edges.

"Business," Lance repeats, and tries to remember that fact. His father who worked in business. In some memories, Lance can see him coming back late for dinner, or himself being awoken early as he left for work.

"You were named after him?" Shiro asks. "How does that work?"

"My mamá called me Leandro," Lance says, because he remembers that, a warm sweet whisper wriggling into the centre of his heart. "But no one else did. Right?"

Hunk nods again. "But your dad called you that when he was angry at you."

"Oh," Lance says, staring at his food. Another thing forgotten. How many of these things are they? How many are lost from Lance forever? Will he ever recover them? Is it even possible?

"Did you have any siblings?" Allura asks gently, and Lance nods again.

"My oldest sister is thirty. Solana. She's the nurse."

"And she has kids, remember?" Hunk prompts.

"Alonso and Daniela," he says, pulling the names like gum off his shoe out his brain, from where he tucked them as Hunk relayed them off not a half-varga before. "Toddlers."
"I met them, too," Pidge says quietly from next to him. "I went to visit the summer after-everything happened. With Hunk."

"We stayed there a month," Hunk says. "Everyone still lived at home. No one could watch the TV at nine p.m. because your grandad always wanted to watch that show of his before bedtime. Remember?"

Lance can't remember Hunk and Pidge ever staying with him. The thought feels bizarre, that they visited him in Cuba instead of returning to their own families in Hawaii and America. "Why did you visit me?"

"You invited us," Pidge mumbles. "You wanted to surf with Hunk."

Maybe that's true. It must be true, if Pidge says it's so. It sounds plausible.

"Tell us about the rest," Allura asks, so Lance does so, Hunk and Pidge pitching in to fill in the numerous gaps in Lance's memory. Sometimes, he does remember things, though - silly little quirks about his family that have somehow been ingrained into his brain. Diego worked at a restaurant but he wanted to be a musician. Lillynn wore glasses that everyone kept stealing from her until she could pay for laser surgery. Isa was a skater lesbian who refused to skate with Lance in case he drove all the girls away. Lance repeats these facts to everyone as if by rote, and the others will maybe smile or laugh or nod in response. Like this, he somehow makes it through dinner, swims through this murky, foggy night to shore.

"What will you do now?" Hunk asks, and Keith looks up sharply.

"...Sleep?" Lance says, and somehow everyone relaxes a little and nods at him.

"Yes, on you go," Coran says, "I'll clear up! Off to bed with all of you!"

Allura and Shiro stay behind with Coran. Keith joins up with Lance after a moment, and Hunk and Pidge wave and smile and hurry on ahead.

Keith says, "I didn't know you had such a big family."

"Oh?"

Hunk and Pidge whisper quietly ahead, Coran, Allura, and Shiro whisper quietly behind before the door shuts. Keith speaks quietly too, doesn't quite meet his eyes.

"You never talked about them much."

Lance remembers this. Homesickness, like physical illness in his gut, he couldn't force the words up to talk about it. Not to Keith. His family felt like a secret, a weapon. Keith had no one. Lance had everyone.

Now he doesn't. Not like before.

"I thought it would upset you," Lance says honestly, and Keith's brows jump as he looks at him, studies his features.

"It wouldn't have," he says finally. "Lance, do you-" Keith frowns, and stops, the words hanging in there.

Lance plucks them out and asks, "Do I what?"
"No, it's stupid."

"Do I what."

"Just...the druids. Do you remember them asking you anything? About us? Or...anything we might've been able to use against them?"

Keith's eyes are focused on him, steel grey and serious, and Lance wonders what could've prompted this. "No," he says. "They stopped asking me anything after a while."

"...Oh," Keith says, and then nothing else till they reach Lance's door. Lance stops halfway in his room, turns round to look at Keith.

"What will you do now?" he asks, and Keith's eyes dart away for a moment before returning to Lance.

"I'm...going to go train," he says, watching carefully as Lance nods, considers it...but he is too tired to train. Nothing makes sense, and attempting to battle a bunch of bots won't help.

"Alright," he says, and drifts back into his room, the door sliding shut as Keith takes a step back, and Lance changes into his pyjamas, falls to the bed, and sleeps.

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It is strange to wake up and remember all that he has forgotten. For a moment he hesitates in awakening, waits for the druids to come and bustle him along or for a soldier to kick him awake for training, not neither come, and the mattress is gentler, the pillow softer, the blanket thick and full. Memories descend like a fog and Lance is easily lost in them: awakening like this, confused and alone; the paladins, his friends, spread out around him, talking about things he couldn't remember; Hunk explaining what apparently happened the past few days; trying to tear his own leg out, and the urge returns briefly to do it again; talking about his family, painstakingly making a picture of them in his head and adding a name to each stick-figure drawing he could manage, coloured with brown or black or blond hair as Hunk described, blue eyes like his, brown eyes like his mother. A whole line of people who look a little like him round the edges, scratched off his memory, shot out by lightning.

Lance says at breakfast, "If you want to test me then test me. I don't care."

They seemed surprised that he knows, but of course he knows. It's the obvious step forward; check him for anything all those drugs might've left over; see if the rattling of his bones is because of the electrocution or just how they're built, now. Look over his legs, see if they're infected, or if the broken one is bugged, something like that. See if he's really salvageable.

He isn't.

It'll become very clear, very soon.

"Oh, uh-" Allura says, lowering her spoon with wide eyes. "Who told you about that?"

He looks at her blankly. "You all keep talking about it when you think I can't hear."

"Ah," she says, then sighs.

Coran rests his cutlery and says, "It's nothing terribly invasive. Not like with the galra."
"It's okay if it is," Lance says. "It won't hurt."

Shiro, for some reason, has to swallow and look away.

"Let's finish breakfast," Coran says, but Lance is already finished. He eyes everyone as they eat, heads hanging, shoulders slumped. All of them. Hunk looks at him a few times and musters up a wobbly smile, but it doesn't touch his cheeks, his eyes. Pidge meets his eyes also, but she's quicker to move away, ducking back to her food. Keith keeps watching him when he thinks Lance is otherwise occupied. Curious, and sad. Like he's waiting for something, but Lance can't give it. Maybe he's waiting for a memory to purge itself from Lance's stomach, to pile like bilge as it tears up his throat, expels itself from Lance's mouth, coughing and heaving, to reveal them all the truth. But that won't happen.

Coran always smiles. When he doesn't, he looks very old. Lance wonders if he's conscious of that fact.

The infirmary is as they left it earlier that morning, when Lance, Pidge, and Keith came through with Coran to redress their wounds. As Lance leaves the dining room with Coran and Allura, Shiro turns to the others and speaks to them, too quiet for Lance to hear, but when he follows, the others do not. They make him sit up on a table for a while as they poke around. Coran apologises profusely before sticking a needle in him and drawing blood. It's just another hole, near-invisible to the naked eye, joining a hundred others. Allura digs round the shelves till she comes up with a holograph that is able to scan his brain, and she holds it up to his head, inspecting whatever she sees there, tapping a few times until she reaches the base of his neck.

"Oh," she says, as though the single syllable has been wrenched up her throat. "Oh, quiznak."

Coran and Shiro rush to her side. "What is it, princess?" Coran asks, and she points to something, and he shakes his head and takes a step back, peering from the holograph to Lance and back again. "Oh, heavens. Lance-" He has to turn away.

"What is it?" Shiro asks, wide-eyed. "What does it mean?"

"This," Allura says, pointing again. "There's an incision, right there. It's tiny, can you see it?" Shiro nods. "The galra must've- this explains so much."

"They cut into his brain?"

"Those scars on his neck...that's where they came from."

Shiro nods slowly, but his eyes are wide and horrified as they come across Lance. He moves slowly round the bed so he can inspect the back of Lance's neck, and Lance wonders what he sees there. He doesn't remember those scars, what they look like, how they came. If it's a tiny incision, will they, too, be tiny? Or are they big cuts, so the galra had room to be precise? Big enough to be noticeable, but then again, Coran and Allura were probably looking for faults in him.

"What does this mean for Lance?" Shiro asks finally, as Allura fusses on the holograph and Coran buries his head in his hands.

"It's the likeliest root of this...numbness, shall we call it," Allura explains, her explanation solid even as her voice shakes. "I'm unfamiliar with the human brain, of course, but it's not as though humans and Alteans are terribly different - even the tiniest cut can cause the gravest damage. It seems that...the galra managed to pick a spot that, if damaged, would reduce - or indeed, eliminate entirely - Lance's ability to feel things... Physically... Mentally..."
"Could it cause memory problems?"

Allura shrugs. "I'm not so well-versed in human brains to answer accurately. I'd...assume not."

"That may not be the only cause," Coran says, voice grave as he finally turns back around. "I'm going to process this blood, and Allura - I think it's time to check his quintessence."

"Of course." Coran departs the room with a vial of Lance's blood, and Allura turns to him.

"How do you..." She stops. "What do you think of that, then?"

"Of the galra cutting into my brain?" She nods, though she winces a little at the crassness of his words. "Sounds likely."

"Do you- can you- does it feel like it might've been cut into?"

He shrugs. "I'm not a neurologist, princess."

Her eyes close briefly, and Shiro grimaces. "Right. Okay. This shouldn't cause any issues - if you're in pain, or...anything, just say the word. That shouldn't happen."

Lance nods, and Allura raises her hands and closes her eyes. Lance and Shiro keep watching as quintessence gathers in her hands, seeping from both himself and Allura. His looks weaker, damper...different from hers, which is bright and vibrant and silken light. His colour's off, a dim grey instead of pretty white like hers. Allura's fingers tense a little, as though feeling out the strange ball of magic their quintessence makes in her hands, and she winces, but keeps focusing.

As she draws more quintessence out for comparison, Lance feels the weight of the world so suddenly and heavily on his shoulders; they slump, the air is gone from his lungs and he has to take a deep, gasping breath, the colours of the world shutter into greyscale like this is one of his dreams.

Shiro says, "Allura!" And she snaps out of it, the quintessence in her hands whirling wildly for a second before before zapping back into their owners. When Allura opens her eyes, she stares at him. "Lance," Shiro says. "What was that?"

It takes a moment for him to catch his breath, but he doesn't need to: "His quintessence," Allura says, voice hollow. "It's gone. It's- his quintessence is- is-"

"Gone?" Shiro echoes, staring first at her then Lance. "What do you mean, gone? Wouldn't he be dead?"

"I mean," Allura says, panting a little, "it's gone. Almost all of it. It's been sucked out, by the, by the galra! Only a skeleton of it remains; enough for him to function. There's...evidence it was supplemented by the galra's own quintessence. Maybe to help him in fights, or, or to recover after battle, or..."

Lance watches in confusion as Allura has to take another breath, pressing her fingers against her eyes to hold back tears. Shiro puts a hand on her shoulder, but he's obviously shaken, too, and as bewildered as Lance. He seems to care more, though.

"What does that mean for him, Allura? Would that also explain the numbness? Or... Or anything else...?"

"It would make him more vulnerable," Allura says, "to whatever they were doing. To prosthetics a-"
and to whatever- whatever they wanted him to do, and it would make the drugs so much stronger, a-and the torture so much worse- b-but yes. To the numbness. In tandem with the incision..."

"Can you fix it? You can channel quintessence, can you-

Allura shakes her head. "It's too much, it's too much," she says, clutching the holograph as tears start spilling down her cheeks. "We have to find another quintessence planet- I-I don't know which ones are still left that the galra haven't found - and they can perform a ritual, b-but it's too much, it's too much for me."

"It's okay, it's okay," Shiro says, rubbing her back in circles, whispering more to her, Lance doesn't listen, his attention lists, he stares above them into nothing. An incision in his brain and his quintessence sapped. Electrocution, put in the ring, shot up on drugs... It all sounds pretty rough. But Lance doesn't care. All he cares about is that damn leg, and if Pidge or someone else can come up with a way to fix it, even that won't matter anymore.

He feels hungry for something he can't eat.

"Princess?" says Coran quietly after some time, returning with his own holograph, the vial presumably up in the labs. "I have some results of interest. Is everything alright?"

"She checked his quintessence," Shiro says when Allura is silent. "She says it's...gone. Almost all of it. And that there's some weird galra quintessence-"

"Traces," Allura murmurs. "It's all used up."

"Oh," Coran says, and seems to nearly lose his footing before grabbing the edge of a counter. "Oh, I see."

"The results?" Allura asks.

"Nothing unusual," Coran says, and Allura frowns and takes the holograph off him. "He is, essentially, working as well as the rest of us."

"That can't be-" Allura says, but she scans the results and goes quiet.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Shiro asks.

"Well, yes, but...there could've been answers."

Coran nods. "Anything that turned up in a blood test would've been easy to fix. But this is...far deeper."

"Allura says we need to find a quintessence planet."

"Yes, we will - I'll get straight to work on that, actually. Lance, are you alright?"

Lance nods. Most of what they're saying is flying over his head, and he has to forcibly remind himself that it's important to know what they're saying. No weird blood test results. Incision and quintessence. Got it. "Are we done?" he asks lazily.

"Well...it looks like it," Allura says slowly. "Would you like to see?" She offers the brain holograph to him, so he takes it, and she zooms in on the image to show him a tiny cut on his brain. "That's it."

"Huh," he says. It is so small, and yet, apparently, the cause of so much of damage. Is it so easy to
change people? A flick of the knife? Or did it take time? All those hours on the druids' table, when he still felt, when every encounter was agonising and terrifying, were they scanning his brain to learn the perfect place to prick?

And they managed it. Now he is a shadow of himself.

He gets up to leave, but Coran flings out a hand. "Wait," he says, and the others looked at him. "We haven't run any tests on his legs, yet."

"Oh," Allura says, and frowns. "Of course."

She finds a similar holograph to what she used to scan his brain; this time, she makes him stretch his legs out on the bed so she can run the holograph along them. "Whatever they're made of," she says finally, "it's been imbued with quintessence to make the prosthetics strong, near-invincible to damage. I can't detect a definite point where the prosthetic ends and your leg begins... Perhaps the galra quintessence fused with your flesh to make the prosthetic more natural?"

"They must've improved their technique," Coran murmurs, coming to Allura's side and inspecting the scans. "It's certainly not that way for Shiro's arm."

"It's not?" Shiro asks, looking over the scans also.

"No, you can tell where your skin fuses with the prosthetic... It's different," Allura says, her eyes running over the holograph before inspecting Lance's legs again. "They've obviously managed to obtain a material that mimics human skin - beneath that, there is this- metal?"

"I think so, princess."

"Metal, treated somehow with galra quintessence that forms the legs... The left one is incomplete... It's a tiny part, I can't quite make out the use for it..."

Coran peers down, and shakes his head. Lance stares down at his glowing leg and wonders what tiny part could be so crucial as to cause this defect. "There don't seem to be any issues so far," Coran surmises. "But we should monitor the situation."

"Yes," Allura says. "Of course. But let me just check..." She hovers her hand above Lance's legs, eyes closing and quintessence gathering once more - her own, this time, except it only lasts a half second before something dark and violent shoots up from Lance's legs and knocks her hand away, eyes flying open.

"What was that?!" Shiro demands immediately, stepping up and raising his own hand above Lance's legs. The second it gets within an inch's distance, it's knocked back, also.

"They have done something," Coran says. "They don't want us making any changes to the legs, or perhaps replacing them - this must be druid magic."

"It must be," Allura says, frowning, and tapping at the holograph. "This might have grave consequences... It may be through the druid magic that the remote electrocution is possible. And whatever components these prosthetics are made from, they are able to carry the current through the legs... Perhaps the galra quintessence makes it easier for the current to travel up the whole body. Or- perhaps it helps control where the electric shocks go, their strength... I need to...think about this."

"You might want to speak with Pidge about this," Coran advises grimly. "She might have ideas if they see the scans."

"I... Yes, I'll do that."

Coran looks to him. "Lance? What do you think?"

He shrugs. "I don't really care," he says. "If I don't remember getting electrocuted then it doesn't really hurt me."

Allura hugs the holograph close to her chest, ducking her head; Coran looks away, fists tightening; Shiro winces, hard, but looks Lance in the eye as he says, "It doesn't quite work that way." Lance only stares, so Shiro sighs and moves on. "What will you do now?" Shiro asks him, and Lance frowns, feels like he's heard that question a thousand times over already. He shrugs. "We didn't say - once we filled the pool up, we found a gym, and dusted it off... You can always check it out if you're, uh...bored."

"The pool's full?" Lance asks, then remembers Hunk mentioning something about him swimming for six hours. "What's in the gym?" he asks just as Shiro begins to reply.

"Uh...it's like, fancy Altean versions of everything we already have back on Earth. I can show you- I go there a lot. Hunk, too."

"Maybe," Lance says, the rest of the day spinning into endless oblivion before him. "Okay. Should I change?"

"You'll find the wardrobe has been filled with suitable clothing," Allura says. "While you were-gone, the paladins informed me it was impossible to live with only three or so outfits on board. Hunk and Pidge chose most of your outfits."

Lance nods, wonders how he didn't notice before. He can't remember what it was Hunk and Pidge wore when they embarked on this mission, though; he wouldn't be able to tell if they got anything new.

"Let's go," Shiro murmurs eventually, and Allura nods. Coran heads up to the bridge, and Allura, after a moment, follows, and Shiro and Lance head down to their bedrooms.

Shiro cannot, apparently, speak any words as they traipse down the hall together; as the door of his room shuts behind him, Lance hears a great, shuddering gasp before heading down to his room. As Allura said, the wardrobe is full of clothes, categorised by use: casual and formal and sports and sleep, and Lance ends up wearing a white sports tank and blue shorts that reach his mid-thigh. He ends up staring in the mirror at his own legs.

They look like human legs, even the left one despite the purple edges. They almost sort of feel like human legs, too, soft and smooth, but Lance wonders that if he pulls too hard, whatever it is will be ripped to pieces and show the gears working beneath. Perhaps that would help reveal the secret use of the tiny part that's thrown his left leg off. It feels wrong and hideous and bad- looks wrong. It doesn't feel anything, it's simply a part of him like any other limb. Just...uglier. And dangerous. They're both dangerous.

Good. If Lance can't be anything useful for the paladins anymore, let him at least be dangerous. Let enemies be scared to engage him, allies terrified of turning on them, the galra regretful that they ever touched him.

He wants the paladins to be afraid of him, just a little. They are already, he knows. Shiro's eyes dart to the leg then back up when they meet in the corridor outside their rooms, and he rubs his thumb and forefinger together repeatedly by his side, agitated, worrisome.
The gym is as Shiro said it was - high-tech versions of Earth machines, decked out in pristine white and aqua blue. There are several treadmills lined up by each other; stepping machines and crosstrainers facing a row of bikes; a section for weights machines; a section for weightlifting alone. Shiro starts by standing on a bare piece of mat and stretching.

So Lance stretches, and he jogs, and then he starts running. The treadmill speed is never high enough; a minute passes and he has to crank it up a little further. Shiro warms up on the crosstrainer for ten minutes, before moving onto the weights machines, using only the ones where he can keep an eye on Lance. Does he think he's subtle? Or does he not care to hide it?

Working out his muscles at least scratch the itch that has been gnawing on his bones since he awoke. It wasn't so bad yesterday, but's it's been growing, heightening like a fever unbroken. Now that Lance is actually exercise, he realises how badly he needed this; to work, and work hard. To almost feel that burn that comes with overexertion, except it never comes. Lance can keep going.

He runs for an hour, still feels unchallenged when he finally turns off the treadmill. Shiro's been mixing up cardio and weights, and he watches with careful eyes as Lance moves to a bar lowered from the ceiling.

"Lance-" he says, but he's cut off as the door slides open, and Hunk and Keith appear, decked out in their own sports kit. "Oh! What are you two doing here?"

They stop short in the doorway, looking from Lance to Shiro then back. Hunk's eyes catch on the leg; Keith's on Lance's shoulders. "We came to work out," Hunk says slowly. "Pidge disappeared with the princess, and, uh...we didn't know what else to do."

"You aren't helping Coran install the part he picked up the other day?"

Hunk shakes his head. "We did all that yesterday. If you two are here we can- uh, I mean, we can go to the training deck-"

"No, it's fine," Shiro says, and Lance doesn't miss the meaningful way he widens his eyes at them. "Isn't it, Lance?"

"I don't really care," Lance says. "So long as you don't bother me."

"Right," Hunk mumbles, nudging Keith and heading towards the treadmills with him. Shiro continues on the rowing machine; Lance positions himself below the bar and hops up a foot, tightening his hands round the bar and folding his calves.

Shutting his eyes and proceeding to pull up, it is easy to imagine himself back with the galra once more. Training took up a significant portion of his time there, even if he can only remember slashes of it; sweating and exhausted on the treadmill; red-faced on the weights machines; tears in his eyes as he benchpressed. When he still felt, training was exhausting, he was often sick or fainted afterwards, he got as many injuries as he did in the ring by exercise alone. Now, it is of no consequence. He stops training when his arms refuse to lift, his legs refuse to push. Until he reaches that point, he can keep going.

What else is there to do?

Shiro isn't happy with this approach. Lance doesn't know how much time has passed, but when Shiro calls his name, he opens his eyes to see Keith on the rowing machine and Hunk benchpressing in the corner. Shiro is in front of him, stern but unable to disguise the panic in his eyes.
Breathing heavily, Lance drops and says, "Yeah?"

"You need to-" Shiro stops, and frowns. "You're going to injure yourself if you carry on like that."

"Like what?"

"You're exercising incorrectly - you're overworking yourself. You need to rest after sets. And pace yourself! You spent an hour on the treadmill at top speed! And you're injured - you could reopen the wounds!"

Lance watches as Shiro's face animates, fear and concern and slight confusion, as though he can't comprehend why this is happening at all. Didn't the galra do this to him, too? Or was it different? Was it only Lance they forced to endure such things? Just because he was a paladin? "It doesn't matter," Lance finally replies. "If I can keep going-"

"You don't need to."

"What else is there to do?" he asks. "You don't want me swimming because I push myself there. You don't want me training because I try and kill you all. I can't help round the castle or hack intel like Pidge. I don't even know what I used to do here - the only thing I can do is fight. Training helps me fight."

"Lance- you are worth so much more than your ability to fight."

"No I'm not," Lance says, and weights crash against metal as Hunk drops the bar. He is staring, wide-eyed, at Lance and Shiro, and Keith, too, has stopped his workout, straightening his legs out so he can see round Shiro to Lance. "What?" he asks them all. "I'm not. I can't do anything except fight. I can't even pilot one of the lions. I'm non-essential cargo. The only reason to keep me around is for long-distance sniping, or when you expect an ambush."

"Lance-" Hunk says, voice shredded with shards of glass, but Lance gives Shiro one last look before jumping up again and closing his eyes, resuming his workout and tuning the others out. Though specific memories no longer remain, Lance's old workout schedule is imprinted onto his brain: after pull-ups, he ignores everyone's looks, finds an unoccupied space, and starts doing push ups. One-handed, clapping between, everything the galra could think of to make it harder for him. Eyes shut, their sharp commands return to him, he keeps his back straight and his hands distanced appropriately, he counts the reps, he pushes faster. He uses the weights machines. He goes on the rowing machine. The cycling one. He does sit-ups and squat thrusts, any old exercise his ravaged brain can dredge up. He doesn't know how long he does each of them. He doesn't know how long he spends there.

He never gets tired.

Isn't he such an achievement? His entire existence, a miracle in endurance. He can reach heights never attained more, lift weights for longer and run faster, swim six hours, decimate legions of enemies. This is what the galra wanted, this is why they gave him such advances prosthetics. What weapon needs feelings? A gun doesn't eat, doesn't drink, doesn't break its heart over heartbreaking people, and neither does Lance. He is above such things.

Lance is a victory. Is that strange to say? It feels odd to think, like maybe once that idea could never ring true, but now it is simple fact. It doesn't matter what the old Lance was; this is confirmed glory. All he had to sacrifice was the ability to feel.

That isn't much.
Hands on his shoulders stop him from his next butterfly press: he opens his eyes to see Keith once more, sad-eyed, ever-watching. Keith has been acting a little strangely since Lance awoke; cannot take his eyes from Lance but cannot meet his eyes either, his gaze follows Lance when his legs cannot.

He says, "You've been working out for hours. You're bleeding through your bandages."

So he is. White tank tops stain easily. "Okay," he says, and finally lets go of the weights, and something in him sinks with disappointment. Whatever itch needed to be scratched, it is still unsatisfied. It grasps at his fingertips, jolts down his spine, but there is nothing he can do.

"You should go shower," Keith says, "then visit the infirmary. I can get Coran for you."

"Cool." He stands, and Keith doesn't move back; for a moment they are so close that Lance can feel Keith's quickened breath against his neck. His hair is a little damp, smells of soap, his clothes of laundry detergent. Lance is bloody, sweaty, in comparison. It feels strange. Like maybe it never used to be this way.

But Lance can't remember.

He moves past Keith, who follows, sweeps down the hallway to the lift, and as they reach the right floor, Keith searches his face for a moment then departs for Coran. Once Lance has showered, they are both waiting for him in the infirmary.

"It won't take long," Coran assures him as he walks in, and Keith just stands to the side, watching, jacket off to show that his arm wound had been redressed, also. Lance removes most of his clothes, and Coran clucks his tongue when he sees blood coming through the bandages on his cut and arms, but otherwise says nothing.

In fact, no one says anything the whole time. Keith hangs around, brows pulled up in a constant frown, eyes tracing the injuries, Lance's face, maybe trying to find something to recognise. The colours are all the same, except on the scars. His face still the same, except for the scars. Hands still the same, there are scars there, too.

He doesn't know how they got there. He doesn't want to think about it; instead, he turns his thoughts back towards his family. It feels a little like they have been haunting his step all day, a half-second behind him, ghosts that never fade from his thoughts. He was able to blot it out whilst he exercised, but sitting like this, Coran washing down his injuries before dressing and wrapping them once more, there is nothing to occupy his thoughts.

Sophia. His mother. What was her maiden name? What's his surname, in fact? Why did she choose to have seven children? How did she feel when Federico died? Did she blame Lance? Is she capable of that kind of feeling?

Alejandro. His father. Lance is named after him. Maybe they knew Lance would be their final child, and so decided to bestow that gift upon him. Lance doesn't think he holds it up well; it's almost comforting to think no one here calls him Leandro. He doesn't want his current self and whatever self belonged to that name to intersect. Like it might blemish the memory of who he used to be.

Solana. Hunk spoke as if she really was the sun. A joy to be around despite all the pain in her life, worked so hard to provide for her children, for the household in general, helped make dinner even when she'd sometimes be out all night on call, always trusted her siblings to look after her children in her wake.
Would she trust Lance now?

She couldn't. Lance wouldn't.

"What are you thinking about?" Keith asks, and Lance opens his eyes to look to him. Coran has decided that the wound in his gut has torn further due to his workout, and is stitching it back up. Keith comes forward a little bit, voice soft. It is always soft around Lance. Lance is pretty sure it didn't used to be that way.

"My family," he says, and Keith bites his lip. "I'm trying to remember them."

Coran's hand wavers, then keeps going.

"What do you remember?"

"Not much," Lance says.

"Tell me about them."

"I told you last night."

"Tell me again." Soft, but still a little commanding. His eyes, deep grey and intense, so watchful, so careful. He keeps his hands straight down by his side, but they're tense. Perhaps this talk of forgotten family scares him.

Lance tells him again. "My mamá is called Sophia. My papá Alejandro. I have three older sisters: Solana, Lillynn, and Isa. I have two older brothers: Diego and Alberto. I had a third, Federico, but he died. I have a nephew, Alonso, and a niece, Daniela. I...have grandparents. Montez and Agathe."

"What were they like?" Keith asks quietly, and Lance tells him and Coran. Tries to tell them. It's much harder without Hunk and Pidge filling the gaps in his speech with hints or facts lost from Lance. When it becomes clear how difficult it is for Lance to describe them, Keith asks about Cuba instead, and Lance is able to talk about that without much difficulty. White beaches and clear blue waters, surfing out in the sun or listening to his sisters gossip as they all sunbathed together. Turning a corner and finding a group of lads round a table playing dominoes and sidling over to watch and listen to the commentating. The music that seemed to live deep within the cities, embedded in the roads, emanating from the walls of every home and every shop, different songs and genres melding into one. Rumba music from a group dancing on one corner fusing with a gaggle of girls watching CNCO on their phone from another. The colours, so vibrant, the food so delicious, the people, so kind and funny and loud, like the old Lance.

All of that belongs to the old Lance. It hits Lance after a moment, and he finds himself frowning. "But that isn't me anymore," he says, and Keith's lips part, eyes widening. Coran, who has long finished wrapping Lance up, shakes his head.

"It will always be you," he assures Lance, but that cannot be the truth. Lance doesn't want that to be the truth. His hands are stained red with so much blood, he will not touch something so pure and perfect and uncorrupted.

"Lance," Keith murmurs, "we'll go back one day. To Earth. Won't we?"

Coran nods, says, "Of course. Whenever you feel ready, we'll drop everything and go visit! Cuba sounds as lovely as Altea did back in the day!"
Going back... Does Lance want to go back? Does he deserve it? Some strange twinge in him wants it more than anything; another refutes the possibility altogether. But the majority of him...doesn't really care. "Maybe one day," Lance says, and that seems to finish the conversation.

One day, Lance might return to Cuba, and embrace his family, and apologise for the hideous thing he has become.

But today, tomorrow, for however long he is like this...he does not deserve it.

Chapter End Notes

yoooooooooo i made a pinterest board right here!!! it provides a general aesthetic but also. a . glimpse of future things to come !!

sorry for the aftg and ac2 refs.................................i am sorry

i still love feedback i rly do. esp this chapte.r. pls and thank
Fighting Lance used to be easy. It used to be a joke, when Keith was tired or bored or in a bad mood, he’d say want to spar? and Lance’s pride would never let him say no. So they would spar, and Keith would beat him, easily, maybe fool around for a few minutes if he was feeling particularly merciful or mean. Lance was too gangly and tall and awkward, he hadn’t ever learnt to fight like Keith had, it was never ingrained into him, how to move, how to punch, how to stay balanced. Lance spent too much time on the training deck prancing about with his gun; personally, Keith thought it didn’t matter how many targets you could shoot on centre if you couldn’t knock the guy right in front of you out cold. The spars were never good; Lance got angry about losing and talked shit, Keith got angry in return and talked some more shit, and they’d both stalk out the room or fight some more, and it would piss everyone off, and they’d all have to wait a few days for them both to cool off before things returned back to normal.

It is a little like that now, just the other way round. Lance moves like nothing Keith's seen before. It's not like they go hand-to-hand with the galra very often, so Keith hasn't observed their moves, but he just knows Lance moves like them. The galra under Zarkon's rule are cruel and ruthless, and Lance’s fighting reflects it. It is unbelievably efficient, not a single second wasted, and it is harsh, mean. Lance is so much stronger than before, every touch no matter how light belies his new...
power. It takes extra manoeuvring to dodge his legs, but it's worth it; getting hit by those is definitely fatal. His reach is longer than Keith's, longer than before, and now he actually knows how to use that.

He knows how to do everything.

Keith can't possibly defeat him.

But sometimes, Lance will entertain him. He wears this...smile, or smirk, that's the better word, it carves up his face like a knife, his eyes narrow and predatory. He enjoys tossing Keith around like this, blocking his hits so easily, dodging every move he makes. It's all a game to him.

Just like how sparring with Lance used to be a game to Keith.

Is this revenge? Is this simply what goes around finally coming back around?

Is this what Keith deserves?

The answer can only be yes. Keith was still in charge when they lost Lance. Keith still doesn't know how it happened - Lance was there, fighting Lotor's favourite general, and then he was just-gone, and Lotor was unconscious, and Zarkon was dead, and- and they had to get out because Haggar was going to blast them all! Keith couldn't save Lance! He tried, he wanted to stay behind, damn the galra and the druids and the generals, but the others wouldn't let him. They had to take Shiro back. They had scarce a moment to close Kuron's eyes before Coran was recalling them to the castle.

And so they went, and left behind Lance. Lance, the only fucking person who could hold this team together. Without him, the whole world felt empty; Coran stared into nothing for hours and Allura spent all her time training, Pidge was at her laptop every minute of every day trying to track Lance down, Hunk installed a dozen different inventions just to improve the castle's searching accuracy and speed, Shiro couldn't talk about it, plagued by his own issues, and Keith...

He cried. Maybe not a lot for others, but far too much for himself. He didn't at all until one night up in the observation lounge, all alone, just surrounded by the vastness of space, and it hit him that Lance was gone, hidden somewhere out there, a place so impossibly huge that they could never scour it all. They could never find Lance. The boy - the only boy - Keith loved.

From then on, it just kept happening. He wept for hours up there, and then for more in his room, and he woke up in tears, and someone said something at breakfast about how it had been two months already and Keith had started up again. No one even judged him; Hunk and Pidge pretty immediately joined in. Shiro took him aside to inquire about his feelings, and Keith had confessed everything, as if Shiro didn't already know. Allura joined him up on the observation lounge, once, and she had wept, too. Coran spoke, shortly, about Lance being very dear to him, and then he hadn't said a word more, as if he had so much grief that to release even a drop of it would cause an unstoppable wave.

But they were never the same without Lance. Even though they had a full team, it felt hollow, empty, wrong. No one joked the way Lance did. No one stayed calm in stressful situations like he did. They lost their sharpshooter; they lost their dearest friend. Even Pidge and Hunk couldn't quite reconcile their friendship without him.

And they still can't, because this Lance is so horribly different. He approaches Keith now with that smile on his face, so eager to just rip Keith into shreds, he knows it. But god if he doesn't love Lance anyway. If there isn't something appealing about this Lance, the way he stalks forward, the
strength in his shoulders, the thick scar running down his lips. It makes Keith feel like some weak, insipid thing, and he hates it, and he loves it, and he's losing his fucking mind.

Lance thinks he is a galra general. Keith isn't sure why this is his default, maybe some subconscious reminder that Keith is half-galra, but whenever Lance talks to him, he calls him general in such a disgusted tone that Keith squirms. Nothing he says gets to Lance; nothing he does breaks through whatever haze descends on Lance when he fights. Keith is just another opponent to mow down in the quest for victory, for survival.

Every single time.

There's no stopping Lance's advance. He's fast, he breaks through all of Keith's blocks, has him backed up against the wall, arms twisted behind him, in seconds. In his other hand his bayard materialises, the blue-and-white rifle, did he steal it from Allura or is it still, somehow, connected to him?

"Lance," he begs, well aware how pleading and helpless he sounds, "stop, please, stop, I'm sorry, we should've come after you, I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm-"

"Shut up," Lance orders, and then his voice softens cruelly. "Keith."

And then he kisses him.

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A bullet tears through Keith's throat, and he wakes up. He's sweating, hair damp and blanket kicked off, chest heaving, eyes wet. His lips still taste Lance, gunpowder and salt, and his neck still burns, like a bullet really did rip through it and kill him.

He ends up running to his bathroom and vomiting up whatever space goo confection they had for dinner previously that evening. He kneels over the toilet, head hanging, coughing and hacking and crying, wishing he was better than this, wishing he wasn't so plagued by these nightmares.

Why? Why, every night, is this what he dreams of? Him and Lance fighting, Lance winning, Keith pleading, Keith dying...

And them kissing, just a moment before. No matter how the actual fight goes, Keith will end up trapped beneath a kiss as Lance juts the barrel of his rifle against his neck. And Keith thinks I deserve it just as he wakes up.

Every night. Every fucking night since Lance returned and fought him on the training deck. It's exhausting. He doesn't know what time it is, but there's no light from beneath his door, so everyone else will still be sleeping. He's just...tired. And stressed, and sad, and it takes a moment for him to remember to even flush the toilet because he's so busy crying. He feels like he's falling to absolute pieces, and it's dumb, and useless, he doesn't get to freak out because this is his fault! He caused this. He knew there were dangers going in to get Shiro and he went with it anyway. He knew Lance was more vulnerable when fighting enemies up close, but he still let them converge on him anyway. And then Lance was gone.

That's his fault. He failed Lance. He failed the whole team. Everyone is fucked up over it, they've been fucked up for the last five months and now suddenly it is so much worse. Allura cries when she shouldn't. Hunk doesn't smile anymore. Pidge doesn't even seem angry like before. Everything is wrong, and it's his fault.

It should've been him. Maybe Keith would've been less vulnerable to the torture, since he's galra
himself. Maybe they wouldn't want to- *experiment* so much, that's what Lance calls it, sometimes he slips and calls the druids his doctors before he recognises his mistake and moves on. Maybe they wouldn't toss him in the ring.

Maybe they would. At least Keith knew hand-to-hand fighting. At least- at least it would be *him* suffering, not Lance! Lance didn't deserve it. Lance was arrogant and rude and easily distracted but he was a *good person*.

Now what is he? How much blood is on his hands? He barely remembers his time with the galra, now - what if he killed innocents in the ring without realising? What if they pitted him against other prisoners? Surely they wouldn't keep sacrificing galra to him? Unless it was a way to weed out the weaklings?

Lance doesn't remember anything from being back here, either. Doesn't remember the fight. Doesn't remember his leg. Doesn't remember realising Keith was in love with him, though that's definitely for the best. He seemed...softer, in the aftermath of the electrocution, and Keith wonders if his earlier theory wasn't correct: that being in excessive pain managed to bring back the old Lance, somehow, and now even though he's back to this new normal, he still lingers.

For someone who didn't feel anything, he sure seemed distressed at dinner, talking over his family while Hunk and Pidge chipped in. His family sounds lovely, and the pain hurts acutely, to think Lance no longer really remembers them, either. Hunk had been near tears the entire discussion. Pidge, too, except they weren't so obvious about it. Keith doesn't know how Lance *missed* it - maybe too lost trying to grasp what few memories remained.

All of that, *taken* from him. It should've been *Keith* - he doesn't have any family left to go back to! It doesn't *matter* if those memories are decimated!

It's so unfair, Keith can't bring himself to stand up. He crawls back to his bed and drags the blanket over his knees, hunches down against them and weeps. Like a fucking crybaby, because he can't do anything else. Yesterday, Lance had hurt himself exercising so much, so *long*, Keith hadn't known what to *do* to get him to stop. He had to just sit there and watch and see if he'd come to his senses, but he never did. And Keith is scared of how long he would've let Lance keep going if the blood hadn't started seeping through his tank top. It had been...a lot, to see him like that. Muscles that hadn't existed, suddenly in action. Keith's eyes kept getting stuck, he didn't know where to look except *everywhere*. Shoulders during push ups. Arms during butterfly presses. Legs during squats.

Stupid, and useless, and Keith would've kept watching for hours if he hadn't started bleeding. What does that say about him? *Selfish*.

And then Lance had talked some more about his family, and Keith felt even more stupid. It was hard, listening to Lance figure out the details of the people he had once cherished beyond everything: *Mamá is a nurse- no, she's a doctor. Who's the nurse? Solana. Solana's the nurse. Part- part-time? My brother Alberto, we called him Berty because he was a nerd, he's studying... He's doing a PhD- no, a Masters- no...*

So Keith had asked about Cuba, okay? He thought it might go easier, and it did: memories rolled off Lance's tongue like a wave finally cresting to shore. It sounds beautiful, and lively, and *fun*, and deep in Keith's chest he can understand Lance's sometimes extreme homesickness, what it *was* that he missed, not just the people, but the *place*, the way of life, something so starkly different to whatever Keith has lived.

Keith wonders if he'll ever see it. Will they really go back to Earth, like he said they would? Lance didn't seem enthused. But part of Keith wants to go, explore that world Lance lived. He wants to
meet this sprawling family and watch the way they work with each other for himself. He wants Lance to see them and smile, for all those memories to come racing back home, for everything to be normal again.

But it doesn't matter what he wants.

For now, he goes to the training deck.

--

Shiro is less than impressed when he pokes his head in two hours later.

"Keith," he says, and ends the training exercise. Keith scowls, his bayard returning to its non-weaponised form, but turns to Shiro. "How long have you been up here?"

Keith shrugs, chest still heaving, sweat dripping down his temples. "Couple hours, maybe."

"Keith," he says, and fully enters the room, doors snapping shut behind him. "Haven't you been sleeping well?"

Keith holds Shiro's sad, solemn gaze for all of two seconds before he has to drop it, hanging his head. "No," he mutters. Should he tell Shiro? Could he? Shiro probably wouldn't judge, but- but still. What does it say about Keith, that he still wants Lance to kiss him even as he kills him? That's fucked up. Being in love with the old Lance is understandable, but this one?

Still, Shiro comes forward: "What's wrong? Are you staying up late? Can't sleep? Bad dreams?"

Keith shrugs again, feeling a little like a reluctant child; he is ten again, and Shiro is trying to coax him out into the sun with him, but Lance is a burning house Keith wants to live in, wants to breathe in the smoke and the fumes and feel the heat on his arms, ravaging him, ruining him. He'd let him. If Lance wanted, Keith thinks he might let him do anything.

He definitely cannot tell Shiro.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Shiro asks after the silence. "Maybe I could help."

Keith knows Shiro could help; struggling to sleep is basically just a personality trait of his, now. "It's fine. I'm working it out."

Shiro raises his brows. "I don't think so."

"It's not important. It's just- hard. To sleep. Knowing everything that's..." What can he say? Knowing everything. And not knowing anything at all.

"I know," Shiro mutters, and comes to sit cross-legged beside him, reaching up to grab Keith's shoulder and pulling him down, too. "We should've done better."

"What could you have done? You were in a coma - it was us who should've-"

"But I led the search when I woke up. I didn't- I should've- and Pidge said that ship was different, that it was bigger and weirder and- but I didn't look into it for ages. I thought- I thought-"

"We all thought it wouldn't be so obvious." Keith sighs. "I thought he'd be with Lotor, too."

"I thought they'd try and use him against us. I don't know- one of his generals can control people, and they probably could've infected him with their quintessence, but... Instead they did this."
"And they want him back," Keith says, and shuts his eyes. "They want to experiment on him more. What can we do? We can't exactly lock him up to keep him safe. He obviously hates being stuck on this ship."

"I know," Shiro mumbles. "I know, I- I'm scared. About this electrocution issue, did- did I tell you? What we found out yesterday morning?"

Keith shakes his head.

"They cut into his brain," Shiro says, and Keith's eyes widen and fill with tears almost immediately. "They drained him of quintessence, as well. Just enough to function. Allura says he had traces of Galra quintessence, as well, but I'm not sure what that means. And we can't touch his legs. We scanned them, there's a piece missing from the left one, but we can't touch or do anything to them. Allura and Coran are looking for a quintessence planet - some way to rebalance him again. I don't know. I don't understand any of it." When Keith looks over, Shiro's head is in his hands, his shoulders trembling. His whole body is so tense, he doesn't want to cry or show weakness, but he has to. They all have to.

"I don't either," Keith says, feeling tears drip down his cheeks at the thought of Lance, perhaps still able to feel and in agony, having his neck so thoroughly cut into. The scar that is, apparently, due to the incision, is a little higher than the razor-edged garrote scar. It sits like a big, fat diamond at the back of Lance's neck, right beneath his cranium. He wonders if Lance remembers getting it. It's horrible. Lance's brain has been cut into. Keith isn't a neurologist, but he's also not an idiot - that could explain any number of the things wrong with Lance.

And his quintessence, sapped for who knows why. To keep him compliant? To weaken him? To fill him with their own tainted quintessence?

It's too much, too much to think about or understand. Whatever the issue, it's too much for Allura to fix with her own powers; too much for their advanced infirmary to handle.

Everything with Lance is...too much.

Keith finally leans against Shiro, tucking his head on his shoulder and letting the tears fall freely. Shiro raises his head only to lean it on Keith's, and it doesn't take long to feel dampness on his hair.

"I don't know what to do," Shiro whispers, his voice weak and sad and skippy. "I should, because I've been there, too. But they did something else to him. I don't kn-know how to fix it. I don't know how to help him."

"Me neither," Keith says, and his voice is so small and childlike. But he always gets like this around Shiro. He always turns back into that teeenaged version of himself, lost and scared and so alone, except Shiro was there for him, like a friend, like a brother. "Shiro, I love him."

"I know," Shiro murmurs, but his voice is all cracked up and quiet. "I know you do."

There's nothing much to say; stuck at a dead end. At a loss. And Lance is technically still locked out the training deck, so he can only find them like this if someone else comes along and opens the door for him.

It shouldn't be such an issue, but Keith is scared Lance will see him like this, red-faced and crying, and immediately suss out Keith's affections like he did during the fight. Keith doesn't want Lance to know. Not this one. Keith loves him, but he's not sure how Lance will use that information. What if he uses it against Keith? What if he brings it up in an argument? What if he goes along
with it just so he can take advantage?

What if he doesn't care at all?

Keith loves him so much, it hurts. Every moment of every day, his throat aches with things he cannot say and his hands tremble with the desire to reach out and touch, to trace the scars, to hold Lance's face in his hands and whisper *I love you* *I love you* *I love you*. Every night, his mind races with all the things he could've done to save Lance; how much earlier they could've rescued him. All the horrors he wouldn't have had to face. His heart aches and breaks, slowly, pulling apart like gum, trying so hard to stick together. It is going to snap one day. How will he ever be the same?

It feels so stupid to think about himself when the person suffering most here is *Lance*. Even if he doesn't act like it.

"S-so," he says when he finally feels up to talking once more, "we need to find some quintessence planet?"

"Right," Shiro says, and sniffs. "Coran says there used to be planets that happened to be exceptionally rich in quintessence, and you could go to those if your own quintessence was messed up, or your home, o-or you were really ill...but he doesn't know how many are left. S-since the galra took over. And it'll take a while to search."

"Okay," Keith says, and commits this information to memory. "What'll that do, then? If we go there? Will that...fix everything?"

"I don't know- I don't think so. I think...the incision in his brain is what took away his ability to feel. I think..." Shiro takes a deep breath, sighs it all out. "I don't know. It might be like when you're so depressed you're suicidal, but you don't take your life because you have no energy. And going to that quintessence planet will be like...the kick you get when you get depression meds, and you have the energy to kill yourself."

"You think Lance will *kill* himself?"

"I- no! I don't know! But what if he remembers everything again? What if he's even *more* powerful and dangerous? What if they *can't* fix him? What if that weird galra quintessence makes it impossible for him to be fixed?"

Keith considers this, and says, "*Fuck.*"

"There's nothing we can do," Shiro mutters, and stands up, brushing at his cheeks and lashes. "We should go get breakfast, huh?"

Keith rises and sighs. "I know," he says. "Your eyes are all puffy."

"I know," Shiro groans, and begins to leave, Keith trailing him. "Didn't think the first thing I'd do today was cry over Lance."

"Can't relate," Keith says dryly as the door closes and they head down the hallway. "I cry every morning over Lance."

Shiro manages a single peal of laughter before quieting immediately, the two of them traipsing down the corridor as Shiro wipes his cheeks clean and Keith does the same, brushing the tears from his lashes, patting under his eyes to check for redness.

It's probably pretty obvious when they come in and the entire team at the dining table look up at
them. Hunk winces sympathetically and says, "Breakfast?"

"Breakfast," Shiro says, and sits.

"Early workout?" Allura asks leadingly as Keith sits between Shiro and Hunk. Lance sits opposite, gazing blankly as his food. He doesn't look up as anyone speaks.

"Yes," Keith says, and takes his bowl of goo from Hunk. "We got carried away."

"Right," Shiro says. "I went to get him for breakfast, and we...ended up training together."

Stupid that they're lying, since the others already know they definitely weren't training together, and the only person who it'd be embarrassing to admit that to doesn't even pay attention to them. Still, Keith really can't take anymore punches to his pride. He's cried too much in front of the others while Lance was missing; he'd really rather not start that trend in front of Lance.

"I see," Allura says, and sips her water. "Now that we're all here together, I want to discuss the results of some of the tests Coran and I ran on Lance yesterday. We didn't tell you earlier only because we were making sure our results were watertight, and...there are." The unfortunately is left unsaid. Keith says nothing; Allura likely won't tell him anything Shiro didn't, but Hunk and Pidge perk up, holding still as they watch her.

Allura shares a glance with Coran, who says, "Initially, we scanned his head to figure out what the scar on the back of his head meant. This may be...upsetting to hear, but I must tell you that the galra made a small incision on Lance's brain, presumably to hinder his ability to feel."

Hunk's mouth drops; Pidge blinks and asks, "They cut into his brain? How did they know- how could they be so precise? Didn't it affect anything else?"

"We don't know," Coran says grimly, and Keith's heart clenches at the way Hunk's eyes widen. Don't know Pidge mouths to herself, and looks to Lance again, who's still eating, still staring vacantly. His free hand drums against the table. "We aren't so well-versed in human brains."

"But hopefully we'll find someone," Allura rushes to say. "I also checked his quintessence levels; they were extremely drained, with only enough to keep him alive and relatively healthy. This has a plethora of consequences: mostly, we're seeing him at his weakest and most vulnerable. That's why it took a full week to heal his injuries once we rescued him; it's also why he's so..." She looks at him, not even aware of their conversation. "...out of it."

"Oh, god," Hunk says, scraping his voice up from the bottle of some barrel. "Is that why he's so different? Does drained quintessence take away someone's personality?"

"Something like that," Allura says. "Combined with the incision, it makes sense that he's so numb and unfocused. However, we also found traces of galra quintessence... Unfortunately, we're not sure what that means for Lance."

"We're looking into potential quintessence-balancing planets we could visit that will help heal Lance, but that search may take a while, considering current...conditions," Coran continues. "We've also discovered that it's impossible for us to tamper with or otherwise change Lance's prosthetics."
"The galra have enchanted them, somehow," Allura explains. "Anyone who attempts to fix or replace them will be shocked."

"Is there nothing we can do?" Pidge demands. "There has to be something- let me try, I can-"

"No, Pidge," Shiro says firmly, and Pidge stops, scowling. "I won't let you near them until we can make sure they're safe. Have you gone through the info from the ship? That might have something that could help."

"I'm trying," Pidge grumbles. "The encryption is unreal. I've spent the last week cracking the code. I'm almost done, and then I'll get the info."

"Good. Hunk, I don't want you near the legs, either. Unless you can build something that can pass off the shock, but- since it's galra magic, it won't be that easy."

"I'll see what I can do," Hunk says, clearly shaken but nodding back at Shiro.

"The princess and Coran will continue looking for a quintessence planet. Keith and I will...keep Lance busy."

They all look to Lance. His space goo is finished, his chin finally raised, his eyes stare out above them. He's clearly not listening. Not here at all. His fingers thrum against the table. Is he back with the galra, or somewhere else? Home? The garrison? Nowhere at all?

What if this keeps happening? How do they keep bringing him back?

What if they shouldn't? What if bringing him out of this fog will cause some- some relapse, some return to how he was yesterday, or when he fought Keith, or when he was in the pool? Focused on something no one else could see, lost in some other world where endurance was priority, where nothing and no one else mattered. Where enemies and friends could not be told apart.

They end up in the sitting room. Pidge plugs her set up in by the wall, and Hunk retrieves and notebook and pen and sits at Lance's feet, Keith and Shiro on either side of Lance on the sofa.

There isn't actually much for them to do. Coran and Allura are busy in the control room and don't seem to need help; lord knows neither of them could ever keep up with Pidge; and all they can do for Hunk is provide answers.

"Okay," Hunk says, finishing off a note he made in the notebook and looking back up. "I know you keep saying you can't feel anything - but are you able to feel your legs, or where they connect? Do you notice if they're heavier or more tiring to move? Were you aware they were infused with quintessence?"

Lance answers by rote - no, no, yes, can't remember - as Keith and Shiro watch. Shiro actually has one of the holograph tablets out - Keith isn't sure what he's doing, if he's reading over Coran's report on Lance's legs or maybe just playing space sudoku - but Keith has no such distraction. He crosses his legs on the sofa, tries to keep at least an inch of space between his knee and Lance's thigh, and watches.

It's a little strange to see Hunk like this, although Keith has gotten relatively more used to it. Hunk's a genius - he made some kind of Geiger counter for an element that didn't exist on Earth, it's obvious - but sometimes it's...easy to overlook. Hunk's a fan of food and makes quite the show of it, cooks for them all and scours out ingredients when they land on marketplace planets, complains quickly of his hunger, often eats when he's in need of comfort. And he's kind, and funny, and Keith loves him for that. Even though he was obviously losing his mind over Lance being missing, he
kept everyone else grounded the way Lance usually did; kept them eating, kept them searching, complimented Pidge on whatever intel she'd dug out, assured Allura that she was on the right track, sat by Keith and lent his shoulder to cry on.

But he's a fucking genius, and he sits serious on the floor, leaning in to inspect Lance's legs but never getting too close. He has the scan of Lance's legs that Allura took yesterday beside him, and when Keith manages a peek at the notebook, he can see various sketches of Lance's legs, how they look, how they're composed, the pieces separated and labelled. The other page is filled with scrabbles, recording Lance's answers and Hunk's own observations, things Keith can't make out and probably can't really understand.

He doesn't speak until spoken to.

"You don't remember using them as weapons when you fought?" Hunk asks Lance, and Lance shrugs.

"I think you're overestimating how much I remember of being there," Lance says, foot tapping incessantly by Hunk. "I know they put me in the ring and I know they tortured me. I don't remember the rest."

Hunk marks that down. "Do you remember how you lost your first leg?"

Lance shrugs again.

"Keith says you told him that you fought- do you remember the druid monster we fought on the Balmera?"

A pause, and Lance frowns, his eyes fluttering shuts as his brows pinch. Keith bites his lips, shares an uncertain look with Hunk. "I don't know," Lance mutters eventually. "What was it like?"

"It was huge, as big as Voltron," Hunk replies. "Could shoot at least twenty lasers at once, and point them into one huge laser, too."

"Uh," Lance says, eyes going distant. "I think so?"

"Alright. You told Keith you fought a mini-version of that monster in the arena; it focused its lasers into one and blaster your right leg off beneath the knee."

Lance nods, and shrugs so carelessly that Keith has to avert his eyes so he can't see how indifferent Lance is to this. "Cool," he says, and Hunk winces once more.

"Do you remember..." Hunk sighs. "No, it's not important. You can't recall using your legs as weapons?"

"Nope."

"Did Lance ever use them against you guys?" Hunk asks, looking from Shiro to Keith, and Keith looks past Lance to his brother, who nods slowly.

"Sort of," Shiro says. "Not the way I use my arm as a weapon. I think the prosthetics probably can change shape but I haven't seen it. But they're super strong - when Lance had me on the ground with his foot against my chest, I could only use my own prosthetic to push it off. And it was a struggle. I think the galra must've really worked hard on upgrading their prosthetics."

Hunk nods, keeps writing.
"They didn't turn into weapons with me, either," Keith says. "Not like Shiro's arm. But they're deadly. He kicked me back once during our fight and I think it broke some ribs."

"Probably," Lance says. "I think I trained with them a lot. Or. Something. My right one, at least. To get used to it."

"Yeah," Hunk says, furiously writing down his conclusions. "You'd have to. And then getting the left one switched in wouldn't be as stressful; at least, you wouldn't be able to feel any issues that were there. Obviously. Your left leg might actually be causing a lot of stress, you just can't feel it. You might've gotten your right one in while you could still feel - do you remember, or...?" Lance shakes his head. "Well, that would've made it a lot more difficult to deal with. They probably had to do physio with you so you could learn how to work with it, and then they likely trained you on how to use it in a fight. But you got your left one just as we rescued you...so you had no time to learn how to use it...unless it was easy because your right one was already put in...or they'd already trained you about this...or maybe that's why they used their own quintessence?"

Hunk rambles quietly to himself, flipping a page and continuing his notes, and Lance just stares blankly at him, at the window behind him.

Sky and stars. Vast, endless. Keith doesn't know where exactly they are, but too far from Earth. Always far too far. Keith wonders if they shouldn't just take Lance to Earth and see if the memories return home like mountain stream down to a lake; a tsunami wave over a seaside town. Cuba sounded so vibrant and alive when Lance spoke of it; surely it'd be impossible to tread foot there and not remember it, and all that came with it?

"This is fucking-" Pidge bursts out, and, alarmed, Keith looks over to see her on her feet, hands in her hair. "Fuck! This is bullshit!"

"Pidge!" Shiro says sternly, and gets to her side. "What is it? Are you still having trouble?"

"No, I- I cracked the fucking code, but- I can't- it's like I'm on some loading screen, nothing's happening!"

They let out an infuriated groan, pace the entire room, and hunch back down before the set up.

Keith looks at Hunk, who looks at Shiro, who looks at Pidge, who stares maniacally at her PC. She reaches her hands out, stretches her fingers, types a little, and says, "There."

Keith gets on his feet, joined by Hunk, and even Lance slouches over to see whatever it is Pidge has managed to find.

It's- it's a video.

"Oh no," Pidge says. "Lance-"

It's hard to see exactly what's happening, it's so dark, but it's definitely Lance, stretched out on a table, hands shackled by his side and ankles chained up together, he's shirtless, and he already has a few scars. The ones round his heart, the lines by his ribs. His gut isn't nearly as bad. There are deep dark circles beneath his eyes, lines that only come with weeks of constant exhaustion.

He's talking. His hair has been shaved into an undercut and he has the parallel slashes on his cheekbone but he's grinning and saying, "Hey, is that a camera? Are you guys filming this? Hey, are you livestreaming this to my buddies? What's up, guys! It's ya boy Lance, I'm just on a galra ship, I'm being tortured, I haven't slept in ten days and I don't know what's going on but it's fine! It's so fine. Wow, that's sharp. That's really-" Film-Lance breaks off, eyes squeezing shut as a knife
pierces his stomach, blood spurting up instantly, over his chest, his chin. Lance cries out, and one of the druid hits his face.

"Silence," she commands, but Lance hisses, struggles with the bonds, breathing ragged. "Silence!" she says again, and another druid comes to Lance's side, a needle in her hand, and stabs it into Lance's neck. The liquid glows purple, pulsing through Lance's veins till is dissipates, and Lance lets out a wheezing breath before going silent.

"You will never feel pain again," the druid says. "You will never be the same as you once were."

Then she turns, and looks to the camera suspended over Lance's body. Her eyes are hidden, but her grin is wide, sharp-toothed.

And it cuts off.

"A message," Pidge says, and Keith realises she's gasping for breath, her shoulders shaking and her face whiter than a ghost. "O-or a warning?"

Hunk is staring wide-eyed at the screen, eyes filled to the brim with tears, his fingers tremble. Shiro is taking stumbling, halting breaths.

"That was me," Lance says, and when Keith turns his eyes are blank, his mouth slanted. "Fuck," he says, and then he laughs, grating to the ears as he shakes his head, and Hunk gulps in a breath and Pidge grabs his hand and Shiro takes in a painful gasp.

Lets it out again, gasps, and keeps gasping, his hands go to his hair and his eyes go distant, and Keith says, "Shiro. Shiro!"

"N-n-no," Shiro says, chest heaving, shoulders hunched. Keith tries to reach for him, but his hand is knocked away. "No! I need to- I need to-"

"Shiro, it's just us! It's just us. Shiro, breathe. Come on."

It used to be the other way round. When Keith was still a child and Shiro went to get groceries while he slept in, but Keith would awaken early to an empty shack and start weeping out of loneliness, out of abandonment. Shiro would arrive and see him like that and take his hand and say I'm here I'm here I'm here, tell him to take deep breaths, feel the bed beneath him and window in front of him, point out different shapes and colours in the room around him.

"Shiro, we're in the Castle of Lions. Do you know who I am?"

"Keith," Shiro says, blinking rapidly, eyes wet. "K-Keith, w-where- Lance-"

"Lance is fine."

"The druids."

"It was just a video."

"Right," Shiro says, his shoulders slowly stilling, the world returning back to its previous shape. He straightens up, brushes the tears out of his eyes. "Right. Sorry. I- I'll go inform the others about this. I won't be long."

"Shiro-"

But he's already striding out the room, and Keith can only watch after him and shake his head.
"I'm sorry," Pidge says in a small voice. "I didn't realise- and then I forgot-"

"It's not your fault," Hunk murmurs, and Pidge nods and presses in closer to him. "None of us could've expected that." They all breathe together for a moment, sudden quietness after the clamour of the video. "Lance, do you remember being videoed?"

"No," Lance says. "Fucking embarrassing, though."

"Em- what?!" Hunk says, and pulls away from Pidge to spin round and look at Lance.

"Fucking embarrassing," Lance repeats. "Shameful. Crying like that-"

"You were in obvious pain-"

"Trying to make jokes as if that would help-"

"It was an act of rebellion-!"

"They had to give me drugs to shut me up. I was fucking pathetic. I'm glad they chose me to kidnap - I clearly needed it the most."

"Lance," Hunk says, but can't say anything more. His notebook and pen are forgotten on the floor. Pidge stands behind him, still shaky, wide-eyed, frightened.

"Lance," Keith says, but his voice comes out a whisper. "You weren't pathetic-"

"Don't even start," Lance says, and goes back behind Pidge. "What else have they got?"

But Pidge doesn't budge. "Lance," she says, arms crossed. "What do you mean, you're glad it was you?"

"Did you see me?" Lance asks, brows twisting. "I looked fucking pitiful. Weak, and stupid. Trying to act like I was tough. Crying like a baby because I got stabbed. Fuck. I was worth nothing before I was kidnapped. At least the Galra made me stronger. Better."

"They got rid of all your quintessence," Keith says, frowning in honest confusion. "Lance, they severed your connection to the lions."

"They cut off your legs," Hunk says, voice quiet and so horrified, holding tight to Pidge's hand with both of his own. "They hurt you."

"Maybe I deserved to be hurt," Lance says, and for a moment, the old Lance flashes before Keith's eyes, sitting before the observation window, hand against the window. That Lance is sad, his sea eyes awash with memories tumbling like waves through his mind, lips pulled down, depressed. Lance screwing up a mission, Lance starting a fight. Lance walking away, alone. Maybe I deserved to be hurt - and for a moment, Keith wonders which Lance is saying it. Is it such a stretch to think maybe the old Lance believes this too?

"Don't say that-" Hunk says, eyes wet, but Lance shakes his head.

"See if there's more," he says, and his voice brooks no argument. Pidge sits, pulling Hunk down with her, and starts tapping against at the interface. Tight-lipped and narrow-eyed, but Pidge says nothing more, her fingers just fly across the keyboard and windows open across the screens. Something red flashes up, and Pidge sighs, working faster.

"It's like- some firewall, or something," Pidge says, as more red symbols start popping up. "Every
time I try to access a section, I'm blocked. There's no way around it except to...

She sighs, and types some kind of command. Another video pops up.

"Oh, god," Pidge mutters, but Keith crouches beside her, transfixed. Even Lance watches, arms crossed, eyes serious.

It isn't Lance on a table this time. Instead, a huge open room, with dark grey walls and purple lights, and huddles of galra soldiers dressed in some kind of athletics gear lurking by the walls. There are two people in the centre of the room: Lance, and another soldier. It must be later than the other video; Lance is definitely a little broader, and there are a few more scars littering the backs of his bare arms. The neck scar isn't yet there, but Lance isn't trying to make jokes or rebel anymore. He stands ready to brawl, and Keith spots some galra druids standing not far from them.

The galra soldier makes the first move, and Lance dodges. Lance throws a punch, barely misses. The soldier counters with ease, slamming his knuckles up against Lance's chin, and Lance reels back, yelling.

"Silence!" a druid roars, and Lance quiets immediately, even though a glance back to the druids reveals that his face is twisted in pain. "Pay attention! Don't let your opponent see you're in pain!"

The fight continues. Every time Lance makes a noise, the druids shout at him to stop; when he looks tired, when he stumbles and falls. Such weaknesses are not tolerated. And every time he falls, he gets back up. He has to. If he's on the ground longer than two seconds, a druid will throw purple magic at him and force him to his feet. He's so obviously fucking exhausted but he keeps fighting this galra who has a clear advantage; keeps knocking Lance down, punching and kicking beating him up till Lance is black and blue and red all over.

The real Lance scoffs, shakes his head. Hands in fists, he's clearly itching to punch something, too. They fight until Lance is unconscious, then the screen flickers, and darkens once more.

"I think," Pidge says slowly, "I should talk to Allura about this."

"Shiro's getting her," Keith says, and Pidge sighs, her torso slumping as she stares at the screen before them.

"I can access something, now," Pidge mumbles, hands moving carefully over the keyboard. "A... A training regimen?"

Pidge, of course, has long-since fitted their computer to instantly translate the galra language into English. She scans the chart on-screen, frowning. "Fucking hell," she mutters, leaning in close. "This is insane."

"Of course it is," Keith says.

"No it's not," Lance says, but he doesn't say anything more when the others look back at him. Did the video trigger something in him? Seeing himself fight like that- lose like that? Or is it something else that leaves him so tense and quiet?

Pidge and Hunk seem at a loss, trading looks, shaking heads. Hunk slumps into Pidge's side, but Pidge is unbothered; wraps her arm as far as she can around Hunk's waist, tilts her head to the side so Hunk can rest his head easily on her shoulder. Keith stands, looks back at Lance.

"I want to fight," Lance tells him quietly.
"I know."

"I have to **fight**!"

"I know you do," Keith says again, holding his hands up. "Just wait until the others come along, see what they have to say."

"They'll say it's fucked up and that I shouldn't be allowed to train."

"You can't train anyway," Keith points out. "You're still injured."

Lance looks away, a horrible smirk cutting his face. "So?"

Keith can only shut his eyes and inhale deeply. Arguing with Lance about this clearly won't work; every concerned question he receives is brushed off and mocked.

"I **have** to fight, Keith!" Lance hisses suddenly, and when Keith opens his eyes again, Lance has taken a step closer to him, eyes narrow.

"Okay!" Keith says, glancing round to check that Pidge and Hunk can't hear. "Okay! But they won't let you fight when you're still injured! They might not let you fight at all until they can figure out a way to prevent you from being triggered!"

"Then help me figure it out!"

Like in his dreams? Except it's never worked; Lance never remembers until the very end, when he's about to enact his ruthless justice upon Keith.

But it isn't fair to Lance, Keith knows. Sticking him in this castle and telling him he can't exercise too much, can't swim whilst injured, can't fight at all. He's clearly itching for it, even if yesterday it hadn't bothered him at all. It must be something the galra did to him, sticking him in the arena so often...and what Lance had said earlier, that he had no worth outside of fighting, now... They must have ingrained that into his mind. Forced him to believe it.

"Okay," Keith whispers, taking a step closer to make sure Lance can hear him. "I'll spar with you. At night. When no one is around...but only once your injuries have healed."

Lance makes a face, but Keith just raises his brows.

"Otherwise they won't let you fight at all! I'm only doing it to help you figure out this...issue."

"Whatever," Lance says finally. "So long as I can fight."

Keith nods, unsure of how to proceed, but luckily the doors slide open and Shiro, Coran, and Allura come scurrying in.

"Now," Allura says, joining them at Pidge's set up, "will someone **please** explain to me what is going on?"

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Coran, Allura, Pidge, and Hunk all look over the videos. Shiro tries to watch, but halfway through one of the videos he ends up in a flashback so bad it takes a half-varga to get him out of it. They don't want Lance there, watching, and Lance doesn't seem interested in it either. Lance doesn't seem interested in anything, except fighting, because he keeps asking to use the pool, the gym, the training deck. Shiro absolutely refuses him, citing his injuries, and Lance scowls and crosses his
arms and taps his foot against the floor a little faster.

Keeping Lance occupied is...difficult. Keith tries to get him to play that Earth game he and Pidge bought back at the space mall, but Lance won't focus. Shiro tries to ask him about his memories, but Lance closes up fast, unwilling to share anymore. Sometimes, the others take breaks: Hunk will come and sit and ask about Lance's legs once more, or Pidge will discuss some of the new data with him, as Coran and Allura check the space they're drifting through for possible emergency signals or galra ships.

But they are so far from the rest of the world, there is nothing.

And so the four will return to the labs and watch these videos.

It takes three days for Lance's injuries to heal, Coran removing the stitches to reveal another scar upon Lance's gut, tearing up as Lance stares listlessly through them all. That night, two hours exactly after everyone has gone to bed, there is a knock at Keith's door, and Keith finds Lance in jeans and a navy t-shirt, fists clenching and unclenching, eyes roaring.

"Are we going," Lance demands quietly, and Keith nods. He isn't dressed for it - baggy jumper and boxers once more - but he can use the spare armour on the deck. As he and Lance creep along the corridors, an overwhelming sense of dread begins to flood Keith's system. This is a bad idea. This is a really bad idea. Why did he agree to this? Because he was scared Lance would hurt him if he didn't? Because even like this, Lance was too good looking to resist? Either way, the conclusion is that Keith is really fucking stupid. The last time this happened, Keith almost died. The only reason he didn't is because everyone burst in. What if the mice don't roam their way this time? What if the others don't reach him before Lance shoots his throat out?

Is Keith really so fucking guilt-ridden about losing Lance that he's okay with Lance killing him? Because it's beginning to feel like it.

Still. As they enter the deck and cross over to the sideroom, Keith can't help but hope it will work out. That somehow, he'll find a way to prevent the trigger, or bring Lance back. Stop Lance from wanting to kill him so much. Make it possible for him to scratch this bizarre itch without actually killing anyone.

They change quickly. Keith can't help a cursory glance to double-check Lance has no more wounds, but Lance doesn't pay attention to him at all. Keith calls his bayard to arms, and Lance eyes it for a second before considering the rack of weapons. Hovers a hand over some dual pistols, a mace, a crossbow...and settles on a pair of long, thin, sharp daggers.

Lance meets his eyes finally. There is something changed about him, now that he's in armour with weapons in his hands. He walks as if he is exactly where he is meant to be, strides to the centre of the room and falls back into a stance as Keith follows, stands a few yards away with his sword drawn.

And then they fight, and it is...just like his dreams.

Just like them. So easily, Lance slips into something he is not, something he shouldn't be. Keith asks his name, Lance calls him a general. Keith tries to fight back, Lance blocks every move he makes. He is fast and fevered, Keith can't keep up, it's impossible, and Lance is so close, has to be with daggers, and he pulls no punches, keeps jamming the daggers against his neck, his chest, his head.

Lance pins Keith up against the wall, weapon at Keith's throat, just like in his dreams.
So just like in his dreams, Keith kisses him.

He kisses him.

He kisses him...

...and then Lance kisses back. No dagger runs through his throat, shredding his veins to pieces. No gun suddenly materialises in Lance's hand, no bullet plunges into Keith's neck. Just...Lance, kissing him back.

He has to pull back, gasp, "Lance!"

"Keith..." Lance says, eyes a little wide and wondering, head tilting to the side.

"It worked," Keith says. "It worked!"

"It...did...? You kissed me to bring me out of it?"

Keith nods. "U-uh, well, you were going to kill me- it was all I could think of-"

"And it worked," Lance says, and suddenly starts smiling. "I can train again. With you. And you can keep bringing me out of it..."

Lance draws his hand down from Keith's neck, the dagger pressed flat against his chest, till his fingers curl round Keith's hip. And Keith should...stop this. He did his job; he brought Lance out of it. They can continue training, like Lance wants...unless Lance suddenly wants something else.

Keith's heart won't stop jackhammering in his chest; impossible to ignore the lack of space between him and Lance, mere centimetres, breath mixing, the heat off Lance's skin burning into Keith's. He's too close, too close, but Keith can't push him away; doesn't want to. Unbidden, his hand reaches up to Lance's cheek, skin rougher than it used to be, the two parallel scars raised underneath his fingertips. Sea blue eyes, whirling with something Keith no longer recognises.

Maybe Lance is a terror. So many things about him now scream danger, avoid. But even like this - taller and bigger and meaner and crueller - he is still the boy Keith loves. So close, Keith can pretend, a little, that it's still the old Lance, hot and heavy against him.

This time, Lance leans down and kisses him first. His lips are rough, now - Keith can't imagine the galra were big on skincare - and his hand is tight on Keith's hip. The second his lips touch Keith's, something jolts through him, knowing, now, that Lance wants this too - at least finds him attractive enough to want to pursue it. His hand grasps Lance's neck, trying to pull him down further, and his bayard slips from his grip as he reaches for Lance's shoulder, dragging him as close as possible. Rational thought vanishes from his mind; all he can think is more, he needs more of this, of Lance, shivers down his spine and fire lighting through his veins like an oil spill gone rogue in his ribs.

Lance drops his weapons, too, takes Keith's face in one hand to tilt him back and to the side, pushing harder, tugging hard on Keith's bottom lip.

"Fuck," Keith whispers as they part for a breath, and Lance grins, big and pleased and a little like how he used to do it. "Was that your first kiss?"

"Who fucking knows," Lance says, and kisses him again, a brief press that still makes Keith's head spin. "First one I remember."

Keith squeezes his eyes shut and pulls him back in, lets himself get lost in it, the push and pull, the
bites, how Lance sucks on his lip before pressing his tongue inside. It's bad and stupid and if - when, probably - anybody finds out, they'll both be totally screwed. But Keith moreso, since he instigated this. Because he's wanted it for too long to let himself stop, to force himself to push Lance back and focus on the training again.

Lance kisses him and holds him and presses him hard against the wall, and Keith feels out the shaved back of Lance's head, the thick scar at his nape, the thinner one round his neck. Reminders that this is a different Lance that the one he fell in love with.

But with Lance kissing him like this, it doesn't really matter which Lance he fell in love with. He loves them both all the same.

Then Lance steps back, picks up his weapons, and says, "Let's go again."

So Keith scrambles for his bayard, and they go again. It takes a little longer, this time, to forget who Keith is, but it happens, and Lance tries to kill him again, and Keith kisses him, and Lance comes back. Like this, they keep going, training then fighting for survival then making out for twenty minutes at a time, and by the time Keith finally gets his senses enough to call the training to a holt, it's well past four a.m., and no doubt other members of the ship will begin waking within the hour.

Before they depart for their own rooms, Lance kisses him again, soft and sweet just like all of Keith's dreams, and for the next few hours, those nightmares don't bother him.

Chapter End Notes

welcome to bad decision central where everyone makes super bad decisions all the time without thinking of the longterm consequences of them

uh and noah fence but just bc the vld fandom can be Like That i feel the need to post a fun disclaimer that what just happened is super bad and unhealthy !! it's not hot or sexy or attractive like...it's So Bad!!! it's gonna cause some shit! trust me!

er also the whole 'burning house he wants to live in' isn't actually my own...phrase...i got it off a pin on pinterest....which u can check out on my corrupt lance fic board....linked previously.... the extension of the metaphor was me tho !

anyway. in case it's not obvious i stan lance first and allura hunk and coran second. they r the world to me. just like....comments ! comments also r the world to me. peace.
Chapter Summary

on his first mission out with the paladins, lance meets an old friend, and is forced to consider the widening gap between who he is and the person he used to be

Chapter Notes

sorry for the long wait! but i updated my bpl fic!! and wrote a wee sad thing as well! and also i came down w a cold which has been a nightmare ;;;;;; im terrible when im sick ;;;;

uhhhhhhh tw i guess for death, battle, injury, non-explicit sex?? like. lots of flirtation abt Having sex and then a fun fade to black and then what is, essentially, pillow talk. and?? i think that's it??? oh also i guess mentioned/past homophobia too?

sklsd;lkas anyway i hope u all enjoy this one is a bit different asdjaslkdjaskldja

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oh, your love
Is never good enough.
Oh, your love is lost on me.
What's The Matter, Milo Greene

--

The melancholy that comes with remembering his family is fleeting; lasts a day, little more. Soon, his mind hums with the need for action, his whole body thurns when he isn't doing something. He feels edgy, ready to fly off into some kind of rage, or mania - every minute, dealing with this bullshit they want him to do, is an exercise in his self-control. He wants to fight, but they won't let him. Until his injuries heal, he isn't allowed in the pool. And after the incident in the gym, no one's keen for him to return there.

They won't let him do anything. Hunk asks about his leg like he knows fuck all about it. Pidge shows him these videos as if he's supposed to be horrified by them. Shiro lectures him about his injuries, Allura avoids all his questions about his purpose in the team, Coran just looks at him sadly and tries to smile as if Lance cares.

But Keith... Lance hadn't seen that coming. Not at all. He knew Keith was attracted to him because it was pretty fucking obvious, the way he kept staring, the pink that hovered on his cheekbones when Lance looked at him a little long, but that...?

But it was good, Lance thinks. And it worked. One second Lance had been fighting a galra general, then everything was Keith, and his lips, his eyes, his skin beneath Lance's hands. Lance...hadn't wanted to let go. How could he? When Keith kept pulling him back in like he was desperate for it,
how easily he closed his eyes and left himself vulnerable, the sounds he made, so quiet and filled with honeyed longing.

He's too keyed up that night to fall asleep; part of him wants to seek out Keith and finish what they started on the training deck, but a bigger, hungrier part of him is still desperate to fight, to train...so instead of sleeping, he trains. Copies unfamiliar moves that Keith uses, winds his arms around as though he holds a spear, fights the air with his arms round his back, just in case. Euphoria, or something like it, swirls through his veins; he can fight again! Even if Keith isn't nearly as good as him, he's still a fun challenge, and even when he transforms into a galra general, he comes back in the sweetest way.

_Sweet_. Keith is _sweet_. The taste of him and the sound of him and the feel of him, so _sweet_ and nice and...different from anything else. The only thing that stands out in all these dark, dreary days. Lance wants to fight because... Well, because there's nothing else for him. Because there's a heat that ignites in his veins if he spends too long standing still, because in his sleep he hears whispers from druids telling him of greatness, and the only way to _achieve_ that greatness is through _fighting_.

But Lance wants to mess around with Keith...simply because. Keith is interested, it keeps Lance from going too far in training sessions, it's _fun_. Lance...doesn't remember the last time he had fun. He hardly remembers any of his time in space. The last _fun_ thing he can definitively point to is him and Hunk and Pidge in the cafeteria of the garrison, laughing over some random bullshit from class, or- _something_, and even now a trickle of nostalgia perks up from deep within Lance's ribs, but it is gone just as quick. Doing this with Keith...it's not serious. It isn't stressful. Lance wants this, Keith wants it, it has zero consequences and boundless benefits.

So Lance practises his stances on his own, his mind sometimes returning to those kisses from only hours before. It had kept happening, that they'd fight and Lance would end up in the ring and then Keith would draw him out, and they'd stay like that for ages, ten, twenty minutes, until one of them decided it was time to restart the training. It feels like...the most human thing Lance has done since he awoke on that table.

Nothing else has felt human at all.

And isn't that a good thing? That nothing feels human? In his black-and-white dreams, the druids whisper that it's the pinnacle of his existence, to be human and yet _more_ that human, to be above it all. But...Lance finds himself _wanting_ to feel more human, if it means feeling like he did with Keith.

_Stupid_, the druids hiss. And weak. Things Lance cannot be; isn't _allowed_ to be.

He throws himself into training. Every minute of every day, he prefers using the gladiators but the others disapprove; he jumps the levels too high, always walks out bloody and injured. He swims, and floats, and ducks underwater for minutes at a time, forcing his tolerance higher. He heaves weights in the gym. The others watch these bizarre videos of him being tortured and slowly glean information from those and the data files Pidge hacked; they continue the search for this 'quintessence' planet; they try and make him human.

But it doesn't work, until night time falls and his spars with Keith turn from serious and cold to fun, flirty, backs against walls and lips pressed against lips for seconds, minutes, hours. They start sneaking first aid supplies out the infirmary, and after every session they undress and sit in their underwear for a good half-hour patching each other up. It can be bad, depending on what weapon Lance uses; more than once has Keith had to hide bruises on his neck, garrotes or hands or smooth bars. Sometimes they have to balm up tiny wounds on his throat, left by swords, cutlasses, daggers. Mostly, however, the damage is easy to hide. Lance's injuries take longer than Keith's to heal, but
when it's Keith he's fighting, he rarely gets any. And Lance— he rarely hurts Keith until he thinks he's back in the arena, when his movements turn desperate, and there is only so much a shield can protect Keith from.

But when he's fighting, it doesn't matter how much he hurts Keith, because the opponent, in his mind, is never Keith. And when they're kissing, it's like it doesn't matter to Keith how injured he is, he grabs any part of Lance he can to pull him in closer, bring his head down, sometimes he has to get on his tiptoes to reach Lance. If Keith doesn't care about being hurt by Lance, why should Lance care? It's not his fault he's like this. Why should he apologise?

Sometimes, he sort of wants to, though. The thought makes him incredibly uncomfortable.

So he works out harder. Trains for longer. The others are fucking sick of it, but at the same time they're glad he's occupying himself. They talk to him, sometimes, when they're eating, but Lance can never pay attention; any time he isn't doing anything the world fades into white, a low buzz fills his ears, he eats through muscle memory only and arises when they all do. They're still looking through the videos. Every time they look at him, now, it's like he's a crime scene they're trying to dissect, taking what they've seen in the videos and learnt from the information stored behind them and trying to apply it all to Lance now; perhaps trying to come up with theories, perhaps trying to do simple maths. Old Lance plus torture equals this Lance? Old Lance plus torture plus $x$ equals this Lance? What is the value of $x$, then? How the hell do you figure it out?

As if Lance gives a shit. That isn't his purpose, and it never has been. Lance wasn't put on Earth, stolen into the stars, to solve shitty maths equations or write up a hypothesis on how he was affected by torture - he's here to adapt. Even though he can't specifically remember his time at school anymore, he knows, in his bones, that's what he did. When others halted, tripped up, fell, Lance took the obstacles in his way and dived over then, ran round them, let himself get hit by them, and then got back up. Now, Lance has been tortured, and instead of fighting nightmares in sleep or panic attacks when he's awake, like Shiro, he takes all that pain and makes himself stronger with it.

He adapts.

When he is tortured, he grows stronger. When he forgets his memories, he lets go of his past. When he fights and is dropped into the arena, he works for a solution to keep training.

And when they receive a distress signal from a nearby planet, Lance hops into Blue with Allura, and joins the fight.

--

The planet is less of a planet and more like a messy outcropping of rocks; maybe it was a planet once, sure as hell isn't anymore. It is, from the sound of Allura's communications with it, some kind of rebel base, hidden so well in the ruins of a planet that the galra hadn't thought to look there.

Until, of course, now.

There's already a fleet of ships making a wall around the main base area, a wedge inside the planet that is, according to the rebels Allura had been communicating with, just covered in guns and grenade launchers, barbed wire round all the edges. Even as they approach, small battle ships start escaping a crack around the back of the planet and attacking the galra ships, breaking up their formation easily.

"Alright, Lance," Allura says, "once I break through this, I'm dropping you off with the rebel
leaders, and they'll decide where to put you. You listen to them, alright? Please try and just remain aware of your surroundings and the people you're fighting. We're taking a big risk here, dropping you off solo. If any rebels contact me saying there's trouble with you, I'm picking you up and I won't take you on another mission again.

She speaks to him as if he's a child she's dropping off into daycare. Don't knock over that kid's sandcastle, Lance, don't start fights with your playmates, Lance, and if you do Mommy will have to come and lock you up at home so you don't cause trouble.

"Yes, Allura," he drawls. He's back in his blue paladin armour; Allura had remained in her pink armour, and the armour from the training deck ends up in pieces after every gladiator fight. The others had all stared for a long time when he donned it the first time; maybe it stretched out different across his chest, maybe it felt wrong that someone as fucked up as Lance got to wear the armour of a paladin of Voltron. The bayard obviously didn't come with, so they'd strapped some harnesses on him and equipped him with whatever weapons he wanted, a rifle on one shoulder, a spear on the other, handguns strapped to his hips, daggers tucked in next to them. The facade almost complete. He almost looks how he used to.

The way they'd looked at him tells him he does not.

"I mean it, Lance! I'd go down with you if we didn't have to form Voltron!" she says, ice blasting her way through a dozen of the smaller ships.

"I get it, princess," Lance says flatly, standing behind her chair but ducking his head to he can see through the glass. "I'll behave."

"Good," she says, careening through the gap she's made and glancing behind to check Hunk is covering her. "I mean- I'm sorry, Lance. I don't mean to lecture. I'm just...worried. About everything."

"You're afraid of me," Lance deduces, and she looks at him, brows raised, words lost in her mouth. "You're scared I'll start fighting the rebels. I won't. I know the difference."

"Okay," she says, "I believe you." The rebel base isn't big enough for Allura to drop her lion. On the comms, she says, "I'm dropping Lance within the dobosh and then I'll start attacking the galra head-on. Is everyone in position?"

"Already firing, princess," Keith replies.

"I've got your back, Allura," Hunk adds, and she nods, steadfast in front of Lance.

"Alright, Lance." She hovers above the base. Below them is a sprawling of tents and small, concrete-looking buildings. The rebels running around there are ants, but the wedge is too narrow for Allura to take him down further. "Good luck. Move on out in three, two..."

She faces down and Blue's jaw opens. On one, Lance jumps, lets himself fall, then starts his jets and slows his descent, landing easily on the top of a building. He hops off, engages jets, and lands in an open area, rebels halting momentarily to watch him come in.

"I'm Lance," he says to them, "blue paladin? Here to help."

And someone comes forth, a pale golden alien with hair in double bunches falling past their shoulders. They get right into his space, peering at him, and just says, "Lance? From Voltron?"

"...Yeah," he says, uncomprehending. "Are you the leader?"
"No," they say. "I'm Nyma. Don't you recognise me? Why do you...look like that? I'm pretty sure the kid I scammed for his lion was not this tall."

Oh, he thinks. I must've met her before. "I was kidnapped by the galra and tortured for five months," he says, and her smirk drops. "I don't remember you. I need to talk to your leader - where are they?"

"W-wait," she says, and grabs his arm. "I'll take you to them. I- damn, Lance. You were kidnapped?"

"Yup," he says, popping the 'p'. She's leading him through the crowd, waving a hand at the rebels to send them jogging off again, and taking him to one of the few buildings. "The druids experimented on me and I got put in the gladiator arena. Severed my connection to Blue. This is my first mission."

"Damn," she says again. "That's fucked up. I- sorry, dude. After- I guess you don't remember. I, uh, tried to steal your lion. But my friend and I got separated, he's a prisoner with the galra now, so I...joined the rebellion. Trying to make a difference."

"Huh," Lance says, and looks at her again. She's punching in a code for the door, opening it and letting him in, and he watches her violet eyes, the fluid movement of her body, and says, "Well, if you're not busy making a difference after we fuck up these galra ships..."

"Wow," she says flatly. "Tortured for months and still going after all the girls."

"I go after anyone pretty enough to catch my eye- Nyma, you said?" She nods, leading him up some stairs with a smirk, eyes half on him, half on the way ahead. "Well, it'll be a while for us to leave after we clear up here... I may not have a lion but we can still go for a ride."

"You know," she replies, her voice soft, "if you're offering-"

"Lance!" comes a sharp voice in his ear. Lance scowls, adjusts his helmet. "We put you there to help the rebels, not flirt! Might I remind you that you are on comms at all times so we can monitor your situation!"

"Whatever, Allura," he replies, and Nyma starts laughing softly next to him. "Surely a quick fuck counts as helping, right? Even if it's just one rebel."

"Does it have to be quick?" asks Nyma.

"Lance, this isn't a joke!" Allura shouts. "The other paladins and I are engaged in an extremely intense battle right now! Can you please do your job so I don't have to babysit you!"

"I'm just-"

"Lance," says Shiro, and Lance rolls his eyes, knowing he's lost. "Listen to the princess. Go speak with the leader."

"Alright, alright," he sighs. "Where we going, Nyma?"

"Just up here," she says, and takes him up another level. "Sorry about your friends - but I'm up for it if you are." With this, she opens an iron door for him, and once he's crossed the threshold, she shuts it after him, leaving him alone.

The room he's in now is large, but cluttered with desks covered in tablets, holographic boards with
writing all over them, big posters on the wall, a star chart flickering down from the ceiling. Before
him is a large desk, bay windows behind it looking out on the rest of the base, then further to the
galra ships fighting to maintain their position despite behind hammered at by the lions and rebel
ships. There's a high backed chair at the desk, turned round so whoever's in it can watch the battle
outside, but they turn round as Lance approaches.

They're tall, slender, with a beak for a mouth and feathers coming out the collar and cuffs of their
rebel uniform. Tablets and documents are spilt across the table like oil; there's a mug of something
hot sitting on three sheafs of paper, and a cup filled with pens, pencils, and quills, for some reason.
They move round very deliberately, press a few fingers to the end of the chair arm until they're
facing Lance, then steeple their fingers together.

"You must be a paladin of Voltron," they say, taking in his armour with small, beady eyes. "You're
the one sent to assist us?"

"I'm Lance," he says. "I can't pilot any lion, so I was sent to ground."

"I see," they say, then clear some tablets from the side of his desk and pats it. "Come here- no,
here." Lance goes round the desk to sit against it, the leader rotating their chair once more so they
can both stare out as Shiro, presumably, calls for Voltron. This comms system has become a
double-sided mirror; they get to hear everything he does, but he is locked out of their conversations
unless they specifically invite him in. It's probably a good thing. It would only be distracting. "You
see there?" They points to some crumbled planet shards where a few galra ships have converged.
"They're going to swoop in on dropships from that point and start attacking. It's no use asking your
friends to stop them; the galra are too well-protected by the planet. I'll be here, ordering round my
people, but if you are what Princess Allura says you are, I'm going to need you in the thick of the
fighting. I won't ask you to stay with any specific unit. You go wherever the most blood is being
shed and you take out all galra soldiers in your vicinity. Can you do that?"

"Of course."

"And you won't turn on my people."

"I won't."

"That's all I need," they say, and settle back into their chair, eyes sharp as Voltron is formed before
their eyes.

"You won't fight?" Lance asks.

"You are not the only survivor of galra imprisonment here," they say mildly. "My stint in there left
me unable to move my legs. And the ship that was created specifically with that in mind for me
was half-destroyed on our last infiltration mission. So until that ship is repaired and I am able to
operate it once more, no, I won't fight."

Lance looks at their legs, which seem perfectly fine to him, and shrugs. "I got my legs chopped
off," he offers, "and got galra prosthetics instead."

"So I was told," the leader says, and glances at the glow of his left leg, still visible through his
armour. "I would rather die than let them leave any trace of themselves on me, but I suppose if you
can cope with it, then more power to you."

Lance frowns, and gets off the desk. "Why would I not cope with them?" he says. "They make me
stronger."
"And at what price?" the leader asks, to which Lance has no clear answer. The other paladins could perhaps say; the price of innocence, the price of having a leg that didn't glow all the time. Whatever his reply could've been, it doesn't matter; galra dropships start speeding in from the corner the leader had pointed out, and they say, "Go! Now!" and Lance sprints out the room and down the steps. Nyma is nowhere to be seen, but she doesn't matter right now. What matters are the galra soldiers dropping down from the ships, what matters is Lance reaching back for his rifle, grinning, and taking a pistol in hand as he gets ready to fight.

And *god*, does he fight. *God*, if he doesn't fight the galra like he was made for it. He stays at a distance, shooting, running, dodging, but before long there are too many soldiers to count and not enough rebels; Lance sheathes the rifle, clasps the pistol back in its place, and takes out the spear. He loses himself in the movement, in the rush of blood that comes with twisting the spear everywhere he wants it to go, cleaving through thick armour and thicker bodies, carving up throats, driving holes through hearts. Whatever injuries he sustains he does not feel; as rebels flag around him, he fights on, breathes heavy and hard and grins the whole time, grip tight, arms loose. It is almost, he reflects, like when he fights with Keith before he loses himself to the arena; *fun*, and intense, and there's something pouring out of him, some kind of *power* that boils over in his blood, slams down his veins and escapes with every swing he makes of the spear, every galra corpse he treads in his search to make more.

He is so fucking *strong*.

It doesn't take long for the dropships to stop, for Voltron to grab them and crush them in their fingers, for the soldiers to drop under Lance's hand. He runs through buildings, behind tents, checks every nook and cranny, but eventually, the galra are dead, and he is back in the main clearing of the base, surrounded by rebels, staring at him and his blood-coated armour, the way he can't tear this smirk off his face.

"That was seriously attractive," Nyma tells him, "but you need to see a doctor."

Looking at her, he says, heavy, "I do?"

"You got blasted," she says, "at least three times. You don't know?"

"Part of the torture thing," he says, and lets her lead him along again. "Can't feel anything anymore."

"Shit," she says, frowning. "The hell did they *do* to you, Lance?"

Lance shakes his head. "Nothing like what I'm going to do to you when we're finished here."

"Fuck," she bites out, not loud enough to cancel out the scoff in his ear.

"Are you serious?" Pidge drawls in his ear. "Do you remember the last time you tried to hook up with her?" They're clearly still focused on the battle raging in the sky, because it takes a moment for them to recognise their mistake: "I-I mean- I didn't mean- sorry, Lance."

"Whatever," he says to Pidge. "I don't give a fuck."

Nyma glances at him, but keeps walking along.

"Really, Lance," says Keith, voice thin. "You should be focusing on the mission."

"What mission? I'm finished here, Keith - I already fucking killed them all." There's something in
Keith's tone, though, edgy on the undercurrent, that makes Lance smirk and throw out, "Why? You jealous?"

"Oh, shut up-"

"We're here," says Nyma, and leads him into a white tent, where blue-uniformed strangers flurry about, sitting down with some rebels, laying others flat on the beds, desperately begging for assistance as someone bleeds out. "We need help! I've got a paladin from Voltron here, he's been blasted!"

"I'll take him!" says a doctor, clustered around a patient with three others, and runs over, grabbing Lance by the arm and taking him to an unoccupied bed. "Sit down, son. Armour off, yes, all of it." Lance strips, with Nyma's very willing help, off all his armour, then peels the undersuit off till he's in boxers, and Nyma is staring, half in appraisal, half in shock at the state of him.

"Holy shit, Lance," she says. "What did they- how did you- aren't you in..." Her eyes raise to his own unsympathetic ones, and she changes her course: "You got pretty ripped in a year's time."

"If you say so," he replies, which makes her already-uncertain smirk drop a little further. "I think you'll be satisfied with every part of me once we-"

"Can you not," says the doctor, who's crouched before Lance, mopping away blood from his hip. "You have three semi-serious blast wounds, paladin. This is not time to flirt with one of our most decorated rebels."

"Most decorated, huh?" Lance says, raising a brow, and Nyma matches his smirk.

"It happens," is all she says.

"I'm serious," the doctor says, moving from his hip to his thigh. "Lie on the bed, please. Yeah, turn over. Heavens." He starts mopping up some blood on his shoulder, turns him over again, and Lance just folds an arm behind his head and talks with Nyma as the doctor treats the scorch marks, before sewing up the wounds and covering them with a thick blue balm and bandaging them up. Nyma, once she gets over how unaffected Lance is by his wounds, starts enthusiastically going over her exploits as an official rebel soldier: infiltrations and raids, defending this base and countless others, staying here due to its natural security. Looking, she adds quietly, for her friend Rolo, and failing to find him. Lance doesn't know what to say; he doesn't remember his time in captivity so he can't tell her if a Rolo was there or not. She doesn't look for his sympathy, though, just carries on the conversation, asks him about what he remembers, and he tells her about the fire that beats in his body if he doesn't fight enough. She grins, says or fuck? and he says I haven't been able to try that one out.

Sometimes, he swears he can hear Keith over the comms, taking a half-breath as if to say something, before immediately cutting off the comms again.

As the doctor wraps up his thigh, Allura says, "Alright, Lance, we've taken down the ships. We're returning our lions to the castle and getting on a pod to reach the base. Coran is staying on the ship. Are you...busy?"

"Still in the infirmary," he replies, "although I'm almost done. Do you need me around?"

"I'm sure the base would like to thank you," she says.

"I know someone who can thank me personally."
"Lance!" cuts in Shiro, sounding aggrieved. "Meet us out in the base the second you're done there. If - and only if - they need us at the base for longer, then you can...do whatever with Nyma. Alright?"

"Yeah, yeah, alright," he grumbles, and Nyma cuts him a look.

"They need you out there?"

"They want me so the base can thank us all," he says. "If we stick around, we can go on that ride I mentioned."

A sharp smile splits her face. "Let's hope you stick around, then."

And they do. He stands with the others as their hands are shook, as they're thanked, offered meals, drinks, anything they want. Lance stands at the end of the row, Hunk firm and warm at his side, but it's him the rebels come up to the most: clasping his hand, his shoulders, thanking him earnestly, shaking their heads as they express their astonishment in his actions. He just nods, and thanks them when Hunk nudges him, and keeps an eye on Nyma, who goes up to thank the others. There's a moment where it looks like Keith won't touch her, but Shiro hisses something in his ear and Keith accepts the handshake, bitter-faced, and Nyma whispers something, grinning, eyes flitting to Lance and Keith breaks off the handshake immediately, face matching his armour.

But it doesn't escalate, and Nyma still smiles when she reaches Lance, tilts her head to and fro, dances her fingers across his shoulders. She wants him, Lance knows, and he wants her, too. Rests a hand on her waist as they speak, trails fingers across her cheek, pretending to look for injuries. Whatever he has with Keith is clandestine, and never goes as far as Lance wants it; as he needs it. But this is different. A one-time thing, a fling for Lance to have as much fun with as he wants, and Nyma wants it, too.

So when Pidge demands to stay and grab intel to look for her brother, and the others are welcomed into a feast that Hunk ends up helping to cook for, Lance lets Nyma drag him to her room in one of the buildings, and has his way with her.

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Sex is surprisingly rejuvenating. Nyma's all soft round the edges, nothing like Keith, and she's hot, and experienced, and makes the most obscene sounds when Lance does something she likes. When they're finished, she sits on his lap and traces out his scars.

"So strange," she murmurs, pressing thick fingers against the burn scar on his left shoulder. "That they'd even take you... Surely one of the others would've been a better target? No offence, Lance, but you weren't exactly...a threat when we met."

"So I've heard," Lance replies. "Maybe they picked me because I was most pathetic. Easiest to break."

"Maybe," she says. "But still - why not Shiro? Didn't they have him before? Or that little one, didn't they say their brother is a rebel?"

"So they tell me," Lance says, and leans up on his elbows to catch her lips again. She complies for only a moment before batting him off, running a finger over the square round his heart.

"They really did a number on you," she says. "But they were so close to killing you, multiple times, and they didn't. Why is that? Did they want to experiment on you more? There must've been a reason they worked so hard to keep you alive, but also do so many horrible things..."
"Maybe they wanted Shiro two-point-oh," he says, folding his arms behind his head. "Stronger, better, faster, stronger, you know? They gave me two prosthetics instead of just one, and they're both better than Shiro's. And I was put in the arena like him. Called Champion like him."

"Oh?" she says, and leans down to press a kiss to the garrote scar.

"One of the galra ships has a huge arena. They pitch prisoners against galra competitors. Shiro says he got put through it, and eventually won so much they started calling him Champion. Same thing pretty much happened to me. Not before I lost a leg, though."

"Yeah, shit," she says, reaching behind her to perhaps feel out the difference between his real leg and the prosthetic, frowns when she can't. "You don't think... Do you remember Rolo?" Shaking his head, she continues, "He was a cool dude. We were in trouble because we stole some shit from the galra. We thought they'd protect us, or at least forget about the debt, if we stole your lion and gave it to them. So I tricked you...and Rolo kept your friends busy. We were a team. Grew up together and everything."

"I see," Lance says, drawing out a smirk. "So I'm a rebound, huh?"

"Life isn't all about you, baby," she replies sharply, flicking his nose. He grabs her hand before she can pull it away, kissing the top of it, then pushes up, trailing kisses up her arm as she rolls her eyes. "Men. So insatiable. And Rolo and I weren't like that. I'm not his type- it's a big dumb story... Tell me, is it a problem who you love, where you come from?"

"It depends," Lance says, flopping back after his attempt at seduction fails. "It used to be. Boys couldn't love other boys. People - like me, darker-skinned - couldn't love white people. Shit like that, you know?"

"I think I do," she says. "My old planet was so bound by tradition. It's like you said - boys couldn't love other boys, girls couldn't love girls. Rolo and I were both pretty screwed, although him moreso than me."

"Huh," Lance says. "You like boys and girls both?" She nods, and he grins lazily. "Same here. Knew we were bound by something."

"Yeah, well, one night we just packed our shit up and left. Could've probably pretended to be together, stayed unhappy all our lives, but we wanted freedom. So we just drifted...did shitty jobs...got in trouble...and he got caught. So now I'm here." She sighs, sits back on Lance's legs for a moment before sliding off, sitting instead cross-legged by his side. She keeps her hands on him, though, fingers along his ribs, pressing against old blast wounds. "And I'm glad to be here, I am. Actually making a difference for once, can you believe it. But I worry, Lance. Do you- I know you say you've forgotten. But do you remember anything? Would he..." She gazes at all his scars, and perhaps sees her missing friend in his place. "They wouldn't hurt him like this, would he? Not over a silly debt."

"Doubt it," he says, and her body untenses immediately, she lets loose a breath and presses her fingers a little more firmly against his skin. "I was a paladin of Voltron when they caught me. You know, when I was still important. They wanted something from me, but I don't remember what. It- it depends on where they put Rolo. Most prisoners end up in workcamps, making food, or mining shit... But if, for some reason, they put him on the same ship I was in, he might've ended up in the arena. But I don't know, Nyma. I really don't remember."

"It's okay," she mutters. "I get it, your brain's been shot to shit. I just... If that happens to him, after all we've done to be free, to live our own lives..." She shakes her head, and for a second Lance
thinks he sees tears swelling in her closed eyes before she opens them, her stare resolute, mouth set. "He won't fall. Rolo can endure some pain, and he can fight pretty decent. I just have to believe he's okay, right?"

Right, Lance thinks. Maybe that does help. Maybe it's what the other paladins said to themselves while he was gone. "Yeah," he says, because her gaze has shifted to his eyes, expecting answers. "He's probably not that important, in the grand scheme of things. Not like me."

"Right," she drawls, "Mister Blue Paladin, where would we be without him?"

"Dead?" he tries. "I kicked ass today."

"You were scary," she says. "I've never seen anyone have so much fun killing people."

"It's a talent."

"It was kind of hot."

"Just kind of?"

"Just kind of," she says, and raises his arm so she can stare at the scars on it. Then his next arm, then she rolls him over and stares at his back for what seems like hours, and when she turns him back over, she lays down beside him so they're both on their sides, staring at each other. Lance takes one of her hands in his, presses tiny kisses to her thick knuckles. "I'm glad I met you again," she whispers. "Sometimes I felt bad about that blue kid whose lion I stole. But I guess I didn't need to. You're fine, now."

"Tell that to my teammates," he mutters. "I'm glad I met you, too. The only people I talk to these days are too depressed to have fun with me."

"What about that- the red boy. He was raging at me when I went up to thank him. I think he likes you, babe." Her smile is small, teasing, and she raises a brow as she speaks.

"It's a thing," Lance says, and she nods. "When I fight one-on-one, I think I'm back in the arena, and don't stop till my opponent is killed. Obviously, no one's into that, but I hate not being able to train, so Keith figured out that if he kisses me just before I try and kill him, I come back to myself."

"Shit," she says, "I wonder what prompted that discovery."

"Who gives a fuck? He's cute, we make out a lot. I'll take it."

"You should," she says, tugging her hand from his lips to run it gently through his hair. "He seems cute. And a good fighter. Pretty badass, from what I saw."

"He is," Lance says, and can't resist a smile. "He's cool."

Her eyes dip deep into his, searching violet versus open blue, and after a moment, she just grins as her comms starts buzzing, and she sits up. "Cool, uh huh. Yeah, Captain Nyma reporting. I'm in my room. I can be down in ten. Nothing serious? Roger." She sighs, looks over. "I'm gonna change. Don't stare too much."

She gets up with a groan, cleans herself off and changes while Lance lays in her bed and watches with a grin, but eventually she shoves him off her bed and forces him back into his uniform, and together they stagger out, arms still round each other, laughing about how it took them ten minutes to make sure they were actually able to have sex together.
It's so much more calming than whatever he does with Keith. He slams Keith against the wall, they make out, Lance wants him but he needs to fight more. Lance has fought; then the desires for more could come through, and as such, he acted on them with the closest person interested. Better Nyma than Keith, anyway. He won't ever see her again. And Shiro would probably roast him over a hot stove for a few hours for even touching Keith.

So he goes back to the ship on Blue, something in his heart calmed. Nyma has work, it's true, but she lets him kiss her one more time for luck, ruffling his hair and wishing him well as they part, and Lance catches Keith's eye, watching with a scowl, before they too have to disappear onto their separate lions.

Allura, of course, can't wait to scold him: "I'm aware you're your own person," she says sternly as they head to the castleship, "and you're, apparently, a young man, and you've been through hell and back so obviously you can make your own decisions - but can you please try not to repeat this again? At least, not in the middle of a mission. And not when you're injured, either. Only after the mission is done, and if we're invited to stay for a while longer, can you disappear off with a...friend. I mean- if I have to hear you flirting with some girl who tried to steal Blue ever again, Lance. I didn't need to hear that. None of us did."

"You're the one keeping me on comms," Lance points out, sat down with his back to the pilot seat, legs stretched before him. His helmet sits on his lap, still bloodstained from the fight. "If you'd let me use the comms as I needed instead of forcing me to stay on with you all then you wouldn't have had to hear all that."

"I shouldn't be hearing it anyway," Allura says. "Promise me, Lance. Only after missions, only after you've seen a doctor. Alright?"

He stares down at his helmet, long and hard. He's not stupid enough to believe what he did was okay - the fact is, he didn't care, and Nyma didn't seem to care much, either, and the others weren't on ground to stop him. But she's right - Nyma was distracting, and he doesn't need that. "Fine," he grinds out. "Fine, whatever. I'll wait."

"Thank you," she says, and zooms into Blue's hangar. "Let's walk up together, okay? You need a healing pod?"

Blue's jaw opens, and Lance stands, cracking his bones a bit before following down the steps after Allura. "Nah," he says, noting the other lions already parked and empty. Probably took their speeders back up the bridge. "I got some bandages on. Nothing serious."

"Three blast wounds?"

"One went right through me. It's not an issue."

"...Okay, but I still want Coran to have a look over them in the infirmary; and since you didn't join us for the feast, you're going to have to sit and eat on your own tonight. I...don't think anyone will be doing much else, today. I, personally, intend to sleep the night through, for once."

Lance glances at her, frowning. "Trouble sleeping?"

"...I worry," she says shortly, then says nothing more till they reach the infirmary. Coran is already there, treating Hunk. He's peeling back a bandage that covers one of Hunk's eyes, wincing a little as he does so, and Allura presses her hand to Hunk's shoulder and whispers good job out there before leaving.
"What's up?" Lance says, coming to sit a foot or so from Hunk.

"Nothing serious," Hunk says, voice quiet. "Just a- got a bit close with a ship. The laser came right at me, I don't know. Just messed up my vision for a bit, but it's good." Coran hms at that, discarding the bandage and inspecting Hunk's red, slightly glassy eye.

"It will be," Coran surmises. "But I'm going to wrap it back up again, alright? Can you close your eyes for me?"

Hunk does so, and Coran grabs a small tub of gel and starts applying it.

"So," Hunk says, "Nyma, huh?"

"Yup," Lance says. "You gonna yell at me, too?"

"Nah, dude. I mean, if she's a rebel now, then I guess she's turned over a new leaf."

"She's looking for some dude Rolo," Lance says, and Hunk nods. "He's been captured, so. She seems to be a pretty good soldier."

"Yeah... So, uh... did you... have a good... time...?"

Lance laughs, a single ha, and says, "Yeah, sure. Let's call it that."

Sighing, Hunk says, "No, I mean... Did you, though?"

"Yeah," Lance says, and they don't talk any longer. Coran fixes Hunk up, gives Lance a brief lookover, and then he's allowed to leave. No one joins him as he fixes himself a bowl of goo in the kitchen. He sits at the table and eats, far too present for his own good, but no one shows up to distract him. Instead, his brain gets lost in the fight from earlier, on slicing through his opponents, how easy it had been, how good it had felt. As good as fucking Nyma, even. Good in different ways, quenching the same thirst. The halls are empty as he returns to his room, everyone, he assumes, in bed already.

And Lance, for once, finds it easy to do the same.

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He's awoken, of course, halfway through the night by Keith.

"You don't want to fight?" Keith repeats once Lance has gone to meet him, brows furrowed as he stares up at Lance. He hasn't bothered to put his armour on, yet; it sits bunched in his arms, and instead he wears his usual sleep attire, a t-shirt and boxers and yeah, Lance thinks, eyeing him up and down, he's pretty cute. He and Nyma have a bit more in common than Lance thought. Both a little snarky, both smile alarmingly wide when they laugh with honesty, both desperate to find Lance's weaknesses.

"If I could feel exhaustion, I'm pretty sure I'd be dead on my feet," Lance says.

Keith's grip on his clothes tighten; he says, "Why, because of all the fighting today? Or because Nyma tired you out?"

"You are jealous," Lance says, and finds a grin unfurling despite himself. "Yeah, dude, because I fought today and because I fucked today. Why are you so mad? Aren't you glad to go sleep? Is one
night of not getting injured a bad thing for you?"

"I'm not fucking jealous," Keith mutters, averting his gaze in a way that screams yes I am. "You could've gotten yourself in danger again. Last time we met Nyma, she used you to try and steal Blue. And almost succeeded!"

"She didn't have any reason to turn against me," Lance says. "All she used me for was a bit of fun, and I was using her too. Are you really jealous, Keith? We can fuck if you want. Doesn't matter to me."

Lance is so sure Keith was going to say yes, okay, but something flickers in his eyes at Lance's final words, and he steps away. "No," he says, voice steel. "I don't want to sleep with you. Don't don't ask me again."

"But we can still make out, right?"

"Why? Does that matter to you?"

Lance looks at him for a moment, grey eyes, set mouth, then pulls away his eyes, shaking his head at the ridiculousness of it all. "Jesus," he says, "how old are we, twelve? What do you want me to say? You're hot, and I like making out with you. It's fun. Nothing else is fun around here."

"Fun," Keith repeats. "You think I'm fun."

"Yeah? And?"

"...You didn't used to."

"I'm not who I was," he says, looking back, and Keith meets his eyes and nods. "Look, c'mere." Keith scrunches up his nose, stepping back, but Lance takes his hips and reels him back in, grinning. "C'mon, asshole. You want a kiss before bedtime? A little smooch before sleep?"

"Oh my god," Keith says, biting his lip to stop himself laughing, leaning his head back so Lance misses his lips, "what are you saying?"

"A little kisssie kiss?" Lance says, mouthing at Keith's throat, and Keith gives in just like that, steps into Lance's embrace and kisses him, tilts his chin so he can reach, lips on lips, soft and warm and ever-giving. "There," he says softly. "Is that what you wanted?"

And Keith says, "Yeah," a barely-there sound, and they kiss again.

--

The fire, Lance realises in the following days, that trails through his veins is, in fact, only smoke. Wood and paper on the ground, still smouldering. In the aftermath of fighting on the rebel base, Lance is imbued with real fire, a heat that burns, that urges him to work harder than he ever has before. The gladiators cannot stand before him, no matter what level he jacks them up to. He gives himself every disadvantage, one weapon, no weapons, locks a hand round his back, blindfolds himself, and he still comes out of these fights relatively uninjured. So then he swims, and it's not enough, and he works out, and it's not enough, nothing is enough, not like fighting the galra, not like fucking around with Nyma.

He is also alarmingly present. The breakfast after the mission goes a little something like this:

"How are you doing this morning, Allura?" That's Hunk, sat beside Lance, looking to Allura at the
head of the table with soft, careful eyes as she glances up at him.

"Much better," she says. "I actually slept the night through for once. I think...we did a pretty good job."

"We did," assures Shiro. "Very few casualties. Most of them were in the sky."

Allura nods, picks at her food. "Anything come of that intel, Pidge?"

"A few records that might be worth looking into," Pidge says. "I asked around, and someone told me they'd met Matt at a base halfway across the galaxy, but they told me not to bother. Apparently that base has been compromised and Matt will have gone somewhere else."

Shiro lets out a sigh. "How does this keep happening?" he asks, and Pidge shrugs. "Just-- always right out of our grasp."

"We're going to find him," Pidge says, quiet but determined.

"It'll be okay," Keith adds, and Lance barely stops himself from raising his brows. "Matt'll be okay, Shiro. He's a leader now, right?"

"Right," Pidge says. "We have to believe he's going to be okay."

"I know, I know. It's just...everything going on..."

"It's a lot."

Lance keeps eating, mind wandering only a little. He remembers Pidge having an older brother Matt; remembers he went missing on the same mission Shiro did. So they haven't found him yet? Pidge looks a lot less worried about it than Lance would've envisioned; Shiro looks a lot more worried about it than Lance would've thought.

"How are we feeling after the battle, paladins?" Coran asks softly, sitting opposite Allura. "Hunk, how's your eye?"

"Hurts a lot less, now," Hunk says. "But I still can't see out it. You don't think...it's permanent?"

"Surely not!" says Allura.

"Hurts a lot less, now," Hunk says. "But I still can't see out it. You don't think...it's permanent?"

"Surely not!" says Allura.

"Even if it is," says Coran, "we can fix it. Fix you up a new one, eh?"

"Yeah," Hunk mumbles, and shrugs. Pidge, sitting beside Keith, reaches across the table to squeeze Hunk's shoulder, and he manages a wan smile in return. "How about everyone else? No more injuries?"

"No one but Lance," says Allura, and Lance half-nods, still eating. "Although, as ever, he was remarkably blasé about them."

"What were the injuries?" Keith asks.

"Three blast wounds," she recites before Lance can speak, "one went right through him. I ended up going to the medical tent to check their supplies were up to standard, and the doctor who treated him says he should be healed within the day. So. I guess it really isn't that big an issue."

"He was still hurt," Shiro says, voice shredded. "And he didn't even care. All he cared about was Nyma. It's so..."
"That's just who he is now," Hunk says, hollow. "He doesn't care about himself."

"It must be to do with his residual trauma from his imprisonment," Pidge says. "Right? It's just... He's just dealing with the effects of being tortured for five months. And- being drained of quintessence. Having his brain cut into. It's not like- this can't be who he is now."

"I don't know," Hunk says, and everyone looks to him with wide eyes. "I- what if it is?"

"...That's-"

"How long," Lance finally says, flat and irritated, "are you going to keep talking about me as if I'm not here?"

The wide eyes turn to him; Coran's spoon drops from his fingers into his goo, and even though it splashes up against his uniform, he makes no move to fix it. "O-oh," says Allura, looking from Lance to the others then back. "W-we- uh, we didn't...realise..."

"That I was sitting right here?" he suggests. "That I have ears, and can hear the things you say?"

Pidge's features turn tight. "We talk about you all the time when we're eating," she says, and Lance scowls. "And you never complain! You never even listen to us!"

"Why would I, if this is all you talk about? How long are you going to keep grieving the old me? Do you need to hold a fucking funeral or what?"

"Lance," says Shiro tightly, "don't start this now."

"Don't you think we're allowed to?" throws back Pidge. "You're completely different. And you know that. A-and we don't know if the old you is ever coming back, and... And you don't even care at all. About us. Or yourself. Or, or anything!"

"You only want to fight," Keith says quietly, and Pidge nods, gesturing to him. "And fuck, apparently."

"That's just who I am now," Lance says. "If you don't like it, that's your problem. I'm stuck here whether you like it or not."

"Th-that's- Lance, that's not what I... I just meant...can't we just miss our old friend? Can't we be upset about him?" Pidge tries, kneading her fingers together as she stares over at him.

"As long as you keep it away from me," Lance says, standing, "I don't care what the fuck you do."

And he leaves.

--

What was the old Lance like, that they miss him so much? In what memories he can recall, he sees himself smiling a lot, laughing. Times when he's alone he seems to be much sadder, and Lance can remember that sadness, it seems to be the only thing he can remember. It doesn't leave, not even when he's like this. If his ribs hold a pool of still water, this sadness is some turbulent storm rocking to and fro at the very depths, rippling out only a little, the surface, somehow, unbothered. Maybe it is the result of years of living like this, learning to let the storm rage on beneath while keeping his face set in a smile. Is that Lance better than this one? The two videos he saw proved that he was childish, and nowhere near as strong as he is now. Why don't they see him as the improvement he so clearly is? Why, even now, can't they accept it? It'd be better for them. Better
for him. The sooner they accept him, the sooner they can settle back into a team, the sooner they can put the past to rest.

Except they think they can get him back. Lance doesn't see how. What will getting his quintessence back to? Allura said that a planet, once drained of quintessence, was dead; following that logic, Lance is in a state of flux, not alive, not properly, but not dead either. All that getting his quintessence back will do is revive him back to full health. Do they think he will smile more? Perhaps they think he will feel things again, and that in feeling, he will be human once more.

How that prospect thrills him, and terrifies him also.

He doesn't want to think about it. Not any of it. He throws himself back into gladiator training. It isn't hard, although reaching a level difficult enough that his mind doesn't wander takes some time. Power surges through his veins; bots drop to the floor, then through it. This is what being useful feels like.

He's decided to try out a simple mace and shield for his training today, and he's so busy whirling it around, knocking heads off bots and bashing his shield to crack open their chests, that it's only until he's cleared the level and Allura calls his name does he turn and see her standing there in her gown, hair up in a bun, and holding a holographic tablet in both hands. Her brows are contorted slightly in worry, the edge of her mouth tugged down into a frown. Now that Lance is looking, he sees purple marring the dark brown of her skin beneath her eyes; lines of exhaustion stemming from the corners, the tremble of her fingers round the tablet.

How long has she been unable to sleep? Is it Lance's fault? Should he care?

"Princess," he acknowledges instead. "End training simulation."

"Lance," she says. "I... I wanted to share the results from the intel Pidge gathered. From- from the ship you were kept in."

"Yeah," he says, throwing a last glance towards the training deck before joining her at the door. "Here?"

"A-anywhere- yes, here. Let's..." She moves away, towards the wall, and sits, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "Come, uh, come sit with me, please..."

He joins her, sits cross-legged by her, and leaves the mace by his side. "You don't want to get Pidge to explain it?"

"...No. No, Pidge is- she's- the results weren't...satisfactory. Pidge is...quite upset," Allura says, fingers going pale round the tablet. "I-I don't know how to- I should just say it straight, shouldn't I?" She stares at the screen of the tablet, swiping at it and scrolling slowly through whatever's on it before locking it again and sighing. "Lance, I'm...afraid the galra tricked us. They must've- maybe they realised Pidge was pulling info from their ships. They didn't keep any online record of what they did to you, where they kept you, their, their experiments..." She shakes her head, and the tablet snaps beneath her fingers. "O-oh... Oh, heavens... Lance, it was just a- those videos, the information, it was just a joke. A stupid joke. They forced us to watch you suffering to reach the actual data, only for that data to be things like...what times you would eat, or, or an exact measurement of your loudest scream..."

Allura sits with her legs to her chest, and as she speaks, her head gets progressively lower till she drops it on her knees, shoulders shaking, tablet shattered before her feet.
"I'm sorry, Lance," she says, voice strained like a piece of gum stretched too far. "I'm sorry, I failed you, we couldn't find you for so long and even the info we got off the ship is useless, a-and I can't heal your quintessence myself, Coran and I don't know how to heal this incision, o-or if it's even possible, a-and you don't even care. Y-you just want to fight, or flirt, a-and I lose my patience and yell at you and I'm sorry, but... I-I don't know what to do. Everything seems so- so hopeless."

He doesn't remember the old Allura, not really, but his brain pulls forth flashes of her in her gown, her combat suit, her pink armour. Head always high, chin up, smiling or scowling, ordering them where to go, coordinating with them from the castle. That Allura doesn't correspond whatsoever with this one; even her hair looks less full that it used to.

"You didn't get any info off those videos?"

She shakes her head. "They didn't record anything...uh, important, I suppose. They showed you getting drugged, and hurting you, but they didn't show any interrogation scenes, or, I mean, it's not like they said what they were drugging you with..." Her shoulders hiccup, her head dips, somehow, further.

"It'll be fine," he says, because he's aware Allura needs comfort, but has no idea how to give it. "Like you said, I don't care. It's not important to me. I can live with this... Can you?"

When she raises her head, her eyes are rimmed red, tears half-fallen down her cheeks, damp patches on the knees of her gown. "I don't know," she says, and the tears bubble over again. This time, however, she buries her head in his shoulder, pressing her face against the armour as though the cold hard surface of it means nothing to her. "Please," she says. "I know I've failed you, but please let me just...pretend. For a minute. You're so different..."

So he lets her cry on his shoulder, eventually lifts a hand to her hair and stares out at the empty training deck before him. Maybe the old Lance would've given Allura the comfort she needs. Maybe he would've found words to say at all, but Lance can't say anything. The pool in his ribs remained undisturbed at surface. Lance won't pay attention to anything going on below.

And when she's finished, she thanks him, like he needs thanking.

Like he deserves it.

He doesn't know what to say to that, either.

Chapter End Notes

plsplspls tell me what u think.....im so nervous sldjalsdklsa.... ily. and i wont put it in tags bc thats a dick move but i feel like i should say ill probs start hinting at potential/future shay/hunk/allura

oh also does anyone actually listen to the songs i put in or ??? just bc. they all bang. im doing u all a favour
delusions

Chapter Summary

keith struggles to tell the truth

Chapter Notes

im alive bitch! barely! sorry i took so long! it took a while to generate the proper like. Thing of the chap then i got a bit of a downer comment that spent me spiralling into doubt lol and then i was just busy w uni and i was at rtx london last wkd so! if anyone was there/is into rt.....wow!

uhhhhhhhhh anyway. i hope ur all picking up what im putting down here. im trying new stuff as a writer all the time with this fic, u kno, experimenting with Theme and Pacing (even if u cant tell ;;;;;) and Stuff so...yeah

uhhh mentions of panic attacks but Not Really panic attacks? just stress. and lots of fighting. !

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Love, is it real love?
It's like smiling when the firing squad's against you
And you just stay lined up.
Cherry, Lana Del Rey

--

Keith can't sleep knowing what Lance did with Nyma today. He can't sleep, not if he hasn't fought Lance, not if he hasn't brushed close enough to death to think maybe I'm forgiven now, not if Lance hasn't kissed him again and again and again, sat with him in the middle of a huge room and wiped down his injuries. He can't sleep.

He is too sad.

Jealous, Lance had said, Lance had crowed with utter delight, and Keith tried to deny it but he couldn't. He said no when Lance propositioned him but he couldn't deny it. If Lance hadn't carried on, if Lance had stopped at we can fuck if you want, Keith probably would have said yes.

But then Lance had carried on. Doesn't matter to me.

And like a bucket of ice cold water being thrown over him, Keith had remembered it doesn't matter to Lance, whether they kiss or not, whether they fuck or not. Nothing matters to him.

Keith doesn't matter to him, and it's stupid to pretend like he does, but...he can't help it. There's a softness that returns to Lance when they're alone together, he makes silly jokes like tonight, says
things like kissie kiss and tries to kiss him, when they patched each other up after fighting Lance would hunch down and wipe any blood away with such tender hands that Keith can barely believe they're capable of the slaughter he'd seen today. He asks Keith if it's painful, once or twice, he apologises if he needs to do stitches, he looks at the mess on Keith's neck with eyes Keith cannot decipher.

And it means something. It has to mean something, or Keith is just making a fool of himself, Lance is just using him the way he used Nyma, and Keith is so easy for it, nearly handed himself over just because Lance smirked at him the right way. Lance says it doesn't matter to him but Keith has to believe it does, that he's lying to himself, that he just doesn't realise it yet.

Because otherwise Keith is lying to himself. Pretending to see things that aren't really there. Wishing to see something, anything more than the ghost that stands before him, grinning with this crass, cruel edge, sun rays sharpened to a lethal point. And Keith has lied to himself too much, he cannot keep doing it. It has to be real. Whatever this is between them, it has to mean something, it has to be the truth. That...quietness that takes Lance when he talks about his family, about Cuba, it comes out around Keith also. It's important. There's something solid inside the fog that turns Lance's edges to mist.

Keith is determined to find it.

--

He sleeps in late, exhausted after last night's battle, after staying up for hours running his mind in circles, and when he finally showers and drags himself out to the common room, Pidge is having a panic attack.

Or something like it. Lance isn't around, and Shiro has preoccupied himself making lunch with Hunk, so Coran and Allura are standing behind Pidge at her computer, trying to calm them down, whilst Pidge is not having it at all.

"I don't understand!" she says, and Coran murmurs oh, I know. "There should be something- there should be something! Why is there nothing here! Who gives a fuck about how many fucking push ups he can do in an hour? In five? Who cares what fucking shampoo he used? I don't- I don't understand-"

"They must've known," Allura says, voice quiet and unusually distressed, and Keith finds himself drawing closer, frowning. On Pidge's set up is a screen full of files ready to be accessed, but Pidge isn't tearing through them as Keith would've imagined. "They must've- I mean, we haven't been subtle. We go in, we search, you get data, we leave... They must've realised what you were doing, Pidge. And knew you'd try and do it if you ever found Lance. So they- so they-"

And then Allura starts crying, which sets Pidge off, and Keith can only freeze, staring with wide eyes as Coran reaches out to touch them both on their shoulders.

"They gave us dummy info," Coran surmises, and Pidge starts wailing. "Hid behind agonising videos of him being tortured... They are...very clever, one can't deny it."

"What?" Keith whispers, unable to move closer to the source of distress. "What did they..."

"I'm sorry, Pidge," Coran says, leaning down to hug her, but Pidge just pushes him away, sniffing. "Keith, the info we grabbed off the ship Lance was tortured on is...essentially...useless," and he closes his eyes at the last part, turning his head away as Allura slams her palms over her eyes.
"We... They..."

"We wasted our time," Coran says finally, and Keith is horrified to find a tear trickling down his own cheek.

"So stupid!" says Pidge, collapsing into herself. "I'm so stupid! How couldn't I see this coming? How could I- and all that data we grabbed off those ships, it didn't even help us find Lance! They didn't keep any record of him anywhere, on any Galra ship! So why would they keep it on this ship! Why didn't I see this coming? And n-now I've wasted all this time, we- we should've been helping him, h-helping him fight, or, or looking for this planet, and I- and I- this is- all my fault-"

"No," says Allura, "it's mine-"

"No," says Keith, taking one stony step forward before getting stuck again. "It's mine. It was my decision- to go in- and I lost him-"

"Keith," says Pidge, and stumbles out her seat to rush to him, wrapping her arms round his torso and pressing her sopping face against his chest. "I'm so sorry-"

"Pidge- don't-" But Pidge is no longer listening, so Keith just settles his arms round her, awkward with the contact but desperate for it nonetheless, hovering till Coran takes Allura in his arms before dropping his head into Pidge's hair, letting his shoulders heave with the weight of his grief, of his guilt. Pidge shakes in tiny trembles, trying and failing to hold herself back, clutching her fingers into Keith's t-shirt and barely letting loose a sound. Beyond her, Allura gives great, horrified sobs as Coran murmurs soothingly in her ear, but there's a tightness to the edge of his words that makes Keith cry harder.

Look at them all. If Lance found them like this he'd probably laugh, but they can't help it. Keith can't, that's for sure, still stuck in this version of himself that tears up with every mention of Lance. It's a little better now, but still difficult to stop his guilt from turning so embarrassingly physical. Keith's kept all his sadness cooped up until the clouds were stormy with it, and Lance disappearing was merely the first raindrop to fall. There are so many. There is so much wrong, and Keith can't help but think it's his fault, he was leading Voltron at the time and he failed so much-

All of them. Now Pidge is devastated and Allura keeps shaking and Coran is trying so hard to keep them all together, holding them one by one and calming them with whatever words he thinks will help, sits with Lance for hours when he's unconscious, rarely lets them catch him unsmiling, lest they glimpse the anguish kept hiding between the lines in his eyes.

"I should tell Lance," Allura says finally, and Keith lifts his head to look at her. Pidge is still sobbing against his chest, but Allura swipes at her cheeks and manages a smile that quivers horribly. "I think he went training, didn't he...as," she says, and has to stop, sniff and clear her throat, before continuing, "as ever."

"I can do it, princess," Coran offers immediately, but Allura shakes her head.

"Why don't you go tell Hunk and Shiro," she suggests quietly. "I want to talk to him myself."

So Coran nods, follows her out the room till it's just Keith and Pidge. Keith, exhausted by sadness, just takes Pidge by her waist and carries her over to the couch, collapsing against it and letting Pidge crawl into his lap the way Shiro did with him when he was crying about his dad.

Pidge is so young, still. Keith was only a year or so into the garrison at her age, channelling all his anger, all his sadness into being the very best he could be, as good as Shiro always said he could
be. Pidge is...still a child. Keith isn't sure how long they've spent in space, but he's certain it must be over a year at this point. Sometimes, at the garrison, Shiro would sneak them out to the rooftop to starwatch like when they were kids, and it was at these times that Keith would let himself revert back, curling into himself and against Shiro's side, and Shiro would let him, stroke his hair, rub his back, let him be a child again. Tell him everything would be alright.

And Keith has failed Lance. Intensely, ridiculously, unbelievably so- but that doesn't mean he has to fail everyone, all the time.

So Pidge sits curled up between his legs, face pressed to his chest, and he rubs a hand against her back and runs his fingers through her hair, channelling every ounce of Shiro he can manage as he whispers, "It's okay, it's fine, we'll get through this, everything will be alright."

He doesn't believe it, but he has to, for a minute, for Pidge. Pidge is still a child, and Keith is, apparently, some kind of adult, and he has to take care of them in whatever way he knows how.

And he grew up half his life alongside Shiro, so he has the best teacher.

But they cry so long, and Keith, he feels it, too. It is so difficult to live like this, doing their best to help Lance and failing at every turn. They don't save him fast enough to prevent the druids from installing him with new legs, a new soul, new bones made of stone; they don't check his legs, and therefore don't rescue him from even more electrocution from the druids; they can't train one-on-one with him, except Keith; they can't even seem to say the right things.

Now this. They spend weeks hacking the encryption and days watching those god-awful videos and hours going through the info they'd supposedly unlocked, and it was all for nothing.

What if nothing works, then? What if they never crack the code to Lance getting better? What if it can't be done? What if he's just like this, forever?

Would Keith be okay with that? There's a way Lance looks at him, now, like he never did before, it sets Keith's blood on fire but is chilling to his heart, Keith still can't tell if he likes that, if he's into it, if he's so desperate for Lance's time and affection that he'll just take it. Like a starving dog begging for scraps, Keith will take any bit of attention Lance gives him and will call it love, call it real, call it - call Lance - human. Someone capable of empathy and care, the way Lance used to be.

Perhaps, then, this is what Keith and the others deserve. Easier to play at being Lance's rival, to hurl all manner of rude and insulting words at him, than to acknowledge his own crush on Lance, to let slip to anyone that it even existed. Easier to ignore the way Lance overflowed with empathy and care, a kind of selflessness that only comes from real, true love, an incredible value placed on every friendship Lance made. So, so easy to just take that for granted, so that only now, when Lance is a shell of himself - the opposite of himself - does Keith realise what he had shunned.

All for the sake of ego. Keith was desperate for Lance's friendship but Lance was such a competitive asshole sometimes, and Keith was an asshole too, and by the time they'd grown to become actual friends Keith couldn't get the words out his throat, shame swallowing them whole before he had the chance.

And now that Lance is gone, and who's to know if he'll ever return? It had taken two electric shocks to get him to sound at all like himself again, and it caused him to forget his own family. They can't do that again. There has to be some other way. The quintessence, the incision...surely if they fix those, Lance will return? Or some version of him, at least, something different than how he is now.
"Keith," says Pidge, breaking him from his reverie, and he looks down at her to see the crying has ceased, somewhat. Her shoulders are still but her hands are still knotted into Keith's shirt, and she makes no effort to move from their close position. "Keith, do you really love him?"

It became very obvious when Lance went missing; still, Keith says, "Yes."

"Even now?"

"...Even now," he admits, and Pidge's brows dip as she frowns at him.

"The way he is? Or..."

"I don't know," he says tightly, breaking eye contact. He doesn't want Pidge to know, to somehow suss out what he and Lance spend their nightly hours doing now. If anyone could figure it out, it would be Pidge, and Keith never knows what constitutes a wrong move around her.

Still, she presses on: "Were you okay, yesterday? Hearing him with Nyma... Watching them go... It- it can't have been easy."

"It wasn't." He frowns down at her, but Pidge's eyes are creased only in worry, gentle concern. "Why?"

"...You're being very nice to me right now," she says, and shrugs. "Thought I'd return the favour. But I can just go back to being mean if you'd prefer that."

He scoffs. "Maybe," he says dryly, then sighs quietly. "It's fine, Pidge. In comparison to all our other problems, this is just some...dumb teenage bullshit."

She hums, leaning her side back against him and staring off into the distance. "My brother fell in love at your age," she says, and Keith blinks at the sudden change in topic. "He never told me who it was, but I knew it was requited. He'd facetime us and smile like he'd pulled off the best prank against Iverson, always talked about this friend he had who was just so incredible...and it was dumb teenage bullshit, for the most part. But...it was also love. And that's important. She frowns, as if uncertain where she's going with this, then adds, "And Lance needs that. Especially now. Only someone who loves him the way my brother loved whoever it was will be patient enough to deal with all this...shit going on. God knows I'm not. Lance probably can't stand to be around me."

"That's not true-"

"It is. I don't want to fight with him and I- I don't know what else to do. I don't train in the gym or swim like you guys. And I- I've been so busy, with this, this-" Her lip trembles, but she takes a deep breath and fights on: "This bullshit, and I know- I know he knows. That I can't look at him the same way I used to. Seeing what they did to him..." She shakes her head, turns her face in to Keith's chest again. "So stupid."

"It's okay, Pidge," Keith says, though it rings hollow. "They tricked all of us."

"But I'm supposed to be smart."

"This doesn't make you stupid. We're just- none of us are...at our best."

They scoff a little. "You almost sound like Shiro."

"I'm trying."
Pidge hums a little and says, "You're doing a decent job."

"...Yeah?"

"Mm. Nothing like Shiro, but, uh, not bad." She lays her head back against his chest and lets out a soft sigh. "I just can't believe this all happened to Lance. Out of all of us, I... They hurt him so much and now he's like a stranger. Honestly, the only time he seemed like his old self was when he was flirting with Nyma, but even then... I dunno, Keith. I don't want to think about what that means."

"...I have a theory," Keith confides quietly. "I think fighting is...good for him, somehow. It makes him more... I don't know... Like himself. He talked about missing Red with me after we fought the galra on that junkyard planet...and then everything he pulled with Nyma after fighting them on the rebel base..."

He takes care not to mention the way Lance turns after their own private fights; laughing, smiling, making dumb jokes. Even if Pidge was marginally more okay with it that the others, it's still a risk Keith refuses to take.

"Hm," she muses. "That's actually- that might make sense. In the torture videos, it did sort of seem like they were trying to force him to become some kind of soldier... Maybe in fighting, he feels like he's fulfilling his purpose? So then he can relax?"

"Yes," Keith says, feeling something like excitement spark through his veins. "Yes, just like that."

"And that's why he needs to fight every day...otherwise he feels...useless...? Or...something like that..." Pidge continues murmuring to herself, and Keith leans his head back, simply listening, as Pidge starts connecting various dots from the torture and Lance's behaviour.

It isn't long till Coran reappears: "Time for lunch, paladins!" he says with a tacked-on smile, and when they arrive, everyone is already there, even Lance and Allura. Her eyes are puffy and red, hands trembling just a little as she eats her meal; Lance continues to be lax and slow, unbothered by them.

And he remains unbothered all day. Keith can't help watching from the corner of his eye, all the time. Lance doesn't immediately return to training; turns and asks Hunk about something unimportant, what he did during the rebel fight, and Hunk, surprised and pleased, starts rambling at length. When he returns to the gym, Keith and Hunk shadowing him, he doesn't even work as hard as usual. He talks to them. Makes jokes. It feels so surreal, and Hunk can't stop smiling, talking to Lance during dinner about his new improvements on the ship, a few things he'd deduced about Lance's legs from the notes he'd made.

It's wonderful, the few days it lasts. Three, in fact, of Lance being almost normal, almost like himself, but still so casually cruel and dismissive in a way he never was before. He just...laughs more. Not at them, not always. He even talks to Shiro about his prosthetic, asking for tips, and Shiro is so blown away that he's left speechless for a good minute or two before unloading all his knowledge about his prosthetic onto Lance.

Keith, unfortunately, has to get used to not sparring with Lance in the middle of the night. Which should be a good thing, but it isn't, and Keith hates admitting it to himself. Shouldn't he be happy about the progress Lance has made? But why has he made it? Because he fought the galra? Because he fucked Nyma? Something else? Something Keith has been unable to unlock despite all his own private efforts? Is it selfish to be upset by that? Why is he so upset by that? Surely loving Lance means encouraging all his progress?
But it feels like too tiny a precipice to lay his hope upon.

Progress doesn't just happen, not like this. Nothing is ever that easy.

"Alright, paladins," Allura says on the second day of this vague, uneasy peace. "Whilst extenuating circumstances have made it impossible for us to train together as we did before, I think now is the time we return to our schedule, even in a limited manner. I've asked Coran to watch over us from the training deck control room, and I think if we even did some exercises only for the morning, that would be quite beneficial to us. In the afternoon, we can return to our own private endeavours... Coran and I are still searching for a planet capable of balancing Lance's quintessence, and Hunk is trying to gain an in-depth understand of Lance's prosthetics. How does that sound?"

"I'm already on board," says Coran with a soft smile Allura's way.

"A good idea, princess," Shiro offers up immediately. "Will Lance be joining us?"

"Of course," she says, and Keith glances over at Lance, who's watching Shiro and Allura in turn as they speak, eyes unreadable. "It's imperative we find a way to fight alongside Lance for when we are all on the ground, rather than leaving him alone to deal with enemies as he pleases. That will be, I think, the focus of our session today."

"Are you sure?" Keith asks, nervousness crawling into his gut. "We already know if he fights someone he tries to kill them, so..."

"There could be a way to prevent him from being triggered into thinking he's in the ring," Shiro points out, and Keith bites back a frown. "Or some way of pulling him out of it. And besides, you and him were able to fight against the galra together on the junkyard planet without him turning on you. He fought alongside the rebels without hurting them, too."

Keith nods, changing another look at Lance, who flits his eyes over Keith before saying, "It's different with other people."

Allura and Shiro start a little, as if they'd forgotten Lance had been paying attention. Hunk and Pidge are still, watching with interested but still wary eyes, waiting for Lance to continue. Hunk's eye, in fact, is still red and puffy, but he claims to see perfectly out of it despite his previous panic, and it's narrowed now at Lance.

"It is?" prompts Shiro after a moment.

"It's- yeah," Lance says, and shrugs. "I don't...go back to the arena. I just stay where I am."

Shiro nods, and Allura seems pleased by the news. "That would make sense," says Shiro. "I'm pretty sure all the fights in the arena were just one-on-one, instead of fighting multiple people at once, so...it wouldn't generate the same reaction as fighting one person."

"Excellent," breathes Allura. "Well, once breakfast is finished, I want us all suited up and ready to go on the training deck within the varga."

Everyone else seems...excited, small, hopeful smiles, hoovering down their food with a little more enthusiasm than usual, but all Keith can feel is nervous. Anxiety creeps into his gut, forcing his shoulders higher, his head lower, his hand tight around his cutlery. He cannot look at the others, cannot look at Lance at all. It feels like too much to hope for, that they could possibly train with Lance at all, keep him happy, or at least sane. But at the same time it would make sense to try it
out; Keith himself fought alongside Lance against the galra, back before he got shocked, and Lance didn't try to attack him at all. But will they be fighting against Lance or with him against gladiators? Will they try both? What if they want to test everyone going against him one-on-one, see if any of them can drag him out of the state he gets into? What if they try and make Keith do it? What if Keith slips up and does something stupid? Does he just let Lance almost kill him before the others drag him away? What if he fights Lance and they can just tell there's something different? What if it takes Lance longer to lose himself when fighting Keith than with the others? What if he laughs too much, smiles too much, pins Keith down and flirts the way he does every night?

Surely he wouldn't. Surely they wouldn't attempt one-on-one fights with Lance, knowing how they end. Keith is just being paranoid. Scared that somehow, this will cause his secret nights with Lance to end.

He's so selfish, that's all this is, so Keith grits his teeth as they collectively move from the breakfast table up to the bridge where their uniforms are kept, and change, Lance striking in his blue paladin uniform. It looks...different on him, now. It's hard to put into words; his old clothes are tighter on him than before, but the uniform accommodates his physical changes with ease, and it makes it feel so permanent. He looks more like a soldier than any of the rest of them. Battle-worn and tired, and ready for any kind of fight. Like on the rebel base, and he'd cut through dozens of galra with ease. It makes him seem righteous in all his bloody, single minded fury. He almost looks like one of them, except he isn't.

Not even Shiro quite matches the brutality of Lance's stride, the blankness in his eyes or the way he smirks as they enter the training deck.

They begin with warm ups, stretching and jogging round the deck a few times. Lance can't even handle that; he has to be fast, sprinting like the ground is collapsing beneath him, and he doesn't even seem to break a sweat.

"Jesus," mutters Hunk after a while, trailing a little after Shiro, Allura, and Keith, his slower pace matched by grumbling Pidge. Shiro lets out a sigh in reply, Pidge murmuring back to Hunk too quiet for Keith to hear. Jesus indeed. When they all used to train like this, Lance would lag behind with Pidge and Hunk even if he could go faster, laughing or chatting with them, or otherwise challenged Keith to a race even though that wasn't the point of a warm up jog and they'd end up collapsed, panting, on the deck floor whilst the others sighed and stretched beside them. Keith tended to beat him - he'd always been fitter and faster, after all - and now that Lance is winning Keith isn't annoyed or jealous, he's just...sad. It stretches out in his chest like gum, covering his heart, his ribs, fastens all those feelings inside of him. Leaves him aching. He doesn't want to watch the ruthless way Lance pummels the floor but he can't look away. It breaks his heart.

When Allura calls off the warm up, she stands in the centre on the deck, surveying them all. Hunk and Pidge are chatting about Lance's legs, watching as Lance keeps stretching, doing lunges and squats as he waits for the training to begin. Shiro comes to Keith's side, resting a reassuring hand on his shoulder, and Keith finds himself wincing, wondering how obvious his nerves are. He tries to unclench his fists but the bite of his nails into his skin keeps him sane, keeps him from running out the room, from dragging Lance out the room.

"It's going to be okay," Shiro murmurs. "I'm sure he won't go off the rails this time."

Keith shrugs. "You don't know that."

"...No, I don't. But you fought with him against the galra, and he didn't hurt you. Right?"
"Yeah," Keith says, blowing a sigh out his mouth. "Yeah, he didn't. But...we don't know..."

"I know. That's why we have to do this. And I think we were right, back when we were talking about him before we sparred?" Keith nods, incapable of forgetting the fear that jumped through his veins as Lance cut through Shiro's defences. "I think he needs to fight, or else it builds up this...bad energy in him. And I worry about what that energy could cause. I don't know how he's contained it this long. Maybe we're lucky, that he's been able to fight in two big battles, and that's gotten rid of it. But that can't last..."

Keith nods, keeps his mouth shut. The urge to be honest with Shiro is so strong, like sickness creeping up Keith's throat; he's scared he'll part his lips and the truth will vomit out of him. It must look strange to the others, that Lance is somehow reigning himself in night after night with only his training, and Keith, foolishly, hadn't considered that. That makes this session all the more important - if this succeeds without Lance trying to hurt anyone, he'll have an official avenue to release this hunger of this.

And even less reason to fight with Keith in the night.

_Fuck_, he thinks, chest ready to cave in, and Shiro's hand tightens on his shoulder.

"It'll be fine," but no matter how this ends it _won't_ be.

It can't be.

What will Keith do now? Without their nightly fights, what reason does Lance have at all to interact with him? He blows off Pidge and Hunk all the time, barely listens to Shiro or Coran, and goes now to the closet to find another weapon. What grasp Keith _does_ have on Lance is shaky at most - didn't, after all, Lance chase after Nyma on a mission like a sailor speeding after a mermaid? - and it relies solely on these clandestine interactions. They'll go on more missions, Lance'll find more aliens to flirt with. Why would Lance keep Keith around, then? What does he have to _do_ to keep his attention? If Keith _has_ been making it up, if all those tender moments with Lance were just fake, a show, Keith seeing things...then how long can this last?

It can't. If this goes well, if they're able to train together without Lance turning on anyone, it won't last at all.

"Alright, paladins," Allura says finally, her voice ringing out over the light chatter of Hunk and Pidge and capturing everyone's attention. "Now, Coran is in the training deck control room, ready to cancel the simulation if at any point he thinks we're in dangerous territory; however, I hope it won't reach that point. Obviously, Lance fought alongside Keith against the galra on the junkyard planet several movements ago, and I'm sure some of us saw him fighting with the rebels at the base we visited two quintants ago. I thought today we'd start with a simply fight against the gladiators, focusing on being a team and protecting each other, and perhaps figuring out ways to work with Lance. How does that sound?"

Lance rolls his eyes when she mentions trying to work with him, but shrugs.

"Good to me," says Shiro with confidence. "Is Coran on comms?"

"That I am, paladin," Coran chimes in the ears of their helmets. "Make no mistake, I've got my eyes _and_ ears on you all!"

"Good, good," Shiro says, heading towards Allura and taking Keith with him. "Alright, everyone, let's get in a circle, facing out. Let's be ready."
"Alright, captain!" chirps Hunk, smiling and dragging Pidge over, and though no one quite blinks an eye there is a glance towards Lance, who stands by Allura with a replica of his old bayard in his hands. Hunk had taken up this role - Lance's role - during training, during...everything, while Lance was gone, making jokes that Lance would, smiling and cheering the tone of any room he entered, but it's different now that Lance is here. He shouldn't need to keep doing this, but...he does. Every time Lance enters a room now he does the opposite of what he used to - the atmosphere goes cold, goosebumps raise, and everyone holds themselves a little tighter. Watching, waiting.

But nothing ever happens.

Now, however, they stand as Shiro had instructed, Keith between Lance and Hunk, bayard formed in his hand with his left arm raised, ready to create a shield if need be. Hunk's got his gatling gun ready; Lance readies his rifle against his shoulder, mouth straight, eyes alight.

"Let's start at level five," Allura says, and Lance's eyes roll, but Keith thinks it's a wise choice. Start low, test how everyone works around each other. Take it up bit by bit, not jumping levels like Lance always does when he trains alone. "Level five training simulation begin."

It's easy. Kind of. Alone, Keith practises at much higher levels, too. In fact, Keith is sure at this point they've all trained higher than five - Lance takes it to crazy levels, but Pidge at least has reached eleven or twelve, fighting alone, and higher by her friends' sides. It's just- strange. They can't settle into a rhythm like before. Is it because now they fight with one extra person? Or because that person takes up all the gladiators? Keith goes to swing, but the gladiator before him gets headshoted before his bayard can make contact. So he tries again, and the next gladiator is gone. And it doesn't happen just to him; with ease, Lance takes out almost all the gladiators, breaking formation instantly to get all the angles, and the second the level is over Allura calls it off and looks Lance square in the eye.

"Lance, what is it called when a group of people work together?"

"A bank heist," Lance says flatly, and Allura quirks a brow before dragging it back down again.

"No - well, maybe - it's called a team. And in a team people rely on and protect each other. Is that what you're focusing on, or something else?"

"I'm thinking there are enemies, and we need to kill those enemies." A fire roars in Lance's eyes, embers burning to cinders, making his gaze dark and dangerous. Allura doesn't look away, which Keith finds spectacularly brave considering they're all far more used to gentle tides or brief storms in the blue of Lance's irises.

"That's fair," Allura says, "and if I tell you the best way to achieve your goal is to work together?"

"I'm a better fighter than you all - I can clear the floor so you don't need to bother."

"That's not the point - it's not about being a better fighter. It's about looking after those around you!"

"Aren't I doing that by getting rid of the threat?"

"And when the level gets higher? When the gladiators are too many for you to deal with alone? By breaking formation you're leaving everyone, including yourself, vulnerable. Instead of going off on your own you need to communicate with us. How many gladiators were one of us about to take on that you shot down? That leaves your teammates second-guessing themselves, throwing them off
their game. We can't have that in the field, Lance."

Lance may burn with fire, but Allura is icy with her logic. She crosses her arms and tilts her head, but even with her helmet on Keith can see the purple smudges beneath her eyes, lines where they didn't exist before. She exudes strength, but there is a tightness to her shoulders that belies something more - fear? Worry? Sadness? Keith doesn't think he could berate Lance so strongly if he were in her position. Maybe that's pathetic of him.

"What if there are never too many gladiators," Lance asks, and it isn't spoken with arrogance or anger, but as a plain fact.

"There will be," Allura replies, and her shoulders loosen a little, kindness softening the arch of her brow. "And even if they aren't overwhelming you, they will still hurt you. Maybe you can't feel it, Lance, but it still affects your performance. We need to learn to work together, all of us. So will you please remain in the circle when we fight? Even if you feel it is too easy? Call out which shots you take? Allow us to fight our own battles?"

Perhaps it's because her father was a king, and a paladin too. Keith isn't much a believer in royalty, but there's something flowing through Allura's veins that make people listen to her, even cold, unfeeling people like Lance. Even strange, scary people like Lance. Warm, sometimes, and touch so soft it's impossible to think he doesn't care...

Keith can't tell.

"I'll try."

"That's all I ask."

And they return to their positions. Hunk lets out a long sigh under his breath, and Keith finds himself reaching over instinctively to squeeze his shoulder, trade a quick, relieved smile. Pidge does the same, and a glance to Shiro reveals him murmuring to Allura, nodding at her and smiling as her face crumples for a brief second before she pulls it all together again.

Lance returns to his spot, adjusts his helmet, switches his grip on the rifle so he's leading with his left hand.

"Ambidextrous?" Keith asks as Allura calls out the level.

"Giving myself a disadvantage," Lance says, but you wouldn't tell it from the way he shoots. Dead on, every time. At least he calls out his shots. Keith doesn't have to waste energy honing in on gladiators someone else will take down.

It works well enough that Allura doesn't haul him over for another talking to when the level is over, and instead they methodically make their way up to double digits, taking a break after they finish level ten to drink up and talk over their strategies. Coran pops down and speaks with Allura, hand on her arm and encouraging her to drink her water when she goes too long without it.

"Not bad," Keith says, and Hunk shrugs with a half-smile.

"No," he says, "not bad."

"Not good," Pidge mutters. "It feels wrong. Do you- it feels wrong."

"I feel it too," Hunk says, and leans over to Pidge to wrap an arm round her shoulders, a brief, tight squeeze. "We just- have to adjust. I don't think he will."
"He listened to Allura," Keith points out. "I don't think he's too far gone."

"No," Hunk murmurs. "But...I don't want to hope and then-"

"It falls through," says Pidge, nodding, and Keith finds himself nodding, too. Lance stands on his own, drinking water without really caring for it. Even standing, he absentmindedly stretches, digging a heel into the ground before him and pulling his toes to the ceiling, ditching his water at the side to yank his arms behind his back.

"He's stronger beside us than on his own," Keith says. "And being strong is important to him. So...he has to work with us."

Pidge sighs. "This sucks," she says, and Hunk folds against a wall, eyes closing.

"I know," he says, and Keith's heart twinges. "But it's all we've got."

Casting a last glance to Lance, Keith goes instead to Hunk's side, squeezes his shoulder again while Pidge rubs his back, silence overtaking them. What more is there to say? They've said it all before. Lance is different, and terrifying, and stronger than any of them. What more can they say? Words are useless.

Shiro comes by in the last minute of their break, smiling tightly at them all and saying good job, everyone, pressing hands to shoulders and patting backs and darting quick looks to Lance, and then Allura is calling off their break to resume the training.

They climb quite steadily through the levels until they hit thirteen, and Pidge starts struggling a little. It's not really an issue; Shiro and Hunk cover her, as expected, and Pidge starts teaming up properly with Hunk, letting Hunk weaken the gladiators at long distance until they reach the group, and Pidge can take them down. Level fifteen, Hunk struggles a little, the number of gladiators a little overwhelming for someone with a long-range weapon. He starts mowing them down in large chunks, relying on Pidge and Keith to keep the gladiators off him as his gun cools down. It's during one of these moments that Keith slips.

The level is a little higher. On his own, Keith can take it to the late teens. He cracked twenty once, but he ended up in the healing pod for an hour with a few broken bones. It's level seventeen, and Keith and Shiro are working extra hard to cover Pidge and Hunk, and Allura is doing her best to cover everyone, breathing heavily but focus never wavering, and Lance hasn't even broken a sweat, rarely even shifting a foot in his endless rally of head and chest shots.

But Keith's poor nights of sleep is catching up on him. Even when he slept, he dreamt terribly, instead of a plain fight Lance would play with him, brush the butt of his gun against Keith's cheek in the imitation of a caress, grab Keith and whisper in his ear, lips against his skin, only to throw him halfway across the room. Keith kept falling for it. Keith kept falling for it, what is wrong with him? Not just in the dream. Every night, in every fight, Keith falls for Lance and the way he softens imperceptibly in Keith's presence. Is he hallucinating? Is it real? Why does it make Keith so afraid? Why does it feel like his heart is physically tearing itself apart in his chest every time Lance so much as looks at him?

Why did Lance do that with Nyma, when Keith was right there? Flirting as though the rest couldn't hear them, couldn't see them, as if Nyma hadn't played Lance before? Except Lance couldn't remember that. But he knew, nonetheless. Nyma told him, they all told him.

And then he went off and... And...
And Keith couldn't sleep, and normally Keith can handle it, but it comes after days... Weeks... Months of poor sleep, of staying up all night searching desperately for Lance, sitting by Hunk's side, helpless, as he sobbed, fighting through nightmares where Lance was tortured or torn up or dead. Lance's return didn't alleviate that, just changed the shape of it. Keith remains up all night, searching for glimpses of Lance in the terror he spars with. Hunk still cries, in the kitchen when he makes dinner, quietly and without remarking upon it, just wipes away tears before they touch food. And the nightmares, jesus the nightmares...

He stumbles. That's all it takes. A sudden wave of exhaustion hits him, his vision blurs and he reels back, and the gladiator gets him. Grabs him round the neck and drags him up, feet kicking, vision returning. He can't even yell as a mechanical hand closes over his throat, he tries to hack at its arm with his sword but his hand swings wildly- he dropped his bayard when he was smacked with his lack of sleep.

For a moment, fear grips him - maybe it's stupid to be afraid of a bot that's programmed to not kill him, but he can't help it, it's unrelenting, and at level seventeen even Keith's shield can't crack its arm apart.

Then it's gone, and Keith is stumbling on the ground, Hunk steadying him before staring, caught- and Keith looks over, and Lance is tearing the bitch apart, physically limb from limb, then holds his rifle point-blank to the bot's face and blasts it into pieces.

"Halt!" calls Allura, and suddenly his friends are at his side. "Keith- are you alright? For a moment I thought you'd faint-"

"It's nothing, princess," Keith says, exhaustion magically gone, heart thumping in his chest. His whole body electrifies at the way Lance looks over at him, eyes dark but still tender, still caring. That gladiator almost got Keith and instead of letting anyone else deal with it, Lance dropped everything to rip it to pieces.

Because Keith was in trouble.

Is it real? his brain asks. Shiro is saying something, Hunk pushing water into his hands, but he can only stare at Lance, a few steps back from the others, watching him. It has to be real.

It has to be real, his poor, useless heart whispers. It has to be.

"...lucky Lance got you," Shiro says, and Keith's attention snaps back to him. "But obviously he's doing the best out of all of us, so..."

Right. While everyone else is struggling, Lance is practically swimming through these exercises. He didn't come after Keith out of affection or whatever, but just because it was another bot to kill...

...So why is Lance still looking at him like that?

"Do we need to stop?" Allura asks. "Are you sure you're alright?"

He feels ready to take down a thousand armies. "It was a moment of weakness," he says. "But I'm ready to go now."

"If you're sure," she double-checks, and he nods, taking a last swig of water before tossing the bottle to the side, and they all fall back into their stances, Lance's arm brushing against Keith's as he turns round. Keith's heart jumps, it races, it swoops, but more bots are materialising around them, and Keith clearly isn't right on his game, so he has to pay perfect attention.
They hit level eighteen before even Shiro flops to the ground with a groan.

"One more thing!" Allura says, sitting on the ground with the rest of them. "I just want to test us all fighting against Lance, just to see. It's clear now that he can fight alongside us, so long as there is a common enemy. But will he remember who we are when he's fighting all of us? It'll be useful, I think, if we could train against you, Lance... You must've picked up galra strategies, after all, and you're a very strong opponent... It'll be good training for us, to learn to oppose you..." She continues in the same vein for a while, and even though Lance is nodding, his eyes flick occasionally to Keith, and it causes only more confusion to bubble up. Keith tries to squash it down, focus on his water, on Hunk and Pidge complaining about exercising so long, but he can't stop thinking about it. How fucking old is he again? A fucking child? He doesn't have time to act like a lovestruck teenager. So why is he? Why can't he stop wondering if this thing between him and Lance is real, important or not? It feels like it didn't matter this much.

Not before Nyma. But now...

It's all he can fucking think about. He disgusts himself.

"Hey, buddy," Shiro says, and Keith blinks, tears his eyes from Lance to look over. "You doing alright?"

"Yeah," Keith says, voice sounding distant even to him. "Yeah, why?"

"Just, before," Shiro says, and Keith nods absently.

"I'm just tired. But I'm okay. I can keep going."

"So long as you know your limit. We probably won't last another hour against Lance, we're all so tired already. Then shower, maybe have some time to ourselves, big dinner?"

Keith keeps nodding, longing briefly to just collapse onto his bed and not bother with any of this.

"Still struggling to sleep? Maybe if I ask really nicely Allura will let us drop by a space mall, I can try and find some lavender..."

Shiro is smiling when Keith looks back up, and Keith finds himself smiling, too, shaking his head. "The lavender never helped me. We'll have to go back to Earth and get my mothman toy."

Shiro sighs. "Well, then, if that has to be then so be it. I'll ask Allura immediately. A return trip to Earth, as fast as possible, Keith can't sleep without his mothman stuffed toy-"

"Shiro-"

"-and if he goes to bed without it he'll cry until you bring it to him-"

"Shiro!"

"-or maybe he just has to talk about what's bothering him?"

Keith rolls his eyes. "I'm unfamiliar with the concept," he says flatly.

"I know," Shiro mutters. Lowering his voice, he says, "Is it still Lance? I know this is upsetting-"

Stiffening, Keith says, "It doesn't matter. I was just tired, okay? I'm doing fine."

"Keith-"
"This isn't the time, Shiro."

And he can't fight with that, so Shiro just sighs. "Okay, Keith. Another time."

Which is ominous, but it isn't right fucking now so Keith doesn't have to deal with it.

"Paladins!" calls Allura, already on her feet, and it meets a chorus of groaning, and a few sideways glances to Lance, at Allura's side in a second.

Fighting Lance in a group is a lot different than on his own. Keith can see Lance prioritising them, Keith and Shiro who are deadly at short range, Hunk attacking from long, Pidge and Allura constantly dynamic.

Pidge is out first, mostly because she's still tired from the other exercise, and, Keith thinks, unwilling to fight Lance with any seriousness. Hunk follows for much the same reason, and Lance spends some time laying into Allura alone, dodging away from Keith and Shiro's attacks, dancing over Allura's whip when it reaches out to trip him up, and it's only when Lance manages to shove Shiro into Keith, downing them both for a few long seconds, that Lance can direct his rifle to Allura's throat and she's dropped through the floor.

Keith fights as best he can, but Lance doesn't focus on him; takes out Shiro not long after Allura, and when he turns to Keith, he's grinning.

"You planned this," Keith accuses, and the intensity Lance had fought with against his friends melts away in a second as he grins. "Lance, Coran is still watching us!"

"C'mon," Lance says, "fight me. We haven't fought in a while."

Keith indulges him. "And whose fault is that?"

"I've been sleepy," Lance says, sidestepping Keith's swing and kicking his chest, Keith stumbling back before righting himself. "I'll come calling eventually, Keith. Can't stay away."

Is he still being silly or does he mean that? "Really?" Keith says. "Can't find a better opponent?"

"Not a better looking one, at least."

He smirks, still as a rock when Keith shield-bashes him, just stretches an arm out and presses his rifle against Keith's heart. "Bang bang," he says, and Keith is dropped through the ground.

Within seconds, they all resurface onto the deck, where Lance stands alone, and Allura beams.

"Excellent!" she says. "He didn't turn on you, Keith? Maybe he was too tired. Or- maybe you didn't fight long enough for it to trigger. Still! We've discovered two ways for us to all train together again! I want us all here after breakfast immediately tomorrow! Early to bed tonight so we can prepare as much as possible!"

"Ugh," Pidge says, leans heavily against Hunk as she scrabbles her helmet off. "Really, princess?"

"We must make ourselves stronger, Pidge, and Lance is an excellent opponent!"

Lance nods, and Shiro throws a glance over to Keith, but he ignores it, taking his own helmet off and fiddling with it.

"How was it, Coran? Nothing look out of ordinary?"
"It was fascinating, princess," says Coran, voice booming through the deck speakers. "I think we can learn a lot, sparring against Lance like this! We have everything to gain!"

"That's exactly what I think," Allura says, and smiles. "We can discuss this further at dinner. For now, I told the mice I'd watch their latest performance after this, and they'll scold me if I take too long..."

She bustles off, and they follow instinctively, smiling a little at the mention of the mice, then separate off to their own rooms.

Even in the shower, even drying off, even lying fully-clothed, eyes wide open on his bed, Keith can only think one thing: Is it real?

--

Lance comes to his door on the the second night after daily training with him begins, hands clenched, mouth firm and serious. The whole day, he'd been regressing, blanking out during meals, working harder as he trained, vicious towards his fellow paladins. Keith says, "Really?" but Lance doesn't answer him, just strides off to the training deck, and Keith has to hurry after him, never quite catching up.

He can't stay away, Keith thinks, and it feels horrible to think, and wrong, but it shoots sparks down his spine.

They change in silence. Even as he shucks off his pyjamas and steps into his armour, Keith cannot stop looking at Lance, every inch of him exuding pure strength, physical and mental fortitude, muscles bundled under scarred skin, burn marks, knife wounds, laser blasts. His back is a tattered painting of long, thick stripes from the lash of a whip; burns, too, words along the line of his shoulders that Keith cannot understand. He is, somehow, still so beautiful. In a different way than before. He was all innocence before he was taken, youth shining out his eyes, a smile like stars, a barely-opened book still loaded with potential.

Now he is a little more like someone's ruined diary. Pages and pages torn out, ink stained, paper burnt to a cinder. That which remains is unreadable; any blank pages are crumpled before they're written, Lance's future already a trampled-on, depressive thing. It burns still, and the fire is mesmerising in its utter damnation of Lance. He is in a constant state of ruination.

When Lance starts browsing the weapons rack, Keith tears his eyes away and changes quickly, calling his bayard to arms as Lance glances at him, then reaches for two pistols.

They do not speak until the first spar is over. It's- every time Keith fights Lance, it's terrifying. He thought he'd get used to it, but it is impossible to get used to. There isn't a way to describe the fear that grips him when Lance loses sight of his surroundings; his movements become desperate and honed in on Keith, he is bold and risky and takes these chances only because he knows whatever blows Keith lands will not cause him any pain. It's upsetting.

But it's good for him, so when Lance pushes the gun up beneath his chin, Keith kisses him, and smiles when he says, dazed, "Keith...?"

"Hey," Keith says, and Lance's eyes trace him, against the wall, again, disarmed and hands pressed uselessly into Lance's chest.

"Keith," he says again, and the pistols drop as he leans forward to kiss him once more.

Who cares about blast wounds when Keith can have this? They're on his legs, mostly, wherever
Keith couldn't shield himself fast enough, and besides, there aren't even that many, and they don't hurt, or, if they do, Keith doesn't care to feel them. He has Lance before him, in his arms, hungry for him and him alone, pulling him in tight because they can never get close enough in this armour, their mouths slot together so perfectly Keith just can't care about the rest.

But Lance steps away eventually. Picks his pistols back up. And they keep fighting.

And it is still terrifying, but Keith knows how to end it. There is a moment, at the climax of every spar, where Lance nudges his weapon against Keith's throat, looming over him with this horrifying, kind of hot, familiar-unfamiliar smirk, and Keith knows he has seconds to spare. Keith isn't sure why Lance pauses - maybe to savour the victory over his opponent, maybe to torture them a little more, maybe just to feel powerful - but he always does it, and it gives Keith the time he needs to manoeuvre forward in whatever way possible and capture Lance's lips in his own.

Then the moment breaks, and Lance is back to his new strange self.

They go five bouts, today. Just under two hours. It is good, despite the horror of it being something that is actually happening to Keith and Lance both, it lets Keith challenge himself, harder than he ever manages with the gladiators. Lance can go from flirty and playful to downright unforgiving within a second, it keeps Keith on his toes, and he hasn't trained against someone dual-wielding pistols, either. It's good for them both.

Keith's aware it's also very bad for them, or at least him, but that's a personal issue, that so far, at least, hasn't caused him any real problems, so he's just going to deny any issues until they blow up in his face.

When the fighting is over, they strip in the middle of the deck, and Keith winces at the blows he got in on Lance, a few wounds on his inner arm, slashes down his hips, as ever, a sideways cut on the back of his calf. Lance frowns at him, opening up the first aid kit, and Keith looks down to see a few blast wounds along his shoulders, his legs.

"Oh," Keith says, the pain crashing in now the adrenaline is draining out. "Oh, fuck."

"C'mere," Lance says, already taking out wet wipes, and Keith obediently shifts over so he's sat at right angles to Lance, presenting his left side so he can stretch his wounded legs out. Lance is clinical and quick, but he hisses out soft apologies when Keith flinches with pain. Keith isn't sure where Lance's medical knowledge comes from - there was basic training at the garrison, of course, but Keith wonders if it's due to being part of a huge family, or if Coran perhaps taught him some things - but he cleans up the blood and seals any gaping wounds, dressing them and bandaging them with care, and, most bizarrely, leans down and kisses every one.

Keith isn't imagining things, then. Lance is different around him... Tender.

"Thank you," Keith murmurs, lifts Lance's chin with his fingers and asks for another kiss, Lance's lips soft and cautious beneath his. Nothing like the animal intent behind every make out against the walls. "Let me do you."

"You don't have to," Lance says, "I can do it myself."

"It's fine."

"You're hurt."

"And so are you. Come on."
Lance holds his gaze for a long moment, uncaring of the blood dripping from his wounds, and Keith meets it with force, lips set, eyes unchallenged by the intensity in Lance's. Perhaps Lance fancies himself a closed book, or some portal to the unknown that no others can enter, but Keith can see so clearly that he is worried for Keith, that he feels guilty for what he's done to him, and that he wants to accept Keith's offer, let him patch him up without a fight.

He isn't imagining things. This is real. It's different and scary and Keith doesn't want to imagine the outcomes to this situation, but Lance feels something for Keith and it's real, it's solid, unlike the rest of Lance. Keith can reach over and touch it, the beating heart beneath Lance's scarred skin, and know it races for him.

"Okay," Lance says at length, and Keith works first on the calf wound, cleaning and bandaging it up so Lance can sit comfortably, then does the rest, keeping his touch gentle and soothing. Keith isn't sure it makes a difference to Lance, but it's important to him. The evidence of people treating Lance with cruelty is so painfully clear on his skin, branded deep within his soul. Keith doesn't want to add any more to that than he's already done.

There is nothing to stitch up, thank god, and when Keith is finished, fingers lingering on wrecked, dark skin, Lance takes his jaw in hand and looks at him.

"Thank you," he says slowly, sea eyes swimming in Keith's, and he leans forward, head tilting, to kiss him once more, soft and deep and perfect all at once, and Keith curls a hand round his neck, his heart starving for this affection, this gentle touch. Lance can love him, Keith feels it in the way his lips brush against Keith's, the barely-thereness of his hand upon his jaw, the way he draws back but remains close, foreheads touching, breath mixing.

This is real. This is progress.

It has to be.

Chapter End Notes

so anyway im That Asshole who kind of starts fics w/o knowing how they'll go and just hopes for the best but i Fucking Finally figured out my outline for this and i thought i should share so u'd kno the length of this bad boy! basically it's split into three mains arcs, and every arc is punctuated by a Change in lance. so far, we're uhhhh mid/late into arc one. im thinking of maybe trying to keep each arc to only 10 chapters, ergo this being 30 chaps long, but im rly bad at planning actual chaps and also Pacing so............. and also i've added some more stuff based on some s4 plot points so. uh. idk exactly How Long this will be but. Long. i intend to keep the pov format, tho chap lengths might start going up and down to accommodate everything.

otherwise like. i uh. wanted to talk about comments? like i always invite feedback bc Duh I Thrive On It but also. im a human being cranking out this bad boy despite uni, despite opera every monday, despite singing lessons every week, despite essays and theory assignments and also just Having A Life and ik this isn't perfect and there are definitely mistakes. but im also a young writer trying to improve and learning new things, and trying to implement them. if you're going to be critical (which again! i invite!) at least be nice and constructive. like....back in the Very Old Days of fanfic dot net the general idea was you were nice, you were critical, you were nice again. even if
criticism is valid, if it's just presented with nothing else it rly makes me feel like that's all you saw in the fic, was one or maybe several errors, and everything i worked so hard on was unimportant to u. that is to say i got a critical comment at 3am like two weeks ago and i had a five hour anxiety attack that messed up my sleep cycle and i had to skip all my classes, Lol ! so be nice. also, dont comment just to ask abt updates? thats very disrespectful bc ur disregarding all the effort the author has put into this and asking only when u, the reader, can be satisfied? like. i guess the vld fandom has a lot of young ppl in it so maybe they just dont Know but also. just be nice? its not a wild concept.

that being said, feedback, lads. i do lov it. if ur not sure what to talk abt, like, i struggle w imagery and pacing a lot (as u might tell lmao) so anything abt that would be gr8 to hear! also characterisation, and the way everyone interacts w each other? since this is quite a mature, lol, fic, i try and keep everyone a little more serious than they are in canon? also i have a lot to say abt allura bc i lov her sm, so if her whole character makes sense/is realistic etc...would be so great to hear! anyway i do lov u all and i am so thankful for all commenters ;;;;

EDIT I ALSO MADE A PLAYLIST ksdajlkdsks its incomplete and on spotify, here u go, pls enjoy !
decomposition

Chapter Summary

everything grows and everything rots. lance comes very close to true happiness.

Chapter Notes

alright lads guess which silly bitch decided to nanowrimo specifically for this fic and chomped out 10k within the first three days. guess. guess. it's me anyway this chap is rly long bc a lot of stuff is happening and pacing?? idk her!

so....aliens and new worlds galore. none of them based on mass effect this time! uuhuh i dont wanna spoil so like. everything bad that's already happened?? more of that. like. nothing worse that what's already happens goes on in this chap

askdjasldasjlasjlasjld

anyway...pls enjoy... sorry a lot is going on but uh. hopefully it's all smooth and makes sense n u see what's going on... otherwise i would pls ask u to click the link for the song bc it's a very beautiful song and very dear to my heart... from a musical called hadestown about the myth of orpheus and eurydice.... concept album by anais mitchell, live album by the cast....they both miss a few songs from the current live production tho so i'd recommend downloading the audio boot... saldkjsla ANYWAY pls pls listen to the song if nothing else ;; im getting a guitar just so i can play + sing it at the same time ;;;;;;; the song in question is track 15 on spotify so dont click epic ii! it's the 3rd one!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

But even that hardest of hearts unhardened
Suddenly, when he saw her there
Persephone in her mother’s garden
Sun on her shoulders, wind in her hair

The smell of the flowers she held in her hand
And the pollen that fell from her fingertips
And suddenly Hades was only a man
With a taste of nectar upon his lips, singing:

La la la la la la la...
Epic III, Hadestown

--

Days are easier with his new training sessions with his team. His bones rest better, no longer chatter endlessly against each other, desperate for motion. How was he ever satisfied with his own ruthless training regime and Keith when he could've had this? There's something different about
fighting someone physical, someone with emotions that can be easily manipulated to turn the tide of a fight, with weaknesses Lance can pick out and subdue within seconds. It's exciting, exhilarating - Keith isn't improving fast enough to develop new strengths that Lance can tackle, whereas this new training regime gives him four opponents constantly interacting with him and each other, against gladiators, against one another. Hunk, for all his physical strength, cannot bear to hurt Lance seriously. Pidge, for all her smarts, lacks the skill to be of any danger. Every time Shiro faces him he is haunted by his own time with the galra, leaves him prickly, rash. And Allura... She might be the only person on this ship to pose a real threat to Lance. Her incredible strength, her speed, her ability to lead and coordinate with others... It's fascinating. He usually takes out all the others just so he can spend proper, uninterrupted time figuring out her fighting style, and how to dismantle it.

And then there's Keith. Who Lance, against his better judgement, his own will, his knowledge of Keith's feelings, cannot stay away from.

He wants to. God, does he want to stay the hell away from Keith and the way he looks at Lance, all fire and passion and something terrifyingly genuine that Lance, in his weaker moments after their fights, cannot help reciprocating. Keith is dangerous, Keith is a bad idea. Keith doesn't talk to him all day, Keith spends their training helping the others, Keith waits up for him every night and spars with him and lets Lance almost kill him and then lets Lance kiss him, and it's making Lance feel things.

Lance isn't supposed to feel things. The druids, his doctors, they scream in his sleep. What the hell is he doing? Stay away from that boy. Focus on his purpose. But what is his purpose? He can't remember.

So he trains. After a few days, they sort out a genuine schedule so that it's not just Allura shouting out various ideas and the paladins consenting via grumbles of irritation or exhaustion. An hour of private exercise is now required, be that on the training deck, in the gym, or in the pool, and it can happen any time during the day, except after dinner. Alongside that, they spend an hour every morning honing their fighting skills. One day they practise aiming, the next agility. The second hour of morning training is everyone sparring against him. It's almost fun, watching the five of them team up and organise against him, only to fail dismally every time. After that they eat, have a break, and return only to fight gladiators together. Slowly, they start developing strategies for working with Lance, depending on what weapon he's using. With the paladins, they prefer him to use a gun of some sort, and that allows him to focus on long-range targets while Shiro or Keith cover him. As the levels climb, however, it's up to Lance and Allura to carry the team, and Lance utilises all his new skills to ensure everyone can keep fighting.

Allura's over the moon. She thinks he cares about keeping everyone safe.

He just wants to keep fighting as long as possible.

And it's good, it's satisfying, it's nothing like after a big fight against the galra but it's still something, more than he ever got in his private spars with Keith in the night.

So why does he keep going back? These feelings that he shouldn't have. The way Keith fights him without pretence. The relief that shudders through him when lips press against his and he escapes the arena only to find Keith's body against his, chest heaving, whatever weapon he uses a second from ripping through Keith's throat. The terror in Keith's eyes dissipates and turns hot, turns something in Lance hot and he can't fucking stay away.

He cannot stay away.
What the fuck is wrong with him? What is it about Keith that keeps drawing Lance back? Those fucking eyes? His stupid hair, his impressive body? The way he fights? The way he talks to Lance? Serious when Lance is serious, soft when Lance is...whatever it is he gets like. Lance can't feel anything but Keith offers to patch him up despite being in pain. Lance can't feel anything, yet here he is in front of Keith's door, night after night, asking for his time. His company. His affection, which he gives so freely. Too fucking freely.

Lance can't help himself.

He doesn't give it a name, this feeling, this pull towards Keith that shouldn't exist. Instead, he trains. He listens during meals, Allura discussing the strange barrage of distress calls that leads them along the edge of the universe back towards the Sol system, Hunk and Pidge asking endlessly about his leg, the awkward silence that lingers between Keith and Shiro. He watches silently as Coran encourages the others to eat and sleep and hydrate regularly, gently pulling Pidge from her set up to have lunch, brushing his hands through Allura's hair as she receives another signal, formulating a plan with her, finding Shiro to discuss it with also.

Watches Keith, somehow, always returning to Lance's side. Why does he do that? Why is he avoiding Shiro? Why doesn't he speak with the others?

Why does Lance care so much?

Why can't he stop?

--

They visit so many planets in the following movements, responding to distress calls and wrecking galra ships, that Allura devises a basic plan for them all to follow. For the most part, the paladins will take to the sky in their lions and take down the ships and rescue prisoners, and Lance will go to the people, take out the galra on the ground, and coordinate with the leading group there.

And he will find someone. That part is...crucial, somehow, that he flirts despite knowing his comm channel is permanently open for everyone to hear, and he picks someone out of the crowd that gathers round him once the threat is decimated, and if given the go-ahead he trails them to their room and he has his fun. It's imperative, that for one, two hours, his head is filled with someone else, new and exciting and different in a plethora of ways, and Keith has to see it. He has to hear the way Lance's voice changes when he initiates some seduction.

Keith has to know he isn't special, or...think so, at least.

But sometimes, they're on the ground together. Sometimes a bizarre, dark fog covers the planet and makes it impossible for vessels to attack one another in the air. Sometimes they all have to go to ground, and they have to split up.

Sometimes, Lance and Keith are automatically put together. It makes sense, after all. They've been a good team in the past, he's been told. And they still seem to think he can only fight with guns, see him purely as long-range support when their training sessions have made it clear how versatile he is on the field.

Not that it matters. He straps up as usual, sniper rifle and spear and pistols and daggers all bound to him in various ways, and he keeps his hand steady on the pistols as Red drops them near the woods and they start whispering out a plan. This particular planet is an agricultural marvel, a key port for rebels and scavengers alike, vital to the resistance, troublemakers in danger. Makes sense that the galra would want to close it off and make it their own. Shiro and Allura will scurry the streets,
Hunk and Pidge will check on the farms, and a fuzzy transmission they receive explains government officials held at gunpoint in a city square.

So that is where Keith and Lance will go. It's easy. Galra patrol the streets, they take them out and poke their head into a few homes to inform them of the situation, then continue on until Coran tells them they're close and navigates them to a five-storey building. The galra are securing the farms, apparently, Hunk and Pidge running into more trouble than they expected, and Allura and Shiro encounter little resistance as they start entering homes and untying various citizens.

Easy, but Lance still double checks every opponent they run into, making sure he's attacking the most dangerous one, dancing on the balls of his feet, ready to jump to Keith's side and take out the enemy. Stupid. Keith can't match him, but he fights with speed and agility and fierceness, fire lighting the grins he shoots Lance every time they take care of a patrol. With every kill Lance feels something stony in his heart fracturing, and combined with the strange feelings Keith's smiles spark it grows stronger- the stone grows weaker- Lance can't explain it, he refuses to. He focuses on the mission, goes where Coran directs them. The building is the town hall, secured by more galra, and it takes a while to fight to the roof but it's nothing serious.

Lance settles down on his front and removes the sniper from his back, setting it up before him before scoping out the situation below.

"Alright," he relays to Keith, "I can see a commander walking in front of maybe ten people, all tied up with galra holding guns to their throats. They look pretty desperate. More galra along the edges... You could go to the ground floor and jump out a window to keep the element of surprise."

"Yeah," Keith says, peering over the edge of the roof and into the square below. "Or I might cause a distraction and force a chunk of them to come fight me, leave them more vulnerable."

"I'll take out the commander and then you can attack," Lance says. "I'll try and shoot as many of those ten as possible." He points to the galra standing with the aliens.

"Okay. I'll focus on the guards at the fringes. Will you...be alright up here?"

Lance turns his head and stares impassively at him.

"You could get sneaked up on!"

"And I could've died when I was captured by the galra but instead I'm stronger than ever," Lance replies in a dull tone, and something nips his heart, the way Keith's concerned expression stiffens, and drops completely. "Think I can handle it."

"Whatever," Keith mutters, getting to his feet. "See you on the other side."

His form is jagged as he strides to the door, hurls it open, and disappears down the stairs, mullet trapped in his helmet, unweaponised bayard clutched tightly in his hand. Lance wants to feel bad - almost does - but Keith doesn't need to worry about him. Regardless, he will be fine. Lance survived hell, or so he's told, and this isn't the first time he's been stuck atop a building or a hill to take out targets at long-range. Keith's worry is unnecessary, a waste of energy. He should worry about himself, he may be half galra but he's so human, he hasn't been trained the way the galra have been trained, the way Lance has. He's in far more danger of getting hurt that Lance could possibly be, and Lance wouldn't even feel it.

And it is so telling of Keith's own feelings. Turning back, putting his eye to the scope, it's all Lance can think about. Keith cares far too much about him. Lance is beginning to realise Keith's feelings
for him go much deeper than he'd first thought. There are times, when Keith turns and looks at him, when Keith dresses his wounds after their fights, that Lance would almost call it...*love*, or something like that, and it's... It's..

He takes the first shot, the commander drops, the galra startle and in that tiny second, Lance takes three more headshots at the line of galra, manages another two before Keith bursts out a window below him and starts drawing attention from the guards.

Two of the aliens are killed by the galra before Lance can shoot them, and he hisses to himself, refocuses his scope, and moves on. Shot after shot, body after body slumping to the ground. Galra drip in from the streets branching off, and Keith is a force tearing through them, aided by Lance's well-placed shots, taking out galra behind him, ones lingering paces behind the others trying to get a good shot.

"Guys, it's getting pretty hot out here!" Hunk says, breaking through Lance's concentration, a shot going awry. He curses, trains the sniper, and shoots the correct galra. "They really want to keep control of these farms, I don't think Pidge and I can handle it alone!"

"Yeah, we're kind of fucked," Pidge says, and Shiro murmurs out *language* without any substance behind it. "We could use a third to help us out."

"Lance?" Allura says immediately. "Shiro and I are quite busy out here, what's your status?"

Lance surveys the square for a moment before returning his eye to the scope and taking out a troublesome galra on Keith's flank. "It's cooling down. We've taken out the galra threatening the officials, but we haven't had a moment to look after them."

"The crowd's thinning out," Keith says, voice heavy and out of breath. "Another minute and it'll be quiet."

He's right. Lance says, "Galra are still patrolling the streets. They'll find the square and realise-"

"It'll be fine, Lance," Keith says, and shoots him a look from the ground. "Think I can handle it."

Lance scowls back, heart clenching up as Keith steps over a corpse and goes to his knees, untying rope from the aliens cowering in a row. "Whatever," he snarks back, putting his sniper away and getting to his feet, taking the spear in hand and setting back down the stairs. "Coran, where am I going."

The stupid thing is that it was totally avoidable. If Lance had lingered a minute longer, it could've been prevented. But- *feelings*. He feels petty. And...hurt. And worried, it makes him prickly and rash so he sprints out the city to Hunk and Pidge, gets so wound up in fighting he doesn't even hear Allura and Shiro's gasps of shock some time later, is grinning as he strolls back into the square maybe an hour after he first left it, and Keith is nowhere to be seen.

But no one is, except dead bodies. It takes finding Shiro, wearing a tight smile and conversing with the aliens they've saved, to realise what's happened:

"The commander," Shiro says, and Lance thinks of the first headshot he took. "He was- he was just knocked out. But he woke up- saw Keith- you'd gone to help Hunk and Pidge and he managed..."

"He's in a healing pod now, Shiro," Coran says over the comms, voice soft and warm and the opposite of whatever clutches Lance's heart, freezing out his ribs. "His armour saved him from the worst of it."
"Thank god," Pidge mutters, but her eyes are still wide as she releases a great breath.

"Oh, no," Hunk moans beside him, shaking his head. "Will he be okay? It wasn't serious, was it? Was it a blast wound? Should I have not called for Lance? Would he have been okay if I hadn't-"

"Don't blame yourself," Shiro says sharply, reaching out and gripping Hunk's shoulder, fingers white. "Don't, Hunk. Maybe things would've been different if Lance had stuck around, but we don't know that. Maybe something worse would've happened to you two if he hadn't gone to help. What matters now is that he's safe, and the wound isn't life-threatening. Is it, Coran?"

"Not anymore," Coran chirps, and the spear Lance's hand has been clenched around breaks in two.

"Oh," Shiro says, staring, "uh..."

"Thanks, Lance," says Hunk quickly, glancing at the ruined spear on the ground before tacking on a smile. "For helping us out."

Lance shrugs. "Whatever," he says again, but this time he means it, detached, uncaring. The fight at the farms was big and out-of-control and Pidge and Hunk were barely holding out, and it felt fucking fantastic to just take out the galra and grin as his friends stared with wide eyes, but it's like none of that even matters now. Lance was selfish, wanted to fight in a big crowd rather than do nothing by Keith's side, and Keith got hurt. Fatally hurt. It sucks the fun out of everything. He can't relish in the thrill of the kill when- when someone is- when Keith is- when Lance could've prevented it, it would've been so easy-

And he can't think of anything else all day, no matter what he does. They're allowed back on their ship for a few vargas before the celebratory feast, and they're supposed to be getting ready but Lance ends up in the infirmary, hovering in the doorway as Coran fusses over some foreign tools by the cabinets and Shiro stands cross-armed before Keith's pod, still, a little slouched, shoulders heavy with the weight on them.

"Lance," says Coran, voice shaded in bewilderment before it evens out into a soft smile, and he lifts a hand. "Came to check on our red paladin? He's quite alright, I assure you."

"Lance?" Shiro repeats, turning and looking over at him. A corner of his mouth lifts, almost a smile, almost relieved. "You want to see him?"

Yes, obviously, Lance thinks, and strides to Shiro's side, squaring his own shoulders and straightening his mouth out into something uncaring. Keith is pale, skin too ashy in the pod, eyes closed. Bloodstains mark the near-fatal wound in Keith's stomach, but he must've received other injuries, a blast to the shoulder, something on the side of his leg. Lance wonders absently if Coran spotted the healing wounds on Keith's skin that Lance himself had planted the night before, but Coran says nothing and Shiro doesn't ask him, so he assumes not.

Keith looks almost dead. Hair tied back, it makes him look young. And tired. Just...hovering in cryo, no defences, no armour, no closed shoulders. Just a teenager. In this cold, white light, he looks a little like how he does after their fights on the training deck. The vulnerability is similar, Lance realises, if not the exact same - the Keith that presents himself to Lance every night in only his boxers to be patched up is the exact same as this one. No defences. No armour. No closed shoulders.

What does that mean? That Keith trusts this version of Lance with that version of himself? Is this what Lance, with his ruthless fighting and brief mental excursions back to the ring, reduces Keith to? Is it his fault or Keith's choice? Why...
Why the *fuck* does Lance *care* so *fucking* much. Why does he *care* so much?!

He can't stand it, he takes one last look at the bags beneath Keith's eyes and walks out, showers and changes into the formal wear they've acquired, sits on the edge of his bed, tapping his feet against the ground and grinding his hands into his forehead to stop himself from doing- *something.*

Anything! His fingers ache to find that fucking commander and tear him to shreds, his heart twists into itself with confusion and fear and- and-

And something is so *wrong* with him, what happened to the Lance of only a few movements ago, that cared mostly about fighting Keith and thought making out with him was a nice bonus? Why can't he retain that level of detachment? Did the druids fail in whatever they were doing to him? Does being away from them allow him to develop feelings, limited as they are?

Why is the prospect so terrifying? But he doesn't want to feel anything. Not affection for Keith nor care for his supposed friends, he doesn't want to feel bad for what he's done, galra he's killed, friends he's *almost* killed... He doesn't want to be afraid of everything that's happened to him. Things he cannot stop.

He has to get out. Distract himself. The feast is the perfect place to search, so Lance nods at the thanks and congratulations and keeps his eyes peeled, till he finds a boy with dark hair around his age who winks when he looks over, and Lance gets up and strolls over, takes an empty seat, and grins lazily at the way this guy compliments his fighting. The guy's a farmer with calloused hands and solid arms, and he takes Lance's hands within ten minutes and they keep kissing all the way back to his place, and it's *almost* enough, *almost* a distraction.

But his hair is dark and his skin light and his eyes, they're a strange pale blue like half the people here, and shame coils inside him even as he curls over this guy and presses his teeth to his neck. He knows what he's doing even as he does it. It's not enough, and Lance has to grit his teeth to keep Keith's name out his mouth.

He forces himself to stay afterwards, like he did with Nyma and the other nameless people he's been through this with so far. The guy loves his eyes and his freckles and drifts his fingers over Lance's scars like everyone else. Lance doesn't really care. It doesn't feel like those scars belong to him. Every ounce of him, now, is carved by galra. None of it belongs to him.

And neither does Keith.

*Jesus.*

Lance doesn't - *shouldn't* - care. He kisses the guy hard and fast and says his goodbyes, and when they return to the ship Keith is still in cryo, and Lance doesn't care about that either.

--

It's just he has no one to fight with overnight.

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Keith doesn't get hurt again. Not like that. Lance doesn't exactly have much say over battle plans, but he has some sway in regards to his own position and who he thinks will best suit being at his side. Time and time again he insists going to ground alone, and it's far more convenient, but if Allura and Shiro aren't backing down, Lance just looks at Keith, and he'll step up. And they *do* work together well, so everyone lets it happen. Their first time out after the accident is awkward, mostly because Shiro had said *we put you in cryo and did the usual feast thing, a trade*
was set up, we gave them some extra protection, uh, Lance went and did his usual thing, but that night Keith still shows up at his door, ready to fight, and it's brushed off.

But Lance doesn't let it happen again. Every potential threat is immediately eviscerated. He keeps his eyes everywhere, all the time, making sure he catches anything Keith might have missed. Every enemy killed is double-checked, so there are no surprises. It's what he has to do, to keep the team safe. If Keith got hurt again on his watch no doubt it would somehow become his fault. That's it. That's all it is.

Keith looks at him like he knows better, though. Hits harder during their fights, releasing his frustration with Lance's actions, fingers trembling with tenderness when he salves Lance's wounds in the early hours of the morning. He doesn't say anything, except maybe a I'm fine, Lance! in the middle of a battle, but sincerity shines in his eyes when before it was shrouded, and it seeks out itself in Lance, pulls something real to the surface, casting an anchor into misty seas and coming back with something Lance cannot directly confront. Sees its reflection in Keith's eyes and knows he should be more worried about it.

To acknowledge it would make it real, though. It can't be real. Lance can't be- old Lance, actual Lance is already broken. Galra-trained Lance can't be broken, too. The druids, they know him and they seek him and they sing in his sleep to him, if he is broken they will know and somehow make him even worse. He's stuck.

He has to make a choice.

The opportunity comes up as he and Keith are creeping through messy undergrowth of an unfamiliar planet, trying to determine where the hell civilisation is. All six of them have been dropped off in pairs across the planet, Coran hovering as always in the castleship above, and despite picking up a distress call when they entered the quadrant, no one picked up their attempted communication, nor have they actually seen anybody yet. Hunk and Pidge have gone below ground; Allura and Shiro comb the wild fields; and Lance and Keith got dumped in a forest.

Lance is pretty sure it's a trap.

He says as much, and Keith just scoffs. "Maybe so," he says, hunched over and moving close to the ground, bayard held out before him but unweaponised. "But unless we get confirmation that the people here are safe we're not leaving."

Whatever Lance half-mutters, spinning a pistol round his finger before shoving it back in its holster. Whatever, he thinks, it's not like he's trying to keep anyone safe. If the galra have set a trap here, it won't be for the others, it'll be to catch him. He almost doesn't mind. Sometimes he wonders what it would be like to return, how he'd stomach it, what it would do to his mind. He has already forgotten so much. Would he slot right in as though he had never left? Would muscle memory alone carry him through? Would it hurt?

Would it upset the others? They all look so sad when they think he can't see. Like maybe rescuing him was worse than searching for him. Maybe it is. Maybe it was better for them to be without him but hoping for his return, rather than being confronted with the reality of him. He has forgotten his old self and the others won't talk about it with him anymore. He once cared about his family but now they are little more than stick figures drawn in crayon on the canvas of his mind, names and ages scribbled out next to them. Who's to say what else he has forgotten, what secrets, what sadnesses, what tiny fragments of himself have died without anyone ever knowing of them?

Is that sad?
Does it make Lance sad?

He can't tell; he doesn't think so. He's aware of that yawning gap between him and his past self, he acknowledges that it's sad but it's wasteful to be sad about it. There is no returning to whoever he once was. There is no return in general. What's done is done. He doesn't care. He doesn't even feel-

"Lance!" shouts Keith, and Lance blinks out of his daze to realise they've moved into an enclosed clearing, trees hanging like a widow's veil over them, leaves thick, not a ray of light seeping through. Tiny torches installed in their armour have been lighting their way thus far, but around them, a deep, dark purple begins to glow. "Dammit, Lance, you were right!"

"Fucking told you so," Lance mutters, and reaches back for his spear before remembering he broke it in half when Keith got hurt. He drops his hands and grabs the pistols at his side, turns his back to Keith and feels him doing the same, the two of them turning slowly on the spot as leaves ruffle and twitch around them. A low hum as Keith's bayard transforms into a sword, another as he calls his shield up. It is hard to see beyond the clearing, littered with dead leaves and crackling twigs. Trees rise beyond them, towering into the sky, sombre as the wives of dead sailors, and galra movement is sufficiently covered by the abundance of vegetation, bushes and bizarre plants that twist and creak without wind.

"Allura?" Keith says, but there is silence in their ears. "Shiro? Anyone...?!"

"Interference," Lance mutters. "They obviously-"

"Keith? Lance? Is that you?" asks Coran from the ship, and he can feel Keith's shoulders loosen as he sighs.

"Yes, we can't get through to the others. Can you contact them from us? The galra found us in the forest. We're surrounded and they're hidden in cover. Worst case scenario is they overwhelm us and take Lance back. Do you have our coordinates?"

"I do, paladin," Coran says, voice warm but shadowed in concern. "Don't worry, boys, I've had no trouble reaching the others. I'll let them know what's going on and point them the right way."

"Brilliant," Keith says. "See you soon, hopefully."

"Of course, my boy. Stay safe, the both of you."

"Thanks." With that, the comm goes out, and Keith's shoulders tighten back up. "Thank fuck. We'd be screwed without them."

"You might be," Lance says, and Keith doesn't answer that, just digs his elbow into Lance's back as they move towards the centre of the clearing.

Lance knows that if the galra get close enough, they're going to blast them with a rally of shots from cover; apart from his paladin armour, he has nothing to defend himself with, and Keith's shield will only cover so much of him.

He shoots blind. Keith is useless without the enemies within range, and to leave Lance's side would leave him vulnerable and force Keith into the unruly undergrowth, weakening his attack and making it so easy for the galra to swarm him.

Times like these he wish he had a gun like Hunk's. Something big, maybe a little unwieldy, but capable of releasing a stream of laser beams to cut through enemies with. As it is, Lance points and shoots and points and shoots and adjusts his position as he hears a grunt, a body flop to the ground.
It unleashes the volley of shots he was waiting for. Keith hisses something too quiet for Lance to hear, and Lance stops shooting with his left pistol and instead yanks his arm across his body, calling up his rarely-used shield to protect him for a brief moment before dropping it and shooting back.

The galra know their best option is to stay within cover, surrounding them and striking them without end. With his shield down, Lance is especially vulnerable, and as he pivots and takes shots he can feel blasts ripping through him, hears a crack as something particularly strong breaks through some armour.

"Lance!" Keith hisses, and when Lance glances back at him Keith's head is already cranked back so he can stare Lance down. "Put your shield up! The only reason they're still shooting you is because you're letting them!"

"But I'm the only one who can attack them-"

"By putting our shields up they'll be forced to come into the open! Come on!"

He tilts his head further back, manages a quick glance down Lance's front and winces, fear tightening his eyes as he looks back up at Lance.

...He must be hurt. Lance stuffs his left pistol back in its holster, keeps shooting with the right, then calls up his shield and tucks as much of himself behind it as he can, his rifle pressing against Keith's back in their attempt to leave as little of themselves open as possible.

Shot after shot is deflected off his shield, when Lance stills he can see almost every shot just as it comes, directing his shield back and forth to protect his sides. His helmet has fastened to protect his entire face, and he scowls as the galra direct their guns to his head, shots bouncing off and jolting him in increments.

But it works. The shots grow fewer. In the distance, a dull murmur as the galra confer with each other.

"Okay," Keith says. "Maybe shoot a few down while they're distracted? Maybe a group of them in the same space, and we can make a run for it?"

"And then what? We can't reach the other paladins, we don't have a map, we're totally lost and completely outnumbered. They'll come after us."

"We can outrun them, and the others are already coming our way."

"Then why run? We don't know their coordinates. We could end up running away from them. I'll shoot, we'll shield up, wait till they give up, I shoot again. We have to keep their attention if we want the others to have the element of surprise."

"Fucking hell," Keith mutters. "Fine! Do what you want! I'm just trying to protect you, but-"

"Then don't bother!" Lance lashes back. "Do I fucking look like I need protected?"

"Have you seen how many scars you have? Is it so wrong of me to want to keep you from getting any more?"

"It doesn't matter if I get any more! Besides, I can withstand way more pain than the rest of you, and I'm not even a proper paladin - it doesn't matter if I get hurt at all!"
"It matters to me!"

"I don't care!"

"Yes you do."

Lance glances back again, but Keith stares straight ahead of him, head held high, shoulders stiff. He speaks with such surety that it catches Lance for a second - that sincerity back to steal the truth from Lance's lips - and he manages, "You don't know-" before something is flung into their clearing.

Small and dark and a single button on it glows purple, and Lance can only stare in horror as it starts beeping.

"No," Keith says, and Lance thinks the same thing: no, not Keith, he can't get hurt, I won't let him get hurt, get him away, get it away! - and time seems to slow down. They both move at the same time - Keith twists and tries to grab hold of Lance's arms, and Lance turns to face him, their eyes meeting for a long second. Keith's are wide and scared and Lance can make out his own name on Keith's lips, but he shakes his head, shrugs out of Keith's grip with ease as the beeps speed rapidly up, and Lance places his hands against Keith's chest armour, Keith yelling louder, now, scrabbling against Lance's hands, and he shoves him with all his might from the grenade, Keith tries to stay balanced but he stumbles back and falls to the ground just as the grenade goes up, and Lance catches the sound of his name again as a boom rings out.

Time speeds up. The grenade was dropped a few yards from Lance. Not far at all. The explosion lifts him from his feet and he crashes into Keith, his breath rasping, his arms too shaky to lean on when he tries to sit up. The world is even darker than it was before, the scent of smoke leaking in from the crack in his visor. He can barely lift his head from where it landed on Keith's thigh.

Keith, whose hands are on his shoulders, trying to shake him. His face dazes in and out of vision, a haze of light tan and steel grey and the red of his helmet, and he is saying something, Lance can't make it out. He wants to move but his limbs do not cooperate.

He must be really hurt, he thinks blearily. His eyes want to shut, he lets them, Keith shakes him but it does nothing.

"Lance?" he hears as his mind begins to shut down. "Lance?!"

And then he is gone.

--

The galra don't come after them, apparently. They slither off, gone before the others even arrive. Lance is stuck in a healing pod for four days. When he emerges, his back is a patchwork of burn scars and the old stuff, and Hunk's in tears when Lance turns back to face the others. Apparently what he did was very brave. Coran embraces him. Pidge squeezes his hand. Shiro takes him by the shoulder and thanks him personally.

That night, he and Keith do very little fighting. That edge Keith's been pressing against Lance since he was hurt by the commander a few movements ago melts away. They spar once, twice, halfhearted. Apart from a few wounds when Lance disappears into the ring, they don't inflict much pain upon the other. When Lance undoes the top half of his undersuit so Keith can treat some slash along his arm, Keith sits and stares at his back, a hesitant hand traces the new scars, and Keith takes a breath so stuttery that Lance takes his chin and kisses him deep as he can.
It isn't wrong, he has decided, to want to protect Keith. To protect any of them. Lance can endure things no one else can. He doesn't care about scars, he doesn't feel pain. A grenade is nothing to him. Toss him in a cryo pod and he'll be alright. He isn't as essential as the others. The paladins of Voltron can't get hurt, not like he can. He won't let it happen.

Maybe this counts as a weakness, putting himself in the path of danger to protect them. Maybe it'll be used against him, but...rather that, he thinks, than let the others come to harm.

So he keeps kissing Keith, long as he's safe.

"You didn't have to do that," Keith says quietly, armour clumped beside him and undersuit half undone. "I said I was going to protect you."

"And I said you didn't have to," Lance replies. They sit side by side, facing each other, Keith's shoulder presented to Lance so he could patch it up. Keith's thigh burns where it's pressed against Lance's. Their faces are mere inches away. Keith lays a hand on Lance's arm, his palm pressed up against the galra writing burnt into his skin. "It doesn't matter if I get hurt, Keith. I'm serious."

"I'm serious, too," Keith says. "Just because you can't feel things doesn't mean they can't affect you. And you- I don't think you realise what it does to the others. You've already been hurt so much, to see you stuck in the healing pod again..."

"That's unimportant," Lance says, and Keith pulls a face. "In the grand scheme of things-"

"I don't care about the grand scheme!? Your safety is more important!"

"I don't- Keith, I don't get safety anymore. There is no safety for me. I'm being hunted, Keith. For some reason, they want me back. They could do- who knows what they'll do to anyone blocking their path? It might as well be me getting grenaded."

"That doesn't make any sense," Keith whispers, but Lance shakes his head and kisses him again, again, again again again-

Until he feels more normal, and then he goes back to bed.

--

It is impossible to retain that feeling of normality. Everyone speaks so softly to him during breakfast. They don't work so hard when they fight against him during training. Allura's eyes are unusually soft when they happen upon him. Coran keeps telling him how brave he was, to push Keith aside like that and take the brunt of the explosion, gets wistful, says but you've always been like that, haven't you? When they meet in the gym, Shiro comes up to Lance again and says, really, though, thank you, Keith gets into so much trouble anyway and you didn't have to do that and thank you, really Lance, it means a lot and even Hunk and Pidge keep smiling at him when he looks their way.

As if they know something he doesn't.

And it's unsettling, so Lance can't latch onto any feeling, let alone normalcy. He has to ignore it, keep doing what he always does. He's made a decision to protect the others, but that doesn't mean he has to change. Train, every hour of every day. Fight, his friends or Keith or any galra they encounter as they bounce from planet to planet, quadrant to quadrant, seeking out distress signals. Holds Keith, kisses Keith, feels something soft and warm blossoming between his ribs every time he looks at Keith.
But Keith doesn't stand it for long.

The next planet they save is incredibly grateful...and several quite specifically to Lance. These people are outspoken and honest, those that find him attractive come right out and say it and Lance, why should he refuse them? *You're very handsome*, says one girl and he replies *not as handsome are you are pretty*, and some boy says *that scar on your mouth looks so cool* and Lance says *wanna see it up close?* and all this even *before* the fighting. After the fight his hands are being clasped by leaders, grateful girls, blushing boys, people squeeze his shoulder, admire him for fighting on the ground, dealing with the gara face to face, and so without *fear*, without panic.

*Heroic* they sigh, and Lance doesn't miss the way Keith stares during the feast, sat next to him yet somehow a thousand worlds away. The paladins sit at a long table, facing out towards the rest of the townspeople, and they come up to them in clumps, thanking them, praising them. Lance sits at the end of the table, so three or four huddle round his corner, some almost ridiculously close to sitting on his lap, and he humours them, brushes fingers across cheeks, accepts various tokens of ribbons and jewellery and other strange things, he brags, he flirts, he ignores the way Keith tenses, the sharp words he hisses in Lance's ear occasionally, how he turns to stone beside Lance and eventually stops looking at him altogether.

*Good.* Lance cannot take the way Keith looks at him any longer. So full of...want and...and *need* and something Lance refuses to give words to. Something tender. Something terrifying. Lance doesn't like it, he doesn't like this *situation*, this *fixation* on Keith. So he picks one, and he goes.

The next night, he and Keith don't just fight.

They *fight*, Keith doesn't hold back, Keith has untamed fury in his eyes and gets up in Lance's face and slashes with his sword, thumps him with the butt of it, chuck it to the side and punches Lance across the face.

Repeatedly.

"Dude," Lance says, calmly raising a hand to block the next punch. "What the *fuck.*"

"Do *not*," Keith replies, breathing heavily and trying to tug his fist from Lance's grasp, "ask *me* what the fuck. What the fuck is up with you? Lance? What the *fuck* are you doing?"

"...Fighting you?" Lance says, and Keith's breath hisses out his nose, throws another fist but Lance grabs that too. "Like usual? Except you're obviously really fucking pissed off at me?"

"Oh, you actually picked up on that?"

Lance sighs. "No shit, I picked up on that. The hell is your problem?"

Keith doesn't answer, jostles his fists until Lance shrugs and lets them go, and Keith strides away, back to the centre of the deck. Halts, taps his foot. Rounds back on Lance again. "I am just *sick* of this!" he says, and Lance blinks. For a moment, his voice had wavered, as though on the cusp of breaking. "I am just fucking *sick* of this shit, Lance! I know you know! I- I thought- I *know*. I know you know what I'm talking about."

Staring, Lance says nothing. Leans motionless against the wall. Keith starts pacing back and forth in the centre of the room, fingers clenching and unclenching, shooting heartrending looks at Lance every now and again.

"You- you can't keep doing this. You can't *act* like you're mean and cruel and heartless and then just-* not* be. You always offer to fix up all my wounds when we fight. You try and do your
own wounds so I don't hurt myself patching you up. You- Lance, you saved my life, you saw that grenade and decided to take the brunt of it, and- Lance, it has to mean something! I can't do this anymore! Watching you go off with- with all those people, I-I- Lance, I really can't-

"You are jealous," Lance says, as if it's a revelation, remembers finding Keith after the day with Nyma and saying the exact same thing to him, seeing hurt and shame and humiliation in Keith's eyes, kissing them out of him. But he can't kiss this away. Keith stills now, facing Lance but tucking his head to the side, not looking at him directly. "Keith," he says, and stops. Keith doesn't understand. Keith doesn't know. Keith- but is Lance willing to sacrifice what he has going with Keith? These solitary nights of solace? This strange peace, these sweet kisses? Lance doesn't want to. He doesn't want to.

"Yes!" Keith explodes. "I'm fucking jealous! Fuck you! You can't act like I'm special in private and the second you see someone else you run after them! Flirt with them when everyone can hear! When I'm sitting right fucking next to you! Fuck you, Lance! I know you know this is real! This- whatever the fuck this is, Lance, it's there and it means something and you cannot fucking refute that! You just fucking can't!"

"You don't," Lance says, trying to take measured breaths. "You don't understand." His heart is beating oddly in his chest. Keith doesn't even look that upset anymore - he looks angry again, pure rage. Maybe Lance has made him too sad already. "You don't understand," he says again, quieter.

It isn't enough.

"What don't I understand," Keith demands, striding forward so they're a metre apart. "What don't I fucking understand, Lance? Are you playing me or not? I need to know- Lance, I need to know."

"I'm not playing you," Lance says, because he can't be honest. He can't say it aloud.

Keith doesn't give him that inch. "Then what are you doing with me? Is it some sick joke? Is it just- you go visit planets and fuck whoever is there, and then you come back to the ship and try and- and you have me?"

"No! Keith, I wouldn't..."

"Would you? How would I know? You fucking act like you don't give a fuck."

"I have to," he says, and finally digs his chin out his chest to look at Keith. God, he's a fucking picture when he's furious like this. His hair is messy, strands falling into his face. It's longer than it was at the garrison. His steel eyes are narrowed, plush lips thin and downturned. His hands still clench, a thumb rubs repeatedly against an index finger. He breathes heavy. The purple under his eyes hurts to look at. "I have to, Keith. I can't... I'm not allowed..."

"Not allowed what? To fuck whoever you want whenever you want without any fucking consequences?"

"That's not what I'm talking about!" Lance yells, and takes a sharp inhale when he realises how loudly he'd spoken. Keith only cocks his head, waiting, and Lance...he gives in. He has to give in. That pool in his chest that seemed so still in the surface is now a storm pounding down on his heart: tell him it says like a heartbeat. Tell him, tell him, tell him. "That's not what I- Keith, I'm already fucked up. The old Lance, whoever you used to know, he's gone. Dead. Fucked up. And now I'm- the druids made me to endure anything. I'm not supposed to feel pain, feel emotion. If I do, that- that means I'm fucked up, too. This version of me. I can't- Keith, I can't be. I can't be! I can't feel anything, that just means I'm fucking broken! Whatever the druids did, it doesn't work! I
don't work the way I'm supposed to! I wish I didn't feel anything! I wish I didn't give a damn about you, Keith, but I do! I fucking do! When I saw that grenade the only thing I could think was oh god, not Keith. Not because I knew you were one of our best fighters and that you getting hurt would damage Voltron. Not even because I knew it would upset the others if you got hurt again. Because I didn't want you to get hurt. I wanted to fucking protect you! What the fuck is wrong with me?! Why do I feel this way?! I'm not fucking supposed to, Keith! I'm not fucking supposed to, but I do, because I'm so fucking up that even five months of torture can't make me fucking normal, and now I- now I-" He stops, panting. Keith's anger has drifted, a little, the thumb moving a little slower than before, eyes softer round the edges. "Keith, I feel something for you. And I- I can't- I can't say it. Make it real. Because otherwise that makes all of it real, the failure, the- the- and the druids will know, Keith, I just know it, they'll realise I'm fucked up and they'll- they'll- I don't know and it- I'm-"

"Lance," Keith says, and holds his arms out. Lance can't stop staring, at his eyes, his fucking eyes, the anger vanquished, concern and fear and- and everything Lance won't let himself feel just shining out of him. Like it's nothing. Like it doesn't even hurt.

It hurts Lance, to see it. In his heart. His bleak, black heart, crushed into some ruined thing, dust and ash, a wreck of himself. Pulsing, still, for something. Searching always for love. Seeking its home.

Lance stumbles forward, drops his head on Keith's shoulder and twists his arms around Keith's waist, holding him tighter than ever before. Keith rests a hand on Lance's shoulder blade, raises the other to cradle the back of his head, brushing through stubble and the hair at the top of his head, and murmurs Lance's name. It's all he says.

He cannot cry. He no longer knows how, but he says, "I don't know who I am, Keith. Who am I if I'm not an emotionless, feelingless robot? Does that mean I'm human like the rest of you? What if I don't want to be?"

"You were always human," Keith says, so close. "The galra tried to scrape all your humanity out of you, but- Lance, you're so good. They couldn't."

"They took everything else," Lance whispers, hollow. "The more I try to remember, the more I forget. I don't have anything."

"You have me," Keith says, and pulls back a little to look him in the eye. "Don't you?"

And Lance nods. Strands of gold drift from Keith's soul, and Lance, he wants to take one of those and link in to his own. If he tries hard enough, he can almost see it, a strand wandering his way, and when he says, "I do," it surges into his chest. The muck and slime that has nestled between his ribs melts in the face of such brilliance, it reveals Lance's heart still there, still beating. "If you want me to stop chasing others then...I'll stop."

"Will you?" Keith asks, searching his eyes. "Do you promise?"

"I do," Lance says, and Keith breaks into this tiny, soft smile. "Don't make me talk about it anymore. I can't- I can't-"

"Okay," Keith says, and kisses him. Warm, passionate, perfect. A little, Lance can't help imagining, like coming home.
Is he different after that night? Keith looks at him differently. He feels- more alive. Is it the training, is it fighting on the string of planets they rescue from invasion, is it this thing with Keith? He talks to the others more. Keeps asking Shiro about his prosthetic, because every time Shiro gives him advice about it he somehow forgets within days. He's more patient when Hunk and Pidge poke around his legs, sometimes getting too close and flinching away, biting back swears. Coran and Allura seem to feel less pressure about finding a planet to fix his quintessence on.

It almost feels...normal. Like a trick. This can't be- this can't be normal. Lance doesn't want it to be. The way he is- that isn't normal. He isn't Lance normal, he isn't druid, normal, he's stuck somewhere in between. Even now, heart beating for Keith every night, he knows he still does not feel emotion in the regular way. He doesn't laugh like the others. There is something still locked inside him, the garden in his ribs overgrown and half-dead, his heart beats but there is not enough life to sustain it. It is an echo.

But if there's anything he's become good at, it's ignoring the truth even when it's staring him down in the face. He trains all day, appeases the others during meals, messes around with Keith during the night and then returns to bed, and the druids are there in his sleep, crowded round him on the table, standing in clumps as they judge his progress in the ring, asking him why.

Asking him what the hell he is doing, and he has no reply. What the hell is he doing? He and Keith don't even fight anymore, they don't need to, Lance gets his fix from all the planets they go to and the high lasts a good few days, Lance doesn't care to fight with Keith at night so more often than not they end up against a wall, making out and removing each other's armour piece by piece so they can unzip their undersuits and press fingers against scars.

Lance has the most, obviously, but Keith has his own. They sit, talk.

Or, Keith talks. Lance doesn't remember where most of his scars come from.

"These," Keith says, sat on the ground with his thighs over Lance's crossed legs and pointing at the square over his heart, "are from the druids trying to cut your heart out."

"Really?" Lance says, and looks down at them. They're thin and pale, they'd be startling against his skin if he didn't have so many. "Why would they do that?"

Keith shrugs. "Probably just experimenting. You said they stopped when they realised you were dying."

"Fair enough," he says, looks over at Keith. He has a strange looking scar along his left side, it tosses and turns as though it's a constellation from the sky, embedded into Keith's skin. It's pale and silvery like starlight, Lance catches the gleam of it only due to the bright whiteness of the lights cast down on them. "What's that one?" He brushes a finger along it, sees Keith shiver, rests his hand more securely upon Keith's hip.

"It's stupid," he says, and Lance raises a brow. "It's from...when I was a kid. I barely remember... It was when Shiro sort of- adopted me. Kind of. Found me, I guess, and let me stay with him. He was teaching me how to ride a bike, and I-" Keith winces, but not from pain, but from embarrassment, cheeks going red, and Lance finds himself leaning closer and smiling. "I mean. The full story is that I. Is that we were playing catch inside home one day, and I, uh. Threw the ball into the window. And it broke."

"Really," Lance says, and Keith rolls his eyes when he sees Lance is beaming.

"So stupid," he mutters. "So I ran outside and got on the bike and started cycling away from Shiro,
because he was raging, except I still wasn't very good and I kind of...doubled back and cycled straight into the house where the broken window was and I. Fell. Into the glass."

"Wow," Lance says.

"And I was like- stuck under the bike and like wriggling around and the glass got everywhere and Shiro was freaking out and he's gay so he didn't know how to drive so he sort of grabbed me and sprinted towards the closest road and called an ambulance and he was freaking out because he thought I was like, bleeding out."

"And what were you doing?"

Keith shrugs. "I was just chilling, I guess."

"I can't believe you fell off a bike and never told me," Lance says, and Keith just quirks his brow, humiliation lifting in return for anticipation of what Lance will say. "All these years, I could've had an actual reason to bully you instead of just being mean about your hair."

"You remember that?" Keith asks, and Lance nods.

"Sort of," he says, lifts his free hand to brush a lock of hair behind Keith's ear. It's so long now that it's tied back into a bun once more, low and a little sloppy on the nape of his neck. "I know we were rivals. Lance and Keith, neck and neck. Right?"

"That's what you said," Keith replies. "I would've been your friend, you know. If you'd ever been half-decent to me instead of acting like I was the worst thing to happen to you."

"Is that what I did?"

Keith nods. "You were kind of a shithead, dude."

"In my defence, you were probably a shithead, too."

"I wasn't," Keith says, expression contemplative for a moment before he smirks. "Maybe I was. Just a little."

"A little, yeah right." Lance rolls his eyes, looks down at himself. "Tell me more," he says, and finds more thin scars lining his ribs, and he runs a finger along one of them and says, "What about these, then?"

"Uh," Keith says, and frowns. "For fun. Apparently."

He shrugs, eyes a slash down Keith's hip alongside his hand. "That?" he says, rubbing his thumb along it.

Keith's face falls. "That's...from our first fight. When you tried to kill me. You were using a sword then, and a rifle. Dual wielding."

"Oh," he says, and stops, pressing his thumb along the line of it. It's a little thicker than the others, pinker, newer. Considering how often they fight, how ruthless Lance gets when he disappears into the ring, he has to wonder how many of Keith's scars are due to him.

Probably a lot. Probably- probably most.

"It's fine," Keith says, as if sensing the turn Lance's thoughts have taken. "You were in the ring, you thought I was a galra- I mean, I am galra. But you thought I was-"
"A general," Lance says. "I don't know why."

"It's fine," Keith repeats, heavier, eyes on Lance's. "I've probably scarred you up a little as well."

They both know he hasn't. Keith's scars are interesting, but Lance's are just horror show after horror show, and Keith grimaces no matter how lightly he speaks of them. Keith doesn't want to contribute to them. Lance can't feel it but he can see the tremble in Keith's fingers every time he touches Lance, like he's scared to leave a mark the way everything else has.

"Yeah," Lance says, "okay," and he drops his free hand to his stomach, which is absolute chaos compared to the precision on his ribs. "And what happened here?"

"You..." Keith pauses, eyes alighting on Lance's hand splayed across his belly before he takes it in his own, rests their joint hands in Lance's lap. "Well," he says, "I didn't see you before you got in the healing pod, when we rescued you, but...Allura says she found you with the druids... They were doing a bunch of things to you - the lip scar came from that, I think - but they were also cutting into your gut. Allura said it was little cuts, like they were curious about what would happen if they did that... But you also got a wound there when we went down to fight the galra on the junkyard planet. Before you- the fight before you got shocked again."

"Huh," Lance says. "Pretty ugly, aren't they?"

Keith scoffs. "Is that important to you?"

"No," Lance admits. "Is it important to you?"

Keith shakes his head, reaches a hand out to trace the scar over Lance's lips with his finger. "No," he says finally. "Actually, some of them are pretty hot."

Which has Lance grinning and leaning over Keith for a kiss, two, ten, twenty. He doesn't count, nor does he pull away.

Night after night, just like this.

Lance doesn't want it to stop.

--

He doesn't mess with strangers now; he honours his promise to Keith. Even as pretty aliens crowd him, praise him, touch him, he smiles and grins and yeah, okay, he indulges it a little, but he doesn't act like he did before. He doesn't sleep with any of them, doesn't even kiss them. Sits by Keith's side at the feasts, if they stay the night he slips into Keith's room and makes out with him for hours, enthusiastic and invigorated but never taking it as far as he does with the aliens.

Because it's different with him.

Lance can do nothing but accept that. They live together and they fight together and they fuck around together, and Lance can't imagine living this way without him.

He just can't. He can't fight it. He's tried so hard but he can no longer ignore it. Do the others notice? He prays to god that they don't. Allura and Coran are still searching for this special planet that will apparently cure Lance of all his ills, and Hunk and Pidge spend most of their time with him asking about his prosthetics or even ooh- and aahing at the range of weapons he can use. Shiro is... Shiro might notice something. Shiro seems to spend a lot of his time trying to talk to Keith, who's still trying to avoid him, and...that might be concerning.
Depending on what Shiro so obviously wants to talk to Keith about; if it's to do with Lance or not.

If he's noticed something.

God, Lance hopes he hasn't.

He prowls, now, across the lounge room in search of Keith, wandering along the windows as if he might spot Keith hiding from him in the vast space around them. Lance is laid down on the couch, arms behind his head while Pidge and Hunk sit cross-legged on the floor by his legs, muttering in nerd to each other as Lance thinks of the scars Keith had spoken about last night, the fat diamond he'd traced on the back of Lance's head, the necklace of ruined skin round his neck.

Eventually, Shiro gives a sigh and collapses onto the sofa near Lance, leaning his head back and closing his eyes.

"Trouble, Shiro?" Hunk asks offhandedly, tapping at Lance's knee with a strange metal tool coated in white plastic, and grinning when he doesn't get a shock.

"Not really," Shiro sighs, and wipes a hand down his face. "Sort of. I think Keith's avoiding me."

"Yup," Pidge chirps, taking the tool from Hunk and tapping Lance's other knee. "He totally is."

"Do you know why?" Shiro asks. "I don't recall saying anything to make him mad at me."

"I don't either," Hunk says, leans back on his palms and watches with a soft smile as Pidge hogs this fun new tool of theirs. "He's been a bit weird though, lately."

"Yeah," Shiro murmurs, "I noticed that. Maybe he doesn't want to talk about it? But...why not...? It's been-" He stops, flashes a glance to Lance. Lance blinks and refocuses his gaze on the ceiling above. "Have you noticed anything, Lance?"

"Like what," he asks flatly.

"Just... I don't know. You guys hang out a lot on missions, now. Does he talk to you?"

"Wouldn't you hear it if he talked to me?"

"We hear what you say," Pidge says. "We don't really hear Keith unless he's yelling."

"He doesn't talk to me," Lance says, and Shiro exhales heavily through his nose. "Maybe he's just busy."

Pidge scoffs, and Shiro says, "Doing what, though? Training? We all train so much together that he doesn't need it. He doesn't play games like you guys, he doesn't really care about science... Is he helping Allura and Coran? But how could he...and besides, they'd tell me..."

"Don't worry about it," Hunk advises. "The Blade of Marmora have started patching through messages to him, though. Maybe it's that."

"Wait-" Shiro says. "What?"

"The Blade of Marmora?" Lance repeats.

"You don't know?" asks Hunk, and Lance gets up on his elbows to look at him, and his eyes are wide, brows raised like he's really surprised. "Oh, dude, I thought Coran would've totally filled you in."
"The Blade of Marmora?" Shiro repeats, and jumps to his feet just as an alarm rings out. "We- we are talking about this when the mission is over!"

"Totally-!"

"Paladins," calls Allura's voice from the speakers, and Shiro just sighs before jogging out the door, the rest of them following after. "We've been tracking a suspicious galra cruiser for the past few quintants, and it's finally made a stop on a planet near us! Our initial scan of the planet shows nothing much of interest on the planet except for a vast ocean, however galra ships surround the place, leading me to believe there might be some hidden base. I want two paladins to go down and investigate; the rest of us will cause a distraction in the sky."

"I want to go to ground," says Keith, who strides into the control room seconds after Lance and the others make it. Allura stands at her controls, Coran positioned not far from her. "Being half-galra will give me better access if there is something hidden."

Allura nods. "I'm happy with that. I don't mind volunteering my services - I can disguise myself, or-"

"I'm going," Lance says, and Keith shoots a look at him. "I can't pilot a lion; I'm going down."

"I...don't know how I feel about sending you to a supposedly secret base," Allura says, and Coran nods beside her. "Lance, what if it's a research facility? And they could- trigger you, or... Or manipulate your quintessence more- we're so close to finding a planet that can balance you out again-"

"I'm going." Lance repeats, and Keith nods, steps up to his side.

"We're a good team," Keith says, and Lance finds himself glancing back to Shiro, watching as a frown twists his mouth. "And I can protect Lance from them."

Lance scoffs, says, "Yeah, because I need protection-"

"Yeah!" Keith says. "Because you do!"

"I'll protect Keith from the big bad ocean," Lance says. "Which one of us was guardian of the sea again?"

"Wha- just because I didn't get the blue lion doesn't mean I can't swim!"

"Can't swim, can't surf, can't ride a bike-"

"Okay, I was learning-"

"Boys!" says Allura, eyes wide with exasperation. "Just- take Keith's lion and go, then! The rest of us will cover you. Coran, I've topped up the castle with my energy; you should be able to open a wormhole if things go...badly."

"Roger, princess," says Coran, and presses a hand to her back before smiling up at all of them. "Well, go get changed and off you go!" he says, turns back to the controls and manoeuvring them slowly closer to the planet. The rest of them run to the bridge, change into their armour, and hop down to their speeders, and once everyone has gone down, Lance jumps in after Keith, laughing at the way he yelps when Lance grabs onto the T-bar behind him, one hand on the bar and the other arm wrapped round all his weapons, he holds tight to the speeder as it attempts to drag them both to Keith's lion.
"Jesus," Keith says when Lance drops down the hatch into Keith's lap, weapons spilling onto the floor, and he sprawls out for a moment before comms open and Keith unceremoniously shoves him off.

"Alright, paladins," comes Allura's voice from somewhere above him, and Lance just flops back onto the ground in front of Keith's feet until Keith kicks him so he can pilot Red, and Lance crawls off to the side. "I want the four of us to really go in guns blazing. We've got the element of surprise for now, so try and take out their weapons array as fast as possible, otherwise they might very quickly overwhelm us. Keith and Lance, we'll try and blast a hole in their defences for you two to fly through. Coran is in the process of looking up a safe place for you to land."

"Thanks, princess," Keith says, and a buzz as the comms drop. "Lance, get out of there." He nudges Lance's side again, and Lance just huffs and slouches over to the space behind Keith's seat, where he lays out the weapons he grabbed and decides which to actually take with him.

"Won't need a sniper, will I?"

"You never know," Keith replies. "If you take a rifle I wouldn't bother, though."

"Pistols, daggers, rifle..." Lance frowns at the staff-like weapon he brought to replace the spear. It's a trident, he realises, steel grey like all the non-bayard weapons in the castle, the three forks sharp and heavy, lethal. "Huh," he says. "And a trident."

"You brought a trident?" Keith asks, glancing back with a half-smirk on his lips. "Lance, I think you're taking 'guardian of the sea' a bit too literally."

"Doesn't matter," Lance shrugs, standing up and beginning to attach his weapons to their various bonds. "Technically Allura's the blue paladin now, so."

"Right," Keith says, looking Lance over for a second before turning back to the scene before them. Allura and Hunk are leading the charge; Allura freezing up ships and Hunk using his heavy beam to blast them to pieces, and Coran pops up on their dash with a quick, "There's a heavy concentration of energy in the sea around this area, so here's the coordinates to its closest beach. Keith, Lance - good luck."

"Thanks, Coran," says Keith. "See you on the other side."

Lance leans over the back of Keith's seat and nods, and Coran's image flickers and dissipates.

"Lance, Keith!" shouts Shiro. "You've got your opening! Just-" He falters for a second, looking at Keith then up to Lance, and says, "Just stay safe."

"We'll try," says Keith, and he reaches forward to turn the comm off, slamming the controls forward and blasting them through the gap Allura and Hunk have made in the wall of ships around the planet. A few small ships break formation and come after them, but Keith blasts lasers out the tail gun and gets rid of them with ease. "They will be on the lookout for you, though," Keith says after a minute. "Lance, you have to let me protect you. If something happens to you in that facility- if I can't get you out- you could- you could-"

"Disappear again," Lance finishes, and rests his chin on the top of Keith's helmet. He makes a noise, but doesn't shake him off. "I know. I'll be extra careful, alright?"

"Will you? Do you promise?"

"Yeah," Lance murmurs, forgets to keep his tone hard, forgets everyone can hear anything he says.
"Yeah, Keith. I promise."

"Okay," Keith says. "When we get out, I want you to stay behind me. I can shield us both. You can use your rifle over my shoulder. And- and- we won't engage unless there's absolutely no other option, okay? Even if that means running."

"You can't be serious."

"I mean it! Nothing in that facility, no amount of intelligence or, or people in that place are more important than keeping you safe from the galra!"

"That's not true," Lance sighs out, but Keith doesn't reply, the beach Coran pointed them to coming into vision as Keith descends. "Where are we even going from here?"

"Our suits will lead us to any unusual amount of energy," Keith says. "We follow where it tells us, and at the strongest point, we go into the water. Yeah?"

"Sure."

The landing is soft, cushioned by baby pink sand that glitters in the red sun, and Lance feels something strong and strange welling up in his throat when he steps out the lion, something salty and almost-familiar greeting him as he faces the green ocean.

"It's..." he says, but can't finish it. Warmth floods him, but its edges are cold and bitter. Looking at the sea makes him want to cry.

"Almost like Earth," Keith agrees, moving away from the lion so its holographic shield bubbles up around it. "It's beautiful," he adds, resting a hand on Lance's shoulder before looking along the beach. "But we're not here for beauty. I don't see any soldiers - do they think by having that many ships in the sky they won't need troops on the ground? Or are they concentrating them around the facility?"

He looks to Lance, who shrugs. "If it's important enough to need so many ships, it'd make better sense if this place was swarming with soldiers, but...maybe we're not close enough. What does the suit say?"

Keith presses a few buttons along his left arm, and a small orange screen pops up. "We're on ground," Keith says, and Allura appears on the screen, staring determinedly ahead of her as ships crash and boom around her.

"Good job," she says. "Now locate the facility and begin the infiltration!"

"Gotcha," says Keith, presses something else to change the screen to a map of sorts, a three-dimensional world constructed before them on Keith's tiny screen. Where they stand has two red dots; further along the beach there is a burning core of pulsing red, and Keith points in its direction. "This way, I guess. Keep an eye out."

Lance nods, reaches back and takes his rifle out as Keith holds his sword out before him. They make quick work, but they're cautious, constantly glancing around them, scrutinising the environment and how...empty it seems to be. To the right is the sea, beneath them pink sand, to the left a stretch of beach before it dissipates into grassy cliffs. It's so Earth-like, so pretty, but there's nothing here. No animals, nothing scuttling through the sand. No people, aliens or galra or anything.

Lance wants to feel at ease, but it makes him edgy. Allura had said they were maybe five quadrants
from the Sol system yesterday; why the hell is there such an important base so close to Earth? Do they know about Earth? Are they watching it? Is that what the facility is for?

"Keith," Lance says lowly, "I have a really bad feeling about this."

"I know," Keith murmurs, watching as their two red dots grow ever closer to the explosion of it before them. They can't be far. "It feels- eerie. Wrong. What if..."

What if this is a trap. "We can handle it," Lance says, and Keith glances up at him, nods.

"Okay," he says, and they take two more steps before a shot rips through Keith's chestplate.

"Motherfucker!" Lance yells as more shots begin to rain down on him, spots snipers up on the cliffs and launches himself in front of Keith, turning his back to the cliffs and shoving Keith against him.

"Lance!" Keith shouts, panting and trying to pry Lance's hand from the crack in his chestplate. "It's not that deep, I'm fine! You said you'd let me protect you!"

"We have to run," Lance says, but he looks the way he came and realises they're surrounded, galra soldiers soaking wet standing and aiming at them. "What the hell! Keith, why didn't they show up on your scanner?!"

"I-if lifeforms or too high or too low, or, or in the ocean, I guess, the scanner misses them!"

"Fuck!" Lance says, glancing back to check the snipers are still shooting. They are, and Lance shoves Keith to the ground and starts shooting back at the circle of soldiers around them.

Who then start shooting back.

"Fuck!" he says again, and the comms flicker, go static, then silent. "Can you reach anyone on your comms?"

Keith is getting to his feet already, blocking the hand Lance sends to shove him back down, and calls up his shield. "No. Can you? What is happening?"

He leaps forward before Lance can stop him, slicing through three galra soldiers in one swipe, and Lance has to let himself appreciate it before getting angry. "I fucking knew it! Bad fucking feeling!"

Keith clears out a space for them to run through, and Lance follows, but something must have hit his leg because he stumbles a half second before continuing, and his breathing is getting heavy, he can't catch up-

"It is useless to run, blue paladin," declares a lilting voice, and like magic, Keith and Lance are halted in their steps. Soldiers come round them and grab them, take their weapons, and though Lance pushes and shoves he cannot move, something gold and glowing wrapped round his body. Keith is the same, he can see him on his periphery but can't even turn his head to look at him.

The soldiers drag them back into the centre of the soldiers, where a druid now stands amongst them. With a flick of her fingers, the magic is gone, but no matter how hard Keith and Lance fight, they can't get out of their captors' grips. They can't.

"Got you now, paladin," says the druid quite cheerfully, gliding forward and tracing a claw down his cheek. "You are quite hurt, aren't you?" Brushes the claw beneath the corner of his mouth and
comes back with blood. When Lance looks to Keith, his eyes are wide with horror, combing over Lance and whatever injuries he sustained from the gunfight. "I suppose that is what happens when you try to...protect, you said?" Her mouth crooks up. "You wanted to protect this boy. Your leader."

"I'm not the leader anymore," says Keith in a low voice. "Let us go. Let us go!"

"I might let one of you go," muses the druid. "It depends how willingly the other will come with us. Didn't we say we had so many other ideas to explore with you, blue paladin? Do you really think you've reached your peak already? You don't even have enough quintessence to be a real force..."

"I've taken down hundreds of your soldiers," Lance replies raggedly. "Thousands, probably!"

"Oh, probably," she replies, "but what about more? Tens of thousands? Hundreds? You don't even remember all that you're capable of now, let alone in the future."

"What are you talking about?" demands Keith. "That can't be possible!"

"The blue paladin wasn't our first pick, you know," says the druid, circling Lance and examining him as though he were under her microscope. "but what an excellent choice he turned out to be. What were you capable of before? Nothing... You kept telling us that. You were worth nothing, we should kill you now, the others wouldn't even miss you. Seventh wheel, I recall you saying. Amongst all these special people, what was your speciality?" Forced onto his knees, the druid has to bend down to look him in the eye. "Hm?"

"I have no fucking idea what you're talking about," Lance says, voice thick and rough as he ignores the sliver of doubt she's seeded into his heart. What was his speciality? He doesn't... He doesn't even remember that. Did...he not have one at all?

"There was none," she says as though she heard what he was thinking. "You weren't special, blue paladin. You could shoot a gun, but you weren't the only one. And you had one paladin too many, is that right? When you disappeared, they simply slotted another into your place and Voltron could be formed once more. And what has happened, now that you've returned? Isn't the stress on everyone else so much worse? Trying to deal with you, figure out how to fix you? As though you can be fixed. They have no idea what's been done to you."

"Shut the hell up," replies Lance. "Shut the hell up!"

"Lance, what the hell is she saying?" Keith asks, but Lance can no longer look at him. "You thought you weren't special?"

The druid lets out a cackle that has Lance wincing. "Weren't special?" she repeats. "He thought he was a burden. Glad he was chosen over the rest of you. It would be funny if it wasn't so horribly sad." She bends back down in front of Lance, claws under his chin to force his gaze on her. "They no longer understand you," she tells him, and Lance can do nothing but stare into the darkness where her eyes should be, shadowed by her hood. He can no longer struggle; the injuries he took must be severe. "You belong to us, now," she murmurs. "You have no place with them. But we can make you stronger. Strong enough to demolish an entire planet on your own. Don't you want that? To feel useful?"

Don't I? he thinks, but it isn't him - it's some other him, one that desires only to feel useful, to be part of something, and Lance... Doesn't he? Doesn't he want to be useful?
"Lance, don't listen to her!" Keith shouts, and Lance tears his gaze from her to look over at him, on his knees as well, helmet yanked off and lying to the side. His hair is wild round his face, eyes silver and open, imploring him, begging him. "Lance, she's just trying to take you back! She's lying to you!"

"I do not lie," the druid says sharply. "Better watch your tongue, red paladin, lest I cut it off."

"Wh-

"Don't hurt him!" Lance yells, and to his surprise she only grins.

"You were meant to be without weakness," she tells him, almost sadly. "Will you come with us or not?"

"I will not."

"Then your weakness will be exploited..." She sighs, raises to her feet. "What is so special about the red paladin, anyway? In comparison to you, he is nothing...and yet you protect him. We were watching every time, blue paladin. Every planet, every distress call... That grenade, you threw him out the way despite the potential damage to yourself... And then you kept protecting him. It was almost fascinating, really..."

She drifts back a few steps, crosses her arms.

"...but, essentially, useless." She raises a hand to Keith, and the soldiers step back. Keith makes it only to his feet before gold and purple magic shoots out the druid's hand, threading together and engulfing Keith, and then he is off his feet and screaming like nothing Lance has ever heard before, loud and painful and scared, and Lance's jaw drops.

"What the- stop that!" Lance shouts. "Don't touch him! Get the hell away from him!"

"And what will you do in return?" asks the druid, flicks her wrist and the magic contorts around Keith, his limbs start dancing in unnatural ways, yanked back too far, too painfully. "Will you come, blue paladin, or let your friend get hurt?"

Weakness, Lance realises. This has all festered weakness, every night with Keith, every kiss, every dumbass promise he made - it all led to this. And it was always going to. You cannot feel the way Lance does about Keith without leaving yourself open to endless agonies. Agonies like this. Like watching Keith in agony, unable to help, he struggles harder with his bonds but his breath is coming faster than ever, blood dripping onto the sand beneath him. His heart is compressed, trying to shield itself from the pain of seeing Keith harmed, because of him, it cracks into tiny pieces, dissipates into dust.

What has he done.

What has he done?

The druid pauses for a second, Keith crashing to the ground and panting, twitching, whimpering just a little. "Don't," he hisses out, voice thin, "don't do it, Lance, don't listen to her, d-don't, I can handle it, I s-said I'd protect you-"

She raises a hand, and he is screaming again.

"Stop it," Lance whispers. "Let him go. Let him go!"
"Come with us," says the druid. "Say you will come with us, walk with me without guards forcing you to, lay back on that table and let us do as we like."

Come with them... Walk without guards...

Lance's weapons are maybe ten metres away where the guards assailed them, if Lance can pretend, if only for a second- the druid is magical, it's true, but... But if he's fast- takes out Keith's guards and maybe she won't be able to use her powers on them both-

"Fine," he says, and her lips smooth into a grin. "Fine! Just let him down already!"

"Young romance," she sighs, and allows Keith to drop, he curls into a ball but still stares up at Lance with wide, horrified eyes. "Such a pitiful thing. Let him go."

The guards release Lance, and he drops forward, realising suddenly that they'd practically been holding him up. Getting to his feet is so difficult, but he manages, takes his time, tries to conserve his energy.

"Come along, blue paladin. I'm sure your friends will get you soon," she says, waving a hand at Keith, and then she turns as if to go back into the ocean, and Lance's leg flies out and connects with his guards, and he runs to Keith and blocks hits from his guards, the druid turns but Keith is already on his feet, summoning his bayard and taking galra out like his life depends on it-

Punch after punch connects, they can do it, the light at the end of the tunnel has never been so bright-

And then something purple hits his legs. Crackles up them.

He drops. Vision blurry in seconds, breathing harder than it's ever been. He is moving, violently, twitching, he can't tell, his heart is in a vice grip of something purple and clawed and it will not let him breathe.

Someone is screaming. Someone is always screaming. Lance never quite goes unconscious, but when the- the- whatever it is stops, he is left motionless on the ground, trembling and breathing heavy, and scared. He can feel it right in the core of his heart, the way he hasn't been able to in- in months.

Then Keith's head pops into his vision, bloody, helmet-less, bloodstained.

"Keith," he whispers, and Keith shakes.

"I killed them, Lance, I promise," he says, voice weak and strong at the same time. "Lance, I killed all of them. You're safe. I pr- I tried to protect you."

"Keith," he says again, and his voice is barely a shadow on the wind. "I-I don't wanna forget again, Keith. A-any of it."

"You won't," Keith says, but he's crying so much the words are barely coming out his mouth. "I-I won't let you- Lance- please."

"I don't want to," Lance mumbles as darkness takes over the blinding white in his vision. "Keith, I don't want to..."

And then it is dark.
:^) oho?

(uhhh if u enjoyed that don't forget to like subscribe and comment for more of the same, see u next time guys)

(me: memory loss! heaven! now! u: claire we cant keep doing this)
friction

Chapter Summary

lance forgets, and tries to remember. keith is stuck remembering everything.

Chapter Notes

mmmm guess which bitch is coming off an rt extra life high even tho technically it ended 12 hrs ago..... i fell asleep a couple times in the last 5 hrs or so but i was awake for the full final hour and it was rly emotional and intense at the end so it was fulfilling. so uh. anyone else who was On That.......wow

anyway no warnings i think except this is agonisingly long like. around 22k im so sorry i have no control??? as always, the song's title is a link to that song on youtube so i encourage u to give it a listen! the only thing by sufjan is in particular a very Keith song in this au haha. anyway enjoy ;;;; see u on the flipside ;;;;

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Should I tear my eyes out now,
Before I see too much?
Should I tear my arms out now?
I wanna feel your touch.
The Only Thing, Sufjan Stevens

--

For a long time, it is just Keith on that pink-sanded beach, surrounded by the corpses of galra soldiers and the druid, the snipers on the cliffs dead by Lance's hand. The sea is gently greeting him, each wave wandering just a little further up the shore, wetting first his toes, his feet, the right side of Lance's limp body. It's warm and soft, almost weightless like the foam that got everywhere when he had to clean dishes in his and Shiro's home. The further it tides in the more Keith knows he has to move Lance's body, but he can't. He sits on his knees at Lance's side, spies clouds seeping out the horizon, edging closer like an overly cautious dog. They're raining by the time they reach Keith and Lance, wash out all the blood on Lance's armour. Make everything smell like sugar, too sweet, sickening.

It makes him cold. He cannot move from his position, even though he should. Collect their weapons from behind the barrier of bodies Keith had created in his rage. His helmet, dropped not far from where he currently sits. It's stained in blood- everything is. Everything. Keith's injured, a head wound and that blast to his chest, other things, careless things. The rain can't wash all the blood of the galra away, staining the pink sand darker, red, purple, ugly. And Lance...

Lance. His armour is riddled with blasts. How many times did he let himself get shot? Did he even notice? At one point he turned his back to Keith and he could see every shot he'd taken to shelter Keith. There were so many.
Keith can't stop staring at him. When Lance had passed out Keith had buried his head in Lance's chest and screamed for all he was worth, and at some point the comms had flickered back on, the others trying to ask him what the hell had happened. He doesn't even remember what he said. Lance's name on repeat? Did he only cry? His cheeks are still wet, but it must just be the rain. Emotion has left Keith vacant. He just sits, Lance's right hand in both of Keith's. He looks like he's already dead, skin ashen from blood loss, head dropped to the side. His hair is so fucking messy.

Will he forget everything again, like the first time? The druid only shocked him once. And it wasn't as long. But Lance was already so hurt. What if he forgets everything? All those nights, week after week of nights spent together, sparring and kissing and talking about scars old and new... Is that all gone? Will Lance forget his promises to Keith? Will he revert to that ghost of himself that haunted the halls of the castle when he was first rescued? When he first awoke the last time he was shocked?

What is Keith going to do? He can't forget what's happened. He doesn't even think he can pretend anymore. If Lance doesn't remember, if that druid has truly stolen away all those special moments together, he'll... He'll...

He doesn't know.
He doesn't know.

"-eith?! Keith?!

He can't turn away from Lance.
There is so much blood.

"Keith, what- what happened-"

"Lance, oh my god- what-"

"Keith, buddy, just talk to us-"

"Lance, no, no, Lance, what did they do to him-"

"We heard you on the comms, Keith, you said they hurt him? What did they do? Is he...alive?"

"Shock," Keith whispers, lips so stiff he can't get another word out.
He thinks Shiro is crouched by his side. "What did you- shock?"

"Sh-shocked him," Keith says, and it keeps raining.

"...Shocked," repeats Hunk in a low voice.

"Again," Pidge says. "Th-they did it again-"

"I didn't...fix his legs in time," Hunk says, and someone starts sobbing.

"Hunk, Hunk," says Allura, "don't, Hunk, how could we know-"

"If you'd like to return to the ship," comes Coran's voice though Shiro's comm, "I'll have healing pods prepped and ready for the both of them. Does Keith need one?"

"I think he's in shock," says Shiro. "Keith?"
"Couldn't...do anything," says Keith. Lance's hand is so cold in his. How would Keith know if he was dead? He has so many injuries he could've bled out by now. "I c-couldn't protect him."

"No...don't say that..."

"He needs one," decides Allura. "Hunk, can you tow Red back? Shiro, if you take Keith then I can take Lance-"

"No," Keith whispers. "I'm not leaving him."

"Keith," murmurs Shiro. "We need to get him to cryo."

"I-I can't."

"...I'll take them both, Allura," says Shiro. "Can someone carry Lance?"

Shiro helps him to his feet. Hunk comes forward and carries Lance, touch so tender. They leave pink-red-purple sand behind. It never stops raining.

--

Keith is in the healing pod only a day. When he emerges from its confines he has a shiny new scar on his chest and he changes quietly in the corner of the room as the others sit around Lance's pod, but Lance never leaves it and Keith sits at Hunk's side and rests his head upon Hunk's shoulder and they sit in silence all day. No one asks him about what happened; he wouldn't know what to say.

They just sit, and wait.

--

"Can you just...explain, again...what did they..."

"It wasn't they - it was only one of them. She came out the sea with all the soldiers-"

"There were some on the cliffs, I thought?"

"Most of the soldiers-"

"And they surrounded you."

"Right. But Lance was already taking heavy fire - he was shielding me from the snipers. And he doesn't fight with a shield up, so he was taking fire from the soldiers around us, too."

"Whereas you...?"

"Lance blocked most of the sniper fire away from me. They hit me in the chest the first time but it wasn't that deep. It was- they never shot to kill us. Only to wound. One of them got the back of Lance's leg, he, he couldn't run away quickly. They wanted the druid to talk to him."

"Why keep you alive then?"

"I already said! I was- I was- they used me to force him to go with them! The druid tortured me so that Lance would do anything to make them stop."

"And normally I'd understand that..." Allura looks down at the holographic pad she's been reviewing through this conversation, frowning. "But Lance can't feel anything. Wouldn't he- if he
knew he'd be safe with us, wouldn't he feel no obligation to save you from any pain? Wouldn't he just make you endure it whilst he fought for escape?"

The silence stretches out long before he can answer, swallowing up the whole room. No one else is speaking, nor even moving. Hunk is scribbling away in his notebook, but Pidge is motionless, sat in front of Lance's pod at Coran's side. Shiro stands perpendicular to Keith and Allura both, as though mediating their discussion. He doesn't say anything, though. Probably spoke all his thoughts the first five times they went through this. Three times the third day Lance didn't wake up. Twice yesterday. Once, now, today. The fifth day.

"But he couldn't escape," Keith says, finally remembering what it is he said to the same question yesterday. "He was too hurt. Even if he can't feel pain, he still- his body still struggles. He got blasted in his legs, right above the prosthetic, he couldn't run. And he had guards on him. And- and- obviously when we did try and escape, they just- they-"

"Right," Allura says. "Electrocution. But that wasn't their first choice - they didn't immediately take away his memory of us. Instead, they offered him a choice. To go with them quietly. They mentioned quintessence?"

"She implied he would be- insanely strong if his quintessence was balanced, yeah."

She just shakes her head, looks down at her notes. "But he already is so strong... What could possibly change? He... I just can't imagine it..."

"Going over it again and again won't help, princess," says Coran gently. "The pod says he's fully healed, let's all just step back and..."

As he speaks, the seal on the pod unlocks, cold air hissing out as the doors slowly open. Pidge is on her feet in a second, arms out as if to catch Lance, but there is a moment of stillness as they all stare, as though Lance is a lab specimen showing movement for the first time.

When he steps from the pod, Keith is hit with a vision of the morning after their very first spar, when he'd stumbled from the pod and into Shiro's arms, and Lance had left the pod a king descending a regal staircase in his palace. After that awful day on the junkyard planet, those terrible days when Keith and the others sat and waited for Lance to awaken, he'd been terrified. It had been so strange, that Lance had been little more than a ghost inhabiting a suit of armour, and when he'd awoken he'd been scratching at his prosthetic and assumed he was hallucinating being back with his friends.

He doesn't do that this time. He steps out, crosses his arms, looks over them all - and his eyes catch on Keith, and he breathes out and almost, almost smiles, and says, "You're okay?"

"Lance-" Keith says, but he doesn't rush up to him the way he wants to. Not with everyone watching. But he says, "Yeah, I'm fine. What do you- wh-what-"

"Do I remember?" he asks, corner of his mouth crooking into a smile, and Keith's eyes go wide, breath catching in his throat. "I remember, Keith. I remember all of it."

"Oh, thank heavens," exclaims Allura, and holopad dropped to the ground as she hurries to Lance, flings her arms round his neck. Lance places his hand on the small of her back but otherwise does not retaliate, only nods as she gushes, "We were so worried, absolutely terrified your memory would be gone again- oh, Lance, what miracle is this? To think you retained your memory, I..." She withdraws her arms, takes a small step back. "How?"
"Does it matter?" asks Shiro with a voice of gravel. "He remembers. That's what's important."

"Yeah," Hunk says, and he creeps a step forward in Lance's direction. Lance looks over at Hunk, smile dropping, brows furrowing, before he nods and Hunk barrels into him and scoops him into a bear hug. Again, Lance doesn't react, but he pats Hunk's shoulder when he drops him back down. "Dude, I can't believe you're okay... Do you even know how much you got shot? You got shot a lot, dude. There was a massive bloodstain in the- in the sand-"

"Shh," murmurs Allura, taking Hunk's hand and drawing him into her side, and Hunk's attempt at a smile crumbles as he drops his head to her shoulder.

"It was awful," says Pidge, and she reaches forward and takes Lance's hand in both her own, squeezing tight, avoiding his eyes. "We thought you'd forget everything. H-how do you remember? I don't want you to forget, but..."

"Let's talk about it over dinner," says Coran, Allura's holopad in hand as he goes to Lance's side, pressing his hand into Lance's shoulder. "Why don't you have a shower and a change, we'll convene at the dining table and have a good long chat about this, eh?"

Lance nods, eyes catching on Keith again for a moment, before surveying the others. Shiro hasn't left Keith's side this whole time, they spoke briefly when he was released from the pod but other than that Shiro hasn't pressed him...but now he watches Keith watching Lance, Keith feels it hot on the side of his face so he tears his gaze away, crosses his arms, prays his cheeks aren't flushing but feels heat rising regardless.

Keith has never been able to hide things from Shiro for long, but...but he can't know anything about- this. Whatever it is between him and Lance. Their promises. Their missions together. Lance choosing to protect Keith even at his own expense. Lance admitting he feels things for Keith, Lance being scared in front of him, he'd kept twisting his fingers together, clenching them into fists like he was angry, but he'd been shaking. All of him, a volcano seconds from eruption. It had made Keith scared for him.

"Allura," says Hunk at long length, turning to her with a gentle smile. "Come cook with me?"

Allura first glances to Coran, who smiles, then over to Lance: "Is that alright with everyone? I'm not needed for anything?"

"Well-" says Pidge, but Coran darts a look at her and she quiets down.

"No, princess," says Coran smoothly. "Everything will be discussed at dinner. I'm going to clean up in here; would you mind helping me, Shiro?"

Everyone holds their breath as they look to Shiro, whose eyes are still on Keith, and Coran almost looks like he'll take it back when Shiro says, "Of course I'll help, Coran. I don't think I've done this before, actually; will you show me how?"

"Well, of course! Pidge, Keith?"

"I need to shower," Pidge admits, and Keith nods with a sheepish smile, glances at Lance again, who meets his look with a single cocked brow.

Keith does not go and shower. He leaves Shiro and Coran behind, spies Hunk and Allura strolling to the kitchen, and he, Lance, and Pidge all walk together back to their rooms.

"I'm glad you're okay, Lance," says Pidge quietly, staring ahead of herself, arms swinging
awkwardly by her side. "E-even if you don't care."

"I'm glad I'm okay too," says Lance, and Pidge lets out a tiny quiet sigh. "I didn't want to forget anything."

The remark floats over Pidge's head, but Keith casts a sharp look in Lance's direction only to find Lance already staring at him.

_He remembers_, Keith thinks, despite already knowing. He remembers, Lance remembers. For those four, five days, Keith was so scared that Lance would just- _forget_. Time passed but he couldn't pay attention. The others spoke but he had so little to say in response. He thought he was going to lose _everything_, just like before, but he hasn't.

He hasn't lost anything.

"Those were your last words," Pidge says, eyes keen on Lance, "before you passed out. That you didn't want to forget."

New information to Lance; his brows furrow, and Keith finds himself stepping in: "Remember, the last time this happened it seemed like the old Lance had come back? It was kind of like that."

But it wasn't, and he's not sure why he's lying to Pidge about it, but what if she wants to dig deeper into why Lance didn't want to forget? What if she figures out exactly _what_ he's so scared of forgetting?

"Oh," Pidge mutters. "Duh." She lets out another sigh, pats Keith's shoulder, and steps away from them towards her room. "See you at dinner, then."

"See you, Pidge," Keith says, and Lance nods, and they walk away together, falling easily into step. Lance doesn't hurry forward; Keith's gotten used to quickening his step around him.

When Keith goes to peel off to his room, Lance's hand shoots out and grabs his wrist, and they go together to his room, doors sliding open to reveal a room as blank and empty as Keith's own. There are a few weapons lying around, a couple holopads on the desk, but nothing much else.

"I didn't forget," Lance says, taking Keith's other wrist in hand, grinning at him for the first time since he left the cryo pod, and the guards Keith had so carefully been resurrecting round his heart fall in an instant. _He remembers_. "I didn't forget anything this time. You and I, Keith... I didn't forget any of it."

"Thank god," Keith whispers, stepping closer. "Lance- I was so scared you wouldn't remember, and I- I didn't know what to do-"

"But I remember," Lance says, drops a wrist to take Keith's face in hand, thumbing along a pale scar on Keith's jaw. "I didn't want to forget."

He is so close. His grip loosens on Keith's wrist, enough that Keith can slip his hand into Lance's, press his free one onto Lance's solid waist. Lance's head is bent forward to look at him, Keith looking up, tracing those parallel scars on the cheek, the slice down his lip, those blue eyes, soft and strange and scared. Lance can't feel but his touch on Keith's skin is so gentle, like he knows how easy it is for him to hurt Keith and he doesn't want to get anywhere near that. He is still in the cryo suit, still smells faintly of ozone and medicine, but his skin is warm against Keith's hands, and he is alive and breathing and _so physical_, so near.

And he was gone for so long. Five months. And even now that he's back he keeps getting hurt in
the worst of ways and even now, when he proclaims to feel some emotion, he doesn't care about his own safety, his own health.

"I didn't want you to forget," Keith finally breathes, and Lance tilts Keith's face up just a little further to finally kiss him. His lips are soft from being in the healing pod, and Keith can feel the way Lance relaxes under his hands, shoulders softening as he presses kiss after kiss against Keith's lips, his cheeks, his jaw, his neck. "Even if you forgot, I knew I could never," Keith says, a little breathlessly as Lance pauses at a sensitive area between his neck and shoulder. "And I was s-so scared you'd see right th-through me. And laugh at me."

"I don't think I would," says Lance, pulling away, moving his hand down from Keith's cheek to push his thumb against the wet spot on Keith's neck. "Even if I did forget."

Keith only shuts his eyes, pushes up onto his toes so his and Lance's foreheads meet. An inch hovers between their lips, breath mixing, his heart blossoms in his chest, every tangible reminder of Lance giving his soul new life. Lance is here. Lance remembers. Lance cares about him.

For a long time, Lance keeps kissing him.

Then goes for a shower. Keith considers leaving, but the room smells too much like Lance for him to go through with it, he just flops down on Lance's bed and, after a moment, wriggles into Lance's old jacket and just closes his eyes, revels in the realness of it all. Lance when they first rescued him was like glacier-thick ice - cold, stubborn, unbreakable. But it is as though his room represents the very core of him, still warm and soft, even if it isn't quite what Keith expected. He wears Lance's jacket like a blanket, coats himself in the memory of him, then curls up on his side and gets ten minutes of the best sleep he's had in months.

"You should keep that," is what he wakes up to, eyes opening blearily to see Lance in some jeans, towelling his hair dry. He's so hot, but he winks at Keith then turns back to the bathroom to hang his towel back up, and his back is horrible. Maybe some scars are hot but Keith can't look at the burns on his back and see anything other than his own mistake. What Lance did to save him. And then the whipping scars, the galra words burnt into him... It's fucking awful.

Keith finds himself on his feet without realising, tracing the letters, he recognises the shape of them but he can't make them out. The Blade of Marmora have started sending him messages, if he wants to take up training with them again, perhaps go on missions, they'd help him learn what being a galra means...and Keith has been debating about taking them up on their invitations. Just to know. To write down the words on Lance's back and arm and see them translated into something he can understand.

Lance cannot feel Keith but he must've heard him move, so he stays still until Keith steps back, and he pulls a shirt on, looks round and shakes his head at the look in Keith's eyes. "Don't," he says, heavy. "Just don't."

"I'm sor-"

"Please," Lance says, so Keith bites his lip and nods. "You told Shiro you'd shower. Will you?"

"In here?"

"Spare towel."

So Keith showers too, washes his hair and body with all of Lance's fancy products from before he was kidnapped. Wonders briefly if Hunk or Pidge will pick up the scent and know what he's done,
but at the same time he can't care. It feels like...intimacy. Which should be impossible with this Lance, but it isn't, and Keith is the one to get to experience it...

He towels off in the bathroom, secures the towel round his waist and leaves to see Lance sprawled on his bed, cupping his head in hand to smirk at Keith.

"Damn," is all he says, eyes tracing Keith's own scars, harder to catch, harder to blame himself for, then the ridge of Keith's abs, the line of his shoulders. "Borrow a shirt, if you want."

Keith does. Yanks his trousers and underwear on, twists his hair into a towel and rummages through Lance's wardrobe, plucks out a pale blue t-shirt he can probably pass off as his own, and pulls it on, ducking his head to hide a smile when he hears Lance's melodramatic sigh.

"We should probably go get dinner," Keith says as he turns around, "before the others come looking."

"Yeah," Lance mutters. "Keep the jacket, though," he says, getting to his feet and plucking the jacket off his bed, draping it over Keith's shoulders. "Doesn't fit me anymore, anyway."

"I'm leaving it in my room," Keith warns as they head toward the door, pausing for another kiss, this one deeper and harder and far more ardent, and Keith breathes heavily for a moment before grinning and opening up the door.

No one's in the corridors, no one spots the two of them heading to Keith's room and hanging up Lance's jacket in there, no one sees how closely they walk together, sides pressed together, perfectly in time. They break apart as they reach the dining room, and Keith has to hold back a laugh as he sees Coran wiping down the table, feeling a little like a school kid hiding a big, juicy secret.

Which he is, technically. The big juicy secret of Lance having all three of his feelings, one of them at least being Something For Keith.

Keith doesn't care about the specifics, what matters is that it's there and it makes Lance do dumb shit like try and protect him.

Like want to kiss him.

For hours.

"Hello, boys!" greets Coran cheerfully. "Just in time, I was going to send Shiro to go looking for you! Why don't you go see the others in the kitchen and I'll just finish up here and get Pidge!"

"Sure thing," says Keith, and so they go to the kitchen, pressing close together again, halting in the tiny corridor between those two rooms to exchange a tiny kiss.

Shiro looks at them when they enter the kitchen. He's stirring something in a bowl, while Hunk is readying plates and Allura is digging out cutlery, and a couple months into Lance's imprisonment Pidge figured out how to use the music system, so something soft and a little jazzy is drifting from the speakers. Lance nods at Hunk, leans against a counter, but Keith is stuck in the doorway, pinned down by the weight of Shiro's gaze.

He knows something. Keith has known that for a while now, and that avoiding Shiro wouldn't help that, but...Keith can only lie so much. And he's reaching that limit with Shiro. If Shiro tries to directly confront him about whatever he thinks is going on between Keith and Lance, Keith can't be sure what would come out his mouth. Nothing good.
"Keith," says Shiro. "Good shower?"

"Uh," Keith says, "yeah?"

Shiro only nods, looks over his still-damp hair, and continues stirring.

"That's enough, space dad," says Hunk, peering over Shiro's shoulder. "I'm gonna bring these bad boys out the oven and you need to be ready to pour the sauce on instantly, alright!"

"Alright," says Shiro, smiling fondly and taking the bowl in one hand, standing to the side as Hunk yanks on some gloves and pulls a tray out the oven, Allura reaching over him and plucking the food from the tray and onto the plates, Shiro dousing each item in sauce as Hunk had instructed before placing the bowl at the side.

Five months is, after all, a lot of time. In their search for information, they'd ended up on a lot of...interesting planets with interesting things to offer up. To Pidge, that meant info about her brother. To Allura, perhaps new resources to help them in the sky. To Hunk, asides from various gadgets and tools for engineering, that had meant ingredients, recipes, things to make the strange castleship feel a little more like home.

He's made them tacos. Space tacos, he calls them. The sauce is a vibrant purple and the rice he garnishes them with is a dizzying yellow, but they've had them before, and they do taste delicious. They take a couple plates each and set the table, Pidge rushing in after Coran within minutes, and then they sit at the dining table as though nothing had ever gone wrong.

"I made them for you, Lance," Hunk says immediately, smiling hard to conceal the fear in his eyes. "You know, just like your mamá made them? Uh, kind of."

Everyone watches as Lance looks down at the plate, nodding slowly. "Right," he says, doesn't continue, and Keith manages a minute shrug at Hunk when their gazes meet. Lance's memory of his family was already shaky before this, and despite his initial focus on them after he got shocked the first time, he hasn't much cared to speak about them since. "Thanks," Lance adds, but he doesn't sound particularly grateful.

Hunk turns to Allura and Coran. "So tacos are like, an American staple, like, everyone loves them. But they originate from South America-"

"Which is a continent," says Allura, and Hunk nods with a bright grin.

"Right! And what important country is there?"

"Which is a continent," says Allura, and Hunk nods with a bright grin.

"Right! And what important country is there?"

Coran narrows his eyes at Hunk and says, "Cuba?"

"Exactly!" enthuses Hunk. "Cuba, obviously, where Lance comes from. So food like this was pretty common, but his mom made killer tacos. We'd have them every Monday when Pidge and I stayed over. Unreal. Food made with a mother's love is truly like nothing else."

Allura's smile is a little heartbroken round the eyes. "That must be true," she says, "if you say it."

"They taste great, Hunk," adds Pidge. "Just like Sophia made them...sort of."


"What do you think, Lance?" asks Coran, and again they all look at Lance, who's been pushing the rice on his plate around without saying much. "Just like home?"
Some rice falls off his place from force, and Lance looks up, fixes his gaze on Keith. Contrary to the soothing warmth and certainty that had glowed in his eyes back in Lance's room, Keith spies only a distant storm raging ever closer.

"I," Lance says, and frowns. "I don't know."

_Oh no_, Keith thinks, wishes he could take Lance's hand right now and squeeze the tension out of it, out of his shoulders, rigid next to Keith's. Pidge is staring hard at Lance, fidgeting her spork between her thumb and forefinger, Hunk is glancing from the plate of food before Lance to the expression on his face, a new day dawning cold, seeping the golden out his skin.

"Lance," Shiro says. "What do you remember of home?"

"No," Hunk says, "he said he remembers- he remembers everything-" 

"No," Keith corrects. "He said he didn't forget anything between the first time he lost his memory and now."

"It would make sense," Pidge says quietly. "He couldn't go through something like that again and come out unaffected."

"Lance," Shiro repeats a little more sternly. "What do you _remember_?"

Silence turns the room still, hands clenched round cutlery, heads all turned to Lance, waiting, a Renaissance painting in action. Lance still has his eyes on Keith, and Keith wonders if he's weighing up what's better: to remember his time with Keith and forget his family, or the other way round?

Pidge twists her spork so hard it goes flying out her hand, crashing onto the ground, a metallic ringing filling the air.

"I don't," Lance answers, looking finally to Shiro. "I don't remember anything."

Shiro's eyes close, knuckles white round his cutlery. Allura stares with wide eyes, physically taken aback, looking from Lance to the others as if to confirm this is as terrible as she thinks it is. Coran shakes his head, Pidge hides her eyes, Hunk looks down at this feast he made specifically for Lance and somehow does not cry.

"Wh-what do you mean," Hunk says instead, voice low but hope still shining through. "Do- do you remember me? At the garrison?"

Lance's gaze drops back to his food, where he shoves the rice around for a bit before dropping the spork, leaning back, crossing his arms.

Shaking his head.

"I remember-" he says, halts. His fingers start tapping against his arm, hard and fast. "I remember being in space. Piloting the Blue Lion. And I know I was taken, I remember...some of that. And then I woke up again and you told me I’d been electrocuted. And I remember everything from that point fine."

"This can't be happening," Pidge whispers, and Keith curls his fingers into fists, remembers that brief image of Lance's family he saw only once during their mindmeld. It was the most important thing to him, those people, as important as Pidge's brother to her, as Keith's solace in the desert was to him.
"I'm sorry," Lance says flatly. "I didn't realise."

"You don't remember the garrison?" says Hunk, almost desperately, now. He leans over the table, looks Lance deep in his eyes, but Lance won't look at any of them. A barrier has been erected, invisible but obvious to the touch, hard and cold and it won't let any of them reach Lance. "Where we were roomies? You and me and Pidge, our team? Iverson? Keith?"

"None of it," Lance says. "I don't remember any of it."

"Your family," Hunk tries further. "Varadero beach, come on, buddy! The shack that sold onion rings not far from your house, the, the garlic knots your mom made..."

Lance just shakes his head.

Hunk finally stops, stares back down at the food he made, eyes going shiny as he processes what has happened.

What does this mean? That Lance remembers all this time in space - with Keith - but not his childhood, not the most important people in the world to him? How did the druid do that? Was it intentional or just a fluke? How could Lance possibly forget so much? How did none of them realise?

What does this mean for Lance? His emotions have been coming back, but how do you care for something that is completely gone from your memory? Is it going to affect him, is it going to creep up on him and provoke a meltdown in the future? What if it doesn't? What if it doesn't mean a damn thing to him?

"Allura," says Pidge quietly, "how far did you say we were from the Sol system?"

"Uh," Allura says, voice unsteady before clears her throat. "Well, five quadrants, Pidge. Do you have something...in mind?"

"We could," Pidge says, looks furtively over at Lance. "We could go to...Earth, couldn't we?"

"Pidge-" says Shiro.

"Back to Earth?" Keith can't help saying. "The garrison are probably still looking for us-"

"And what about the galra?" asks Coran. "If it's as Keith says - they've been sparking distress calls specifically to draw out Lance and observe him, doesn't that mean they're still near?"

"We can wormhole!" Pidge says. "That'd give us some time - a few days - all we need. Just to visit his family. If- maybe if he sees them again, he'll remember. I mean...how couldn't he..."

"Do you think so?" asks Allura, and Hunk nods slowly beside her.

"Being surrounded by a- by the origin of a memory can sometimes trigger the remembering of it," he says, and Pidge nods. "If he goes back home, sees his family, the place he grew up... He has a whole wall of photos, too, maybe that'll..."

"Well," says Allura, "Shiro?"

"It could work," Shiro says with a sigh. "I don't think there's any harm, in fact...if there's any chance it'll help, I think we really should."

"Keith?"
He shrugs. "Yeah," he says, in the absence of anything logical or scientific to say like the others. "We'll have to be careful so we're not recognised, but...it might be a good idea. We could- they could contact their own families," he adds, nodding to Hunk and Pidge. "If you want."

"We should," Pidge murmurs. "My mom thinks her whole family is dead."

"Lance?" says Allura. "Is this... How do you feel about this?"

"Whatever," Lance says, and Shiro's whole body slumps with the heaviness of his sigh. "I'll go if you want to."

"...Then it's settled," she says, a little uncertainly. "Why don't we... sleep on this, perhaps outrun the galra in case they're still around, and wormhole tomorrow?"

"Excellent plan, princess," says Coran. "Let's finish up here and I'll head to the control room while you all rest."

"Are you sure?" says Shiro. "I don't mind helping, if there's..."

"You can do dishes," Coran says. "Hunk, why don't you just relax? Shiro and I shall handle anything; the rest of you go and do what young things do these days."

Hunk manages a wan smile, and Allura squeezes Coran's hand in thanks, but there is little other reaction, and Pidge slouches off once dinner is over, and after double-checking there's no need for either of them, Hunk and Allura take the lift up, presumably to one of the observation decks, and, quite naturally, Lance and Keith fall into step with each other.

"You want to train?" Keith asks, but Lance shakes his head, and when Keith ducks inside him room to pull on Lance's jacket, Lance ends up following and they sprawl across Keith's bed, making out for a few spells before laying back and saying nothing.

It isn't exactly peaceful, the silence. Keith can feel Lance's agitation coming off him in waves, fingers tapping, feet wagging, the way he'll roll onto his side and take Keith's face in hand and kiss him until something inside him stills a little. There is molten lava stewing inside of him, it wants to erupt but Lance has too much of a handle on himself to let it go, it forces him to shake, to move, to clench his fists, stretch his fingers, drum his blunt nails on the top of Keith's bedspread. It infects Keith, too, toes twitching, hands grappling with each other and Lance's.

Keith is apprehensive of returning to Earth, mostly because he doesn't think it could possibly end well. Whatever happens between Lance and his family, whether he remembers or not, is going to be messy, and it's dangerous to go back, with the galra on their tail and with the garrison no doubt still looking for them, Keith just doesn't think it's a good idea.

But Lance has lost a whole portion of his memory, an enormous slab of it just gone, melted like snow in the sun by the druid's power. Maybe the others are right; perhaps being back home will trigger something in Lance. In fact, Keith hopes it does - Lance, despite what he says, is clearly uncomfortable with not remembering.

"I don't want to go back," says Lance after what must be hours of laying together. Lance is on his back, arms fixed behind his head, staring unseeing at the ceiling. Keith has turned onto his stomach, arms wrapped around his pillow as he watches Lance. It's not even very cold, but he's put on Lance's jacket regardless, pulling the hood up, the fabric hanging down enough to obscure everything but Lance from his vision.

"You don't?" Keith asks.
"They're strangers," Lance says, and Keith winces, eyes closing for a brief second. Lance is still staring upwards when he opens them again. "I don't know them. And they won't know me."

"They'll recognise you. And you might remember them."

"But what if I don't? That won't fix anything, it'll only make everything worse."

"You can't think like that. We're going, and... hopefully it'll be for best. Even if it doesn't work out for you, Pidge and Hunk want to call their families, and...and it'll reassure your family that you're—well, alive."

Lance doesn't reply for a long time, gazing endlessly into the ceiling as if he's staring through it. What is he looking at it? Is he trying to imagine his own family? Does he see planet Earth projected up in the sky? The white beaches of Varadero he used to talk about so much? Or does he not remember those, either?

"What if that's worse."

His voice is like cracked-up gravel, eroded down to its bare minerals. Rough and flat and difficult to tread.

"What's worse?"

Keith sounds fucking stupid in comparison.

"Being alive," Lance says, and Keith frowns at him, the way his scar tightens as he twists his lips, how it relaxes as he falls back into a scowl. "Like this, instead of dead. What if they'd rather him—me?"

Him. Then again, Lance has always spoken about his pre-kidnapped self as though he's a different person, and Keith can't blame him. They all do that, now.

"I don't know," Keith answers honestly. "I never met your family, but the way you used to talk about them... Pidge and Hunk, too... They sound like they really love you, and...I don't think it'll matter what you're like, so long as you're alive. And we can explain to them, we know how to—heal you, sort of."

"Sort of," Lance repeats, gravel of his voice ground down even further. "But you don't actually know. What it'll do to me, if it'll help or not. It might not do anything. Allura says I have traces of galra quintessence in me. We don't even know what that means."

"There's still hope."

"And I have a fucking cut in my brain - you can't fix that, Keith."

"You don't know that!"

"We don't know anything about this! It's useless to hope."

"Is that what the druids told you?"

"Oh, fuck off—"

Lance is interrupted by three chaps to Keith's door, and Keith barely has the presence of mind to start yanking Lance's jacket off when the doors slide open. It catches round his elbows, and Hunk
pauses in the doorway, raising a brow first at Keith, then at Lance laying beside him.

"Um," says Hunk. "Hey?"

"Uh," Keith replies, "hi."

"I was just...looking for Lance?"

Keith Hurries out the jacket and shoves it behind him. "Right. Well, he's...here."

"So he is," Hunk takes another step in, and Keith can see Allura waiting behind him, something clutched in her hands. "I was just- uh-" Hunk frowns. "Why do you have his jacket, dude?"

Keith whirls round to look at Lance for help, but he's still on his back, head tilted to the side as he watches. "Uh," Keith says, turning back, "well, uh, it doesn't fit Lance anymore, and, uh, it's...warmer than my own jacket, so..."

"We...got more jackets when we went shopping," Hunk points out, and behind him, Lance lets out a bored sigh.

"Never mind that," Allura says, coming forward sharing a significant look with Hunk. "Lance is here?"

"I'm here," says Lance, and he sighs again as he sits up, twists his legs to the side and shuffles up the bed to sit by Keith. "What's up."

Hunk looks again to Allura, who gives him a soft smile and places the notepad she's holding into his hand, then pushes his shoulder to force him further into the room.

"I drew something for you," Hunk says, coming to sit on Lance's other side and flipping open his notebook to a page filled up with eleven figures drawn on it. People. Two elderly and two children, two middle-aged, five spanning maybe late teens to early thirties. They all have the same skin, shades of brown and bronze, some have freckles on their cheeks, others splashed on their shoulders, one has a strange birthmark on his neck, their hair is almost all the same, curly, wild.

Like Lance's, almost, except Keith knows that whatever hair products he uses keeps his hair flat, that it only tends to get curly when they're in the heat too long. His skin, the same too, freckles on his cheeks.

"It's your family," Hunk says carefully, swallowing before pointing at each person and saying, "Look, I put their names above them, and, uh, their ages when we left Earth, their main occupation, I guess, their...relation to you. I thought...we can't show up and you know nothing. I thought if you at least...knew who was who..."


They all sound so unfamiliar on his tongue.

"Uh, and I made a small note..." Hunk says, pointing to the top right corner. "About one of your brothers who...passed away. We spoke about him after you got shocked the first time- do you...remember?"

Lance drags his eyes up to Hunk, going vague and distant for a long moment only to shake his head.
"O-oh, well... You had a brother, he was a couple years older than you... His name was Federico, and he, uh...died in a car accident during one of your summers back from the garrison. So... Just so you know."

"Federico," Lance says slowly, and Keith can't help mouthing the word alongside him, all the names laid out before him, sisters called Solana and Isa and Lillynn, brothers named Alberto and Diego, niece and nephew named Daniela and Alonso.

"I just thought...it would be best. To...lessen the impact," Hunk says, eyes careful on Lance, hands hovering. "Of- your mom will go into shock just seeing you, dude...so I thought...and I'm pretty sure I'm the best drawer, a-and I've met them before, so..."

"I see," Lance says shortly. "Thanks."

He doesn't move, nor does he say anymore, so Allura presses a hand to Hunk's shoulder and raises a brow at him, and they both sort of look at Keith, slight frowns marring them both as he remains silent.

"We'll just go, then," Allura says, tugging Hunk onto his feet. "It's very late... I'd recommend you two going to sleep soon, since I imagine we'll be up bright and early to squeeze some training in before wormholing. Just to- we haven't trained in a while. And I..." She looks again at Lance, furrowing her brow. "Well, I just don't want anyone to get...frustrated."

"Sounds good," Keith says. "We'll just, um..." He looks at Lance, who has a finger tracing the outline of a sister's hair, before reaching back and feeling his own semi-shaven head, grown out barely since he returned from the galra. "We'll see."

"Of course," says Allura, moving back towards the door. "Tomorrow, then."

"Thanks, Hunk," says Keith, and Hunk nods also, holds out a fist for Keith to bump with his own, throwing one last curious look at Lance, before reaching back and feeling his own semi-shaven head, grown out barely since he returned from the galra. "Lance...? Are you-"

Tossing the notebook aside, Lance grabs Keith's arm and yanks him forward, fastening his lips to Keith's and kissing harder than he has all day; before it was luxurious, maybe a little stressful... Before he was kissing Keith as though to distract himself, but now it's as though he wishes to consume and ignore all else, throwing himself into Keith in the hopes that perhaps he'll leave the rest of the world behind.

Keith pulls away, says, "Lance, you should-" but Lance immediately attaches his lips to Keith's neck and attacks, sinks his teeth in and presses his tongue against the marks he leaves behind, and it's enough for Keith to tilt his head back and hiss, "Fuck", feeling Lance grin against his skin.

Then Lance keeps doing it. Pushes Keith back against the bed and sinks down on top of him, a knee between Keith's legs, a hand digging underneath Keith's t-shirt to spread against his side, the other hand in Keith's hair, tugging his head further back in Lance's relentless pursuit to distract himself. Keith knows that's what it is, he saw storm whirling in Lance's eyes as he traced the figures on the page, saw him turn that on Keith and decide to get rid of it. Keith knows this, and he knows Lance needs to talk about it, or- think about it, sit and do as Hunk asked, learn the names, the faces, what they mean to Lance, or...used to.

But, god...sometimes Keith, for all his half-galraness, is only human.

A leg hitches up Lance's hip without meaning to, hands tangle round his neck, in his hair, his body
burns wherever it touches Lance's, his torso, hands, the insides of his thighs. Keith has wanted for so long - not just since this thing started, but before that, when Lance was still literal sunshine, when they were still asshole pilots in the garrison - that even though he knows he should stop this, he just can't.

Which is emblematic of their whole relationship, really. That very first kiss, Keith had watched Lance watching him, saw Lance come in for a second one and knew it would do him no good, but he couldn't stop himself.

Lance's lips travel lower, nip along his collar bone, fingers pressing bruises into his side, tugs a little too hard on Keith's hair and he gasps, the sound breaking the relative quiet of the room, echoing against the bed and the walls and the notepad tossed on the ground.

Keith digs his hands into the bed and pulls himself back, shaking his head at Lance. "Lance, I'm serious," he says, and Lance withdraws his hands and flops onto his back, sighing. "You need to- you can't hide from this. You have to think about your family. They think you're dead, or missing. You didn't ask for this but...you can't just walk in there without remembering any of them and...not expect a freak out. You need to learn their names. That's all."

"I don't want to," Lance says, glaring at the notebook. "It's fucking stupid. It doesn't matter."

"It does. They'll already be devastated...this is just making it a little less bad."

"So why does it matter? Knowing their names isn't going to fix me. It'll be obvious I don't remember anything."

And it just infuriates him, he scowls, crossing his legs and staring at Lance until he finally looks back up at him. Keith knows that Lance is lacking emotion, but the idea that he has this huge family to care for him and he just- wants to ignore them is like a live wire being jabbed into his raw, bleeding heart. "If you don't go to your room and learn all of that," he says, waving towards the notebook, "then I'm ending this. I don't give a fuck if you can't train, if you won't be half-decent to your own fucking family when they've been devastated over you for- years, probably, at this point, when you have all these people who still love you and are probably still fucking looking for you no matter what the garrison says, if you're going to just ignore it and disregard them because it makes you feel something and you're fucking scared of having emotions or whatever, then I'm done, Lance. I'm fucking serious. I won't put up with this."

"You're fucking with me," says Lance, brows raised slightly. "Keith, come on, man."

"I'm fucking serious," Keith says, and stands, picks up the notebook and shoves it at Lance's chest. Lance stares up at him for what seems like an aeon, eyes wider than usual and glinting with something painful, then he tracks his eyes down Keith's face, his arm, to land on the notepad against his chest.

Then Lance takes it, and stands also.

"Fine," he says, voice low and devoid of...anything. His shoulders are raised like a half-cocked gun, and Keith's feels his heart soften slightly as Lance stalks towards the door, so he dashes forward and takes his shoulder.

"Don't be an asshole," is all Keith says before he twists Lance around and goes on his toes to steal another kiss. "That's all I'm asking."

"Fine," Lance repeats. "Fine, I'll do it." His voice is softer, too, his kiss less desperate than his
previous ones, hand warm and reassuring on Keith's waist before he withdraws, hand lingering, then leaves.

When Keith changes into his pyjamas, he keeps Lance's jacket on.

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The morning is unbearably tense. Keith awakens early from a nightmare of the galra chasing them down on Earth and forcing them to watch as they maul everyone they've ever cared about before them, and ends up in the training room an hour before everyone else convenes there. Hunk squeezes his shoulder and Shiro shoots him a sympathetic look, but no one else mentions it. The original plan is to only fight each other, to maybe let out some frustration but not get seriously harmed, but Lance doesn't pull a single punch and eventually Allura is forced to pull out a training simulation, the six of them fighting gladiators ostensibly together, but it's mostly Shiro and Keith protecting Hunk and Pidge while Allura and Lance actually take down enemies.

It's not a good start for the morning, and though Coran tries, the conversation during breakfast dries to dust, they separate to shower and change, and when Lance comes out geared up in his paladin armour, he, Allura, and Shiro have a twenty minute fight about why it's better for them to visit Earth in their casual clothes. Lance only backs off on this insistence that he gets to bring some weapons - handguns, the trident - and Allura lets out a sigh and Shiro shakes his head, hand over his eyes, but Coran fetches the holsters and that's the end of that.

They gather around midday castle-time in the hangar, where Pidge is setting up her pod with the cloaking device. They haven't yet wormholed; Coran has been steering them from one quadrant to the other, hiding in half-moons, and racing through asteroid fields, just in case there are any galra still following them. He stands before them now, ready to depart and take them to the Sol system once Allura commands it.

"Lance," says Shiro, standing in front of him with concern creasing your brow. "How do you feel about this? Are you ready?"

Lance is wearing dark jeans and a dark t-shirt and a black bomber jacket, something suspiciously notepad-looking stuck in one of the pockets. His handguns are holstered under the jacket, the trident secured against his back. Like this, most of his scars bar the ones on his face and neck are hidden, and Keith wonders if that was the intention or just a coincidence. Keith is glad regardless. It is probably better to take something like this step-by-step; reveal Lance, let the family adjust, explain his lack of memory, let them adjust, the torture, adjust, the hideous scarring. Adjust, somehow.

Keith himself is wearing jeans, pale blue and ripped, a light t-shirt, canvas trainers. As opposite as he could get from the outfit he went missing in. Pidge has wrapped herself up completely in teal trousers and a big dark cape with a hood, paranoid, she'd admitted, of being recognised as either Pidge Gunderson or Katie Holt. Hunk pointed out that they were going to Cuba, and that no matter the time of year it would be hot, so he's in cute yellow shorts and a floaty white t-shirt tucked into the waistband, and Allura had gone for something similar, a pretty white skirt that falls to her knees and a blue long-sleeved top, emblazoned with a few gems along the neckline that seem to glow, highlighting her regal presence. Despite the heat, Shiro has wrapped up in dark trousers and a big grey hoodie with deep pockets that he shoved his hands into, and Coran has chosen his space mall outfit, complete with the trench coat and backpack.

Keith thinks they look absolutely ridiculous, and probably a little scary. Lance does, at least, with his weapons and the sharp jut of his shoulders, the scowl that refuses to budge. Everyone else has
their bayards hidden somewhere in their clothes, and Coran's pocketed a small gun, as well, though if there is trouble Keith has no doubt he'd take the pod up to the castle to tackle the problem from there.

Maybe they're being too cautious; frankly, Keith doesn't think there's such a thing as too cautious in a ten thousand-year long space war.

"I'm fine," Lance says at long length, but he doesn't meet anyone's eyes and his shoulders are a long hard line tense to his chin. "Let's just go."

"Are we all ready for this? Hunk, Pidge?" asks Shiro still, and Pidge nods, hand in hand with Hunk, who's a little tinged green round the edges, but gives the thumbs up regardless. "And princess? Are you happy with this plan?"

"I see few other options," Allura admits, voice dipping into a grave tone. Shiro gives Lance one last look before going to her side and squeezing her shoulder, nodding. "I agree with Lance... Let's just go. Pidge, you...know where to land?"

"Yeah," Pidge says. "I've got the coordinates locked and ready."

"And we'll be landing in...the garden?" Allura checks.

"It's most likely to be empty," Pidge says. "And it's big enough. And the backdoor, it's never locked, so..."

"Okay," says Allura, and takes a deep breath. Lance tenses further as she sighs. "Coran, to your station. Everyone else...hold on."

Pidge steps away from the pod and wraps her hands around one of the panels that operates it. Hunk and Allura stay together, Shiro leans against a wall, and Lance plants his feet and crosses his arms, so Keith does the same, wishing there was some way to ease Lance's nerves without giving up their secret.

"It's going to be okay," Keith whispers, keeping his eyes down so hopefully the others won't notice them talking. "Just let someone else do the talking."

"I'll have to," Lance mutters back. "I don't even know what happened."

"We'll just...say who we are. Talk. Explain how we left Earth. We don't need to get into it immediately..."

"They're my family, Keith," Lance hisses, and in his periphery he can see Lance's fingers drumming once more against his arm. "I think they'll notice pretty quickly that I'm fucked up."

"So we'll explain the torture first," Keith says. "We'll build up to it. It'll be-."

"If you say it'll be okay one more time-"

"Alright, paladins!" calls Coran's voice through the ship speakers. "Wormhole in three- two- one-"

The now-familiar jolt as the castleship transports through space, shuddering a little and causing Keith to almost lose his balance. He keeps his feet planted, though, ducks his head a little until it ends and they're sailing smooth again. There is, of course, no way for them to enter the galaxy and not, eventually, be seen, and since the pods travel far slower than the castle or the lions, Pidge had sighed in defeat and told Coran to hide the castle behind the moon, which sounds dumb and is,
Pidge had reminded them, very dumb, but there is apparently no other option.

Coran notifies them when he's reached a suitable spot, and they all start loading in; Coran appears after a few minutes, hops in, and Pidge starts manoeuvring them out the castle, around the slow bend of the moon, and towards Earth.

It feels vaguely surreal. The Earth, blue as always, just...coming towards them, or rather them towards it, Pidge hovers over the controls but it seems to be taking them in exactly where she'd programmed it, they enter atmo just over a swath of blue before steering ever downwards, tensing a little as they struggle through some intense cloud coverage, and by the time the sky is clear, it's a straight shot to the land beneath. Closer and closer to an island, Keith can't help feeling like they're going to land in the ocean but when they touch down, it's in a garden straight off the beach, and he can't help but take a deep breath of relief before the doors slide open and Shiro takes the first step out.

It is fucking hot, is what Keith realises immediately. Though the sun is nowhere to be seen, it blasts down on them with no remorse, heavy in a way that makes it difficult to breathe. It is also, he notes, pulling the hood of his jacket up, raining. The clouds are heavy and grey above them, and it pours down like a sheet, soaking them all the second they step outside. Regardless, the air feels more alive here, scented with flowers in the garden, salt off the sea, detergent from now-soaked clothes hanging from a line strung between two windows of the three-storey house behind them. The backdoor is cheerful yellow, the stone white, various windows open. Some of them have thin white curtains hanging from them; others have blinds half-open.

Before them is the ocean. The gate is shut but they can see beyond it, the sand, the sea, the families playing on the beach, lounging despite the rain, playing music from their own speakers under huge umbrellas. Some people are swimming despite the agitated waves; others are dancing in the downpour, laughing as their clothes get soaked.

This is where Lance is from? It makes sense, actually. Everything feels...nice in a way Keith can't explain. Warm and comforting and inviting. People everywhere, but still this pocket of privacy, flowering, untrimmed hedges hiding them from view. Keith can see how Lance would've grown in this environment, why he'd need to comb down the curls of his hair, how freckles would blossom on every bare inch of skin, why he'd be so akin to the sea.

Hunk has a wistful smile on his face. "Just like I remember," he says, and Pidge nods, takes a few steps to caress the petal of a flower growing along the edge.

"Me too," she says, and the two cast worried looks at Lance.

Lance, who's staring up at the sky, letting the water fall across his face, into his clothes, as though inviting God to wash away all his sins. His eyes close as they watch, and he raises his hands palm-up to the sky, raindrops gathering and dripping down his fingers. The overcast light doesn't quite suit him; washes out his skin, hides the sprinklings of freckles across his cheeks. His scars gleam pink and white and unnatural. He looks unnatural, a dark spectre with a fucking trident strapped to his back, tilted from his left hip to right shoulder so it's easier to grab it. His eyes don't match the sea here. The blue is too hard, marbled instead of fluid.

It feels wrong. Perhaps, Keith thinks, tugging on his fingerless gloves, they shouldn't have come after all. Perhaps they should've waited longer. Allura had said they were close to finding a quintessence planet, right? Should they have found that first? But what if it does nothing? What if it turns Lance into something worse? Is this the best option, then?

Keith doesn't think so.
"Lance," says Allura. "Shall we?"

Lance opens his eyes, lowers his chin and looks instead at the ocean, how it stretches out to the horizon, darkening waves rolling out and cresting in bright, foamy white.

"Okay," he says, and hesitates, as though his eyes are stuck on the sea, before turning away, moving round Pidge's invisible pod and up the steps to the white wood porch and halting at the yellow door into Lance's home.

Quiet as they fan out around him. Lance raises his arm, and after a deep but silent breath, Lance knocks, fast, three times.

Waits.

Knocks again.

Waits even longer. A minute passes, and they look round at each other.

"Maybe they're out," Hunk murmurs, so Lance moves his hand to the doorknob and opens it up. He doesn't enter immediately, just stands on the brown mat outside the door as he surveys the inside. Keith can't see much around him; white walls, coloured tile. When he moves inside and the others follow, Keith sees a big, open room, kitchen to the left, round dining table to the right, and...a small table beneath two calendars, one shut but the other opened onto...

Lance heads towards it, and Keith follows at his side, Hunk too, opening up the closed calendar and leafing through it.

"July," Lance reads, or rather translates, from the calendar. Runs his fingers along box after box, all filled in with a bright red X...until the twenty-eighth.

It says something, but Keith can't read it; he only recognises Lance's name.

"It's my birthday," Lance reads from it, though, and Hunk glances over and nods.

"You're nineteen," Hunk says, and Lance frowns, pulling his hand away. "It's Sunday," Hunk adds. "They'll be at church. That's why they're not here." He's still going through the calendar, and when Keith looks over he sees more and more boxes of red, month after month until Hunk reaches the end. "This is...a record," Hunk explains when he sees Keith's searching gaze. "Of how long we've been missing."

"And?" Keith asks.

"One year, three months," Hunk says, and he holds Keith's gaze a second before looking to the side, ducking his head.

"Jesus," Keith whispers, looking down also.

On the table beneath the calendars is a photo. Framed, of Lance, it must be his first year portrait from the garrison because he looks young and shiny with perfectly straight hair and big blue eyes, and he's smiling so bright, and candles burn around it and behind it is a vase of flowers, none Keith can name but all varying shades of blue and yellow and pink.

"Jesus," Keith repeats, quieter, goes to pick up the photo but Lance reaches it first. Touches his hair, already curling at the ends from humidity. The back of his shaved head. The scars round his neck, on his lip, his cheek. Keeps a palm pressed to his face, eyes softened with curiosity before
going dark, and he turns the photo face down on the table before turning away.

Keith can only follow, reaches behind Lance to squeeze Hunk's shoulder, and surveys the others; Pidge is stood in front of a group of family portraits upon the wall, lower lip wobbling; Coran is stood behind her, a hand on her shoulder and expression inscrutable; Shiro has his hands on the kitchen counter, a modern-day Atlas with slumped shoulders, eyes closed; and Allura has rounded the kitchen table to stand before a small painting of the Virgin Mary hung up behind it.

The whole room is bright and open, white walls with coloured tile around the kitchen area, soft woods, warm tan granite on the kitchen counters. The portraits on the wall aren't the only photos around; there are groups of smaller photo frames, some random, others arranged by holiday, Lance's family decked out in t-shirts and shorts or big hats and coats. Kids' drawings litter the walls also; paper, a little crumpled at the edges, running wild with the crayon scribbles, vibrant reds and yellows and blues, drawings of family, drawings, Keith realises upon moving closer, of Lance. Coming home.

He can't look too long. A name, clumsily written on the bottom, says Dani with a big smiley face next to it, and the Lance in this drawing has a big smile, too, the kind he hasn't ever worn since he was rescued.

There's a corkboard with dinner invitations and certificates pinned to it; a jewel-toned bowl filled with fruit on the kitchen counter; scraps of paper and pens left seemingly at random on every surface. There's a window each on both sides on the sunshine door, a sunburst clock on the wall, curtains of thin white linen drifting back and forth with the wind through the window.

The rain is dulled in here, a low vibration through the house, but Keith is glad of it; at least they aren't left in total silence.

"Come on," Lance mutters, opens the next door and goes through a slim corridor to reach the front door, stairs to the left, and the living room to the right. For a moment Keith thinks Lance will ignore it and head upstairs, but something catches his eye and he throws the door open, striding over to the wall and stopping just short.

"What is this?" breathes Pidge when she comes in, shoving past Lance to touch the one of the many pages taped to the wall before them. Hunk jogs to her side, eyes wide, and Keith finds himself staring, too, reminded of his own conspiracy board back in the desert. There are photos of it, in fact, of the board and of the shack, of his abandoned bike lying in the bottom of a crater. There are sticky notes scribbled on and stuck to the wall accompanying the photos, some with arrows pointing to whatever they're talking about. There's photos of the seven of them: Lance, Keith, Hunk, Pidge, Shiro, Matt, and Samuel. They each get a page of information that Keith can't understand, but he can make out dates, locations, the name of the garrison, all their names on each others' reports. There are missing persons posters, letters from the garrison, printed out emails from various parents.

"Holy shit," Hunk says, and breaks into a teary smile. "They were looking for us. They knew we weren't dead!"

"Oh my god," Pidge says, reaching a hand up to a photo of her and her family, stuck beside an email from, according to the name, Pidge's mother. "My mom... She thought I was dead, but...your family convinced her..."

"Is that-" Shiro comes up beside Keith, and reaches for another email, but the names at the bottom tell Keith it's from his own parents. "I can't believe it. I thought they'd given up on me."
"What...is it?" asks Allura, voice hushed. She and Coran are stood in the middle of the room, just in front of the dark brown coffee table, looking lost as they stare up at the wall.

"They were looking for us!" Hunk says again, and Allura's features soften at the way he smiles. "Lance's family, they contacted mine and Pidge's and Shiro's- they must've realised something shady was going on and they tried to figure it out! Look! Pictures of Shiro landing! Mysterious ships spotted in the sky! Photos of that cave we found Blue in! Statements from the garrison! Just like when Shiro was missing, they tried to tell our families that we were all dead! But they didn't believe it! And how could they! They must've found Keith's shack, or- found someone to find it- and how can you refute that evidence!"

"That's wonderful," says Allura, smiling too. "And now they'll know they were right all along."

"Oh man," Hunk says, "I can't wait to call my moms."

"What does it all say?" asks Coran, and Pidge and Hunk both scan the board before coming to a conclusion.

"Still alive!" they both say, and grin at each other. "But location unknown," adds Pidge, a touch more serious. "Potentially off-world. That seems to be their most likely conclusion. The odds that we were kidnapped from the garrison are basically zero, and murdered? Yeah, right. The garrison tried to say we ran away, but I'd worked my ass off getting in there, and Hunk was one of the top engineers - except for some, uh, issues - and everyone knew Lance was dying to make fighter pilot, and that once he got it he was never going to drop it! And how would that explain Keith? And obviously they found the link between us and the Kerberos mission..."

"It's amazing," says Hunk. "Maybe they hired someone to help them figure it out?"

"Maybe," Pidge muses, eyes drifting over the pieces of information, coloured string tying together evidence, a few big black question marks dotted over the more questionable pages.

"It is incredible," says Shiro after a moment, and his eyes are bright and shiny when he looks to Keith. "Don't you think?"

"Yeah," Keith murmurs, eyes still stuck on his own little shack. "It's impressive."

Shiro's gaze burns a little longer into the side of his face, then he lets out an imperceptible sigh and looks back to Allura and Coran, saying, "I don't think there's anything we can do but wait for the family to come home, though."

"We can go check out your room," Hunk says to Lance, who shrugs. Motioning to himself, Lance, Pidge, and Keith, Hunk says, "Just the four of us? And you guys can wait around until his family come home?"

"Sounds good, Hunk," says Shiro. "We'll just...hang out in the hall."

"You know the way?" Hunk asks Lance, but he just shrugs again, turns on his heel, and heads out the room. They go up one flight and Lance goes right, but Hunk shakes his head and says, "Next floor, buddy." So they continue up the stairs and this time when Lance turns right, another corridor stems before him, and they follow along until he halts before a door.

It must be his bedroom, because it has five signs with his name on his door, touristy tack, one in shells, the other in fancy wood, another in ugly bright-coloured plastic. One, and only one, says the name Leandro.
There is a little dust still on the door, but when Lance pushes it open, a breeze greets them, a big
tall window left open on the wall opposite.

The room is blue with tan wood flooring, there are posters tacked to the walls and the sheets are a
star-sprinkled night sky, he has a desk with a computer still on it surrounded by swimming
certificates, star charts, drawings from the kids.

But Lance doesn't look at all that. There's another corkboard, covered in shiny photos, and it's
those Lance stands before, arms crossed and shoulders still high, mouth a long, firm line. All of
him, in fact, is made up of hard edges like steel, a look in his eyes of stone. Keith wonders if it's
real or if he's forcing it, if his emotions are rising towards the surface and he's acting colder than
usual to hide them.

Hunk and Pidge join him, start pointing out pictures of themselves, photos of Lance as a kid, but
Keith can't look at them. He knows they'll make him too sad, to see the chub of Lance's cheek
when he was a child, the transition of curly hair to suddenly, strangely straight, how all that
childish youth straightened out and grew into teenage zeal, look at Lance now and see how that all
just stopped.

It is still raining outside. Maybe they should close the window, but the scent of it is fresh, the wind
carries it into the room, clears away dust and must, replaces it with sand and salt. Lance looks
wrong in this room, the black clothing clashing with the soft blue, every inch of him un-childish,
unkind. So clearly not what he used to be that it hurts. Is Lance regaining his memories worth the
shock his family are going to go through? What if it isn't? What if they don't come back?

But they have to.

Hunk and Pidge are still talking, but they keep glancing at Lance, a desperate edge to their voices;
Lance ignores them, picks up a photo from the centre of the board and stares at it before picking up
a mirror from his desk and looking from it to the photo and back again.

What's Keith to do? He didn't know Lance before, not really, and he isn't listening to his actual
friends. His face is stoic but his brows crease when he looks back at the photo, and Keith glimpses
a group of people squeezed in around a table, not the one downstairs, all smiling at the camera. It
must be another family photo, and Lance looks at it long and hard before pinning it back to the
board, ignoring the way Hunk and Pidge stare with pinched brows, and instead looks at Keith.

What does he look like? Worried? Or scared? Keeping a straight face in this situation is impossible,
no matter how hard he tries; bites his bottom lip to stop the edges curling down, feels a furrow
between his brows, and his eyes are open as ever, he's never been able to hide himself from Lance.

Before, Lance was just too oblivious to see whatever emotion gathered in Keith's eyes besides
anger; but this Lance has made a talent of catching Keith's gaze and somehow knowing exactly
what he's thinking.

"Lance?" he says, before Lance can comment on his concern, mock his emotion, wave it away.

He does it anyway. "It doesn't matter," he says, voice low. "I'm not that person." He slams the
mirror back down on his desk, turns away and stands instead by the window. "I never will be
again."

Someone sniffs, and Keith looks back to see Pidge's shoulders shaking as she stares up at the
photos, Hunk's lip trembling as he watches Lance's stubborn back. Keith can only shrug, offer an
arm to them both, let them squeeze him tight. He has to remind himself to draw breath after breath,
his whole body on edge, prickly, hairs rising as if to ward off his friends. Keith wants to comfort his friends but he also wants them to leave; Keith wants to talk to them with honesty about all the things that have happened, but he can't. His heart twists with discomfort, but he holds on until they let go, Hunk wiping his eyes and Pidge immediately attaching herself to his arm.

"Let's go back down," she mutters, and Hunk nods, reaching out to grab a photo of him, Lance, and Pidge on the beach before he goes. They're all smiling, Lance's big and goofy, Pidge begrudging, Hunk's warm as the sun. The sea is blue and peaceful behind them, and Pidge is wearing a t-shirt, glistening with sun screen. Hunk meets Keith's eyes as he pockets it, but neither of them say anything, and the two of them leave the room, the door half-open after them.

With their leaving, the room goes awfully still. Without their chatter there is nothing to distract from the dust motes swirling in the light, how they twist through the air as if wrapping Keith up in abandonment, in decay, in death. Has Lance's room been touched in months? There are cardboard boxes on the floor that must have been sifted through at one point, but sit half-open, still full on the floor. Through the dust there are footsteps, to the window and back, and on the bed there is a small area clear of dust, as though someone has been coming in every day to open the window and perhaps just sit and contemplate how bereft this blue room is.

And now Lance is here, in his bleak black outfit with his half-shaved head, and the room feels even emptier. Haunted. This Lance is a ghost, a mere echo of the one that lives inside all those photos. As Keith watches, he unholsters his trident and throws it on the bed, then climbs through the window and sits on what must be an awning beneath it, back straight and head turned a little to the sky. Raises a hand to gesture Keith over, and...there really is nothing else to do but wallow in the sadness every inch of this room excretes.

So he climbs through as well, Lance's legs dangle over the edge but they're three storeys up and it's still raining and Keith finds himself nervous, draws his knees to his chest and breathes out in relief as Lance tightens an arm round his waist.

"I'm not that person," Lance says, chin upturned, eyes shut. His voice is hard, like Keith could knock his fist against it and it wouldn't even shatter. "I'm not him anymore. I don't even remember him. Or anything about him, or the school he went to, what he wanted to do... They're not going to fucking recognise me, Keith. And I won't recognise them."

"You can't talk like that," Keith says, wrapping his arms round his legs. "We don't know what'll happen. We just have to wait."

Lance turns his eyes on Keith, and it feels a little like a metal cage slamming down around him. Pinned down, trapped in a gaze he cannot look away from, that he doesn't want to look away from.

But Keith can't help wondering if the old Lance would've ever made him feel like this.

"C'mere," Lance murmurs, eyes dropping to Keith's mouth, and it's hot outside but it's still raining, so Keith leans in and lets Lance kiss him like a wave being ravaged in a storm, the hand round his waist gripping hard, slipping beneath his t-shirt and digging into his flesh. Lance runs colder than usual these days, his fingers calloused from torture and lack of moisturiser and the handling of so many weapons, and a thumb brushes accidentally against one of Keith's scars, his mouth falls open in a gasp and Lance just consumes him, so relentless and hot and Keith grabs at his neck, his stupid fucking hair, his legs cross, left one dropping onto Lance's thigh, he can't even give a shit, relishes the contact, the way Lance's free hand falls to Keith's knee and squeezes.

And he wants him. For all his faults, Keith still wants him in every way he is allowed, like a teammate and a friend and a lover, like a fucking boyfriend, and if this is what calms Lance down
then, well, Keith is happy to do it.

He wants to do it. He wants to kiss Lance, and keep kissing Lance, fuck the circumstances and fuck the risk, fuck the way Hunk's step had slowed when he'd visited Keith's room last night and saw Lance there too, fuck the way Shiro keeps trying to find him and talk to him about things that don't need fucking talking about.

Fuck all of them. They don't know Lance the way Keith does; Lance doesn't let them, because even if he doesn't say it Keith knows he doesn't fully trust them. But he trusts Keith. Talks to him, about his emotions that no one else knows he has, about his feelings, for Keith, about being confused and scared and not wanting to come home. And Keith was the one who told him to go anyway, who talked him into it, so the least he can do is calm Lance's frayed nerves with a kiss or two or ten or twenty.

Except, after minutes of this - half an hour, at least - a door slams three storeys below them, behind them, and when Keith twists away from Lance, he can hear chatter from downstairs, shrieks of confusion, Hunk's voice rising, and then a general shushing.

"Lance," Keith says, looking back but Lance has shifted from his lips to his cheek, and Keith rolls his eyes. "We should go down. See your family. Remember?"

"Don't want to," Lance mutters against his ear, nipping at the lobe, and Keith jolts but remains strong.

"Come on, Lance," Keith says, reaching back and pulling Lance's face away from his. "You can't just ignore them." Lance just rolls his eyes, jostles out of Keith's grip, and kisses along his jaw. "Lance-" His neck. "Come on-" Parts his lips and digs in his teeth. "Don't change the subject- Lance-"

Fuck, though.

God, fuck, shit, fuck- fuck!

He pulls away again: "Lance, I'm serious-"

"I don't want to," Lance repeats. "You said it yourself, didn't you? Step by step. It's better someone else explains the situation before I show up, isn't it?"

And that is what he said, isn't it?


They take longer than half an hour. It's just so easy to get lost in it, in the constant push and pull, Lance all over him, the rain and sea salt barely reminding him where they are. Lance's arm is constant round his waist but his hand keeps pressing up and down Keith's thigh, cold in the heat, through his sodden jeans. He crosses his legs over Lance's lap without thinking, within minutes his only thoughts are more, are closer, are need.

He doesn't want to let this go. Not Lance, not any of it. He'd come so close to losing it, knelt at Lance's bleeding side and screamed for everything he thought he'd lost, but he hadn't. He has Lance. Sitting up here in their casual clothes, kissing like a secret, it feels so normal as if they'd never left Earth at all, they could be friends from the garrison and Lance had invited him home, they're trying to hide their relationship because everyone at school still thinks they're rivals and if Lance's family finds out then Hunk will find out and if Hunk finds out then everyone will know, and when it's dark they will creep out onto the beach and swim under the stars, kiss under the stars,
do *anything* under the stars.

"Wow," a flat voice cuts through Keith's fantasies, and he springs apart from Lance, who only raises a brow as Keith twists round to see Hunk standing there, arms crossed. "You guys serious?"

_Fuck_. Keith withdraws all his various limbs from Lance and slips back through the window, straightening with a nervous cough and dusting himself down a little. His clothes are absolutely soaked through. "U-uh, Hunk, we were just- we weren't- we, um-"

"You have a hickey," says Hunk, tapping under his own jaw, "right there."

Keith's eyes fly wide and his cheeks flood with colour as he slaps a hand over the offending area, turns to glare at Lance but he's just smirking, sticks his tongue out like the fucking _devil_. "Uh," he says.

"Lance, come on," says Hunk, and Lance slouches through the window and stands by Keith, dropping a careless hand on his back. "Your family are waiting. I explained as much as I could - your sister translated. It's..." Hunk's gazes wanders, and his lip trembles again before he takes a deep breath and looks back. "Take your damn jacket off, it's soaked. I'll get you both towels. Then..."

He turns away before leaving the room, and Lance turns back on Keith immediately, tilting his chin up and grinning at his apparent handiwork.

"You're a fucking asshole," Keith hisses at him, and Lance just grins, leans down to kiss his cheek, the corner of his mouth. "You realise everyone's going to realise that this suddenly came into existence when we were alone together? So much for secret!"

Lance brushes a thumb against a spot on his neck. "There's more than one," he says, and Keith tries to be angry but Lance is giggling like a fucking schoolgirl, hands framing Keith's face, blue eyes alight as he kisses him again, and Keith lets him.

Because, after all, Keith wants this too.

"Oh, come _on_," Hunk says when he returns, throwing towels at them before they pull apart. "So how long has this been going on? Since last night?"

_Last night_. It's so ridiculous Keith almost laughs, but instead he hides his face with the towel and pats himself dry, towels his hair and squeezes as much water out his clothes as he can, kicking Lance in the leg when he wrings his shirt and it rides halfway up his torso.

"A while," Lance says, leering, and Keith presses a hand over his face and forces him to look away, can't help grinning as Lance hops out his grasp and winks at him.

"A while," Hunk mutters, watching them with strange eyes, and for a moment, Keith finds himself doubting him, the grin dropping as he looks over.

"You won't- tell anyone, will you?" he asks, and Hunk's brows pinch.

"Dude," he says uncertainly, "I- I can't _not_ tell Shiro-

"You absolutely _will_ not tell Shiro!" Keith replies, striding into his space. "Hunk, promise me. Tell me you will _not_ tell him under _any_ circumstance-

"He'll figure it out, dude," Hunk points out, and the fight leaves Keith's body, he steps back and
sighs and drops his towel on the bed, where Lance has tossed his own. The heat combined with Lance's careless drying of his hair results in it being more curly than Keith has ever seen it, defined but still soft, half-crescents looping down against his forehead. "God, let's just get this over with. Keith, I'll introduce you first, okay? I mean, I told them about you already, but..."

Keith shrugs and follows Hunk out the room, Lance trailing them, taking hold of the end of Keith's shirt without saying anything. Silence accompanies them down the stairs, through the corridor to the back, and Hunk halts before the door to the kitchen/dining area, chest heaving a little.

"Okay," Hunk says, taking deep breaths and closing his eyes, "okay. Okay, okay, okay..."

Keith turns back to Lance. "You good?" he asks, but Lance has fashioned himself a shield of rock and metal and stone; shoulders it briefly only to press a desperate, terrified kiss to Keith's lips. "It'll be fine," he whispers. "Just take a deep breath. We're gonna be fine, Lance."

Lance doesn't reply, breathes and swallows and takes Keith's hand in both of his, presses them against his chest.

"Come on," Keith whispers after a moment, and with a final squeeze that is echoed around Keith's heart, Lance lets go, and Keith nods at Hunk, and the door is opened.

Shiro, Allura, Coran, and Pidge all stand in the kitchen; Shiro looks like he hasn't moved at all since they arrived, he glances up and sees Keith and whatever Lance did to his neck and resumes his previous position; Allura is leaning against the island counter, Coran as always at her side, hand on her shoulder that tightens imperceptibly when they walk in; and Pidge is stood a little closer to the wall opposite, wringing her hands and widening her eyes as she looks at Keith and Lance.

"Fuck," Lance whispers behind Keith, "fuck fuck fuck-"

"Don't," Keith murmurs, doesn't look behind but speaks just loud enough for Lance to hear.

Lance's family sit round the table, some of the seats moved to the side so no one is blocking anyone's view. Eleven people, their gazes flitting over Keith to land on Lance, and Keith can see them process it, the set of his shoulders, the unbreakable ice of his scowl. The scars, the muscle, the height, the guns strapped to his hips, the- all of it, those with tearstained cheeks start crying once more, a sister traces Lance's scar along her own lip, the youngest kid there turns to who must be her sister and asks something in Spanish that makes the whole family flinch.

If it's possible, Lance gets even stonier, stands in the middle of the room between Keith and Hunk, between his family and his team, and says nothing.

"This is Keith," Hunk says, and a sister who must be in her mid-twenties starts speaking to the table in a low, strained voice. "Our red paladin. He was keeping Lance..." Hunk slides a look their way, and Keith raises his chin and ignores it. "...company. He was with Lance both times he was- he was shocked. So."

Keith waits until the sister is done, then says, "Uh, hello." The sister murmurs, then looks at him. "Uh, I'll just- uh-" He takes one last look at them before rushing to Shiro's side, laying a hand on his back and watching from behind as Lance steps forward.

"Lance, if you just...want to talk to them, or..."

"And say what," Lance says. "What did you tell them?"

"I..." Hunk chuckles a nervous glance at the translating sister. "I-I haven't- I couldn't-"
"For fuck's sake," Lance mutters, then strides over to the table and takes the last empty seat, facing away from his team, and the family that had spread out pull their chairs back in, hands pressing against Lance's shoulders, but he shakes them off, stiff and surly.

When he speaks, it's in English.

"Uh, buddy," Hunk says. "Spanish, remember?"

And there's a horrible moment when Lance twists back to look at him, mouths //Spanish// and frowns, and Keith takes a shaking breath, fears the worst-

But then he speaks in a language Keith cannot remotely understand, and he sighs out all his fear, crosses his arms on top of the counter and hangs his head.

It's so awful. He can't look, he can't, but he can hear it, Lance's voice twisting over unfamiliar syllables, his voice solid and harsh and unaltering, even as his family cry out, as they cry, as a woman's voice says Leandro and Lance snaps at her and she never says it again, as someone shoves out a chair and a door slams shut, and when Keith looks over, the two children and their mother have disappeared.

The air is thick with expectation, heavy with fear. Keith's chest heaves, his throat aches no matter how deeply he breathes. Shiro has leant upon his elbows so that he can cover his face with his hands, and Allura is whispering in Coran's ear, shaking her head. Hunk watches with wet eyes, murmurs to Pidge and holds her tight as Lance's family start sobbing in earnest, and Lance twists out his chair to storm over to Hunk, fire in his eyes.

"You didn't tell them anything!" he exclaims, and Hunk winces back. Keith just barely watches, still hunched over the counter, eyes stuck on how Lance's rage emanates off him like smoke from a fire.

"I-I tried-"

"Tried what? What did you even tell them?!

"I told them we went to space! You think that was easy to explain? That we found a blue lion and wormholed out the galaxy? They don't know anything about this! And not only that but telling them you got kidnapped and tortured? I couldn't do it, Lance. I'm sorry. I couldn't tell them. Not everything." Pidge tightens her grip on Hunk's arm, rubbing up and down it in an attempt to be soothing, but she watches with wide eyes dripping tears, mouth wobbling. Hunk tries to hold Lance's gaze, but he breaks like a wave against a stone cold cliff, hangs his head and covers his face in his hand.

Lance meets Keith's gaze from behind Hunk, and it pierces him like a bullet, like a thousand, Lance is a machine gun, stone cold weapon who can't feel, or at least, not enough. Not enough to spare his own family this horror. Not enough to feel bad for Hunk.

"I need to fight," he tells Keith, and god, does he believe it.

"What did you tell them," Keith replies, testing each word as he says it, too aware of how Shiro uncovers his face and shifts his head to look at him, the way Coran's gaze brushes across his neck and over to Lance.

"I need to fight!" Lance says, sweeping over with clenched fists, but Keith won't let him trap him again. He looks over his shoulder at the family, who are holding each other, hiding faces in shoulders, staring wide-eyed at Lance.
"Do you remember anything?" Keith tries.

"I don't," Lance says. "I told them I don't remember them. That my legs are fucked up. That I was tortured for months. They kept trying to reach me. As if the old me is there. As if he still exists."

It has to be painful. His voice is a rock kicked down the street and down the drain, and he can't keep his eyes on Keith, his fingers bite into his palms, his pulse jumps in his neck.

"Okay," says Keith quietly. "Do you think you can keep talking to them?" Lance shakes his head, and Keith looks round at the others. "Can any of you guys talk to them? One of his sisters was translating for Hunk, right?"

"Yeah," Hunk mumbles, sliding a hand over his face, "but I don't think I can do it again."

"Maybe you should, Keith," Allura murmurs. "If- if Lance can't handle this - if he really needs to fight - Shiro and I can take him on, and you can... You were there, after all. When he got shocked. And..." Her eyes lower, and Keith crosses his arms, missing the high collar of his cropped jacket. "Well, anyway. Perhaps you're not as familiar with Lance's family as Pidge or Hunk, but...I think maybe you should talk to them."

"Me?" Keith repeats, looks to Shiro for support but can't catch his eye, looks back at Lance, who's staring down at his hands. "But I..."

Hunk widens his eyes imploringly, murmuring, "Come on, buddy."

"But..." He looks back over at them, the way their eyes track the back of Lance's head, the scars there, how the damp t-shirt clings still to his shoulders. "But I don't know them..."

"Here," Lance says, digging into his pocket and handing over the notepad Hunk had dropped off last night. It's open on the drawing he did of Lance's family, very accurately drawn, he realises now, and he looks up to Lance to thank him and his breath catches.

They're so close right now. There's no way the others don't know what's going on between them at this point. Still, Keith doesn't touch. They may no longer be a secret, but at least it hasn't been said aloud. Keith doesn't want to make it quite real.

He asks, "Do you want me to?"

Lance nods, so Keith takes the notepad off him and scans along the names, back up at Lance, and nods back.

"If you're going to spar with the others," Keith advises, "leave the guns behind. You don't want to slip up."

"I know," Lance says. "I'm going to."

Keith keeps his hands to himself. Doesn't touch, doesn't take a cheek in his palm, doesn't go on his tiptoes and kiss, doesn't even squeeze a shoulder or touch an arm. He lifts his head high and brushes past Lance, nods slightly to acknowledge the way Coran touches his shoulder, how Pidge and Hunk accompany him, and stand on his either side when he takes Lance's empty seat.

The others immediately descend into hushed discussion behind them, but Hunk puts a hand on his shoulder and Pidge, after a moment, does the same, so Keith lays the notebook on the table and looks up from the drawings around the table till he finds each corresponding family member. Some
of them stare at him, but the others keep their eyes on Lance.

Before Keith can introduce himself properly, the sister from before enters the room, door slamming shut behind her, and she pauses to take in the situation before taking her previous seat, eyes sharp on Lance before softening on Keith.

The sister to Keith's right is younger, but not by much. Her skin is maybe a few shades lighter than Lance's, more golden than brown, echoes what looks like her father's tone sitting across the table. Her hair is a lighter shade, too, but still soft brown and curly, fixed into tight buns behind her ears.

She has the same hairstyle in the drawing Hunk did, the same skin, same eyes... Her name is Lillynn, it tells Keith. She was twenty-five when they left.

"Is there something you wanted to say?" she asks, her English perfect and accent strong.

"Uh- yes," Keith says. "I- uh- I'm Keith. And I was there both times Lance was...shocked, so... Um, Lance isn't- doesn't- he's struggling. To talk about things. So. I thought I'd...explain what happened."

"That would be helpful," she murmurs, casting a forlorn glance behind Keith. When he looks back, he sees Lance discarding the guns like Keith asked, leaving them on the counter alongside Shiro and Allura's bayards. He takes his shirt off in one quick swoop, leaving it by his weapons, and Keith winces as the scars tearing up his back are revealed, and the whole family seems to gasp in unison, a chair screeching back an inch in shock. This sister - Lillynn - her eyes go wide and she gapes, a little, at the way the scars tighten over Lance's muscles, bunching up as his hands clench, then relaxing a little. As much as Lance ever relaxes, these days.

After a moment, Shiro does the same. He's scarred, too, but it't not as bad as Lance, not really. The worst of it is around his prosthetic, and Lance's family don't even seem to notice Shiro's top surgery scars alongside everything else.

Lance ignores everyone; heads out the backdoor, and through the window Keith can see him stretching out, Shiro and Allura joining after a moment and doing the same. Coran stands in the doorway, tensed and ready to intervene if necessary, and at Shiro's word they begin to fight, Lance against the two of them, fast and urgent and excellent, and it is even harder to meet his family's gaze after that.

 Mostly because they don't look at him. They keep watching Lance and the fluid way he moves, beautiful, poisonous.

Lovely, Keith knows. Deadly.

But he won't lose his head if he's fighting two people; Keith finds the only person not staring at Lance and tries to speak to him instead, Lillynn catching on and translating again quickly.

"What is it you want to know?" Keith asks, because this brother is more slender than the other one, mid-twenties also, and his arms are crossed and eyes narrow and Keith thinks they've been like that since he came in the room. A glance at the notepad assures Keith that this is Alberto, who was twenty-three when they left and some kind of maths genius.

Lillynn translates, Alberto speaks. Changing his words, Lillynn says, "He doesn't think that's Lance."

Keith blinks. "What?" he asks, and then, "Of course that's Lance."
She converses with her brother, shakes her head. "He says that it's impossible for someone to change so much in so little time... That the Lance he knew could never turn into this kind of person, no matter what he went through."

"You... You don't understand," Keith says. "The- the level on which the galra changed him. They cut into his brain, that- that has consequences we don't even know of! And they- Hunk explained quintessence, right?" She nods, but it's uncertain, and Keith frowns. "It's like...energy, running through you and- and everything, and it can be harnessed or manipulated or stolen and they- well, they stole Lance's quintessence. And...we don't really know what that did, either. But- with both those things, and months of torture combined, I... I know it's hard to believe. And...upsetting. But it is Lance. He remembered himself, before. Even after the first time he got shocked, he could still recall some things about you and the garrison..."

Lillynn nods, murmuring beneath his confused babbling, and Alberto's frown hardens into a scowl, speaking sharply to his sister. Before he can finish, his mother - Sophia - intervenes, a still ocean unwavering in the face of such a storm. It draws more family members into it, Lillynn losing track and falling silent, and Keith just sits, forcing his shoulders down from his ears, waiting for more. Outside, Lance blocks Allura and rolls under a kick from Shiro, and he's grinning, his frustration relieved enough for him to be playful.

Keith wishes it were him fighting Lance, instead.

It's so strange, and horrible, something Keith wouldn't have imagined happening in a thousand years, except- he never imagined any of this happening, not Lance being kidnapped nor them not finding him for months nor the way he turned out afterwards, different and scary and uncaring. Alberto slams his fist against the table and the father says something sharp; the sister with children tries speaking, grandparents on her either side rubbing her shoulders; and the youngest sister who'd traced the Lance's scar on her lips says nothing the entire time, fiddles with the end of her skirt and rubs her eyes when she thinks no one can see. The eldest brother keeps an arm around Sophia, crooning under his breath when tensions seem to spike. Keith can't follow it - never had a family like this, never sat round a table and talked with ten other people like this, can't even understand the language - and he doesn't know what to do.

The hands on his shoulders are the only things keeping him grounded.

It quiets in waves, one family member falling silent after another, until the father is taking his wife's hand and pressing a gentle kiss to it, giving a meaningful look to all his children before speaking shortly to Lillynn.

"Five months he was gone?" she clarifies, and Keith nods. "Do you know what happened, exactly, to him?"

"Not exactly..." Keith admits, and her face falls. "He was- they tortured him in- all the ways someone would be tortured on Earth... Um, and they drained him of his quintessence, we...don't know when they cut his brain. But they drugged him up, uh, a lot- we don't know what with, or why... And there was a gladiator ring that they tossed him in, to fight other galra soldiers. But he didn't start winning until after a- robot beast blasted off his right leg. And- yeah, his legs are prosthetics. The left one is broken and we don't know why. Whatever they did, he can't feel...emotionally, or physically, or..." Keith casts a glance up to Hunk, and feels Hunk's sincerity burn through him. "But he was beginning to feel," he admits quietly, and Pidge gasps so softly beside him, Hunk's hand going tight on his shoulder. "He told me. He was beginning to feel...fear. About how he'd changed. And- who he was. What he was if he didn't remember most of his past. There was...other stuff, but..."
"Was it about you?" Hunk asks, and Keith refuses to meet his gaze. "Keith. Was it about you?"

"Maybe," Keith bites out, and Lillynn halts, glancing over at him before continuing to translate.

"What happened," Lillynn asks after a few minutes, "when he was shocked? How did it happen? Hunk was... It was confusing."

"Uh," Keith says, "yeah. It...is confusing. The- the druids can use magic. So...they...enchanted...? Or... They'd electrocuted him before, enough to make him forget being electrocuted, but nothing else significant. So...we were all surprised when it happened. It was the first time Lance went on a mission; he wasn't supposed to, but he ended up on the ground and fighting galra alone, so I went to pick him up in my lion and joined him until the galra were all dead. It was when we were in my lion...the druids contacted us and tried to lure him back to their side, talking about- letting him fight, making him stronger. But he refused. And- it came from his prosthetics. They did something to them, to...make them a conduit of electricity, and it travelled up his body, I... I don't know the science of it. But they shocked him twice, he was already hurt, he had a gut wound no one knew about. And we couldn't put him in a healing pod, so when he woke up he thought he was back with the galra. Thought we were a hallucination...and we realised he'd forgotten everything since he was rescued. And then...he struggled to remember you. Hunk and Pidge had to help. But he- he still remembered, right?"

Hunk nods. "Dumb stuff," he says. "He remembered teasing you about your glasses, Lilly."

"Oh," Lillynn says, and immediately conveys this information to her family. "The second time?"

"The second time...was almost a week ago, right?" Keith asks. "Because I was in cryo for a day, and Lance was in five days, and then we spent the whole day and didn't realise..."

"Yeah," Hunk says. "More or less."

"It- we'd been following a suspicious galra cruiser to an unusual planet, so Lance and I went down to investigate, and... The druids had been following us. Uh...tracking us, tracking Lance's progress. So they set a trap, and tried to capture Lance again. They wanted him to go of his own free will, but he wouldn't. No matter what they did. And when he tried to take out more galra, they shocked him again... Only once, not as long as before. But- but it was bad. He was so hurt. They'd shot him so many t-times, and he kept trying to protect me when he was the one who needed- needed-"

"Hey, it's okay," whispers Hunk, rubbing his shoulder as Keith's voice shakes and he blinks furiously. "You did as best as you could. You're both still alive."

"But he forgot," Keith says. "And I could've- and if we hadn't gotten close, he wouldn't have felt the need to- to fucking look after me-"

"Don't," Hunk murmurs. "Don't say that. Tell them how he changed when he was hurt."

"Changed?" repeats Lillynn.

"Changed..." Keith says, then nods, taking a deep breath to even out his voice. "He got more like himself. He apologised the first time, between shocks, mentioned a weapon... A-and then the other day it was- he just didn't want to forget. What had happened. So..."

Keith shrugs, Lillynn's voice constant and low beneath his, family members frowning and staring and turning to look at Lance through the window, where Shiro is panting on the ground and Allura is holding her own, but only barely. Keith tenses, ready to jump outside and- do whatever he needs to do to keep Lance in his right mind, but Shiro gets back up and it seems to take the edge off,
"Does..." asks Lillynn hesitantly. "Does Lance...remember? Anything? Of being...hurt?"

"...I don't- I think he knows a little. But- but it's confused. Even when he first came back, he had
memory gaps, didn't know about the electrocution or the incision or the drained quintessence...
Most of what we know comes from these vids we found- Pidge hacked into their data on the ship,
and once she broke the encryption she found all these...videos. Of Lance being hurt."

"Videos," Lillynn repeats, and Pidge pinches Keith's shoulder, shaking her head when Keith looks
up at them; but it's too late. Lillynn has already turned back to her family and started translating,
and soon brows are raising, eyes glancing at Pidge, questions being asked. "Can we...also see the
videos?"

"No," Pidge says, fingers tight on Keith's shoulder, "absolutely not. No! They're awful. They're
horrible- the druids, they were mocking us by making those. You don't want to see them. Trust me,
you really, really-"

"Do you have videos?" asks the mother, Sophia, in a tender voice of soft, sun-baked sand, and
Pidge wilts instantly. "Of my son?"

Pidge nods.

"I want to see them," she says. "Please."

And what can they do in the face of a despairing mother? Pidge tells Coran, who tells the three
fighting, who move back inside while Pidge and Coran get in the pod to fetch Pidge's set up, and
then Keith shares a look with Hunk and they leave their bayards on the counter and join the fight
outside.

Keith doesn't take his t-shirt off, even though it's pale and thin and sticks to his skin in the rain.
Feels too much like an invitation, for others to stare, Lance to play.

They can't do that here. They need to focus, work together to stay on top of Lance, and they never
really manage it; he keeps them on their toes, varies between ruthless and teasing, and for a whole
hour none of them can ever quite catch their breath.

Towels are ready when they come inside. The youngest sister bundles Allura's hair up on top of
her head, staring with pink cheeks, and Sophia attends to her son, gives him a towel and holds her
hands to her chest as he scrubs it into his hair, swipes it across his back. Takes the shirt Shiro hands
him and pulls it on without a thought.

It doesn't take long for Pidge to set her computer up on the table and pull up the relevant files;
Shiro says a few things and excuses himself outside, and Keith knows he should follow but he
knows Shiro will say something if he does, so he waits for Allura to send Lance out, then hovers
behind Lance's family with the other paladins as the videos start.

If Hunk and Keith explaining it to them was bad, the videos are worse. Visceral. Lance is still
himself in so many of them, and then somehow not himself but also not the Lance before them, and
he still screams and cries and calls for his mama, the druids hurt him till all that leaves his mouth is
mangled Spanish that has his family in tears. Video by video they see new scars sliced into Lance's
skin, more drugs pushed into his veins, more druids telling him to be silent, to endure the pain, to
fight, and keep fighting.

It's disgusting, but every attempt to end the viewing session before all the videos has been watched
are rebuffed, no matter how distressed the family obviously is, and when it ends, the mother simply stands up, moves to the kitchen, and starts making dinner.

The eldest brother joins her, the grandmother, the youngest sister. The other brother storms to his room. The grandparents converse with the father. Lillynn joins her sister in collecting her children from wherever they'd been dropped off.

And even when Shiro comes back in, Lance stays outside, laying in the grass as the rain falls down.

--

Keith doesn't know what to do with himself for the evening, so he does nothing. Hunk helps with cooking and Allura and Coran end up asking dozens of questions to Lillynn, and Pidge sits with her computer and talks with Alberto once he comes back downstairs, and he does, in fact, speak pretty good English, and Shiro joins the kitchen effort too, so Keith eventually leaves and flops on the ground next to Lance. They don't even make out, don't even talk. Just stare at the sky as the clouds clear and the rain stops, and sun starts shining down on them, the heat dwindling only in the later hours of the night.

Dinner takes a long time to make, and Keith is thankful. It gives him time to process his thoughts, even though that's impossible. Coming here was supposed to be helpful, but...Lance doesn't remember. It's good that Lance's family know he's still alive; good that Hunk and Pidge plan to sit in front of the computer and call up their own parents, Shiro's too; good, even, just to be back on Earth, in a place where time makes sense, the sky goes dark at night and lights up with constellations Keith can understand.

But it was wrong of them to come. With Lance like this, so incapable of change without throwing his shields a thousand times up, on top of all the other layers of salt and stone and steel, it just doesn't work. They wanted Lance so desperately to remember but this clearly wasn't the answer. Now his family knows and they've seen those terrible videos and they've been exposed to this Lance, and even if Lance gets better and returns to them they can never forget how he first came back to them, unable to love them, with no memory of them.

Nothing except this notepad drawing from Hunk, which Keith hands over without words, but their hands meet and neither moves away.

They eat, they drink, they shower in staggered sets. The others manage to make conversation, Keith taps out within minutes. There seems to be an argument about rooms, since apparently they're staying the night, but Keith ends up with Lance, and his father tries to bring in a mattress but Lance just flicks him a look and it's moved elsewhere.

Lance changes into his eldest brother's clothes, sweatpants and a t-shirt, and Keith rifles through Lance's old wardrobe and borrows a shirt, and they lay in silence on Lance's old, aired-out bed, windows still open to breathe in new life. Keith can't think of anything to say; he just wants to sleep, but Lance's bed is a single and Keith is pressed tight against his side, legs tangled, head curled into Lance's shoulders, and it's- a lot.

And it's inappropriate, it's wrong, to feel like this in such a...grave situation, but Keith still feels it. This want, burning through him, burning out every other feeling like a fever, capturing Keith's mind completely like a sickness.

Like a hallucination.
Around them, the house goes quiet; Lance’s siblings all shared their rooms with the paladins, except for Coran who sleeps in the living room, and while those who speak English have some conversation with those they’re sharing with, the atmosphere is too heavy to really discuss anything except going to bed.

But Keith can't sleep, and Lance can't either. They both stay awake, silent, the light stretching across Lance’s room from the horizon until the sun, at long last, sets.

Then Lance says, "Let's go outside."

"What for?"

"I want to fight," because of course he does. "Today's been- it wasn't enough. I need more."

And Keith, of course, goes far too easy: "Yeah," he says, and this time when Lance climbs out the window, he knows that there are pipes running down the house he can slip down, and they round the invisible pod, out the gate, and cross the beach till they reach damp sand, the sea lazily wandering up to greet them.

They fight like they always do, the one piece of real familiarity in between all of this strange familiarity. When they kiss, it takes longer and longer to break apart and resume the fight.

Until they don't. Until Keith manages to push Lance to the ground and pin him there, laughing at the way Lance huffs, quieting when Lance sits up but doesn't try to shove Keith off him. Outlines Keith's jaw in his hands and kisses him, soft and gentle like the still sea behind them, and then they keep kissing.

It doesn't feel real. It feels too normal, like they're just two crazy kids sneaking out at night to mess around on the beach, like maybe they're friends from school, like maybe Keith is a tourist on holiday and Lance is a local boy who caught his eye walking down a street. Like there exist a thousand universes that culminate in this convulsion of singular moments, of lips and tongue and teeth and the way Keith removes Lance's shirt as though unveiling a great painting, how Lance slips his hands under Keith's shorts and slides them off as though unravelling some great trail of secrets.

Moments. And the spaces in between them, when Keith's breath catches at the way the moonlight looks on Lance's shoulders, scars down his arms that Keith had seen inflicted in one of the videos, knife wound after knife wound slicing downwards, how it catches in his hair, dancing in the now-wild curls of it, how they spiral halfway down his forehead, how it turns his freckles navy blue gleaming across his face.

Beyond Lance sits his home, lights off, curtains and blinds closed, the pod shimmering just barely in the darkness. The sand stretches out in glittering white before it, the sky navy, stars sprinkled like loose paint drops across it. Home. Not his, and not quite Lance's either. But the closest thing they have; each other, this beach, the water moving in time alongside them, a gentle rocking that sometimes brushes against Keith's fingers when he leans back and digs his fists into the sand.

The air is cool at night, but Lance's breath is hot on his neck, the water warm on his fingertips, heat courses through his veins, sears wherever he and Lance meet, which, like this, is everywhere: hands on hips, teeth on his shoulder, a connection that, previously, Keith had no words for.

None that match this, because they aren't two teenagers hunting for privacy to enjoy themselves. They're two young men thrown into a war they didn't ask for, half-ruined by the consequences of it that no one had seem coming, and coping, secretly, in the only way they can. Human - half-human
- contact, salt in the air, the way Lance whispers shh in his ear and laughs when Keith yanks his
hair.

Love. Can Keith call it that? It's always been that for him, that has never changed, but is it different
with Lance? It feels different, these days. These weeks, on missions together, fighting together,
hiding this secret together, they've felt different than they did at the start. Lance, and his new
feelings. Do they encompass love, or do they fall just short?

But then why is it like this? So perfect that Keith loses his words.

So perfect he loses any hope of loving anyone but Lance.

So perfect, that even when all is done they remain outside on the beach, preserving these moments
for as long as possible. Hours. Night turns to dawn. Locals start walking dogs, going on runs. The
house behind them wakes up.

And yet they remain.

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The castleship seems sterile in contrast. That morning, they make a hasty retreat; haste to Lance's
bedroom, haste back to the ship. Breakfast is served but there is so little to say. There is work to do
and school to attend, and when a sister suggests Lance rummage through his room for things to
take back with him, he waits until everyone has left to unpin the family photo he'd looked at last
night and shove it in his pocket, and the goodbyes are emotional but empty.

Tenser is the air in the pod as they return to the ship. Shiro has given up on patience; his gaze
batters Keith's head but he refuses to look at him, at anyone, how knowingly they watch him sit
beside Lance.

They don't know anything. Lance left a few marks and when they slipped in that morning they
were less than subtle, but they don't know anything. What Keith told Lance's family regarding how
he was beginning to feel things again was barely a drop in the ocean. It doesn't compare to what
Lance really told Keith, the way he said it, just barely containing himself, the way it had been
building up for weeks beforehand. They don't understand because Lance didn't choose them.

He chose Keith.

Shiro is less than happy about this; they disembark and Shiro grabs his arm, holds him back as the
others leave. Lance turns to look at him, frowns, shifts his gaze to Shiro and disappears with the
rest of them.

"Let go of me," Keith says, and jerks his arm, but it's Shiro's prosthetic gripping him and he won't
budge. "Shiro."

"Don't," Shiro replies. "I'm not leaving until you give me an explanation-"

"Let go of me!" Keith says, and Shiro lets go, clenching his fists by his side as Keith rubs his arm.
Shiro's eyes, usually warm with love and care, rage with the type of fire that refuses to die down;
so Keith doesn't bother. He brushes past Shiro and starts striding the same way the others went,
and Shiro doesn't try and grab him again.

But he keeps following.

"Keith, I swear to god," he says, a half-pace behind him as Keith traces the path to his room. "You
need to provide some answers about whatever is going on between you and Lance-

"I don't have to do anything!" Keith rebutts, turning on his heel to face Shiro directly. "I'm going to go train, and you're going to leave me alone, okay?!"

He turns back and keeps walking, but he picked up his stubbornness from somewhere: "Is this why you've been avoiding me?" Shiro asks. "Because there was something going on between you two? And you didn't want me to know?"

Keith keeps walking, heart clenching as though wrapping round every memory, every moment with Lance and protecting all that time from Shiro and his judgement. His breath escapes him in short, heavy blasts; his feet slam against the floor. Rage curdles in his blood, leaves his brain dizzy.

"Answer me, Keith!"

"I don't have to!" Keith shouts, and he dashes down the corridor and along some more till he reaches the safety of his room, locking the door hiding in his bathroom.

He does go train, eventually. Has lunch, attempts to comfort Pidge and Hunk about everything that happened, but he is still too distracted. Love intensified by the physical act of it, Lance cannot stop catching his eye. In training they focus too much on each other, defeating each other, protecting each other. They sit together at dinner, converse in short, quiet bursts, Keith teases Lance about how easily the humidity screwed with his hair, Lance raises a brow and makes a quip about the sunburn Keith had received in the few hours they'd spend lying in the grass outside Lance's home the previous evening.

And no one misses it, but no one says anything. They leave dinner together and end up at the pool, and when they part, Lance tells him not to bother bringing his armour when he comes round Lance's room that night.

His heart sings with excitement, his mind gets lost in memories as he showers, and he spends far longer there than he means to, sits on his bed, alarm clock in one hand while he taps his knee with the other, until he deems it late enough to finally go see Lance.

At this point, there is no reason to sneak around; the rooms are all soundproofed, and usually it's too early for anyone to be reeling from nightmares. Lance's room isn't far; a few corridors, a couple of corners. As promised, Keith hasn't brought his armour for the very first time, goes empty-handed, nerves and excitement twisting his heart, thumping down his veins. Again, he thinks, he prays. Again.

"Where are you going?" comes a voice from the darkness, and Keith twists to see Shiro lurking in the darkness, watching with crossed arms.

"Shiro," Keith says lowly. "What are you doing here."

"I'm here," Shiro says, matching his tone and taking a step closer, "for answers."

"Answers," Keith scoffs. "To what question?"

"You already know," Shiro insists, but Keith deigns him only silence. "Keith, just tell me what's going on with you and Lance!"

"Nothing serious," Keith lies, able to look Shiro in the eye only because it is so dark. "Is that what you want to hear?"
"Don't lie to me," Shiro says, and Keith winces, scowling. "Do you think you're subtle? Yesterday, when Hunk went and brought you two down to see his family? I'm not an idiot, Keith."

"It's nothing," Keith says again, but Shiro shakes his head.

"Stop lying!" His eyes widen a little, imploringly, and Keith shifts his gaze away, shoulders rising. "I saw you two last night, okay? I'm not a fucking idiot. I had a nightmare, I needed some air, I opened up the window and I saw you two there. And I know how you feel about him, Keith. Don't lie and tell me it's nothing."

What can he say? Shiro knows him to the bone, and Keith's always been honest about his feelings for Lance before this. Before he came back and everything just...changed in a way that refused to be shared.

"How long has this been going on," Shiro asks quietly, and Keith is tired of lying, the truth lies at the bottom of his throat like bile, ready to be expunged. Keith wants it gone. Keith does not want to be sick any longer.

"Months," he says, and Shiro lets out a breath like he's been gutted. "Since- after he first got shocked. You wouldn't let him fight, so I said I'd spar with him at night once his injuries had recovered."

"You did what? Keith, that's- that's suicide. We know what happens when he fights someone alone-"

"It's different with me," Keith says, then shakes his head. "I figured out how to bring him back. It's like that fairy tale, Sleeping Beauty... I just- I kissed him. And he- stopped. And realised who I was again."

"No..." Shiro moans, but Keith raises his chin.

"It's good," he says, "Lance has been able to burn off that weird energy and I've improved my own skills fighting against him. Everything else is just a- a-"

"A bonus?" Shiro says, straightening up and fixing his eyes to Keith's. He's shorter than Lance these days. Everyone is. "And the sex, then? Has that been months as well?"

"Jesus," Keith hisses, "no! That was just- that was private."

"You were on a beach," Shiro reminds him. "That's public property, remember?"

"No one else was there! Shiro, what is your problem with this? Am I not allowed to- to spend time with Lance, now?"

"That's not what I'm saying," Shiro says, "but you're being stupid if you think there are no problems about this!"

"Problems like what," Keith demands, stopping his pacing to glare furiously at his sort-of-brother. "Well? What is the fucking problem?"

Shiro shakes his head again, leaning his head back for a moment as though he can't believe what he's been asked. It it mostly dark, at night the castle corridors light up through the seams in the floor, a low blue light that makes everyone seem a little haunted. Shiro's brows are heavy above his eyes.
"The problem," he says, enunciating his words as if he really thinks Keith is fucking stupid, "is that he's using you, Keith."

"Using me," Keith repeats, and laughs once. "Using me? Fuck off, Shiro."

"Isn't he?" demands Shiro, his voice a mix of Professional Leader and Stubborn Big Brother. It makes him sound like a fucking asshole. "He doesn't have feelings, Keith! He cannot care about you the way you care about him! He's obviously been using you so that he can mess around with you the way he does with all those aliens-

"Take that back," Keith says, voice rising. "That is not what this is! We- you have no idea how he acts around me! He's different! He does care! Just because he doesn't show it to you doesn't mean it's not there! He protected me from that grenade! He offered to go back with the druids when they kept hurting me!"

"He saved you because he knew you'd actually be able to feel the pain of being blown up like that! He offered to go back so that he'd have an opening to fight back! Keith, don't be stupid!"

"I'm not being stupid! You're the one with this fucking idea in your head of how Lance is, and you can't let go of it because you can't imagine a world in which Lance actually feels something for me! But he does! He told me-"

"He lied to you-"

"He's scared! About everything that's happening, but I calm him down, I keep him grounded, I help him when no one else even realises he needs help!"

"What the hell does he have to be scared of!?" Shiro demands, gesturing his arms down and opening his palms, asking for an explanation. "Keith, he has no quintessence! He has a cut in his brain! He is incapable of feeling anything, physical or emotional or- anything! Whatever you think he's feeling, it's just an act! To convince you into- doing all this shit you're doing with him! It's not like we're on civilised planets all the time! He needs someone at the castle to screw, right?"

"Shut the fuck up, Shiro!" Keith explodes, heart throbbing in his chest, shame curling in his gut while rage pumps through his every vein, forcing ugly, unkind words out of him. "Just shut the fuck up! You don't understand and you never will! Lance fucking cares for me! You can't fucking take that away from me! You can take my parents and you can take my home and you can take the garrison away, but I will not fucking let you take this from me! I love him! And I know he cares for me, too! So just shut the fuck up and leave us the fuck alone! Okay!?"

"Keith, don't fucking do this-" Shiro says, but Keith is already storming away, fury burning into his heart, trying to poison all the memories Keith has stored there with whispers that what Shiro's saying is true. That Lance's breakdown was fake, that everything is fake-

It isn't fake.

"I said fuck off!" Keith yells, hurrying towards Lance's door in the distance. "I'm not fucking talking about this anymore if you refuse to-"

"You're the one refusing to confront the-"

"Just shut up! Shut up!"

Perhaps they're being too loud; Lance's door slides open just as Keith approaches, and Lance stands in the doorway, shirtless and hot and caring.
"Keith, don't do this-"

"What's going on," asks Lance, cutting through their bullshit like one of those daggers he carries around. Keith halts, stood between him and Shiro, who stares wide-eyed at Lance and his unconcerned tilt of the brow.

No one says anything for a long moment, Keith just looks from Lance to Shiro and back, chest heaving, heart aching and burning and dreading whatever's coming next, his fingers feel heavy, tingling at the ends, he hasn't got quite enough oxygen, plants his feet to prevent himself from swaying.

"...Is there a problem," Lance tries again. "Shiro?"

"I was- I..." He seems to have lost all fire in the face of the ice wall Lance erects with such ease. "Lance, whatever you're doing with Keith-"

"Is none of your business," Lance says smoothly, and Keith's eyes go big, the corners of his lips twitching up.

"He's my brother."

"Is he?" A brow pops up, Lance shifts his weight to the other foot. "You want me to beg at your feet for his hand or what?"

"I want you to stay away-"

"No can do," Lance says, and holds out his hand to Keith. "You coming in?" he asks, and Keith finds himself looking back at Shiro, his brother, shoulders slumped, brows pinched, shaking his head just slightly.

And he has always been like that. So protective. So unwilling to let Keith have his own experiences, to live his life like a normal kid. And maybe he isn't normal. Maybe he never was. But can't he be allowed this one thing, this one fucking thing that Shiro doesn't even understand?

Doesn't he, at least, deserve this?

Keith thinks he does.

So he turns away, takes Lance's hand, and the bedroom door slides shut behind them.

Chapter End Notes

hm so do i get award for least satisfying return to earth ever in the world
or.......................... :^)

anyway i have a bunch of stuff to talk abt! first off just reminders that i have a playlist and a pinterest board if u want to check those out to get a better Vibe of this fic!
secondly and related, if anyone has some songs they think fit this fic/where it's going, feel free to rec them! i'm always on the lookout for lyrics to put before chaps lolololol

uhhh lastly i made a tag on my sideblog for this fic bc ?? that's a thing ppl do. and originally i wrote this chap like a couple months back, or at least the scene where lance comes home, and i did it from lance's pov and a few things were diff - everyone
already knew abt lance and keith, it was set a little more in the future - so if anyone's interested i can pop that up on tumblr and put it in the tag. i dont think theres any spoilers lol. uh and it's just fic: mos if anyone wants to like...put anything in that tag too....... so yeah! hope u enjoyed! feedback as always welcomed! i did quite some research on cuba and spanish and that kind of thing, but uh, it was difficult finding the kind of info i was looking for. so if this doesnt feel very authentic, uh, feel free to let me know. oh! also i hc lance and his fam as afrolatine, and since the original photo of lance's family from that mindmeld episode had a variation of skin colours i tried to convey that also. so. yeah! peace. im dead.

OH also im aware things look p bleak in this fic. but i do want to remind everyone it will have a happy ending. ik that the "langst" genre (???) gets a lot of shit for putting a latine hero thru a lot of useless pain etc, and i rly dont want to contribute to that. this is just a very long painful journey to what i hope will be a satisfying ending when we get there lololol

so ya feedback welcomed! where do u think this is going! did this chap surprise u! in a good or a bad way! if it was a bad way uhhhhhhhh just pretend it wasnt! jk. peace for real.
Chapter Summary

things fall apart, and others come together

Chapter Notes

yohoho back at it again with the bullshit. first things first this chap has uhhh pretty graphic descriptions of torture just. sprinkled throughout. it gets pretty gross ngl. so id be wary of that. it pops up a few times as well so if any of that is uncomfortable or might set you off, i’d tread cautiously.

i feel like i need to apologise for how long the last couple chaps were.....idk i had very specific end points in mind and then certain events Had to be in certain povs and then so much ended up happening during keith's chap sldjaldja but sometimes thats just how it is. i dont think chap lengths are going to be very consistent after this tbh.

sooooo enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I seek to cure what's deep inside
Frightened of this thing that I've become
Africa, Toto

--

Who am I?

It's a question that haunts Lance the moment he steps out onto that green grass, tilts his head back and feels rain for the first time in years. Every drop feels heavy with a memory he can no longer grasp, till it slips off his skin, through his fingers, leech into the ground below. Pushing the yellow door open and facing the evidence that he once existed here; drawings and photos and his name written in black ink, red crosses marking off each and every day he was gone missing. A board on a wall dedicated to looking for him, with pictures of someone who looked a little like him, things he used to own, he used to do. A bedroom he lived in, most of his possessions either hidden in cardboard boxes or strewn on the walls for all to see, photos, posters, star charts. A rosary above his bed that his mother presses into his hand the morning he leaves.

Who was this person, and who is he now? Hunk and Pidge stared at those photos as though mourning a ghost. Keith watched Lance watching Hunk and Pidge as though he was a ghost himself. Maybe Lance is. How would he know? He thought he was something more solid than that, though. Something you could smack a gun against and he wouldn’t back up an inch. He thought he was a shield, he thought he was a steel wall that could stand up to anything, to any injury or any abuse.
But his family had looked at him, then through him. As if trying to find whoever he was within the cracks.

Keith looks at him like that too, sometimes. As if there's something deeper within him. Something hopeful.

But Lance doesn't think there is.

Who am I, asks the face in the mirror in his bedroom. *I'm you*, Lance thinks, staring then at the family photo he'd picked up, eyes honed in on a thin boy with messy hair and a stupid grin, wonders how they could be the same. *You but stronger. You but better. You but unafraid.*

Or, so he thought. Fear gripped his heart when he awoke on that infirmary table and thought he was with the galra, it's true, but it had been leeched away within hours, and from then on fear had no hold over him. In an ambush or sniping from a cliff, there was no place for fear; if anything, killing only brought Lance elation, that he was doing what he was, somehow, crafted to do. Hold a gun, brandish a spear. End a dozen lives in the blink of an eye. Even navigating battles with his supposed friends isn't scary, though sometimes Lance thinks maybe it should be. The way they look at him, sometimes, like they want to cordon him off with black and yellow caution tape and stand around taking notes on him. He doesn't like it. It reminds him, sort of, vaguely, somewhere in the back of his mind, of being with the galra. They watched him, too. They'd leave him alone in a tiny dark room for hours and he was completely trapped, lost in the dark, and yet he had felt their eyes on him. Burning into him. It had been something physical, an invisible brand, and his skin itches when these people do the same thing.

That doesn't scare him, though. It's something else, someone else. Real fear creeping through his gut hunting for his heart, clawing through his lungs, sneaking between his ribs. Keith looking at him like he knows everything Lance is thinking. Like he *knows* Lance, and then Lance will refocus, pull himself back together and scowl, and then Keith looks at him like maybe he doesn't know Lance at all.

And Lance doesn't know which he prefers.

Neither, nothing, none of this, *none* of this! He didn't used to be like this. Weren't there weeks when he felt nothing at all? When the days drifted by him, when he'd sit down for dinner and come back to himself all alone in his room? He felt like a ghost back then, barely existing, barely breathing. What is he now? Is he here or is he human? He can't be both. He can't be out the galra's reach only *human*.

Or, mostly human. Human with unhuman legs, unhuman attributes. Human but not really human at all.

He's sick of thinking like this, he wants to train, see Keith, or maybe not see Keith, he still can't decide, last night he felt possessed by a spirit of something younger than himself, when he laid in bed with Keith before going to the beach it had felt too much like safety, like something Lance might keep wanting for a long time and might miss if it ever left.

It's his own fault. He got carried away. Keith had kept grinning on the beach, whenever he got one over Lance he wouldn't hesitate to make a quip about it, and he'd looked different on Earth, on sand, before sea. Realer and more solid than Lance had thought, something about the moonlight turning his hair silver like his eyes, lining the muscles in his arms, his legs. If Lance is a ghost banished from heaven then Keith had to be god himself, and Lance had wanted to devour that holiness whole, take some of it into himself, keep his veins flowing with something celestial, something higher than himself.
He shouldn't have done it; he knows that. Whatever was brewing between the brothers is now at a boiling point due to his actions, and he can't even be sorry. At this moment Shiro is no doubt hunting Keith across the castle, demanding answers, but Lance can't care. He is too full of gold, of sand and sea, to be anything but amazed that Keith had actually gone to the beach with him last night. Had wanted to. Had wanted Lance - ghostly and haunting and nothing good - regardless.

Regardless, last night on the beach had been like a shock to his nervous system, kind of, not really. A different kind from what he's used to. It didn't force him to sleep, it woke him up, his heart had jolted and for a moment every feeling had been undeniably real, undeniably there.

What does that mean? The druids tried to torture his emotions out of him and somehow they keep coming back. They want him anyway. Had they anticipated this or do they have no idea what he's going through? Would they realise and fix their mistake? What if they did take him back, strip him down to his bones, coat them in steel till he's a walking suit of armour? He thought he already was one, but he isn't. He thought he'd died in every real way a person could, but his heart has begun to ache profusely and he cannot distract himself from it. Usually, when he wants some distracting, he goes to Keith. But Keith is the source.

So he can't.

Otherwise he'd train himself into the ground, but since returning to the castle this morning he's been laid out on the infirmary operating table, with Pidge and Hunk and occasionally Coran prodding at his legs with the new tools they've developed, trying to fix them. Fix him. He doesn't fight back. The broken leg fucking glows in the dark, attempting stealth is a joke. And he doesn't want the druids' magic to still be such an intricate, necessary part of him. He can't linger on it too long, or else he'll recognise currents in his legs, pounding back and forth and begging to bite through the rest of him.

His family had stared at the left leg for so long. At all of him. His hair and his face and his scars, they stared when he was talking to them, they stared when he was completely unaware of them. That's not what a family is supposed to do, he knows that much. But he no longer functions as a regular human should, so why should they treat him like one?

They looked at him like he was a monster.

And he is one.

The legs prove it. The scars are a warning sign to those around him that they should not try to touch him, lest he decimate them. Lest he turn the cruelty that was dealt to him upon them instead.

"Can you fix them?" he asks as Hunk and Pidge stand on either side of him, staring where the prosthetics supposedly meet his flesh. They say it's difficult to find the exact point, that the purple glow on his left leg dies out but it still feels like prosthetic beneath skin for an inch or so beyond it.

"We don't know," Pidge says, and taps at what is definitely his own thigh with one of her new tools. "Technically the answer is yes, but...the galra modified them so we can't touch them, implanted them with something that passes an electric conduct onto you...so it's possible they've done other things we can't see that'll make the process of removing these difficult..."

"We might have to..." Hunk pauses, then says, "uh, just...chop your legs off. H-higher than the galra did it. If we can't take them off you safely, th-then..."

"It's a big if," says Pidge, glancing to Hunk with a confident smile. Her brows furrow though as Hunk stares down at Lance's legs, the smile slipping into distress. "I just wish we could- switch off
"Maybe Allura can do something," Hunk muses, running a thin, rectangle-ended tool along one of the glowing seams of his left leg. "With her quintessence powers, or maybe she can siphon the galra quintessence away using a healing pod..."

"I don't know," Pidge murmurs. "There was a reason we couldn't do that... I think the galra quintessence is blocking us, right? Or like...it's fused with Lance. If it goes down..." They look over to Lance, and their brows raise as though they didn't expect Lance to be paying attention. "...Lance goes down, too."

Would that be so bad? Lance almost asks, but he keeps his mouth shut. Asking a question like that would only derail their focus, make them too sad to look at him. Lance has to wonder: would it be, though? If this galra quintessence is the only thing keeping him alive, maybe it'd be better for it, and him, to be gone. At the time, Lance had brushed off the way that leader of the first rebel base they'd visited had spoken about Lance's legs, the strange combination of horror and disgust and real fear that had flickered in his eyes when Lance had spoken about being stronger for them, and how he'd never let the galra change him like that. Lance hadn't cared; Lance had wanted to fight, and these legs helped him.

But he thinks he gets it, now.

"Did you call your moms, Hunk?" Pidge asks, tapping along the back of Lance's leg that Hunk has raised up slightly.

"Uh...yeah, actually! After, um...everyone calmed down, Diego let me borrow his computer and I facetimed them," he says, and Pidge smiles. "My li'l sisters started crying. So did my moms, actually. And me." Pidge lets out a soft laugh, and Hunk gives a smile of honey as he sets Lance's leg down then lifts the other. "It was insane. They kind of lost their minds for a bit, and it took a long time to explain everything, and then all that's gone on with Lance and... But they believed me. They said the garrison were acting super shady and they were suspicious, so they called up Lance's family and found out they felt the same, but the garrison kept blocking them and sidestepping their questions, they hired, like, private investigators and called up conspiracy theorists... Crazy, right?"

"Yeah," Pidge murmurs, tapping along and making notes on a holopad. "My mom said the same. She cried for an hour. And I had to tell her I hadn't found Dad or Matt yet, b-but I know Matt is alive, so...and she said she'd keep up the appearance that she was still looking. Just in case, you know?"

"My moms too," Hunk says. "You think they called each other, after? I went down to get some water halfway through the night and I saw Sophia on the computer..."

"I'm sure they would," Pidge says. "Did Shiro call his parents?"

"Yeah, that's... After I called home, I went to get water and Shiro was awake from a nightmare and heard me go downstairs, so we ended up talking a bit and I told him I'd called my moms and he was like, oh I should do that too, and I was like, yeah dude! Come on! It's been even longer for your's! But he seemed really distracted..." Lance raises a brow when Hunk looks over at him, and Hunk flushes pink, returning his gaze to the notes Pidge has taken. "Uh, yeah. But - Diego sleeps like a log - so I brought him in and he called his parents and it was so crazy... I was just chilling in the corner, like, trying not to cry at the way his parents reacted - it was insane. It was... Shiro really looked like just a kid for a moment, you know? I'm so used to him being our leader, or the best pilot at school, and to see him in front of his parents was like...such a weird reminder that, like. He's a kid, too. You know?"
"I get what you mean," Pidge says, and Hunk rolls his eyes as she brushes a finger over Lance's knee and hisses as she's shocked. "Ugh! I thought I was getting used to that... Can you pass me the...? Yeah. No, but I know what you mean. It's kind of like when you see him and Keith teasing each other, and it's like, oh, yeah, they're basically brothers... What were his parents like?"

"They cried a lot...and then they started scolding him. It was actually so funny, but they were still, like, on the verge of tears? I dunno, it was weird. But Shiro seemed happier afterwards, so..."

"Good," Pidge murmurs, and Lance twists his mouth, crosses his arms, and says nothing. Shiro must know something; Keith has been avoiding him for weeks, and when they left the pod this morning Shiro had grabbed Keith's arm and glared at Lance, and Lance figured Keith would fight back if he wanted, so he'd left it alone.

But what if that was the wrong idea? What if something happened? What if Keith told Shiro? Does Lance care?

What if Shiro tries to stop it? What if Keith does as Shiro says?

So maybe Lance does care. He can't decide; he can't sort it out in his mind. Everything from the past few weeks is a jumble in his head, incomprehensible to look at, and Lance is scared that if he sorts that jumble out into names and pages and files then suddenly something might make sense. He might be drawn towards a conclusion, an epiphany, and then he'll be forced to change again. If he starts thinking about what he does and doesn't care about; why he does, why he doesn't, why he shouldn't; why he isn't like the druids tried so hard to make him into, what they were making him into in the first place; and his family, how they think and feel and whether Lance is bothered by it, whether he wants to ease their sorrow or erase them from his mind all over again.

He keeps listening to Hunk and Pidge. Hunk laughs about his sisters, who showed him their report cards and talked about school, his moms, who gave him a new recipe and listened with awe as he explained how he learnt to cook in space. Pidge talks about her mom and how she seemed to understand Pidge's situation instantly, how she talked about where her father could've gone, how close yet so far Matt always seems to be. A world that Lance has, too. It exists out of his grasp, planet Earth spins on its axis and carries with it the wealth of his old life, and Lance stands before it, that knowledge within arms' reach, and remains motionless. Watches it go on without him. It must be better. Him returning home did nothing but make everyone feel worse.

Even if he wanted to reach a hand out, connect that world and himself, his wrist is still chained to his thigh. It is the one thing he cannot break out of, chains of smoke, whispers of the druids. *Silence* they have always said. *Be strong. Be brave. Get back up again. Keep going. Get up. Keep going. Get up! Get up! Shut up!*

*Shut up*, Lance thinks, staring at Hunk's mouth shaping words of home and comfort and things Lance can no longer have, at Pidge and the way her eyes light up and get wet at the same time, recalling something kind her mother had said. *Shut up*, he thinks.

Shut up, leave me alone. I don't want this- *interaction*, this constant reminder of that which I don't have. A longing I feel regardless of all that's been done to me. Why am I like this? Why am I changing? Will I keep changing? Does it ever stop? Is this as far as I can go? What if I never remember? What if I never care?

What if that's just who I am now?

Something unfixable.
A toy, half-broken.
A destructor, a liar, a soldier, someone who cannot touch anything lest he crushes it in his grip.
"Lance?"
Are they speaking to him?"
"Hey, buddy...just take a deep breath, alright? You're fine."
He is fine. Why are they speaking to him like that?
"And don't... Pidge, go get some...yeah. Lance? Are you listening?"
"I'm listening," Lance says, but it comes out a rasp, air barely scrounged out his lungs, and when Lance looks down, his chest is heaving.
"Uh huh," Hunk murmurs, and when Lance looks to him his brows are furrowed, concern turned into a thousand bullets through Lance's chest. "Deep breaths, okay? Pidge?"
"Here," Pidge says, handing Hunk some bandages, and Pidge takes one of Lance's hands and unpries his fingers from his palm, and he sees they've been dug in so intensely that his palms are bleeding.
"Oh," Lance says, and Pidge dabs wet cloth against the blood. Hunk does the same and smothers the small wounds in balm and wraps up his hands. "I didn't realise..."
"Got a bit lost in your head, huh?" Hunk says, his tone all fake cheer and superficial sunshine. "Happens to the best of us."
"Are you okay, Lance?" asks Pidge, carefully turning bandage over hand and back again. "What were you thinking about?"
The druids in his head, whispering in his ear, their hands guiding always at his elbow. Do they linger still or does he imagine it? At night everything is a shadow.
"Earth," Lance says finally, as they're both taping up his injuries and putting the bandage aside. It's not a lie.
"Oh," Hunk says, the vowel punched out of him. "Did you- remember something?"
Lance shakes his head, and Pidge's breath shudders out her body.
"Does it make you angry?" they ask quietly in tune with a diminished seventh. "Does it make you sad?"
"It doesn't make me anything," Lance says, and it feels like a truth and a lie at the same time. "It's just how it is."

Except Keith, and it doesn't make sense. If only he was flung out of reach, then maybe Lance could make sense of his head and the way his own thoughts had turned his body against him, how now Pidge and Hunk glance at him like a ticking time bomb that even they cannot defuse before the minute is up.
"Well," says Hunk in a sigh, "be careful. Of... Your hands were bleeding. You could hurt yourself."

"I know," Lance says. "Whatever."

That kills the conversation, but they don't do much more. Coran pops down at some point, comments on Pidge and Hunk's notes and frowns at the new bandages on Lance's hands, then herds them up for lunch, and Lance sits by Keith and explains in short how he got the bandages then distracts him by telling vague jokes, and Keith points out something dumb he did during their fight last night and Lance pulls his eyes away, still half-smiling, only to meet Shiro's cold glare.

That anger stays with Shiro, Lance spars with Keith as much as he can during their training that afternoon but Shiro says something about his prosthetic making him more on Lance's level and they fight for a while, and having the prosthetic doesn't really help Shiro as much as he implied but he hits hard and fast and angry, emotion spilling into action, and Lance wonders how much he knows.

It must be a lot, for him to act like this. It must be too much. Keith must have said something. Keith must have- told the truth. Shiro must know, what they did last night and what they've been doing for the past month or so. Every night, did Keith break down and confess it in a whisper or did he scream the truth at Shiro, so loud maybe the whole castle heard?

Or maybe Keith told him nothing. And that made Shiro angrier. Why would Keith care more about Lance, emotionally unavailable and attempting nightly murder on Keith, over his big sort-of brother, who's apparently raised him since they were both young and carried him all the way from their cabin in the desert to the nearest road so an ambulance could pick them up?

Lance thinks that might make him angry, too.

At the same time, he doesn't give a fuck. They're all fucking adults here, except Pidge, but Keith can make his own decisions and if they, perhaps questioningly, veer towards Lance, then why should Shiro care? So Lance fights back without remorse and sweeps the floor with Shiro and Allura eventually intervenes and they all fight against gladiators, and at some point Lance starts bleeding through his bandages and gets blood on the butts of his guns but it doesn't affect him. Tiny pricks of red. When he showers the blood dissipates amongst the water, he washes his hair and when he dries it off, it is still as curly as before. Like returning home had triggered something and now it cannot be flat again. It's wild and he doesn't know how to tame it, so he leaves it alone, sprawling a little across his forehead, springing up.

Then he sits on the edge of the bed and thinks. He thinks for ten whole minutes about what the hell is happening to him, and a pinprick of fear penetrates whatever fortress has been guarding the pathetic hollow of his heart, so he jolts to his feet and walks around till he finds Allura and Coran standing before the star chart in the control room. They'd left the Sol system as quickly as possible, and the areas surrounding it are blue with freedom.

"Maybe here..." Allura murmurs, pointing to an entirely blue quadrant not far from them. "This planet seems inhabitable, and it has all the signs... Not even very far, we'd make it tomorrow..."

"That sounds ideal," Coran says, eyes trailing the map till he sees Lance. "Lance, my boy! We've just been looking for a quintessence planet, care to join us?"

"Don't think I can contribute much," Lance says, but he skulks up alongside them and stares at the planet Allura is pointing to. "What's special about it?"
"Strange energy readings - it's a small planet, you see? Tiny, yet it survives so close to its sun... And the energy readings really are off the charts... Of course, it could be nothing. From this distance, readings can be muffled, and we don't have logs on this area of the universe, so... So, we don't know what's there. The galra could've invaded and we'd have no idea. Or the people there could be dead, or maybe there are no people, and we can't balance your quintessence on our own - we need people familiar with its planet's quintessence to guide us... And then maybe you'll...recover."

"Recover," he repeats flatly. "You think it's possible."

"I think it's impossible for you to not change, somehow," Allura says, and Lance looks to her face, her clear blue eyes, the imploring manner they gaze up at him. "Losing so much quintessence is unhealthy, combined with this strange galra quintessence... And then gaining it- so much has been lost, I fear it could kill you but...with the right help it shouldn't. You should...get stronger again. And...more in touch with yourself. I... I don't know what else- there are so many factors..."

"Stronger," Lance picks out, stretches the word out, feels it out in his own body. How does he get stronger? He's already so... Isn't he a miracle of endurance? Or was he mistaken?

"Yes, probably," Coran says, ignorant of Lance's ponderings. "Physically or mentally, who really is to say, but somehow, certainly! Maybe your soul, I mean, I was informed of what happened when Allura tested your quintessence... That will definitely be improved by having this whole mess sorted!"

"My soul," he repeats flatly.

"Quintessence is an energy that exists in all things," Allura says, zooming in a little on the planet they'd singled out. "But it- it has a unique relationship with everything. Everything. And it bonds to- to people, and to the lions, that's why, that's why you couldn't just pilot any lion. Your quintessence had to be compatible. That's why you can't fly Blue or Red now. And so it is somewhat representative of your soul, your real, inner self... And so- when we ran those tests, when we saw your quintessence..."

Galra quintessence. Traces. "My soul," Lance says, "is tainted by the galra. You can't fix that, can you."

"I don't know," Allura rushes out, fisting her hands in the skirt of her dress. "I think- when I... It was- is bonded so closely to you, that which existed...I couldn't even help you myself. Such a small amount blocked me, but it's so intricately bound up in you, now, and I... Yes, I suppose you're right."

"Princess," Coran murmurs, but Allura shakes her head.

"No," she says. "I want to be honest about this. That's what I think. I don't know if it is the truth. It's just...how I see it."

"You're probably right," Lance says, and looks back up at the star chart, zooming closer on this planet. There is no visual, no detail, just a big blue sphere growing closer, stats stacking up beside it, the centre pulsing white and pink.

The planet has a ring of moons, some big and some small and some cracked and some misshapen, and they dance around the planet as it fills a the room above them.

"Look at that," Allura murmurs, gazing into this convulsion of energy. "It has to be what we're
looking for."

Is this his salvation? White and pink and blue. They'll reach it tomorrow, she'd said.

"It must be," Coran says, a strange tilt to his voice as though he's just seen enlightenment. "It's untouched."

"What will they have me do?" Lance asks, voice quiet. As the planet grows larger and stills, the room becomes hushed, the low monotony of the ship's engines buzzing under their feet. Lance can pick out every breath Coran and Allura take, deep and slow, awed.

"It depends who they are," Allura says. "Anything... It could be something akin to my own powers, or... I remember, one planet I visited the quintessence was like spun silk, and they'd wrap you up in it like a cocoon for a day and when you emerged you were...vitality personified."

"I won't do that," he says lowly, and she nods.

"Anything," she says. "We just don't know."

For a long time they stand and stare at this planet, slowly spinning, bursting with life and energy and the secret that might cure Lance. Will change him somehow, Allura is sure. Lance isn't sure how to feel about that; maybe he does want to change. Be something better, nicer. For Keith, at least. He doesn't want to keep trying to kill him at night. Sparring is fun but he always jolts back to the arena and he loses himself there, all sense of personhood, who he used to be, what he stood for, all that exists is him and the opponent and the physical presence of death hanging over them, pools of blood slipping them up, mangled limbs litter the floor, Lance wears a crown of bones still sticky with flesh.

He feasts his eyes upon the neck. Sometimes he fights real monsters, savage animals, near-invincible robots, but the galra soldiers that go against him, they have such weak necks. They have armour similar to the paladins, high armoured collars, but there's a gap, enough to wedge a knife through, tear apart with a spear, if he has them on their knees it's too easy to shove their heads back and aim for the gullet with a gun.

The crown drips into his face. He isn't allowed a helmet. He isn't allowed armour. He wears his prisoner's rags and once he starts winning he gets a gun, and once he starts falling in line he gets whatever weapon he asks for.

"Lance?" says Coran, and when he looks down his chest is heaving again.

There is no blood here, even though he can see it dripping from his hands. Guts lodged between his teeth. Something is dripping down his cheek, his brow. He blinks blood out his eye.

"Lance," says Allura, and the bandages are red beneath his nails again.

"I'll go to the infirmary," he says, and strides away, blood trailing his wake. Do they see it? Maybe they've always seen it; maybe that's why they always look at him the way they do, why they don't follow now, why Allura quietly asks Coran to plot a track to this new planet.

It will wash away this gore for good. Earth tried. Earth poured rain on him and called it holy, God opened the Heavens for Lance and cried endless tears and Lance tried to soak them in, but he'd stood in that grass and felt his sickness still aching within him. God didn't help. Earth failed.

Blood beneath his nails, in his eyes, down his cheeks. He doesn't come across anyone in the hallways. He walks alone, a spectre waiting to be turned solid.
Tomorrow, he thinks. *I will change tomorrow.*

But into what?

--

He does end up in the infirmary, although it feels like some kind of miracle. He peruses the cabinets in a daze, considering the various tools and foreign objects lined up there, held half-captive with the idea to grab any of those things and stick himself with them, sees a shelf of plastic-covered needles and imagines using them on himself, filling them with something good, quintessence, or maybe alcohol, and shooting himself up first. Before anyone else can do it. He wonders if he could make it hurt. That maybe, in doing it himself, he can prompt something physical out of himself.

But he doesn't try. The bandages and balm are, in fact, laying out on the table from when he, Hunk, and Pidge were here earlier. Lance undoes the bandages with fumbling fingers, and the blood is dripping from his palms by the time he remembers he needs to clean it up, so he gets wet towels and sits back down on the bed and cleans his hands, then gets back up and finds a dry towel and sits down and dries them off, except by that time they're bleeding again and the white towel is smeared with red and it goes on like this for a while, time dripping out of existence until the blood clots and he wipes his palms clean and dry for good. He squeezes too much balm out the tube and ends up coating his entire hands in it, wraps his hands back up in bandages too loose on one hand, too tight on the other.

"Lance?" comes a voice, and when he drags his gaze to the door Coran is standing there, frowning before coming quickly to his side. "Have you been here all this time? Did you..."

"I," Lance says, and the world wobbles, the air thick like soup, or the grey mush Lance was fed with the galra, it was viscous but not chewy, except some parts of it would be cold and solid and it was disgusting... He felt full after he ate it, but the wrong kind, the nauseous kind, every breath reminding him of what lingered at the bottom of his throat, heavy and undigested, and if his mouth is open too long he thinks it might just *come* out of him, unable to stop it, but- he *needs* energy if he wants to keep fighting, so he swallows it back down and ignores the burn in his eyes, his throat, and after a while it becomes *easy-*

"Oh, you've done the bandages all wrong, and- did you get that all over...? Zarkon's dusty underthings, my boy," Coran says, and the air is clear again.

"What?" Lance says.

"Come on, get up, wash your hands," Coran says, undoing the bandages Lance had spent so long figuring out. "Yes, yes, very annoying, now come along."

Lance gets to his feet and the air is *too* light, he sways on his heels for a moment before Coran presses a hand to his back and keeps him moving forward.

"Everything alright, my boy? You seem a little...off." His tone is light but the weight of his eyes on Lance's is unbearable. Lance stares at his hands, the balm is clear but he can still see it, dewy and sticky, turning his edges to mist.

"I'm just..." Lance frowns, holds his hands under the tap that Coran turns on and, after a moment, starts moving his hands together to get rid of the balm. Even as the water turns it slimy and it slips off his hands, the fog doesn't dissipate. It coats him further, his arms, his torso, up to his head. Fading away. What is a person defined by? What they love, *who* they love? Their history, their
family? But Lance has none of that, not really, not anymore. No way to ground himself. He disappears. He is a ghost.

"Lance," Coran says, steam raising from the water, and Lance realises his hands are turning red.

"I..." Lance says, removes his hands from the water. "What was the question?"

Coran yanks the tap off, pats Lance's hands dry, sits him back on the bed, and redoes what Lance spent hours doing.

"Are you alright, Lance?" Coran asks, eyes meticulously on Lance's hands.

Am I alright?

"Does it matter?" Lance asks, and Coran tugs on a bandage before tying it up.

"I think so," Coran says. "You left the control room two hours ago. Did you come straight here?"

"I think it took a while," Lance says. "I'm..." Fading away. Nothing to anchor himself to. His family presumably tried their hardest and this is what he came to. The garrison, this team, the druids - and he is imperfect for all of them. Not a good son nor a good pilot nor a good paladin nor a good fucking...whatever the fuck they were making him into. Unless this was the outcome - a loose screw tossed into space and destroying everything he comes into contact with, spinning worlds out of axis, people out of control.

"Lance," Coran says again, and both hands have been tied up by now. "Are you listening to me?"

God, he thinks, "No," he says. "I'm sorry. Were you speaking?"

"...It's dinner time," Coran tells him. "I was sent to look for you. Will you come?"

He nods, and gets to his feet. His legs, as always, are solid, he walks without stumbling. The seat next to Keith is free when he reaches the dining room, and he sits there and five minutes into dinner Keith says something about his hair, and Lance finds himself laughing, pointing out how red Keith's nose is, and his fingers come back into focus. Eating dinner isn't a problem, the food stays down, the cutlery doesn't drop from transparent fingers. Keith laughs and the sound melts into the air, softening it, making it easier to exist in.

He can catch his breath, time stays and sticks and stretches out over Keith's smile, the way his eyes light up, how he tucks a lock of hair behind his ear and punches Lance's shoulder when he says something dumb. The others talk in their own time but Lance doesn't hear it. Dinner ends and Lance doesn't want to end up wandering the halls again, so he mentions the pool and asks Keith to come along and challenges him to a race, which he wins, and a wrestling match, which he loses but sort of on purpose, and everything in the water is real.

Everything is real.

"Come to my room tonight," Lance asks in swim shorts and a towel round his neck. They stand in the lift as it returns them to their floor, shorts dripping water onto the floor. Keith has his hair up and soaked thoroughly, and he has Lance's bandaged hands in his, and he doesn't ask questions.

"Sure," Keith says.

"Don't bother bringing your armour," he adds, and realisation is a star blowing up in Keith's eyes.
"Yeah?"

A soft kiss before the doors open, lips on lips, nothing between them for a sweet second.

"Yeah," Lance says, and Keith smiles as the doors slide open, and squeezes his hands before going one way, and Lance goes the other.

Everything in the water is real. Lance tries to remind himself of it as water rains over him in the shower, but he shuts his eyes and tilts his head and tile turns to grass beneath his feet. The rainwater in Cuba had surrounded him. The air had been thick and heavy, enough to turn Lance's hair the way it is, enough that the rain was a gift. Lance breathes in steam, it coats his lungs in silk, he exhales dust and rot and it seeps into the soil below. The beach is so beautiful Lance can't look away, even though he knows he should turn back to his home.

The sand is white, pure, untouched except by the rain. The sea is gentle, waves cresting low and soft against the shore, kissing the heels of brave babies and their smiling mothers before sinking away, and people are playing in the water, tossing a beach ball back and forth and ducking each other under the water, and music is playing from a stereo tucked under an umbrella, and people are dancing, singing, drinking... The sky is grey but the sun still comes to greet them.

Earth, Lance thinks, stretches a hand out to catch the rain in, and knocks up against something.

Tile. White, all around him. He lowers his chin and opens his eyes and he is in a white tiled box, and when he gets out and dries off he does not know how long he was in there, except once he pulls some sweats on he can hear yelling outside his room.

"I said fuck off!"

That's Keith, he keeps yelling until Shiro intervenes, and with a heavy sigh Lance knows the jig is up. There is nothing left to hide, his door opens as he approaches and he stands in the frame, catching Keith's eye first and then Shiro's, and Shiro's is still steel, like a knife, or a thousand, driven an inch into him point-first, up his arms, his chest.

"What's going on," Lance says. The corridors are dark, lit in their seams by blue, so it must be night, so Keith must be coming to visit him. He must've spent hours in the shower, losing his edges again.

Shiro burns before him.

Keith's gaze swings like a lantern from Lance to Shiro and back, hovering and holding on Shiro, how his chest heaves, his fingers all clenched up and brows wobbling like he's not sure if he's angry or sad.

Then the lantern comes back to Lance, and it stays there. Has Keith always been so expressive? Torn up, torn apart, torn from his brother because he wants to be with Lance. Whose fault is that? Lance, for wanting so much? Keith, for wanting back? Shiro, for not leaving the wanting in peace? Keith looks ready to throw a hit but he's shaking all over, lava shivering in open air. His gaze softens upon Lance, his edges, too, fading just a little.

"Is there a problem," Lance asks when no one says anything, turns his gaze away from Keith.

"Shiro?"

"I was- I..." When Keith turned away from Shiro it was like a lamp had gone out. His shoulders slump, he gives in. Still, he straightens up and says, "Lance, whatever you're doing with Keith-"
"Is none of your business," Lance cuts in before Shiro can say something. What is he doing with Keith? Shiro sure as hell doesn't know. Or maybe he does, and whatever it is - awful, a nightmare, cruel - is something Lance does not want to hear.

"He's my brother."

"Is he?" Is that common knowledge? Are they brothers? They have different surnames. They don't look very alike. Then again, their comfort around each other, the way Shiro has really hunted Keith down in the past few days... Maybe he is. "You want me to beg at your feet for his hand or what?"

"I want you to stay away."

"No can do."

It doesn't matter if they're brothers; doesn't matter what Shiro meant to Lance before. Shiro doesn't understand, and won't allow this to continue. And Keith is looking at Lance with wide eyes and a grin curling his lips, like he wants nothing more than to rush Lance where he stands and kiss holiness into him like wine sliding down his throat.

So Lance constructs a wall. Every word, another brick. Body language, unimpressed and harsh, the cement sealing it together.

And Shiro, on one side.

Lance on the other.

Keith, hovering atop the bricks, perched to drop down on either side.

Lance makes it easy; "You coming in?" he asks, and holds out his hand, so ready to catch Keith when he falls.

And he does; takes Lance's hand, doesn't look back, and Shiro's head falls into his hands before the doors seal and Keith tries to devour Lance whole, bites his lips and sucks his tongue and drives him onto the bed, tugging Lance's hair, scratching into his shoulders. Digs into him as though like he wants to take out Lance's heart with his teeth.

Keep it, Lance wants to say as it dangles from Keith's lips, blood running down his chin. Keep it, it is ruined and ugly and deformed, but if you want it you can have it.

Keith would treat it so tenderly, Lance thinks.

"He knows," Lance says suddenly, and Keith looks up from where he was chewing up Lance's collarbone. "That's why you were fighting."

"Sort of," Keith says, frowning up at him, sitting back up a little. "You want to talk about this now?"

It will bother him if he doesn't. "Why did you tell him?"

"He was waiting for me when I left to come here... He...caught us last night. Had a nightmare, opened a window...saw us. On the beach."

"Oh," Lance says, wonders briefly what it looked like to Shiro. Moonlight, the touch of a god, the ocean a third participant.

More likely, an asshole messing round with his supposed brother.
"I knew he'd be angry," Keith mutters. "That's why I- I didn't want him to know. And I knew from the start he'd hate this- this, that I even got involved, and- and he was so angry. And I... But I'm allowed to do what I want! I- we- everything that's happened, don't we deserve this?"

He would treat Lance's heart so tenderly, he sees it in Keith's eye. Soft and warm and careful candlelight, holding full. Hands on Lance's shoulders, legs by his hips. His hair falls a little into his face, but he doesn't move it away, like maybe he doesn't want to let Lance go.

"You and I, Lance," he murmurs, and Lance blinks up at him. "Don't we deserve some happiness?"

"This makes you happy?"

Keith's cheeks darken, he glances away for a moment, doubt flickering his flame. "Doesn't it make you happy?"

Happiness...feels foreign. But Lance laughs with Keith. And he smiles. And he feels, he...feels.

"This makes me feel alive," Lance admits, his edges solid so that Keith has something to hold onto. "Like I'm human."

Something curious shines in Keith's eyes. "C'mere," he says, and Lance gets up on his elbows so they can kiss, slow and wet, and Keith follows when he lays back down and hooks his arms round Keith's waist.

He doesn't tell Keith about his own strangeness today, and minutes and hours turned to dust, how Lance's personhood depends on how near to Keith he is, he just sinks into the bed and distracts himself the same way he always does: with Keith, and the intoxicating feeling of being alive.

--

This night he dreams of death. Which isn't unusual - it is, after all, something he's encountered many times by now. But the deaths are strange, they're...unnatural. Or maybe too natural, Lance can't tell. Like a film projected before him, Lance sees his supposed family, living their lives in full and dying of old age; his friends, the war scars them and the wars hurts them but they mature also, going old and grey and passing away in peace. The earth living for longer than Lance can comprehend. Worlds he has never seen, blue and untouched.

But it is only a fogscreen. The druids lay in wait behind, teammates and family on their knees before him, Earth burning behind them, and they are dying, and they are begging for his help. He stands before them and does nothing. The druids take their time like they did with him, one tiny cut after the other, someone is on drugs, Shiro is panicking, a Robeast lasers Pidge's fingers off one by one.

"Stop," he says, his voice a whisper, and a druid hisses silence and nothing else comes out of him. People with eyes like his, wide and filled with tears, gazing at him, or squeezed shut, blood trailing over eyelids, stop he wants to beg but his mouth is motionless. Arms sawed off. Guts in piles next to their owners. A druid forces quintessence down Keith's throat till it drips out his eyes, his nose, his ears. They don't deserve this he cries, or tries to, and a druid smiles as she presses a torch to Hunk's throat, scream going raw being going out.

It is so real. He can smell it, heavy metallic blood gathering in his own throat like a fog, the heat off entrails, off the fire, salt from sweat and tears, it gathers on his own skin and sinks in like a thousand tattoos, his own suffering hidden with all theirs. Sickness gathers, tries to crawl up his throat but he is still. The heat is oppressive, every breath is a challenge, an exploration in death and
decay. He wants to move but all he can do is dig his fingers into his hands and stare, teeth grit, suffer with them.

And they die. One by one, there is no final killing blow, no knife wound or gun blast of mercy, just a slow descent punctured by screams and pleas and eyes, always, on Lance. Perfectly able to help them. Unhurt. Edges of his mouth crawling up into an unbearable smirk. They die, and he laughs.

Stop it, he wants to say. Hurt me instead. I can take it. A thousand times over, I can do it, I'll be stronger, I'll be better, just stop hurting them! Why can't you stop hurting them?


"Why does it matter to you, Lance?" asks this druid, cutting Keith's cheek open with a nail. "Get up, Lance."

Get up, help them. He can do it. He can do it.

"Lance?" she says, and grins. "Just get up."

Get up, he thinks. Get up get up get up-

"Get up! Lance! It isn't real, it's just a- jesus."

Upon waking, emotion fades. Lance sees these people dying in the back of his mind, and there is no horror. Instead Keith, kneeling next to him, a hand on his shoulder and the other cradling his own head.

"What is it?" Lance asks, shaking off Keith's hand as he sits up. In all honestly, that dream wasn't as bad as some others; there are dreams when it's his own innards being laid before him, or worse, when the others are watching, seeing him in true weakness, utterly vulnerable. Laughing when ethanol is dripped into an open wound. A poison-slicked knife is driven into his side and quintessence heals his flesh over it, and the poison burns through him, and they heal it, and it burns and they heal until his side is a ragged mess and he is barely breathing, and the others, they smile at each other, they say finally, getting what he deserves.

Those are the worst. They don't scare him...merely humiliate him.

"Talking in your sleep," Keith says. "I figured you were having a nightmare, then you wouldn't wake up..."

"A nightmare?" Lance says, but that is, technically, what it should be called. "It wasn't really... It wasn't scary."

"You were...asking them to hurt you instead," Keith says, hands hovering as though he thinks Lance really is scared. "Who were they hurting? Were you dreaming of the druids? Were they hurting us?"

Lance nods. "And my family. And I was just...watching... But it wasn't scary, it was just- what's the point of me, if I don't go in and fight? Do what others can't? Take the kind of heat that would kill someone else? But I couldn't do that. The druids told me to shut up and I...couldn't say a word."

Keith finally takes his hand. They're scarred, too. A long one atop three of his left hand fingers, a druid digging in a knife as though to chop his fingers off, then thinking better of it. Rings around his right hand pinky. Slashes across both palms. Raised, rough, calloused, ugly. Longer fingers, good with knives but better for guns. Keith's hands are smaller, like they never quite lost their baby
fat. He'd taken his motorcycle gloves off last night, slowly and carefully as though bearing a blood vessel connected directly to his heart. His fingers are calloused but the skin on his palms looks soft, and when Keith entwines their hands their palms meet. Lance can't feel it. He leaves his fingers loose, knows if he squeezes too hard he might quash Keith's bones into dust without even meaning to.

"Maybe," Keith says, "you're scared they'll control you, somehow."

"Somehow..." Lance murmurs. "But I don't think I feel fear - not for them. Not...unless..." A tightening in his chest, a quickening of his pulse. Is that fear? He feels the same way around Keith. So maybe love and terror are the same thing.

"Unless you do?"

"Unless I do..." Where else does he feel like this? He'd felt it a little back on Earth, before going in front of his own family and explaining to them what the hell was wrong with him. Felt it waking up that first time on the infirmary table, thinking he was hallucinating on drugs. Sometimes it snatches at him when he fights Keith and disappears into the arena.

How long has he been feeling it? Is it the only thing he feels?

If love is terror, then the answer is yes.

"Keith," Lance says, "are you afraid of anything? What does it feel like?"

Keith frowns, and crosses his legs, free hand playing absently with Lance's loose fingers. Doesn't look in his eyes when he says, "I don't know...a lot of things. More than I'm willing to admit... I'm scared of...losing anyone. Of- of everything that's already happened happening again... You getting hurt, or...taken...the druids doing...anything to you...or anyone else. But also...I'm scared of being half-galra. What that really means. No one's told me... And I'm scared that- that somehow I'll do something horrible because I'm galra and it'll be out of my control. Or that one day Red will reject me. Or that...I'll wake up and...Hunk won't be making breakfast, and Pidge won't be making coffee, and Shiro won't be training, Allura won't be hounding after us all, Coran won't be cheering us up...and you'll be gone...again."

Again.

"What does it feel like?" Lance asks, and Keith glances over, brows raising.

"Uh...I don't know. I get really hot. In my chest. Because I get angry, at being scared, at whatever it is that's... And usually, I can just fight whatever's scary, or I can train enough to ignore it, but sometimes...it doesn't work like that. And I just get cold. And alone. My heart beats really fast, like I'm on a really high training level, I get sweaty, even though I'm cold, I... It's hard to explain. I get really reckless. I keep thinking, if I can fight my way out to the other side, then I can relax..."

"But there isn't," Lance says flatly. "Another side to this. Unless... Did I tell you? Coran and Allura are taking us to a quintessence planet. That might...fix me, or whatever."

Maybe it was better when Keith wasn't looking at him, because now his eyes are flinty, keen. "And are you scared of that?"

"I don't know," Lance says, moves his fingers to his neck. His heart beats erratically. He doesn't know what that means. "What if I'm not the same? What if I am?"
"It's just another step we have to take," Keith says. "You either stay the way you are, or we do something that can only help us in the long run. Which sounds better?"

Being stagnant. At least he knows what it's like.

"I guess you're right," he mutters.

Before they get up for a shower, Keith slips his hand from Lance's and puts it to his face, aligns it with his jaw, and frowns down at him. "It'll be okay, Lance," he says, his voice certain and eyes serious, and Lance lets himself believe it. It'll be okay. If he keeps Keith's voice in his head, saying that, then he will be. It is difficult to believe - he exists in a state of non-okayness, so for that to suddenly flip would be a challenge itself - but he thinks so long is Keith is at his side, laughing at his shit jokes, willing to stand against him at risk of his own death...

It feels like warm balm across his heart, a golden lamp shining on a dark and lonely road. Safety, his mind whispers, and maybe it is safety. He doesn't really know what that is these days.

Keith stays a while more, and it's only when Lance finishes up his shower and sees Keith sitting on the bed does he realise why - he picks up something lying on Lance's bedside table and lets it hang from his finger as he looks up at him, frowning. "What's this?" he asks, swinging it a little below his finger, the heavy cross jolting it from side to side faster than either of them expected.

"Give me that," Lance mutters, and grabs it from Keith, sitting beside him and cradling it in his hands without meaning to. "It's- a rosary. My mother gave it to me before I left. I...don't know what to do with it."

"Oh," Keith says, brows raised a little before he peers down at it. It's soft and wooden, except for the cross, its edges gilted in gold metal. "I did notice... You never told me, before, that you were religious, actually... Do you...remember that?"

"No," Lance murmurs. "I mean- I know about it. And I... I... It is... special..." He frowns down at it, recalls how it was hung above his bed, as though to protect him from nightmares.

"You should wear it today," Keith says softly. "As a necklace. It'll- people do that."

"Maybe," Lance mutters, and puts it back down.

It will take hours till they reach this planet - mid-afternoon, Coran estimates - so Lance trains with Keith and the others all morning, loses himself a little during lunch when Keith converses with Hunk and Pidge, and then he goes for a swim and disappears completely. It is like- hovering there, in the water, feeling nothing, it is as though he is nowhere at all. Untouched. Unfeeling. The world around him simply ceases to exist, white walls dripping black until the void consumes Lance once more, except it is lit with dark purple, and electricity jolts it, and Lance, into pieces, his heart skips, fear, blood is dripping down the walls, it is not his own, it is Hunk's Shiro's Keith's Allura's anyone else's, he stands over them armed with a dozen weapons, tools, his own fingers sharp as razors.

The butcher. A killer he is already, but this is different. Torture he knows intimately, once it stopped hurting he started watching. They plucked off fingernails and inflicted dozens of cuts upon his fingers, doused them in salt. Filled open wounds with acid. Shaved off half his fucking hair.

They wanted him to hurt so much that he stopped hurting. After being rained in ethanol a dozen times then a papercut doesn't hurt. They could do anything to him, so long as they did it enough times he got used to it. And he got used to...everything.
Hands. Ears. Any extremities, easy to play with, you can do a lot of damage without getting close
to killing someone. The legs, the arms, you have to be careful but they're pretty easy, too.
Shoulders, sides. Muck up their faces. Shallow cuts on the chest. Deep ones if you've got
quintessence handy to heal them back up. And then there's fire and water and shoving someone
under enough brick that they can't move, can barely breathe. Reenact their deepest horrors. Magic
makes anything possible.

Magic made him possible, whatever he is now. A killer, a butcher, a husk. Hovering. His legs drop
a little under the water but remain fairly buoyant. He isn't even aware until his name is called half a
dozen times, and then he blinks once, twice, and sees Shiro there.

Shiro, who probably fucking hates him, as evidenced in the sharp way he speaks: "We've breached
the planet's atmo. Coran and Allura are talking to the people there, and they want you ready to go
out before they head down."

Lance asks, "What should I wear?" as he takes a couple strokes to the edge and pulls himself out.
"Not your armour," Shiro almost spits as he takes leave, Lance grabbing a towel and following
after. "Something nice."

Lance towels off in the lift. It is excruciating.

"Whatever you're doing with Keith-"

"I know," Lance mumbles.

"Lance. Just tell me if you're messing him around-"

"Why should I?"

"Tell me what's going on."

"We're just having fun," Lance says, a truth and a lie, something in between. But it is true. And yet
it isn't.

"If he comes crying to me about a broken heart, because of you-"

"He would never do that," Lance says, swinging the towel round his neck and glancing over at
Shiro, who's scowling. "He's smart, he's strong, he's badass, he's scary as hell. He's gonna be fine."

"He's a human fucking being," Shiro replies, and the lift beeps at their stop. "And I know how he
feels about you."

Lance blinks, but Shiro is stepping out. "How he feels," Lance repeats, and Shiro sighs. "How he
feels?" he asks, but Shiro is shaking his head and striding down one way, and Lance's route forces
him to take the other.

How he feels. Implying...that Keith has feelings for Lance. Well, shit, he already knew that.
Otherwise Keith would never have gotten involved. But...it was him who gave the first kiss. Who
offered to keep meeting nightly. And the way he looks at Lance, sometimes - soft like the moon
from a distance on a misty night. Lit the same as well, bright glowing light so gentle as it reaches
Lance.

How he feels...
How he feels doesn't matter, Lance decides, marching to his room and getting ready, throwing on dark trousers and some dark, silky blue shirt, hopes that's good enough. For a long time, he hovers over the rosary, left on the bedside table Keith had found it on.

Wear it, Keith had said. A necklace of protection. Of love, Lance thinks, he knows. Maybe if he had the thing when he left Earth he wouldn't have been yanked away by the galra. Maybe he would never have gotten hurt at all.

He puts it on. Hides it under his shirt, pretends it isn't there. He can't feel it, anyway. It doesn't even matter. He wants to pace, wants to scratch at the palms of his own hands. He doesn't know what having his quintessence balanced will do to him, so he's been ignoring it, putting it out of his mind, making it distant. But it's happening soon. Within an hour, two at most. Will he change, will he stay the same? Remember something? Regain whatever personality he once had? Will he become stronger, and is that all he cares about?

His very bones itch, his teeth grit hard enough to give him a headache. He doesn't want to think about Keith and feelings, but he also doesn't want to think about this fucking planet and its inhabitants and what they will do to him to make him normal again. Will he become normal? What if he doesn't?

Jesus, he thinks, shut the hell up. Keith will calm him down. Maybe Keith will fight him - maybe not - maybe Keith will kiss him like last night, like if he burrowed far enough down Lance's throat he'd end up tucked securely in his heart, like he wanted it, like he felt safe there.

But Keith isn't in his room, and Allura starts calling for him over the speakers, so he goes to the control room and sees everyone else already lined up. Allura is dressed diplomatically; Pidge is in a dress, too, seems delighted about it; Coran is as usual, Shiro's wearing a white shirt over his prosthetic; Hunk has suited up, in a yellow top made of some thin fabric that swoops round his arms; and Keith is in red, a buttoned-up jacket that goes to his elbows, looks fucking resplendent.

Lance stands beside him.

"It'll take us ten minutes to descend to the designated LZ," Allura says, statuesque at the controls. "I've communicated with the leader here and believe we are in luck. I've explained the situation, and there is a fairly simple solution - a fountain, they have, of the purest quintessence possible... There is a ritual to perform, and it will take some time, but... Lance, are you ready?"

His slight hesitation is all it takes for Keith to slip his hand through his, not even looking at him, not even flinching when the others direct raised brows and open mouths at him. "I am," Lance says, because there is no other answer.

They do not speak until they land, and Allura speaks with a suspiciously fish-like alien over the comms.

Then Allura says, "If you have anything to say, or... Just in case this goes- well, we have no idea what might happen."

"I..." Lance says, and looks round at the others. "I hope it goes well... I hope I get- better. Even if I'm nothing like him, anything is probably better than..." Hunk's soft eyes fill with tears, Pidge's mouth tugs down. Coran is holding Allura's hand.

Shiro only watches.

And Keith, at his side, holding his hand. How strange things have gotten between them. When
Keith's lips first touched his, Lance never dreamt they'd end up like this, intimate in a way that meant more than sex ever could. Keith tilts his head to the side, eyes open and nonjudgmental, just waiting.

Lance has to say something. He feels it in his gut, in his heart, a clutch of words drumming up inside his throat. "Thank you," he says to Keith, and everyone can hear but to Keith alone. "I wouldn't have made it through without you."

"Yeah?"

"I would've gone mad," Lance says, with a half-smile as though it's funny, and Keith smiles back, but his brows are pinched. "I think I am going mad," he admits, and Keith says nothing, just waits him out. "Maybe this will fix that. And I'll be better. For...you. And everyone."

"I don't care about that," Keith says, and Lance frowns. "I just want you to be...happy. Or...something."

"Or something," Lance repeats, and grins as Keith's cheeks flush. "Wow. Romantic."

"You just told me you think you're going crazy," Keith points out, and Lance shrugs. "I don't think romance has any part here."

"Oh, really? I was gonna kiss you but if we're not being romantic-"

"Don't be an asshole, c'mere-"

"So now you want romance? Too little, too la-"

Keith kisses him like he hasn't really done before. Has to dig his hands into Lance's hair to pull him down to his level, actually, and Lance finds himself laughing into the kiss, how their lips hover apart for two seconds and Keith mutters asshole and they kiss, and they kiss, and they kiss...

An eternity of this would be heaven. Lance's stomach bubbles with nerves and warmth and- and feelings, his heart races at first before slowing to a pace much kinder, he puts a hand on Keith's cheek and wraps his arm round his waist and for a second he so ardently doesn't want to let go - stay like this, in his arms. Nothing changing, nothing different. Together, happy, laughing a little, smiling.

Unaware of the rest of the world, till that world makes itself known with a very sharp ahem, and Keith is suddenly out his arms, face flushed, but biting back a grin. Shrugs a little when Hunk nudges him, smiling kindly.

"That's enough," Shiro says, a dark tsunami cancelling out the light that kiss had shone on Lance, and he frowns, goes to cross his arms before realising Keith's holding his hand again. An anchor in the storm.

"That...is quite enough," Allura says, hands held demurely at her waist. "May I ask when all of this...?"

"Months," Shiro says before Lance or Keith can answer, and Allura's brows shoot up, Pidge's eyes widening, Hunk's mouth falling open.

Coran, at Allura's shoulder, simply gives a short nod.

As if he...knows something?
"Months?" repeats Allura, hands tightening on the controls. "What do you mean- months-"

"It's not what you think," Keith says, and Shiro scoffs. Lance's fingers are squeezed together as Keith tightens his hold on his hand. "It's not," he insists. "But whatever, I'm sure Shiro can give you the full story since he knows all fucking about it, don't you?"

"I know enough," Shiro shoots back. "It isn't healthy-"

"Healthy!" Keith spits back, and Lance shrugs when Keith turns his outraged eyes to him. "What's unhealthy is Lance not being allowed to fight- being stuck on this ship without any outlet for his, his energy, who even knows what he might've done if I hadn't stepped in-"

"And that's the only reason you stepped in?" Shiro asks, and Keith hisses, free hand clenching into a fist. "Keith, if you had only brought this issue to our attention we could've dealt with it together-"

"You would've stopped him from doing anything! You would've banned him from the training deck because you're scared] of him and what he can do now!"

"You're scared too, Keith!"

"I- I'm not- I-"

"That is enough!" Allura shouts over them both, staring with wide, serious eyes. "I didn't ask for your personal opinions, I only asked for the facts. And in regards to those, I have to express my disappointment in the both of you - she looks from Lance to Keith and back - "for engaging in- in a relationship outwith that of one between teammates without first consulting either me or Coran on whether that was wise. Especially in the current circumstances - but that is for another day. We are keeping are very kind hosts waiting. Lance, with me. Keith, stay with Shiro."

Keith splutters further, but Lance just heaves a sigh, palms his cheek, and drops a final kiss on his lips before joining Allura as she steps away from the controls, her one side and Coran on the other, and the others trail behind them, whispering furiously, but Lance pays them no mind. Allura is knitting her fingers together again and again, taking deep, stabilising breaths, and Coran has his head up, not looking at either of them.

Lance just feels sick. Sick with nerves and a tremble in his own hands that he hides by clenching his fists, except Coran glances over and frowns, smooths his hands out and checks the loosened bandages round his palms.

"Still unhealed," Coran says after peaking beneath them, undoing the knots with ease and doing them back up tighter as they walk along. "Try not to aggravate them too much."

"Are you hurt, Lance?" asks Allura, looking over with raised brows.

"Not really," Lance says, shrugging.

"I imagine it was merely an unfortunate side effect of being unable to feel," Coran says, opening his own palm before them, before curling it up so much his nails start digging in. "Lance must've been pushing too hard- cut through the skin. Multiple times..."

"Oh," Allura says as Coran retracts his hand. "I see. Well, the quintessence will probably heal those... And his- do you think they'll heal his scars?"

"I'm not sure," Coran says. "Since the healing pod marks them as healed, and of course the galra interference will cause difficulties..."
"And how have you been faring, Lance? Any other...secrets to tell us?"

Her gaze is very pointed, makes him scowl on instinct. Does he have any other secrets? These feelings. Love and terror entwined, the same thing, same emotion, same pounding in his chest. Waking up with visions of their deaths. Disappearing into his own thoughts and losing his way back out; half-rememberings, half-prophecies.

"You seemed a tad off yesterday," Coran adds, and Lance crosses his arms, takes some comfort in the way they both have to look up to meet his eyes.

"I was just thinking about stuff."

"...It took you two hours to get to the infirmary and wrap up your hands," Coran says, and Allura frowns up at him. "And you barely completed that task."

"I was just thinking."

"About what?" asks Allura. "Were you remembering things? Were you remembering your family? Or, or- something else?"

"No," Lance says, and the fire dies from her eyes, hands falling to her side. "It was other stuff. I kept...thinking about the torture. Being back there. What they did to me."

"Oh," says Allura, and Coran lets out a heavy sigh, his shoulders slumping for only a moment before he pulls them back up. Allura can't meet his eyes as she asks, "And...was it- are you... How did it make you... feel...?"

"I don't know," he says stiffly, locks his eyes on the doors opening before them, lighting this tunnel with bright white before he blinks a few times and sees sprawling golden grass, a deep blue sky, and a small group of aliens awaiting them at the entrance.

"We'll discuss it later," says Allura, "uh, depending on what happens here. Lance...please do not speak unless spoken to. And- well... I'll try and join the ritual, but they may not allow me to. But we will waiting for you on the other side."

"I can hardly wait," he mutters, then shuts the hell up as they approach this strange new world.

Allura deals with the aliens - axylans, they're called, colours varying from yellow-gold to emerald green to navy blue, scales for skin, rubbery lips, fins. But they can speak, and they're clever, take Allura and Coran through this ritual step by step as they head towards the apparent site of whatever the fuck's going to happen, and Lance doesn't pay attention, just watches the world around him.

It's a small world. A ridiculously tiny world. Lance thinks he could probably walk round the whole of it within a day. The grass glitters gold, enhanced by the sun's bright beams, and all the buildings are short, close to the ground, maybe of some material that looks like sand, sparkles like it, too. People watch as they walk past, the Voltron coalition, they've heard of it even out here, and their bizarre, large eyes always stick on Lance or Allura, the human who's being fixed, the last female Altean known.

Except she isn't. Lance had at least four druids, and then there's Haggar, and who knows how many more. Is it just the women who become druids? It had only been women with Lance. Maybe the men turn into something different. Something drastic, like Zarkon.

Something damaged, like Lance.
He hadn't thought of it that way, but maybe that is the case.

And maybe these people can help him. He doesn't know how. He definitely doesn't want to know the results. Doesn't want to change, not when he's finally comfortable, sort of, in this thing with Keith and fighting so well and getting the hang of living like this, and now he has to trade it all away. Probably. Keith said he could either stay like this or he could change, even if no one yet knows how. He's chosen to change.

He doesn't want to be scared. Not of himself, not of what he's become. Not of what he could be. But they walk through streets until they happen upon a large square with a circular, ornate fountain in the centre, and pale green like copper eroded after decades, outlined with gold, the centrepiece three fish - and not fish-shaped people - bursting out from the pool, something thick and golden ribboning from their open lips.

There are dozens of these axylans lining the square. Allura asks, "The ritual will take place so publicly?"

"We must come together," replies the apparent leader, "to join our powers. What you've shared has lead us to believe this is a very serious case - let alone that galra quintessence is involved. I have spoken at length with my council, and we have chosen to bring together the strongest of us to partake in the ceremony. Princess, I would be very obliged if you, too, joined us. Is your adviser also capable?"

"I'd be honoured," Allura says. "Coran has some gifts, they're not as prominent as my own, but...?"

"I, too, would be grateful to join the ceremony," Coran says. "We can leave the paladins with Shiro, their leader. And Lance will be...?"

"Completely safe with us," says the leader. "It is an intricate ceremony, that's true, but Lance need only lay in our fountain and allow us to handle the rest." The axylan is short, maybe five feet in total, and has to crane her neck to look at Lance. "If you have anything final to say, I would do it now. You will not be the same when the ritual is over."

Lance swallows down the sickness creeping up his throat, and looks back to Keith. The other four have been stopped some metres behind them, and Keith has his fists clenched, speaking angrily at the axylan holding them back while Shiro tugs on his arm.

He has already said what he's wanted to, but for a moment Lance is taken by the urge to break away from Allura and Coran, run back over to Keith and kiss him a thousand times. A kiss for every thank you he never said, every apology he couldn't force from his lips. Thank you for putting up with me. Sorry I hurt you so much. Thank you for understanding. Sorry for not being better than I am.

But then Pidge flicks Keith's arm, and he looks up- stops what he's doing, just looks over at Lance, eyes a solid weight in his chest. Lance remembers nothing of his past, it's true, but he knows of God. Kind and loving and larger than life. Brings safety to everyone, those who deserve it, even the ones that don't. Keith looks at him and shines that light upon Lance, if only for a moment. Must see something in Lance's eyes that worry him, because he mouths it'll be okay at him, rubs his thumb and finger together until Lance nods, slow, and turns back, head pulling away unwillingly, gum stretching until his eyes snap back on the others.

There is nothing more to say. Lance...doesn't want to know who he is.

But he has to know. He takes off his shirt and trousers as asked, ignores the volley of gasps and
whispers that goes round when he stands at full height and his scars are on show, rosary hanging mid-chest, and lays down in this fountain of quintessence, shudders at the way it tingles, and closes his eyes.

At this point, there is no other option. He has to keep moving forward.

Chapter End Notes

the Reason the lyric is what it is bc one day a couple months ago i was doing the classic listen to africa by toto on repeat to reach transcendence, which i did, and then that lyric stuck out n i was like oh haha thats very corrupt lance au and i stuck it in my bank of lyrics at the top of the document. and i knew from then that i absolutely had to use it. and it fit so well! ur all welcome. what a classic.

i also listened to a musical called preludes by dave malloy on repeat for at least half of this which is why it gets so bizarre in the middle it's bc that musical is super weird, as per malloy, and it's abt the 3 yr period where sergei rachmaninoff had depression/artist's block after his first symphony was railed on by cesar cui. it's so good but if u r a musician it's like. anxiety inducing the first time i listened to the prelude i thought i was gonna die asldkjsald. but anyway its by malloy who did ghost quartet and the great comet so it's Obviously quality!

also i made up the axylans for my og klance multichap where lance was black paladin, that has been....left alone for a while due to my Obsession w this. it was after i saw wonder woman, and i wanted to write a scene inspired by part of it, where lance kind of loses his shit, and...i wrote the whole thing out... and then i needed a quintessence planet for this and basically just reused them here.

uhhh so yeah. this chap probs feels slow but i felt after the big rush of plot in the last 2 chaps we needed some time to slow down, chill out, have a look at lance's thoughts.... i hope u realise what he was going thru in these chaps! if u didnt....he was just having panic attacks w/o realising u kno? so, peace. listen to preludes and hadestown the myth the musical both on spotify and itunes. oh and a big thank u to commenters! i realised i never say smth in my a/ns a while back but for real a huge thank u to everyone who comments! means a lot to me! esp super long comments................keeps me going....... so yeah thanks a ton! hope u enjoyed...???

ohhh WAIT i also wanted to say. wait. ive forgotten........................................ well one thing i wanted to say was like. the extra i mentioned where part of last chap is from lance's pov is here and also if anyone's interested in seeing events from others' povs im considering putting some stuff out.... like the hunk and allura moment last chap when hunk drew lance's family, or maybe shiro's pov on everything, since i feel he's coming off a lot harsher in keith's pov that he means to. hm what else. there was something else. this always happen last chap i wrote a note on my phone of things i wanted to bring up in the a/n so i wouldnt forget. but i didnt do it this time, Foolishly. god. what the hell was it. OH I REMEMBERED.

ok lol also an update/reminder than this is my ""novel"" for nanowrimo and at current, day 22, im on 46112 words! so! not far till i break 50k! how exciting! anyway for real Peace. im out
love

Chapter Summary

keith waits for lance to wake up

Chapter Notes

i think this is a chapter that needs little fanfare. there's discussions of panic attacks and nightmares, symptoms of ptsd, but it's just conversation, nothing explicit. please enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Someone protect me from the one I love
Someone protect me from the one I, one I love.
Your Body is a Weapon, The Wombats

--

The ritual takes hours. Keith struggles with the axylans for some time, trying to get closer, trying to make sure Lance is safe, but Shiro holds him tight with his galra arm and even Hunk gives a sympathetic wince as he wraps a hand round Keith's shoulder. He isn't allowed near. He'd seen it in Lance's eyes, when he turned around before preparing for the ritual, the way he'd gazed for a half-minute, speechless. Keith's words echoed back at him in the form of a barely-there smile: it'll be okay.

And he has to believe that, because he's been standing here so long that he's getting tired of it; Hunk is hunched over, resting his arms on Pidge's shoulders and his chin on her head, and Pidge keeps shifting her weight from foot to foot and muttering, wiping sweat from her forehead and wiping it on her fancy dress. Even Shiro seems regretful of his outfit choice, loosening the top buttons of his shirt within a half-hour of them standing there. They're inside the ring of axylans outlining the square, but they're kept away from the fountain in the middle, from the royal family and Allura and Coran, from Lance, wherever he is now. Underneath the quintessence shooting from the fountainheads.

It may be hot but it is, at least, beautiful. Keith isn't entirely sure what's happening, but the ring around them have created some kind of forcefield? Or...something like that, a barrier of quintessence glimmering above them that at its peak dips back towards the fountain, the colour of it matches the scales of the axylans it comes from, but by the time they join in the centre it is a luscious gold, as is that in the fountain. Every now and then Allura, at the forefront, will curl her fingers on the queen's direction, or the king will reach a finger into the fountain and swirl it around, and a ripple of darkness will shudder up out the fountain and across the barrier, axylans will groan or hiss, do what they can, but it always bounces back and snaps into the fountain again.

Back into Lance. It's the galra quintessence, Keith is sure of it, and they withdraw it from him again and again and it always, somehow, returns to him.
They stop trying that after Allura collapses maybe two hours in, and suddenly a rush of axylans are
presenting a hand and water and towels, and Coran helps her stand and she drinks, pats her face
down, and returns to the task at hand.

Keith's hands itch with the urge to help, but there really is nothing he can do. Not now. He has
done, he wants to think, what he can for Lance; brought him back from whatever strange edge he
was sitting on before, made him more human by his own admission, let him talk about his feelings,
bizarre as they were. Asking Keith what fear felt like, as though checking he, too, was experiencing
it - the way he looked at Keith afterwards, like he still didn't understand, or maybe like he
understood too well. Keith had wanted to ask, hadn't wanted to push. Was scared of the answer.

At least he wasn't the only one scared. He's certain that's what he saw in Lance's eyes when he
talked about this, even if he couldn't quite admit it. Lance is worried about the outcome of this
ritual, and Keith gets it. He's already gone through enough, but...this'll make him better. Hopefully.
*Hopefully*. Make him...more him again. Easy to laugh and smile, easy to annoy, if he wants, easy to
talk to. Make him more present, although he has been doing well on that lately. Make him
more...human. The way he is around Keith, but all the time, no matter who he's with.

Pidge blows a raspberry and finally flops to the ground, Hunk flailing wildly before Shiro grabs the
back of his top and yanks him upright.

"Come on, guys," Shiro says, but Pidge simply wipes her hand against her forehead, and Hunk,
after a moment, sits down with her. "We're supposed to be representing the coalition."

"No one's even paying attention to us," Pidge points out, and Hunk nods. "They're too busy on this
ritual. And it's hot, dude. We're super close to the sun."

"...That's true," Shiro sighs. "You are holding up alright?"

"I'm about two seconds away from turning into a puddle of sweat, so be wary of that, but
otherwise..." Pidge shrugs.

"I'm just worried, dude," Hunk admits, and Pidge goes to pat his shoulder, considers her sticky
palm, and drops it back in her lap, instead making a sympathetic noise. "What if this goes wrong,
somehow? The galra quintessence isn't leaving him- not permanently, at least. And Allura's
working so hard, and... And now *Keith* is involved with Lance, and it's like, what's going to happen
after this?"

"Do *not* bring me into this," Keith says quickly, but Hunk only shrugs.

"We can't worry about that," Shiro says calmly, dropping to his haunches beside Hunk to palm his
shoulder. Keith, upon seeing this, gives in and sits cross-legged by Pidge as they wait. "Patience
yields focus, remember? We need to be patient now, so we can be focused later. On Lance, on
anything that might be different, on *helping* him. From the sounds of it, this should give him his
personality back, or...something. And it might fix some of his issues with feeling. This... Even if
things are bumpy in the beginning, this can only be a good thing for Lance. Okay?"

"Yeah," Hunk mutters, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. "I know, I know... I
just...worry. I feel like- I haven't helped him at all."

Pidge squawks, and, sitting down properly, Shiro says, "You *know* that's not true. You and Pidge
have been doing as much as you can to fix his leg. You developed a whole range of tools that allow
you to actually touch it. That's progress, Hunk. And you... I know you drew his family for him.
That must've been difficult... I can only imagine how upsetting this is for you. All..." He looks even
to Keith, voice catching a moment before he clears his throat. "All of you. I wish I could be of more help, but..."

"It's a lot for you too, buddy," Hunk says with a ghost of a smile. "Looking after us, helping out Allura, and everything with Lance must remind you of..."

"It's different with him," Shiro says, and Keith nods. "But it is...difficult..."

"This is just crazy," Pidge finally says, staring glumly at the fountain ahead of them. "This whole *thing* - I mean, I'm still not over us rescuing Lance and him turning out to be some-*robot* monster heartless-*thing*! And then...losing his memory is bad enough. But going to Earth? And he still doesn't remember? And what if this doesn't help? I just- we went back to *Earth*. That's fucking crazy. We went to Earth and he didn't remember and when I woke up I could hear his fucking parents crying in their room. And Lillynn was- she was crying too, in the middle of the night. I mean, it's good we got to call our parents and all, but...I was... When he didn't remember, I thought I'd... I was so..."

"I almost cried," Hunk says, grinning in sympathy despite the pools of sadness gathered in his eyes. "B-but I knew we had to be strong, for his family. And it was so weird being back, a-and we remembered it better than he did... Seeing all those photos... The *calendars*, I mean..."

"It was crazy," Shiro agrees softly. "It was a drastic action. And it yielded...nothing," he sighs, then glances over to Keith, his features turning sharp. "For most of us."

"Don't start," Keith mutters.

"Couldn't you at least have had some *dignity*?" Shiro asks, and Keith rolls his eyes, Pidge glancing over with wide eyes but still smiling like an *asshole*. "He was missing for *years*-

"We were all missing," Keith says flatly. "I'm not going over this again. You don't *understand*.

"And you're being *stupid*."

"Aw, come on, man," says Hunk, and Keith looks over at him with raised brows. "Don't be- I think Lance is changing."

"Uh huh."

"No...you don't understand. When Pidge and I were working on his legs yesterday, he... He kind of got...lost in his head. Right?"

Pidge nods, biting her lip before saying, "It was really weird. I'd...call it a panic attack, except he wasn't...panicked." Keith frowns, trying to recall his and Lance's time together since yesterday, but nothing like that had happened. "He was shaking. And breathing heavily. But when we snapped him out of it, he seemed...confused."

"Said he was thinking about Earth," Hunk adds. "I dunno... It was weird. And Allura said-"

"Oh?" says Pidge with another wicked grin, and Hunk rolls his eyes and shoves her.

"Allura *said* that Lance had come in during the evening when they were checking out this planet, her and Coran, and he was acting strange, too. That he got lost in his head again, clenched his fists so hard his nails broke the skin of his palm. He had to go to the infirmary. And he didn't even...realise. Like. That's not normal."
"None of this is normal," Keith mutters.

"That is strange," Shiro says. "Maybe he's beginning to... Well... Hm. Maybe... He could finally be processing what he went through, as much as he can... It could be possible he was having a panic attack, but- he doesn't feel anything so. He didn't notice."

"God," says Hunk, digging his head into his hands. "This makes no sense."

"But the point of bringing that up," Pidge presses on, "is that maybe he does feel stuff. Maybe it's slowly coming back to him. So- whatever's going on with Keith, maybe it's...legit."

"It is legit," Keith says stubbornly, ignores the look Shiro hurls his way.

"Maybe," Pidge says with a shrug. "For real, though...are you okay? How long has this even been going on? Shiro said months, but..."

"It was," Shiro says harshly, and Keith reaches around Pidge and Hunk and cuffs his shoulder.

"It was," Keith says quietly. "After the first time he got shocked, a couple days afterwards...we started sparring at night. And to stop him from killing me, I...kissed him."

"Wow," says Pidge.

"Hey, good job, man!" says Hunk with a smile, and Keith can't help smiling back, shaking his head. "I mean, maybe not the best circumstances, and Lance was really, uh, he was, uh...not...doing great back then. But I'm proud of you!"

"Not doing great is a bit of an understatement," says Pidge. "So what changed? I mean...you two hang out a lot now."

Keith shrugs. "I dunno... Or...we had a fight. After he started- because he started trying to protect me on missions, and I was trying to look after him, and I thought that meant something, but then he'd go find someone to- mess around with on every planet, and I... So we had a fight. I told him to quit it or I was dropping our whole...thing. And he dropped it. So."

"Really," says Pidge, tilting her head on her hand to look at him. "Huh."

"Huh," Hunk echoes.

"And after that, it was...different. He had a- a breakdown," Keith says, and lowers his voice further, flickers a glance towards the fountain as though Lance can sense that Keith is spilling the dirt on him, and will rise from his quintessence grave to shut him the hell up.

"A breakdown," Shiro says flatly.

"He was freaked out- I was yelling at him, telling him to fuck off if he wasn't gonna take this seriously, and he...lost it. He said he was scared. Of us. He said he was feeling again, for me, scared I'd get hurt, stuff like that, and he was scared that he was- broken, more than he already was. Like the galra had put so much effort into making him a certain way, and he couldn't fulfil that. Like he'd failed somehow...and I knew, after that, that it was real." He looks past Pidge's raised brows and Hunk's open mouth to lock his eyes on Shiro's. "I know it's real."

"I just don't want you to get hurt," Shiro says at length. "The Lance that came out the healing pod that first time was- awful, Keith. Mean, cruel. He didn't care about anyone's feelings. He- I still think that he'd lie as much as he needed so long as he got what he wanted."
"Well, you're wrong," Keith says, squaring his shoulders and looking away again. God, it is so fucking hot. His cheeks are constantly heated, reinforcing the sunburn he got in Cuba. God, Cuba...what Keith saw of it really was beautiful. What Keith felt there was beautiful, no matter what the others say.

"You don't know how much I hope that's true," Shiro simply says, and Keith breathes in heavily through his nose, says nothing.

"...So," Pidge says after the silence has dissipated somewhat. "How was the, y'know..." She makes a very crude gesture with her hands, and Keith nudges her so hard she knocks into Hunk, giggling.

"Absolutely not," says Keith, but Hunk has started laughing, too, hiding it behind his hand, eyes warm as Pidge's nose scrunches up and she snorts. "No. We're not discussing this. Not in front of my fucking brother."

"Language," chimes Shiro.

"So, if we get Shiro to leave...?"

"No!"

"Okay, okay," Pidge grumbles, sitting up straight again. "But it was, you know...a good time had by all? No upsets or accidents or..."

"Shut up!" says Keith, and Hunk laughs without restraint, enough that even Shiro can't resist the curl of his lip as he shakes his head at them.

"I heard you guys creep in in the morning... So it was a beach thing? That's hot," Pidge continues, cackles harder as Keith flicks her head.

"I'll kill you," Keith says. "I'll sneak into your room at night and pour gasoline all over your computer and record it burning just so I can play it back to you and make you cry."

"I have backups of everything," Pidge counters. "A computer is nothing to me."

"I'll...burn the game console you got at the space mall!"

"You wouldn't!"

"I won't...if you shut up."

"Oh, fine," Pidge says. "Keith doesn't want to talk about the bomb sex he had on a beach in Cuba with his crush, noted, I'll never ask him about his personal life ever again."

"Good," he says, and Hunk shakes a very times with leftover laughs, reaching over to ruffle his hair. It's quiet for a few more moments, the heat excruting, and Keith handles it for about two minutes before saying, "How was Cuba for you two, though? I didn't even- I'd never even been there before and it was still...rough..."

"Rough," Pidge says immediately. "Okay, that's something, do you want to elaborate or-"

"I'll kill you!"

"Pidge, c'mon," Hunk groans, grinning. "We should probably be serious. This is a serious situation. Lance is getting- quintessenced up and we don't even know what that'll do to him and Allura's probably using up all her power and Shiro and Keith are technically still fighting and we don't,
haha, we have no idea what's gonna come next, do we? Haha. Oh god. I think I'm panicking."

"I think so, big guy," says Pidge, wiping her hand on her dress before patting his shoulder. "C'mon, just breathe."

"Calm thoughts," Shiro says. "We're all gonna help Lance after this, Allura will recover her powers after a few days' rest, Keith and I will get over it, and we're all going to work through this together. How does that sound?"

Hunk's dabbing at his eyes, and Keith frowns over at him, reaches behind Pidge to pat his back. "Sc-scary," he says, and Pidge murmurs I know, I know.

"It is scary," Shiro says, and Keith feels something in his own heart calm at that. He may be angry at Shiro, but he's so used to that tone Shiro uses when he's trying to calm something down, and he instinctively feels safer when Shiro employs it. He is, at the end of it all, a good brother. Even if he doesn't fully understand... And he's just trying to help Hunk. "It's scary for all of us. And we're allowed to be scared, you can always talk to us about why you're scared, how we can help you, or if you want to vent...but there's no need to panic, because we're all right here. You can just get it all out before Lance is with us, because we all need to be strong for him, don't we?"

"Do we?" Pidge mutters. "He's already...strong as hell. It's... That's scary."

"Yeah," Shiro sighs. "It is. But we have no idea what's going on in his head. If what Keith says is true - if Lance was telling the truth, and he was scared about beginning to feel again, about failing the druids, whatever that means...then he must be struggling a lot. In ways we don't realise."

"He has nightmares," says Keith quietly. "This morning- uh- don't look at me like that. This morning, I woke up to him talking in his sleep... It's like what you said about the panic attacks, he sounded scared and he thrashed around a bit, but when he woke up it was like...a switch went off. And he stopped caring. But he still has them."

"Maybe it's..." Shiro looks down, examines his galra hand. "After I...escaped the galra, and after I was rescued, I had nightmares, too. Panic attacks. Most times, it was just flashbacks triggered by- whatever. But I don't know...sometimes I'd be walking down a corridor and just panic. It doesn't- there isn't always a trigger. They just happen. So maybe his...body is going through these, these motions of a panic attack, or a nightmares, but since he can't feel he doesn't realise it's happening. And since he doesn't have emotions - or, has limited emotions, I guess... Maybe he thinks of, or dreams of, things that are upsetting but...he isn't...upset?"

"Oh man," Pidge groans. "I really hope this quintessence stuff makes him feel again. This is so confusing."

"It does make sense," Hunk says. "Is that really possible? To not notice you're having a panic attack?"

Shiro shrugs. "Sometimes in the middle of one I'd be telling myself it wasn't actually a panic attack, and only once it subsided would I realise that it...had been. I mean - Lance knows this stuff, right? We're all taught about it in the garrison."

"He doesn't remember the garrison," Keith points out. "Has anyone talked to him about- what comes after something like that?"

"We don't even know," Shiro says. "This situation is so unique, who's to say...but no. I don't think anyone has."
"Would he even listen?" Pidge asks.

"Maybe we should try," Hunk says. "After this. Or- maybe we should wait and see. How he...is."

"This is so awful," Pidge grumbles again, ducking her head into her palms, and Hunk leans his weight against her, pets at her hair for comfort, and Pidge tolerates that for all of two seconds before the heat must become unbearable and she shakes him off. She accepts a shoulder pat from Keith, but only the one, then hunches back down again, staring out towards the fountain. "I feel like...I was never good enough to him before. You know, I sort of...thought of him as an older brother, but when he'd do big brother things like tell me to go to sleep or get off my computer I'd always snap at him. And I was awful in the morning before my coffee... And I made fun of him..."

She shakes her head.

"So did I," Keith mutters, and Hunk winces a little.

"He was my best buddy," Hunk says, and Pidge half-smiles. "I was his number one hype guy. I think I'm good."

"You are," Shiro says. "But I know I'm guilty of mistreating him... I suppose in an environment like this, someone's always going to end up the target of everyone else's frustration, and...I think Lance made it easy for us. You know, he played the whole...confident, goofy lover boy role so that we'd have something to bounce back off of, but I think...maybe sometimes we forgot it was only a joke."

"I just couldn't tell when he was serious," Pidge mutters. "And we always failed our sims with him as the leader, but..."

"Pidge, you never followed the rules!"

"You were always sick in the cockpit! Where we're training!"

Hunk shrugs. "Lance was always trying to show off. I don't handle extreme movement well."

"It was a simulation."

"Wow," Shiro says. "All of them?"

"We all had our flaws," says Hunk diplomatically. "But Lance always got the blame - and Iverson kind of had a thing for throwing him under the bus-"

"Ooh, a real leader would make sure his team followed his every word, why can't you fly straighter so your engineer isn't sick, you know you're only here because Keith got kicked out and he was a thousand times better than you and I think I prefer a kid with anger issues over one who can't fly."

Pidge shakes her head, cheeks flushing with anger as her fists knot up.

"Fucking awful," Hunk mutters.

"Iverson?" Shiro says. "He always was a dick."

"He talked about me?" Keith finally asks, twining his fingers together, looking over to Hunk with raised brows.

"All the time, dude," Hunk says, nodding a little helplessly. "He had a real vendetta against Lance, and he always brought you up."
"I had...no idea..." Keith's eyes widen a little in horror, recalling their meeting in the desert, Keith was just trying to investigate the alien that dropped from the sky only to discover it was Shiro, and then his crush and his team suddenly showed up and Keith hadn't wanted Lance to know that he knew. So he pretended like he'd never even heard of Lance at all. "I can't believe... Jesus. Iverson hated me, though."

"Not as much as he hated Lance," Pidge says.

"It really got to him," Hunk adds. "He just kind of- started accepting what he said as fact. Like every time someone messed up, it was his fault, somehow. And, you know, he'd make a performance of blaming someone else, but- he was just like that. Hid stuff a lot."

"He-" Keith says, then pauses. The excursion to the beach planet is burnt into his brains, the sudden rain of shots fired, the way Lance had promised to let Keith protect him then broke it instantly, the druid, and the awful things she said. All of them. "When we were on the beach, the druid was talking Lance into coming back...and she said...that before, before- everything, I guess, Lance had told them he was worthless- that they should kill him. That we wouldn't care. He thought he wasn't special. He was...glad he was chosen. Instead of us."

"He didn't," murmurs Pidge, eyes wide before turning to him. "Did he?"

"It's...what the druid said. I don't know why she'd make it up - Lance looked like he believed her."

"That can't be true," Shiro says. "How could he believe something like that?"

Keith fidgets with the top of his jacket, looks away. "When I was still the black paladin, after Kuron appeared and we thought he'd take the black lion...Lance came to me. It was- so weird. I didn't know what to tell him. But he offered to step out the team. So Allura could pilot Blue and I could pilot Red. And I told him..." He drops his eyes, scratches his forehead. He- he hadn't known what to say, strange enough that Lance had even come to him in the first place, he did his best but- but if what the druid said is true, Keith thinks maybe it wasn't enough. And then Shiro came back and Lance went missing, and it stopped being an issue. "I told him things would work out," he mutters, and Hunk winces in his periphery. "And they fucking did, didn't they."

"None of this is your fault, Keith," Shiro says, and he scoffs.

"It's only my fault," Keith replies, "I was the leader - I let him get kidnapped!"

"No one let anyone get kidnapped," Shiro says. "And if we all start taking blame we'll be here all day. It doesn't matter anymore why or how Lance was taken - we deal with what's happening now. Okay?"

"Okay," Keith mutters. "But- I never got to. I didn't realise. I never told him what he really meant to the team, and now he's..."

"And now he's gone," Pidge sighs. "Even if this changes him, I can't imagine him ever being that guy again. And I- never got to- apologise for...being shitty... Never told him that he was like a brother to me."

"Maybe he'll remember," Shiro says warmly, leaning forward to try and catch Pidge's eye. "And you can apologise when he's...ready. I guess."

"When he's stable?" Pidge tries dryly. "Maybe."

"It's worth a try. We- I think we all have some apologies to make. But now...there's no point being
regretful. So long as we're aware we did wrong, and we plan to make amends, then all we can do is move on. And...wait. For now."

So the conversation dies out, and they wait. And wait, and wait, and keep waiting. The burning sun, enormous in the sky, slowly dips into the horizon. The quintessence forcefield around them continues to glimmer, strands of it threading together and returning to the fountain. Allura's shoulders shake and Coran's slump, their hands twined tightly together, the axylans all breathing in unison, the royals murmuring to themselves, for hours.

Hours on end.

"If he doesn't get better-" Pidge starts, but Shiro quickly shushes her.

"None of that," he says, and Keith slumps a little against Pidge. Even as the sun descends and plunges them into semi-darkness, lit by quintessence, it is still hot. He regrets the jacket, but there's no way in hell he's taking it off now. Surely they can't be left waiting much longer now... It's taken so long, this ritual, and everyone seems to be buckling from exertion.

It has to be soon, or Keith will start thinking too hard on what's been said - Lance having panic attacks without panicking, Lance being told for half a year that the only reason he made fighter pilot was because Keith dropped out, that Keith was better than him, that every mistake made was his own fault. It puts too much into perspective, the way he reacted to being scolded, how overly-competitive he was, the dick things he'd say to Keith.

And what Keith said in response. Pride hurt, still pining after him, Keith hurled any number of insults at Lance to get him to stop, to leave Keith alone. Engaged him in whatever competition he'd started just to prove that he was better than Lance, maybe he'd shut up then. It had never felt good, but it had satisfied some petty part of him, the same part that now curls up in shame.

Another shudder of darkness across the barrier, and then it bounces off the axylans and plunges into the fountain, physically, for the first time, and then everyone is letting go of each others' hands and the barrier begins to shiver, Allura dropping to her knees, Coran doubling over. The king goes to the side of the fountain, and Keith can see him take Lance's hand.

Shiro is on his feet in seconds, pummeling over there, so Keith leaps up and follows, hears Pidge and Hunk behind him instantly.

"It is done," the queen whispers, gasping, and the king smooths a hand over Lance's forehead, where he drifts in the surface of the quintessence. He shines gold, it's caught in his hair, dripping off his face. "He'll need to sleep it off. He won't wake up until his body has processed the surge of energy."

"A-and the galra quintessence?" asks Allura, heaving out breaths as Hunk crouches next to her and wraps an arm round her waist.

"I'm sorry, princess," says the king solemnly, stepping back and taking his wife's hand. "It was impossible to extract. I imagine it has some unbreakable link to the legs. Regardless, it will be overwhelmed by the normal quintessence. Instead of controlling him, it will be...barely a twinge."

"That's something," she whispers, and slowly gets to her feet with Hunk's help. Shiro, after a moment, reaches into the fountain, shuddering for a moment, and cradles Lance in his arms. They're the same size, now - Lance maybe an inch taller, honestly - and Keith would've thought it still fairly easy for Shiro to carry Lance, but he lets out a grunt and grits his teeth as Lance is removed from the pool. The legs dangle like columns of stone.
Still scarred, that much is obvious. His skin seems more vibrant, though, like it was lacking some kind of lustre that Keith didn't even realise was important till now. As he watches, the leftover quintessence sinks into Lance's skin, leaving him a limp, bronze statue in Shiro's arms. It looks...strange. Maybe because Keith is so used to him being *strong*, powerful, unafraid of a single thing, that seeing Lance so vulnerable is...a little distressing. Keith wants to protect him, press a palm to his cheek, his heart, make sure he's still breathing-

But Shiro is exchanging a look with Allura and marching towards the streets, so Keith gets an arm round Coran and hurries the two of them after him, hears Allura and Hunk smoothing things out with the royals behind them.

Pidge trots up beside him and peers ahead to Shiro, who's upped his pace a little as he breaks into the streets. "He's still got the galra quintessence," she murmurs.

"We didn't really think this would get rid of it," Coran replies, voice quiet and measured. His arm round Keith's shoulders is heavy. "It's too intricate, bonded too strongly with Lance. It's probably to do with the...electric current in his legs..."

"Probably," mumbles Pidge. "How long do you think he'll sleep?"

"Could be days... We just don't know."

And that's the thing, isn't it? They don't know. Don't know what this ritual will have done, don't know what the galra quintessence is doing, don't know the effect it'll have on him, don't know what happened to him, don't know what will happen, don't know what he's thinking, *ever*, sometimes Keith catches his eyes, soft and open, and think he knows, but Lance will turn hard and cold before his eyes and it's like he knows nothing.

"This is so shit," he mutters, and Pidge rests a hand on his elbow for a moment.

"We just gotta...listen to what Shiro says," she says, and sighs. "I know. I don't know how to make it better."

"Patience," Coran says, and takes a deep breath and removes his arm from Keith's shoulders. "I think I'm alright, my boy. The ritual just...took a lot out of everyone involved, I think."

"I could see that," Keith says. "Allura seemed hurt - will she be okay?"

They all glance behind them, where Hunk and Allura still haven't appeared to follow them.

"Of course she will be," Coran says with a confidence Keith doesn't quite feel. "She always recovers, although I don't doubt she'll need a few days' rest, as well. We'll have to take these next few days very carefully...perhaps set a watch on Lance...keep an eye out for the galra..."

He keeps murmuring, and eventually they find the castle, the entrance ramp open and a glimpse of Shiro already inside. They follow Shiro up the ship until he takes an unexpected turn, and Pidge says, "Where's he taking him?"

"To his room, I think," Keith says.

"Why would..." Pidge frowns.

"Well, the last time he woke up on a hospital bed didn't go so well," Keith says, and Pidge nods after digesting that. "And he's not technically hurt, so..."
"It's the best option," Coran says. "As the queen said, he will just be sleeping it off... Might as well be comfy, eh?"

"Might as well," Pidge murmurs, and together they pick up the pace, and reach Lance's room just as Shiro is tucking Lance in, ruffling Lance's hair with heartbreaking eyes before turning and seeing them all there, ripping his hand away.

"I was just- making him comfortable," he hurries out, but Coran takes a step forward and smiles.

"Of course," he says, gliding a hand over Lance's hair as well, pursing his lips a little. "He is still only young, is he not?"

"A teenager," Shiro confirms, brows furrowing as his gaze slides back to Lance, mouth drooping at the corners. "I... I'm so worried about him, Coran."

Coran merely opens his arms, and with a moment's hesitance, Shiro steps into them, wrapping his arms round Coran's torso and hiding his head in his shoulder. "We all are," Coran murmurs, eyes flitting to Keith and Pidge with acknowledgement before he closes them, patting Shiro's back. "I fear this is taking a toll on him far greater than we could possibly guess...but there is nothing we can do."

"There's nothing we can do," Shiro repeats in a whisper.

"For now. When he wakes up...we'll do whatever we can to help, won't we?"

Shiro hides in Coran's shoulder for a moment longer, and Keith's heart squeezes at the sight of it, wishes he could be the one to provide that comfort to his brother, but his stubbornness, and, really, his lack of maturity, prevent him from doing so. When they finally part, the wisdom of all Coran's years shine in his eyes.

"We will," Shiro says, and looks back to Lance. Keith steps forward without meaning to, squeezing past Coran to get a better look. Still scarred, lips, cheek, neck. The rosary still round his neck. Head tilted a little to the side, hair everywhere, he looks so young and so...old at the same time. Battle-hardened before his time. Eyebags evidence of his exhaustion, mouth slack with sleep.

Beautiful, still. Feels strange to think it. Aches a little, in his heart, to look at him like this.

Keith does what he's wanted to since the ritual ended - presses his palm to Lance's cheek, skin a little rough, and warm, his lips the softest they've been for months beneath Keith's thumb. Must be the quintessence, he thinks, doesn't think about why it cured rough lips and not bone-deep scars.

*He loves him,* Keith thinks, gazing down at him. It is only the truth, singing its song for the millionth time in his head. Love, tender and soft and everything Keith has always wanted but has been too scared to get for himself. Didn't seek it in others at the garrison. Waited for Shiro to reach out to him first. Even now, Keith presents himself as above such neediness.

But he needs this, *this* love, for Lance. It sustains him. Throughout all this, Keith can't imagine dealing with this situation without his love for Lance. Warm and golden in his heart, ready for him to dip back into when the outside world got too hard, when months passed without Lance being found, when he strode out that healing pod without a care, when he forgot, and kept forgetting, when he grinned, and kissed Keith back. It was love that kept him going, that whispered in his ear that everything would work out, so long as he followed that love. It let him be patient, be kinder. To Lance, to those worried about him. It made him stronger.

He wants to think it'll make Lance stronger, too. That when Lance awakens, Keith will be at his
side to help him through whatever new world he must navigate. Whether he is different, whether he is the same, whether it'll take time to work it out - Keith will be there. He'll do whatever he has to. Love whispers in his ear and tells him he must.

There is nothing to say. He leans down and presses a kiss to Lance's forehead, the most tender place to place a kiss, and when he turns around Hunk and Allura have joined Pidge in the doorway, and they are all staring at him.

He says, "I'll take first watch," and the others nod, slowly, one by one, and Coran has to shake Shiro's shoulder to make him join them, and then Keith curls up on the floor and waits it out.

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The waiting is so long. Hunk swings by with food at one point, and Keith quietly asks for him to bring a t-shirt and Lance's jacket over from his room, and Hunk holds his gaze for a few moments before nodding and doing as asked. He feels better when he's out that burning hot red jacket and the sweat-soaked shirt beneath it; breathes easier in a loose t-shirt and Lance's jacket surrounding him, warm and still scented, vaguely, of the old him. A little salt, a little sand. Of the house back in Cuba, punctuated with herbs and spices and the fresh plants potted on every floor.

Not Keith's home, but familiar enough.

Hunk joins him again not long after bringing him food; sits with his back against Lance's bed, tilts his head back, and closes his eyes. He's awake, though, breathing normally, sometimes opening his eyes or holding a hand up to hide a yawn. It's a reassurance Keith didn't realise he wanted.

And then they all pile up, like when they first rescued Lance and he was stuck in the healing pod for a whole week. One by one they trickle in, sit, stand, lean against each other. Shiro comes with water. Pidge brings her games device. Allura and all her mice sit by Hunk. Even Coran brings a blanket.

But he doesn't wake that night, or the next day, or the day after that. Will it be another week they have to wait? Keith isn't sure he can handle waiting that long - it was bad enough the first time, but this is even worse. At least they were still hopeful last time, that Lance would step out that pod and maybe be a little different but still him, but there is no guarantee of that now. Who knows what the quintessence has done to him? Will he be able to feel or won't he? Will he somehow become stronger? Will he care about anything now?

What if he doesn't?

He doesn't want to think of it; so he preoccupies himself as best he can. After the first couple days he disappears to shower and eat properly, change into something more comfortable, keeps Lance's jacket and ignores the stares he gets for it. Works out in the morning, trains in the afternoon. Ends up cross-legged by Lance's bed in the evening, sharpening his Marmora blade, sorting through the messages they've sent him. They all come via Pidge and her computer, so the two of them go through it together: mostly invitations to join them, to discuss his role were he to become fully initiated, the kinds of missions they do, what they could teach Keith. All unimportant in the face of the current situation, and he finally replies to inform them of the current situation, and why he doesn't plan to leave his friends anytime soon.

Then Pidge messes around on her computer, and Keith watches from behind, grimaces when he sees a folder entitled 'Lance galra info' in the Recently Used section. Pidge doesn't notice, clicks somewhere else and ends up on a game, and that, at least, eases the boredom. The tension of waiting diluted slightly by the way Pidge hisses curses out her mouth when she messes up, or slams
her fist on the ground as game over flashes on screen.

And then Hunk comes in, like usual, with evening snacks, more water, and a big blanket, and sits on Pidge's other side. Takes first watch so Pidge and Keith can sleep for a while.

He's too tired to dream properly. Awakens with his head back on Lance's mattress, Pidge patting him awake before curling up into Hunk for a couple more hours sleep.

It is impossible to not think now, with nothing to distract himself with. His Marmora blade gleams perfectly in the dim light of the room, his hair is tied back so he doesn't play with it and accidentally yank it out, he scrapes his nails along the top of his hand a few times, but the motorcycle gloves cancel out the satisfaction he once got from the action.

Instead, he moves away from the bed and turns round to face it, takes an admittedly long moment to assume the lotus position, and tries to recall everything Shiro once taught him. It was long ago, back when his anger was at its peak and nothing, nothing, could dissipate it, and Shiro was a tired garrison student who had made a dozen different arrangements with the garrison that let him return to his and Keith's cabin in the desert instead of boarding like the other students, and Keith, still a child and thus incredibly self-involved, didn't realise how difficult it was for him.

So one weekend where Shiro was refusing party invitations and going over all his homework, Keith had an epic meltdown. He can't remember what it was about - they were talking about family at school, though, and Keith recalls the way the other students laughed about how he listed a Japanese brother and a Texan father and shrugged when asked about his real parents - so probably something do with that, and Shiro was busy, and Keith had done all his homework during lunchtime because he always sat alone and had nothing else to do, and he wanted attention.

Or affection, maybe.

Shiro had shushed him and scolded him a little and then held him a bit as he cried, and then sat down in the lotus and showed Keith how to do it, too. It had taken time. He'd seen Shiro doing it before, snatched moments of peace, had seen him kneeling against his bed and whispering, but Keith hadn't ever been able to make out the words.

Shiro spoke of mindfulness and tranquility, told Keith how to lift his ribcage and lower his head, where to place his hands, how to breathe in time with his heart. How to think until he thought of nothing, until he could focus on something white and beating and warm inside himself.

It had taken a long, long time.

It takes a long time now. Keith doesn't shut his eyes - he is, after all, on watch - but he lets his chin slump against his neck, sinks into the familiarity of it, something he hasn't done...since he started at the garrison? He thinks he did a few times, back when Shiro wasn't running himself ragged training for the Kerberos mission. They'd meet up and meditate together. But then Shiro got busy, and Keith had classes and sims and bonding with a team, and he sort of stopped and then Shiro went missing and it stopped mattering.

The room is pleasantly warm, easy to relax in. The castle, of course, self-regulates to keep everything balanced, gets a little cooler during the imposed 'night', but Lance's jacket is warm, the hoodie bunching round his neck and the cuffs past his hands. Pidge falls asleep fairly quickly, octopusing into Hunk's side, and their breathing falls into sync, makes it easier for Keith to focus on his inner self, that burning white core. It's not only for calming down, Shiro had said, but for being in better touch with yourself, being aware of all your limbs and extremities and then, assuring their comfort, letting them go. Acknowledging his feelings, how they hurt him, how
sadness freezes his ribs or anger burns in his hands, and releasing that tension.

Keith maps his own body out, a little bit of tiredness heavy on his eyelids, frustration stringing up his heart, fear roiling round in his gut, worry beating in his throat. *Now let it go*, Shiro says, and Keith breathes in time with Hunk and Pidge and Lance and lets them go.

There is nothing he can do now; only wait, and prepare for the future. There are so many options that it seems impossible to prepare - so he must be flexible, ready for anything. Love, stronger than any other emotion, is a single flower budding in his heart, petals opening and releasing a chain reaction of blossoms filling his ribs, his gut, his arms and legs and *everywhere*. Love, warm and safe. There is nothing to prepare for; Keith has made up his mind already. Stay by Lance's side no matter the cost. For however long Lance will have him, even if he doesn't - if he tells Keith it was a mistake, if he asks for more time - Keith will do as asked.

He will do anything for Lance. Isn't that, after all, what love is?

The dedication of one's soul to another's. If Lance can't understand himself, Keith will do it for him. If Lance can't remember his past, Keith will memorise every drawing and every note and every face till he can relay it all to Lance in perfect detail. And if Lance wants to fight, wants to rid himself of awful energy and inadvertently dive into the arena, that is a hit Keith is willing to take. Has taken so many times by now.

This is how he passes time; Hunk and Pidge awaken when Lance's alarm goes off, and Lance himself doesn't, and together they go to breakfast, listen to the day's agenda, report Lance's lack of progress, then train. Split up for showers, meet up for lunch. Keith stays too busy to be nabbed, gyms with Hunk or sits up on one of the infirmary beds, swinging his legs as Hunk and Pidge mutter about Lance's leg. Joins Coran in the control room to see what system they're floating through, huddles with Pidge over her computer to read the latest message from the Blade, an acknowledgement of his decision and a reminder he is free to join them at any time.

So passes the fourth day, and he is settling in to take first watch of the night when the castle alarm rattles the hallways.

"Paladins!" calls Allura's voice, and Keith is already on his feet, frozen between the open door and Lance, Hunk and Pidge jolting awake in front of them. "We're being attacked! I need everyone on the bridge, *now*!"

Pidge and Hunk move immediately to the door, but Keith feels stuck - he has waited now four and a half days for Lance to waken, he can't possibly leave now. What if he wakes up and no one is here? What if he wakes up and thinks he's hallucinating again? What if Lance he up and looks for Keith and Keith isn't *there*?

"Bring Lance with you!" calls Allura, and Keith tries to lift him but the legs are made of something *solid*, impossible to lift on his own, and Hunk ducks back and hauls Lance over his shoulder with a grunt. "If you bring him to the control room, Coran will keep an eye on him!"

"Come on, Keith," says Pidge, and he takes a deep breath and follows, the three of them jogging, Hunk's breathing turning laboured almost immediately.

They split up to change into their armour and grab their bayards from their rooms, and meet up again in the corridor, Hunk groaning again under Lance's weight.

"What the hell are those legs made of?" Keith asks as they hurry along. Hunk doesn't bother
speaking, but Pidge eyes the leg with a frown.

"We're not entirely sure," Pidge says, because of course. "It's not galra in origin, although it does bear markings... We figure it must be some kind of metal from a planet they've colonised, and-well, the legs seem indestructible, don't they? On the beach, you said Lance took heavy fire, but the prosthetics were entirely undamaged. So whatever material the galra have used, either they've treated it with something, or...it's so heavy because it's so strong. And Lance just can't...feel it."

Hunk nods, panting a little, and Keith chooses to end the discussion there as they come up to the bridge, Hunk rushing past everyone else to drop Lance off with Coran in control.

Here it is impossible to miss that they are being attacked - Coran mutters furiously to himself in the next room over, letting out a hiss as a blast rocks the ship to the side, and Allura calls, "Get that particle barrier up, Coran! Paladins, to our lions immediately. This looks like the galra cruiser we tracked last movement. They clearly want Lance back. We will not let that happen. Understood?"

Nods, and Keith can't help one last peak into the control room, where Lance is splayed against one of the paladin chairs, still sleeping, before hopping down to his lion.

The situation, once Keith drops into his lion and is shot out the hangar, seems pretty fucking dire. The galra cruiser, backed up with hundreds of smaller ships, just surrounding them, how the hell did no one notice? Stealth? Sudden, exact wormhole? They knew that everyone was getting ready for bed?

It doesn't matter, because they're trying to shoot through the barrier Coran's finally got up. Shiro and Allura are on comms immediately, hashing out a plan, but Keith is already thrusting the controls forward and blasting past the shield, dancing through the instant fire that comes his way and directing Red to open her mouth and beam down a dozen ships, twisting through the air and burning down galra after galra, focused only on Lance. Asleep, waiting for them.

It is not as easy as he'd hoped.

"A ship that big," Allura points out midway through plan-making, "will most definitely have prisoners on it. We are not taking it down until we know those prisoners are safe. Shiro and I will go in, locate the prisoners, and have Coran send up pods to take them to safety. I want you three to distract as many galra as you can, protect the castle, and take out any weapons arrays you find. Is that clear?"

"The longer we leave that ship hanging, the more chance they have of taking down the barrier and getting Lance back," Keith says, but Allura just shakes her head. "We have to take it down immediately! Lance is in danger!"

"If you do your job correctly, he won't be," Allura shoots back, and Keith scowls, gripping his controls tighter. "As I said; protect the castle. Do not bring down the cruiser, just prevent it from doing real damage. Shiro and I...will be as fast as we can."

"Shiro," Keith pleads, but Shiro's gaze is impassive. "Guys, come on!"

"Keith," says Pidge, "didn't you once talk about the duty of a paladin? You're putting the life of one person over the lives of all those prisoners, who've probably gone through some of the stuff Lance went through. Don't be a hypocrite."

"I'm not-" he wants to argue back, but Pidge is right. He said the same thing, didn't he? Everyone has families. These prisoners have families...or maybe they don't. But they have lives, lives that
need saving, and the paladins can do that.

Coran can look after Lance, for now.

"Okay," he says, and keeps cutting down ships. "Let's make this fast."

Making this 'fast' apparently includes Shiro and Allura flying to the cruiser, getting out their lions, and having Hunk haul both the Blue and the Black lion back behind the shield, but after that, he, Hunk, and Pidge make fairly quick work of taking out the smaller ships and tracking down the weapons array, then doing as much damage as they can despite having no idea where the prisoners are.

Every minute spent fighting is like an itch building up in his bones, fingernails scratching out the marrow, acid down his throat. His hands jitter, throws his aiming off, he's too aware of his heart pounding in his chest, every breath he takes, the way every hit Red takes jolts him too far out his seat, further than usual.

He wants to go back. He'll stay and keep fighting, he won't be a hypocrite, but he wants to go back, look after Lance while he's not able to stop him. Even if it's just sitting in the same position for hours and watching the way he breathes, at least he's there. Ready for Lance to wake up. To see what he's like now.

But that's not an option, so he messes up his aiming and hisses curses to himself, and Pidge and Hunk tolerate it because they, too, are anxious. Make careless mistakes. Keith races to the side, shooting beams out of Red's tail, Hunk careens to the right so they don't crash and ends up blasting the Galra cruiser, and they all pause, waiting for someone to shriek at them, or for maybe a hundred screams to tear through the air, but nothing blows up and no one yells over the comms, so Keith and Hunk share a look and keep fighting.

He knows that if he could just get himself together, this wouldn't take so long, and he could return to Lance's side. Keep him safe. He can do it right this time, he can. He failed when they were saving Shiro and he failed every time Lance got shocked and he failed on the beach, but he can do it this time. He's committed. He's fought his own fucking brother about it. Lance doesn't have to build himself a suit of stone to save himself with. Keith will be that shield, he will fight for Lance and he will defend him when he's unable to fend for himself. Even when he is.

And he knows, in his mind, that that means fighting here and now to prevent the cruiser from blasting down the particle barrier and stealing Lance out from under them, but his heart won't accept it. He wants a visual. Brown skin and blue eyes and curly hair, scars and all. He wants that moment in the bedroom, where Lance grinned and crowed I didn't forget! and kissed Keith like it could be love. Like Lance could mean it the way Keith has always meant it.

They're so close, Keith can feel it. They've made so much progress. Having his quintessence balanced will help or it won't, and Keith will be there. Lance will remember or he won't, it barely matters to him. Lance will feel, or he won't.

But he's already feeling. So that isn't even an issue.

"We've located the prisoners!" Allura says over the sound of a gunfight, and Keith blinks and refocuses, surveys the battlefield and finds a small fleet of Galra ships that haven't been taken out yet. "Coran, we need pods for extraction! Hunk, Keith, Pidge, stay on that weapons array - the Galra are trying to reboot it!"

"I'm sending out three, princess - keep going, lads, you're doing an excellent job!" Coran chirps,
and Keith grins without meaning to, blasting down the fleet he spotted with ease before joining Hunk in his gunfight.

Pidge escorts the pods as they burst from the barrier, guards the entrance to the ship, and Keith and Hunk focus on this small barrage of ships that dodge and race around them, dizzying them, usually Keith can handle this kind of thing but there's so many, suddenly, and he can hear Hunk groaning over the comms as he spins round and starts shooting again.

"Oh, man," Hunk mutters, "who are these guys? Isn't this supposed to be the easy part?"

Keith grits his teeth, dashing after a couple of ships that keep avoiding his lasers. "Maybe they got smart," he says. "Stay with the cruiser - watch the weapons array. I'll deal with these assholes."

"Alright," Hunk says, and stops following, hovers round the cruiser, avoiding blasts and sending tail-lasers to the top of the ship.

The smaller ships are harder to throw off. There must only be a dozen of these smarter, smaller guys, but for some reason they just won't die like the rest of their kind. Red opens her jaw and Keith sends out a long, sweeping blast, but he only catches maybe two ships, the rest swooping out the way and leaving him barrelling into nothing. He pulls up, spots a group of three, sends furious tail-lasers at them. Clutches tighter to the controls so his hands will stop shaking. Heart pounding in his chest hard and fast, a physical presence against his ribs.

It is not meant to be this hard, and he lets out a growl as his next beam misses and spears into space.

"First pod of prisoners returning!" Allura calls out. "We've still got a gunfight - galra soldiers keep arriving. It might be a while before we can get off this ship."

"I'm ready to take them to the infirmary," Coran says, might keep saying something but Keith's anger bursts out.

"What?!" he demands, and hits the arm of his pilot's seat when he misses again. "You're supposed to be watching Lance!"

"And I am watching him," Coran replies evenly, a slight heaviness to his breath that indicates running. "I have the security camera feed integrated into my suit, paladin. He continues to be asleep, completely unaware of what's going on."


"I shall," Coran says, and blips out, and Keith hisses again through his teeth and finally manages to tear into one of the ships, his beams ripping through it and into the next one.

Good, Keith thinks, grabs ahold of this focus and hunts the other ships down, Pidge herding the pods back and forth from the ship, Shiro and Allura occasionally updating them on the situation in the ship, and Hunk noting when the weapons array seems to pop back up and shooting it down again.

It takes all his focus to shoot down the last ten or so ships of this super strong force. Hunk, once he shoots down the weapons array, remains in his position but sends a few laser beams Keith's way, and it helps tunnel the ships into one long line, so Keith can blast a few of them that way.

Just a little more, he keeps thinking, just a few more ships, a few more podfuls of prisoners, a few more minutes, surely, this can't take much longer- he has to get back to Lance, he knows Coran is
watching him but- but- but even so, he'll be dealing with the prisoners and putting them in healing pods and arranging them in one of the lounge rooms to discuss returning home or being dropped off at rebel bases or market planets or something, and Lance could wake up and no one would be there.

Or maybe he won't wake up at all.

Maybe it'll be days. Weeks. Maybe-

No. He can't think like that. He has to focus, has to take out these fucking ships so that they can focus on the fucking cruiser and fucking go back already!

"Hey, Keith! They're flying in a pattern - they're faking you out! Next time they go up, shoot down, okay!" calls Hunk, who's still hovering by the cruiser and shooting at random smaller ships buzzing about.

"Uh," Keith says, frowning, "sure. Oh - and you've got one of your back, by the way."

Hunk powers up, zapping forward before rolling back and hissing, "Tailgating!"

Biting back a smile, Keith keeps following these ships, maybe seven left, and as Hunk says, they swing up within the second. And Keith, against his better judgement, sets his lasers to shoot down.

The ships zoom up and around Keith, behind him, and attempt to zap along below him - and straight into his lasers. He nabs another five before the last couple realise what's happening.

"Hey, thanks, Hunk!" he says, and Hunk just grins back at him from the dash. "Shiro? How are the prisoners?"

"That looks like our last batch," says Shiro. "We're running over to the control room, plugging in one of Pidge's devices to grab info, and we should be out in five minutes if nothing heads our way."

Five minutes, Keith thinks. He can work with that. Five minutes, he thinks, dodges right beneath a blast, twists on his side, and blasts the last two ships. Grins when Hunk cheers over the comms, Pidge laughing as she follows the last pod back to the barrier, and Keith covers her, blasting any last ships out. There aren't many, thank god, but now that they're not all clustered together they're harder to hit.

That takes up three, four minutes. At five minutes, Allura proclaims they've run into some trouble, which turns five minutes into ten, but that's fine. They're allowed to start taking out the cruiser, now, so the three of them dance around it, blasting off weapons arrays, welding hangar doors shut so more ships can't escape, Pidge running up along the top of it, dodging beams and laughing.

Then Hunk has to drag the lions back to Shiro and Allura, who, once inside, call for Voltron, which adds another ten minutes of forming and dashing around and firing beams until Hunk locks his bayard in and blows the whole thing up.

Twenty by the time they're in the hangar again. Keith's jumping out his seat and into the speeder the second they land, barely able to contain himself as the T-bar swings him along and pulls him out onto the bridge.

When he dashes into the control room, Lance isn't there.

Heart faltering, Keith thinks, What?
"Coran?" he yells into his headset, panic edging every word, "Coran, where the hell is Lance?
"Coran? Cora-"

"Settle down, paladin," replies Coran, wherever he is. "Apologies, I'll be with you in a moment," he says in a lower voice, and Keith clenches his fists up, biting the inside of his cheek as Allura and Pidge pop up on the bridge. "Keith, Lance awake a half-varga ago. I didn't want to distract you in battle. He's on the training deck-"

Whatever else Coran says is ignored; Keith tears off his helmet and sprints away from the bridge, pushing his body as hard as possible to reach the training deck in record time, fingers jittering, legs burning. *He's awake*, he thinks, because of *course* he is. Of course the minute there was an attack on the castle would Lance wake up! He's always been a drama queen, and Keith finds himself smiling, heart pounding with nerves, yes, but *excitement*.

Of *course* he'd waken at a time like this, and of course Keith loves him for it.

When he reaches the training deck, he's panting, slamming a hand on the control, and slumping his shoulders for a second, dropping his hands to his knees before he straightens up and says, "Lance-"

Lance.

Eyes widening, Keith says, "Lance, what are you... *Lance.*"

Faster than anything Keith thought possible, Lance sticks a gladiator with the trident, then drives the blunt end of it into three gladiators gathering behind him.

Without even looking behind him. Without even *hesitating*, he whirls the trident round, the gladiators cracking and dissipaing as he does so, as he jabs another couple, jumps and whirls round in the air, kicking out his leg and just *decimating* the gladiators pushing forward to reach him.

In the space of...three seconds? What level is he on, the deck is *crawling* with gladiators and he takes them out with *ease*, with unbelievable speed, unbelievable *strength*...and he's barely broken a sweat.

"Lance," says a voice, and when Keith glances round, Shiro and Pidge are standing behind him. "End training simulation," continues Shiro, and the gladiators drop through the floor.

Lance turns to them and does not meet their gaze. Shiro had dressed him before putting him to bed all those days ago; sweatpants that hang low on his hips, a blue t-shirt strained across his chest. He's barefoot. Not even wearing a holster for the trident. His skin is- so much brighter than it's been since he was rescued. He *shines* gold and bronze, a radiant brown edged in gilt. His eyes look like a proper ocean, like the one off the beach on Earth, shades of blue deep and intense. His hair springs up with a little more life.

He is so fucking beautiful, Keith wants to cry.

"Lance," he says, and steps forward, then again, "Lance, how are you- what has- what were you even..." He words dry up as Lance jerks back from him, still doesn't look at him.

"Lance," says Shiro instead, "do you need anything? Food? We'll be having dinner within a varga if you'd care to...?"

Lance nods, but still doesn't speak.
"Is- is everything okay, Lance?" asks Pidge, peeking out from behind Keith.

He nods again.

"Lance," Keith tries again, just one more time- "do you want me to-"

Lance finally flicks his eyes up to them, and speak all that Lance won't say for himself: go away.

Go away. He wants Keith to go away.

"Okay," says Keith, glancing back at Shiro and Pidge with wobbling fingers, "uh, well- someone will come get you for dinner. Is that okay?"

Lance lifts his chin briefly and spins the trident in his hands, and Keith stares for a moment longer as Lance shuts his eyes, then pulls himself away.

"Well," Shiro says when they're halfway down the corridor, "what else could we really expect? He's probably...just wanting to burn some energy off. He's been asleep for days, so..."

"He didn't say anything," Pidge points out, frowning. "What's up with that?"

"He wouldn't look at us," Keith says, heart dropped some thirty storeys down his chest, sitting small and sad in his stomach. But- but god, he needs to be strong, right? He said he'd stand by Lance, no matter what. He needs time, that's all. They'll talk at dinner. Lance will explain and- and everything will be fine. Love, Keith thinks, takes a deep breath and lets it fill him like a breeze of fresh air, revitalising the blossoms inside of him. He need only follow love, and it will lead him where he needs to be.

It just hurts a little, that's all. But Keith's been hurt a million times before. He can handle this. He can.

"Let's just go help with the prisoners," says Shiro, "and we can handle this at dinner. Keith? You okay?"

"I'm fine," Keith says before Shiro can start making assumptions, and they hurry along, with Coran's direction, to the particular lounge room the prisoners are gathered. There must be about thirty of them, talking about what they endured and where home is, the looks in their eyes when they realise home no longer exists, making plans with each other, Allura explaining the possible places they can be dropped off, rebel groups they can join, and eventually, invites them to dine with them.

Keith follows Hunk to the kitchen, mostly because he hates being surrounded by strangers in such a...strange time.

"So," says Hunk as they walk along, "how's Lance?"

"He's...fast," says Keith, and Hunk just rolls his eyes, smiling. "I mean it. He was fighting a dozen gladiators - more - and he was taking them out at lightning speed. So maybe the druid meant what she said, about Lance getting stronger... He...looked stronger." The shine of his skin had highlighted his muscles in a way Keith hadn't quite noticed before, but...god.

"Wow," says Hunk. "Stop drooling, we gotta make something big for this feast. Are you gonna help me, or are you going to talk about Lance the whole time?"

"I don't drool," says Keith, though he rubs the heel of his hand against his chin just to check.
"Yeah, I'll help. Kind of. I'm bad at cooking."

"No need to worry," says Hunk with a grin as they enter the kitchen. "I'm **excellent** at it."

And he is. Keith really doesn't need to worry, although he does have to drag his focus from Lance on the training deck from time to time. Hunk has him grating and stirring and putting things in ovens, and he talks the whole time, about motherfucking tailgaters and how skilled Allura must have been, to take out so many galra with Shiro on that ship and come out unscathed, and how she was with the prisoners before the others got there, and how he wished Shay could see it, Shay would've been so good with them too, maybe Hunk should call her, he and Allura have called her a few times lately, and also did Keith see Allura's **hair**, is it getting longer or-

"Hunk," says Keith, staring at whatever's cooking in the oven, "I'm gay."

"Uh- yeah?" says Hunk, adding a pinch of something pink to his bowl and stirring it in. "I already kind of knew, dude. I mean, obviously, with Lance and all, but like- I just knew? I think it's the hair, it has a really gay aura-"

"What I **mean**," says Keith, tugging at his hair, "is that I don't really notice anything about Allura."


"No, she's too... girly," says Keith, and Hunk rolls his eyes again. "She's all- soft and, and pretty, and..."

"And not Lance?" asks Hunk, throwing a look at him. "I get it, dude. You're like, totally head over heels for him. I get it! I crushed kinda hard on him too back at the garrison. But it became pretty clear that his, uh, 'rivalry' with you was really about something else."

"Wh- you- he- I- what?" Keith splutters out, swivelling round to face Hunk properly. "He liked me back at school?"

"He pretended not to - I'm pretty sure he was convinced he genuinely saw you as a rival, but, uh...no dude talks about another guy's hair for **twenty minutes** because they're rivals."

Wow, Keith can't help thinking, tucking some hair behind his ear. "Twenty minutes?"

"Oh yeah," says Hunk, and another look crosses his face when he glances round and sees Keith's cheeks heating up. "Can you get the pie out? Preferably before it burns to a cinder, dude."

"It's not even-!" Keith yanks the oven open, pulls on some gloves, and gets the pie out, which is **definitely** not even close to burning to a cinder, but shuts his mouth as Hunk continues to work his magic, building a feast to feed forty people or more.

They're allowed ten minutes to run back to their rooms, shower, and change into something 'decent' - jeans and a nice shirt, Keith decides - and though he ducks into the training deck on his way back, Lance is already gone.

He's not in the dining room, either.

"Showering, dude," says Pidge when she notes his confusion, patting his shoulder and taking a seat at the end of the table, which has been stretched out to accommodate all their guests. They're all talking, the castle modulating the different languages so it is all English in his ear, and he sits opposite Pidge, taps his fingers against the placemat as Hunk, Shiro, and Coran all start serving food, laying it out across the centre of the table and dishing it out to individuals, Allura walking
round the table and dropping hands on shoulders, exchanging a few words, smiling pleasantly before moving on.

Every minute Lance doesn't show up feels like acute agony in his chest, sharp claws screeching down his poor, bare, bleeding heart, ripping away precious veins and arteries, tossing them into his lungs till he can barely breathe. Love, he thinks, come on! But it entices his heart to only keep beating harder. Where is he, where is he, where is he? Showering, Pidge said. Does it take so long to shower? What is he doing? They've almost finished putting out food, when they sit down there's still one seat bare, even Allura's taken the head, where is he?

**Where is he where is he where is he where-**

Shocked, horrified gasps signal Lance's arrival. Blue jeans, white shirt, so resplendent he makes Keith's eyes fucking burn. God, he just wants to get up and kiss him, a thousand times, deep as possible, safe in Keith's arms. Safe from the entire world, from the galra and from the druids and from the other paladins, from Shiro and the sharp way he looks at him now, from these aliens, dropping their cutlery and clutching onto each other, pointing, hiding, crying.

Lance halts two steps from the doorway, and clenches his hands.

"Is there a problem?" asks Allura, getting to her feet and looking from Lance back to the aliens.

"That's the, the-" an alien tries to say, but Lance looks at them and they cower back, sinking into their seat.

"The champion," says another in a whisper, and Keith catches Shiro mouthing it to himself, sees Lance doing the same thing, the champion.

He told them that, didn't he? Threw it out so casually as if it wasn't a knife in Shiro's gut. Took your title, Lance had chirped. Sorry, buddy.

"Why is he here?" asks another alien, staring with wide eyes. "He- don't you know of the champion? He will kill anything. Galra, monsters, animals, robots." Their eyes narrow.

"Innocents."

Lance blinks rapidly, frowning.

"Innocents?" repeats Allura, eyes widening. "We- he- this is our- this was our blue paladin. He was captured by the galra... We rescued him phoebs ago."

"A paladin?" an alien repeats. "No, princess, don't ever give a thing like that such a title. Call him what he really is - a monster."

"A monster," whisper more aliens, shaking their heads, and Keith can only swing his head back and forth between them and Lance, whose curled fists have started dripping blood. Hunk is frozen, staring at the aliens, and Pidge is shaking her head, Shiro digs the heels of his hands into his eyes, Coran looks at Lance with heartbroken eyes.

"P-please," says Allura. "Please, don't say that. He is- he suffered such torture with the druids, but-but he's different now. He helps us on rescue missions, on liberating planets-"

"So he can kill!" calls out an alien. "That's all he does! It's all he's capable of! My own-" The alien's breath catches, and they clear their throat, swipe at their eyes before continuing: "My own brother was sent to fight him. It was punishment- a joke. No one can survive the champion. My brother begged and pleaded - he was a prisoner too. Weren't they in the same position? But that-"
that- that thing does not listen! It shows no mercy! It deserves nothing! It killed my own brother! And for what!" The alien is panting, and more are weeping, shaking, nodding along. Allura is speechless. Keith can't stop watching Lance. "And for what?" screams the alien. "Answer me, champion! What did you kill him for? Do you even remember? Do you even care?!"

"He- he's having trouble with memory right now," Allura says quickly, voice desperate, "I don't think-"

"I think, princess," says a different alien, "that he should leave. I refuse to sit here and feast with a- with a monster such as him. Send him away, let us discuss our future plans."

"But I..." says Allura, and casts a hopeless glance back at Lance.

A statue of stone, like always. Blood from his fists gathers on the floor beneath him. Mouth sealed shut, jaw set.

He turns and leaves, and there is a long, horrible moment of silence once the door slides shut, before a muffled gasp from Hunk sends Keith to his feet.

"Keith," says Shiro as he races to the door, "Keith!"

But Keith does not reply. Did Lance run away? He's not in the corridor, Keith can't even hear footsteps. He must've run, he must've been upset- Keith pounds after him, what were they thinking, calling him that? A monster. Keith's fists clench, a monster? Lance was- Lance has killed innocents, but he was being tortured, he doesn't even remember his time with the galra much anymore, he was electrocuted as punishment, he, he, they- don't they know? How dare they- how fucking dare they call him a fucking monster, Lance, a monster, Lance of all people- of all the fucking people, he doesn't deserve it, Lance doesn't deserve any of this bullshit-!

"Lance," he pants, knocking on his bedroom door, "are you there? Lance, let me in- Lance-"

The door slides open, and Lance is sitting on the edge of his bed, head in his hands.

"Lance-"

"You shouldn't have followed me," says Lance, voice low and rough and...and dead. His voice is a corpse rotting on the ground, his eyes ash from an urn. His hands are no longer bleeding.

"Lance," says Keith, rushing forward, getting to his knees before him and trying to catch his eye, "Lance, just talk to me-"

"Get out," says Lance, and Keith rears back, blinking, heart thudding. Love, love, where are you? Crashing like a wave against his chest. "You shouldn't have come. Leave me alone."

"Lance, come on," says Keith, heart racing wildly in his chest, hands beginning to shake. "I don't care what they say, I still-"

"You still what?" demands Lance, and Keith jolts as Lance gets to his feet, knocking Keith back on his ass. Lance strides to the opposite end of the room, fists curling, before turning on Keith with a glare made of flint and steel and sharp, sharp stones. "Love me? Love him? Whoever the fuck I used to be. God, Keith, it's time you got a fucking grip already."

Shaken, Keith stands up slowly, crossing his arms to keep him heart from falling out his chest. What is he saying? Why is he saying it? What the fuck is he... "What are you... What are you even saying...?"
"I know, Keith," says Lance, words as harsh as his eyes, a flint knife scraping away the skin on Keith's chest so he can tear at the heart below. "I always fucking knew about your, your fucking feelings. And it's a fucking joke. It's pathetic, how fucking far you're willing to go for me."

"Pathetic," Keith repeats slowly, and time seems to slow down, he is painfully aware of his heart tearing apart seam by seam, millimetres at a time. It stretches, begging to be held together, but Keith can only think pathetic on loop in his head. This can't be happening. This can't be happening! "L-Lance..."

"Listen to you," says Lance, mocking, "Lance, Lance, god, get over it. Did you come to comfort me? Is that why you're here?"

"They...called you terrible things," says Keith, fingers trembling at his sides. "A-and I wanted to tell you that you're not a-

"Monster?" asks Lance, and his lips stretch into an awful, awful smile. Keith can barely breathe over the lump in his throat. Lance looks like a monster now, a raw golden angel from on high, didn't Keith think that once? Hasn't he looked on Lance already and found a being of such terrible beauty, such immense power and grace, who destroyed all surrounding him from righteous fury? But this isn't righteous, it isn't. "Maybe I am one, Keith. Maybe I always have been."

But he's not a monster, not even an angel. He's human like the rest of them. "Don't say that-

"Why not? It's the truth. The galra turned me into a monster, I kill innocent people and I forget my family and I play with people." His eyes sear into Keith's. "Don't I?"

"Stop it," Keith tries to say, but it comes out as a whisper, his voice wobbling. Oh god, oh god, oh god - love where are you where are you where-

"Did you think it was real, Keith?" asks Lance, and his next drawn breath is a gasp. "Between us? You loved me, and you thought I could feel the same back? You that I was feeling at all?"

"Stop it!"

"I can't feel," Lance says, and something wet is tracking down Keith's cheeks. "Not for you or anyone."

"Th-that's not true," Keith says, voice cracking. Lance has to be lying, he has to be, he told Keith-he told Keith so many things, opened his heart up to him with a look in his eyes that cannot be feigned. A look of sadness, of emptiness. Of loss. "You had a breakdown-you were scared-about how you felt for me, Lance, just stop this and I'll-

"Take me back like I said nothing? That's pathetic, Keith," says Lance, a sharp whip cracking against Keith's bare heart, stop it, stop it he wants to plead, but Lance does not listen. "God, you are so fucking pathetic. I can't believe I was ever jealous of you. I was lying. You were mad at me, you were threatening to drop it, so I played the part you wanted me to play. You wanted it so bad you believed it. All of it."

"No," whispers Keith. "Then why- why say all this n-now? Why not- why not-

"I only just now got what I wanted, didn't I," says Lance, that smile turning into a horrible leering smirk. "And god, Keith. You gave it up so easy."

"No," says Keith, because that, at least, is a fucking lie. "It took you months-"
"All I had to do was pretend," Lance says, "that I had fucking feelings... And you just believed me. Like you hadn't been told already that I couldn't feel. That it was impossible for me. It was funny... but now it's just kind of sad. How desperate are you? Shit."

"Stop saying that," but god, he does sound desperate, doesn't he? And fucking pathetic. And, and...

"I'm sick of it," says Lance. "Of you coming looking for me, coming after me. I don't fucking need you and I never will. I don't need anything. A monster only needs to kill, that's all I do. I could give a shit about your bleeding fucking heart, Keith."

"But you- but- you have to be lying, y-you, you told me you needed me, you-"

"Do you want me to spell it out?" asks Lance, and Keith takes a trembling breath. "I. Was. Using. You."

This can't be happening.

"Shut up," he whispers, but it's so thin it barely crosses the room. "You saved me from that grenade, y-you protected me-"

"Which one of us can actually feel again? Who's actually vital to forming Voltron? Sure as hell isn't me," says Lance, and Keith's eyes widen with sudden realisation, or, or the opening of the floodgates, everything he'd been suppressing rushing to the fore. Everything Shiro said, that Keith had fought against, had defended Lance from... "You getting it now? I could always find someone after missions, but that takes so much effort... Why not just have someone at the castle I could fuck whenever I wanted? You made it so fucking easy."

"No," Keith says, and it comes out in an awful, desperate moan that has Lance laughing. "No, shut up, you have to be lying, you have to be...

"I'm not."

"You, you can't be... Lance, I know you, this isn't- this isn't you- just talk to me-"

"You don't know who I am anymore."

It hits like a bullet to the chest, every time Lance pinned him against a wall or the floor and drew his weapon across Keith's throat, the very first time, when Keith had said you're still you and Lance had replied with those exact words. But he's forgotten all that.

He must really mean it.

Maybe I don't know him, Keith thinks, hands shaking, heart aching, every breath ripped from his throat. Lance blurs before him. Love, where are you now? Hacking his heart into pieces. Maybe I never knew him at all.

"Get the hell out, Keith," says Lance finally, and Keith does as he says, spins around and slams his hand against the control, dashes out the room and along the corridor for maybe twenty seconds before he stumbles and has to grab the wall, whole body convulsing.

It wasn't meant to be like this. Keith was supposed to run in there and take Lance in his arms and Lance would say but I'm not a monster, I'm not I'm not I'm nor but he'd said the exact opposite and acted like one, too, smiled as he tore Keith's heart up, laughed as he tossed the pieces to the wind.
Love, what the hell? Keith put his faith in love and look where it took him. Lance never loved him. Lance never ever cared. He thought Keith was pathetic, desperate, an easy lay.

That night, it had felt like some kind of joke, a parody, the two of them laughing at the universe, maybe Keith and Lance were fighting demons every day and slaying gara on missions and trying, Keith thought, to take care of each other in their own fucked up way, but at least they had that night: two nameless teens screwing on the beach because they were young and in love and it seemed romantic. Keith had gazed up at those stars and thought you can't take this from me. Hands covered in wet sand, he'd dug them into Lance's hair to make him laugh, make them both laugh, maybe they were in constant danger but look at them.

But it's clear now that the joke has always been on Keith. That night - that one fucking precious night - was nothing to Lance. It wasn't romantic. He didn't care about the stars, the beach, the sea. Keith was another gara soldier to conquer, another random alien to reduce to nothing. That magic was all in Keith's head, he made it up because he wanted it so much, wanted Lance in any way he could have him. And Lance- Lance just took everything he offered up, because why wouldn't he?

That's all Keith meant to him. That's all he meant to Lance, the love of his fucking life and-

And Lance abandoned him. Just like every other fucking person in his life. Lance left him, Lance doesn't want him and he'll never love him and he never even fucking cared, Keith was just fooling himself the whole time, because Lance is right, he really was desperate, for his attention, his affection, his touch no matter how rough or painful. Keith just wanted something, someone to hold onto. He is so fucking alone in this world. There must really be something fucking wrong with him if not even monster robot stranger Lance is pushing him away. Doesn't even want him for sex, why the hell does that upset Keith so much? But fuck, he'd take it. At least he'd be useful, at least someone would have a reason for wanting him around. And Lance... He really thought- he really thought-

"Keith? Keith?"

It's Shiro, grabbing his arms and hauling him up straight, brows raised in anguish.

"Keith-"

"Sh-Shiro," says Keith, and his voice is a wreck. "Y-you were right," he says, and bursts into another flood of tears, he wishes he could be angry about this, wishes he could go to the training deck and punch this sadness out of him but it will not move. "You were right all along," he says, voice hitching repeatedly, "he was only using me-"

"Oh, Keith," says Shiro, pulls him into a hug, and Keith sobs into his shoulder. "Let's go to my room, okay? I'll go make tea, we can talk like we used to, come on..."

Shiro has to basically drag Keith away, since his limbs will not move, and when Keith collapses on the bed Shiro wraps his arms round his shoulders and murmurs soft, soothing words, but none of them can penetrate into his brain, into the constant repetition of he doesn't love me he never loved me he never cared he was using me and I fell for it because I'm pathetic, I'm weak and pathetic and desperate, and I still love him, what the fuck is wrong with me why do I still love him, I should hate him but I can't, I love him I love him I love him-


"I'm sorry, Keith," Shiro says, hushed, heartbroken. "I'm so sorry."
But sorry doesn't fix it, doesn't help.

Keith still loves him.

Chapter End Notes

.....and thus ends arc 1

(slight edit to the ending 21.17 28/11)
monstrous

Chapter Summary

lance confronts the truth

Chapter Notes

here we are lads.... arc 2..... We Did It Kids dot gif....

im gonna come out and say this Whole Arc is gonna be the roughest of the lot. like.
the last arc was Generally Rough with Moments of Joy and Happiness... this is
like....Rough. Always. ill be adding tags from now on to better reflect the tone change
and the direction this fic will take. so plspls tread carefully i think a few chaps r gonna
have trigger warnings in the end notes so as not to spoil, but if anything in the tags
worry u i'd check them out. like this fic is Dark but it really is about to get worse ;;;;:

otherwise, tw for this chapter includes: graphic descriptions of fighting, violence,
blood, sickness, panic attacks, and torture. it deals heavily with self-loathing and
(vagueish, atm) suicidal ideation. and it's just saturated all the way through except the
very end, so be careful and take care of urselves!

so. . .enjoy....???? D:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And you know it when it holds you under away
Cold and dying
Moving in reverse slow motion
I feel it, it's in my skin, oh, it's in a part of me
Trouble On My Mind, The Staves

--

They make him drink quintessence.

They force it down his throat till it drips out his ears, his eyes, his nose. Till he's gargling, choking
on it, pure gold spilling down his lips. It is raw metal ore slipping like silk down his throat and
flooding his ribs, his lungs, every blood vessel and vein. It's weightless inside of him but burns like
he's swallowed the sun whole, searing against his flesh trying to get out. He gags, coughs, he'd tear
at his chest if his hands weren't chained up. Heavy and rotten and hell on his wrists, his ankles, but
he drinks the quintessence and the raw bracelets they make of his skin heal instantly, skin turning
brown and soft, as though he'd never been hurt at all.

"Drink up," says a druid, and he doesn't really have a choice, they zap him in the chest if he doesn't
comply, bind his mouth open with a clamp, and Lance can't tell which is more humiliating -
resisting and being made so vulnerable, or giving in, letting this happen. Quintessence makes him
sick, and dizzy, especially the strange galra stuff that tastes like acid lingering on his tongue, but his skin is brighter and he feels stronger, invincible, like he could take on ten dozen worlds and it wouldn't even hurt.

Laying his head back, he sees them with their little torture tools, stabbing him or slicing along him or pricking him with shocks, but the pain is gone. The quintessence is like a shield of light wrapping round every inch of his skin, it absorbs any strike before it can hurt him. Wounds heal. Skin glows radiant.

"He is ready," says a druid, "send him in."

"Remember what we told you," chimes another as his ankle chains are undone and the wrist manacles are removed from the table. They push him onto his feet, bind the chains together behind his back, and starts shoving him out. The torture room is dark and dank and it normally makes him sick, but now the quintessence notes the nausea gathering in the pit of his throat and swipes it into nothing. And, Lance thinks, energy pounding through his veins, it is nothing, now. Something so minuscule cannot hurt him. "Take the biggest weapon you can find. Prioritise speed and agility. If you do well, we may begin considering modifications, designated weapons, armour..."

They say that every time; win, and we will grant you such things - strange that they aren't asking him to win this time, though. Perhaps this is an opponent they know he cannot succeed against. He nods anyway, almost feels sick of himself for complying before the quintessence encases that too in its golden glow and dissolves it into nothing. He's been through this so many times already; there is no room for pride nor guilt in the arena. There is only victory, or death.

Lance doesn't know how the hell he keeps escaping death, but he isn't going to stop now. Modifications sound scary - Lance has seen Shiro's arm, and sometimes the druids murmur of replacing arms or eyes or legs, and Lance isn't sure which option if more terrifying. But designated weapons, armour? If he plays his cards right, he can vie for a gun, not even a rifle, he'd take a pistol at this point. And armour? Jesus christ. What he wouldn't give for some fucking armour.

"Everything can be defeated," says the first druid, undoing the manacles and putting her hands on his shoulders as they reach the arena gate for their prised prisoner. "Everything. And we need you alive, human."

He nods, steeling his shoulders. Whatever fight he once had has left him; now he has only this quintessence pumping through him, demanding lives to take, monsters to fight. Monsters that take his life in an instant, without remorse. The druids, at least, would feel a little bad if they killed him now. They're trying to mould him into something, give him purpose. He'd almost be happy about it, about being useful, if he wasn't, what was it...oh, a fucking prisoner. A lab rat. Held against his will, experimented on, tortured constantly...

...But stronger than he's ever been before, and more important...but it's stupid to think like that. His friends, wherever they are now, must surely be looking for him - he has to stay strong till then. Do what these druids ask so they don't axe him to death for disobeying them. They tried that, once, injected him with something then shovelled quintessence into him to keep him alive. Whatever they're doing all this to him for, it must be important. They try so hard to keep him alive.

Even when sometimes he thinks he rather wouldn't be.

That, considering some of the things he's done in this place, he shouldn't be.

The gate opens to screams, cheers. Lance has either lost or drawn every fight he's been entered into, he's never killed the way they want him to. Somehow, though, they like him, or maybe hate him so
much that his constant failure supplies endless entertainment, he amuses them with the desperate way he fights and hides and scrabbles for whatever they throw into the arena - scrappy knives, sachets of poison, once a grenade that had both him and his opponent diving for cover. Around his neck is a black necklace with a beating purple gem that digs into his skin, it lets the whole room hear him, the way he gasps when he's hurt, the grunts he makes running round the arena, how his voice hitched whenever he's able to knock out his opposition.

But they like it when he talks. The first time was when he was set against another prisoner, an elderly stranger with a hunched back and trembling fingers, and when Lance had finally knocked him unconscious, he'd screamed into the stands about justice, were they proud of themselves, how fucking low-minded they must be to find genuine joy in something like this, that they were pathetic, and they'd all laughed and cheered for more. The druids had waited his tantrum out before dragging him back to his room, and he thought they were angry at him until he got an actual dinner later on.

So sometimes he talks. Taunts. Only sometimes, it depends who he's against. A monster like this - Lance can't even describe it. Dark red all over, robotic and hulking with long arms covered in glassy half-orbs that denote weapons of some kind. A lanky body, maybe twice Lance's size.

Something like this, Lance is willing to talk to. Or talk at. The thing isn't exactly loquacious, Lance steps out and raises his fists the way the crowd wants him to, the way he's wanted to since he choked down that quintessence and felt it power through every vein. The crowd roar, heavy in his ear, is this what it was like all those thousands of years ago, when Roman gladiators took their first steps into the coliseum? This rush of power no matter what their opponent looked like, be they slave or lion.

Perhaps the real question is this: is Lance the gladiator or the opponent? Better yet - if the latter, is he the slave, or is he the lion?

He knows which he wants to be. But against this beast, Lance thinks he must be the poor, defenceless slave.

"Hey, big boy!" Lance calls, striding out with confidence sparked by the quintessence. It lifts him to another plane, ascends him till he is an angel gliding on wings, a single glance from him ending lives. Benevolent in their justice, lethal in their power. Lance wishes, sometimes, he could remain that holy. "You wanna get this party started, or skip straight to the dirty stuff?"

It lowers its head, and the dark eyes that had been staring vacantly from either side of its head swivel towards him and glow neon green, and if that wasn't freaky enough it smiles, displays rows of sharp teeth as big as Lance's head. Oh fuck, he thinks, bending his knees to better creep along the edge of the arena, watching it. He gets low enough to start brushing his hands across the dirt ground, looking for anything, a knife, a sword, a dented helmet, a bloody limb- anything!

He keeps his eyes on it, though, as the green core in the centre of its small torso starts glowing, shimmering as though gathering in energy, and Lance has a second to think fuck before a thick green laser beam is coming his way, and he dashes to the side, flattening himself behind a big stone slab sticking out the the ground.

Not easy, then. What did the druids say? Big weapon, speed and agility... He's got the last two on lock, but where the fuck are the weapons? Have the druids asked the crowd to wait before throwing shit down? Is this another endurance test? He hates endurance tests...

Not to mention it's hot in here, heat off the monster and the sweltering of this gigantic crowd, his hands start picking up dirt and gravel as he pats the ground, searching for weapons, glancing
behind him to see the robot powering up for another shot. Lance watches, waits, and when it shoots he dives further round the ring, slumping against another slab, but the buzz of the laser drones on and he realises it's following him, crumbling the slabs into dust, fuck, he thinks, if he keeps running the perimeter he's going to end up right on its dick, but-

Fuck.

"Hey," Lance says, sprinting as fast as he can round the perimeter, "this is kind of an unfair fight. Maybe you could go pick on someone your own size. You know, they've got a lot of monsters locked up for you to, uh, laser into pieces, and I think that'd be more fun, for you. I mean, me? You can slash me into two, maybe three pieces, but, but a big monster like you? Endless! Imagine the fun!" He's panting hard now, but the quintessence spurs him faster, gathering speed as he runs towards the beast's legs, hooking onto one and yanking it out from under it.

Or, he tries to. It grinds him to a full stop, but the druids haven't been shooting him up with god knows what for god knows how long for nothing - he plants his feet and pulls till it drops to one leg, and then he scrambles away, ducking behind a stone to catch his breath as a cheer goes up.

In this brief pause, something is thrown down, and he twists around to see it drop into the centre of the arena - a spear.

Someone gave him a spear.

Oh thank fuck.

The thing's still getting to his feet so Lance steels himself and runs for it, the crowd as ever screaming in his ear, he can hear his own panting echoed back to him over the loudspeaker as he lunges for the spear. It's not in great condition, probably a castoff someone was looking to get rid of, but the point is sharp enough, so he grabs it, rears his arm back, and throws it with deadeye precision into the core of this monster as it straightens up.

It bounces off with a little dink and flops to the ground.

The monster smiles, and opens out its arms.

"I think," Lance says, more for his own sanity now than anything else, "you should really reconsider this - remember those other monsters I was telling you about? I think they'd be into you! Lasers can really get some people hot, you know? Just not me. I like a good, fair fight. Rules, balance - that's the big turn on for me. Yeah, I'm just gonna, uh, pick this up, haha, oh god, uh-"

The discs lining this thing's massive arms all light up green, and Lance grabs the spear from the beast's feet and makes another run for it, at this point he doesn't even know where, speed and agility, big weapon, what else? The spear didn't even hurt it, it glanced right of it, what the hell? Lance keeps watching it as though it'll give him answers, but it just smiles at him as he runs, head dropping back for a second as though it would laugh if it could.

There's no hiding from it now. The discs glow brighter and brighter until they all release their own thin green beam, the ones that aren't aimed on him make it a lot harder to traverse the arena, suddenly speed and agility make a lot more sense. He runs and jumps and prays that god is watching out for him, he's careless with the spear, holds it perpendicular to himself, and within seconds it's fucking blasted into nothing, till he's just clenching his fingers round a chunk of steel steaming at the edges, and he chucks it back into the centre.

There goes his big fucking weapon.
He can't even get close to it like last time - the beams on the arms follow him no matter where he goes, one brushes his hip, and the quintessence he downed earlier can cover a lot of pain...but not this much.

"Fuck!" he chokes out as his flesh burns, and the crowd's screams press physically onto him, like all the galra sitting there watching are instead circling him, pressing their hands onto his shoulders, his arms, pushing him ever harder, all their mouths stretching into yawning oblivion as they cackle.

His heart is beginning to punch up against his rib cage as fear takes hold, breath quickening, hands slippery through the dirt. He can see more weapons sprinkled around him, but he just can't reach them and this thing has so many fucking lasers, jesus christ, jesus christ...

A shield is cast down like a miracle from god herself. F**k the risks - Lance runs out and grabs it, hoists it before himself just a laser aims straight for his chest, knocking him back on his ass. Digging his feet in, he scrabbles till his back is against the wall, the beast advancing to the centre of the ring...and taking aim once more.

Lance tucks his whole self behind the shield, heart thudding, adrenaline coursing through him like a city being lit up for the first time. Now he just needs a weapon - a good gun would do it, or, or...something! Fucking anything!

I wish they were here... Lance almost lets himself think, but he stuffs it into the back of his head, where he keeps all his old, warm memories now, a fire crackling just close enough to keep his hands warm.

Just out of reach of the monsters crawling round his head, dousing light with quintessence and blood and drugs mixed up in syringes.

The monster - the real, physical monster, not one lurking in his mind - pauses, and Lance's eyes dart round the area by him, falling onto a hatchet by his fingers - he grabs it and gets to his feet, runs while the thing is powering up, and flings the axe straight into its core.

It digs in and sticks, energy crackles, and an arm falls limp.

F**k, he thinks, and grins, is halfway through saying, "Hey, not so tough now, are you-" when the functioning arm combines its lasers into one and aims straight for him. Eyes widening, Lance leaps back, but not far enough - there's a sickening sizzle as his right calf is blasted into into nothing, his foot jolted back a little before falling onto its side. When Lance stood up, the shield only covered his torso.

The dark, oppressive ceiling fills his vision as he falls back, his lone right foot imprinted onto his mind, the blood spilling, bone sticking out, how he can feel blood spurting from beneath his knee, how, how nothing is there all of a sudden, he doesn't have a- he lost his- his leg, oh jesus christ, they'll have to do fucking modifications now, he can't fight without a- without a-

He's hoisted up by a druid, catches a glimpse of two more striding into the ring to calm the beast, and hauled back to the torture room, his one foot dragging against the cold metal floor.

They cut his leg off. From the mid-thigh down. The right one, they mutter about implants and prosthetics and weapons, then, inexplicably, the left, too. Fits them with prosthetics, galra-made, human-looking - Lance just watches, bubbles bursting across his vision. Their mumbles die out as sound stops making sense. Colours don't work right - pink, green, blue. Vibrant and, and loud, and his left leg isn't working, purple at all its edges, sharp and, and broken, just like him, broken and wrong, and then pink light hits a druid.
Then another druid.

And then- and then all of them.

Was he unconscious during this? He doesn't remember seeing it. Remembers seeing pink against his closed lids. So did he just shut his eyes last time? Hands ghost over them, but they're not clawed and wretched purple, they're deep brown and soft-looking, they tremble at his gut, which, when did the druids start cutting that open? His arm, he tilts his head and sees burns but can't recall when they came about.

He looks up for answers, but finds only more questions - Allura yelling except he can't hear the words, the other paladins running in and staring with wide eyes, they fuss over his body, Allura picks it up and Lance can only watch as the torture room stretches into a long, dark corridor that ends in a single tiny light - the castleship.

Allura runs and the paladins aren't far behind her, Lance's limp body in her arms, but somehow that pinprick of light never gets any closer. Lance, when he looks down, is still chained to the table, his edges misty, his body ash and dust. Why won't he move? He's perfectly able to, but he lays down and watches them leave him, watches Keith glancing behind and meeting his eyes, and- and-

And Shiro shakes his shoulder, and they keep running.

They run so far. They make it to that pinprick of light, and when they disappear into it, the castle doors shut, that light is extinguished, and the corridor fills with fog until it's surrounding Lance completely.

And Lance? Well, these days...he just sinks right in.

--

The floor greets him upon reawakening, finally something solid against his hands, his forehead, but Lance can't care for that now; scrambles to his feet and stumbles across the threshold of his bathroom, tears and sweat and blood obscuring his vision, then drops to his hands and knees before the toilet, hands shaking as they grab the bowl and he throws up into it, coughing, spluttering, tears gathering in his eyes. Afterimages of his nightmare flood his vision, his leg being blasted from existence, the clinical way the druids had chopped off the rest of them from mid-thigh, and the blood, jesus christ so much blood that it stains everything he looks at, burnt into the back of his eyeballs. Blood from his legs, blood from where the druids cut, blood on his hands, all over his hands, so much blood, innocent fucking blood, brothers of prisoners, children, had there been children? People who couldn't fight, the elderly, the disabled, it had been a joke to watch the champion wrestle his own morals, how at first he refused to do it, and then the- the druids had shot him up with something - more quintessence? - and he'd...

He'd done it.

He'd killed them.

He killed so many people.

And he laughed about it.

His insides heave and he throws up again, chest caving in on itself. Oh god, oh god, oh god, what has he become? Nothing but a tool to be used as the wielder pleases - the paladins use him as an extra soldier, as a talented fighter to spar against, as a...an experiment. And the druids liked to make him play gladiator, and they experimented too, and Lance cared about it until he didn't.
What the fuck was wrong with him? How could he not care? How could he visit his own family and— and treat them the way he did? Maybe he doesn't remember them, but they're still people, people he once loved.

People he loved...speaking of...

He can't even think about Keith. His insides twist and shiver, hands trembling with the foreign but familiar need to tear something up, he squeezes his eyes shut and lets his tears drip into the toilet bowl. After a moment, it auto-flushes, clears away the awful smell and replaces it with that of juniberries, and Lance wishes for a half-second that his life's mistakes could be so easily swept away, so quick and simple that he wouldn't have to lift a finger.

He doesn't want to face all he's done. After Keith left last night, with red cheeks and wet eyes and a horror embedded in every inch of him that left Lance hollow to the bone, Lance had sat down in the corner of his room, hid in head in his hands, and tried to weep. But he couldn't. Isn't that inhuman? No one came to see him. Keith never came back, Lance never broke his resolve and ran after him to apologise, and though it had taken hours, he had finally slept.

As horrible as the nightmare had been, Lance would rather relive that a thousand times than confront a present in which he has made Keith hate him, and the rest of the paladins in turn, where he is seen as a monster not just by the prisoners who once watched him fight, but by people he considered friends.

But he is a monster.

Lance is a monster.

Further memories cross his vision, soaked in blood and guts and what he thought was glory, how he enjoyed it all so much, how after he got his leg replaced he just wouldn't stop winning, and winning meant killing, no matter who opposed him. Lance left Earth to try and save the universe, but now he is a blackened stain begging to be burnt out of existence. A meteoroid has crashlanded in his gut, cracked open all his ribs and smashed his heart to smithereens, crushing his lungs, his kidneys, his intestines. He burns and he rages and he stares at his hands, tries to get the blood out.

A violent shudder overcomes him and he grimaces, goes to wipe away tears but there is so much blood, everywhere, it fills up the room like water in a pool, stains his feet, his knees, ripples as his chest heaves. It makes him want to be sick again but he contains himself, barely, hears the druids whisper in his ears and choke on his own breath. They're not here, he tells himself, but his eyes dart around the room and he realises he has no way of knowing. Blood on the ground and shadows creeping in every corner, what's real and what isn't?

Lance doesn't know.

The shower, then. If he makes it there, maybe it will clear some of the grime off him, steam out the rest of the room, maybe there'll be a newer, better person underneath. He pushes away from the toilet, letting out a shivering exhale, but bowl of the toilet gives beneath his hand and cracks against the wall, the ceramic beneath his fingers crushed into dust, and Lance wrenches his hand back and stares, waits for the whole thing to collapse down but it does not move. When the hell did he get this strong?

He broke the toilet. The fucking toilet.

He can't touch a fucking thing.
He didn't even mean to-

...Staggering up to his feet, he halts at the sink and plants his hands on its edges, thanks god when it doesn't crumble into pieces like the fucking toilet, and washes his hands or, he thinks he washes his hands. He tries and tries but the red won't come out.

It won't fucking come out.

Giving up, he raises his head up to the mirror above the sink.

And then he stops.

Jesus, who the hell *is* that? Lance doesn't recognise himself. God knows he doesn't remember who he was before, but he knows he didn't look like- like *this*. Half-dead yet more alive than he's been in months. Vitality shines in his skin, the way his muscles ripple when he clenches his fist, the bounce of his hair, yet there is a look in his eyes that proclaims he is only a ghost. Ocean blue but cold and empty, a sea of dead fish. Lifeless. And his- and the *scars*, thick across his lips, too pristine and perfect parallel along his right cheekbones, and that awful ring around his neck, and, and... *everything.*

Everything is wrong with him, but he can't stop staring at his eyes. He blinks, and they blink along with him. He opens his mouth and in the mirror his scar is bisected into two, shuts it again and watches his own finger drag down it. That's him. A person. Somehow, *still* a person, or something like one. But the eyes are *something else* - he leans in closer to watch them watching him back, widening and narrowing in time with him, how those ocean tones pick up something distinctly yellow, seeping out the pupil, gold like the quintessence they'd shove down his throat, that he'd been bathed in a week ago, he freezes as the gold takes over, it's bright and lively and bold but it's *empty*, it absorbs all the blue like oil dropped in an ocean, seeps into his sclera through the blood vessels before overflowing them, bursting them open, white becomes gold too, pupils become gold too, *no*, *no*, he isn't *like* that, he isn't *one* of them, he's human he's fucking *human*, he doesn't know what they did to him but they didn't make him- didn't make him fucking *galra*, they didn't and they couldn't, or could they- but they can't they can't or he'd *know*, and he can't stop staring at the gold, he shuts his eyes and opens them again and it's still *there*, maybe he isn't human, maybe he's just a *monster*, a fucking *monster*-

His fist connects with the mirror before he can stop himself, crashes through the glass with a crunch so satisfying Lance can't help a bitter smile, and when he pulls his fist back he sees that he's punched *through* the mirror, through the wall behind it, leaving only a gaping black hole where there once was his face.

Good. He doesn't want to see himself, or his galra eyes or the way he had started smiling without meaning to. Satisfied by violence, like a primal instinct. Lance doesn't think it belongs to him; whose it it? What soul has tainted his own, given him such eyes, tainted him with such bloodlust? Is it the quintessence pumping through him?

What if that's just how he is now?

Chest heaving, Lance pulls away from the sink, looks down at his shard-encrusted hand and watches blood run down, dripping into the pool below. So much blood... It feels good that it's his own, and not someone else's, that he's spilt. He plucks a shard out and drops it to the floor, watches the blood gush for a second before his plastic skin stitches itself back together again.

He doesn't even want to think about what that means.
He just wants to be clean, so he stumbles towards the shower, and slides open the door as though turning the sodden page of an ancient book, trying desperately not to tear it. Terrified hands nudge the shower controls until the spray falls over him, he doesn't even know what the temperature is, he just curls up under the water, clothes soaked within seconds, and pulls his knees to his chest, rocking hard and forth as he waits it out.

Waits out the memories, the visions that flood him of blood and gore and limbs scattered around the arena, the sound of his own breathing echoed back into his ears, his yells, his screams for mercy, his family, his mamá, someone to help him out of this place, it is always so dark and he can barely see past a few metres, it makes the space feel like it's always closing in on him, like the walls are chasing him, and one day he will not escape. Entrapped forever till they squeeze the life out of him.

He thinks maybe they already did.

He waits out the druids whispering in his ears and how the crowd would just fucking scream for him, because they enjoyed the whole fucking thing, waits out the hurt in Hunk's voice every time Lance brushed him off, the way Pidge's voice would shake, sometimes, like she was on the verge of tears, Keith's voice in all the ways Lance has heard it: in fear and in joy, with love, with hatred, with anger, with a tremendous, bulldozing sadness.

Lance feels it in his chest. What did the quintessence do, give him back his heart? He still can't remember most of his life, but he remembers bits and pieces of his capture, and most of his time back with the paladins. This is the real torture, that he has no longer has a life before torture. Every memory- every memory is a dagger in his flesh, is pure torture, the torture is torture and being rescued is torture and his time with the paladins is torture, it's all fucking torture because Lance was a fucking monster, and torture is all he deserves.

And he still is one. Anyone with a heart would've broken it off with Keith far kinder than Lance did - asked for space, time, some room to breathe. Isn't that all Lance wants?

...It's all he wants, but it's not what he deserves. He doesn't get to be with Keith again, not when he treated him like that, hurt him and used him and- and- fucking tried to kill him almost every night, how can Lance know so intimately the scarred flesh of his neck, the way he pants out breaths as Lance advances, the fear in his eyes because it was real, genuine fear, of Lance, of being killing, jesus christ, jesus christ, jesus fucking-

He slams the heels of his hands into his eyes, his fingers digging into his scalp. The shards, at least, have been washed away by the water. He tries to pull at his hair but it doesn't hurt. He's ruined everything. He has ruined fucking everything. He is a fucking monster.

He doesn't fucking deserve to live.

Not beside Keith. Better to be horrible, to drag Keith's worst fears out of them and use them as poison against him, so that Keith would never ever fucking want him again. So Keith could move on, be brokenhearted for a while but build himself up stronger again, and find someone actually worthy of him. Not Lance. Never fucking Lance, fucking monster he is now.

That he even inflicted himself on Keith- on anyone-

His chest heaves and tears drip and the water falls upon him, but he cannot feel it. Can't feel the tile below him, the glass against his back. He is made of plastic, hollow, made of stone, deadly. Humans have memories and hopes and dreams and Lance has only his torture, and that which he has inflicted on others. What the fuck has he done...
...And what the fuck will he do now?

--

The world is shadowed for so long, white tile blackened by ghosts of all the people he has slain, and good god there are so many, that when someone enters his bathroom, he doesn't recognise them between all the other staring figures.

There are so many people, Lance doesn't think he could count them all. What did he say to the druid, that he'd probably killed thousands of galra soldiers? And with such pride, like, like it was a good thing, and- and it is, objectively. The fewer space fascists around the better, Lance knows that, but by his own hand? So carelessly? So thoughtlessly? And it brought him such joy, even now he can feel satisfaction coiling in his stomach at the thought of it...

Monster.

That's what he is, now. He thought big Robeasts that could shoot off legs with a single laser blast were the real monsters, but Lance managed to defeat it. And then Lance defeated everything. Lance was the big bad monster, the horror story whispered around in the prison cells at night, if you caused trouble it was him you'd be up against, not the galra, not the druids.

He was their worst fate.

His hands drive further into his hair, the heels of his palms pressing against his forehead, fingernails scratching his shaved head, and wishes he could sink into himself, into the muddy sludge crawling through his veins, weighing him down from the pit of his stomach. Wishes the water would wash his sins away, that he could step out this shower a new man, but he can't.

He can't even fucking feel things. Can't even feel whoever's pulling his hands away from him face, reaching back and digging his fingers out his head and lowering them to his lap. They're dripping from the shower, but as he stares blankly down, he realises the water is no longer spraying down over him; whoever's here must have turned it off.

Whoever's here... Lance raises his gaze and sees first the outline of a dress tucked under someone's knees, sees brown hands holding tight to his own, makes out Allura, is must be, here white hair shining like a beacon, warding all Lance's demons away.

"Lance, Lance," she's saying, not letting go of his hands, "are you with me?"

He stares at her for a long, long time.

Then he nods.

"Oh, thank Altea," she says, her brow relaxing, her lips turning into an almost-smile. "I knocked on your door and there was no reply, then you weren't in your room but I heard the shower going, and I... Lance, I was calling your name for ages... What were you doing in there?"

He doesn't know what to say. He feels like he hasn't seen her in months, even though she stood up for him at the dinner only last night. She has always been beautiful, but there's something else in her eyes - warm and kind and loyal - that feels...safe.

But surely she knows what he's done. To the aliens, and, jesus, to Keith - he can't help but pull away, relaxing into a cross-legged position only to tighten his arms over his chest. Watch her like a hawk, waiting to trip up. The druids could act nice, too. The druids, who are all Altean, and surely Allura must know that. But she only frowns, folds her hands against her lap, and looks over at him.
"Lance?" she tries. "I- I came to fetch you for breakfast. You- you don't have to worry about our, er, guests, Coran was up all night plotting a track to the nearest space station and we've dropped them off, so- so there will be no repeat of last night." She looks at him for a reaction, but he is stone before her and will not show it. "A-anyway, I- Shiro came in and...explained things, and- well, Hunk and Pidge are so tired, a-and Coran works himself to death round the clock so I- and I- but we have no idea what the ritual did to you. So...I refrain from making a judgement. I ask only that you, er, dry off and perhaps join us?"

He doesn't trust his words around her, around anyone. He spent months here, allowed to say and do as he pleased, for the most part, but now his heart is a shrivelled thing in his chest, barely beating, and it clenches at the thought of saying one word. Silence, the druids would say. Oh, they liked it when he talked in the ring and the audience just ate up the way he'd cry out in agony, but they didn't need words wielded at them during torture, and whatever they were making him into didn't deserve them, either. To make a noise would be to betray his position, in theory, be he a sniper watching over the battlefield or an agent undercover in some lab. And it was weak, anyway. Lance was supposed to be without weakness.

Better to say nothing, just nod. Get to his feet slowly, his body tight and unwilling, Allura murmurs something about you must be frozen, glances at the toilet and says remind me to get that fixed, halts at the mirror and frowns back at him, looks down at his hands, and sees only the scars that have existed there before.

"Lance, are you..." she says, but he doesn't meet her gaze no matter how tender her tone. "Is everything alright?"

He nods, wonders how far that concern runs. He remembers Allura being kind, usually, but he can't help but recoil with the remembrance of her treatment of Keith once it turned out he was half-galra.

What would she say if she saw what he had seen in the mirror?

A monster, the druids' voices in his head echoes.

He goes to follow her outside, but she catches this and unhooks the towel off his door and shoves it at him. "Dry off," she says again. "I'll wait outside."

He holds the towel in his hands and watches her walk away, slower and far more cautious than she'd been in his dream.

But leaving, regardless.

The door slides shut after her, and Lance mechanically dries himself off, realising only five minutes in that he's dragging the towel across his wet clothes, and fumbles out of them, shuts his eyes so he doesn't try and look back and see the reflection of his back in the cracked mirror.

The quintessence may make him invincible to harm but Lance still chooses clothes like donning armour, heavy denim jeans and a white-and-navy top whose sleeves are long enough to cover the worst of the scars. A black jacket with a collar high enough to hide his necklace of raw skin, thick-soled shoes easy to run in.

Allura is somehow still waiting for him when he is ready. Draws her eyes up and down him and bites her lip, but the minute their gazes meet she tacks on a thin smile, hides her steepled hands behind her back. "Shall we, then?" she says, and he walks with her to indicate his agreement. "We have so much to talk about, Lance! You'll have to tell us everything about the quintessence ritual,
how you felt, if you were conscious, what you think it's done to you... And then of course I'll have
to talk to Coran about fitting out your bathroom again... Then we really should start us training
practise again, I'm told that when the others found you last night you were demonstrating
exceptional strength - greater than we've seen from you- well, ever. And incredible speed, frankly
I'm eager to see it... And then... Lance? Are you listening?"

Is he? The words go in one ear and out the other. Allura wants him to talk but nausea builds up so
quickly in his throat at the thought of it, he doesn't think he can force words out for anybody. Last
night he'd opened his mouth and look what came out - pure poison, acid blades and exploding
bullets, turning Keith's heart into shrapnel. Lance thinks: how could I do that?

But he looks at all he has done to Keith and knows: how couldn't I.

It was his only option.

"Lance, please," says Allura, and desperation now tinged her voice. "If there's something wrong,
just tell me - I, I'm not going to judge you, or... I just want you to be safe. And happy."

Safe. Lance finds himself laughing, low and ugly and evil, happy, yeah right, looks in Allura's eyes
and sees more of that genuine fear he's seen so often in Keith. He clamps his lips shut but they stay
stuck up in some awful smirk, he can't force them down.

"Lance," Allura says again, but he shakes his head and though she frowns, she finally drops it.

The scene in the dining room is sombre. Coran greets him with a tight-lipped smile, but Pidge
doesn't even look up at him, Hunk's gaze brushes his for two seconds before he tucks his chin into
his chest, and Shiro raises his chin and locks eyes with Lance with a cold, thin scowl.

"Is everything alright, princess?" asks Coran, standing and doling out food for Allura and Lance as
they sit opposite Hunk and Pidge. Allura slides her eyes to Lance, but he still doesn't know what to
say. Words evade him, his voice is a tiny, crouching thing in the bottom of his throat. It doesn't
want to come out.

Lance tightens his shoulders and grabs the plate from Coran, ready to shove his head down and just
eat, but he doesn't know his own strength.

The plate cracks beneath his fingers, pieces breaking off and crashing to the table with Hunk's
syrup-drizzled pancakes until Coran is left holding a single shard in his hand. A drink is knocked
down, someone's meal gets ruined. Lance's eyes widen, and he withdraws his hand quickly, staring
down at it. What the hell...? He knows he wasn't this strong before. He didn't break everything he
touched. He never punched not only through a mirror, but through the wall behind it.

He never went to take a plate and break it only by holding it.

Is this what being a monster is, then? He cannot touch everything, lest he spread his corruption
elsewhere. Look at Keith - reduced to tears and desperate pleas all because of what Lance did,
because they sparred too much and kissed too much and spent far to much time together. He isn't
even at breakfast, and why would he be? Why would he ever want to face Lance again? Lance
can't even face himself.

His hand is bleeding again. There are only a few shards, this time, where he somehow dug his
fingers in too hard, and he draws them out methodically, drops them onto the table, and stares as
blood drips once, twice, before the skin closes over itself and all cuts are gone.
This isn't normal.

What thing crushes all beneath its hands and comes out without a nick of blood on his palms? Robeasts and aliens encased in inpenetrable armour.

Things Lance used to fight. Things Lance saw as monsters.

That's him, now. That's been him since they hauled him out that arena and cut his leg off to make way for something that would set him on the path for victory. Since they caught him at all.

Maybe it's always been here. Maybe it was waiting, always, to be drawn out.

Maybe it was fate that led him here, not to this moment but this life, if he can even call it that. This existence, this survival. If he hadn't been captured by the galra, perhaps it would've been triggered by something else: going haywire during a battle; getting angry at his teammates; getting sick of not being special. After all, they had one too many paladins. Someone had to go.

Better it was him.

Better him than...anyone...

"Lance," says Allura, and he realises the entire table, now, is staring at him. The waffles have been cleared away, the plate is gone with all its broken pieces. A new plate has been set before him, waffles stacked high. Coran is on his feet, hands tight around the neck of his chair. The anger searing Shiro's eyes is tempered now with confusion, wariness. Pidge's eyes are wide, stuck on his healed hand; but it his Hunk's gaze he meets, saucers of red-veined white and soft brown, brows ticked up, lips parted. "Lance," Allura says again, "are you with us?"

Am I with you...?

He nods.

"What- what happened there? Is that a side-effect of the quintessence? Increased strength?"

He'd demolished gladiators like a monster in the training deck yesterday. He nods again.

"A-and...that healing, I-I've never seen a human heal like that, is that... It must be..."

"It has to be," says Shiro in a low voice. "That's inhuman."

Lance's hands clench involuntarily; inhuman, sounds about right.

"Lance, don't- don't do that to yourself, just...let go," says Hunk in a soft but hesitant voice, as though he's afraid he'll trigger Lance's inhuman side further. "Your hands, Lance. You did this the other week with me and Pidge in the infirmary, remember? You're hurting yourself."

Maybe I deserve it, Lance thinks, but he unfolds his fingers, slowly, unwillingly, they shake with uncontrolled energy, fingers still bent at the knuckle, before he straightens them out and flattens them on his thighs, releasing a deep, heavy breath.

"You good?" Hunk asks, and Lance nods slowly, training his eyes on the food before him. He can do this: pick up a knife, then fork. Carefully. Slowly cut the waffles into edible pieces, apply pressure but- jesus not that much, just slowly, slow and careful, he can do this, he can, he's not so fucking monstrous that he can't cut up his own breakfast without destroying anything, is he?

...Is he?
"Well," says Coran, sitting down, "now that that little furore is over, shall we chat about how you've been feeling?"

Lance stuffs some waffle in his mouth to avoid answering.

"Just to see what's different, what's not, clearly you've gone strength to spare and magnificent healing abilities, but are there any differences in...well...feeling?" tries Coran further, and Lance washes down the food with a sip of his drink.

"He's...not been especially talkative," says Allura when the silence persists, and Lance keeps his eyes on his food, unwilling to see the prying gazes no doubt directed at him. "In fact, I...don't think he's said a word to me at all."

"That's troubling," murmurs Coran. "You don't think he's...checking out, as you say? Like before?"

"I don't know," says Hunk quietly. "He doesn't seem to be paying attention..."

Good. Maybe this way they'll stop bothering him; maybe they'll think he's the same as always. They can't know that he's different now, that he knows how monstrous he is. If they know then maybe Keith will find out, figure out why Lance said the things he did, and come back for round two, a round he'd most certainly win. All he'd have to say is: I know why you did it and Lance wouldn't be able to keep himself together. No matter what is was followed with - forgiveness and love, anger and bitter, bitter curses - it would be too much for Lance. It would be too much of a weakness.

He just has to keep pretending. He thinks he used to be good at that.

Everyone is so careful around him for the remainder of breakfast, even though he can feel Shiro's heavy gaze on him all throughout it. He pretends he's not paying attention, eats mechanically, watches everything he touches.

When he finishes, he doesn't let anyone keep him there - gets up and strides out the room, ignores their calls after them, and stretches out his fingers. His fighting is barbaric but it's all he can think of to calm down. He's scared that if he slows down the ghosts hovering in the backs of his eyes will converge on him and demand why he took their lives.

How he is somehow worthy to live in this world, yet they were not.

Legions of ghosts.

He speeds up into a jog towards his room, strips out of his clothes with closed eyes and yanks his armour on, grabs a couple of the weapons lying round his room, and full-out sprints back to the training deck.

He slams his hand against the control to the door in his haste to just train already - stares in horror as it cracks and crackles beneath his hands, electric zigzagging between the broken pieces before fizzling into nothing, half the panel lying smashed on the ground. He did that.

He keeps doing that.

There's nothing to be done - the door is stuck almost open, so he steps inside, only to find Keith frozen in his armour with his bayard stuck through a gladiator, that drops to the ground and fizzes into nothing before him.

Don't say anything, don't say anything, he tells himself, taking another step inside and crossing his
arms to hide how furiously his heart is thumping against his cheek. Keith, Keith, smart and brave and always so fierce, he burnt with anger but sometimes he would laugh and Lance's heart would melt into sparkly pink goo. He remembers this from before being captured - remembers looking at Keith too long, admiring him as he trained, watching his body move, the way he'd tuck his hair behind his ear with a scowl. The way he'd roll his eyes when Lance would show off during ranged training. How he'd turn his head to hide a smile.

Silence, his thoughts morph into, silence, silence, silence.

And silence reigns. They stare at each other for so long without a word, Lance is glad they're both wearing their helmets so he can't see directly into Keith's eyes, but he can see the emotions rearranging every aspect of his face - furrowed brows and a downturned mouth, the way his head is ducked down a little, his hand tight round his bayard before he deactivates and it dissipates.

"Deck's all yours," he says finally, voice low and rough and flat, and he doesn't touch Lance as he stares down and rushes past him.

Fuck, Lance thinks. "Begin training level twenty," he says, and tears through it to distract himself. Higher and higher into numbers they haven't even touched before, he uses the trident but keeps the rifle slung to his back, just in case, pistols at his hips as always. Everything is so easy. Instinct, pricks of awareness all over his body, he moves faster than he can ever remember moving before and nothing hurts, and even when he's wounded he doesn't stay that way.

He doesn't know how high he goes, but he must train for hours like a monster, he knows that's what it is, does it even count as training if it's so easy? He never learns anything new. He just keeps winning.

"End training simulation!"

For a moment as the gladiators dissipate around him, it is as if the hundreds of ghosts following him have been made almost-solid - hands stretched out to him, weapons brandished, coming after him, finally, what he deserves, really-

"Lance!" continues the voice, and Lance realises it's Coran's, booming from the loudspeakers. When he looks up, he can see Coran standing behind the reinforced glass that allows onlookers to watch from a safe distance. He isn't the only one there. "Have a shower, then come immediately to the dining room."

Then he is alone with all his thoughts and feelings and ghosts, so he leaves out the busted door and does as told, keeps his touch gentle as possible, extends his shower by washing through his hair, towels off and pulls on what he'd been wearing everywhere, and though he starts off quick, his pace slows as he reaches the dining room.

What did they see on the training deck? Horror incarnated? Do they want to get rid of him? Send him off? Dump him onto somebody else's hands?

Maybe they should. It'd be easier for them all.

The room is much the same as it had been at breakfast: quietly, everyone already sitting, and Keith missing.

"Oh, thank heavens you're here," says Allura, sat opposite Hunk. "Come sit, won't you? There are a few things to chat about over lunch."

Ominous. He takes his seat, plate ready before him. They watch him expectantly but silence,
"You nearly broke the record," says Allura, "on the training deck today."

He puts the fork back down and looks at her.

"The highest level was forty-six," she says slowly, "attained by Zarkon at his peak, when he was still with us. You reached level thirty-five...and the closest anyone else has ever gotten was level thirty-three."

The water in her glass ripples. Her hands is shaking. Her whole body is tense, pressed just a little away from him, hardly enough to be noticeable. But Lance notices.

"Lance," says Coran, and his voice is heavy, all his layers of cheer and care stripped back to reveal him sombre core. "What you did today far exceeds a human's capabilities. We need you to tell us what the quintessence ritual has done to you."

Silence the druids hiss, but they're all staring at him, all of them, and Hunk bites his lip and Pidge tries to eat even though her cutlery trembles in her hands and Shiro, jesus christ, Shiro looks so angry and afraid and uncertain, it's scary.

"I," he says, the single vowel wrenched from the rubble-filled ditch in his throat. "I don't want to."

He can't.

They can't ask him to.

What would he even say?

_I was a monster before, but now I'm bigger and scarier and stronger. The kind you can't defeat. The worst kind._

"It doesn't matter what you want," Shiro snarls, and Lance stares at his food, pastry parcels and salad on the side. He thinks of grey galra goop and wishes he could find joy in the small things, but everyone at this table is looking at him like he's a threat.

And he is one, isn't he?

"Tell us!" Shiro says, and Lance tries to breathe, tries to remember who he is talking to. Parcels and salad, water in his cup. His fingers clench. The level he reached should be unattainable by humans. Lance isn't human. Lance is beyond that. Lance is worse that that.

Monster monster monster.

Fine, then. Fine! Lance is a monster. But gold eyes and shadows in the corners of his room, those has to be fake. A delusion. They have to be. Lance is not galra, not corrupted by them or somehow tainted forever by them, and he isn't fucking haunted. He isn't! He isn't!

He can't be. He doesn't want to be. He wants to go home, he only remembers it from their visit the other week, laying out on the grass in the rain for hours and feeling like maybe God herself was washing him clean. He wants that again. He wants to feel clean again. Blessed, holy, and not in the avenging, raging angel kind of way. He wants to be touched by Cupid's bow, seek safety in love. Love of a lover, love of a family. People who knew him once and could bring him back to himself, his better self. Who'd take him in and old him tight, no matter how afraid they were. Surely they'd do that, surely...
Unless he is too monstrous even for them.

_Inhuman._

That's what you are, Lance. You're not fucking human.

_Stop it_, he thinks, _I am I am I am_-

"Tell us!" says Shiro again, suddenly the both of them are standing, the collar of his shirt fisted in Shiro's hands, and _god_ he looks so _angry_, and he's _so close_, eyes narrowed, teeth bared, he looks-

He looks like a threat.

Lance punches him in the chest and Shiro goes flying. Physically _flying_, his feet are off the ground and he makes a dent in the wall opposite, and Lance stares with wide, horrified eyes as someone hisses _holy shit_, yells his name, yells _Shiro's_, Lance looks down at his hand and thinks _what the fuck am I capable of?_

So he leaves.

Actually, he runs.

He has to.

---

The last time he came to the hangar of his own volition was when he went to fight the galra on that junkyard planet. He knows this because he remembers them telling him in the aftermath of the electrocution that followed, that Allura called him to the bridge but he waited till Keith and Shiro had run out of sight to divert his course to the hangar, to the pods. He'd wanted to fight - that's the whole truth. There was, in all honesty, nothing else calling him. He didn't want to protect his teammates. He didn't want to be a distraction. He wanted to feel flesh and bone crumble under his fingertips.

And he paid the price.

Lance doesn't remember it now, and he's visited the hangar in the interim - getting pods to and fro the various planets they've visited, or catching a ride in someone's lion, limping out with them when they were too injured to do it themselves. But that was his only reason to come; work, duty.

This is...something calling him. A siren singing her song in his heart, a hot bright spark that hasn't existed in so long, that he thought had been extinguished with every other decent part of him. He feels it burning in his chest, but it doesn't hurt. Fire, but it is kind, lights up his ribs, scares the shadows away. It gives him a semblance of safety.

The Red Lion is asking him to come home.

And he wants to go. See what solace she has to offer. The others will be coming after him - it'll only be a matter of time before Shiro is checked over and Coran glances over the camera feed, honing in on Lance's exact position. He doesn't want them to see him. If he can get inside Red, the barrier will come down after him, and-

If he can get inside Red.

If...
But she's calling him, and if he doesn't get hide soon, the others will come after him. He doesn't want to hear what they have to say: Lance, what the fuck? Lance, what the hell did you just do? Lance, what are you even capable of?

Lance, maybe you really are a monster. Lance, maybe those aliens were right.

Red wraps herself up in a bubble of hard light, and Lance's heart thumps with every step he takes towards it. This was severed during his time with the galra, he knows that. Can't pinpoint the moment. Red shrieking in his ear until it was diminished into nothing, and there was just another black hole cut into his chest. But that hole feels- filled, sort of, with something begging to become solid, become real again.

Lance, too, wants to feel real again.

The barrier turns to nothing beneath his hand, red fizzling away in thin air, and he holds his breath as Red bows her head and opens her jaw for him.

Holy shit.

Every step is tentative, almost halting. Caught between his fear of being found and the acute knowledge that this is Keith's lion, Lance may have been here a lot since he was rescued but never as a... Never as a paladin.

Red, he wonders, taking the steps up into her cockpit, what are you thinking...?

She purrs deep and warm and safe in his chest when he settles in the pilot seat. As he remembers, a ruby room not quite as spacious as Blue, compact, the kind of place that would be threatening if Red wasn't so soft in the back of his mind. Yes, it's small and dark and reminds him of the haze that would descend upon his vision in the arena, but it's Red, and Red will keep him safe. She'll do anything to ensure it.

The barrier drops back over her once he's inside, saving him not only from the druids coming after him but his own friends, or...people who once were his friends. Hunting him down, no doubt, demanding an explanation. Lance can't give it to them. It's like a flip has been switched, and all the emotion he'd been incapable of feeling before the ritual has just poured like water into his empty ribs, filled it to bursting, and now he can't summon the words to explain. They'd get wet, soaked in something Lance isn't sure he wants the others to see.

Something raw.

Taking a long, deep breath, Lance pulls his knees to his chest and wraps his arms around the shoulders, keeps his centre as safe as can be. Like this, nothing can touch him. Red's presence in his mind even banishes away the worst of the monsters lingering with their bottles of poison and acid. Instead of devolving into panicked thought trains or distracting himself with fighting, Lance is simply able to feel.

Strongest of all is the shame. The absolute guilt. Red tries to tell him it's not his fault, but whose else could it be? The druids didn't force him to say the things he did, to toy with Keith the way he'd done. Even if it had been real by the end - that only made it worse. Made it complicated. Because Keith believed Lance when he said he cared... Lance believed himself when he said that. He hadn't been lying.

Remorse is heavy, too. And fear. Anger, mostly at himself. If he had been stronger, if he'd been better, if he'd never let himself get caught to begin with... The druids say Lance offered himself but
he doesn't know if he believes that. They lie and they speak truth and they just talked so much Lance got muddled. They could say anything. Words crawled like worms into his ears and slithered inside his head, mixing everything up. The fact is he doesn't know what's real and what isn't these days. He hasn't for a long time.

And he is...sad. He longs for a life he no longer remembers. Leandro Hernandez, a boy from Cuba who'd get the bus from Cienfuegos to Varadero almost every weekend if his parents wouldn't drive the whole family over, there'd been some bus tickets tucked in the gaps on his photo wall, Lance doesn't know why Leandro did that but he's glad he did. A boy with a huge family and felt unimportant because of it, resorted to applying to an international space school to get some attention...but also because he loved space. Star charts on the wall, old alien film posters tacked one right next to the other, night sky blankets. A boy who liked blue, who felt blue. Who went to school in North America and suddenly his hair felt wrong, it wouldn't be so bad but he had freckles everywhere and his accent was obvious, so he bought all the flattening product he could until his curls forgot themselves. He loved vivaciously and laughed despite his inner turmoil. He seemed...so good.

But he isn't Leandro Hernandez anymore. He's just Lance, ex-Blue Paladin, ex-Red Paladin, current Champion, monster to end all monsters, and all heroes as well.

Not a good man...but a perfect soldier.

Red takes these feelings and siphons the edge off them, lets him feel them through his body, not concentrated in his heart or jittering up his hands. He holds tight to himself, digs his head against his arms, and finally weeps.

Properly. Not desperate, illness-forced tears of vomiting into a toilet, but real tears. Warm and soft, necessary like a baby's. Red cradles him as though he is one. Cry, she seems to say in the back of his mind. You are safe now. You will always be safe here. Cry, Lance.

He knows that isn't the truth, but the him that got electrocuted on the floor behind the pilot's seat and the him curled up in this seat, sobbing like a baby, seem worlds apart. They aren't really, Lance knows that. Both are physically unfeeling with prosthetic legs and a predisposition towards violence. But it was months ago... Time, at least, creates tangible distance.

It softens the pain just enough for it to be bearable, to be distilled into salt tears dripping down him face, soaking into the denim covering his knees. He isn't okay. There is no fucking possible way for him to be ever fucking be okay again. The world - the universe - would be better off if he flung himself off a cliff, his prosthetics dragging him to the bottom of the ocean. But... But he thinks he can help like this. Like he did before. If he's stronger, he can take out more galra, right? Prevent invasions, liberate those already enslaved. Lance wants that. Lance is a monster in every meaning of the word but god, at least let it be for good.

At least let him help.

Red in his head, in his chest, soothes him. He can, she tells him. He can, he will. Paladin armour, still blue, but the red bayard in his hand like it was once before. Back when he was taken. A sniper or a rifle or pistols, a trident, any way he wants it. Could that be him? Where'd Keith go, then? Black lion? Shiro on the side? Maybe, Lance thinks, maybe...

It will be alright, Red seems to say, and as such Lance lets go of those worries, mind going blank. He just sobs it all out. It feels good, freeing. He can't recall crying like this since...since... Well, since he was imprisoned. But the galra leeched it out of him and Lance hasn't been able to feel like
Hours must past. His teammates are red-faced with searching when they finally appear in the hangar, Allura's voice blasting through Red's comms.

"Lance!" she shouts, then takes a breath and lowers her tone. When he uncurls from his seat, he sees...all of them gathered there. Keith is staring up at him in horror. They can't tell he's been crying - too far away, shaded in light, tears dried by his jeans - but they stare regardless.

"What the hell," Lance can hear on the edge of Allura's comms, and then Keith is shouting, pounding at the barrier of light separating him from his lion.

...Separating him. From his lion.

Wait, Lance thinks, but Red shushes him.

"Let me in!" Keith screams. "What the hell?! Red, please, what did I do- why him?!!"

"Why me?" Lance asks, but she only envelopes him in warmth and safety.

"Red, please! Come on! You can't shut me out again, I can't- please!"

Shiro wraps an arm around Keith, presumably shushing him as he pulls Keith away, but he hurls another dagger-shaped glare at Lance as he does so.

"Lance," says Allura in the ensuing silence. "Please, come out of there. We should talk, or...at least observe the differences in you. If you don't want to talk. I mean...Red let you in. That's a development, isn't it?"

It is.

Lance doesn't want to talk about it.

He crosses his arms, and Allura wilts outside. Hunk is by her side, his arm pressed against hers. He's torn between concern for Allura and surprise at where Lance has been found. Pidge frowns also, her hands in fists by her side, she keeps glancing from Keith to Red to Lance and back, eyes narrow. Coran looks...incredibly sad.

Red made him feel a little better, but shame sits like bile at the bottom of his throat, and he knows if he faces them he will be sick. He doesn't want them to see it. To them, he is a strange scary monster, and he's not sure he wants them to know that he's only human, after all.

...He wants them to leave.

He shakes his head at them.

"Lance," says Allura again, eyes widening, "please! We don't want to fight! We just want to know what's going on!"

But he is silent. Keith shakes his head, breaks out of Shiro's hold to punch against the barrier once more, but Red does not move.

"Keith, I'm sorry," Allura's hushed voice says, looking away from Lance. "I think she's... I don't think it's happening."

"It isn't fair," comes Keith's faint growl. "It isn't fair! What did he do to deserve her!"
"We don't know," says Allura quietly, gaze dropping to the floor. "He won't tell us."

"...This is bullshit,' Keith mutters, and Lance stares as he walks away, trailing fire, head held high like he's never lost a war. Jesus fucking christ, Lance loves him so fucking much. Even when Lance is the cause of the pain, he's so proud that Keith's able to turn his back and act like it doesn't hurt. It takes a lot. Lance knows that.

...Lance hates that he's causing it.

"Lance?" tries Allura again, and Hunk leans into her side so he can use her comms.

"Buddy?" he tries. "If you want, it can be just you and me... You know, face masks, nail polish, our classical music playlist that starts with Toxic by Britney? Like we used to do it?"

That almost sounds nice. Lance is so used to seeing his fingers dripping with blood and guts, it'd be nice to see something polished and shiny there instead. He can almost feel the freshness of a facemask, brightening his skin, minimising his pores, hydrating all three scars. And music... Lance misses music.

But Lance doesn't deserve kind, gentle things. Sitting here in Red, safe from the world at large, is already more than he could possibly ask for... And besides, Hunk is a good man. Nosy and suspicious and his main way of tackling problems is physically tackling them, but Lance recalls the two of them sitting on the observation deck together, watching the stars, talking about home. Lance won't taint him, too. He's too good for Lance.

They all are.

He stretches out, splays his legs a bit, rests his arms against the seat. If he acts enough like an asshole, they'll have to believe he still is one. Then they won't want to come near him. He already broke a fucking plate. Punched Shiro into a wall. Broke Keith's god damn heart.

Tipping his head back, he shuts his eyes, like he's going to doze, just until they leave, but he really does fall asleep, and somehow even then Red tempers his dreams, leeches the blood out of them, drops Lance onto a beach where the sand is pale white and the sea is blue, blue, blue far as the eye can see.

Somewhere that looks a little like home.

And for the first time since the quintessence ritual - the first time, in fact, since he was abducted by the galra at all - Lance's soul feels a little bit at peace.

Chapter End Notes

u all: rly thought chap 10 was bad
me, who knew better: :)

(for those who need it: a link to my happy tag on tumblr)

firstly an Enormous thank u to light of my life murmured lullabye who's been cheering me on and letting me vaguely spoil her for future events so that she could help me out;;; means the world to me;;; i sort of?? borrowed?? the idea of lance talking back to the arena watchers/his opponents from her as well, with her permission haha, which i just
wanted to clarify as it features heavily in her Amazing fic *blueshift*, an au where lance goes on the kerberos mission instead of shiro. it's absolutely fantastic and i know it's only going to get better so go check it out!!!

also a huge thank u to everyone who comments, as always, but also everyone who visits my blog and sends an ask or rb's the chapter post! it's so nice that u'd all go the extra effort!

ive been thinking also abt extras again...... i think maybe doing a shiro pov piece covering most of arc 1, why he's so concerned abt keith, the resurgence of his trauma in correlation with lance's problems, what he thinks of lance and keith etc so......if that's of interest?

ALSO, if anyone thinks they have song recs more suited to this new direction we're taking, feel free to send me them! always need more music

otherwise...what do u think!! did it go where u expected?? is lance instantly redeemed once more? r u getting what's going on w him?? and most important...where do u think it will go...?? i love hearing ur thoughts!
keith has to make a choice

this chapter came physically to my house and KILLED me and thats why it took so long

jk i had an exam then came home then xmas and new years and also this chapter did actually attempt to Fucking Kill Me so.............................swag

nothing much to announce except!!! i split my spotify playlist into three, so one for each arc! it was getting ridiculously long, and frankly they r all still ridiculously long but.... i hope u enjoy regardless! arc 1, arc 2, arc 3!

and now..........................enjoy!

But I guess it's time
To put that to bed.
I guess it's time
To let the dead be dead.
**Hero**, Ghost Quartet

--


Punch, kick, punch with his other fist, double slam.

*The galra turned me into a monster...I play with people, dont I?*

*Shut up, Keith thinks.*

*All I had to do was pretend... It was funny...but now it's just kind of sad. How desperate are you?*

*I'm not desperate. I'm not I'm not I'm not-*

*I'm sick of it.*

Of you. That's what he'd really meant.
You don't know who I am anymore.

Keith thrusts his fists against the training bot, sagging against his fists, ducking his head. *Shut up,* he thinks, *just shut up!*

But his brain won't stop replaying it in his head. He'd stayed up half the night alternatively sobbing into Shiro's chest and trying to punch the shit out of him, sometimes staggering towards the door to maybe go punch the shit out of Lance, but Shiro would tell him not to be stupid, remind him of all the thousand reasons why trying to fight Lance would be a bad idea, and Keith would be reminded of what he'd told himself even as he let Lance push against him and kiss him properly that first time - *dumb, bad, stupid.* Keith would be *totally screwed* when they were found out.

And here he is. Totally fucking screwed.

His shoulders heave as he gasps in great, heavy breaths, wishing the wetness on his cheeks was sweat, his heart twining over and over itself, and-

And what fucking heart? Lance ripped it straight out his chest, ate it for breakfast, licked the blood off his teeth and had the audacity to kiss Keith with those same lips. It's gone. There's nothing inside of him. These past weeks, months, he'd felt so full up with something gold and sweet and right, warmed to the bone by *love,* but it was all fake. Hollow.

Lance was pretending.

The whole time. All of it. He was... He was...

**_Punch._** Punch harder, punch better, kick up into the bot's face, whirl round, get more momentum for another punch. Don't cry, idiot. Don't mourn something you always knew was going to end.

But he'd hoped...

**Hope.**

That's stupid, too.

What did he expect, though? He knew Lance couldn't feel things. The evidence was abundant, even in the most recent weeks when Keith genuinely believed they had something. He didn't give a single shit about being back in Cuba with his family. Their distress was nothing to him. He hasn't cared about Hunk and Pidge in months, and he's been dismissive of Shiro since the start. What the *hell* did Keith expect from him? Why did he think he was special? What could *possibly* make him special to Lance, who could apparently pick up anyone he wanted when they landed on inhabited planets and could fight better than all off them combined? Keith's nothing in comparison to that. The only reason-

...Well, Keith knows the only fucking reason.

**Easy.**

Was he? Desperate he believes wholeheartedly, knew it from the start, but *easy?* But when Lance first moved in for a proper kiss, Keith hadn't stopped it. Keith had encouraged it - clung to him as he was the sun and Keith had never seen light before. Maybe... And then he kept inviting it in. Lance would show up at his door and Keith never said no - Keith started going to *his* door, too. Keith pursued it. Keith loved him too much to let him go. Even when he should've.

All that time, he *knew* he should've. But he is weak, and he could not.
What does that say about him? Keith thought he knew who he was - the galra part was confusing, but he was still Keith. He had a hot temper and he liked to be alone and there was nothing better than flying a lava-shooting lion through space at lightspeed and beyond, but...being with Lance wasn't like that. He got angry at Lance but Lance was such a mess, he was so confusing that it was easy to make excuses and calm his anger down. He liked to be alone, but serene solitude turned into bored loneliness that could be spent messing with Lance in whatever capacity - fighting or fooling around or even just talking. And of course he still liked flying Red, but Lance had gotten hurt there. Keith had opened Red up to Lance and now she was too full of the memory of him, how they'd been towed to and fro countless missions on her, Lance sprawling across Keith's lap when the comms weren't on or leaning against the back of the pilot seat, flicking Keith's helmet, readying his arms and armour.

Tainted, also, by Lance.

Keith doesn't want to think that, but what other option does he have? The quintessence solved nothing - the quintessence made it worse. Did it strip Lance of his last shreds of humanity? Did it make the galra quintessence stronger? It made Lance stronger, from the few seconds Keith caught of him on the training deck. Strong enough to tear his own palms to pieces within seconds. Strong enough for, by the time Keith reached Lance's room, those cuts to be healed completely. That's fucking inhuman. Keith is half-galra and he's not even capable of that. What does it mean? Have they only driven Lance closer to what the druids wanted him to be?

Whatever they wanted him to be. Whatever they still want him to be. Apparently 'terror to his own teammates' isn't enough.

Terror to a whole shipful of prisoners.

Terror to...

Terror to Keith! More than that; worse than that. Keith let Lance pull a whole ton of bullshit he would never normally let slide because Lance was different; Lance was hurt. Lance was, Keith thought, scared. And besides, the whole reason Lance was kidnapped to begin with was because Keith hadn't been paying enough attention to him - to everyone - during the fight to rescue Shiro. So Keith made exceptions.

He made so many exceptions. Embraced Lance and embraced love and now all he wants to do is crawl in a hole and just die for a while. He can't face Lance, and he can't face his friends, can't face them knowing how he feels about Lance and how quickly, how easily Lance discarded him.

He cannot do it.

So he remains in the training room, punching bots with bare fists to disguise his heartbreak with the pain searing across his knuckles. Shiro is the first to visit - slips in with a bottle of water and some food, speaking only in soft, low tones, hands always on Keith's shoulder or back or ruffling his hair with a pained smile. He doesn't bring up Lance, just double checks that Keith definitely doesn't want to join them at breakfast, or at all today, goes over exactly what Keith wants Shiro to tell the others - there was a fight, he doesn't want to talk about it, he needs some space - and then Shiro heads for the door before halting two steps away, turning on his heel, and wrapping his arms round Keith in a tight embrace.

"Shiro?" Keith says uncertainly, raising a hand to pat Shiro's back. "Are you...?"

"I'm sorry," Shiro says, not pulling away. He keeps Keith's head tucked under his chin, like back when they were younger, but it's more awkward now that they're taller, older. Keith allows it
regardless. "I should've... I should never have been so aggressive. I knew you wouldn't respond to
that. I was just so worried, and..."

And rightly, obviously, Keith finishes, but he doesn't say it aloud. Squeezes his eyes shut against
the threatening tide, knows if he thinks about it for too long he'll collapse back into a puddle of
tears, into this strange Keith that Keith doesn't know at all.

"I just want to protect you," Shiro says. "No one should ever have to deal with something so
horrible."

"You act like this is the worst thing that could happen," Keith says, hardening his voice with
humour to hide that, yeah, this kind of is the worst thing to happen to him. Isn't that bizarre? He's
half-galra, abandoned by his mother, his father, his step-father, and drafted into some insane space
war, and yet this is the worst fucking thing. It doesn't make sense. It shouldn't hurt this much.
"You're the one who spent a year in galra jail."

"I am," Shiro murmurs, "and somehow Lance is still..." He stops, shakes his head a little. "I just
mean...stuff like this can be a real shock to the system, especially at your age. Especially when it's
the first person you've ever loved, or been in a relationship with. And...the context of everything...
If you'd only told me..."

"Stop," Keith mutters into Shiro's chest, his own lungs squeezing painfully, forcing sharp breaths
from him. "I fucked up. I know."

Shiro steps away then, leaving his hands square and tight on Keith's shoulders. His eyes are dark
and serious when they lock onto Keith's, a solid rock to grab onto in this ocean of chaos storming
through his ribs. "No, Keith," he says. "I fucked up. I should've done more; I should've paid more
attention. And I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Keith says, turning his face down. "It's my own stupid fault."

"It's not. You're in love - I get it. It sounds like...Lance was pretty convincing."

"You all told me he couldn't feel-"

"And we all hoped that secretly maybe he could. I understand, Keith."

It's so heartfelt, so sincere and kind, everything Keith has been needing but had shunned, so
wrapped up in this fucking affair with Lance. Everything about Shiro radiates warmth, home, a
safe place to land and take roost from the bullshit below. Keith drops his gaze further, rubs a hand
over his face. "I just feel so fucking stupid," he mumbles. "I really... I really thought..."

Shiro draws him back in one last night and murmurs, "I know, I know."

And then he leaves, and Keith is alone for an hour. He doesn't exactly count it, but he summons his
bayard and measures time in levels of training passed, how many bots he litters the ground with
before they dissipate into nothing. Punching bots was satisfying because it really hurt, even now he
can feel bruises pressing against his knuckles underneath his armour, a familiar burn in the muscles
of his arms; but there is something equally pleasing in swinging his sword, using both hands to
deliver a savage slice, tossing it from hand to hand to best manoeuvre round his enemies. After so
much practise, the sword is like an extension of his arms; frankly, he doesn't understand how
Lance can bear to switch his weapons so often. Call Keith predictable, but he's gotten by well
enough on martial arts training, a good knife, and his sword for this long - he doesn't see the point
in changing it up.
Lance - old Lance - used to call it 'getting all that pent-up aggression out', and Pidge called him a fitness freak, but the foremost reason Keith trained so much was because he enjoyed it. It's been different, lately. With their structured training and his midnight meetings with Lance that were less like training and more like constantly fighting for his life before surrendering himself in an instant, and...

Ugh. Anyway, training was never a drag on him the way it seemed to be for...literally everyone else. Hunk enjoys going up to the gym with him, spotting each other on the bench and gossiping about the goings-on in the castle, and he seemed to enjoy learning more tricks on his variety of big guns, but the rest of training - running laps, sparring against each other, trying out other weapons to expand their horizons - was never his cup of tea. Pidge was just lazy through and through, liked messing around with her bayard but liked lounging on the sofa trying to hack some game's database from ten thousand space miles away more, and Lance was...

Well, who fucking cares what he was. He doesn't exist anymore.

Shiro, like Hunk, preferred the gym also - Keith had some suspicions about the training deck, and sparring against others, how that reminded him too much of his time with the galra to be comfortable, but Keith never said anything. And Allura... Well, she was so busy. Keith thinks she didn't have the time to enjoy training.

Not like Keith. Fighting bots, decimating one right after the other, two at a time, three or more with a particularly skilled twist of the wrist, it's pure power burning through him, the one thing he can rely on. Himself, this body, everything he's taught it. Keith still isn't sure what happened to all three of his parents but he knows how to kill a man ten different ways with his bare hands. Keith's half-galra but that only opens up paths towards further lessons in fighting styles he'd never known existed before. The boy Keith loves isn't a boy at all, he's a monster with a quick hands, a quicker tongue, god, a lying tongue.

But Keith knows who he is. He knows who he is.

...Doesn't he? Or has this relationship with Lance changed him in some irreversible way? Pulled out all of Keith's weaknesses like screws from a chair, and for some reason Keith was surprised when the whole thing fell to pieces? Keith wanted so badly to cling onto someone who wasn't Shiro, just for once, he wanted a different kind of love, and god did he want Lance and all the messy bullshit that came with him...

Keith doesn't think he would have wanted that before. So what changed?

Those five months when Lance was gone... When the castle was so agonisingly quiet and arguments would break out within seconds over the most inconsequential matters, when Hunk would make a rare joke and call for Lance's opinion only to realise it wasn't forthcoming, finding Pidge curled up on the sofa in his jacket, games console abandoned in front of her, fast asleep. Everyone had been so terse, out of their minds looking for Lance. They fought over ignoring distress calls in search of leads on Lance's whereabouts. Ravaged every galra ship, station, and base they encountered, seeking information if not the boy himself. Isolated themselves, Keith to the training deck, Pidge to her room, Hunk in the kitchen, Allura on the bridge, Shiro in the gym, and Coran trotting between the five of them with worried hands and a mouth that had ceased to smile.

Keith remembers those months being distinctly agonising, but the days run together till he can no longer parse them apart. Anger hunted the set of his shoulders and fear shook his fingers at night, frustration raised his voice too loud, his tongue too quick. Lance's return flipped that switch for a single week; then he stepped out the pod and nothing made sense ever again.
Nothing has made sense since.

He can't think about it - he can't, he can't, what if this somehow ends up being his own fault? For changing, or not changing, being too rigid, placing too many demands on Lance, being too much in his space, begging his attention, dreaming hopelessly of his affection, did he look at him wrong, did he say the wrong thing? He just wanted- all this time, all he wanted was for Lance to be okay! That was it! That was all!

But then Lance was too okay while somehow not being okay at all, and Keith thought he could-help, or, or-

_Stupid._ He slices through a gladiator bot, chest heaving, all he wants is to banish Lance from his mind, his entire existence and what it's done to Keith, how weak it's rendered him, how fucking sad he is, how desperate he is to convert that sadness to anger but it doesn't fucking work because- he doesn't want to be without Lance. He doesn't want to spend another fucking day on this ship knowing Lance doesn't care for him, won't look at him during meals, won't follow him to the training deck at night, won't kiss him whenever and wherever possible.

He just wants to forget, like Lance has forgotten everything. Forgetting his entire life hasn't much affected Lance; seems, somehow, even more carefree than he was before, albeit in a much more sinister manner. Taking lives no longer weighs on his soul. Fighting is favoured, friendship forgotten. Keith- he doesn't want to forget that, he just wants to take the time spent with Lance since he was returned to them and have it erased entirely from his mind. Every minute of it, especially the good parts, the tender parts, because they hurt the most. All those times Keith looked at Lance and thought he saw sincerity, thought he saw some reflection of the love he bared before Lance every night. All that time, a trick of the light.

_Fight_, he thinks. He cannot forget; he is not Lance. He can focus on fighting, however, and he jumps to the side to dodge a gladiator before tearing it apart with his sword, ready for the next one, ready to throw himself into this - except when the gladiator begins to dissipate into nothing, he sees Lance standing in the almost-open door of the deck, staring down at something crackling by his feet.

There is a long moment where Keith stares at Lance staring at the remains of whatever it is on the ground. His hand, when he lowers it from the door control panel, is shaking just enough that Keith can catch it. Face angled down, Keith can't see the look in his eyes, but there is something terrifyingly still about him as he stares, and then slowly, carefully, he turns his gaze to Keith.

And then he comes inside.

He doesn't say anything, Keith can't help but notice. Last night- before everything, when Keith found him on the training deck, he hadn't said anything then, either. He just stares, hard and cold, a glacier stretching out from Lance's heart - complete lack of - twining through the air to drive into Keith's, flesh and blood and so easy to shatter. Whatever strangeness had gripped him at the still-open door of the deck has gone.

Ashes flinch in the pit of Keith's chest.

Tension stretches thick and heavy between them; Lance doesn't seem to notice, mouth flat and eyes dark, so lifeless and hollow and nothing like Keith remembers them. Does Lance truly have nothing to say to him? Why won't he leave? Isn't Keith allowed to, to, to grieve here, or does the deck suddenly belong only to Lance? Why does he look like that, so empty, so bored, so tired of Keith and his bullshit? Why does Keith have so much fucking bullshit? Why did Keith put up with all of Lance's unbelievable bullshit for Lance to- to- for Lance to just-
He has to leave before he starts crying again.

"Deck's all yours," he mutters, considers bumping his shoulder into Lance's but knows it would not move him, knows it would hurt only himself, so he wedges a yard of space between them and sets his steps straight, fast and purposeful, and gets the hell out of there.

A tear slips out regardless. He wipes it away and pretends it never existed. But then he hears Lance speak - the door didn't close behind him - starting his training at level twenty, blank and cold as if he isn't the slightest bit affected by their meeting, and a second tear joins the first, and by the time he reaches Shiro's room he's hiding his face in his hands, shoulders shaking no matter how much he tries to force them to be still, and he curls up in the middle of Shiro's bed, tucking his eyes into his knees, thighs close against his chest, this way his heart won't leave his chest, if he holds himself tight enough it has no option but to stay inside his poor, wrecked ribs, even if he doesn't want it, even if he'd rather throw it at Lance and let him have his way with it. Feast himself upon Keith's love. There is so fucking much of it. He made that decision - he was going to commit, completely, totally, against what everyone else said, what Shiro said-

He is so fucking stupid. That's the only takeaway from this. Keith was the top pilot at school and he aced the tests without even studying but god, is he the fucking stupidest asshole alive right now. 

Lance can't feel. How many times did they go over that? And yet Keith thought, somehow, that he was special. Lance figured it out, played along. Different, he called Keith. I feel something for you.

Yeah, Lance felt something, alright - lust, and it's in no way equivalent to what Keith feels for him. Fucking lust. Keith had wanted Lance because he wanted that tangible closeness, that intimacy, he wanted that moment of freedom that absolutely no one could pry from his fingers. He wanted Lance because it had been years of pining and watching and finally getting close to him only for him to leave, for him to be so, so different when he came back, and Keith was too scared to ever let him go again.

Lance wanted him because he was the easiest one of the ship.

Stupid.

Stupid, selfish, self-absorbed. He should've told someone. He wanted to be special. He wanted- he wanted someone to think he was special! Not because of his skill with a ship, not because of his ease with fighting, but for who he was, for his hot temper, his biting wit, the way his heart would soften to water, leak out his eyes for the right person. He wanted someone to find him imperative, impossible to live without, dig deep into the wreckage of Keith's heart and pull out something meaningful...but Lance only trashed it further. How is he to trust anyone now? Everyone who promises to stay at his side disappears without a word.

Everyone who says they love him never does, not really. If they loved him they wouldn't keep leaving.

Why do they...

Why did Lance...

So it is Keith's fault, then; he knew people had a predisposition for leaving him, but he hoped and he yearned and he wanted so badly to pretend that maybe that wasn't always true, and now he has the audacity to be upset when history repeats itself. But did it hurt this much before? He remembers crying to Shiro constantly when he was younger, remembers being a disruption in class, Shiro being called in to talk to the principal about him, remembers speeding out into the desert in the evening trying to forget that any of it had ever happened to him, only to return home in
the dead of the night, Shiro waiting up a little impatiently, clambering out their shack to check the hoverbike as if Keith had ever made a dent in it.

And even if Keith did rarely make a dent in it, the most Shiro could do was force him to finish up all the chores while Shiro pretended to do homework in the living room. That hoverbike was their main link to the rest of the world; he loved and admired Shiro as much as a ten year old asshole can love his sort of older brother, but sometimes he loved exploring the desert just that little bit more.

Shiro left, too, though... Or, was taken. But Lance was taken too - but then he left again, on purpose. Shiro never did that. Shiro never meant it that way, Shiro always apologised, Shiro always made sure to sit down with him and talk about feelings and issues and you know I wouldn't abandon you, right? Keith, you're my brother, blood or not.

...How is Keith supposed to talk to Shiro now? He humiliated himself quite thoroughly by his sobbing-then-fighting fits during the night, and before that was the argument, and even before that he was avoiding Shiro at every turn because he knew that Shiro would parse open the truth about him and Lance from Keith's eyes alone, and now...

And now the door slides open and there, of course, is Shiro, whose brows crease immediately and he hurries over, doors shutting behind him, and he comes to sit on the bed next to him.

"Did you...?" he asks, but Shiro knew Keith was on the training deck and was obviously there at breakfast whenever Lance decided to leave it, so Keith doesn't even reply, just reaches up to wipe his face. "I'm sorry, Keith - I didn't think he'd go straight there. If I'd known, I would've stopped him..."

"It's fine," Keith mutters. "It's nothing."

"It's not nothing." Shiro says softly. "Did he say something to you?"

Shiro's trying to be kind and caring, but it's only a reminder of the steely silence that had permeated the deck once Lance stepped in, and Keith's shoulders rise, head ducking down to hide the sudden new onslaught of tears. "No," he says, breath hitching a little. "H-he didn't say anything."

"It's okay to cry," says Shiro, and Keith hunches up further before he feels a warm hand on his back and gives in instantly, slumping against Shiro's shoulder as Shiro puts his back, says nothing. He kind of knows that already, he just hates doing it. He's done it so much, he didn't used to. And it's always about Lance - Lance going missing, Lance being hurt, Lance pushing him away. Lance wringing from him more than he thought he was capable of giving away. It's been less than a day and he's already sick of crying about it, but he knows he won't be able to stop, cooped up on this ship, hiding from meals and getting scared off the training deck, spending his nights in his cold empty bed before he surrenders to the warmth of familial support.

He's just so afraid of moving forward like this.

Of moving forward at all.

A long silence follows, punctured only by muffled sniffing and Keith trying to suppress his own sobs. Shiro doesn't remind him that crying is okay again; knows Keith well enough already to be aware that that isn't the real issue here. He's falling apart, his heart turned to the very stone Lance is made of, except Lance is strong enough to shatter it and now the pieces are flying out his chest, some oozing into his blood, the rest lodging themselves into the skin above his heart, making it so clear exactly where to push to have Keith clutching at these pieces of himself, gasping for breath.
If he can stop crying for one god damn second, he can pretend that isn't him; that he's stronger than that.

Even if he isn't.

Still, he can't help but wonder what Shiro is thinking; how angry he must be. At Keith, sure, but knowing Shiro he's probably angry at himself, and he's definitely pissed as all hells at Lance. Wouldn't stop bringing it up, actually. It had been sort of reassuring, to hear Shiro say that if Lance ever hurt him again he wouldn't hesitate, even if they both know Lance is stronger now, that Lance can't be defeated. Nice to have someone who would actually stand up to him, when so few even bother to stick around.

"Come on," Shiro says once Keith's crying has puttered out, and his neck is getting sore from leaning on Shiro. "We know he's busy on the deck; why don't we go train in the gym, huh? We can bring Hunk, too?"

Keith shakes his head quickly, shoulders tensing at the idea of Hunk seeing him like this.

"That's a no to Hunk, isn't it?" Shiro pauses, then says, "Uh, is it?"

"Yes," Keith mutters. "Let's just go to the gym, then."

The gym, at least, is as empty as Shiro promised; they split briefly so Keith can return to his room and change, but they meet back up at the lift, don't speak until they're inside, setting their treadmills to the same level and starting off with a light jog.

"I am on your side," says Shiro, apropos of nothing. Keith glances over at him, but Shiro stares ahead, at the blue screen projected before him telling him in Altean how fast he's running, his heart rate, the distance. Keith knows he means it, though. Has spent so long searching Lance's eyes, trying to dig into them with a stone axe and with a warm heart and with desperate, prying fingers, that he can see how sincere Shiro is, how brightly genuine care burns in his eyes the way it never did in Lance's. "I may be his leader, but I'm your brother first, Keith. If he's having concerns about the ritual or the quintessence or anything, he can go to Allura or Coran. I'm not interested."

That's not a good way to lead, Keith wants to say, but the words are choked up in his throat, seized on by the overwhelming relief coupled tightly with love that surges through. Instead, his focuses on upping his speed a little and saying, "Thanks."

Not nearly enough to encompass how he feels; Shiro understands anyway.

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The comfort of exercising with his brother, his only companion, sets his mind at ease for a while; keeps him from overexerting himself like he's prone to, but eventually Shiro leaves within a couple hours, hooking a final arm around his shoulders while Keith's pressing weights and murmuring, "Don't push yourself too hard, okay?"

Then he is alone with his thoughts. How endless they seem; how final. Who is he, without Lance? Keith thought he knew who he was, but every moment spent with Lance stripped tiny, imperative bits of himself away until there was nothing left. He'd turned himself into a shield, built to protect Lance from the harm he didn't care for, to look after him when Lance didn't want that, didn't want love or concern. Just pretended. Played along to fool Keith, appease his stupid desires. He had so many; as Lance said, he was so desperate.

Even working out in the gym with Shiro, pushing his body up to and beyond its limits, feeling that
burn in his muscles, his heart slamming against his ribs for reasons other than love, he still couldn't get it out his mind. Everything Lance said. The way he said it, like he felt sorry for Keith, like maybe he would've kept their relationship up if he didn't find Keith so fucking pitiful.

Is Keith really so easy to drop? What prompted it? Keith doesn't think he acted particularly out of the ordinary once Lance awoke; wasn't at his side when it happened, so Lance didn't see how long Keith had indeed sat there, waiting so impatiently for him to regain consciousness and explain to them all what the ritual did to him. Could Lance just tell that Keith had resolved his feelings for him, did it radiate from him the way ice juts out of Lance's skin, too obvious, too much? Was it wine soaking his tongue when he called Lance's name? Was it a split-second decision when Lance saw that Keith had followed him almost immediately back to him room, and saw desperation like a second skin on him? Is that what it was? But Keith had called it love; did Lance see them as they same thing? Did he care at all?

*He doesn't care*, he tries to tell himself, *he doesn't, he didn't, he never did. And he never will.*

Not like this; however he is now. Too strong, too fast, *too* scary. A fear planted when they sparred that very first time in the middle of the night, and only grew in tandem with his love as they continued. Now the two are thick vines hopelessly entwined with each other, fear fed through his arteries straight to his heart. Pleasure and poison, one and the same. He can't take one without tasting the other.

...Maybe Lance was right to call it desperation. No sane person downs poison by the pint and sings when it floods through his veins.

How does he ignore all this? How can he just forget it? He doesn't want to know, doesn't want to keep remembering. Last night when he'd showered, all he could think of was the rain down in Cuba, how hot it had been, how soothing the rain had felt even as it lashed him to the core. Remembers fighting in it, he and Pidge and Shiro and Allura trying to take on Lance and failing, the way Lance never fell into that arena mindset yet was fucking devastating regardless, smirked when he took one of them down, so uncaring of the family watching him, the scars that twisted every inch of his bared chest.

Reason after reason to stay the hell away from him - how could he be so willingly stupid? When did he start letting desire twist his own principals? Has Lance changed him so much?

Did he change himself?

He can't tell. He can't stop thinking about it but he still can't *tell*.

What is one defined by? Their skill and strength? Their power to change things for the better? To help this hurt, grieving, conquered universe as best as possible? Or is it love? That's what Shiro would say. Love, and the ones who love you back. But Lance doesn't love him back, and so the biggest part of himself is erased; is turned dark, turned into a deep ocean that Keith, with hands of ash and a heart beating up a blaze in his chest, cannot survive in. Perhaps this was foretold; guardians of fire and water. It was never possible for Keith to survive Lance, no way to press a hand against his cheek and find something he could depend on. Like water, Keith's hand falls right through Lance; like stone, Lance gives nothing away to Keith.

There was no way he could win. Why did he keep fooling himself? Has he been so lonely all his life? Shiro was just here; but Shiro left too. Is he being melodramatic? Shiro always comes back, after all. Shiro never means to leave. Even now, in this microcosm, Shiro left only because he knew Keith would prefer it; because he couldn't keep up. Because Shiro knows how Keith gets when he's upset, knows he's going to spend the entire day in this gym, running laps round some
empty floor's corridors, before he lets himself sit down and stew in all his bad decisions, and Shiro won't get in the way of that. Will pause him for food, drink, notice when it's gone too far and pull him into an embrace that has Keith shaking in tears within seconds.

But that's one person. There's seven billion people on Earth and who knows how many in this universe and six others on this ship, and only one person out of all these people care about Keith.

One fucking person.

What the hell's wrong with him? Why isn't he good enough for anyone? At school teachers favoured him but the students seemed to either love him or hate him on instinct; regardless, none of them cared enough to take the time to know him. Keith remembers Lance because he'd been neither, because for the first year at school Lance was kind and welcoming even if they only ever met in passing, except something changed before summer vacation and then Lance stopped being nice second year, then they started flight sims in third year and Keith scored top fighter pilot whereas Lance was, apparently, top cargo pilot, and that dislike turned into outright envy and spite. Was that fate's foreshadowing? That their relationship or friendship or any kinship between them is doomed to fail, eventually. Someone sours, leaves, the jig, eventually, is up.

Even here, amongst friends, or...maybe teammates just fits better, he is still the odd one out. Too hotheaded as the red paladin, too impulsive as the black. Allura never said it but she thought he was incompetent, probably - and rightfully, he thinks now - resented him for taking the place she would've held with grace. Pidge never fought Shiro over his mission plans the way she did with Keith; never challenged him, never rolled her eyes at him and scowled. Hunk was definitely a friend, sort of, but he valued pretty much everyone else over Keith, and Lance especially. What'll he think when the news breaks? He'll try to side with Lance. Won't they all, except Shiro? Even Coran prefers Lance, always has, his eyes still glint like he knows more that he lets on, like if he wanted he could crack open the heart of any secret with a single word.

It'd be so easy for them to stack up against him; he doesn't want to see it, doesn't want to be around when it happens. If Lance could lie so convincingly to Keith for months on end, how could he twist this turn of events so the others will sympathise with him? It'd be so easy; I'm a monster, Lance could say, Keith thinks I'm a monster.

But he doesn't.

Or...he didn't.

Lance turned himself into a monster - Keith tried so hard to believe the opposite. Lance was an angel, once. Now only Keith remembers. The weight of it is an anchor dragging him back into the ocean no matter how often Keith tries to swim to surface. Lance was good once - so good. So full of heart and soul, always trying to bring light to others' lives even if he made fun of himself in the process. Keith had been wishing for a boy golden like that, someone so full of joy that it couldn't help but brighten up Keith's endless, heavy darkness, that black void spiralling always inside himself.

Now Lance's void is darker. Or maybe it doesn't exist at all, because Lance doesn't care at all.

Maybe Keith should stop thinking about it - why can't he stop thinking about it? He presses weights, he rows on the machine, he runs on the treadmill, every possible thing he could do in the gym he does once then twice then five times at least and it burns but never enough, never enough to cancel out the star dying in his heart, sparks shooting down every vein and turning cold, the bright explosion of death burning hot in his heart.
It's time, Keith thinks as he finally leaves the gym and heads up a few floors until he finds one unused, to let go. To accept that the old Lance is truly dead. The quintessence ritual didn't help, it made everything worse, Lance somehow stronger, somehow crueller. There is no hope for the old Lance, the warm one, who smiled all the time like it was the easiest thing in the world.

He's gone.

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It doesn't take long to establish a route to run through the empty corridors; though it's been a while, this certainly isn't the first time he's done this. Most floors are made up of one long main corridor from the front to the back of the castle, with the lift situated by the centre. Then further corridors branch off, leading to more residential rooms, rooms set up with desks, with chairs, empty cabinets pushed up against the walls and covered in cobwebs. Keith doesn't exactly explore, but sometimes he needs to pause, catch his breath, have a drink and cool down the burning in his muscles, and he'll slink into whatever random room's nearest and try and figure out what it might have been used for. Rooms for royal guests, classrooms, meeting rooms, barracks? If a castle on Altea worked the same way one on Earth would, then surely there'd be a dozen rooms for the same uses: endless bedrooms and bathrooms and conference rooms, a throne hall, an atrium for the court to wander, observation rooms to sit and chat about nothing. Keith always thought castles sounded so stuffy. Nothing like what the castleship is.

Unbelievably old, yet far more modern than anything that could be produced on Earth.

It's clean, and Keith likes that. The metal modernity of the garrison was cold; lifeless. The castleship, ten thousand years old, is steeped in history, even if that history has been mostly untouched for so long. The sleek lines speak of elegance, the pure white and high ceilings of endless luxury despite the minimalist design. Keith didn't care much for history at school, but if admiring this ship and standing in its empty rooms help take his mind off of Lance, he'll do it.

He'll keep doing it, because he spends hours up here. Shiro never comes to find him for lunch, which doesn't strike him as odd until the lights in the corridors are dimmed a little, which means it's five p.m., long past when Shiro would usually come get him and drag him away to eat or drink for a while.

Something must have happened. Right? What else could it be? It must have happened right after lunch, otherwise Shiro would've come to find him. Did Lance do something? Say something? Hurt someone? Did one of the others inquire as to what happened between him and Keith, did Lance laugh, did Lance tell the truth in that harsh, cutting way of his, did the others see how his words were knives, did they realise how Keith had been cut open beyond repair?

Did they still sympathise with Lance, or do they realise he's a lost cause yet? Should Keith tell them? Is he being cruel by withholding this information from them? But he doesn't want to upset them.

Doesn't want them to see him like this.

Still; his feet slow with indecision as he considers his options: to stay here and hide, let the others figure out this problem, or go back down to the main floor and see what's going on? What if it's ugly, what if it's messy? What if it's about Keith? Worse - what if it isn't? What if Keith is so completely not on Lance's mind that he doesn't even register?

No; he has to get used to it. Exposure therapy, right? That's a thing? He has to confront the fact that Lance doesn't care about him. Never did. He needs to get it through his thick fucking skull that it
was never, ever about anything close to love for Lance. It hurts, but that's fine. Keith's been hurt before. He can take it. He has to.

*I have to*, Keith thinks, eyes closing as he merely runs, instead of sprints, down the long main corridor, too lost in his own mind and his spiralling thoughts to note the faint beep of the lift ascending to his level, nor the arrival of his friend, until he's knocking into a tall, thick body and hands are grabbing his shoulders to keep him upright.

"Hunk?" says Keith when he opens his eyes, regaining balance and taking a step back. "What are you..."

Hunk is...panting. Won't look Keith in the eye, instead removes his hands and starts peering beyond him, like there is a ghost behind his shoulder that keeps slipping away from his vision. His temples are gleaming; he must have been running around for a while.

"Uh," Keith says, swallowing down his grief and shoving it back into the dark pit of his stomach so he can carry a normal conversation. "Are you...okay?"

"It's... You're the only one up here, right?" asks Hunk, and Keith frowns, nodding slowly.

"I've been here for hours," he adds when Hunk bites his lip. "No one else is here."

"No one else..." Hunk repeats, and drops his head into his hands for a brief moment, shoulders shaking before he straightens again, taking a deep breath. "Okay," he says, "okay..."

"What is it?" Keith asks again, knowing he won't like the answer but unable to help himself. What did Lance do? Did he hurt someone? Did he scare someone off? What is Hunk doing?

"At lunch...there was...an incident," says Hunk, and something violent clenches inside Keith to know he was right. "Shiro got hurt - it was- an accident, sort of, but... God, Keith. He's so..."

Hunk finally looks him in the eye, and stops short. What does he see there, Keith can't help but wonder. Is his shame so obvious? His humiliation? His sadness?

"No," says Hunk. "It's fine, you don't have to... I won't... I'll just-"

"No," Keith says quickly, grabbing Hunk's arm as he turns to leave. Anything to do with Lance is a claw in his arms, round his heart, chewing through his gut. It won't let him go. He has to know. "If there's trouble, I want to help."

"But..." Keith narrows his eyes, and Hunk sighs. "He's so strong, Keith. He keeps breaking things by accident. He really hurt Shiro, I don't think he meant to, but- but he ran away. And it's been...hours, Keith, and we can't find him. And I'm...scared. I- I know he hurt you. I understand if you don't want to deal with this. But...I just, I worry, a-and, and-"

"It's fine," Keith says after taking a tight, deep breath. *Shiro, hurt*. No wonder he hasn't come looking, then. But how hurt? Anything minor would've taken only a few hours in the pod - Shiro would've still come to find him. So something worse? Did Lance draw blood? Did he tear through Shiro on accident? "You haven't..." He sighs, and folds his arms against his chest, hides how rapidly his heart has begun to beat. "Did you check the hangar? He goes there, sometimes...or...he used to..."

"The hangar?" Hunk repeats. "But why would he... He can't pilot a lion, he..."

"Still," Keith says, and Hunk murmurs it after him, beginning to nod.
Hunk taps at the comm on his wrist and says, "Keith thinks he might be in the hangar. I'm - we're - coming down right now." As he speaks they hurry over to the lift, and Keith steps inside and taps the hangar floor button so Hunk doesn't have to bother.

"The hangar?" comes Allura's voice. "But he isn't a... Well, alright. Are you going now?"

"Yeah, we're taking the lift straight down. We'll wait outside for you. Come quick, okay?"

"Of course," she says, and the comms seems to close as they both fall silent, nothing but the smooth glide of wires carrying the lift lower and lower. What is there to say? Hunk probably knows what he's feeling just from the look of him; grey tank top soaked in sweat, black basketball shorts lined in red, hair tied back to keep it from getting greasy. His cheeks feel hot with how much energy he's exerted. He knows he looks like a mess.

It's not until they're standing outside the tall, thick doors to the hangar that anyone says anything; Hunk, glancing at Keith for a moment, says, "For what it's worth...I'm sorry about what happened. Shiro...explained, sort of. Nothing detailed. But...it just sucks. To know he was..." Hunk stops, shakes his head. "I, uh...believed it was real, too. When I saw...but...I guess it was fake."

"Yup," Keith mutters, voice low, eyes shifted to the side so as to avoid the sympathy pouring off Hunk. "Guess so."

"If there's anything I can do, dude, just...let me know, okay?"

Keith shrugs, and thanks the heavens when he hears footsteps jogging down the corridor towards them.

"Shiro," he says immediately when he catches sight of him, perfectly okay looking, jogging over and wrapping an arm around Keith's shoulders. "What happened? Did he hurt you? Hunk said he was so strong that, that-"

"I'm fine," Shiro says. "He just knocked me off my feet a little."

"He punched a hole in your chest," says Allura with admonishment in her eyes. "It was-" Her eyes shift to Keith, and she pauses. "I mean, it was nothing, really."

"A hole," Keith says, gut freezing at the idea of a fist-sized gap between Shiro's ribs. "That's impossible."

"A lot of things about Lance are supposed to be impossible."

That's true enough. Lance ever existing as something so thoughtlessly cruel certainly felt impossible, once. Now it is the only reality they know.

"Let's just go," Shiro mutters, and Coran presses his hand against the control so the doors open wide, revealing the five lions bubbled in their shields, and Keith follows Shiro's instinctively, eyes going to the blue lion, but it's empty.

Lance isn't here.

"No..." murmurs Allura, pushing past the two of them and saying, "Lance? Lance?"

No, Keith thinks when his gaze follows her, across the floor to...to Red.

Red, his lion. His girl.
"Lance!" Allura shouts, and yes, that's Lance, all hunched up in Keith's pilot seat, straightening out and peering over at them through the window. His face is in shadows; impossible to tell what he's thinking.

"What the hell," Keith mutters, because the shield is still up, he runs to it and it's still up, he crashes his fists against it and he yells for Red and he begs, in his heart, seeks for the connection of quintessence in the back of his mind but it's gone, it's gone, it's gone- "Let me in!" Keith screams, the terror of not feeling a lion in the back of his mind burning hotter than any other loss. "What the hell?! Red, please, what did I do- why him?!"

But Red doesn't answer. The others crowd round him and Lance, stone statue, stoic steel, is silent.

"Red, please! Come on! You can't shut me out again, I can't- please!"

"Shh," Shiro murmurs, wrapping his arm again round Keith's shoulders and pulling him away from the shield; Keith doesn't want to leave it but the press of that shield against his hands is so cold and foreign and- and why? Why Lance? Why drop Keith? Again, again, first Lance doesn't want him and now his own fucking lion? What the hell did he do? What the fuck make her choose Lance over him? Lance doesn't deserve her, he doesn't, he doesn't, but Red has somehow chosen him when Keith was right here, he's always been right here, trying his best, trying to be a good paladin and a good right hand to Shiro.

Does this mean he isn't a paladin anymore?

"...That's a development, isn't it?" Allura is asking, and Keith crosses his arms tight over his chest once more, keeps his head down, doesn't want to see the desperation in Allura's eyes, the lack of anything in Lance's.

It's quiet for a long, long moment. Keith barely registers it, still swimming in thoughts that surround him like schools of fish, ones with teeth, ones that bite and draw blood. Lance is in Red. Why her, why not Blue? Why would Red cut Keith off without a word? She won't even let him in now. She didn't even say anything, just vanished, and Keith was so- so caught up in being sad then trying to ignore that sadness that he just- completely missed it. Is she kicking him out? Is she sick of him? The way Lance was sick of him, is he useless to her now? Does she really not want him any longer?

But he has to be a paladin. He made a choice; he wanted to save people in a team, with a fucking sentient lion that shot lasers and a cool object that materialised at will and turned into a sword if he needed it to. He wanted to stay with his friends.

...He can't do what Lance did. Hitch rides in other lions, get dropped off into the thick of the fight on the planet. Keith's good, but he's not that good - not Lance-level good. But then what else can he do? Coordinate from the castle like Coran? The idea sickens him.

"Lance," says Allura again, eyes widening, "please! We don't want to fight! We just want to know what's going on!"

Lance says nothing, and frustration boils up in Keith's heart, tangled up in anguish and loneliness and a crushing terror. Shaking his head, he breaks free of Shiro's grasp, pounds his fists into the shield, please, he thinks, give me a chance, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, please please please-

"Keith, I'm sorry," Allura's hushed voice says. "I think she's... I don't think it's happening."

"It isn't fair," Keith grinds out, crushed coal in the bottom of a fireplace. "It isn't fair! What did he
"We don't know," is all Allura says, and when he whirls round to look at her, her eyes are on the floor, unable to meet his furious, desperate gaze. "He won't tell us."

"...This is bullshit," Keith finally mutters, and he doesn't look back to see Lance, doesn't look at anyone, he raises his head to hide his weakness, squares his shoulders to shield his sadness, and he walks away.

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How could it have come to this? It's been less than a day and he's already trapped. The idea of holing up here another minute more is like a fire building up from his foundations till it's burning the whole building, skin dry, itchy from heat. This castle is a pit of flames Keith cannot navigate safely. Turn one way and there's Lance, a log crumbling from the ceiling and crushing Keith under its weight. To the left and there's Shiro, giving his life to push Keith away from some terrific blaze that would've claimed his life in a second. Behind him, Red, dark and dormant, done with him. Go straight ahead, further into the fire, and perish.

Are there any other options? He stands under the shower and tries not to think of rain in Cuba, but even that feels impossible. Like with Lance, he'd chosen - taken time to really think about it, he'd shoved himself through as many of the Marmora trials as possible but he chose to be a paladin. Chosen to love Lance. And at the end of it all, both have rebutted him. At least the last time Red left, Black was there to take her place. Now there is nothing, truly nothing, no Lance to take his shoulder and stand by his side either. Has he ever been so alone? What did he do to deserve this?

There is no more energy left to train with anymore. Nothing left of himself to push. He is empty, he is alone. He is deeply, deeply afraid.

He has no idea what the future might hold. Where does he go from here? It was torture before; somehow it got worse. It's been a day; less than. How could things spiral out of control so quickly? Everything unravelling in the span of mere hours, is this penance for having months of such joy? Or, something like joy. The closest to it Keith's gotten in recent years. Time with Lance was magical, otherworldly; something Keith hadn't earned. Is this just the universe reminding him that he cannot have happiness without putting in the hours first? How many fucking hours must he put in? How sad does he have to get before he can find peace?

He is so tired of waiting for happiness, real happiness, true happiness, the kind that lasts. It is a drop of water the dries up just as his dry lips touch upon it; a burning flame in a storm doused by rain just as he wraps his hands round it. He spies it from a distance and when he really needs it, it is gone.

Everything, gone.

Everything.

He can't do it anymore. He just cannot do it anymore. It's no way to live, wanting and wishing and waiting and thinking he finally has it, in his hands, sure as his skin is tan and his eyes are grey and his ears are round, but then it wavers and it is gone, and suddenly Keith's skin is purple, eyes yellow, ears large, pointy, fluffy as a cat's.

Is that the way to go, then? He chose the paladins but Red no longer chooses him, Black never really wanted him, he doesn't suit any other lion. There's nothing for him to do around the castle:
too impatient to help Coran out, not nearly good enough at tech to join Hunk and Pidge with their
endeavours, and his stint as black paladin showed obviously enough that Allura would rather work
on her own than in a team with him. And Shiro... Well, he's their leader, isn't he? He told Keith
he'd look after him, he'd respond to his needs first over Lance's, but that's no way to run a team.
Favouritism, Keith knows now, drove Shiro to name Keith as his successor, not any logic, certainly
not with Black's blessing. If Keith is the problem here, should Keith just...leave?

"Keith," and there, of course, is Shiro in his door, chest heaving, fingers white against the frame
before rushing in and wrapping his arms round Keith's neck. Awkward, again, Keith sat at his deck
staring at nothing, but he twines an arm round Shiro, flattens his palm against his back. Shiro, his
friend, his brother. Keith doesn't want to leave him - doesn't want to be so alone. But what if that's
holding him back? What if he has to leave Shiro? "God, I- I can't believe that happened. Keith, I'm
so- I don't even know- god, I..."

Keith stays silent, and Shiro extricates his arms from him and surveys the situation, the slump of
Keith's back, the emptiness of his desk, can feel him drawing conclusions about Keith's mood from
these few clues.

"There's nothing I can do," Shiro says, not harshly, but firmly, and whatever final shreds of hope
lingering round Keith's heart decimate themselves in an instant. "I'm sorry, Keith. I have no control
over the lions, not even Black. Do you need me, or would you rather be alone?"

Keith's already nodding at the first question, so Shiro simply looks around and exhales softly.

"Alright. I'll go ask Hunk for some food and drink, maybe drag Pidge's computer in here, and we
can just kick back and maybe think about your options, okay?"

"Yeah," Keith mumbles, although his mind feels made up. "I'll just wait."

"I won't be long," says Shiro, fixing his hand to Keith's shoulder for a solid second before leaving
the room, and Keith is alone again.

But it is a good idea, getting Pidge's computer. Keith had been receiving messages... He isn't a
child, he doesn't need Pidge around to help him message back. He already knows what he wants to
say. Is he being rash? But it feels like his only option. There is no way to return to Earth, learn
about his biological father, whatever happened to his step-father. Being here, as a paladin, is no
longer sustainable either.

Keith refuses to be useless. He refuses to sit around, doing nothing, or playing Big Fucking Hero
like Lance always did during missions. He had a purpose; defend the universe. Being a paladin isn't
the only way to do that.

He has options. Unique options. Options no one else on this ship could ever have...

When Shiro returns, holding up a tray full of food and Pidge wheeling in her computer behind him
before dashing out again, Keith says, "I want to join the Blade of Marmora."

He waits, of course, until Shiro has at least set the food down.

"Okay," Shiro says, voice slightly strangled as he sits on the bed next to the tray, staring ahead of
him. His fingers are bright white when they tangle together on his lap. "Are you sure about that?"

"It makes sense," Keith says. "I want to."

Shiro shuts his eyes, and Keith takes a deep breath, trying to calm the heart thudding against his
ribs. He knows he's right; he feels it in his guts, in his desperately shredded heart. He needs to learn to cope on his own. He can't do that on this ship, facing Lance at every turn, coddled by Shiro. He needs to know who he is, since apparently he's forgotten every aspect of himself.

"...If you want to," Shiro says, "I won't stop you. You have the means to contact them?"

"They've been messaging me for the past few weeks, that they have plans, they need more people. They want me there."

Unlike some people on this ship.

"It does make sense," Shiro murmurs, and turns finally to look at Keith. There is no shadow of a doubt in his eyes, and that, above all things, everything that's happened today and all Shiro has done for him, provides the kind of comfort that seals his heart back into his chest for good, wraps it with enough tissue paper and sellotape to keep it from beating out his ribcage and onto the floor at Lance's feet. "How soon?"

"As soon as possible."

A sharp intake of breath.

"I'm sorry, I-"

"No, I understand, I do, I do. It's just...sudden. But I get it. I do, I..."

"There's nothing for me here. I mean- nothing else. Not with...Red shutting me out, and...and..."

"Yeah," Shiro mutters. "I know."

"If I could stay... If Red hadn't...chosen him..."

"I know," he says again. "I understand."

And he does, Keith sees it in his eyes. How many times has Keith confided in Shiro his fear of being half-galra? Shiro had always reminded him that the option was there - sometimes missions weren't big enough to require all of them, Lance and Hunk liked to team up to check out less hostile planets and sometimes Pidge and Coran would venture off to junkyard planets to find tech bullshit, there was time for Keith to visit the Marmora HQ and learn more but he'd chosen not to.

"Thanks," Keith finally mutters, and Shiro starts navigating to one of the shows Pidge had downloaded back at the garrison, back when life was still normal. Weird anime shit Shiro's always been into, old shit, about a guy called Boruto or his dad or something, Keith never really paid attention. It was good background noise, and Shiro genuinely got into it so it was nice to see him laugh with the characters, or pound his chest with his fist when something heartfelt happened. It's a nice departure from reality, at any rate, and Keith eats the noodles Hunk must've made, drinks the water, mulls over his decision as bizarre fight sequences play out before him.

If Shiro believes in him, he's definitely made the right choice; he feels it in his heart, in his gut, a golden glow bursting out the many, many broken seams in his heart. Freedom, knowledge, people who fight for the same thing he fights for. People he can learn from. Maybe one day he will come back, better and stronger and wiser, god knows he could do with a little fucking wisdom at this point in life. Maybe, by that time, Lance won't even matter to him anymore.

Actually...he really hopes that's the case.
He returns to his room in the dead of night, after a flurry of messages sent between them and the Blade, they've got some agents in a nearby system and can be at the castle by morning, and then he and Shiro exchange a long hug and he goes to pack.

The first thing he's confronted with is Lance's jacket on his bed.

When did it get there? But he hasn't been in his room except to shower since Lance...broke up with him. Is that the right way to put it? Dropped him. Exposed their relationship for what it really was - a sham.

His first instinct is to light the damn thing on fire and watch it crumble to ash in his hands. The desire is intense, real heat in his fingers that tremble with an itch to destroy, but he gets closer and-and it still smells of Lance, sort of. The old one, the one from Cuba. Sand, salt, juniberry shower gel. That Lance is dead, Keith knows it now, and suddenly the urge to burn it curls like burnt paper in the pit of his chest; he can't lose this, this last reminder of who Lance once was, not much taller than Keith, slight, funny, flirty, stupid but so... So...smart, common sense and decency and an endless love of those around him. The Lance Keith fell in love with, the one he kept praying to come back.

Keith can't destroy it. He can't even give it to Hunk or Pidge, or toss it out into the corridor for someone else to find. Clenching his fingers into the soft fabric, he sinks down on the edge of his bed and holds it tight against his chest. Lance died when the galar took him, he knows that now, he knows. Lance who played guitar, he knows because he saw it in Lance's room, because Hunk once mentioned they'd do duets with his guitar and Hunk's ukulele. Lance sang, too, he'd do it on fucking missions, under his breath, shit that made no sense while he was scared, victory tunes when he landed a good hit, High School Musical songs that Lance and Hunk and Pidge all knew the words to. Lance who must've kept star charts up on his walls even before he left for the garrison. Who took photos of his friends and printed them out nice and glossy and pinned them to a corkboard so the ones he loved would never leave him.

Lance. God, Keith misses him. He- so wrapped up in this new Lance, he'd forgotten how much he missed the real one, but it hurtles back to him now, and he knows he should pack but he hides his face in the fabric and lets a final wave of tears crash over him. Lance is dead, Lance is gone. Lance walks these corridors and sits in the red lion, but it's not really him. Those familiar features, distorted. A ghost, a spectre, a monster. There's no other word for him; he punched a hole in Shiro's chest.

Is it dramatic to say he did the same to Keith?

He puts the jacket down; picks it up again, folds it. Holds it tight, then stands and hangs it instead in his wardrobe.

Then he packs. There's not much to it; some of the clothes they got on that shopping spree while Lance was gone, the handheld Pidge had found for him that ended up being mildly entertaining, a few spoils from various missions, a glowing red rock, a toy version of Hunk they'd found on a planet that had heard of their coalition. The Blade will provide him his own uniform, he knows, and probably extra stuff now that he'll be staying there indefinitely; a room, shower products, a towel would be nice. Should he bring his bayard?

...He'll give it to Shiro, who'll probably give it to Allura, who can deal with Lance. What about his armour...? Leave it here? He won't need it with the Blade. Still, it feels...
No. He's not a paladin anymore; he's made that decision.

He leaves it. Rests the night through, nightmares niggle at him but nothing serious, he awakens early, double checks his bag, and goes out with his red bayard to meet Shiro in the dining room. Shiro takes it with a grim face but says nothing, pockets it, and they sit and wait in silence until Coran and Allura arrive, up earlier than the others out of sheer habit, Keith suspects, over anything else.

"What is it," says Allura immediately, noting, probably, that Keith is at the dinner table and not on the deck, the way he's dressed, the bag set behind his chair. "Keith? Shiro?"

"I'm leaving," Keith says, and her eyes fly open, Coran's mouth drops. "Don't argue. I'm going to the Blade of Marmora. Red doesn't want me; I'm not...sticking around for the rest of this bullshit. I'm going today. Two hours."

"...Shiro," says Allura. "You... You can't possibly agree."

"I support his decision," says Shiro, and Allura takes a deep breath, eyes fluttering shut for a moment before she opens them again, shaking her head. "He's right - the red lion has moved on, and we don't know why, but that leaves Keith with nothing to do here. He wants to protect the universe, and he's in the unique position to go elsewhere to do it. He needs space from...everything."

"But... But Keith is our red paladin- he- but we... We can't split like this," says Allura, hands jittering frantically at her sides. "We- I understand you're upset, but, but- this is just a- a phase, I'm sure, I-"

"I'm leaving," Keith says again, and Allura's eyes move to him, open and confused, sad, even. "You can't stop me. None of you can."

He looks to Coran, who's frowning, but he nods when Allura looks to him.

"It would seem I'm outvoted," she murmurs after a moment. "You must check in with us, every movement at least if not every quintant. The Blade will surely provide you with the tech to communicate with us. You will debrief us on every mission you are a part of. If any of the senior members attempt to risk your life based on their own plans, I will be speaking to them. You may be unable to pilot the red lion as of this time, but you are still a paladin of Voltron." Her eyes are so warm, Keith thinks. Blue, like Lance's, but more royal, navy, deep brown round the pupil. She really means this. "We can't lose you, Keith. We need you."

"I..." The sincerity in her voice shakes him to the core. Do they really? Sometimes it doesn't feel like it. Especially now.

"And...I'll miss you," says Allura, and she turns her face to the side for a moment, taking a breath. "Perhaps I don't say these things often enough; with all the diplomacy and civil dinners and balls...you really are a breath of fresh air, Keith. You're talented and you're skilled and you have such a good heart. You won't lose that, will you, with the Blade? You won't forget us?"

"Of course not," he says, because the very idea is insane. "I just- for the moment. I have to go. I have to."

"...Then I won't stop you either. Have you told the others?"

He shakes his head, and Allura sighs to herself. "Right. I'll get them, shall I? Coran, will you start breakfast?"
"No need, princess," says Coran, and he points to the door sliding open, revealing Pidge and Hunk hurrying in with concern marring their brows.

"All my shit's linked," Pidge says, waving her phone in the air before shoving it back in her pocket. "Why the hell is the Blade of Marmora arranging to come here in, like, two fucking hours to pick you up?"

"You have to be joking, Keith," adds Hunk, jogging right up to Allura's side and grasping his hands together. "You can't be leaving. What happened with Lance, that's, that's- Keith, you can't, you-"

"It's not about him," Keith says sharply. "Red doesn't want me; the Blade does. If I can't pilot Red, I can at least be useful somewhere else."

"But- but- but we need you, Keith."

"Not anymore," Keith says, and they all gasp as though shocked but it's the truth. He isn't the best fighter; Lance is. He isn't the best pilot; Shiro is. He isn't diplomatic, he isn't wicked clever, he isn't even that funny. He suits the Blade better. "I'm going."

"It's a good idea," Pidge says, ducking her head for a moment and crossing her arms. "I just... don't like it."

"You think- seriously? Keith, you can't be alone now, you need friends, we're your friends, dude! Talk to us, we can help, we-"

"No," Keith says, harsher this time. "No, you prefer Lance, I know it. I don't care. I'm going. If I need to talk I can get you guys on comms." Hunk wilt, and Keith definitely doesn't imagine the way Allura's hand instinctively slips over and takes one of Hunk's worrying hands in her own. "I don't care if you don't like it."

"Shiro...?" Hunk tries, but Shiro shakes his head, and Hunk sighs. "It feels like... we only just got everyone together again. I don't want to..."

"We've been together for months," Keith retaliates. "The fact is that Red has chosen someone else, and I'm able to join the Blade and help out there. It makes sense."

Irrefutable logic, no one can deny it. Hunk eventually heads to the kitchen with Coran and Pidge, and Allura sits down and grills him over the Blade, the messages they've exchanged, his plans, how long he'll be there.

None of them bring up Lance. Breakfast is made and enjoyed without him ever showing up, and by the time the agents reach their ship and attach their much smaller vessel to an airlock, he still isn't here.

So Keith doesn't go looking. He shakes Coran's hand, is pulled into a hug. Thanks Allura, another hug, her head pressed against his shoulder for a brief moment before she pats his hair and steps back. Hunk, wrapping his arms tight around Keith's neck and hiding his face in Keith's hair, his whole body shakes and it makes Keith's ache, knowing the pain he's causing. Even Pidge looks teary-eyed as she drags him in her arms, and Keith finds himself holding tight, unable to forget the time Pidge had broken down in his arms when they discovered the reasons for those stupid fucking videos, the way Pidge had spoken of love, how Keith thought it somehow applied to him.

Shiro, for last. Smiling, watery-eyed.

"I believe in you," is all he says, and Keith's restraint breaks and he throws himself at his brother,
his protector, his friend forever at his side.

The agents, when they board, remain mostly quiet. Speak only with Allura and Coran, really, looks like Kolivan and a strange mixed alien Keith hasn't met you. She sees him though, hesitant and wet-eyed by Shiro, and smiles.

And that's all it takes.

When he walks away from his friends, when he crosses from the castleship and into the Blade vessel, he sheds his self like a second skin. Gone is desperate Keith, sad Keith, the Keith who'd do anything to make Lance look at him. Gone is Lance, in general.

Now there is only Keith, and the things he might accomplish standing on his own two feet.

Chapter End Notes

if Anyone at All saw that coming You Must step forward and tell me bc honestly im proud of this. when i said i got ideas from s4 back when it first aired....It Was This

anyway i think part of the reason this chap took so long is bc....i dont rly relate a Lot to keith but his and shiro's relationship, specifically as brothers, rly mirrors the relationship between me and my oldest sister. last winter my whole family went thru a lot of shit and she was always there, she was such a beacon of strength for us all and she stressed herself out so much to keep the rest of us afloat and like. there rly is no one else in my life who'd go that hard for me. i actually went to her n her bf's for new years day dinner today and we watched hidden figures and like.... idk. so i guess broganes is surprisingly personal in a way i didnt quite clue into until i wrote that final hug in the end. so. an ode to my eldest sister ig who has No Idea abt any of this fandom shit but lets me ramble abt strictly come dancing or when my anxiety's getting bad. when u get married im gonna write a radical speech abt last xmas, this whole yr, that time u used so much spray tan ur face was orange, and december 9th last yr when u called me and let me cry at u for an hr, trust me. uh, so No Nasties can touch broganes basically

otherwise, huge thanks again to bren of blueshift who helped me out w keith's thought process and is Squarely to blame for the anime mention at the end of the chap. fr it is all their fault. only theirs. i had nothing to do with it.

let me know what u think! sorry abt the wait but uhhh alas bruh! it happens sometimes! i hope u had happy holidays/xmas/new yrs! ik i did! tell me abt them! as long as all ur thoughts, 1200 words minimum, essay topics can range from character development to the use of imagery to enforce persistent themes throughout the work, must contain refs to the text, can also contain samples of other related evidence such as songs, poems, my pinterest board. don't say anything new in the conclusion! just wrap it up naturally. that's it lads. lov ya!
inhumanity

Chapter Summary

lance attempts to be a paladin

Chapter Notes

y did this chap take so fucking long u may ask...... i dont fucking know is the reply...but i do apologise regardless....

anyway tremendous thanks as always to my darling bren for allowing me to spoil them entirely for this fic and complain endlessly abt how much i h8 my own writing and also dreamworks' inability to tell us Anything abt Anything. we Also maybe perhaps decided to commission someone as a christmas present to ourselves, so here i present the commission in full! featuring mos lance and their blueshift lance, looking appropriately sad + regretful vs young + hopeful. id encourage u to check it out and and rb it !! it's v v beautiful and perfect <333

also a huge thanks to blue for so kindly offering to me my beta ! she's already been incredibly helpful so i can figure out future plot stuff so !!!!

lastly....we got: suicidal ideation, discussion of nightmares, nausea, self-loathing, panic attacks, flashbacks, description of heavy gore, and more fun stuff ! i'd ask u to double check the tags and if the new tag bothers u, jump down to the end a/n where im gonna put the final tw.

id also highly recommend listening to this chapter's song... it's very fitting for lance this arc, and also one of my fave songs ever

apart from that....enjoy! if u can

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Don't run away, my friend, you won't be back again
You said you needed me
But I know that you needed yourself to be cleaned of me
Barcarola, Sufjan Stevens

--

Dreams of sand and sea cling to Lance upon awakening, head swimming in salt, waves lapping up his legs and sticking, sand under his nails. He cannot feel yet somehow sunlight warms his body, shines a little in his eyes before he has to open them and look the deep red of the cockpit, the bright whiteness in the hangar. To languish here, in this heat, this sunlight, the seawater that brushes up against his toes with every wave, would be a blessing; too good for him. He should probably leave, but he has no idea of the time, although Red impresses morning upon his mind, suggests she woke
him alongside all the others. Who knows what they're doing now... Will they come looking for him again? Now that Coran knows he's here, he's probably been keeping tabs on him through the security feed...and why would anyone else care to find him? He saw the look in Hunk's eye when he broke that plate, how horror had opened his eyes when Lance punched Shiro yesterday. He's afraid of Lance, and, Lance thinks, quite rightly.

Pidge, too. Her hands had been shaking.

Keith hates him, Shiro hates him, Allura found him yesterday but that only means she saw him at his worst. Who would want to walk into that again? Sat fully clothed in a shower, looking like a freak, panicking over...nothing...

Or was it nothing? Is it nothing, now? Red is warm and gentle in the back of his mind, but he can't stay here. Even if the idea of being found here again by the others wasn't humiliating enough, he can already feel an itch creeping up his bones to lash out and hit something, hurt something, to crash his fist against a gladiator's face and smash it to smithereens. He can't eat; won't eat with the others. Can't go back to his room, cold and empty with a rosary on his bedside table that he can't look at. He begs for holiness but he won't let it touch him.

He gets out of Red. Takes the long way upstairs, slips out the back hatch and makes his way slowly from the hangar, limbs stiff from staying curled up for so long and head down to avoid the cameras no doubt watching him, then finally hurries down the corridor to the main lift, fingers tapping against his arms as he awaits its arrival.

The training deck is his only option, and maybe that's a good thing. The corridors are well-lit but shadows gather in the corners and swallow the light whole, monsters of darkness snaking their way from either end coming to get him, he doesn't know why they want him so badly but they do, they want to tear into him with claws and knives and devices he doesn't even know the names of, sharp or pointy or harmless-looking but glowing, imbued purple like everything the druids touch.

Even him.

The legs are weapons, he knows that now. Surely they always knew that. Stepping into the lift he sees how the left one shines broken and cracked as ever, even through his jeans. Hunk tells him they're abnormally heavy, they must be made of something incredibly solid, that neither he nor Pidge can tell where the prosthetic ends and where his actual flesh begins, that they're twined with him, part of him.

His eyes aren't yellow, his skin doesn't crawl purple, but the druids took his legs from him and made him their own anyway; branded their mark onto the back of his shoulders, his left arm, every single fucking scar carved into his body that came from the druids.

And they all came from them. His teammates never tried so hard to hurt him.

Now they can't. It had been excruciatingly clear yesterday on the training deck, the way he kept climbing levels yet nothing seemed to ever touch him, all that mattered was him and the opponents, and there were so many yet they were so easy to take out, one right after the other, multiple at a time, within a single second, inhumanly fast and with inhuman strength.

A monster like the ones he sees creeping along the corridors, wrapped up in shadows that stretch out to greet him, always emanating a dark, malicious purple, clawed hands and voices that creep up his neck into his ear, into his head, hurt them, they whisper, and Lance jogs to his room to change, hurt them badly, but he won't, his hands shake but he won't, they're probably all at breakfast now, he'd just have to lob a grenade in there, just have to grab the trident and spear three of them at once.
but he won't, what the fuck, he won't he won't he won't -

*You won't*, Red reassures him, not with voice but with a push of warmth into his mind, parting the shadows in the corridor enough for him to make it to the blinding white of the training deck where shadows cannot form, where Lance can put those thoughts to good use and *fight*, though sometimes his mind superimposes the faces of his teammates onto the gladiators and yet it makes him work *harder*, he sees Shiro and smashes him into pieces, sees Keith and aims for the chest.

By the time a voice calls out, "End training simulation," Lance is shaking. His shoulders, his hands, his heart inside his steel ribs quaking, roiling his stomach. He looks at Shiro and sees only how unforgivingly he had smashed a bot wearing Shiro's face into pieces with the trident, how Lance, only yesterday, had gotten scared, saw a *threat*, and suddenly his fist was reacting before his mind could, or, his *rational* mind at least, whatever there is left of it - and Lance had punched, and when he'd pulled his fist back there was flesh and blood and a fucking *hole*.

How the fuck is he capable of that?

Shiro's holding something black and white and red in his hand as he moves forward, examining Lance's defensive stance, the way he holds the trident tight in his hands between them. His face is harsh and cold, reminds Lance of - someone he can't grasp, a family member, a teacher? Someone who looked down upon him, ends of his mouth pulled tight, eyes narrow, words always cruel. The memory is gone, only an imprint remains. Lance is sure it isn't the Shiro he knew before.

But it's the Shiro he knows now. The Shiro he's faced ever since the brothers' argument outside his bedroom. A Shiro who hates him, part of him quivers at the thought but most of him *exalts* in the quiet rage Shiro holds tight to his body, the way he strides in and the way he stops suddenly, waiting for Lance to come to him. God, Lance thinks as he heads over, *someone who understands*.

Someone who knows Lance has committed innumerable wrongs. Someone who will hold Lance to judgement for all the things he's done.

"Keith's gone," is the first thing Shiro says, and he shoves the red bayard into Lance's chest. Lance blinks as the words wash over him - Keith, the man who saved Lance's life a dozen times over without even realising, *gone* - before Shiro lets go and Lance reacts lightning-fast to grab the bayard before it falls. "To the Blade of Marmora. He told me to give that to you."

*The Blade...*

Blinking, Lance freezes, hand tightening round the bayard, his other pressing fingers into his palm, shoulders rising like a wolf with its hackles up - then something soft and soothing spreads through his body light sunlight, and he relaxes. Keith's gone, then. *Really* gone, completely out of reach gone, Lance can't hunt him down at night to fight with him, Lance can't face Keith's absolute hatred of him, Lance can't *hurt* him anymore. He hurled cruel words at him in the hopes Keith would leave Lance alone, and he chose to leave for *good*.

He doesn't want to be happy that Keith has left his friends, his family, the *team* as a whole, but a smile crawls up his face anyway, pulls the ends of his lips into jagged tips, and Shiro lets out a sound of disgust.

"You broke his heart," Shiro says, "you *drove* him off this ship! Can't you at least *pretend* to feel some remorse?"

But Lance can't. The further away Keith is the better. Then he can't see Lance, the way he breaks things so easily, the way he fights, tearing bots apart too quickly and too *brutally*, can't read in him
any sign of weakness that is bursting from Lance's seams.

He's gone.

"God," Shiro mutters, shaking his head, eyes narrowed as he examines Lance up and down. "You don't give a fuck, do you? Is it true, then? What the prisoners said about you being a monster?"

Lance nods, more to himself than anything, but Shiro's expression twists, a storm overtaking his face and casting it into shadow, thunder rolling through his shoulders, his arms, his chest, but then he takes a deep breath and steps back.

"The only reason you're still here," Shiro says slowly, as if embedding the words personally upon Lance's brain, "is because you can kill more galra than the rest of us put together. Don't forget that."

As if he could, as Shiro leaves and Lance turns back to fight. With these hands of stone and a heart of ice, with a body that cannot be hurt, limbs that move swifter than the eye can capture - how can Lance forget was he was created to do? To kill, and keep killing. Watch innumerous lives turn to flesh and blood and guts beneath his fingers. The bayard transforms into a trident and Lance likes it like that, the easier to kill with, better to supplant himself in the middle of a crowd and take out galra after galra after galra with, to ravage endless worlds with and it's so easy, if the druids wanted a weapon they certainly got one in Lance.

That's what he is now.

That's all he is.

Doesn't he feel strong, doesn't he feel powerful? Climbing levels till he loses track, taking down more opponents than the rest of Voltron put together, isn't this what he wanted? Or is it? He doesn't know anymore. But who wouldn't want this, if Lance can't touch his friends and if Lance can't look in the eyes of a lover for reassurance, then surely he can have this. He can kill the aliens who want to kill his friends. He can kill every galra that raises their gun against Pidge or Hunk, take out the ships that hunt them in battle with Red, he can keep killing till the universe is, somehow, safe.

The druids made it sound like that kind of thing was possible, the way he is now.

Millions of lives, taken with his bare hands.

Like maybe he's capable of that.

Like maybe...that's a good thing.

--

He doesn't know how long he trains, can't count the hours, gives up counting even the levels. He climbs and fights and climbs and it never feels like enough, never feels good the way it used to. Before, he'd take out gladiators with his spear and daggers and pistols and rifle; now he spins the trident in his hands and takes out more gladiators than any human could take on and it feels boring. Where's the challenge in a gladiator? Even as advanced as Altean ones, ones that adapt to their surroundings, to the fighting style of their opponents, even when there's so many - Lance smashes them all into pieces, spears them onto the forks of the trident or bashes them to the ground with the end, and it's...easy.

Where's the rush, the thrill? Lance remembers that from before, remembers having to train every day otherwise he’d withdraw, fall into a sullen mood, entire portions of the day disappearing from
view. Remembers standing resplendent and bloody on various planets, unable to contain a smile, a smirk, as he surveyed the dozens of galra bodies that surrounded him, rotten petals plucked from his poisonous stem. His muscles don't even burn, now. He remains expressionless, cutting down bot after bot with a barely-parted mouth and unblinking eyes.

It's not the same.

He's not the same.

The voice that next calls off his simulation training is shaking; he turns and sees Allura standing there, hand gripping her bayard while the other thumb rubs along the top of her thigh armour. The others are assembled behind her, unable to look at him, Shiro's crossed arms harsh and cold, Coran meeting his gaze for a half-second before he murmurs something to Allura and hurries past Lance to the weapons closet at the opposite wall.

Even Allura instead surveys the training deck, eyes trailing the walls, the ceiling, the floor at her feet. Her fingers tap repeatedly against her bayard.

Lance doesn't ask what level he reached during his training; neither Allura nor Coran provide any indication.

"I see you've, uh, received the red bayard," is how she begins, examining the floor panels at his feet. Lance frowns as her eyes catch on something in front of him, but he focuses his gaze and realises he's spinning the trident round in his hands and stops immediately, holding it tight to his side. "A trident, then? Not a rifle? Perhaps it felt inspired from your previous weapon choices...?"

Lance nods slowly, curling his hand around the bayard as it grows hot and returns to its nonweaponised state. His other hand starts clenching immediately, but he lets it. Even if his nails tear the skin, it'll grow back instantly. Even now, whatever injuries he may have sustained during training have likely healed; at the very least, no one seems to be pointing them out.

Besides; he likes the trident. Has gotten so used to manoeuvring a battlefield with the spear that he can't imagine fighting without one - how else would he slaughter so many enemies, how else would he kill all the galra around him? More than kill; massacre. Destroy. Reduce to a ring of flesh and guts and blood around him. Fingers tingling, Lance realises this is what he's been lacking today during training - what he's been missing. Something visceral, something alive being made dead due to his hands alone. The power is one thing, but wielded over gladiator bots that turn to dust the second the kill shot hits? There's no satisfaction in that. Lance needs to see that last breath leave his victim's body; needs to tear open their chest and watch their heart beating and squeeze the life out of it with his ruined hand. Blood thumping round his veins, heart drumming against his chest, he feels this desire intense, a desire he thought he was fulfilling by training but how could it possibly compare? It's nothing like pinning an opponent down, digging his thumbs into their eyeballs, the heel of his palm against their chin to dislocate the jaw, nothing like yanking off a limb and using it as a weapon, nothing like killing, murdering, massacring.

Nothing like plucking opponents from thin air and turning violent lives into violent, violent deaths.

"Uh, Lan- Lance?" comes a voice, and the dark red blurring his vision clears up back to the edges, revealing Allura standing maybe a few paces from him, closer than before, her bayard now clenched in both her hands. "Lance are you... Are you with us?"

He is. Blinding white to blot out the shadows that creep; gladiator bots that can never fight hard enough against him to fulfil his bloodlust.
That's what it is. If blood isn't spilt then it's not a real fight, it's nothing to be proud of.

*What the fuck is wrong with me?* Lance thinks, but his hands shake with the need to kill and he knows it's only the truth.

He nods anyhow.

"Uh, uh...great! Well, evidently you're now our red paladin, which is... Well, I imagine the transition might be a bit of a challenge, but I hope we all work together to get through it!" She smiles, but it doesn't even reach the bags under her eyes. "I...am putting a lot of faith in Red. She's clearly decided that you are fit to be a paladin if she's gone so far as to block Keith out, so... However, I imagine your mind must be under a lot of stress, e-even if...you don't realise it. So I thought perhaps we could bring back training exercises. Just to...feel out the strength of our connections to each other. I'd rather we do this sort of thing now, rather than be attacked by enemies later and realise we're unable to form Voltron for long periods of time, or at all. I thought we'd perhaps try several exercises out, then if all else fails we could attempt the mindmeld exercise, if that's...alright with you?"

Lance shrugs.

Breathing deeply, Allura closes her eyes for a second, a hand letting go of her bayard and pressing against her chest, before she opens them again and finally rests her gaze upon Lance. "Are you going to speak at all, Lance?"

To say what? He knows if he opens his mouth one millimetre it's going to creep into an ugly smirk that belies all the dirty, disgusting emotions that roil in his stomach when he fights. He shakes his head.

Shakes his head, doesn't look at Allura, tries not to think about what she says. Exercises, fine, mindmeld...less fine, but him, the red paladin? He doesn't remember how to be a paladin anymore; he isn't suited for it the way Keith so obviously is. Keith, so thorough in his idealism despite the quiet rage that bubbles up around him, so dedicated to protecting people, god, protecting *Lance*, it makes Lance sick to think of all the things Keith sacrificed to try and keep him safe.

The way Lance dismissed it.

The way Lance, sometimes, tried to protect Keith in return...

...Well, whatever the fuck he was doing, it wasn't nearly enough.

How is Lance supposed to be a paladin now? The way Red showed him? Bonding, *somehow*, enough with the others to form Voltron reliably; being deployed onto the ground to take out all the galra, to *protect the people*...

Him, protecting the people.

...*Him*?

"...start off with the maze exercise, perhaps you and Hunk? Or Pidge, or...any of us, I suppose! And then protecting each other against the gladiators - we did a variation of that when we first started training together before the ritual. Then fighting against a common enemy... I suppose an incredibly high-leveled gladiator is our only option... Perhaps some meditation to calm us all, then move onto the mindmeld..."

"Sounds excellent, princess," says Coran, who during this speech has left the weapons closet with
strange headsets that he sets at the side, then goes immediately to her side. "Might I suggest that instead of upping the gladiator level considerably, I merely increase its size from the control room and perhaps give it a few advanced manoeuvres for the round?"

Allura nods, slowly, looking up at Coran. "Yes, that's... That's a much better idea, Coran. Will you watch us?"

"Of course, princess," he says. "Good luck, all of you."

"Thank you," Allura murmurs, the sentiment echoing back through Hunk, Pidge, even Shiro, but Lance cannot budge an inch. "Now, she says, moving finally to join Lance in the centre of the deck, "Let's begin."

--

It doesn't work.

It becomes clear maybe...three, four minutes into the first exercise? Hunk guiding Lance through the maze, except Lance turns left too soon and Hunk stutters his commands and Lance ends up shocked, and everyone winces and Lance's mind fills with fuzz and static but he keeps going, his heart shakes but he finishes the exercise, faces blurring before him, hands trembling.

Trying not to panic.

The next exercise is even worse - protecting each other from an onslaught of gladiators, except Lance doesn't need protection, and he takes out gladiators faster than the others can even comprehend, but then he gets a sword through his arm and the ground fizzles beneath him and he drops onto a lower level of the deck.

He doesn't understand what he did wrong. When the exercise ends, when the others drop through the ground and then they all reemerge onto the main deck, Lance can't comprehend the words they say to him. It it so simple, in his mind, what his role is now - what his role has been these past few months. Protect the others. Use his body - this body, this thing of concrete legs and plastic skin - to take the hits the others cannot. Use these precisely-honed skills to decimate the enemy. Take fire. Take charge. It's different when you're in a ship and you can't see the faces you obliterate into pieces with laser beams or elemental blasts. It's different to look every opponent in the eye and tear them to shreds.

Different to zone out, let his body take charge, sometimes he doesn't meet their eyes at all and he doesn't really tear them to shreds, or at least not deliberately. The spear and the daggers and the guns, they find the most vulnerable, most lethal access point and they dig in. Sometimes the corpses get caught underfoot. Sometimes Lance is a little enthusiastic in his brandishing of polearms.

It's different with him, and they try and try and keep fucking trying to get him to work with them, but to comply with them would be to betray this one instinct: to protect them. Without that, he kills without reason. Without that, what he does is murder.

The next exercise is even worse, because Lance fights the oversized gladiator with ease and the others don't get a word in, and when Coran resignedly does up the level of it, it takes out Pidge, Hunk, even Shiro far too quickly.

They take a break at that point. Lance leans against the wall stretching out his legs, his arms, rolling his neck; the others collapse against the wall, panting out breaths, double-checking no one's
been harmed, and Pidge downs half a bottle of water in two seconds and Hunk shuts his eyes for a very long time, doesn’t say anything. Shiro stares stubbornly ahead; Allura’s hands never stop trembling.

How exhausted they all get, trying to connect with him. Some dark and ugly part of Lance - the rotten core of his wasted heart - finds it pathetic; mostly, it makes him sick. His hands shake too, so he rolls them into fists, or digs fingers into crossed arms. Chokes down bile in his throat rushing forward like bilge water to a forgotten shore littered with the tattered remains of his heart. It’s his own doing, after all, how they won’t meet his eyes. How fear turns their fingers to spiders. Lance may have nightmares of the druids but there is no doubt they have nightmares of him. Rescuing him, perhaps, cut to pieces and scarred to shit, expecting sadness, expecting fear, only for a monster to emerge and eat their joy whole.

The brief meditation session does nothing to dispel the blood that lingers always in Lance’s vision; the others take strong, deep breaths, and Lance falls in line alongside them, but a calm settles that falls just short of his rabid mind. Before at least he was still moving, half-focusing on the supposed team-bonding and mostly just the fight, but now, in this stillness, it is as though the chaos has moved instead to his mind, yanking out errant thoughts, indisposable fears, hanging them like a veil before his face, and forcing his eyelids open so he has to look at them. He isn’t good for the team. He’s not going to fit in. Red, what the hell? Why him? Why shut Keith out? It isn’t right. It isn’t fair. Hasn’t Lance done enough damage? How much more does he have to do before the team realises they’re carrying a dead weight? Does he have to do it himself? But how? He can’t hurt himself, he cannot be hurt.

Red hushes him, though. Quiet and constant and far away, but he feels how she exerts as much of her energy as possible to keep him calm, or...calm-ish. Calm enough that the others, with their closed eyes and intense focus, don’t notice the way his sadness and his fear cannot contain themselves, how they express themselves unremarkably in the constant vibration of his wrecked fingers, wagging feet, a clenched jaw.

In his racing heart, when Coran asks them gently to focus once more, and starts handing out the mindmeld headsets: "These will facilitate the bond necessary for forming Voltron," Coran says, and his voice is low and soothing, trying to be a warm wave over them all, but all Lance can taste is salt as it crashes against him. "Open your mind and welcome your teammates in. Focus on each other, your strength, and Voltron coming together. Lance- please."

Lance, because he's the one throwing everyone's game off. Lance, because he is the one piece that doesn't fit.

Red shushes his mind but she's too far away and the others are close, too close, sat in their circle with his knees almost touching Shiro's and Allura's, hands fisted, mind racing, mind roaring.

He is the last to put his headset on. The others are silent, but he hears a gasp escape Allura's mouth, a sharp exhale leave Hunk's, as his mind settles in with theirs - or, tries to, at least. Even he can feel how unnatural it is, trying to force a tectonic plate into space that doesn’t exist. Everyone is warm in their sphere of thought and emotion, but Lance can see how fractured his head is, how his mind is ripped at the edges, how those edges are dagger sharp.

The fear in his chest tightens his heart into a stranglehold and the guilt stuffs rocks down his throat and the shame, worst of all, bubbles low and heavy in his stomach. Sadness is a second self pressing against his skin, trying to get out. The others are reaching for him, he can feel that, Hunk strongest of all, Allura not far behind, but his edges disappear into shadows where only monsters lurk, and they cannot grasp hold of him.
He won't let them.

He won't.

Contain the tainted self, don't let the others see precisely what he's become. Fully aware of his actions and sickened by them, afraid to live and incapable of dying. They don't know how he's changed. That he knows what he's done and that he feels the weight of it on his shoulders, druids' hands pressing him onto a table, into an arena, the other paladins handing him a weapon and telling him to kill.

"Lance, please," says Allura, and he opens his eyes and blinks when he's sees a grainy vision of what he's thinking about projected before him - a floor, the arena or maybe just another planet, littered with corpses, limbs, blood saturating the view. Shiro, Pidge, and Allura all seemed to have focused on their lions fine, waiting patiently in the centre for the others to join, but Hunk is struggling with an image of... Lance, not in a fight, not even injured in a cryopod, but...the old him, Leandro Hernandez, a mundane setting, their school cafeteria? Lance - Leandro - opposite Hunk, head thrown back in laughter, and his hair is straighter and longer at the back, completely unscarred, jaw curved by youth. He looks so... happy, and Lance can't even remember feeling anything like that. Was that him? When they think of the old Lance, does he smile like that, laugh like that? Does he always look so young? So unharmed by the world? Lance cannot believe he was anything like that, but he must've been, for the galra to take him so easily, change him so easily. Look how vulnerable he is. How innocent.

When Hunk opens his eyes, it dissipates to nothing.

Lance's gruesome vision sticks.

"Please," Allura repeats, hands fist tightly in her lap. Despite the crease in her brows, the way her eyes shine like flower petals after the rain, the blue lion still sits in the centre of their circle, her focus never wavering. "Please try and focus on the bonds of each other. Thinking about, about... that isn't... It isn't... conducive to team bonding, and it's- it's upsetting, I-I think, for us all, so if you could just..."

Focus on something else. On his lion, on their connection. On being one of them, even though that's impossible. Don't focus on Leandro, flickered to death opposite him. Don't focus on the past at all, because what if he slips, what if his mind lets his walls down for even a second and the others can look into the wrecked house of his mind? Ceiling torn out and wallpaper scabbing, and there is nothing inside it. Photos scratched by collapsing brick, thick with dust, too ruined to see the subject. A chest of drawers, but the wood is rot and none of the clothes inside fit. A mirror, cracked, and a deep black hole where his face should be. Nothingness.

What if he opens his mind for them, and they see that?

Nothingness.

But Allura looks at him like it breaks her heart to see blood and guts projected from his mind. Hunk has a hand over his eyes, and his shoulders are shaking slightly even as he takes a deep breath, refocuses. The yellow lion takes a minute to appear in full, but even he manages it.

Is Lance going to keep doing this? Hurting his friends in minor ways? He hurts them enough physically, has hurt them already with words alone... If he...closes his eyes. He just has to focus on Red, right? He can feel her, purring warmly in the back of his head, emanating kindness and care, a white sand beach with waves of crystal blue rushing to greet him, Red invites him to lay down and just relish in the safety, but the druids- Lance and Keith both were tortured by a druid on a beach.
They're everywhere. Here, crawling in his head, taking note of the paladins around him and murmuring hurt them hunt them kill them all, the way his fingers dig into his knees because he's so tense, like one more push from the druids in his head or Shiro at his side will crack whatever dam is holding his storm back. One push and Lance's hands would no longer be his hands, his body only a conduit for the voices in his head, the druids he can still see in his mind's eye that grin with no teeth and hide their eyes from him.

Maybe if he shields his thoughts, he can join the others. He cannot elevate himself to their level but he can tag along, he can cooperate, he can let Voltron function even if it doesn't operate as well as it would with Keith. Coran says open your mind but Lance knows that is impossible for him, state that it is. If he...hides the bad parts. They know he's fucked up, so they'll expect his head to be a mess, but they can't see all of it. They can't understand - if he hides the bad parts, the really bad parts, the things he said to Keith despite having his empathy returned to him, the way he keeps picturing his friends hanging from chains on the walls, stakes driven through their hearts - if he hides all that, maybe it could work.

This whole session would be over faster, at least.

The very second he thinks it - gives in - he can feel his mind widening, expanding, growing to fit alongside the others but- but it can't. His mind is crooked and jagged and theirs are nice and neat and tidy, or at least, nothing like his, just full of shit, full of spiders like Allura's trembling arms.

Like her shaking fingers, steadfast but still scared, scuttling into his mind, tentative, feeling out the broken edges of which there are so many, pressing against the vulnerable spots, of which there are so many, too many -

No, he thinks, but her gentle prying is forgotten as he realises her hands aren't the only ones in his head, her quintessence, a pretty, sparkly, soothing thing, not the only kind hovering in the back of his head. He recognises Hunk as something warm and embracing, Pidge as bright and curious, Shiro holding back but solid, a little heavy, and cool against the hot flames constantly ravaging Lance's mind for more memories to burn and thoughts to blacken.

They're in his head, he realises. He thought perhaps that to open his mind would be to join a higher level where their minds were all equal, where the focus on Voltron would overwhelm any other strangeness that might come from bonding in this way, but they're in his head, and the druids are whispering, and they're whispering, too, he can feel Pidge unable to hold herself back from peering at memories, digging into his brain, just like the druids did, maybe the druids had a scalpel and blueprints and a plan, but the intrusion is the same, something Lance can't stop, something Lance is powerless against-

Then Hunk shushes her away, and Pidge keeps herself at bay again, until all that's left is sparkling pink spiders crawling into all the cracks of his mind, creeping into half-lived memories, edging across the bare ground floor of his mind and hiding behind his rotten chest of drawers, inspecting the state of him because god knows it is a state, a mess, a ruin, a-

Get out my head, he thinks fiercely, but Allura is just as fierce, and just as desperate.

"Lance," she whispers, right next to him, sounding decades away. "Lance, what is this."

Don't, don't, he thinks, wants to push her out but he is powerless in his own bones, the others hold back, whispering constantly in the back of his head, what are they saying, but Allura dives deeper, finds the darkest, dirtiest memories and brings them into her shining light. Fighting Keith, complying with the galra, waking up on a chair in the control room and rolling out his neck, stretching his fingers, feeling jittery - running to the training deck, sick but quick, taking down bots
with a tremor in his fingers, an earthquake rolling through his bones, sweat on the back of his neck not from exhaustion but fear, how rapidly his heart had beat, stop he thinks, or thought, or I don't want this maybe both, what the hell is wrong with me, sat in the shower, shaking from nightmares that seemed like respite because reality was somehow even worse, don't do this to me, the realisation crashing down on him, pulling at his hair and sitting heavy on his shoulders, tracing scars to cut into his chest and yank out his heart, dangling it before him, don't look please don't look, black and sodden and shrunken down three sizes, what the fuck is that, is that his? Is that him? Curled up fully-clothed in a shower, he can see it the way Allura saw it, too big for the space, hands tearing into his own hair as he stares at nothing in abject horror, and did Allura know? Did she walk in and see him like that and just know something was wrong the whole time?

Was she waiting for this?

To expose him like this?

To show the others how pathetic, how disgusting, how absolutely monstrous he really is?

That's what you are, Lance, the druids say or, or he thinks it's the druids, there are so many voices in his head now he can't tell which is which, you're a monster -

"Lance," Allura says as his eyes snap open, the vision before him blurred but he can still see it, it's his own hand and it's squeezing a live, beating heart into pieces, and he's done that, he knows he's done that at some point, it isn't conjured from his imagination but a memory lost to him, and they can all see it, they can all see that he's done that-

He breaks the mindmeld headset. He doesn't mean to- goes to take it off- but it cracks beneath his fingers, and what can he do? He has to get out before he wretches in front of everyone, before they judge him, keep judging him, look at that hand round that heart and know him for what he is-

Monster.

He is knelt by a freshly-flushed, newly-repaired toilet when Allura settles delicately to her knees besides him.

He can't look at her to begin with. Stays hunched over the toilet bowl, chest heaving, pushing his nails into his palms so he doesn't break anything again. The druids in his head won't stop muttering you had your chance why didn't you take it, are you a coward as well as a monster, are you really so pathetic, so afraid of death?

Of the destruction you wreak so well? The violence wrapped around you like a second skin, crafted from the corpses of your victims, slick with their blood? Eyeballs as buttons and frozen lungs as your thick collar, and a heart, in your hand, still, cold, dead...?

He really could've killed them, though. With his bayard or without it, if they had theirs or if they didn't, Lance has bested them all in combat, even Allura. He could've done it. He can do it.

But he doesn't want to. No matter what the druids try to shove into his head- he won't.

He's got too close already.

Can Allura somehow still sense where his thoughts tread? She has tears in her eyes. Her fingers are twitching. Her whole body, trembling. She's been afraid of him for a while, and yet....here she sits.

"You're not a monster, Lance," is all she says, and she looks him in the eye this time. How sincere she looks, how earnest and young she has always seemed. A real rose, beautiful and graceful and
able to fend for herself, sharp with words, endlessly blossoming. Up close, Lance can see the weight of what this does to her, how worry creases her brow all too easily, how dark the bags beneath her eyes really are. Petals tear away too easily. Does she have nightmares like him? Is she getting any sleep?

He can't reply, knows that if her's is the voice of a tired, world-weary empress, then he would be her tortured fool, demented by dreams, visions, things that seem real and yet are untouchable. If he is not a monster, why does he see monstrous things all around him? Hazy figures, a blood-soaked floor. Why does he dream each night of the atrocities he has committed, the sins he cannot undo? Why are there fucking voices in his head telling him to kill his supposed friends? Those same friends, in his head, too. Gone now, but he can still feel the imprint of them, how warm and solid their quintessence had been, how wrong- corrupted his own was in comparison.

And Allura has the nerve to say he isn't a monster.

"Lance," she says now after a beat of silence, "what I saw-"

He shakes his head, feels vacant in his own skin, lost in his own head. Monster, the druids chant on end. Even Allura's warmth in the back of his head hadn't been able to blot it out. "What I heard," she insists, and Lance pulls away from the toilet, buries his chin in the hollow of his chest. "Lance. It sounded so real, as if they..."

"They are," he hisses out, then clamps his mouth shut as she emits a tiny gasp, staring at the white tile between his crossed legs, burgundy earth, black. The druids whisper silence - even if he had more to say, it can't come out. "Lance, that isn't possible," she says, and he hears her move slightly, settling her weight different across the floor, but he still doesn't look. Won't let himself. He isn't breathing quite right, can't calm himself down from the memory of four people in his head alongside the druids, looking and judging, trying to connect. "It must be...your mind, just...making monsters out of memories. You just have to let it go."

Let it go. How? How? He can't. And he doesn't want to. No one but Shiro holds him to judgement for what he's done, so he has to take these disgusting tainted memories and bludgeon himself to death with them. Has to face the things he's done, the thing he's become.

It's not something he can control, anyway. The druids are inside of him, clawing into all the vulnerable, damaged parts of his brain and dragging his worst fears into the light.

There are so many of them.

Kill her, they croon, and Lance looks to Allura, her pure white hair somehow less poofy than it used to be, those tired lines on her face, how she sits, pleading, she's not even got her bayard on her. What does she think she's doing? Trying to help him, to save him? From the voices in his own fucking head? The corrupt quintessence so imbued in him, so entwined with his soul, that even she cannot get it out? That an entire ritual on a planet devoted to quintessence healing cannot fix it? There is no rescue from this, Lance does not deserve it, Lance does not want it. He wants Allura to look at him the way she did every time her patience snapped, every time he said something cruel and her eyes couldn't help but narrow. She needs to be angry at him. He needs to see it as a tsunami wave cresting through her body, every muscle tensing with strength, something stronger than Lance or the god he no longer prays to rising in her eyes.

"Leave," he says, tries to make his voice jagged and poisonous like when he spoke to Keith before
he left, but he is a ghost, the words out his mouth mere smoke. His fire died out so long ago.

"I will not," Allura says, straightening her shoulders.

"Go away."

"I will not."

"I don't care what you think you saw," Lance says, he doesn't meet her eyes still, but thinks of the ways he has hurt her since he awoke on that table: dismissing her, snapping back at her, turning to a frozen gladiator on the training deck when she came to him and wept upon his shoulder. How awful he has been to her. How little he deserves her kindness, her comfort. "It doesn't matter to me; I can handle it on my-"

"Drop the fucking act, Lance!" Allura exclaims, and her voice of steel, of an archangel's battlecry, forces his head up, to gaze upon her and the way she's looking at him, wide eyes but furrowed brows, lips parted, hands shaking still. "I saw what was going on! I heard the druids in your head! The quintessence ritual changed something! Just tell me so I can help!"

"No," he says, silence they croon so that's all he says, and her eyes narrow only slightly in disbelief, shaking her head, sitting back on her heels.

"You need to tell us, Lance. We can't have a repeat of that. We need to be able to form Voltron. I need- if something's changed, I need to know!"

Not because she cares, because why would she? She plucked a couple memories out of his head and scanned them for viruses, of which there were many, and she doesn't want the infection to spread. She wants him to form Voltron with the others. She wants him to kill with the rest of them.

She wants him to kill the only way he can, endlessly and ruthlessly till the blood is burnt into his skin, till it's the only thing he can taste like smoke in the back of his throat at night, till it soaks his floor, crawls the walls, envelops entire rooms.

Allura wants Lance to kill for her.

...Isn't that what the druids wanted, too?

"Lance," she says, softer. "If something's changed, please just tell me. I'm not going to judge you. I just want to help you."

Absolutely unacceptable. He shakes his head.

"You didn't like feeling us in your head, I felt that. Shall we keep some distance then? Are there specific areas you'd like us to not go near? We need to work together to move forward. If Red is so confident that you can form Voltron with us - if she chose to shut Keith out and allow him to leave - then I am confident as well. But we must work together. Lance..."

He can't say anything. She reminds him of someone he used to know. The dark skin, the eyes, the air about her - like an old friend, like one of the sisters he recalls only from their visit. He tried to stick their names in his head, but to remember them is to allow the druids to contaminate them. He won't let them.

"Lance, if you're...feeling anything - if the quintessence unlocked something in you... I can't even imagine... If you need to...to talk, or... If you want more tests done to try and discern what exactly changed, or... Lance, I just want you to be well. And happy. Voltron is important to me, but you're
my paladin. Lance, we were friends once. If you're in pain...and I can help...

But he says nothing. The druids are a physical shadow clinging to his shoulders, they sneak clawed hands before his face and clamp over his mouth, and no words can come out. He sits and stares at the toilet because to look Allura's beauty and kindness in the eye hurts too much. She is too pure for him, they all are. His hands lay at his side but they twitch, his heart still drums against his chest, it is desperate to get out, but he makes no move. A monster he may be, but he won't hurt Allura. He won't force her away, and he can't ask her to leave.

Instead, she sits by his side till his breathing has stablised, and when she stands, she offers him a hand, and helps him up.

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From them on, Allura is...softer, somehow. Serves him his plate at dinner so there's no chance for him to break it. Engages him in one-sided conversation, calmly discusses their future plans - hunt down more rebel bases, find someone who can heal his incision, continue saving lives in whatever manner possible - and asks for his opinion every time, even though he can never give it. Nods or shakes his head, shrugs, feels stone embedding itself into his bones, lodging rocks into his mouth, but he doesn't know how to form the right words. Allura wants more than Lance can give.

But she doesn't push.

Protects him during their mindmeld sessions - because those do continue - and pushes back those who want to pry, encourages Lance to keep himself open long enough to form a tenuous bond with the others, until everyone is too busy focusing on forming Voltron to pick at all Lance's loose ends. They're lucky - trouble avoids them all for a week or so, gives them time to mindmeld, apparently the only effective way of bonding, and allows the others to get used to Lance.

But Lance cannot get used to Lance. He has nightmares every time he shuts his eyes. His hands shake with an overwhelming need to be careful. Every morning he tumbles from bed and darkness shrouds his vision as he gropes his way to the bathroom, and he feels the blood slick on his fingers, breathes deep to try and calm down but all he can taste in the back of his throat is metal and rust, heat clamouring, lungs tightening. There is no escape but to sit in a freezing cold shower until the water washes enough of the blood away for him to unstick his eyes open.

Even then, days pass in a daze. At night he is alive, battling beasts and grappling with galra, but upon awakening that one searing joy is diminished. He trains on the deck, bashes bots to bits, but it isn't enough. It isn't murder, Lance isn't wringing necks and imbuing his soul with all the lives he lays waste to. He knows, now, what the druids wanted him to be - how couldn't he, when the urge pounds through his veins every second of every day? They wanted to make him a killer. They did, they succeeded, how many galra did he kill before the quintessence ritual? How many is he expected to kill now, when only Allura knows there's even a slight difference in him? What if it doesn't matter who made him a killer? What if all that matters is that he can kill, that he's a lethal force on the battlefield, that he can sway the tide of a battle in ways he was incapable of doing before?

Inevitably Allura will collect him. She doesn't ask anymore, just speaks calmly and takes his hands until he is dragged from the arena, from the table, from wherever he ends up upon awakening. Will wait till he dries off, sits with him while he eats, escort him to the training deck for practise and the mindmeld sessions. He thinks the others must talk about it with her in private; in front of him, they say nothing.

He's glad. Stripped of words to explain himself with, all he can do is make himself useful. Doesn't
bother anyone, doesn't say a word. Pidge won't even come near him now. She'll hang around when he lays back in the infirmary and Hunk and Coran fiddle with his legs, but she won't engage him. Hunk tries, but his smile never quite reaches his eyes, sadness swallowing his attempts at joy whole. Shiro clearly fucking hates him, even if he takes deep breaths and closes his eyes and lowers his guard during their mindmeld sessions. And Allura...

Protects him, like she said she would. Lance thinks: maybe if this works, I can actually help.

Lance thinks: she hasn't told anyone yet. Would it be okay to explain further?

What if the druids steal the words straight from his mouth?

What if she doesn't want to know?

What if he's hoping for too much?

But the truth curdles in his chest, he knows it will make him sick if he holds it back too long. Already he feels his mind derailing, bit by bit, every nightmare he cannot hide from, every morning spent in freezing showers he cannot feel, every mindmeld session where the difference between his jagged head and the others' collected minds have never been so obvious. He isn't one of them. He can't even pretend.

That doesn't mean he can't help.

"Lance," says Allura one day in the aftermath of training. Her face gleams a little in the bright light of the training deck, her hair tied tightly in a bun at her nape, and she takes deep, calming breaths. The others had been sparring together, and Allura had taken Shiro on for a brief turn. Shiro's latest improvements combined with his advanced arm allowed him to hold out against Allura far longer than the others, but even he succumbed to her strength and skill eventually. Lance had watched for a while, knew he was effortlessly better than them regardless, and sat on a corner ledge practising with a sniper rifle so he was out their way.

Allura catches him in the weapons closet, where he's putting the sniper away. He'd been considering if he wanted to bring other weapons to his room - sometimes it's easier to just practise stances in there with the daggers or trident instead of trodding all the way to the deck in the middle of the night for it - and his hands hover over a pair of knives, small ones that can be hidden under sleeves, wonders if it's worth learning his way around a pair of tiny things like that when he already has so many weapons in his repertoire.

Taking his hands away, he turns and looks to Allura to indicate he's listening, surveys that behind her the deck is empty, and the others have left them in peace. Coran will be continuing his search for rebel bases and information, perhaps enlisting Shiro to his side or asking him to clean. Hunk will be sat in the infirmary, going over his notes, various reports, blueprints he's made up, trying to find a way to fix Lance. Pidge will be with him or Coran or on her own, maybe pointing out something Hunk missed or urging Coran on to promising data or curled up before her laptop, going through the videos, trying to be of help to Lance without having to ever come near him.

"Lance," Allura says again, and he refocuses his gaze on her, crosses his arms. She's still in her paladin armour, but she absently starts loosening the gauntlets as she speaks. "I... I wanted to check up on you. The others don't know how bad it is, but they all realise something is different than before. Your mind is...more than chaotic during the mindmeld. And everyone can see you've been sleeping poorly."

He raises a brow - look who's talking - but her eyes stay serious and he refuses to hold her gaze,
"I wanted to ask...if you've been- if your, if your sleep has been... If you're having nightmares, Lance. They- Keith mentioned it, once, to the others, who told me...that you had a nightmare the day of the quintessence ritual. I imagine they might have gotten a little more...active in the aftermath?"

She evidently knows something but just isn't telling him. The rooms are so soundproof that no one can hear the way he awakens from his nightmares - loudly, desperately yelling for help, crashing to the ground, breathing faster than healthy - and the only other giveaway that he's sleeping poorly is the purple under his eyes, but even that can be attributed to other things: staying up all night to train, or being unable to sleep in the first place. He spies knowing in her gaze and shifts his eyes again, shoulders rising only slightly.

It's enough for her to jump on. "Look, the mice tell me it's bad. I want to help - Lance, let me help. You've been so quiet, and I... I can't take back everything that's happened to you, or...what's happened since. But nightmares- I can help with nightmares. I have them too. Coran, he makes me this tea - we even have medication, Lance, that could help, if you could only...explain..."

_Explained._ Allura, he could say, every night I go back to the arena and it feels _good_. Every night I tear enemies apart, I tear _innocent people_ apart and it's almost satisfying. Allura, every time I wake up I forget where I am and I forget _who_ I am and I'm trapped in a world that feels realer than anything else has since I woke up on that table. Allura, he could say, I'm so scared. Allura, even, I can feel evilness growing like a tumour in place of my heart.

Allura, please _help_ me.

Laughter rings in his ears, deep and delighted and scratching against his temples, tearing behind his eyes. Oh, Lance _wants_ to tell Allura. Holding back the truth is like trying to push a tsunami back with his own two hands. He's not strong enough.

It's going to swallow him whole and take him away and how does Lance recover? How does he come back from that, except regurgitated through salt and seaweed and abandoned to shore?

And how could Allura help him, anyway? If he told her anything she'd be disgusted, and rightfully so. These disgusting hands have done disgusting things.

"If you won't tell me anything," she says finally with a sigh, folding her gauntlets over each other, "then I have only one request. If you leave your door open, and I mine, at least I'll know when you do have nightmares, and I can try and aid in the aftermath? Is that alright? Is that...anything?"

It's more than he could ever ask for.

He shrugs, and she takes that as acquiescence.

"I won't ask the others," she says, "though I'll mention it. Just in case the sound bleeds through - I don't want to worry them. Is that-"

"Allura?" calls Hunk, standing in the repaired entryway of the deck. "Are you coming?"

She holds out a hand, keeps her eyes on Lance. "Is that alright, Lance?"

It's...something. An open door; potential for change. Lance doesn't _enjoy_ waking up seeing black and purple and fog all around him, doesn't enjoy being completely incapable of functioning for hours upon getting out of bed.
"Allura," Hunk tries again, "he's waiting-

"Lance," Allura says, and waits.

What's the worst that could happen? A hundred thousand things, Lance ruining everything he touches, Lance being monstrous.

...But what's the best? What's the very best? What if it does help? What if Lance wakes up and Allura is there and it helps?

Lance can't say it aloud; can't ask that his most basic needs are met. But he nods, and Allura smiles, sadly, softly, a little crooked; touches the palm of her hand to his cheek for a half-second and turns to walk away, except she sees Hunk coming over and pauses.

"Is everything alright?" she asks him as their hands effortlessly slide together. Lance tries not to stare; ignores the sick lurch of his heart, the few memories he has of holding a hand in his own.

"Fine," Hunk reassures her, then looks to Lance with endlessly kind, warm eyes. "You doing alright, buddy?"

How can Hunk be so good to him? Call him by such friendly names? Lance doesn't deserve that. He hasn't been a very good buddy to Hunk or anyone since he disappeared.

He nods, because what else can he do? Shake his head and remain silent? Open his mouth and speak the truth? But it is a sickness inside of him he wouldn't wish upon anyone; to part his lips even a fraction would spread it.

"Alright," Hunk says softly, then looks to Allura and says, "We really should go before we're late."

"Of course. Lance - we'll see you at dinner," she says, and he stares as they smile at him, eyes brighter than he's seen in days, before they look to each other and walk away, hands tightknit between them.

--

The day seems to pass slower with the weight of a potential miracle happening overnight heavy on his shoulders. After training, he goes to the swimming pool and spends the hours until dinner racing back and forth, forward and back and breaststroke, propelling himself through the water, and sometimes he lets himself open his mouth underwater and choke on it just to feel it, just so he knows for a fact that it's there and surrounding him and he's not floating in space. It feels like he is. The water pushes him forward and he rolls and kicks off the pool walls to maintain speed but he can't feel it, not the way it drips down his skin and soaks his hair, nor the way the air turns him cold when he gets out. Little things that prove he's alive, lost on him.

So how come shivers creep up his spine when he walks down a long corridor, how come claws tighten round his neck, choking the breath out of him? How do those feel so real when Lance can look down and see they don't exist, can look behind him and know the corridor is lit all the way back with bright fluorescent light? But shadows are always gathering; druids ever-hissing. The non-physical has the power to steal his mind from him, turn his world into a living nightmare. The things he once relished in - water, fresh air, sunlight - no longer reach him.

He needs help - he knows that. But he doesn't deserve it, and he will not ask for it. Everything Allura's doing for him is already too much; something is bound to go wrong, he knows that, but blood soaks his vision and builds up in his throat every time he wakes up, and he's already so sick of it. Allura is like an angel come down from the heavens to grace her with their light; her halo
scares away the shadows that cloak Lance and drag him back inside his own head. If all she did was walk into his room when he woke up, he knows it would help.

He hopes it helps. How can he be useful to the others when he's lost in the mazes of his mind, in the heavy fog that always descends, how hedges because sentient, steal him under their leaves, twine his ankles together, shackle his wrists, how can the bed he sits on turn into a plain metal table so fast? Lance digs his hands in to reassure himself that beneath his fingers are blankets, but he can't feel them like he keeps expecting to, and his fingers rip through the fabric.

A reminder, then, that in search of even the slightest comfort, his body betrays him - ruins, breaks, tears apart. Takes something whole and turns it systematically, rhythmically, into pieces.

These thoughts linger well into the night. During dinner, the others assume he's zoning out like he used to, and he allows it. Better than the truth; more appealing. Allura doesn't interact with him overtly - has decided, Lance thinks, to honour Lance's silence, his inability to lay boundaries, and chosen to keep their shared knowledge of his... sickness secret. Regardless, no one else tries to talk to him - take his plate from him when he's done, cast careful eyes on him when he goes to take his drink - and they let him walk out in silence when he is finished.

He doesn't want to hope. He is lost down a deep dark tunnel that never quite ends, and hope is an open door the druids have been trying to close for months. The panel of light emerging from it grows smaller and smaller with every step Lance takes, and there are so many steps. The further he tries to progress the faster that door closes. Still- Allura's making an effort, jamming her foot in the doorway to keep it open, if only an inch. Lance doesn't want to hope but the way she talks to him, despite his neverending silence, how tenderly she treats him despite the brutality he now embodies, it makes him hope. He wants to reach that door whether it's closed or not. He could break the lock, he could kick it open, he could see that hope and optimism and grasp it in his own two hands, take it from anyone who felt he was undeserving.

He could.

He really could.

The dreams, that night, seem fond of this idea - this longing for hope, how out of his reach it is but how desperately he wants it regardless. Lance competes in the arena, he beats his opponent, he goes through his gate and into another arena, another opponent, another gate. Each gate is bright white with light, promising freedom, the outdoors, fresh air, hope, but the more Lance fights and the more he wins, the less he gets any closer to it. He gets desperate - starts tearing people apart with his hands. Rips them limb from limb, dragging his nails along their throats, dislocating jaws, plucking eyes from their sockets, grabbing heads by their hair and yanking as hard as possible.

There is an odour to the arena that sticks with him no matter how long he spends outside of it. Metallic blood and rust, obviously, but something else, something rotten, a stench that can only come off decaying body parts sprawling across the dirt ground, shoved to the edges, and the heat of the place only intensifies it. It is a graveyard for bodies never buried. Lance was a dead man the second he stepped into it.

It clings to him, now. Is that why, when he passes through his gate, that natural brightness of the outdoors turns to white floodlights every time? He wants freedom but death follows him and taints everything around him, takes him back to where he operates best. He holds his hands before himself, but they are unrecognisable - blood, all different kinds of it, stains his skin, and there's flesh under his nails, dirt, too, and they shake more than they used to, the fingers trembling till he grips them into a fist and throws a punch at his next opponent.
Desperation begins to gnaw at his nerves. There has to be an end to this. He has to get out, he can't keep doing this, fighting and killing and thinking, hoping, this time, this time for sure - gate after gate, opponent after fucking opponent, are they getting stronger or is he getting tired? But he isn't capable of getting tired, so the monsters he's facing must be getting as monstrous as he is. Hard to kill. Nearly impossible.

Sickness curdles in his chest, fear forces his breaths faster and faster, his heart storming against his chest, desperate to get out, his vision begins to blur at the edges, just a little further, the next opponent is some kind of robot, all sharp edges and lasers out its everything, and Lance has to run and dodge and duck behind pillars that crumble to dust within seconds, he can't catch his breath and he can't think, his thoughts jumble like a jigsaw puzzle crumbled into all its separate pieces. He can't form two coherent thoughts, let alone fit them together to come up with some kind of plan.

When he throws himself at the robot, the lasers don't even hurt. He forgets, sometimes, that pain isn't an issue for him any longer.

He yanks and pulls and heaves with all his strength and the robot comes apart with ease - Lance thinks, it has to be this one, I have to get out, I need to get out of here, let me at least see light before I die, but he walks towards the light and into another arena, and hope begins to fold into itself.

There is no getting out. Lance can't leave this place. Maybe physically he can walk out and into the open air, but he is still here in this graveyard, in this Roman colosseum, where the druids tried to dig his heart out and maybe it's still in his chest but they succeeded anyhow, it is buried underneath all the corpses he treads to reach his next opponent, it has been sliced into so many pieces that died with every opponent he killed with his own hands, it is gone, it is dead. They dug inside his brain and in one fell swoop took his kindness, his heart, his soul, and cast it all aside. Replaced them with cruelty and ruthlessness, that which is useful in the arena, in battle. Even his legs, turned into things of the galra because his humanity was too much for them.

The druids have already killed the most vital parts of him; to keep hoping would be to kill himself, with every disappointment, every death, every moment stuck here.

The next opponent is some kind of alien beast monster, claws and scales and huge sharp teeth, and Lance thinks, what the fuck, how does he kill something like that with no weapon, when his fingers won't break through skin like that, when its claws are as long as his forearm?

I should give up, he thinks, but his legs spur him faster and the druids in his head hiss and urge him onwards, and he has to. He has to survive, right? He doesn't want to die here. He wants to see the light, he wants to live again, so he has to kill it. He has to- but jesus christ it's huge and fast and it swipes with its claws and tears the skin of his cheek apart, he stumbles back but it only swipes again, claws dragging down his shoulders and tearing his prisoner rags further to pieces, maybe I should give in, he thinks, scrambling away, getting to his feet and dashing for the edge of the arena, maybe I really should.

But he doesn't want to die here.


There have to be weaknesses. Long legs, a tail - things to grab, to trip it up. Eyes, fleshy, human.

So he dashes round it, yanks on the tail, forces it to lose balance. Pounces when it's down, goes for the face, a swift punch to knock it out-
But it raises its claws and slashes again, and Lance throws himself back but it jumps onto him, it's going to kill him, not here not here not here -

"No," Lance says, jerking his arms forwards, grabbing an arm and shoving it away from him, planting his other hand against the thing's chest to keep it from getting too close. It slashes wildly at him, and its claws are sharp, dig straight into his chest, and Lance pants, already feels his shoulders melting back into the dirt, into this mass coffin, just another body that will decompose with all the others, not before another prisoner, another galra soldier with something to prove, another monster fashioned by the druids tramples his body to bits, not before someone yanks his prosthetic legs off his body to use as another weapon, but after that... Quickly, aggravated by the death all around him and the heat that soaks into his pores, it wouldn't be long at all for him to simply...stop existing.

Its claws gleam in the flashlights. They dig into his shoulder, shaking him as they tear deeper and deeper, yanking him back and forth and if Lance could feel he knows he'd be screaming - as it is, that arm begins to collapse no matter how hard Lance forces it to hold onto the thing's arm, and he can't breathe, can't think, he just can't die here, he won't fucking die here, "No," he says again, "no, I'm not dying tonight! I won't die here!"

One arm has flopped onto his stomach, utterly useless. But he has one left, and the thing has eyes that gleam yellow, and if he can just-

Get up -

Reach up, the thing's other claws are digging into his side, I'm not dying like this, his soul is lost already he knows but physically, not like this, not here-

It's just a -

The eyes ! Further away than they appeared but Lance pushes himself up, engages his core, stretches, and finally, finally -

I'm not fucking dying here -

Lance, please, holy shit-

Digs his thumb into the eye socket. Yanks hard. Pulls the damn thing out.

Shocks it enough that it goes slack, and Lance pulls himself from the claws, darts back a few steps, opens his eyes again.

Drags in a huge breath, shuts his eyes again. I'm not dying here, he thinks, but where, exactly, is here? Nausea threatens in the back of his throat; the lights are off.

"Lance," comes a voice, but it's a whisper, so quiet it seems like it must be miles away.

"My- my eye -" someone else says, Lance opens his own and looks down and yeah, he realises, that is an eye he's holding- but where- where is the monster- wasn't he in the arena-?

"Hunk, Hunk, I told you- told you not to come - we need to go to the- the- but Lance-"

"My eye," they repeat, and is it- is that Hunk? Something seeps over Lance's vision, deep red like sick wine, and he can't quite tell.

"I-I, I don't- Hunk- Lance, are you, are you awake, I-I heard the screaming so I- but I wasn't the
only one- Hunk, oh my- quiznak -"

His eyes adjust to the dark. He's pressed against the wall, but Hunk stands at his bed, hunched over, hands clutched over his face, and Allura stands between them, hands fluttering frantically, eyes darting from one to the other to the open door, clearly shaken.

"L-Lance are you, are you with me?"

Eyes wide, in her dressing gown and nightie. Hair loose and wavy all round her shoulders. A hand, trembling, goes to take Hunk's shoulder.

He nods.

"Ilura," whispers Hunk, hoarse and, and shaking, all of him is shaking, Lance realises, is he crying? "Allura, he tore out my fucking eye."

Lance did.

It's still in his hand.

"I-I know," says Allura, sounding equally as shocked. "We need to- t-take you to the infirmary- Lance, I-I-"

"Princess?" enters another voice into the fray, and Allura sags with relief as she turns and sees Coran in the doorway, shoulders raised. "I heard screaming- figured I'd see for myself what was happening...and what has happened?"

"His eye," Allura whispers, and Coran steps immediately inside. "Lance took out his eye."

Coran gaze shifts from Allura to Lance to Hunk in quick succession, then he marches further forward and wraps an arm round Hunk's waist. "Off we go, lad," he says, and Hunk follows with small footsteps, head lowered, hand over his face which, as he turns towards the light, is covered in blood, and then they are gone.

"Lance," Allura says.

Reality begins to settle in - first in his throat, tightening with the need to throw up everything he's eaten today, then in his wrists, his fingers, something cold trickling into his heart and making it beat a little faster, his jaw clenching, his breaths stuttering.

Hunk's eye is in his hand.

"Say something," she says, steps closer, but not too close - halts just far enough away that he can't reach out and grab her. "Lance, please."

If he opens his mouth, he doesn't know what might spill out. He needs to sit at the toilet and purge himself of his demons, and pray that the memories of his own monstrousness follow.

"Lance!" she yells, her own fists clenching, but Lance can't say anything, can't look, can't even think. She strides forward, takes the eye from his hand, her whole body shuddering, then skitters back - looks long and deep into his eyes, he doesn't know what to say, what else to give up to bring her back to his side - she turns round, makes for the door.

As she steps into the corridor light, honesty breaks through: "I didn't mean to," he says, quiet and cracked, scared like a child.
She doesn't turn to look at him, only halts momentarily, then hangs her head and disappears.

After a moment, the door slides shut behind her, and leaves Lance in the dark once more.

--

It isn't fair. It isn't right. How much harm has Lance inflicted since he was taken? So much. Too much. It makes him so sick that he throws up into his toilet till he's in tears, hacking and coughing and squeezing his eyes shut, but it's not enough. The sickness is still there. In his heart, what is left of it, the druids tore it to pieces and the quintessence ceremony stitched it back up again, but it's fragile and it's weak and it's going to fucking break. The quintessence ceremony didn't fix him, it made him worse. Too strong for anyone to handle, invincible, at least on the outside, the perfect fucking killing machine.

The druids wanted him to kill, so he killed. He killed so many, whether they deserved it or not. And the paladins, he came back and when it was clear he wouldn't accept help, they sent him to kill again, hundreds of galra, he doesn't even know how many because what was the use in counting? The number was stupid high. Footsoldiers are so fucking easy to kill.

And it's not only death he hurls all around him like a lightning storm out of control, but sheer pain, physical, mental, to everyone who interacts with him. The paladins. Rebels. His own fucking family.

And now Hunk. Hunk was already hurting bad, how could Lance ignore that? Trying so hard but there was nothing that Lance could dredge out of his soul to make everything better - this whole situation can't get better. There is no coming back from this, no return to Leandro Hernandez, the boy he was once. Now he is only Lance, a paladin, a soldier, a killer.

Where is his retribution? Where are the consequences for what he's done, the punishment, the judgement? Keith ran away but he didn't blow up in Lance's face, so he never felt the anger there's no doubt Keith feels in the aftermath of their breakup. Shiro hates him but he is quiet and cutting about it, and it's not enough, it isn't loud, isn't strong, it hurts but not enough.

The others can't hurt Lance; they won't, and Lance won't let galra soldiers live long enough to hurt him.

There's only one person who can do it.

Shaking, he stands from the toilet. Stumbles back into his room, sits numbly on his bed. Weapons scattered across his floor, late night practise, or when he was too lazy after previous battles to return his loadout to the training deck. Daggers, he picks one up.

It isn't fair that he hurts others. It isn't right that he cannot be hurt in return. There has to be some way- if he does it himself- there has to be a way - he needs to atone, he needs judgement, he needs to feel something before his physical numbness infects his heart again, turns him back into that cruel killing machine who didn't give a fuck about anyone else!

His skin is plastic but even plastic can be torn apart. It splits like warm butter under the knife, his flesh parting as he drives the dagger deeper, almost to the bone, but when he withdraws the knife it starts knitting itself together, the flesh, the skin, as if nothing ever happened.

All that remains of his attempt to cast judgement upon himself are a few drops of blood dripping down to his wrist.

He tries again. And again. And again. But no matter how deep the cut, no matter how long he
forces the knife down, no matter how much blood gushes from the wound, the end result is always the same: glowing bronze skin dripping with blood.

It isn't fair. It isn't right.

It isn’t human.

Chapter End Notes

TW: graphic self-harm in final passage. due to the quintessence ritual, however, the effects are only temporary

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this chapter is actually just an ode to how much i love allura and her friendship w lance

also i feel compelled to mention that keith's chapters are actually a lot more...lighthearted? upbeat??...optimistic?? than lance's. so i understand if reading lance's chapters is heavygoing and depressing, but that's not, in fact, going to be the entire arc. keith's chapters, though dealing with i think important issues, are going to be much more focused on sort of healing and getting Better, so they shouldn't drag u down the way lance's do.

other than that...sorry for the wait! dont forget to comment!
unfamiliarity

Chapter Summary

the blade of marmora are somehow everything keith did not expect

Chapter Notes

don't even look at me......................to be fair...i didn't have my laptop for 3 weeks and i did go on holiday skiing and also had exams during the time i didn't update so....................yeah......

anyway like two days after i updated the art i commissioned for this fic was done! which meant i had to wait until the next chapter to link it which took....3 months. **so here it is!!!** many thanks to the artist of course <3 this is essentially a character design sheet...hopefully this gives u a better idea of various scars + the legs etcetc... pls show some love!

i also wrote the hallura extra from like chapter 8 id been thinking abt forever.. takes place after the dinner when its discovered lance has forgotten p much everything and hunk and allura disappear then reappear with a drawing of lance's family. it also includes commissioned art bc i cant help myself, so if anything at least check the a/n of that fic to see the piece!

most importantly, after thinking abt it for literally months and months, i’ve decided to change pidge's pronouns from they/them to she/her. i have personal opinions on pidge's gender (demigirl fits my personal bc) and i settled on they/them pronouns for silly personal reasons, and without thinking much about the narrative underlying pidge's gender identity in canon. since i've started this fic i've rewatched that scene and realised how she does explicitly say things like 'i cant 'man up', im a girl' etc. like i just forgot that was how she said it. and also various posts on tumblr have explained why, if ur cis, u wouldn't want to hc pidge as a trans girl (esp when that is the underlying tone of canon). so basically. at the end of it. im cis, so i dont rly get a say. ive consulted a bunch of friends who know more abt gender than i do, and came to this conclusion that a) ive always embraced trans girl pidge content and b) she came out as a girl, ergo, one must write her exclusively as a girl. so i've gone back and changed all the pronouns, tho god knows i'll have missed a few, and added a tag so ppl know. i hope that all makes sense haha feel free to ask any questions !

otherwise.......swag. enjoy. sorry it took so long;;

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I settle for a ghost I never knew
Superparadise I held on to
But I settle for a ghost.
The Blade of Marmora headquarters are far darker than the sprawling corridors of the castleship. Everything is dark grey, black, purple, as if to turn on a light would be to draw the attention of the entire galra empire. Keith doesn't mind it; less of a strain, at least, than the brightness of the castle, with its long white hallways and the way light would seep through the seams of the ceiling during the night. Even the single bedroom they show him to is dark, barely lit by the window against the wall.

Small, too, a single bed in the corner, the walls taken up by shelves, a desk and chair, a holograph computer with built-in comms, a wardrobe with a spare Blade of Marmora suit inside. It has a circular window with a thick ledge outlining it, and after standing in his doorway for a moment, Keith drops his bag onto the bed, and sits up on the ledge of the window, wrapping his arms around his left knee and holding his leg to his chest. The Marmora suit is thick and insulated, so he can't feel the cold of the glass when he presses his covered hand against it, and he can't escape the immediate, niggling thought that this is what it must be like for Lance. To push your hand against something you know you should feel, and be numb to it all. Not even just the cold: but the solidness of it, the texture, smooth but unforgiving.

Can't help wondering if this tiny room, with its bare essentials and dark purple glow, in any way resembles whatever they caged him in during his imprisonment. Did they keep him on that table they saw in the videos, all the time? Strapped in, metal round his wrists but something else round his legs? Did they keep him somewhere separate, smaller, darker, inescapable? Did they blindfold him so he didn't know his way around? Was he always in shackles? Was he with others? Or was he alone?

Does Keith still care? But for a time, at least, the Lance tortured by the galra was the same Lance that left them. Young, and probably - definitely - scared, enduring the kind of pain Keith can't even imagine.

But he's chosen to move forward. Hung Lance's jacket up in his wardrobe on the castleship, shed his paladin armour in his bedroom, gave Shiro the red bayard to hand to this new Lance. If he's serious about moving forward he has to act like it. Focus on what he can do now to help, do here, away from Lance and the terrible effects he had on Keith's head, on his heart. Sadness and shame and humiliation are an endless black vortex inside his gut, determined to suck in every thought and feeling and spit them out sicker than before, but Keith can cage it off. Lock it inside himself until it becomes useful, until there's an enemy before him and he can turn that spiralling dark energy into action, into tearing his way through the things that would kill him and his friends in an instant. Hurt them the way they hurt Shiro, the way they hurt the paladins on every single combat mission they're on. The way they killed Lance and sent back a monster in his place.

Keith won't discriminate. If they fight under the galra empire, then they're responsible. They need to suffer for all they've done. If Keith has to kill two galra or ten or twenty, he'll do it. If asked to hunt down the very druids involved themselves, he'd take that challenge willingly. With enough anger shading his vision red, it hadn't even been hard to kill the one on the beach. With Lance half-wrecked with blast wounds, his body shivering like rocks on the verge of an avalanche, how young he'd sounded when he spoke...it had been so easy.

For too long, Keith has been... confused. He got swept up in that vortex within himself, and the one within Lance, and he got scared and sad and so unlike himself. And everyone got a little like that, with Lance gone, the way he came back. But- but Keith can't be like that now. He knows where he
is. He knows what he's doing. And away from Lance, the way chaos infects the entire world around him, he can finally focus on what's really important: defending the fucking universe.

He couldn't protect Lance. Fine. Lance didn't want protection anyway! But other people - more vulnerable people, whole planets of people, Keith can protect them. Help them, in whatever manner the Blade wants from him. Whatever they demand from him, he can give it up. He can.

How else does he prove he's good enough to even be a paladin?

He can't go back until, somehow, he's proved that. He's already failed a thousand times over. Everything with Lance disappearing, when they were searching for him, when they found him. Even before that - failing to reign in his anger, his impulsivity, failing to understand how a black paladin should behave. Failing to understand his team. If the Blade of Marmora can teach him, somehow, to be not just a skilled fighter, but a worthy teammate - maybe then he can go back.

After all, they've survived this long without being found out, right? Individual agents are discovered and killed, maybe tortured, Keith presumes, but the organisation itself still exists - even allowed one of its own to end up on Earth - and this particular headquarters is still nestled safely between two black holes, impossible to discover without insider information, impossible to penetrate, too. There must be so much he can learn from them, not just fighting, but history, culture, what it means to be a galra rebelling against the tyranny of your own kind. What it means to be only half-galra, to be excluded from your own ancestry for so many years, to have only a strange blade as a reminder that he isn't exactly like the others.

Of course he'd suspected. On Earth, in that shack in the desert, ideas had solidified - aliens definitively out there, ones asking for Voltron, he couldn't tell if they'd made contact with Earth so it was possible, right? Sometimes the blade lit up like it was trying to tell him something. Sometimes his father was vague but he'd call Keith's mother out of this world, call her an angel dropped from heaven, but he never quite explained how she disappeared. Didn't die, didn't willingly leave them both, but she had to go, and wherever she went meant they could not follow.

Sometimes, Keith thinks his dad did follow, in his own way. Building the ships Keith and the other garrison students ended up flying, like maybe one day he'd be able to build his own, stronger and better, take them further into the sky that anything else on Earth. Would he be proud of Keith, that he made it so far? He doesn't know if his mother is alive, but if she is, she's here, right? With the Blade. They've said nothing of it to him so far, but he can ask, right? Even... Even if she's dead... Even if she's dead, there'd be records. They'd know her - she went to Earth, she had a child - they'd have to know.

Keith wants to know.

He has to know.

It was stress, in the end, for his father. A heart attack, something so human, so common and normal and nothing, Keith thinks now, like the live his father really lived. A heart attack, jesus. Can Keith suffer such a thing? Do his galra genes prevent it? His mother, would she look down on such a death? Or would she just miss him? Does she miss both of them?

Is she in this building, somewhere, waiting for him? Waiting for him to come find her?

He unpacks first. Not much to look at; his blade, his civvies, a few changes of normal clothes. A holographic photo frame Pidge had made for him once Lance went missing - an official photo from after a diplomatic mission, all seven of them with a few aliens, in their paladin uniforms, smiling together. Puts it next to the computer, only lingers on Lance's youthful smile for two minutes.
Admires the view out his window - dark sky, sea of stars, pretty planets. It's not real, he knows; they're locked up inside an asteroid, but they carved out pretend windows and enchanted up these pretty views anyway. With all the darkness, the purple and black and low light, Keith's glad of it. Feels like otherwise he'd choke to death on the closeness of everything.

He thinks maybe he'd stare out of it forever - he swears he can see these fake stars moving, shifting slightly moment by moment as if mimicking the real universe outside this asteroid - until someone knocks twice on his door, and when he presses the button to open it, someone is standing outside.

"Keith?" she says, and he nods. "You may call me Tarandi. I'm a senior member of the Blade, I coordinate missions and accompany younger recruits to watch over them. This way."

Tarandi, he thinks, and follows her along the long grey corridor that makes up the residential wing, looking her over. She seems half-galra, like him - something about her long raven hair, the way it falls down her back, the long thin ears reminiscent of elves in video games on Earth poking out of it. She's taller than him, taller, he thinks, than Kolivan, and her skin is a deep, dark purple, her leather-looking clothes black and tight round her slim figure, her eyes, when she glances back at him, deep brown. She's the one who came to pick him up from the castleship alongside Kolivan. Her voice is deep and smooth, like melting dark chocolate, and her nails are razor-sharp.

"Where are we going?" he finally asks, craning his neck a little to look up at her.

"A tour," she says shortly. "Some people you must meet, some areas of the base you cannot visit. The training wing, the school, the druids' den, the armoury. Kitchen and recreational centre. Control and command."

Druids - druids like Haggar, vanishing with ease and reappearing at Keith's shoulder, ready to blast him with magic? Druids like the one Keith hunted down and killed on the beach, whose fallen hood had revealed the way her glowing golden eyes faded to grey as he pushed his blade into her heart? Druids like the ones who changed Lance, who tortured his own soul out of him...?

Druids who haunt his dreams. It wasn't Keith they tortured, but he dreams of Lance trying to kill him and the druids are forever at his shoulders, telling him what to do, how to kill him, how to drag it out. How to make it really hurt.

Tarandi's low voice drifts slowly back into his ears: "...first taking you down to the-"

"Druids' den?" he interrupts, and she pauses, glancing at him and slowing her pace slightly. Her brows are thick, black, curve slightly towards the bridge of her nose as she looks at him. "You have druids here? But- but-"

"You have had much trouble with druids," she says carefully, and Keith detects some sympathy in the quirk of her mouth. "You will need to sit down with myself and Kolivan and explain in full this...situation with your blue paladin. But not all druids are tools for the galra to extend their tyranny - your mother is a druid."

No, he thinks, mouth hanging uselessly open, eyes widening, staring helplessly up at her.

"Yes," replies Tarandi, and realising he spoke aloud, Keith shuts his mouth with an audible click. They enter a circular room with various doors branching off it, and without even looking round, she proceeds to the right and enters another long corridor. "Although she doesn't like the term. The Altean ascendant that granted her such powers died long, long ago. Her magic is very limited - she
prefers guns."

Druids aren't always bad, sure. The magic Allura wields has some similarities to the druids', after all. And if druids are galra, why wouldn't they exist also in this organisation comprising galra?

"My mother," Keith repeats, tries to figure something else out to say, but- but what? What if Lance looked at Keith's mother and saw only a torturer?

But what if that doesn't even matter now?

And it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter.

"She and I trained together in our youth," says Tarandi. "Born into it, as I was."

"My mother," he says again, "is a druid."

Tarandi narrows her eyes at him: "It isn't a dirty word-"

"Is," Keith interrupts, and she flicks a scowl at him. "She's still alive?"

Brows rising, she pauses and blinks down at him for a moment. Her long roman nose twitches slightly, head tilting to the side, and a sheath of her thick black hair falls to the side, revealing an elflike ear pierced to the high heavens with jewels of lilac, silver and gold. "Of course."

"Where is she?"

Her steps halt for only a brief moment before she continues walking, a little swifter than before. She passes multiple doors before taking a left and stopping at a lift. It takes two seconds to arrive, all steel grey and purple lighting, and she presses a button and the doors slide shut. "I'm sorry, Keith," she says, and Keith crosses his arms, looks away. "That's classified information. She's on an important investigation, and there's no way for us to communicate with her until it is done."

"But-"

"She's a very competent woman," she interrupts, not looking at him either, "she'll be fine. I'm sure whenever she returns it's very likely you'll reunite."

That shuts him up, mostly because he can't even imagine it. He has a thousand things to ask Tarandi about her: what does she look like, how long was she on Earth, did she want to stay, did she regret leaving, does she really prefer guns over knives, did she ever get another Marmora blade, does she miss him, does she love him? If she loves him, why did she leave? Did she love his father? What if she didn't? What if she didn't care about either of them? Was it some kind of...druid experiment?

...Maybe he doesn't want to know the answers, after all.

When they arrive at their level, Tarandi presses a button to prevent the doors from opening and regards him, chin high but eyes downcast, her cheekbones jutting, her long pierced ears glittering. Her brows are tight when she asks, "Where is your father, Keith?" Her voice unspeakably soft when she adds, "Is he okay?"

"...He died when I was seven," Keith replies, and Tarandi's eyes close for a second, her hair flowing round her shoulders when she shakes her head. "Why? Did you know him?"

"...I knew of him. You won't be able to meet your mother for- whoever knows how long. But..."
She looks to the side, taking a deep breath, then fixes dark brown eyes on him. So dark they almost look black, but even though Keith has just met the woman, they are already so warm, so welcoming, flushed with love. "But she loves you. She misses you everyday. And your father also. I think she hoped...one day, she might...return..."

"O-oh," Keith says, and blinks furiously. "N-no, he, uh...a heart attack. Stress. I think he- I think he wanted to find her again, too."

Tarandi seems to take a very deep breath, raising her chin again and staring skyward for a moment, before saying, "I'm sorry to hear that. At least she'll know... At least she'll finally have you."

She turns away then, allowing him a second of privacy, to dry his eyes, catch his breath, before she opens the doors and steps out, shoulders back and eyes forward as if her voice hadn't turned into the softest, gentlest press of warmth against his skin. She must know his mother well, if they trained together, if they were born as Blades together. If she knew about Keith's father, if she cared enough to inquire about his health.

"The level we were on is residential only," she explains as they enter another circular room, this time with a round bench in the centre, where two Blades are sat, whispering together and comparing the holographs emitting from their suits. They glance up at them, nodding up at Tarandi, taking a moment to eye Keith up before nodding at him also. "The recreation rooms, kitchen, dining room, and relaxation area are all located there. Unfortunately we are running on a tight schedule, so I'll show you those later. This is where our armoury and training rooms are located. While we all have our Blades, it's useful to carry extra weapons on the field... Your mother was fond of guns, I like to dual-wield swords, almost all of us carry knives and grenades. Ideally you'd enter the armoury, pick your weapons to practise with, and move straight into the training area. We also have a gym, a pool, smaller rooms for private training."

As she speaks, they move round the circular bench and head to the opposite side of the room, entering another corridor and sweeping past a few doors. Most walls have long windows showing the inside - rooms and rooms of different weapons, a female galra knocking the shit out of a punchbag, two galra duelling intensely with long spears, the kind Lance used to slice enemies apart with.

Keith can't help but think of him, here, the way Lance would pick up random weapons and somehow be absolutely excellent with them, the way he dual-wielded a gun and a sword like it was easy, like it was normal, the way they only seemed to meet in fights, in battles, in a crushing, whirlwind violence.

It was only in Cuba they met in love. And it was only Keith, really, who felt that.

Obviously. Lance can't feel a damn thing.

"Here," says Tarandi. "You might appreciate this room more than your mother ever did."

The door to their right slides open, revealing another dark room, the wall panelled grey with purple light seeping through the seams. In the centre is a long grey table, knives scattered across the top, and lining the walls are racks upon racks of swords.

Tarandi raises a finger to her mouth, indicating quiet, and Keith's gaze alights upon the galra working in the centre of the room, a bright light perched over her as she works on sharpening a long, thick blade with a whetstone. Slowly she moves the sword back and forth across it, hunched over but pulling back occasionally so the light can fully hit the blade, and after a moment, she sets the whetstone aside, takes a square of thick sandpaper, dampens it with a little water, and starts...
"Hello baby," this galra murmurs, "I'm almost done."

"Hey, Zorah," says Tarandi quietly. "We can wait."

"Aren't we on a tight schedule? Keith wants to ask, but he makes the mistake of looking up into Tarandi's eyes and finds her gazing warmly at Zorah, sees love shining brightly like stars glittering across the night sky of her irises. Reminds Keith of the way his dad would gaze up into space as he spoke of his mother, out of this world, as if the real meaning might slip past Keith. Reminds him of how he'd go to his bathroom after training with Lance, take a moment to stare at himself in the mirror, cheeks flushed and hair mussed, the way he couldn't stop smiling, the way his own eyes had looked. Grey and bright, shiny silver. Like Lance had cleared all the rust off him. Left him open and vulnerable.

But after a minute or two, Zorah sets her things aside, dips her fingers briefly into the water and dries them against her clothes, and looks at Tarandi with eyes of blossoming violet.

"Baby," she says again, coming to stand before Tarandi, raising a hand to cup her cheek. The height difference between them is almost laughable - they're complete opposites, Tarandi tall and lean and dark all over, and Zorah is short in comparison, soft and round, skin lilac, eyes purple, fluffy ears that indicate she's full galra. "I was just fixing up your favourite blade. I know you won't be going on a mission for a movement, but you like to practise with it..."

"Thank you," murmurs Tarandi, and Keith just stares, wide-eyed, at the way they so easily enter a kiss, not even a passionate one, a soft press of lips, how they let their guards down and shut their eyes, foreheads pressed together for a minute before Tarandi smiles gently and pulls away. "I thought you might want to meet our Voltron initiate; Krolia's boy."

"Krolia's... Oh," Zorah says, and her eyes alight finally on Keith, going a little wide, lips parted as she takes him in. "Oh, goodness, he's so short... Oh, he has her eyes... Her jaw... Her awful awful hair..."

"Krolia," Keith repeats after a moment, still a little stunned at the way Zorah's arm is suddenly around Tarandi's waist like it always belonged there, the way Tarandi's shifted to stand closer to her side. "Is that her name?"

"That's her name," says Tarandi. "This is Zorah. She's in charge of the armoury, and she'll work on any blades in dire need of help. She also sticks to walls."

"Yes," Zorah says quite proudly. "When Krolia came back from Earth, she likened me to a frog, which I...think is a compliment. I'm so glad to finally meet the son of Krolia... You're the picture of her, really."

"I am?" Keith asks, and raises a hand to his face. Her eyes, Zorah had said, her jaw, her hair... Do they have the same colour eyes, or does she mean the shape? Does her chin round to a point, like his? Is her hair black, or does she have a mullet, too?

"Oh, just like her - just not galra. Oh, I always knew she'd have beautiful children - Tarandi, look away, lest you despair upon the future you might have had."

"Zorah," says Tarandi, and the first full-fledged smile Keith's seen from her spreads across her face. "It's been twenty years! I don't feel that way anymore."

"But she's still taller than me," mutters Zorah. "And nicer. And she was a Blade like you. And-"
Tarandi shakes her head at Keith. "Your mother is very skilled," she tells him, and Keith just nods, head tilted slightly to the side. Zorah's pressed a hand to her face, head burrowing into Tarandi's side, and Tarandi just smiles fondly, as if this is normal, as if this is her usual happiness. "Some people are still a little insecure over it."

"You were in love with her since you were kids," Zorah says, and Keith's brows jump up his head. His heart lurches; it feels weird to be hurt by how well these two strangers know his mother while they're standing laughing about it. "How could I stand a chance?!"

"Because you like swords," Tarandi says, "and she didn't. Speaking of - his Marmora blade and his Voltron bayard turn into swords. I thought you might have some suggestions..."

"Of course I have suggestions," Zorah mutters, and shifts her weight to one leg, peering up and down Keith's body. "Let's see your blade."

"Uh..." Keith says, still at a loss for words, but Tarandi nods, so he reaches behind himself for his blade, and holds it out as it transforms into his sword.

"Okay," Zorah says, breaking away from Tarandi to come closer and inspect it. "Okay, okay, okay..."

The moment of foolishness is forgot immediately; Tarandi clasps her hands behind her back, watching benignly, and Zorah's supposed jealousy of Keith's mother disapparates. She lifts Keith's Marmora blade from his hands with care, a hand under the blade and the other wrapping softly round the pommel, outlines the curve in the blade, the length of it, balances it on one hand, feels out the weight of it.

"We fought you," Zorah says finally, "during your trials. Both of us. I saw you early on, when you were still strong. You can fight with this single-handedly - would you like to dual-wield? Or would you prefer a stronger blade to wield with both hands, keep your Marmora blade as back up? And I can make you some knives, different kinds, Tarandi uses kunais but we have a lot of variety..."

"I-" Keith says, and against his will he thinks of Lance with a sword and a rifle, with matching daggers, fingers curled tight around a spear. Lance capable of picking up any sword in this room and handling it with ease. Lance, not even thinking about this kind of thing because it didn't matter. He could do it all. Any weapon, any weight, any length...it didn't matter to him. "Can I- all of it? Can I do both?"

"You can," Zorah replies, eyeing him up and down for a second before smiling and handing back his blade. "Of course you can. Why don't you and Tarandi have another look around... Kolivan will be waiting for you both. Then come back tomorrow, before your training. We can discuss it more then."

"Uh," Keith says, glancing at Tarandi, "sure?"

"We'll see you then," Tarandi says, then smiles, that soft, small smile Keith is already linking to Zorah, her violet face, purple eyes, big fluffy ears. "And I'll see you tonight."

"Of course, baby," replies Zorah, reaching high to cup Tarandi's face, her other hand already splayed on her waist. "And look after this baby, won't you? Remember, Krolia told us that humans are so unbearably frail..."

"This one is different," Tarandi says, and a hand rests against Zorah's short, vibrantly purple hair. "And he is half-galra, like us. We mustn't underestimate our allies."

"Some people are still a little insecure over it."
"We mustn't overestimate them, either," Zorah counters. "He is still young. Now go. Tell Kolivan if he doesn't come see me when he's done with you then I won't be able to fix his weapons in time for his next mission."

Tarandi nods, and some kind of silent communication passes between them in a single second, Tarandi's head lowered so she is a little closer to Zorah, Zorah's thumb rubbing so casually against Tarandi's cheekbone. It makes Keith's heart twist into itself, so brokenhearted that to see such intimacy hurts, because he really thought he had that. How, before missions, he and Lance would glance at each other and without saying a word they'd be paired up on scouting missions, whenever the paladins were forced to go to ground and split up. All those nights on the training deck, when they would patch each other up after the fights without talking, how Lance couldn't feel but his touch was unspeakably soft, the way they'd kiss before parting, how Lance looked at him, how easily Keith left himself to drown in Lance's eyes.

But it is only a moment, then Tarandi and Zorah kiss one last time, and Tarandi turns to leave.

"It was nice meeting you," says Zorah, smiling, her eyes still shaded in love, and all Keith can do is nod and turn away also, hurrying after Tarandi's long stride back the way they came.

Tarandi picks up on his awkwardness in a single second: "Apologies," she says briskly, "Zorah and I's relationship is known throughout the base. If we knew it would make you uncomfortable-

"That's not-" Keith says, and stops, because it did make him uncomfortable, sort of. If the ache lodged in his chest counts as uncomfortable, if the way it pricked up and scraped at his arteries, at the bounds of his chest, counts as uncomfortable. "No, it's fine. Did you...both know my mother?"

"Ah," Tarandi says, and a warm smile ghosts her face before they pass back into the circular room and it drops off, making her seem cold and collected before her fellow Blades. "I'm sorry. Was that strange for you to hear? Your mother and I were very close growing up. Krolia disappeared before Zorah joined us, but when they met, she knew immediately how I once felt. It's silly... It was decades ago, now."

"Right." And it is strange to think, how his mother has this entire world she never let Keith know about. She never tried to come back for him, as far as he knows. Never left a letter, never left a photo. Gave him a fancy blade that led him to an hours-long trial of fighting strangers for something so intangible, so impossible to grasp. While he struggled through his bizarre life marked with parents leaving and dying and disappearing, and getting in fights and yelling and not knowing what the hell to do with himself, his mother was...in the Blade of Marmora? Making women like Tarandi fall in love with her? Women like Zorah jealous of her?

That's what she's been doing this whole time?

They return to the lift, go to the next floor down. "Control and command," Tarandi states. "Before we begin anything, you need to explain your situation to us, and Kolivan will decide the next steps for us."

What kind of missions to send him on, then. He nods, picks up his pace to match her, and tries to focus on that. Missions, and helping people, and doing what he is supposed to do. He isn't Lance; he can't handle a thousand weapons, he can't take a hundred bullets, he can't fight ten opponents at once - but he can still fight. He is still useful.

He wants to be useful.

This is another corridor, but there are no windows. Every door looks like reinforced steel, and the
lights are minimal here, mostly darkness with a purple glow. Tarandi guides him effortlessly, along and along until the very end of the corridor, then knocks twice on the door presented to them.

"Took you long enough," mutters Kolivan when he opens the door, and Keith bites back a sudden, bizarre smile at the way Tarandi is in fact taller, by a good few inches, and how she holds out a hand for Kolivan to grasp before Kolivan turns and lets them into the room.

Or...a study. This must be Kolivan's study. Dark, of course, everything black and purple-accented because this is the Blade's theme apparently, a large metallic desk in the centre of the room with a comfortable-looking chair behind, two substantially less-comfortable opposite. There are shelves, full of strange-looking items, holographic devices, bizarre weapons, there are folders, books, rolled up maps, a glowing blue holographic star system to the side, spinning slowly on its axis.

Keith and Tarandi take the two uncomfortable seats as Kolivan settles into his, and regards the two of them with a frown.

"Zorah wants your weapons as soon as possible," Tarandi relays as agreed, and Kolivan rolls his eyes. "Otherwise she can't get them done in time for your next mission.

"Yes she can," Kolivan scoffs. "Tell her if she wants my weapons so bad, she can come here and ask for them."

"Tell her yourself," Tarandi tosses back, and Keith keeps his mouth shut, presumes that if Tarandi was born a Blade, trained with his mother, even, that she and Kolivan must have known each other a long time. "I actually return all the weapons I use after missions. I don't need to hear her ranting again."

"I won't be lectured by my own subordinates," Kolivan says, but Tarandi just raises a brow and he sighs heavily, sets his eyes on Keith. "Your blue paladin was kidnapped almost a deca-phoeb ago," he states, and that sentence alone puts out the warm fire their fond conversation had started. Keith finds himself wincing, ripping his eyes immediately away to prevent Kolivan from digging in and dredging up all of Keith's faults that led to said kidnapping. "Obviously this has already been discussed. However the events that have passed since he was rescued...have not been relayed to us in much detail. Princess Allura was kind enough to contact us and give us the basics, but-"

"Wait," Keith interrupts, and Kolivan's eyes narrow, "Allura called you?!"

"For good reason," replies Kolivan, leaning forward and clasping his hands upon his desk. "You told us you were looking to explore your capabilities. The princess explained there were...other motivations regarding your sudden desire to return."

Of course. Of course she did! It wasn't enough that Keith was humiliated in front of the entirety of Voltron like that - with Lance kissing him and saying those things to him as they descended upon the quintessence planet, with how Keith immediately ran after Lance only to be fucking dumped, to be found, shaken and in tears, by Shiro, who then had to tell the rest of the team what happened - no, that was too kind. Allura had to tell the Blade that Keith had gotten involved with Lance, like a fucking idiot, only to be dumped, to no one's surprise.

And that's why he's here. Not out of noble desire, not even out of a foolish one. But to escape the monster that broke his heart.

How does his life keep getting more pathetic? Wasn't his mother leaving him as a baby bad enough? His dad dying from a heart attack even more depressing? And his third father, if he counts as a father, just wandering into the desert one day, never to be seen again, the cherry on top?
But no. It keeps getting worse.

Of course it does.

"You need to explain to us," Kolivan says slowly, deliberately, gaze heavy on Keith's avoidant one, "what happened to your blue paladin, what's changed since he was rescued, and your current mental state - otherwise I cannot send you on any missions."

"What?!" Keith demands, eyes snapping to Kolivan's, who is unsympathetic, then over to Tarandi, who's chosen to stare slightly left of Kolivan's head. "Why the hell not? Why bring me on if not to fight?"

"Because you can still learn," Kolivan replies. "There is much for you to know of our culture, our language, skills that will no doubt prove useful in your future. And you are still young. Easily affected by things like heartache."

"I'm not a child! I can handle-!"

"It is only due to your affiliation with Voltron that we're even considering sending you on missions - we have physical proof that you're more than capable of joining our ranks. Our own children we do not send out on missions so young. You may want to reconsider your tone when discussing these things with me - I have absolute authority over your time here. If I want you to stay in the classroom with our children learning the galra alphabet then that is where you will go, regardless of your skills, your talents, or your desires. Do I make myself clear?"

Keith's jaw clenches as he tries to stare Kolivan down, but Kolivan is bigger than him, imposing without even trying, he doesn't even look angry, a slant to his brows that turns his heavy gaze into merely disinterested in Keith's bullshit. Tarandi's pursed her lips at Kolivan, but when Keith looks at her, she only nods her head towards Kolivan in agreement.

"But I'm best at fighting," Keith says lowly, fists clenched in his lap. "What else am I supposed to do? If I can't defend the universe with Voltron then I can at least do it here. That's why I came here."

"You came here to escape the blue paladin," Kolivan says, and Keith's heart jerks in his chest, he has to look away again, hide how easily his emotion overcomes him. Not tears, but a tightening in his chest that tugs at his mouth, forces his sadness into something too physical for comfort. "Now tell us what has happened. He was kidnapped by Lotor and his forces during a battle to retrieve the black paladin from where he was being held beside Zarkon; it took five phoebs for him to be found due to intense secrecy surrounding his capture; and upon his rescue, he was different. Explain how, explain why, and explain what happened to you."

It's asking a lot. How does he explain it all? What's relevant? Should he just say all of it? Is there a reason to omit anything? Where to even begin? He came back and he was different. He got shocked and he was different. He got shocked again and he was different.

He said he felt something for Keith, and Keith felt that something was different. How far into that should he get? Humiliate himself further just so they know the full extent of his idiocy? What if they think he's too stupid to qualify for missions, too out his god damn mind to cope?

But he thought it was love.

But that was crazy.

"It's a long story," Keith says finally. "A lot has happened."
"It's too important to ignore," Kolivan replies. "Tell me everything."

Two sets of eyes, heavy on his. A holopad slipped from Tarandi's pocket, ready to type his story into permanence on. Kolivan, more than willing to send him to sit with children if he refuses to obey.

The story itself, bursting at his seams to be let out. He doesn't want them to pity him, but he wants their opinions regardless. What if they have useful information? They train druids here - what if that provides insight into how the other druids dealt with Lance? What if Keith is stupid to ignore this opportunity for the sake of pride?

So he tells them everything.

He has to.

--

Talking through everything is somehow...both better and worse that he thought it'd be. Something about how Tarandi taps at the holopad, taking notes, how unjudgemental yet unwavering Kolivan's gaze is on him, it makes it hard to speak the words into existence. To admit the mess they have all collectively made of everything. Speaking it aloud makes every move they made sound insane, like why the hell would they ever send Lance out on a mission on his own? Why would the team let Keith go with him? Why the two of them, alone, seeking out some galra facility that they all knew was going to cause a problem? Why the hell go to Earth? Because Lance might remember? And then he didn't, and they had to leave. Lance fighting with the others, Lance hurting Keith. Lance losing his mind in more ways than Keith can comprehend. Lance not really being Lance at all.

That's what it comes down to, in the end. They took all these risks, made all these moves, in the hopes old Lance might return to them. But that was impossible. Lance died on that galra ship. It took two whole months, but they killed him and turned his hollow husk into some kind of monster, and filled it with the desire only to kill.

That's the only way he can explain it to them. Druids and quintessence and all it did was make Lance into the opposite of who he once was. Like they knew that Lance was the most devastating choice of paladin they could've taken.

Except they didn't. He wasn't even their first choice.

"A movement's training," Kolivan finally declares when Keith is done, and his face falls. "And maybe then I'll consider sending you out on a mission alongside some others. Tarandi, he met Zorah at the armoury?" Tarandi nods, and Kolivan looks at Keith for a moment before returning to Tarandi. "Then the two of you can handle his training. I want him learning our history, our culture, our language, and what the Blades have accomplished since formation. Have him speak with our druids about the issues with the blue paladin. It's possible he might have some powers...but his Altean heritage is likely too diluted for them to have real strength. I want him trained in weaponry and stealth. And make sure he's in his room at a decent time - I promised the princess that he'd be able to contact them every night."

"You won't let me fight for a week," Keith sums up, and Kolivan settles that heavy, unimpressed gaze upon him once more.

"You'll be training daily with warriors well beyond your skill level," Kolivan retaliates. "And learning other useful things besides. Are you not grateful for this opportunity, or shall we send you
"No!" Keith says, and Tarandi raises a brow at his tone, which he knows immediately is too suffused in fear to ignore. "No, I want to stay. But I want to- I can't go out on missions for a week?"

"That is indeed what I said," Kolivan says. "Tarandi, won't you show him around so I can deal with your obnoxious wife and her tyrannical rules surrounding the return of weapons after missions?"

"Of course," Tarandi says, "and please don't call her obnoxious to her face. Keith, won't you come with me? The faster I take you round, the sooner you can get to actual training."

She's already pushed out the chair and on her feet, turned expectantly towards him. Kolivan takes the holopad she slides over to him, gives it a cursory glance, then pockets it and turns to his shelves, plucking bloody or rusty weapons from between the fancy devices and sighing.

They're done with him. He may be a paladin of Voltron and the son of one of their own, but at the end of it, he's just another initiate to deal with amongst all the others. He wants to fight on a mission because everyone fucking does. He isn't special here.

He's less than special. Only half-galra, with zero contact with their supposed culture outside of fighting Zarkon's empire. It isn't the same.

...Maybe they're right. Maybe learning this kind of thing will help - Allura and Coran have admitted it themselves, the logs on the castleship are outdated. Wildly so. They don't always have time before missions to contact the Blades and double-check strange info. If Keith learns it - culture, language, history, Blade strategy in general - well, won't that help as much as any fighting skills he learns, too? Wouldn't that be more valuable? Keith's never going to be the best fighter. That's impossible now. But stealthiest, or...to have the best knowledge of the galra's preferred tactics... He could do that.

It's just...not what he needs.

"Come on," Tarandi murmurs, and they return to the lift, and they look around, but his enthusiasm for it is gone. Training decks, multiple; small rooms to practise stances or for one-on-one duels; the kind of thing Keith usually cares about. They go to the classrooms, shelves packed with books and holopads, posters on the wall that instead of displaying the alphabet or times tables, lay out basic Marmora strategy, emphasise stealth over all else, on forming bonds with fellow members even if you end up working alone. He appreciates the message. It's nice that they care about that kind of thing, in a different way than Voltron does. There are only so many paladins; dying isn't really an option. There are more Blades, but they're spread out across the universe, either eye-deep in undercover operations, or laying low at a base.

The Blades aren't afraid to die; that much is obvious. What's more surprising is that they're completely unafraid to live, either - Keith's impression so far had been that the Blades were cold, anonymous, unattached from the world and from each other, but Tarandi and Zorah are married. Whenever Kolivan had met Tarandi's eyes, even in the midst of discussing all the ways Lance has gone insane in the past deca-phoeb, the very corner of his mouth had curled up a little, into something that almost looked fond.

And he keeps seeing it, these glimpses of affection between Blades. Tarandi takes him to lunch, a small kitchen and a room with a few tables attached, and they sit with a group of friends who all did a recent raid together, and they talk to Keith with such vibrancy and honesty, and they tear into someone who made a minor error on the mission so intensely that Keith almost laughs. Blades huddled in corridors, sat together on small benches, or seen through one of the long windows,
conversing quietly, intimately, pointing at data on a screen and nodding. A few people they pass ask Tarandi about Zorah, or Tarandi will tap shoulders and raise her brow very menacingly and the Blades will say sorry Tarandi we'll hand over our weapons right away, because clearly Zorah and Tarandi are well known throughout the base. That in spite of being in love, in spite of that being a weakness, they've survived long enough to cement reputations in the main headquarters for the Blades.

The strangest thing otherwise is that there are children on the base. Actual children, as in half Keith's age, sitting in the classrooms he pokes his head into, learning all the things he needs to be learning, too. They have their own set of training rooms so they don't see what the adults are doing. Some seem to be mixed, like him, like Lotor's generals, with vibrant skin colours or interesting ears and tails. The worst thing, Keith observes when they all file out to their training deck, is realising some are almost as tall as him.

It's just sad, more than anything. Kids prepping for a war when they should be having fun, studying for class, playing pranks. They shouldn't be here. Sometimes, Keith would look round at the paladins, his friends, and think the same thing.

The tour doesn't take long. A couple hours at most, combined with lunch, then Tarandi drops him off at the training area.

"Dinner's at six," she says. "It starts getting quiet at nine, ten, so try and call your friends before that. Wake up call is six a.m. sharp. Exercise, eat, and we'll go from there. You think you know your way around?"

He nods.

"Kolivan isn't trying to punish you. Everyone here has had years of training to become initiated and then go out on missions. You're a paladin of Voltron, so you get to skip all that; but you're also a half-galra raised by humans. You can't skip everything. Besides; Zorah's probably fixing you up a few blades to practise with tomorrow. A little optimism never killed anyone."

Says you? Keith wants to ask, quite genuinely, because she isn't smiling but her gaze is warm, because her frame is tall and athletic and her skin, her hair, her eyes are dark all over, yet she speaks of optimism. Looking on the bright side of things. Silver linings in clouds that haven't yet stopped raining.

..New blades sound nice, though.

"Tomorrow, Keith?" she says, and he raises his chin, his eyes to meet hers. Irises so dark they could be the night sky from the desert he lived in for a year, inviting wonder, awe, and the chance to explore if Keith is willing to take her up on it. And he has already explored space; some of it, at least. She's being very patient with him.

"Tomorrow," he affirms, and she nods her head.

"I'll see you at dinner - enjoy training."

She leaves swift as a raven, turning on her heel so fast that her thick sheath of hair flies out behind her shoulders for a second before flowing straight down her back, waist-length, unimaginably heavy. Her step is so light he can't hear her footsteps. She's out of sight in seconds.

And he is alone.

Just as he likes it.
Training is...different in the Marmora headquarters. Maybe it's the pervasive darkness, light only coming in the form of glowing purple lights. Maybe it's the AI system, different from the castleships version, kitted out with its own Marmora blade that changes weapon depending on what Keith requests. Keith *hates* how it uses a spear, and its stature, tall and dark and ruthless, keeps reminding him of Lance. It isn't fair. It's taller than Lance, far taller, and built bigger like Kolivan, and its moves are stealthier, less brutal and heavy.

Still. It's the *drive* of the AI, how it keeps coming and coming and coming, unaffected by Keith's blade, or exhaustion, or hunger. It's completely inhuman. It's exactly like Lance.

It makes Keith angrier. Or...makes him feel *more*, and anything that isn't anger is useless to him, so he makes it anger. Whatever is squeezing his heart, latching to his ribs and growing like weeds around them, making it so hard to breathe, he can't focus on it - it has to make him *angry*.

It's the only way he can keep fighting.

So he fights, *hard*, and Tarandi evidently predicts him getting consumed by his training because she comes by and picks him up for dinner, doesn't remark on how red is face is, how heavy he breathes, and she takes him along to dinner. It's busy, and they sit with Kolivan and Zorah and a couple others he's introduced to, and they discuss a few missions, speculate on Zarkon's current movements, on Lotor's, if they're working together or apart...and then they talk about Kolivan's (apparently non-existent) lovelife. Someone inquires into whether Tarandi and Zorah are going to have any children soon (one day, with a playful look at Keith). A couple others detail their current plan to continue their prank war against some other Blades who are currently on a mission.

The kind of things the paladins once talked about that.

But they don't talk about that kind of thing at all anymore.

The Blades are sensitive around him. He doesn't say much, they don't pry, but they still ask him a few things, how his first day's been, what's he been doing, don't ever forget to return your weapons to Zorah after missions or she'll skin him alive, et cetera... But it's weird, and ghosts keep crossing his vision, Allura sitting where Tarandi is, Shiro instead of Kolivan, Coran as Zorah, Hunk and Lance and Pidge as the group giggling about their prank war, and Keith, still here, still quiet. So similar to how things used to be, except completely different. Different people, different place. A different time entirely. Like maybe Lance's kidnapping symbolised the end of an era, of this kind of chatter round the dinner table, of prank wars and joking about dying Allura and Shiro's white hair. Like Lance died an idiot teenager and came back an adult killer, and it forced them all into adults before their time.

He doesn't mention it to Allura that night, to Hunk or Pidge or Shiro, all crowded round the computer in the lounge. Most of the discussion revolves around his first day, what it's like, what his missions are, what his training will be. Keith pointedly brings up Allura calling Kolivan behind his back, and though she looks remorseful she also stands by her actions. They say they miss him, even though it's been one day.

Keith spends most of the time wishing Lance would pop his head in. But he's never brought up, and Keith refuses to do it himself. He left Voltron to get away from Lance, to move *on*.

But he spends the entire night awake, and he can't think of anything else.
Solace comes, to Keith's shock, in lessons.

Training terrifies him because the AI gladiator is Lance. Meals with other Blades members are too much like how Voltron used to be. His late-night calls with the paladins are too stressful, Allura distracted, Hunk exhausted, Shiro quietly raging. Lance never there, but the focus of everyone nonetheless.

And the druids...aren't helpful. *We shall study*, they say quietly, hoods heavy, hiding any intention Keith might read in their eyes. *There are spells, rituals... Experiments we could not name.*

Which is fucking useless. A riddle Keith cannot untangle, and doesn't care to. Kolivan or Tarandi can surely relay the whole story to them, decipher with their combined knowledge what the hell Lance had turned into - as if the answer could be anything other than *monster* - but Keith no longer has the energy for it. He doesn't *want* it be anything other than monster. Why else would Lance say all those monstrous things to him? Just to kick him off the ship? Just to keep Keith away from him? It would have taken far less, would've hurt *far* less.

Only monsters cause as much pain as possible to as many people as they can.

In lessons, at least, Keith cannot afford to be distracted by such things. They tutor him privately, save him the humiliation of sitting in a classroom with children. There is so much to learn - everything from the alphabet and basic language to typical mission strategies and formations. Tarandi escorts him near everywhere the first few days. He trains with her and Zorah most often, sometimes with an entire group of people. They run different sims than Voltron, more suited to stealth, more focused on fending away death than wreaking it on every enemy in vicinity. It isn't the way he usually fights. To begin with, he isn't very good at it.

But he has always been a fast learner, at least physically. He studies hard, because he has nothing else to do - because to do otherwise would be to fall into the pit in his mind that tunnels all his past failings into an endless abyss, the kind of black hole that cannot be crawled back up from.

Even though it's not what he's used to, it's the fighting he learns fastest. Academics in the morning, tactics in the afternoon, training in the evening, meals interspersed, and the video call to his teammates before bed.

He doesn't mean to dread it, but galra culture is genuinely fascinating, and tactics are essential to staying alive, and Zorah gives him a whole stack of weapons - a longsword that takes both hands to use and cutlasses he can dual-wield amongst them - with glimmering eyes, whispers *I knew he'd like them!* to Tarandi as he start training with them that day, and even his meals with the other Blades at least offer interesting conversations.

Most days, it's Shiro and whoever's not busy, sat together in someone's room, chairs pulled in from somewhere or other so they can all sit at the desk and speak with him. The first night it had been everyone but Lance. The second night, Coran had something to work on in the ship. The third, and Allura was away speaking with allies. The forth, both Hunk and Allura hadn't shown up, and Pidge had started snickering as Shiro tried to explain away their absence.

And so it goes, until the seventh night, when Tarandi knocks on his door ten minutes before they usually call, and sits down at his desk.

On his desk, actually. He doesn't bring it up.

"Hey," she says casually, as if she didn't just silently enter his room and sit up on his desk with only one single knock to signify her entrance.
"Uh," Keith says, sat on his bed opposite, "hey?"

Tarandi is...a good person. Keith knows that, because she works as a Blade, and sometimes during meals she'll discuss past missions with him to explain the kind of work she does. She's reserved but authoritative, funny but only rarely and always quietly, and even though she's stopped ferrying Keith around to all his various lessons and meals, she still hovers in the background, a tall figure blending easily into the dark, with eyes sharp enough that Keith can never forget that she's there.

It's unnerving. Zorah, at least, is bright and bubbly and open about everything - weapons back straight after missions or you're cleaning them yourself, endless conversation about the most mundane things, declares her love for Tarandi near-constantly in a way that its strength doesn't really catch Keith out anymore - but Tarandi isn't really like that. Worked with his mother, once loved her, still discusses her sometimes. Friendly with Kolivan, with all senior officers. Highly respected. An incredible fighter.

But so quiet, so silent, cloaking herself in shadow and disappearing from the human eye within seconds...

Nothing like any of the Voltron paladins at all..

"I wanted to speak with you," she says, deep brown eyes reading his easily. "How have you enjoyed your time with us so far?"

"Uh," he says, "it's been fine...?"

"Has it?" she says, and Keith frowns, resists the urge to cross his arms and instead leans back on his hands. "Is there anything troubling you, or...are you struggling with anything that you'd like to...talk about?"

Keith blink at her, unimpressed. "No," he says.

"I've seen you during your solo training sessions. I know you're angry. Obviously you've been through a lot-"

"What are you trying to do?" Keith asks, sitting straight. "Are you trying to talk about my feelings with me?"

"Someone has to," she says, and Keith scoffs, shakes his head. "You're young, and you've been through a lot. We have to know you're emotionally ready for a mission-"

"Emotionally ready?" he repeats, and raises his brows at her. "Am I not good enough in training? Am I not learning enough in classes? Do I look like I'm having a breakdown every day, or do I look like a capable fucking fighter who can handle himself on a mission?"

"Both," she replies dryly, and Keith scowls. "If you don't want to talk about your numerous anger issues and unresolved feelings over your blue paladin, that's fine by me. All I request is that you are conscious of your feelings and that you make sure they don't somehow interfere with or disrupt any mission you go on."

"They won't. Are you done?"

She shrugs. "I'm done. Zorah can do this next time."

"Next time?"
"Next time," she says, and gets to her feet. "Give the Princess Allura our best. Make sure you go to bed early, and... Well, if you do want to discuss- anything- well, it's not the same, but...I did know your mother. If that's worth anything."

He nods, just to acknowledge what she's said, and watches her as she glides from the room, door sliding shut behind her. Maybe that kind of thing would be worth something, if she ever said anything about maybe where his mother was, or what she'd been doing the past twenty years, or why exactly she so desperately needed to leave Earth without a single sign she'd ever been there except her old Marmora Blade, but Tarandi doesn't discuss that at all. His mother is spoken of only in passing, in old missions laughed about over dinner, or maybe when Blades are poking fun at Zorah for how easily she gets jealous. Nothing of substance, nothing that meant anything to him.

They gave him a picture, though. Just one. She does look like him, it's true. Lilac skin with purple stripes on her cheeks. Messy hair. Big, golden eyes with indigo irises.

All that, connected to a person he doesn't know.

So he waits for the paladins to call him. Nine in the evening is when they contact him, late enough that dinner and late night activities are over, early enough that they all go to bed at a decent time. The calls sometimes last up to an hour.

Except no one calls at nine.

In fact, it takes them twenty minutes to call him, and only Shiro is there.

"Hey Keith," he says softly, "how's it going?"

"The usual," Keith replies, eyes flashing round the blue screen projected above his desk, looking for any detail to explain why no one else is here, but there's no sign that something's off other than the purple under Shiro's eyes - and that's always there. "Is everyone busy?"

"No- not quite. Tell me about your day. How's training coming on?" Shiro's hiding his hands away from Keith's eye sight - out of nonchalance, or to hide the way his hands always fidget together when he's worried?

"I'm doing pretty well," Keith says. "Progressing faster than they expected. Dual-wielding's not that hard once you get used to it. Is something happening?"

"Nothing's happening," Shiro replies, too quickly, eyes darting to the side for a moment before he looks back at Keith. "Not anymore. Look - are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Keith replies, and crosses his arms over his chest. Shiro's eyes keep going to the left, as if something's there, watching him. "What is going on over there?"

Shiro heaves out a sigh, and Keith presses his lips together, shoulders climbing in anticipation of a horrible surprise about to land in his lap. "It's better if you just see for yourself. I'll talk to you once they're done, okay? And don't - he lowers his voice, slides his gaze to the left again before continuing - "just don't be...rude. Or blunt. Or- just be nice, okay? Something bad happened last night, and... They'll explain."

"Who-" but Shiro's moved out the frame, murmurs something too quiet for Keith to hear, and then Allura appears and sits down, one hand clutching her dress while the other is clapped in Hunk's, guiding him to the seat next to her. It's a little strange, the way she tugs on his hand so he shifts slightly to the right, how pale his fingers are round her hand, how he slowly settles down, and then, after staring down in his lap for a moment, he looks up at the screen to Keith.
He doesn't mean to be rude, or blunt, but his mouth opens and his eyes widens and he stares, trying to reconcile the immense difference of this Hunk and the Hunk of last night; and Hunk looks away to the left, perhaps to where Shiro hovers still, and conceals the brown leather eye patch from view.

"Holy shit," Keith finally utters, and Allura raises her brows imploringly at him, lips tightening at the edges, and unknobs her hand from her dress to rub it soothingly over Hunk's. "I-I mean," he says, "um, how, how are you...?"

"Hunk," Allura says softly, "he's just surprised. We all are."

"It's disgusting," Hunk says, and Allura instantly shakes her head, presses her hands tighter round Hunk's. "It's- I can't train like this, I-I can't- a-and Shay will think- and now Keith thinks-"

"Shay will understand," Allura murmurs, "as will Keith, if we explain. No one finds it ugly or disgusting or anything like that. Shall we explain what happened?"

"I-I'm sorry, Hunk," Keith says quickly. "I didn't mean to- I just didn't realise- what's happened?"

"What do you think," mutters Hunk, finally turning back to face Keith, and yes, it's strange, that instead of a left eye Hunk has an eye patch, and Keith isn't sure he wants to hear the story behind it, but it isn't anything resembling disgusting. It makes him look...older.

Actually, maybe that's worse.

"Don't tell me," Keith says, looking between Hunk and Allura with wide, horrified eyes, processing the way they can't quite meet his gaze, "don't tell me he did something-"

"He thought he was having a nightmare," Allura cuts in, her voice hushed but defensive. "So don't- he wouldn't have done it otherwise. And it was my fault. I suggested leaving my own and his door open, so that I knew when he was having nightmares, so I could help, somehow...and Hunk wanted to accompany. Well, I couldn't stop him. And Lance was..."

His name still makes Keith wince, tear his eyes away. His heart bashes its fists against his chest, cracks open his ribs, rips up the skin. Lance hurt someone else. It shouldn't surprise him.

"He thought I was a monster," Hunk says, voice plunged into the very depths of despair, a field of soft warm grass turned sodden with ice cold sadness. "He was having a nightmare, and I couldn't get through to him, and he thought I was a monster. So he- he tore my eye out-"

"Coran found us. I managed to wake Lance up, but the damage was already done. When we got to the infirmary...the eye was too damaged. We had to- put Hunk in a healing pod. A-and- well, we've already started trying to correct his stance, his aim, his... W-well, it affects everything-"

"And Lance did this," Keith says, edges his words in steel so that even though they cut up his throat to say them, they emerge hard and unwavering and unafraid. "He took out your eye-"

"Keith, please-"

"He didn't even know that it was me, I couldn't, I couldn't-"

"-traumatising for everyone, I don't think you realise-"

"-and my aim's off, I keep missing things, it's so embarrassing-"
"-please have some empathy, I understand the situation-

"-can't even look at him anymore...but he doesn't show up anywhere we can see him, either."

"Haven't seen him all day," Allura agrees slowly, and her gaze wanders off to the side, the corner of her mouth turns down. "I should probably... Hunk, will you...fill Keith in for me?"

"Of course," Hunk says, and smiles at her, and at once, the previous furore is forgotten. His eyes-his eye softens, the fear and sadness that had turned his features rock solid dissipate, leave him soft as ice cream left out in the sun. Love drips from his barely-parted lips like melting strawberry sorbet. "T-tell him I don't- blame him, but I can't- i-if I look at him, I remember- the-the way he-

"I know," Allura whispers, "I know. Leave it to me." And she smiles, so easy, so brightly, palms his jaw and kisses his cheek, says a quick goodbye to Keith, and is gone again.

"She-" Keith says, blinking, "uh, what?"

Hunk sighs, looking after Allura with a small frown before redirecting his gaze at Keith. "She's just, um... She thinks something's up with him, so she's just...keeping an eye on him. I don't- I don't know. I can't- I really can't- I-I thought maybe he wasn't all bad, b-but he... A-and when he woke up, he didn't say anything, he just...

"He isn't human anymore," Keith mutters, and tightens his arms across his chest, digs his chin into his chest. "He just isn't."

"I didn't think so...b-but..."

Shiro must say something - Hunk looks over in that direction, and nods, biting his lip.

"What else has... Anything else happen today, then?" Keith asks, and Hunk shrugs.

"Pidge is super busy all of a sudden... She locked herself into the lab for hours. Shiro and I trained together for a bit - he and Coran tried to help me with my aiming and stuff, so that was nice. It was... I don't know. Got my eye patch. Could be worse, huh?"

"It looks fine," Keith assures him. "And with all this Altean tech, I'm sure something can help you with your aim and...everything..."

"Yeah," Hunk says. "Yeah, Yellow's been helping me, actually. I can kind of feel her in the back of my head - like always, you know - but like...she's there, in my head, and she can see what I can see, but also...what I can't see? It's not- she kind of gives me visions, like...outlines of what I should be able to see, so... Allura says that's normal."

"Is it? Your lion sees for you?"

"Kind of? If- our lions sort of... They're linked so closely to us, at this point, that they kind of sense our...defects...and help us fix them?"

"Huh," Keith says, looking carefully at Hunk's face; wonders how much he sees now, how far his right eye's line of sight takes him. "I guess that isn't so bad. And you are...okay?"

At this, Hunk huffs a laugh, lips uncurling into a sad frown. "Come on, dude," he says quietly. "Are any of us?"

*Guess not*, Keith shrugs, and doesn't meet Hunk's eye across the screen. Maybe he just doesn't
want to think about it. So caught up in his own bullshit, in his torrential disaster with Lance and his immediate need to escape, he hadn't really thought about the others. Hunk, left in the dust, terrified for - of, now - his own best friend. Allura, trying to lead a team slowly splintering apart. Pidge, still looking for Matt, still looking for a way to help Lance even when all Lance does is hurt people. Shiro, stuck between being a good brother and being a good leader, stretched as thin as he can go. Coran, filling in all the gaps between, back bending with the weight he carries but still standing straight when they all can see him.

So no, Keith would say. Probably not.

"Yeah," Hunk murmurs after a few moments' silence. "That's what I thought."

Keith only sighs, isn't sure what else he can really say. He isn't there; he doesn't know what could possibly change in the one week he's been away. Has Lance really started resorting to assaulting their friends? Was it out of fear, like Allura insisted? What if it was just anger? What if that was just an excuse? He already hurt Shiro, almost fatally. He hurts them all the time in training. Lance, violence, monster... Synonyms for a tall figure with guns on his back and a spear in his hands, blood on his face, all over his body, none of it his own.

"I'm sorry that happened," Keith finally says. "Even if you have Yellow helping, it must...suck."

"It was scary, dude," Hunk admits. "I- I don't know- you used to fight him every night?"

"...Yeah," Keith sighs. "It was scary too. But we- but it always...ended with- well, other stuff, so- I- I don't know. Lance is scary, now. I thought...we'd all kind of agreed on that."

"But I didn't want to," Hunk says, holding Keith's gaze for only a second more before tearing his eyes away and crossing his arms tight over his chest. Hiding, Keith knows. He does it all the time.

"He didn't even know it was me..." he whispers.

Like Coran, when Hunk isn't smiling his sadness is very obvious; but also his exhaustion, his fear. Arms tight around his chest, maybe, but eyes always so open and giving. Purple clouding beneath. Lines, stronger and stronger each day. Brows tilting always down, lost in thought. Even his hair, messier than before, growing out enough that he has it in a low ponytail, strands pulled out, loose round his face.

"We all miss him," Keith says, fists tight in his lap. Keeps his voice hard again, like he's over it, like he's completely reconciled everything between himself and Lance, between normal Lance and post-kidnapping Lance. "There's nothing we can do about that."

Hunk raises a hand to press his fingers against the top of the eyepatch, tracing the edge carefully, his eyes pensive.

"He didn't even know it was me..." he whispers.

"Look," Keith says finally, "if you want to talk about it- I-I mean, I understand... I know what it's like, to be afraid of him and still love him. And if you want to talk about it...then we can talk about it."

"I don't want to force you-"

"But you're sad, right? And confused? And scared he'll do it again?" Keith words are sharp, dipped in flames blue enough that they come out scalding. "I know how that feels. Maybe you lost your best friend, Hunk, but...I'm still right here."
Hunk cracks a smile at that, something soft that almost brushes his eye. "Right here," he repeats, sardonic like maybe he wants to make a joke about Keith being quadrants away, but then he crosses his hands over his heart, and something in Keith's throat catches. "Right here," he says, and his smile rings truer this time, infectious and bright and Keith smiles back, nodding.

Lance is gone, and that's fine. That's fine. But Hunk is right here, untouchable but warm in Keith's chest, and Pidge, wherever she is right now, is with him still, Allura too, Coran too. Shiro always. In this new place, full of strangers and dark rooms and words he can't understand, he still has Kolivan, Tarandi, Zorah. Every Blade who agrees to train with him, to show him round somewhere Tarandi hadn't taken him, to lean into his side and murmur a joke when Kolivan lectures them all.

So maybe the love of his life doesn't love him back.

But maybe, with these people around him, and a mission to defend the universe against Zarkon's forces, that isn't really a big deal.

Maybe it was never that much of one to begin with.

--

It's easy during the day; busy with training, with calls, with learning everything he needs to know about the galra.

The worst comes at night.

The ghost of a monster Keith thought he loved wrapped around him, head on Keith's chest, tucked against the back of his neck.

A bed of teeth, every attempt to get comfortable turning into a memory biting into him, of warmth and safety and thinking he had finally found some kind of home.

The kind of thoughts that, if lingered upon for too long, tear him to pieces.

So no, he doesn't sleep very well these days.

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In the morning, he takes deep breaths and focuses on the soothing darkness around him and thinks of Hunk, lightyears away from him, and everything he said last night. Hands on his heart, fingers pressed against his new eye patch, the warmth of his gaze when he looked upon Allura, how that warmth didn't fade when he looked to Keith.

And his heart hurts a little less.

Breakfast is a quiet affair, a little hushed, everyone whispering to each other and not Keith, catching his eye and gives the fakest smiles possible before looking away, and Keith can't be bothered addressing it until Tarandi and Zorah hop up when he does and guide him, not to his lessons, but to Kolivan's office downstairs.

"What's going on," he says lowly, but neither of them look angry; Zorah's eyes keep twinkling, the edge of her mouth turning up, and Tarandi's chin is upturned, stepping more brightly than usual. "Is something happening? Am I- moving up in lessons or..." A week, Kolivan had said. Then he'd consider missions. "Is it a mission? Am I going on a mission?"

"We shall see," Zorah says lightly, but she's grinning, gives it away too easily.
"Maybe," Tarandi says. "You've been keeping up fairly well in training. Although we do go easy on you..."

"Thanks," Keith mutters.

"...but still impressive, for your age and your size. Evidently capable of taking on enemies, and with a team to buff your weaknesses, you'd certainly be an asset."

"It's not up to us," Zorah adds quickly. "Kolivan is the be-all and end-all on missions. And on you. He hasn't actually told us his plans for you."

Which clarifies pretty much nothing - but it would make sense, with the way Tarandi wandered into his room last night to double check his emotional health. And though they've been pointing out mistakes he's made, careless or impulsive errors, they haven't actually told him off too severely for anything. Even last night when Tarandi came in, it was enough for her that he was aware of his feelings, even if he didn't want to speak in-depth about it.

The last mission he went on - the last planned mission, where they sat and discussed positions and strategies prior to being sent out - Lance lost his memory. Allura and Coran had been tailing the ship that led to that planet for a week or so, and once they discovered what was there, they still chose to send Keith and Lance down. And Lance got hurt, and Keith got hurt, and then Lance forgot fucking everything.

Except his time in space.

But Lance isn't here anymore. Isn't riding round in Red with him, isn't prowling some foreign territory with him, isn't at his side, taking shots meant for him, taking on the most dangerous enemy, shooting or spearing everything in sight. It's just Keith, alone, working with these strangers.

A week's time, and they're really only strangers to him.

He and Tarandi sit in Kolivan's uncomfortable chairs when they finally reach his study. Zorah hops up on the edge of the desk by her wife, simply smiles brightly when Kolivan raises a brow at her, and then all three adults' attention falls to Keith.

"Uh," he says, "do you want something?"

This alone makes Zorah laugh, Tarandi squashing her own smile to poke at her knee. Kolivan glances at them, edge of his mouth lifting slightly, and only when Zorah goes quiet, still grinning, does he look then to Keith.

"Today," he says, "at noon. We have been scoping a nearby galra station for several movements, and know we have a limited window today to enter, gather data, and leave. Maximum information, minimum destruction - of property or of soldiers. This base is too close for us to touch deeply. If we provoke them, they will come looking for us. Even if it is near-impossible to enter this base, the galra will find a way to exterminate us. Thusly, we search for knowledge - and bring about no death. Is that clear, paladin?"

It isn't.

"Infiltration?" he clarifies, and Kolivan nods. "We- we can't kill anyone? But-"

But Lance killed everything, and Keith had gotten so used to that being the only way to win. When did Voltron's victories because so stewed in blood? When Lance came back? Or was it when he left, and no one knew what to do with themselves when they weren't fighting galra to learn Lance's
location, what was happening to him, why he'd been taken at all?

"We do not have the manpower to afford any losses," Kolivan says lowly. "I don't care what you did with Voltron - you either follow our methods or you leave. We are infiltrating this galra base. We are taking as much information as possible. We are leaving. Is. That. Clear."

As is he has any other options. He's been learning stealth, every day during training sessions with the others. He's seen with his own eyes how the galra here turn to shadows before his eyes.

"Yes," he says finally. "I understand."

"Then take a look at this," Kolivan says, and slides over a holopad with the base blueprints spread out over it. "The base has some outside security, so we're taking one of our smaller ships fitted with the invisibility cloak technology your friend Pidge sent us. We don't have anyone on the inside, so we're going to enter from this point" - he jabs a finger at one seems to be a utility room - "and spread out. I will go to this floor and head to the control room. I want Tarandi to head here to security. Zorah, you stay with Keith and evaluate the base as a whole. We have no idea what may be hidden there. When we will return, we can discuss whether it's time to place an agent there. Any objections?"

"How long's our window?" Tarandi asks.

"Two vargas," Kolivan says. "Absolute maximum. I'm uploading the blueprint to all of your suits, but a reminder that it may not be exact - rather, based on blueprints we have of all other galra empire bases we've infiltrated. Zorah - keep him from doing anything stupid."

"Stupid." Keith scoffs, but Zorah nods and Kolivan raises a brow at him once more.

"The princess has informed us of various reckless decisions you've made in the past - it won't be tolerated here. You follow mine and Zorah's instruction until we are out of there. Depending on your performance here, we may take you out on more missions...or extend your training."

"You want me to act like an adult," Keith says slowly, "but you refuse to treat me like one. If you want to discuss my flaws, then don't call Allura behind my back like I'm just a kid. I know them better than she does."

"You didn't even tell us about the blue paladin," Kolivan says sharply. "How can we trust what you say when you disregard something so vital?"

But that wasn't personal- or, it was too personal. If Keith's...issue with Lance is a weakness, then isn't love considered a general, human failing?

Or maybe it is just Keith, how oblivious he was, how he knew something was wrong, had to be wrong, but...love. He wanted it so badly.

"That's different," he mutters, but he mustn't be convincing - Kolivan scoffs, takes back the holopad.

"If you want to be included in these conversations, then by all means, I will somehow tear you away from your volatile personal training when the princess calls and all three of us will discuss in depth your personal and moral failings. Is that what you'd prefer?"

"Yes," Keith says, and Kolivan shrugs. Tarandi and Zorah, silent beside him, are smiling close-lipped at each other.
"Anything else?" Kolivan says, looking away from Keith, and Keith breathes a sigh of relief, Kolivan's gaze heavier than any weight he ever lifts in the gym, pressing directly onto his lungs.

"I propose a new plan," Zorah chirps, and Keith's brows pop up. "Why don't you swap Tarandi and Keith, and then instead of sweeping the base, Tarandi and I spend those two vargas...inspecting the utility room?"

"Or each others' tonsils?" Kolivan replies, and Zorah sticks her tongue out, winking at Tarandi. "Shall I send Tarandi on her overdue infiltration assignment, is that what you're asking? Well, I've long thought Tarandi's skillset was better suited here, and of course, a certain someone's desperate pleas to keep her in-base, out of danger-"

"Stars, Kolivan, I was kidding!" Zorah says, both her hands tightly clasped round one of Tarandi's. "I've been doing this for decades, no I do not have any questions regarding a basic infiltration of a galra empire base!"

"Nor do I," Tarandi says, "and nor would I like to leave the base on any infiltration assignment, Kolivan."

"Noted," he says dryly. "Noon, by the stealth pods, suited and geared up."

"Gotcha," says Zorah, aiming a finger at Kolivan and winking as her thumb pulls the trigger. "I'll be in the armoury, waiting patiently and lovingly for your requests."

"Then I'll train with Keith for a while, shall I?" Tarandi says, and gets to her feet. "Come along, then. Kolivan - you're wanted in Communications. There are issues with..." She tilts her head, running her tongue over the top of her teeth as though tasting her next words, "...certain assignments."

"Very well," Kolivan sighs. "I'll attend to that in a few."

They don't talk during training. Tarandi and Zorah hold hands until Zorah slips into the armoury, and even then they don't speak. Keith's glad. He doesn't want to hear anything they have to say, especially if it's the same condescending crap Kolivan gave him. Yes, he was blinded by love, and yes, he was silenced by heartbreak, but- he's still an adult. Of sorts. Admitting to the Lance fiasco is- hard, like heaving the door off a coffin while it's still stuffed underground, even if he wants to open up, dirt pours in and buries him to the gullet before he can reach open air.

But everything else? Talking about his mother feels less like a dagger in his heart if he yanks it out and points it at Kolivan, Zorah, Tarandi, all these people who have heard of her and yet refuse to tell him about her in any detail. He doesn't even mind admitting to his own faults, of recklessness and impulsiveness and going off on his own. Did Allura discuss these with Kolivan, and make no mention of Keith actively working to improve such issues? Or maybe, as with everything during his time with Lance, he regressed. Maybe, in all that time Lance was gone, people stopped caring about that kind of thing.

So they train for a couple hours. Tarandi's a spectre, but she solidifies in a way Lance never could - they don't talk, but she points out when he makes errors and helps him adjust his technique, and she nods approvingly whenever he gets something right.

They separate to shower, come together to eat quickly, and then go and pick up their preferred weapons from the armoury, along with Zorah, before heading to the hangar where Kolivan waits, arms crossed, before their chosen vessel.
Kolivan goes over the plan quietly with him as Tarandi pilots; the journey passes in the blink of an eye, they land not too far from the base sat half-hidden by the moon's craters, and start creeping forward. Across the craters. Round the edges. Consults Kolivan's blueprint, Tarandi pulls out a bunch of tools and opens a hidden door at the back, and they sneak in.

A utility room. Shades of black and purple like the Blade HQ, with hints of dull grey like the steel of sword, bubbling gold like the quintessence they harvest from planets, that they taint and inject into prisoners, into gladiators, or...maybe just Lance. He never explained, if it was just him, if the druids ever experimented on other prisoners. Maybe, after a while, that was the sort of thing he stopped paying attention to - maybe, in fact, he was never let around the other prisoners at all unless he was to fight them.

He never really told them anything.

Irrelevant, Keith thinks disparagingly at himself, shakes his head slightly as if shimmying his brains back into place, and surveys the room again. He's read about this, at least - basic infiltrations of a galra empire base. They're tiered in terms of importance - low-ranking ones tend not to have much outside security, if any at all, for Blades to deal with. Exceptions exist, obviously, to confound, to disguise, but it's rare. It's how they got in so easy. Kolivan casts his gaze around the room, presses his ear to the door, then opens it slightly and peeks his head out. Pushes the rest of the door open, gestures at Tarandi, and, lifting her hood over her head, long back hair braided and twisted tightly into a bun at her nape, she slips past Kolivan and disappears from the room.

Kolivan then turns to them, and with his hands alone, instructs them to take the right, go straight, then go right again. He holds the door open for them, and when Keith glances back two seconds later, he's already out the door and disappeared into the shadows.

Just like that.

A hand grabs his shoulder, and Keith jolts, turns to see Zorah widening her eyes at him, brows raised and mouth a thin line. She mouths pay attention, and Keith nods, moves to walk beside her, but she reaches behind his head and yanks his hood up for him, double checks her own. Sets her eyes on the dark corridor ahead, so Keith does the same thing. Stops thinking about Kolivan and Tarandi, wherever they are now, about Lance, not even here, not even involved in this mission, yet so present in these thin golden lights, in the cold metal of the walls, and he follows Zorah along the long, dark corridor.

Information. That's all the Blade wants. Not death, not revenge, not to takeover the base - just information. Not exactly Keith's strong point - extracting info from every data point available was always Pidge's thing, and Keith just found as many galra as possible and slaughtered them. Not dissimilar to what Lance does now.

But not similar to him at all, either.

Stop it, Keith thinks, but as they prowl further down the corridor, pressing up against the wall as Zorah checks if the right corridor is clear, everything Lance represents is embedded in these walls. It wasn't a place like this, it was bigger and scarier and full of hundreds of wailing voices, no doubt, but the same colours, the same lines, the same bots patrolling hallways that this new Lance was created in. In fact, it's all Keith can think about, if Lance was dragged down corridors like these except longer, with higher ceilings, surrounded by cells of prisoners crying. If he got used to the dark, to the glowing purple, if he longed for light, if he forgot was it was like. Were there Blade agents in that horrible ship? Presumably not - surely they would've called Voltron right away. Was it too heavily guarded for a Blade agent to infiltrate, was it too hidden away, did no one want to
take a job there, a place so full of desperation and despair and desecration?

Or maybe Lance got used to it. Maybe, when he returned to them, the bright white light of the castle, the blue interior, the sheen across every surface, was too much for him. Maybe, by then, he preferred the darkness.

Frankly, Keith can see why. As they creep along, he and Zorah stick to the darkness, shrouding themselves in it. Darkness is safety, they teach that in classes. If you're in the dark then the enemy doesn't know you exist. If you stay there, you can do all manner of things without the enemy ever knowing. In the light it is impossible to hide.

It's solid advice. It's just...not what Keith is used to.

The second corridor is as busy as the last. It's only when they go to make their next turn, when Zorah lashes an arm out and pins him against the wall, pressing herself against it, that Keith hear it - two footsteps, metallic-sounding, only bots. He holds his breath, heart thumping, as they grow louder and louder, impossibly loud, Keith thinks, he hadn't realised how quiet the base was until their marching reached his ears. He tenses as they grow closer, ready to engage in a fight despite what Kolivan told him, but they pass into his eyeline...

...and then they keep going down the corridor. They don't even see them.

And it keeps happening. Keith can't help but be surprised by this, so used is he to the concept of tackling bots and soldiers alike head on, knocking them out, hiding the bodies, sometimes, if they were still attempting any element of surprise. Voltron could never do this kind of stealth. It just wasn't their...style. In a team mission, there were enough of them that they didn't have to bother with it. Even if they were split up, it always seemed like they could only hide for so long before there was a loud and fantastic confrontation that naturally drew all sorts of attention.

But now, he keeps to the shadows. When bots appear, they hide around corners, Zorah jumps and sticks herself to the ceiling, Keith ducks behind pillars, into storerooms. Pushes himself up against the wall and stops breathing. They're never caught. They're like whispers carrying on the wind that fade before the galra ever hear them. He was taught this kind of thing during his classes, but to actually experience it - stepping lightly, camouflaging himself, pausing every five feet to listen for galra - is a whole other thing entirely.

Then they start checking rooms. When they hit the corridor Kolivan directed them to, Zorah takes out a small device from a pocket on her utility belt and sticks it to the door, and if it's silent, they'll go inside and do a sweep; if not, Zorah cracks the door open and rolls in a black sphere as small as a bullet, shuts the door again, then waits until all has fallen silent and enters, unconscious galra soldiers limp in chairs, on the floor, the sphere disapparated.

Temporary, he'd been told. They wake up, think they fell asleep on the job. Keith and Zorah look through any computers they might have been working at, control desks, documents and holopads lying around. They each have scanning devices that copy the information and store it onto USB stick-like items that are tucked into their utility belts, in case they find something pertinent. It seems mostly trivial - logs of discussions of fuel, their next shipment of resources. Nothing about the Blades and their hidden headquarters a bare quadrant away. Zorah doesn't seem interested, seems to trust his judgement, and so they move swiftly on. The occasional, whispered report from the others concludes there's not much else of interest kicking around.

Maybe that was the point. Drag him out on a mission like this so maybe he wouldn't even be interested in missions anymore - but even if there's nothing to be found, there's still something thrilling about it. Maybe he isn't staring death in the face like he did every time he and Lance went
toe to toe, every time it was him and Lance against the world, but he holds his breath and lets death walk right by him. He knocks death out and makes a copy of his lists and logs. Death forgets that threats don't walk only in the light.

Keith is knelt at a door, trying to undo its stubborn lock to reach the empty room behind, Zorah guarding, when Kolivan radios in: "Thirty doboshes, meet at entry point. I'm almost done at control. Anything interesting on your ends?"

"Not much," Tarandi replies quietly. "They seem to be updating security, but not here. Zorah, Keith?"

" Haven't heard about security," Zorah replies, "but we've found a room that's pretty tough to get into, so maybe there's something in here. And I need to sweep the rest of the floor."

"Be quick," Kolivan says. "Be safe."

"And you, Kolivan, Tarandi."

"And you, love."

The comms go silent, and Keith bites back a growl as he fucks up the hack again. Tech was never his fucking style, okay? Pidge would've broken this door open five fucking minutes ago. Keith would've bashed it in, if he was allowed. But he isn't.

"Keith," murmurs Zorah after a pair of bots came their way, and she had to yank him and sticker them up to the ceiling to avoid detection, "maybe we should leave it alone. It'll take a half-varga to sweep the rest of the floor and return to the entry point. It could just be nothing in there."

"Or it could be something," Keith replies determinedly, staring at the console he's still trying to hack. "I'm not leaving."

"No..." Zorah sighs, looks round. "Look...patrols circulate roughly every fifteen doboshes. So...you should be safe here for a while. Are you comfortable with me leaving you here so I can search the rest of this floor?"

"You're gonna leave me alone?" Keith asks, glancing back for a second. The impression so far was that they were absolutely going to coddle him every step of the way in his journey to becoming a full-fledged Blade initiate.

"I can stay here if you'd like-"

"What? No, that's- that's fine. Yeah, go. I'm fine."

"You're sure?" Zorah's mask dissipates for a second so Keith can feel the full effects of her single raised brow aimed down at him. "Keith, you cannot do anything reckless, or-"

"What exactly could I even do? I'm going to stay here and open this fucking door and see what's behind it. I'll wait inside until you come back to I don't get caught by another patrol. We'll go to the entry point. We'll leave. With any luck, I might actually find something."

That actually makes her smile. "Alright, alright. If you hear this" - she knocks three times fast, pauses, then twice - "then it's me, okay? I shouldn't be too long. Good luck. Be safe."

"You too."
"Stars on your side, Keith."

He watches her the entire time she walks down the corridor, but even before she reaches the end of it and turns, she becomes a shadow, flickers out of sight. Is it an almost magical property? Is it the suits? Is it part of being a Blade? Or maybe she's there, maybe his eyes are staring right where she's walking, but the darkness has embraced her as one of its own. Maybe she looks back and cannot see him.

There is no point looking after what is already gone. Keith looks back down at the console - he fucked up again, no surprise - and really concentrates. He's attached another device to the side of the console, as instructed, which helps scramble the lock a bit, but Keith still physically needs to finish it off. Pick out certain patterns, cross a few wires. If there wasn't something special behind that door, it wouldn't have a lock like this, right? They haven't been locked out of a single door yet.

It takes time. Tech was part of his training, too, but a week of lessons is only worth so much. It takes maybe five minutes more, but eventually, the lock gives, he slips in, and closes the door carefully behind him.

Darkness surrounds him for two seconds, until a light flickers, and the room is lit by the usual purple glow. Surrounding Keith...are bookcases.

Or, the space equivalent. Holopads tucked into folders, lining the room. On the opposite side of him sits a single computer.

He practically runs over, shoves the seat aside, and starts hacking in. It's a little easier now that he knows some of what he's reading, but only barely. They weren't kidding when they said they'd make him learn the alphabet, and he hasn't moved much beyond that in his language classes. It's the kind of thing that wouldn't even make Pidge blink, that she'd run through in minutes, if not seconds. Keith has to hunker down and focus, keep an eye on his hands, on what's flashing across the screen. Locked files that he can't open, but he can download. Warnings in red. Big headers with scores of paragraphs beneath, as if someone has been archiving something, or watching an event unfold, and written every single detail they thought relevant down in the report. It just feels important. None of the other data they've grabbed looks anything like this.

And maybe he wants to be special. He and Zorah have found fuck all, Kolivan will have downloaded something of interest from control, and Tarandi's found evidence of a new security system being implemented elsewhere. This door is locked for a reason. These logs look different for a reason. Even if he can't understand what the fuck he's even looking at, he's copying it all, downloading it all, holding his breath every time he hears even a hint of noise from the space around him. Heart beats and his palms sweat and he's no in any immediate danger whatsoever, but the adrenaline still pulses through him.

A victory of a different kind, collecting this information without the galra ever realising they were there. Killing them is easy at this point, rescuing planets is a daily occurrence at times, but that's all immediate changes he's enacting - he does something once and leaves it alone. Discovering this information, whatever it is, may be nothing now. May be nothing for a long time. But maybe it'll have something useful contained with in, even if it's not life-changing. Maybe, in time, it'll make as big a difference as driving the galra empire away from an enslaved planet.

That's why he came here, right? To save lives in other ways, through different methods? Obstructed from enacting justice across the universe by the mere presence of Lance, a shadow always just behind him, out of sight, Keith turned to this. And it is different, and it is strange, and his fingers are clumsy and he can hear his own breathing pick up when he makes a mistake, it makes everything feel real, makes that single week of training feel worth it.
It's not the same as it was at Voltron. But he's not the same- or at least, he wants to be. He wants to be stronger, not in the way Lance is strong, but the way Shiro is strong, the way Allura is determined and focused and so scared, but in control. Of his head, his thoughts, his emotions. His heart flops uselessly outside his body, Keith yanked it out his own chest and gave it to Lance but Lance tossed it on the floor and it's taking so long to crawl back to him. He wants it back. He wants to be himself again.

He copies the data off the console. There's so much of it, the galra bots Zorah warned him of have come and gone before the download has finished, and Keith barely has the time to rip the device from the computer before Zorah's knocking at the door.

They meet silently, Keith nodding to assure her he got the data, and they creep back along the way they came, past all those rooms already explored, housing sleeping galra and stolen data, and to the utility room. Tarandi and Kolivan are already there, Kolivan taps his wrist before they leave the base, and sneak back to their ship.

"You were a dobosh late," Kolivan intones once he's settled into the pilot seat, and Zorah skips over to the back of his seat and pokes at his face.

"Oh, the shame!" she cries, clutching a hand to her chest and leaning back dramatically against the seat. "What a poor example I have set for our dearest star Keith! How will I ever repent... I shall return home; I shall infiltrate, on your order, Kolivan, and do anything for anything-"

"Shut up," Kolivan mutters, starting the engine and beginning to lift off.

"You're not going anywhere near there," Tarandi says, grabbing her wife and pulling her away from Kolivan. "Find anything? Seemed pretty quiet down there."

"It was," Zorah says, and she keeps speaking but Keith's eyes catch on the way her hand finds Tarandi's arm and slides easily down it to entwine their fingers together. Their hoods are down, now, their masks dissipated to nothing. It technically counts as a mission report, Keith thinks, as Zorah recounts what happened after their easy entrance to the base, she speaks directly to Kolivan at times but her eyes remain on Tarandi's face. Just searching. Looking for something, Keith thinks. After every mission, looking for anything wrong, any error, any mistake carved onto skin that hasn't been noticed yet. How her eyes settle finally on Tarandi's, how she smiles even as she speaks, like Tarandi is the warm, safe beach Zorah was waiting to wash ashore upon. The way Tarandi smiles back, how they move minusculey to face each other and link their other hands, how absentmindedly Tarandi kisses the back of Zorah's palm, like she was waiting, too, for Zorah to appear.

_I've been doing this for decades_, Zorah had said before, hands tight round Tarandi's, sounding almost offended. An easy mission, they'd all said, and it was pretty easy, he thinks. Unbearably easy for them, surely, but they draw into each others' orbit as if being separate and knowing the other could potentially get into trouble was agonising.

No matter how unreasonable. How absolutely ridiculous it is. Senior officers of the base, Tarandi born a Blade and Zorah one for at least two decades, Tarandi sweeping through classes of children and double-checking their alright, pausing when she comes across Blades throughout the base to ask their how they're doing and if they need anything. Zorah in the armoury, sharpening blades, taking weapon requests, sending her wife out to threaten people into giving their weapons back. Strong, capable women, and yet moved so easily by fear.

_By love._
By some combination of the two.

Lance was strong and capable, too. Keith was- is- well, he was a paladin of Voltron, wasn't he? That *means* he was strong and capable, too. And maybe Lance looking out for him was fake, or at least not what he thought, not *motivated* by love like Keith had stupidly assumed, but Keith... He watched Lance fight and it was like terror being reborn over and over again within the body of the boy Keith loved. Lance was strong, and capable, but he couldn't feel anything, and he never seemed to know when he was hurt. How Keith would rove his eyes over him after every mission, double-checking what Lance cared not for, the way Lance would look at him, head tilted, like he expected it, almost enjoyed it.

But there was never any linking of hands, no smiling at each other once everything was okay, because it was never okay. No matter how lowkey the fight, no matter how easily the opponents were decimated, Lance always ended up with a blast wound somewhere, a slice across his stomach, cracks in his armour. Feeling invincible but being vulnerable made him careless.


"Keith? Keith!" A hand yanking his hood down and ruffling his hair pulls his back to reality. "Come on, star boy! You found something, didn't you? You got through the door."

Keith shrugs out from under Zorah's hand on his shoulder, shakes his head to clear this thoughts, and says, "Yeah, I found something, but I don't know what it is. It looked important. I thought you could look at it when we get back."

"Don't be silly," Zorah says, taking a holopad out her utility belt and holding out a hand. "Give me it. Let me have a look."

So Keith passes the stick over and she plugs it in, Tarandi leaning in behind her, resting her chin on Zorah's shoulder.

Zorah hums as she reads it, scrolling quickly through the pages, but then her eyes widen and she says, "Oh."

Tarandi's lips part but she says nothing.

"Oh," Zorah says, and looks at Keith for a split seconds before wheeling around and shoving the holopad in front of Kolivan's face. "Look," she whispers at him. "Look at that! How come we never knew this?"

"Knew what?" Keith asks, still standing by Tarandi, hands empty.

"A whole host of them... Even Krolia's research hasn't extended this far - these must be incredibly well-hidden..."

"She's been there for over a deca-phoeb - if they still don't trust her enough to give her this kind of information..." Tarandi murmurs.

"Krolia's a good agent - they *should* trust her by now. They do! These must be super secret. These must be..."

"Forgive me, Zorah, if I don't return my weapons to you instantly after we return - I'm holding a base-wide meeting effective immediately. Keith - explain how you found this, again."

"What are you even talking about?" Keith asks, arms crossed. "What does my mother have to do
"Oh, it's incredible!" Zorah gushes, wide-eyed. "Oh, your mother is infiltrating a high-security intelligence base, she gives us locations to check out, but... We knew the galra empire had their own spy web. Of course they did! But this lays it out perfectly...so we don't really need her there anymore. And it lowers the chance of her being discovered, you know, since we're not only raiding bases she sends up the coordinates of. It's been dangerous for her lately... She hasn't contacted us in phoebs. We barely know she's alive, sometimes. Oh - but she is! She is definitely alive. This just opens up so many opportunities!"

"Kolivan, the opening this gives us- think of the resources we'll discover, the information we'll learn-"

"I know, Tarandi," Kolivan says as they shoot across the galaxy, their base already within eyesight, "I know. Keith...you have no idea what you've done today. It's better if I explain in front of everyone - but, thank you. If it's as Zorah says - you chose to split up so she could sweep the base while you broke through the lock - then I admire your determination. The information you found has the potential to change everything we know."

He doesn't know what to say, so he says nothing. Just watches as the wives buzz together, grinning, whispering, how calmly Kolivan re-enters the base and powers down in the hangar, the way he smiles at Keith, like he's proud of him, like on his very first mission, Keith did something right.

It keeps happening. Zorah grins at him, Tarandi smiles, Kolivan hauls him up in front of the conference hall to explain how he found what he did. People shake his hand. They thank him. They say you probably have no idea how huge this is, but it changes a lot. But he does know what it means - a hidden spy web, coordinates and all, suddenly available, ripe for the taking. Keith knows what that fucking means. That means the galra could have hidden a metric fuck ton of info from the Blades, from Voltron, the coalition as a whole. About Zarkon's plans, about Lotor's. About their savage desire for quintessence. About what, exactly, they were doing with Shiro the second time round.

But mostly, as he trails round the base accepting congratulations, receiving smiles from strangers as he eats dinner, as Hunk and Pidge and Shiro all cheer for him when he explains the day's outing, he thinks mostly about his mother. In danger, but slightly less so now. Able to come home early, if she deigns it so. Will it be soon? Within a week? A month?

So consumed by these thoughts is he, of pride in what he's done, a strange warmth brewing at the way the others look at him now, of his mother, out there, somewhere, soon, perhaps, to come home...that he doesn't think of Lance at all that night.

He doesn't even dream of him.

Chapter End Notes

look look look look look it's a lesbian from outer space. followed by her lover who's a lesbian from outer space too. speaking of i realised i was a lesbian some time mid march. Please Clap.

all hc surrounding krolia, eg galtean and having druid powers, stem from conversations had with a friend before season 5 even aired abt how keith's concept
look (white hair + fangs) reminded us of altean Looks (eg lotor). so thats that on that. thanks s5 for giving me krolia's actual name and not forcing me to make up smth stupid. also i thought abt making krolia's mission the same thing as in s5 but i only watched it once and i dont rmbr anything abt it so....unswag. unyeet. unstan etc.

also idc abt canon blade of marmora. my city now.

uh. otherwise ever since i changed up my chapter posts to get a swaggier look i dont think theyve been showing up in mobile tags, so feel free to rb the post here and give me a sweet boost.

goodnight...pls comment...im sorry....its half five am........i have an opticians appointment in six hrs......
faltering

Chapter Summary

lance wants to hope, but the druids are everywhere. they won't let him.

Chapter Notes

time isn't real. i do what i want

anyway im so glad we've all agreed that voltron ended after s3. luckily that's the last canon season within this fic!! so who gives a fuck about anything that happened after!! except maybe lance getting his broadsword. that was a cool thing never discussed ever again

anyway;; i am sorry;;;;;; but here she is at long last, our midway point, miss chapter 15...at a stunning 25.3k words....idk what to say... a lot happens!!! again, please check the tags and if anything worries you, skip to the end notes where ill be detailing tws and mild spoilers for what happens in the chapter. this is absolutely the heaviest one yet and i try not to pull any punches. pls put u and ur mental health first!!

i listed a poem below, an absolutely excellent one so i encourage u all to check it out!! some of it was so mos lance it physically Hurt me the first time i read it, but if u want a song, too, here's heart of darkness by sam tinnesz from shadowhunters! (f)

also finally i commissioned @estrellalance on tumblr for some Arte for one of these scenes, so ill leave it here but also in the end notes!!! pls check her out her lance art esp is to Die for probs one of my fave lances tbh!!!

enjoy <333333333333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Summer after summer has ended,
balm after violence:
it does me no good
to be good to me now;
violence has changed me.
October, Louise Gluck

--

Forming Voltron is a fucking nightmare.

An actual, living nightmare.

A horrible, nerve-wracking nightmare.
The kind of thing he lies down in bed and has real nightmares about.

The druids are in his head; he knows that. He knows that, even if it sounds fucking insane. He hears their thoughts slithering into his, turning from gold to purple to blue like his until he can't figure out which ones are which anymore. He hears things like hurt yourself or hurt everyone or kill them all and he doesn't know if he's thinking it or if someone else is thinking it for him. Sometimes he looks at his hands and wishes he could hurt himself, more desperately than anything, and when he's training every instinct in his body is pointing out weaknesses he can exploit in the others until they back down, and then he has to stop himself. Stop himself, and his thoughts, because sometimes his body screams at him to keep exploiting the weaknesses; sometimes his hands itch with the urge to tear the others to pieces.

Is it really him? Is it the druids? Is it the tainted quintessence burning through his veins?

The world is full of things too frightening for Lance to comprehend, let alone speak of; how does he let them know how he feels? How does he explain to them that this is painful, and scary, and too often not at all worth it? Forming Voltron is like one tectonic plate bashing against another, forming volcanoes, causing earthquakes, splitting the land right down the middle. Lance is on one side. Voiceless, alone.

The others opposite him, across a gap too far to jump, too deep to climb down then back up. Allura tries to build a bridge, but she can't do it alone, Coran isn't enough help, Hunk skitters away, Pidge doesn't move. Shiro is asking them to walk away. Keith is already gone.

But their voices remain. Their voices are in his head, every time they form Voltron.

Shiro, the loudest - commanding them, controlling them. Or at least Lance. Everyone else seems capable of moving of their own volition, but Lance is a stone that cannot move without being thrown, without Shiro demanding him to plug in his bayard or swing wildly at the simulation laser bolts flying at them from the castleship. Lance can't refuse it, either. Shiro asks him to do something and he does it.

He doesn't get to make a decision.

It's a fucking nightmare.

Red doesn't help, either. She follows Shiro's command, not his. Trapped inside a metal war ship, his head overwhelmed with other voices and thoughts and feelings and choices that aren't his, that he can't control, that he can't stop. He wants to curl up on his seat until it all goes away; he wants to scream so loud everyone else shuts up.

But he just sits there, voiceless.

He doesn't get a say anymore. And he doesn't deserve one.

Knowing that doesn't make it easier. Every night, curled up on the bed in darkness, their voices flood his mind, intertwining with the druids until they are indistinguishable. Shiro's voice says you're a monster, Lance. You deserve to die and who's to say he isn't saying that? Behind Lance's back, to the others around him? Who's to say he isn't thinking that, constantly? In the mindmeld, in Voltron, Lance hears bits and pieces of Shiro's thoughts that essentially equate to that sentiment - Shiro really does think he's a monster. He thinks Lance deserves a greater punishment than something they can conjure up with their bare hands. But to whose hands must they throw him so that he can be punished accordingly? Even Lance's own do no harm to himself. Should they toss him to the druids? Drown him in the sea? What if even the elements of the world around him aren't
strong enough to hold him down?

...What if that is no longer important? Lance wants to move forward but the one time he took a chance on hope, he tore Hunk's fucking eye out. Every time dares to hope that being a paladin will get easier, he feels a thousand druids' talons digging into his brain and ravaging it slowly, methodically, into mutilated pieces. The voices linger. That sense of control that is no longer his stays, permeates, until he's standing in the shower unable to move because the druids, his friends, his head keeps telling him to plug the drain and let the shower fill up, allow his legs to pin him to the floor, and would he fight back? If he threw a punch, would the glass of the shower wall break? Lance thinks maybe he wouldn't want it too.

What does he want, then? Death, and pain, and retribution. That which he is immersed in yet refuses to engulf him fully. Life? Hope? Happiness? But he has already ruined all chances of those.

Friendship? Belonging? Someone on his side?

Hunk's eye, wet and sticky in his hand.

Allura's voice, shaking, face tear-stained.

Keith, leaving nothing but the cold behind.

...To do good. To fight galra. Kill them all, the druids say he can do it and when he trains on his own, shutting his eyes, not listening to the levels bounce up, he knows it, too. He doesn't have to be friends with the others; he doesn't have to ever be near them. Form Voltron, shoot down ships, follow orders because that's all he can do - and then get loaded off onto the planet below. Wreak havoc like he used to, except a thousand times more intense now, more deadly. The galra wanted a monster and so a monster he shall give them. He will decimate. He will save planets. It's the least he can do.

It's all he can do, now. It seems murder is the only good these hands are capable of.

Days pass like this. Lance doesn't count them, but he can feel them digging into his body, the weight of them on his shoulders. Acutely aware of how he wakes up on the floor of his room, panting, gasping for the light. Showering blindly, lest he glimpse the scars on this body of his. Training, too fast, too strong, too deadly - turning his own features to steel, a shield for the others' shocked, horrified gazes to bounce off of. He eats, he sleeps, mindmelds are held and Lance's brain is cracked to pieces every time they form Voltron.

Days pass.

His body never tires.

It doesn't even belong to him, at this point. That quintessence ritual, whatever it did to him- before, his soul and his body matched, both evil, unforgiving things, but now... The ritual changed him, his soul, and now it doesn't fit within this body. It- he wants to get out. It's no longer Lance smashing gladiators to pieces for hours at a time, nor is it him waking up in his dark, empty room, nor him staggering through the day, outrunning shadows no one else can see and wincing from the drag of nails no one else can feel.

It's this body. This thing of the druids, they marked it, they changed it. They forcefed it quintessence and pushed it through inhuman training regimens and kept it locked up in the dark all day until it was- this, something no longer deemed as human. Something monstrous. Lance doesn't want to be monstrous.
He doesn't want anything to do with it. What it's capable of, what it's already done. The way it shuts Lance's mind out during battle and operates on its own, inflicting death and destruction everywhere it goes.

He feels like a bomb handcrafted by the druids. Set up to destroy, to explode in a way so fantastic it'll decimate everyone surrounding him. Those trying to help. Even the ones just watching from afar. He has no control over it, but if enough people poke or prod or invade his mind then it's going to happen. Something awful. Something irreversible.

Something fatal.

Days pass.

He doesn't count them.

He doesn't talk to people.

He doesn't look Hunk in the eye.

One. Eye.

He doesn't look anyone in the eye. He looks them in their mind, even if he doesn't want to. In the mindmeld, their memories sit like lakes overflowing from their heads, and sometimes Lance can't resist taking a dip in Allura's pond, exploring old, deceased friends, a ruined planet, an innocent personality. Hunk's, sometimes, but his own - his younger - face flits up so often in those memories that Lance can't stand to look. Even with Pidge, his older self pops up far too often.

He doesn't even try looking into Shiro's mind.

His own head doesn't resemble that - static builds round his brain, and though the others try to peel back the layers they keep finding more static. There's nothing left for them to find.

Without him, they deem their joint state stable enough to return to missions once more. He sits at the table and listens as they speak but words won't regurgitate themselves out his mouth. They say it's tough, but we must return to our duty or this is as close as we're going to get and maybe it doesn't get better than this. He thinks: but you're tearing my head apart.

He thinks: but I can't even function when I can feel you clawing at my brain.

He thinks: but I can't do this. I'm not a paladin.

Stripped of words and choice and control, though, he says nothing, he nods along, he stands with the rest, leaves with them, trains with them. Everything is almost normal. Everything is almost like how it was.

Except him.

--

Most of all, he misses Keith.

--

He doesn't look Hunk in the eye; he wakes up on the floor in his bedroom, in devastating, bleak darkness, and for long, stifling hours, he loses himself; he is back in the druid's ship, he is on the table, he is in the ring, he is locked up in desolation, and he is alone.
Except for Allura.

Who keeps coming back.

He doesn't question it, only because he can't. He wants to. He wants to look her in the eye - two eyes - and say: *why?*

What compels you?

Where do you have look to find something worthy in me?

Because Lance has no idea. He shuts his eyes in the shower, getting changed, his mirror is still broken. Is there a glint in his eye that draws out the compassion in Allura? Is is the scars on his face, the burns on his body, that guilt her into action? Is it his silence that begets words from her?

Does she feel sorry for him?

"Come on," she whispers now, as Lance blinks open his eyes and sees the lights are switched on, and Allura is knelt by his side, hand on his shoulder. "It was a nightmare, Lance, it's nothing now."

It wasn't a nightmare, though. He was in Voltron. He was fighting the bad guys. Even now, the adrenaline of blasting through enemy ships crashes through his veins, leaving him jittery, hands clenched. Part of him wanted to keep fighting. Part of him *enjoyed* it.

But the press of voices...thoughts...minds against and never alongside his, part of him wanted to drive Red into a cliff and crush himself, wanted to position himself directly in front of a galra cruiser, see if they blew him up. There were so many entities in his head, trying to grab at the tatters of his mind to strengthen themselves, druids trying to kidnap him again, paladins trying to make *him* a paladin. They all wanted so much he couldn't give. Once they were done, there was no room for Lance left. They took his body, they took his soul, now they come for his rotten, burnt brain. What do they *want* from it? It's diseased. It's sick like the rest of him.

"Lance," Allura still whispers, and he nods, sits up. "Why don't you go get showered, hm? And-well... Let's talk about some things on the way to breakfast, shall we? I'll wait outside..." She speaks softly, stands with grace, her eyes trailing round his room. Takes his hand in hers and helps him stand, too. Allows him to move in front of her, she stands patiently in the centre of the room as he leaves, the door sliding shut between them.

When Allura is around, the urge to be sick is less intense than usual; still, he has to stand at the sink, curling his hands into fists so he doesn't grab the ledges and crumble them to dust, and breathe deeply, forcefully, locking any sickness back inside his throat. Cupping his hands under the running tap, he takes a quick drink, doesn't look at his palms. They fixed the toilet, didn't fix the mirror. Maybe they don't want him to glimpse whatever they see when they look into the vacant wells of his eyes; maybe they knew he'd break again it before he let that happen. He prefers the black hole, the cracks like a mermaid's scales that dissect the rest of the mirror. Instead of a face there is only darkness, only a shattered, useless object.

So he showers; it rains, he thinks of Cuba, regret permeates his entire body until nausea threatens once more. Shuts his eyes, dries off, gets changed. Dark clothes, a little baggy, anything that hides the essence of himself. Long sleeves, so he doesn't keep looking down at his wrist and wondering, looking down at his wrist and *wishing*. Thinking back to that night and dreaming of scars, of blood, of justice.

None of that. Allura waits outside. Once a shining beacon of justice, now Lance wonders if his
corruption has spread to her, too. When it comes to him, she forgets justice, and retribution, and treating evil with punishment. Despite his actions, she sees no evil within him - at least, not one she can treat with punishment. She thinks whatever evil within him can be quelled with help, with support. She thinks if she keeps extending her arm Lance will grab on, and her goodness will flow through their joint hands into him.

But it can't. And it won't. Didn't they already try? Allura testing his quintessence, being jolted back by something tainted in him; an entire planet of people crowded round him, joining together to tackle the darkness within him, and yet it did not move, they could not shake it from him. Evilness clings to him, stains the armour of his skin like blood. Becomes part of him until the two are entwined: Lance and evil and Paladin and monster.

It infiltrates everything. White tile, shadows in the corners. Darkness everywhere in his room. He's barely breathing when he stumbles out to Allura, and she just takes his arm as if they stroll through a sunlit garden, gently guides him down the corridor. Doesn't ask, because he's done this before. He keeps doing it. He's not sure she knows why he's so scared.

"I won't deny I'm surprised at our success in forming Voltron," is how she begins it, and their eyes meet for a moment before she looks away. Lance just nods, even though he doesn't quite agree. They can form Voltron, it's true, but it only lasts so long before it all becomes too much for Lance and he breaks the whole thing apart, every time. Always him, every time. "I know things are difficult for you. I know how you long to train and fight as you desire. And I know you believe certain...things due to the..." Another glance his way. "...voices you seem to be hearing. But I think hiding here, focusing on forming Voltron, on training together... I know we need it, but I think perhaps we're stagnating a little. I- Lance, I think we should return to our mission again. I- I want to know if you're comfortable with that."

His heart leaps. His pulse races, in his neck, his wrist, heart thumping against his steel ribs. Their desire is his desire, to fight again, even if it's their own galra, to see him snap necks, crush skulls, bash any monster in his way into tiny bits and pieces. His bayard, a trident. Guns slung round his shoulders like always, pistols and daggers on his hips, Altean grenades strapped onto his belt. If he misses Keith the most, then right behind him is murder, he misses murder, the way people stare at him once they've seen him on the field, how corpses litter themselves around his feet, how, if he lifts his foot, he can see the remains of those bodies tread into the soles of his shoes. How unnerved the other paladins always get, wide-eyed, movements jerky, afraid, because they don't want to set him off, don't want to become a victim of his rampages.

Allura wants to help him, but Lance isn't broken glass that might prick her a few times before she pieces him back together; Lance is a mace, Lance is a gun that never runs out of ammo, he's a thousand burning arrows, he is his three-forked trident, he is whole and strong and powerful enough to crush anyone who gets too near regardless of intention. Lance is a weapon. He can't control the whims of those who pull his trigger.

"Are you, Lance? I understand - I can imagine- or, I can't, but- well, Hunk's training has gone so well, he's happy to return to duty, a-and it's been so long - the galra empire, they don't wait for us, Lance. Haggar's silent but that only means she's working on some awful plan. Lotor's been steadily capturing planets and using them for his will for phoebes, now. We've made a dent by freeing planets, but- it's still not enough."

All she wants is to save people. A pure and noble and genuine sort of kindness, of goodness in the soul. Lance can't touch it nor those who wield it, but the blood he spills can at least prop them up to reach the giddy heights stolen from him.
He nods again.

"I can speak with Shiro - agree perhaps to only form Voltron when the need is greatest, a-and- or we could even send you off on your own, like before, remember? You were so good at that, having a man on the ground capable of such..." Her eyes wander again. "...strength helps more than you can imagine. And it keeps the citizens safer instead of having us all in our lions. We can put out a call to those in need... Contact any Blades in this area... The rebels might have work for us... It doesn't have to be hard - it just has to help."

_Help._ The word itself is like a trigger in his throat, he nearly gags on it, has to look away, seal his lips together to prevent the sickness lunging up his throat and out his mouth. He _wants_ to help, that's the worst part - but everything he touches wilts and burns and turns to dust, to ashes, to darkness. He knows, before the ritual, that he wanted to help Keith - protect him, save him, keep him happy if that was at all possible - and now look what he's done to him. So then he wants to help Keith by breaking up, by keeping Keith away from him, and all he fucking does is break Keith's heart and turn Shiro's concern for him into pure disgust. He wants to help the others fight, so he agrees to mindmeld sessions, but they see blood and guts in his visions, his hand round a heart, they _feel_ how wrong his mind is with theirs, and it hurts them, too. His entire existence _hurts_ them.

Allura tries to help him.

He repays her by taking out Hunk's eye.

"Lance, r-really," Allura says quietly, and she finally keeps her gaze on his, eyes wide, appealing to him. Her hands keep knotting up in her dress. "I think it's time. If you're comfortable, a-and ready-we...we can't go on like this. The druids tried to make you into a monster, but- but it doesn't have to be that way. You're powerful, but you can use that power for good. For _us_. You already have."

But he doesn't want this power at _all_.

He isn't _capable_ of goodness. How can any goodness come from something so wrong as him? Darkness inside him shrouds his insides like a fog; he opens his mouth and smoke comes out. He doesn't mean for it to stain everything it comes into contact with, but it does it anyway. He doesn't mean to infect others with his own sickness; he is just trying to breathe.

So he shrugs, and keeps his mouth shut.

"Please, Lance," she whispers, and his eyes shut, they keep walking but he ducks his head, doesn't look at her. She's so _sincere_. He cannot fucking bear it. "One mission. One simple mission. _Please._"

How does he say no to that? He wants to help, too. If it's possible - it feels impossible, it feels _wrong_ - but if he can... If Keith can't fly Red and they can't save people without forming Voltron... If Lance is the single piece in this puzzle out of place...

He nods, and Allura's hands move to take one of his own, her head pressing briefly against his shoulder as she whispers _thank you_ before she pulls away, leads him into the dining room, and begins discussing said mission with the others.

His plate is already at his seat. He is at the end of the table, so only Allura sits by him. Opposite is Coran, Hunk on Allura's side, Pidge hunched up furthest away from him. He focuses on cutting up his food without breaking anything, only so he doesn't see the way Shiro's face changes when Allura says his name, how she brings up a mission and Hunk reaches tentatively to his eye patch.
Their voices rise in protest, because Lance knows what they see, the things they hear every time they form Voltron. They know his mind is too shattered to bond with theirs. They know he's wrong. He's not a hero like the rest of them.

But there are things he can do that they can't, things, though awful and disgusting and conjure horror in all its forms around him, that actually help people. Things he can do that they won't, that they're too good to do, that they're not willing to do themselves. Shiro is noble and upstanding and always trying to be good; Allura's right hand, her second-in-command.

Lance is the opposite, so he stands at her left, and does the work the others wouldn't even contemplate needs doing. He can resign himself to this. Helping people comes in many different forms. Sometimes the only help they need is a little blood on his hands.

That's how Allura explains it, actually: "I know it's not ideal," she says, and Lance refrains from rolling his eyes, muttering underatement like the pre-ritual him would've done, "but we must face reality. Lance is our Red Paladin now, and besides...none of us our capable of what he can do, now. Shiro - we need only form Voltron in our most desperate moments. I truly think that if we sort out some system where Lance is able to fight with us in Voltron, but also on the ground, against galra armies, then he will be of immense use to us. Shiro, I know you don't forget the relief you felt every time you stepped on a planet and knew you had nothing to worry about, because Lance had already killed all the galra. He's our best fighter. And- he's basically invincible, now. He is an asset we cannot set aside due to- resentment."

"Resentment-" Shiro scoffs, but Pidge interrupts him, softly, quietly, enough that Lance barely even hears her.

"She's right," Pidge says, and this shocks Shiro enough to grind his countering argument to a halt. "It'd be stupid to leave him behind. He terrifies everyone. Even the galra."

"Even the people he's supposed to save," Hunk mumbles, eye downcast at his half-eaten food.

"Even me," Allura admits, and Lance forces himself not to react, keeps eating, takes a sip of water. Eyes straight down, unblinking, mouth flat and bored. Allura is scared of him. He knew that already. "But that's not what is important - he is a paladin of Voltron. We need him. And...I think...he needs this. To...kill again. We haven't seen what he's like against the galra now that he has his quintessence back. I think- I think we all need to know."

Shiro sighs, crosses his arms, slumps back against his chair. "It isn't right," he says, and Lance can only agree. "Whenever we form Voltron...it's off. We last maybe ten minutes before whatever the fuck's wrong with him messes it up. That's not- we're supposed to be heroes, Allura. People are meant to look up to us. But Lance... I don't want- people shouldn't have to see that. Kids shouldn't have to look out their windows and see Lance slaughtering the way he does in the name of justice."

"We don't have a choice," Allura says, and when Shiro looks to Coran with wide eyes, he only nods. "Let's train together this morning. No mindmeld, no Voltron. Coran, you and I start looking for calls for aid, allies in the region - Pidge, keep working in the lab. Shiro, if you can train with Hunk some more that'd be wonderful. We also need to be on the lookout for rebel data, you know, doctors who might be able to help..."

Lance stops listening after that. This is the line Allura is insistent on - Lance returns to Voltron, and Lance gets help. Proper, medical help. She wants to find a therapist, or something like it. She wants another quintessence test. The incision on his brain healed. The galra prosthetics removed. She wants to take a rubber to his face and erase every scar, every sharp line, any indication that he is not who he once was.
He can't listen to it, that's all. He can stomach some forms of hope, hope that he helps people, hope that killing the amount of galra he kills is a good thing - but actually getting better? Opening up to people, explaining all the things he feels? He can't. The language hasn't been spoken into existence. The druids sew his mouth together, they don't let him speak.

She wants them to train, so when he finishes eating, he returns to his room, closes his eyes, and changes into his paladin armour. He's doing target practise when the others come in, and even when they leave, he does not join them. Pauses, briefly, for lunch, then gets right back into it, because it's all he can do, it's the only thing he can handle. When Shiro and Hunk come along for their own training, Lance leaves for the gym, just to move, just to pretend he can feel his muscles burning. It's all he does, every day, is train, and fight, and get so fucking sick of himself. Allura's right. He needs to kill. He'll start dragging his fingernails through the veins of his own skin if he doesn't feel something soon.

Something different from disgust and horror and fear. Something that isn't invisible hands choking his throat. Something that isn't tricks of the dark chasing him down hallways. He wants to feel good, feel joy the only way possible.

He knows it's not right, but he doesn't know how else to go on.

--

The missions come in thick and fast once Allura starts requesting them. Once they start coming in, in fact, Lance feels like he can't pause for breath. Alarms will go off, or a comm will come in from the rebels or the Blades, or they'll track down a nearby galra base and begin infiltration, and Lance's shoulders will jump. Fists, clenching. His heart races too fast for him to contain, he can barely breathe. On most missions they have to form Voltron, and Shiro prefers to do it first thing, to shoot down whatever battle cruiser or awful monster the druids have created so that they can split apart and do their own thing. It's about as long as Lance can last, anyway.

Forming Voltron is worse when they have a real opponent to shoot down. Battle cruisers loom and even though he knows it's not a ship full of prisoners with an arena inside, it's the only thing he can think about, and it puts everyone else on edge. The druids send out monsters and sometimes it takes so long for Voltron to kill them that it seems impossible, but they still manage it, and Lance continues to be the most deadly things the druids have ever created.

The others can feel that thought, too.

And it's- it's too much. The others, in his head, telling him what to do, commanding his lion for him, their fears and worries and horror regarding him all swarm his own head, intermix with his own chaotic feelings, and the druids keep hissing at him, they don't stop, he should break away from the others and tear them down with his ion beam, he should blast the castleship apart, he helps kill a monster and they murmur good, very good, see how powerful you are, how strong? Look at all these monsters we've created, yet none of them can live up to you.

It's a corruption. Right at the heart of his soul, it's ruined everything inside of him, everything outside. He isn't the same anywhere, and it turns everything good to ashes in his hands. Lance wants to be a paladin and he wants to help fight the empire and he wants, above all, to do good, but when he forms Voltron he stops belonging to himself, whatever self there was left, he is removed entirely from his body to make room for everyone else. He squeezes his eyes shut, locks his jaw because he wants to scream, desperately, just to expel something from his body, but he can't.

He just can't. This body, this lion, this team... A cage as surely as his place in the galra ship was.
So he breaks away. He fractures the connection, Voltron is undone once again. And every time, they send him to the ground, in whatever capacity possible. It's fine, it's good, it's- exciting. A thumping heart, fingers that tremble. Inability to breathe. The things he has nightmares about. Yet, somehow, the only good part about his existence.

Fighting galra soldiers on the ground, at least, feels familiar. It really is the best place for a weapon like him. Allura picks a mission, the others make a plan, Lance keeps training, and eventually Allura points him at as many galra as possible and shoots. And that's his life, now, training and fighting and killing, nightmares and panic attacks and staying awake in bed for hours at a time, missing Keith, making himself sick with guilt for the things he said, the things he didn't.

It's not much of a life, but it's all he's good for, these days.

After several missions rescuing various planets or helping out rebel bases, Allura finally lets them attack a galra base. She sits with him, sometimes, at night, cross-legged on his desk chair, laying flat on her back on his floor, and talks to him about these things. Plans, ideas, the way Hunk plaits her hair that day. One day, she asks, "Are you still afraid of the galra?"

Which is a pretty stupid question, and Lance tilts his head down at her from where he's sat on his bed. Allura's laid on her side on his floor, her mice chasing each other in front of her while she chatters away.

Rolling her eyes at herself, she then asks, "I mean, of course. I mean...if we go to a galra base...can you...handle it? I don't want to- I know places can be triggering, a-and- obviously it's not the place you were trapped in, but... Well, all galra ships look the same, so..." She trails off as he shrugs at her, waves a hand to show he's fine with it.

Even when he's not sure.

"I just don't want- I was worried about you even back on the beach, and you were...far more stable back then. I just...worry..."

It's almost incredible to watch, the way her brows twist, the downturn on her lips, her hands wringing together. The mice congregate on her shoulders, or rub their bodies against her hands to soothe her. It's downright insane that Allura would waste her time worrying about him when she knows what he did to Keith, to Hunk. Hunk sleeps in her room but she stays up almost every night talking to him, expecting no reply, and will come just as surely at the most ridiculous hours of the morning to waken him, her white hair a halo, an angel allowing him to bask in her glow if just for a minute.

And she gives him so much more than a minute.

"There are galra bases everywhere, that's all... Not all have prisons and labs and all that- hardly any, really. The Blades say they're taking care of a lot of intelligence bases, mostly we're looking at galra who are running quadrants, who are going out and attacking passing ships... That kind of thing... Quashing them would be so easy, Lance, we'd be done so quickly - I'd be at your side, always, if you need me-"

He shakes his head viciously, and Allura pauses, worries her lip.

"Or not at all. Whatever you want. You need only...ask..."

But he doesn't ask, and she knows he never will, so she moves on, starts strategising - *all of us will have to enter the base itself anyway, you might as well go on ahead* - and within days, Coran is
blaring the alarm and pulling up the castleship defences as the rest of them drop into their lions.

Dread and exhilaration twist Lance's stomach into knots, hands of the druids pushing through his skin to rearrange his intestines. Flying alone with Red is okay - she tries so hard to be soothing and kind even when it goes against her impulsive, fast-paced nature - but just waiting for Shiro to call for Voltron grates on his bones. He sits, pilots, as best he can. Shoots down galra ships, blasts off weapons arrays. Follows the orders given to him.

Wishes he could gain the same satisfaction he gets killing galra with the lion that he does when he kills with his bare hands. The blood, at least, wouldn't stain him so deeply.

Inevitably, the galra base spits out their own robot to fight them, too powerful for the lions to handle alone, so Shiro calls out, "Form Voltron!" and Lance loses himself once more. Red slots into place alongside Black, the others slots up against his mind, their thoughts spilling uncontrollably into his. Shiro's, mostly, inspecting every detail of the monster, registering how it readies itself to attack, Pidge already calling up the Voltron shield, Hunk and Allura working together to start dodging its attacks.

They're all focused on the external battle, but Lance fixates on the internal one, he can't help it, it's taking place in his head, it's not like he can ignore it. He tries to keep the walls round his mind as immovable and as harsh as a boulder, but the paladins, the druids, even the galra attacking them have hammers, bigger, heavier, too much for Lance to defend himself against. His mind is a boulder but they keep chipping away at it, digging through every mask, every stone of silence he cast in between himself and them. Isn't he supposed to be a human shield? Isn't he supposed to be able to survive everything? But he can't survive this, can't shield himself from those that pry so deeply into his head. His mind is a pile of ashes in his hands and every voice in his head is a gust of wind, blowing every shred of him away before he closes his fists around that which remains. The ashes slip through his fingers. He loses everything.

He doesn't really know what happens next. His hands are on the controls and he can see what's going on outside just fine, but- his vision blurs, static drowns out the noise in his ears. Shiro's will is strongest, making a plan, executing alongside the others, regardless of what Lance thinks. He is bypassed completely; Red follows Shiro's orders alone. He just knows that, somehow, they take out the monster, and when Lance dwells too long on others' thoughts, on the way they see the monster, huge and formidable and difficult to kill, all he can think of is his time in the arena, when he battled something that looked just like this, just a few times smaller. That feeling of being trapped, and isolated, and barely able to survive... He may have left the arena, but that feeling stays.

Trapped in the castleship, a necessary paladin, an unpredictable monster. Isolated, from the boy he loves, the friends he once called family, a couple of Alteans who help him despite knowing him the least.... And while this body is more than capable of survival, in whatever form it may take, Lance is not so sure his mind is up to task. Days drag by. He dreams, each night, of murder in its most violent acts. Sometimes, when he is sat at the dinner table with the others, he daydreams about pushing a knife into his skin and really feeling the pain of it throughout his entire body.

Mostly, he just waits for moments like these, when the robot is blasted into pieces and Lance's mind immediately ejects him and Red from Voltron, and, overshadowed by a sigh from Shiro, Allura calls his name.

"We'll join you soon enough," she assures him, so goes their plan. "Pidge will follow you once you start cleaning the place out. Good luck, Lance. Stay safe."

She always says that. She doesn't need to.
Once Red has blasted a big enough hole in the side of the base for him to dive through, he leaves her on her own, bubbling up as he darts out her jaws, and into the base. Galra have already clustered round the wound he made, guns out, shooting at him before he's even inside. It's no matter; he conjures his bayard, forms a trident, and starts taking them out.

It's easy.

It's...fun, almost. Exhilarating, at least. He doesn't charge down the corridors; he strolls. Deflects laser blasts if he can be bothered, stabs the trident into a chest, takes out a pistol and starts shooting if he's in the mood for it. It's lazy. There's nothing urgent about it. The amount of galra that the others would have to carefully strategise to kill... Lance walks down a hallway. Waves around a few weapons. He doesn't even blink.

Warmth swells in his chest like a cloud has cleared and sunlight falls upon the cavity beneath his ribs; like all his bones had been dislocated, and in swinging his trident and shooting his guns, they slot back into place, build him up stronger than before, invincible. Smiling, shooting, swinging, he thinks: Invincible.

The goal, like most missions, is to find a big space and start drawing attention. If Pidge creeps in after him, she'll need room to manoeuvre and time to download what she's looking for. Announcing his presence alone causes a stir; enemy galra stick to him like the blood under his nails.

So he finds a big room. An open area full of galra, and full of entrances for galra to ambush him from. He takes out his trident, pats his pistols, solidifies his stance. Then he starts killing.

It's heaven. It's everything he ever wanted, every wish he ever had coming true, every need fulfilled. He's been shut in the darkness, dampness, for so long, barely alive till now; he now steps outside into fresh air, and every breath cleanses him like fire. He shuts his eyes; no need to look, no desire to see the things he's capable of. He already knows. Lodged in his brain, the memories won't get out. The fire cannot cleanse them.

The others talk on his comm; try to tell him what's happening, Pidge is in the base, Allura incoming, Coran protecting the lions. Maybe, even, try to forewarn him of the danger coming. Because he opens his eyes - just to double check everything is as usual - and sees a monster approaching him.

Something big, inhuman... Claws and teeth, like the thing that attacked him in his dream, the one he tried to pluck an eye from before he woke up and realised it was just Hunk, just an old friend. But this- this is real. Flesh and blood. The druids, did they- did they know? In his head, did they- can they spy on his dreams, did they see and did they make this? Because they are in his head. They whisper even during his dreams, why wouldn't they see it, why wouldn't they know?

Paralysed, but for a second. Then...claws; teeth. A danger he can escape, and fight back against.

His heart beats faster, though. Thumps up against his chest, and he pants, trying to breathe, trying to feel anything other than terror. Where's the joy? The exhilaration? Galra soldiers were boring, but now that he faces a genuine opponent, he can hardly stand straight. He wants to let it kill him. He wants to curl up and shut his eyes and not be here, or at the castle, or- anywhere! He wants to find a sea with no galra facility hidden within, sit at its shore with...Keith? Allura? His mama?

He wants to walk into the water and never come out.

Instead, he fights back. It's tough but he's tougher, it's fast but he's faster, laser blasts glance off it, the trident's fork barely hurt it, but Lance wears it down eventually. It collapses in a pile of blood.
and corpses before Lance soon enough, and that is, Lance thinks, the end of it.

Except, almost immediately, a large door across the hall slides open, and another monster crawls out.

Lance kills it.

But then another one, another one, another one. He doesn't know how long it lasts. He forgets.

Everything, so quickly, being rescued, being a paladin, sort of, fighting alongside the others, every tryst with Keith - gone from his mind. Around him, the world goes dark. Spotlights on him and the monster. The ground matted already with flesh and blood, the constant crunch of bones. His armour, gone, prisoner's rags damp with blood and sweat, stained and torn and nothing adequate to defend himself with. The gate- it keeps opening. How many monsters have the druids created? Are they aliens stolen from other worlds? What if they're innocent? What if Lance is a killer? What if Lance is wrong, in doing this, in complying, what if he's just as bad as those he's supposed to fight, how can the paladins ever accept him again, how can he be saved, why haven't they saved him yet, he doesn't know how long it's been but too long, what if they don't want to save him?

What if they've left him to this fate?

Murder, over and over again, until the druids are done with him, until his veins brim with quintessence, until his heart no longer beats, until he is made of steel like they keep demanding of him. Til this body is no longer human, and is incapable of human acts.

Murder. Over and over again.

He cannot keep living like this.

He doesn't know how else to go on.

When the last monster falls, Lance, too, falls; to his knees, hands implanted in- guts, he thinks, he can't- can't see right, his vision blurs and all he hears is static, the loud ring of applause and cheering and druids whispering as though right behind him, like they hover just at his shoulder, out of sight, perfectly audible. They're too loud, in his ears, they keep encouraging him, they want him to stand up and fight, but- but he can't. His hands are so slick with blood he can't even hold his fucking weapon properly. He can't see straight. The floodlights, they're too bright - every flaw, every human aspect of him too exposed. They scheme behind him about taking those aspects and crushing them in the dirt, grinding them to dust with a mortar and pestle, mixing them with something tainted to see if anything monstrous might come out.

He doesn't feel the hand on his shoulder; he doesn't feel anything, these days. He doesn't know what they did to him. What did they turn him into?

It pushes him up anyway. Really pushes, till he's sat back on his heels, till he's being shaken, and he has to open his eyes again, even though the world twists and turns and nothing looks real. Even though Lance can't tell what's real.

Like Allura, sat before him. Hair tucked away in her helmet, pink paladin armour donned. Like she broke in, and found him. Like after all this time, she's still trying to save him.

But he can't quite tell.

"Lance," she says, but she's sat atop a mountain and Lance is buried many miles below; her voice barely reaches him. "Lance, what's going on? Are you alright? Are you...tired?"
Of course he's tired. Bone-weary in his soul. Like he's dragging his own body through a dark tunnel, heaving it over the bumps and gaps of a train track, yet he never reaches the light. Like he's still dragging it, even now, sat here, lost.

"Lance," she says again. "The base has been cleared and Pidge has retrieved the data she needed. We have to leave so Coran can blow up the base. Will you stand up?"

What are you talking about? he wants to ask, but his lips won't part, a bare whisper rattles through his throat, remains locked up behind teeth. The world clears a little around where Allura sits; purple light everywhere, no floodlights, no stadium seating, no druids at his ear, whispering. Nothing solid, at least. The flesh on the ground stays; the bodies left in his destructive whirlwind battle are no trick of the light. He was in the middle of a battle; transported, temporarily, back to the arena.

It just felt like it. Monster after monster appearing, and no other paladins were around, it was just him, causing a distraction, making a scene, attracting the attention of everyone...and it just felt like he was back there, and he was all alone, and there was no hope whatsoever.

Even now, found by Allura, no living enemy in sight, he can't shake it.

"Come on," Allura murmurs, getting to her feet and taking his hands. He lets her haul him up, follows her blindly through the corridors back to where their lions sit, waiting. Lance spies Shiro, Pidge, and Hunk already flying back to the castle; maybe they got bored of waiting for Lance. "You did such a good job," Allura adds before patting his shoulder and using the jets on her feet and back to navigate up to Blue. Lance looks behind him - dead galra litter the ground, and there are blasts to the floor, the walls, as if someone - maybe Hunk? - was shooting without care, but Lance doesn't know.

Blue hovers even though Allura is sat inside, ready to leave. So Lance follows too, back into Red, and his hands are on the controls but she's the one guiding them back to the castle, waiting for Coran to destroy the base before deeming it safe enough to return inside. Over the comms, Lance vaguely hears Coran ask him to the infirmary, so once they're in the hangar, he jumps up onto the speeder and arrives at the bridge, then makes his way down alongside the others.

He doesn't know what to say to them, and they don't seem very interested in talk to him, either. Hunk and Shiro are crowding round Pidge, like maybe something happened to her, and Allura walks with Lance, but she doesn't speak, either.

Coran meets them in the infirmary, fussing over Pidge while Shiro talks softly with Hunk, and Lance just leans against the wall and waits. He's covered in blood; Allura's eyes get stuck tracing down his armour, so he ducks his head and does the same, and sees what she sees - white armour stained red and brown and black, bits of flesh, guts. His footsteps leave bits and pieces of corpses behind him.

There's too much blood to tell if his armour is messed up; to tell if he was, at some point, injured. But it doesn't really matter either way - it's probably healed already. He doesn't know why he's here. He would rather be alone. He would rather shut his eyes and shower, and maybe when he opened them again the blood would be gone and the guts would be gone and Lance wouldn't have to deal with it. It would just disappear and he could pretend that he fought like the rest of the paladins, normally, with normal weapons, with a normal constitution, instead of like...that.

Once Pidge is sat on a hospital bed with a few bandages plastered on her, mumbling about the data she found, Coran turns to Hunk, Shiro, and Allura in turn. They all seem to be fine, submitting to the brief check up easily, exchanging a few words about how the battle went, and then they go and
Then Coran looks at Lance, and something tugs at the corner of his mouth, pulls up his brows. He clears his throat, says, "Would you remove your helmet, Lance?"

He hadn't even realised it was still on; he undoes the latch, pulls it from his head, and holds it in his hands as he awaits Coran's evaluation. He peers at Lance's face, round his head, then holds up his holographic scanner and checks him over.

Coran frowns at the results, then forces a tight smile and says, "Good to go!" in that overtly cheerful, optimistic voice that Lance knows means something must be wrong.

But no one else mentions it, so he goes to leave. Doesn't think anyone would care, except Allura says, "Lance!" and he turns to look at her. Sat up on a table beside Hunk, one of his hand cradled in both of hers, resting in her lap. Hair loose but messy from the helmet, how she's borrowed Hunk's bandana to keep it out of her face. Shiro looks at her, too. His arms are crossed, scowl deep. "You did a great job out there!" is all she chirps, and Coran nods, Hunk, too, not meeting Lance's eyes, and Lance just nods, and leaves.

He did do a great job, didn't he? Pidge got hurt, but...it's not like people were expecting him to look after her. He was to create a path, and he did. Cause a distraction, so he did. Pidge was already gone by the time Lance was pulled out of his nightmare. What could he have done that led to her being hurt? She was alone, doing her own thing, or...so he assumes. What does it matter, anyway? It looked like a shallow wound. They didn't even put her in a healing pod. She's obviously more concerned with whatever data she picked up, anyway. And no one was glaring at him like he did something wrong. No one...really looked at him at all. Hunk couldn't, and obviously. Pidge wouldn't even glance in his direction, kept her head down, turned always to the others. Shiro was stubborn about it, cold shouldered, a face cut from ice. Coran masked fear with cheer, poorly. Allura...is different. But he doesn't know why, and it makes him nervous.

As he strides down the corridors, shadows scurry after him. So he walks faster, tries to keep his gaze straight, tries to ignore them, but they keep coming after him. Like every nightmare he has, every time during a fight when he'd return to the arena - it keeps happening. How does it stop? How long does it have to last before he can feel safe again? Because he hasn't felt safe since they dipped him in quintessence and he remembered himself - before that, even. When his feelings for Keith got so entangled with the reality of what he was, and he just wanted Keith to be okay, but their life - as soldiers, with each other - it just wasn't possible. Love became fear, became terror, becomes nightmares so deepseated in his psyche that sometimes he dreams of Keith, too. Watching his fights from the stadium, or taking the place of a druid, eyes cold as he tips quintessence into Lance's mouth.

It's only sometimes, though.

He's glad he broke the mirror. He doesn't know what to do with his armour after he takes it off. He wants to soak it in ethanol and kerosene and burn it to hell, but he gets the feeling it wouldn't work. Once it's taken off, he can't help looking at it, and wondering what it looked like on him. There's no white it in, the blue soaked to navy, darker. It's not even red, like he keeps expecting. Alien blood comes in all different colours. It's just...messy. And ugly. No one else looks like him on the battlefield. How is it that they seem so pristine, so untouched? Even Pidge, with her wound, how come the blood didn't run down her armour, how come it didn't stain her like blood stains him? Because it's her own? Is that so important?

Is his armour supposed to be some testament to the lives he's ended?
He just wants to feel clean again - so he showers. Shuts his eyes, doesn't see the blood flow off his body, stands there for hours to make sure of it. Swims, after, to fill up his hours, shuts his eyes again to try and dream of a better place, but the world turns to darkness around him, water thick as quintessence, so he opens them, faces the the walls around him, the way he can swim for miles and end up in the exact same place as he started.

He thought he was moving forward. Even alone, without Keith, trying to be a paladin, trying to help people in whatever limited capacity...but no matter how hard he tries, he's still here.

Stuck.

--

Days pass.

His nightmares get worse.

He doesn't say it out loud - what that mission did to him. For the others, it was routine; normal. Bash the base with Voltron, get in, get Pidge to the data safely, get Lance to manage the crowds, get out. But- but it wasn't. It wasn't the arena but it felt like it. It wasn't like when he was fighting Keith and then suddenly he'd be fighting a galra general - those monsters were real, not memories, not his imagination. The floodlights weren't real, the stadium, the cheering, the prisoner's rags, but-but the monsters themselves? And Lance, fighting them, desperately. What did that look like? Did he still look like himself? Or could they see the prisoner he used to be?

Still is, maybe.

Did they see at all? Or are they used to Lance being okay, Lance being invincible, Lance being too scary to go near? What if no one saw? What if they just realised he was missing, and Allura doubled back and saw him collapsed like that? Did she tell them? Do they know? Or does she keep his secrets for him? What if that isn't safe? Like Shiro turning first to anger when he discovered what Keith was doing with Lance; another costly mistake. What if their safety is more important than his safety?

And it is, obviously. So what if it isn't, then? What if Allura doesn't see it that way? Is she putting them in danger, by not being honest about everything Lance is? But what if she told them, and they reacted like she did - with kindness and sympathy and concern?

Lance couldn't handle it. If Shiro stopped being angry- if Hunk ever looked at him again- it isn't fair, it isn't what he deserves! He doesn't want sympathy and kindness and concern! He wants- he needs someone to hate him almost as much as he hates himself. He can't live with himself otherwise. A visceral, shredding anger, so that when they turn his gaze on him he can feel the way they want to take him apart limb by limb till he is nothing more than every creature he has already faced. He wants shame to burn him so much he is sick. He wants guilt to flood his mouth and steal his voice for good, he wants regret to paralyse his movements. He wants the sea to take him home; he wants every bomb ever aimed at him to have ripped him to pieces already.

Days pass; he goes on missions; he trains daily. They form Voltron, his mind cracks apart, he loses himself. He fights and kills and loves every second of it. Within seconds, the love shades into hate and disgust and fear, love and terror entwined once more. Allura sits with him and entices him to speak to her, but the druids have taken everything from him; Voltron scratches out the rest. How does he explain that to her? How could he want to? It isn't fair, to tell her. To say anything at all.
To the others, he is a silent monster that loves only death. That Allura knows even somewhat better is a burden on them both.

But he keeps getting worse, and she knows it. The way he tumbles from bed; how she has to ferry him from place to place, the way she will sit and watch him whenever they have dinner, as if monitoring him, making sure, as often as possible, that he seems to be okay.

She can't do it all the time.

The corridors are his downfall. They keep- they're so long, and tall, and- and they're so bright but there are shadows everywhere, and Lance can't keep outrunning them. He tries to. More often than not he ends up sprinting back to his room, to the training deck, locking himself in the lift just to escape how the shadows morph into the talons of the druids, how they become a fog of voices, whispers, physically pressing against him, battering his body, his soul, his brain. They hunt him down, every day, every second he has to get from one place to another. He'd rather hide. He'd rather give up.

Nightmares crack him up every night, he is a mess by morning. Memories and his imagination twist together until he is barely capable of perceiving reality. Air thickens around him; the corridors fall on their sides. It's impossible to walk a straight line when all he sees is darkness at the end of the tunnel. The druids want him to walk into it; either that, or the shadows will catch up and drag him into them. So he turns a corner, but despite the white walls, the blue lights - darkness at the other end. No safety. No freedom.

His body bristles; spikes break through the cloth of his shirts, his shoulders rising, his fists clenching. He tries to examine the area around him but it blurs into one. He wants to fight, to push it away, break the fear in half then half again until it's worthless shit at his feet, but what can he punch - air? Darkness invisible to any other eye. They already think he's a monster, he doesn't need them to think he's insane, too.

Even if he is.

Even if it doesn't feel like it. Allura heard the druids too, when she explored his thoughts in the mindmeld. That means, somehow, they are solid - part of him, attached to him. Inside him. Corrupting him from the inside out. These shadows - they want to take the outside. Shade his skin indigo, shower him with blood, turn every individual thought and desire and love to ash.

They're real, even though he knows they should be fake. The druids, whatever they did to him, left him capable of...vulnerable to...stuck with these voices and visions and- and him alone, because even Allura doesn't realise how deep it goes. How this is reality for him now, how it sinks into him until the druids' voices are entrenched as deep as the veins in his skin, deeper, locked behind his ribs, nesting within his lungs. How they creep into his brain and feast there, tearing apart every part of him that once spoke of logic and reason and reality.

The shadows are everywhere; Lance cannot move. Stuck. He can't see the druids but he feels them watching him, smirking, laughing, measuring every movement but- where can he go? Further into the darkness? They will eat his heart; they will gouge their talons into his brain and shred it till it's nothing. There is only so much of himself left. They wouldn't have to take much from him until he was gone entirely, and some robot left in his place.

He wants to be free- he wants to escape! He wants to feel safety again, real safety, he wants to stop being afraid of everything except afraid is too weak a word - terrified, horrified, disgusted, and so lost. A little toy soldier for everyone else to push around. Allura says she wants to help him but she sends him off to kill just like the druids did, and she sits with him afterwards but she still let him
fight in his own personal arena, and the others are meant to be his friends but they cannot fucking look at him, and he doesn't want them to.

He wants substance. Something solid to lean against. Keith-shaped, maybe, the way his body was like a pillar of stone when he wasn't fighting against Lance, how Lance could rely on him, and he would never give under Lance's weight. He wants the world to straighten itself out, for corridors to be straight lines and light, for his shower to be water and day dreams, for his bed to be soft and warm, and if he tucked himself up tightly enough then the monsters under his bed wouldn't then infiltrate his head.

He wants - more than anything - to be the boy he once was. Leandro Hernandez, where did that boy go? Locked inside Lance's heart? Or did he die, is he in heaven, did his soul return to Earth? If Lance found that soul, would it return to him? Or would it want nothing to do with him? All he wants is to be a little boy cuddled into his mama again, eating hot food even in the height of summer, he wants to lie by the ocean, he wants music to flood the world he inhabits. Wars, galra, even space itself... Lance doesn't want any knowledge of those things. He wants to be a child hardly aware of the world outside his ice cream. He wants warmth. And love. And everything he has rightfully been denied.

It's selfish to think but he can't stop thinking it. Selfish to want but he can't help wanting it. Why didn't he savour that trip to Cuba, why didn't he weep, why was he so wrapped up in himself and Keith and this desire to fight? He had everything in those few days - family and friends and the sea not two minutes away. Lance wishes he could understand the man he was for those few months, but it feels impossible. His own memories and desires stamped into Lance's brain - no longer something he can comprehend.

This world eats him. It tears his flesh from his skeleton only so it can break his bones into pieces next. The world wants to break him down to his barest essentials and then some, but Lance isn't sure how much more he can take. He can't speak. He can barely sleep. Corridors terrify him.

One corridor in specific, though. The training deck is a safe midway point, he can usually make it there without suffocating on shadows, but from his bedroom all the way to the dining room? It isn't safe.

It's sudden, the way darkness engulfs him. Creeping always over his shoulders, yes, but it never grabs him, not fully, wholly. Not so intensely.

Not until today. Not until right now. It tears into his stomach - it has claws - then stabs his eyes out, and, lost, he stumbles. Falls- thinks he falls? He can't- he can't see, seconds ago he could see so clearly, white corridors, blue lights, but-

You can't do it.

But he can't anymore.

You can't.

But he can try. Light at the end of the tunnel, silver lining on every stormy cloud, there has to be something to reach for, towards, something good to devote all his badness to, like maybe if he tries hard enough he can cancel it all out.

There has to be something, or, or- or what's the point of him? Druids’ voices invade his mind with their army of talons, teeth, taking everything from him - how long before they take over his mind completely? Before there's nothing left of him at all? Before he's just a husk with an invincible
body lost to their control?

What if that really happens? What if he's more than a risk, but a genuine threat?

Oh, they croon in his ear, would that not be so sweet?

But the world they create - of darkness before him toppling into purple walls and their dark robes, translucent, barely there - he doesn't want it. Only three druids left, they don't approach, only observe Lance. Chained, slumped against a wall. Shivering in the cold... Feverish, maybe. Clad in rags yet he feels bare, exposed, the thin cloth not thick enough to hide the way his chest heaves, hands in fists only to conceal palms gleaming with sweat, holds his body tight to himself to keep from shaking, but he shakes anyway. They only look and yet fear overtakes every function of his body, and he knows they can see it, that they examine the way it eats him up, how it leaves him lacking.

Nothing is solid, reliable, anymore. Not even Allura. It's just Lance trying to navigate this dark, tricky world around him, except walls give way to shadows, the ground vanishes beneath him, and he raises both fists to fight for freedom only to realise that even now they're still in chains, only this time he can't tell who holds them.

Fear shudders through his body, he slams his fists against the ground just to feel it, to know it's there, but- but they took everything from him. He can't fucking feel whether it's there or not. He can't rest a palm against the wall and know it's there, and it's so dark he can't look, either, and he can't breathe because - in the dark, they'd shunt him into a tiny room and tell him not to sleep. He'd be exhausted from fights but the quintessence still pumped through his veins, wouldn't let him rest. He'd curl up, brimming with the need to fight, night after sleepless night, and it made him so sick.

He doesn't sleep enough. He eats, sort of. Trains too much, or, not enough, or...he doesn't know anymore. Too much for any human, but he's not human, so he can't measure himself by that metric anymore. The physical world doesn't quite penetrate him the way it used to. It's ghosts and shadows and monsters in the dark, that's what's fucking wrong with him. The darkness has claws, and here, now - wherever he is, a - a corridor? - lost to the ground, they dig in. He can see the sheen off claws, the shifting of velvet that separates the arms reaching for him. They want to gut him from the inside out, he can feel it, claws in skin, piercing and tearing and scratching till they reach blood, and bones, and then they scratch through that too. He can feel it.

They take his voice, his touch, his empathy... Take his legs, take his teenaged body and turn it into something else. Now his sight, his hearing, his perception of reality. Even in the darkness the druids are here. Their whispers are quieter, but just as insidious.

It would be so easy...

It would be. So easy, so easy...


Two hands, curled into fists. So easy...

Just give in.

Two hands, curled into fists. He's defeated so many enemies with those alone.

Just give. In.

But he doesn't want to - and this is the sticking point. He agrees, he has to, he can't not, with
everything else they say. Because it's true. And Lance has nothing but the truth to turn to these days. But - hurting his friends? Even if they don't consider themselves such anymore. Even if they would rather him gone, still kidnapped, still suspended between life and death and somewhere in between, somewhere they couldn't follow...

Even so - Lance has too much blood on his hands. Too much, it's thickened and congealed and it doesn't come off. Even so, he doesn't want to kill anymore. He doesn't want to kill anyone. Even so...they were his friends in a past life. Friends of the soul he once possessed. Leandro Hernandez, a good person. Leandro would stay and fight for all the right reasons, wouldn't he? Leandro would be brave, so much braver than Lance is.

Lance can't be brave. Shadows with claws, swears he can see blood on his skin every time they dig in. Hands on his throat, pushing steadily on his chest, his lungs, his diaphragm. Things no one else sees that terrify him. Is it real? Is it a hallucination? How does he tell the difference? How does he tell anyone anything?

Because he can't tell the difference right now. He could've sworn he was in a corridor two minutes ago, but now everything is dark and the outlines of the world beyond twist and vanish and refuse to make sense. Static buzzes low in his ears, he tries to move his mouth, to speak, but nothing happens. Frozen. Held in place by an invisible force that he can't see but he can feel it, deep in his soul, aching in his chest. He can't feel physical things so druids make up sensations and shove the burning pokers into his stomach to see if that hurts instead.

It hurts.

It really hurts.

What will they do to him now? How much of his soul is left for them to pry out his broken bones, his barely beating heart? Or will they cut more pieces off him? Scratch out what's left of his quintessence? Toss him back into the arena?

Or maybe that's unnecessary, now.

Allura was right to be worried about him - galra ships all look the same. Black and purple and the smell of it, metal and rust and something thin that squeezed the air from Lance's lungs even when he had his visor fully activated so he wouldn't get guts in his mouth. The galra base they blew up wasn't an arena but it felt like it, by the time Lance was knee deep in corpses it looked like it, and suddenly fighting for the druids and fighting for Voltron felt the same. The monsters, the motions all the same. Lance was the same, too.

Looking down, blood drips from his hands, all the way down his arm, trickling from his lips. He bit his tongue. Tore the arm off an enemy with teeth alone, he doesn't know. So maybe he's the same to the druids and to Voltron. Blood on his teeth, hands, oozing from his eyes. They don't ask him anything. Feed him as required. Arm him and set him loose amongst enemies.

See him as a monster.

What if that's going to keep happening? What if that's his life now? Fighting on command, lungs full of blood, strangers' flesh stuck behind fingernails... What if - to everyone - he's just another weapon in the arsenal?

Because he'd rather die. Truly and absolutely, he cannot keep living like this, fighting and killing and nightmares and fucking corridors of darkness engulfing him whole till he can't even see, can't breathe, heart fucking pounding against his chest, desperate to get out of this evil, contaminated
thing called body, called vessel, how he tries to open his eyes to see but walls of purple flood his vision, glinting teeth within stretches of smiles, long claws, prying hands. Is this real, or is this some kind of fear-induced hallucination?

How does he tell the difference? Fear flies every rational process out of order. He doesn't mean to be afraid, but the druids did so much to him that he can't even remember, yet still this body reacts on instinct, seizes up, gasping for breath, for something to hold onto.

He doesn't mean to be afraid, but he can't fucking help it. Druids surround him, they live inside him. They tainted his quintessence forever. For fuck's sake, they electrocuted him through their prosthetics, twice.

All he wants is safety, but he can't find it here, can't find it anywhere.

"Lance."

With the druids, safety looked like Voltron, paladins, a castle, a house on the brink of a beach in Cuba. With Voltron, it looked solely like Keith, the muscles of his body, the solidity of his stance when he raised his sword, how he’d press a hand to the nape of Lance's neck, kept him grounded. But Voltron tears his mind apart, the paladins fear him, the castle is a constant trap he tries not to run into, that house is too filled with the memory of the old Lance, stubborn and cruel and hungry only for physicality. And Keith...gone in the wind, in a space ship, black and purple like the galra but edged in a silvery grey, different but not different enough.

"Lance!"

But Keith, gone, anyway. Unsurprisingly. As hoped for, Lance has to remind himself. He wanted-needed Keith to be gone. He thought being separated from him - having to fight his battles on his own - he thought that would be better, but...

"Lance, please. It's just me. It's just..."

Druids in his head and against the wall and in his ears and on his shoulders, corridors that twist, fill with fog, with shadows, with hands, galra bases that turn into arenas that Lance has to go through alone-!

"...deep breaths, please, slowly, slowly..."

Slowly.

Deep breaths.

Chest still heaving, he realises. This was given a name on Earth, when he was at the garrison, he's sure of it. Panting and shaking and feeling like burning from the inside out. Another thing forgotten.

"Please, just calm down... It isn't real... Just look at me, look at me, look at me..."

He fights most battles alone. Even during missions, they dump him and let him take down the enemy. He trains alone, most of the time. Showers, changes, falls asleep alone.

Wakes up to Allura, shining hair, gentle hands.

Blinks a few times, the darkness clears, slightly, somewhat. Emerges Allura on her knees in front of him, tears in her eyes, his hands in hers. Darkness clings to the edge of his vision. Ever her bright
beacon hair can't shake it away.

"Lance," she says, so softly, as though to be speak any louder would be to spook an injured animal prone on the ground. Lance thought he was invincible. "Are you listening, Lance?"

He nods, but it's difficult. Meets her eyes, but it's difficult. Nearly impossible, actually. He can't stop shaking.

"There's nothing to be afraid of here," she murmurs, shuffling forward so that she can tilt her head, try and meet his eyes better. He looks down at their hands instead, where his hands, scarred and running red with blood, meet her's, soft and dark brown and so safe, even if they're trembling with him. "It's just you and me... What was that? Is everything alright? Shall we...talk about it?"

The words are a wind of whispers that die out before they can reach him. Her hands are safe but- Lance can't help looking- shadows dance still on the walls behind her. The corridor never quite ends on either side of them, twists into a thousand directions, into endless darkness that Lance is too paralysed to navigate.

The druids are watching. He can feel them on his shoulders, lurking somewhere behind him, behind Allura- hissing in his head, something about Allura, how her hands aren't safe, can't be safe, isn't she the one sending him on these missions? Isn't she the one taking him to eat, so that he has his strength, taking him to the training room so that he can get stronger, taking him to bed to make sure he sleeps, and waking him up in the morning, to start it all again?

"Lance," she says now, with her funny accent, stretching out the vowel, making the word more dignified than Lance feels deserving of. "Is there anything you can do to... Are you... How do I know if you're alright?"

You don't, he doesn't say. You can't.

God forbid he hoards more of her sympathy.

He can't hold her gaze longer than two seconds at a time, can't look at their hands too long, either - the difference, how clean she looks, so untouched by the world, how damaged he is in comparison - and he can't- can't stop glancing from side to side, wall to wall to wall to ceiling, black holes and mountains of fog everywhere he looks.

Can't stop looking panicked, because he imagines he must appear that way, his brows drawn up, perhaps, mouth left gaping open or teeth clenched too hard together, and his chest- panting furiously, his breath still coming out too fast regardless of what Allura said. What was the name of this, this collection of sensations? Why is he afraid to give it a name?

"Lance," she says again, and this time she lets go of one of his hands to press hers against his jaw, gently pushing till he's looking back at her again. He doesn't have to look to see his own hand clenched up beside him, to hide the trembling, to prevent it from lashing out, he doesn't know anymore. "There's no one else here. It's just us, okay? There's nothing- watching, or-"

Something must catch her eye- she turns, her hair fanning out around her shoulders, and he can look at that, the whiteness, the thickness, how it curls naturally at its ends. Bright enough to ward the darkness away, if only for a few minutes.

"Oh," Allura says, louder now that she's not speaking to him. "Shiro."

"Allura," greets another voice, and Lance can't forget the way Shiro has solidified his voice to a glacier around him. The cold tone, the heaviness of it. "Is there a problem?"
A problem, or a collection of them? Stuffed into one body, one thousand problems.

"What does it matter?" she replies sharply, and straightens up so she isn't sat back on her thighs, her sheath of hair falling over Lance to hide him from Shiro's view. "I'm handling it. Do you mind?"

Stone silence, Lance can feel it crowding him. The wall behind Allura keeps spinning like a vortex, beckoning him in. It doesn't make sense. It can't be real. If Shiro and Allura are both here, and they can't see it, that means it isn't real, right? He's just seeing things. He's just been seeing things for days. Weeks.

His breathing picks up, staring at it. He thinks his hand is bleeding. Watching it, he feels lightheaded, like he might pass out. He doesn't know how long the silence lasts, only that Shiro says, "Not at all," and walks away again, and then Allura is turning to him, tucking her hair behind her ear, and taking his jaw in her hand again.

"Let's get out of here," she murmurs, "alright? Let's go to my room. I have windows - we're in the most beautiful star system, Lance, let's see what's out there...

What choice does he have? Darkness everywhere except where she is. He can't get out of here if she's not by his side.

By the time he stretches out his fingers to get to his feet, the wounds in his palms are already gone. The blood remains. Allura spots it and says nothing, takes the stained hand in hers, and guides him gently to her own room.

There are stars to be seen from her windows. While she wipes away the blood, talking about the new hairstyle Hunk had given her the previous night, he stares out, constellations forming and names coming to him unbidden: Hercules, Lyra, Ursa Minor. He doesn't speak but he mouthes the names over and over, those which he can dredge out his mind.

Allura doesn't say anything. Watches his lips, fetches Hunk's notebook sat on a desk nearby, and starts copying what he writes.


Slowly, his heart rate calms, his chest stills. His hands, resting on his knees, relax. The chaos of his mind quiets.

And, if for only a few hours, he remembers what safety feels like.

--

"There has to be a way," she says the morning after as she takes him arm to go to breakfast, "to help you feel less afraid of the druids."

He frowns as she easily pinpoints his fears, but he can't say anything, so he shrugs.

"Something," she says, "that will make you feel- safer, I suppose. I don't think- like this, I don't think attacking them directly will succeed. I'd want- well, I'd want Keith with us, for one thing. And I don't think Voltron is anywhere near strong enough. And we don't even know where they've disappeared to...but- perhaps...ships where they've been? Or...bases that might have seen them? Might have...information..."

But they haven't seen them on ships, as far as Lance can remember. He knows that the first time they fucked up his memory one of them was on a ship, and he knows that during his captivity they
were on a ship, but...since then...he's only seen them in one place.

The beach near a facility hidden underwater. They scanned the planet, knew there was life concentrated below sealevel in one specific area. The druid emerged from the sea, galra soldiers with drops of saltwater running down their armour.

A facility... They didn't know its purpose. They'd speculated, though - underwater, hidden and guarded so well? Prisoners, experiments, everything the galra would want to hide.

Maybe even monsters like him.

He opens his mouth to say this- this one thing, one desire, just to help, but the words don't come. His jaw feels paralysed, tongue heavy in his mouth. He wants to go there. He wants to help them. If there are other prisoners out there going through things he went through - if they're going through different things, if they're being subjected to a thousand different experiments with a thousand different results - he wants to go there, he wants to get them out, he wants to save them.

He wants to be a hero.

Allura spots it- the attempt at movement, maybe the look in his eyes, and before he knows it she presses Hunk's notebook into his hands, waits until he's fumbled it open to give him the pen, and he stares at a blank page, trying to ignore the glimpses of leg and family and wonderings on the pages he'd flipped through. Holding a pen is- different. It feels too small, too slippery. He can't quite wrap his fingers around it properly.

His scrawl is near illegible - cartoonish, childish. He has to write in capitals for it to make sense.

BEACH FACILITY, it reads. It's all he has to write for Allura to get a strange look in her eyes, turning to face him with some combination of worry and pity and understanding that he can't stand. She looks down at it again, beach facility she whispers, traces the letters with a fingertip.

"I see," she murmurs, frowning down at the notebook before shutting it and taking Lance's arm again. "We never did find out what was happening there, did we? And I suppose...it would stick out for you. But I- Lance, I am not letting you go down there alone again. I know you were with Keith last time, but... I'm coming, too. Maybe Shiro, or...Hunk will join us. You cannot go in there alone. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself, I... We'll discuss it at breakfast, won't we?"

And they do. Or, she does. She gives Shiro the notebook, so he can see the way Lance had written the words himself, how desperation is etched into the indents on the page, how heavy-handed they are. Hunk and Pidge peek over his shoulders, inscrutable expressions forming, and Allura bites her lip.

"It makes sense," she says quietly. "We pulled out because of- well, obviously. But...we never investigated. And I strongly believe that, considering the discreet location and heavy guard, the facility could be containing prisoners and very well experimenting on them. We could learn things...save the prisoners...destroy the place... And...Lance wants to go there."

Shiro only sighs heavily. He doesn't seem angry, for once; his soft eyes, the sympathetic pull of his brow, almost like he feels sorry for Allura. "I agree with you," he says, and hands the notebook back. "Although I don't think it's wise to return considering what happened last time."

"But if they really are doing experiments-" Hunk says, voice quivering oddly, his eye, too, it keeps darting between Lance and Allura-

"We have to go!" Pidge says with sudden vehemence, her hands tight around her cutlery, eyes
narrow. "Why else would they hide the place in the ocean? They're obviously doing some sneaky shit there- we have to go. What if there's information on Lance, on what they did to him? On his prosthetics, or his quintessence? If they're doing experiments- they could've been figuring out what to do on Lance, or- or honing information from what they did to him-"

"Pidge, you... You want to investigate the facility, too?" Allura asks, brows raised. Hunk vibrates next to her, leg bouncing beneath the table, and without looking at him she passes the notebook back so he can flurry through the pages to land back on Lance's words.

"Of course I do! How can I fix him if I don't have any of the original blueprints, the tools? His legs especially, they're so fucked up-"

"They're kind of fucked up," Hunk admits.

"Language," Shiro admonishes softly, but he's watching Pidge carefully, eyes searching. "You think you can fix him?"

"His legs, at least," Pidge says. "If not fix, then...I can at least remove them without damaging Lance more. Then we can give him Altean prosthetics - something that won't...hurt him the way those ones do."

"Maybe we should go..." Shiro murmurs, and leans back in his chair, staring idly past them all. Arms crossed, his right hand rubs almost compulsively against his own prosthetic, and Lance wonders, for a moment, if he's comparing their experiences again - wondering if his prosthetic is capable of all that Lance's are, if he's lucky, to have gotten off so lucky. Does Shiro look back at all he's gone through and think that he's lucky?

"Coran?" Allura tries next, and Lance keeps eating, keeps his eyes on his food. They really do think he's just a decoration on a chair, a gun locked and loaded and useless when it's not being shot at something. They say anything around him, so long as they think he isn't listening.

"I'm uneasy about returning," Coran says, a little gravely, eyeing his glass of water at the side. "Such horrible events passed there, and I...can't help but think something equally awful will happen again. But...I understand the need for information. And if there are prisoners- innocent people being tortured as Lance was- worse, even... We are- you are paladins of Voltron. We don't have a choice, princess."

"No," Allura says quietly, and her eyes are soft on Hunk, who's watching her, nodding just barely as she speaks. "We don't, do we? We already failed to save one prisoner. We cannot allow that fate to befall anyone else."

"Settled?" Coran checks, and Pidge nods determinedly, and Hunk murmurs yeah, and Shiro, at long last, only dips his chin once.

"Lance?" Allura says, and he takes a moment, wait until she presses her palm to his elbow to look at her. "Lance, we've decided to go to the facility. Are you sure you want to do this?"

Stripped of words, stripped of any other desire than this - to free those trapped when he can't even free himself.

He nods, too, meets her eyes for a fraction of a second, then sits back, and pretends again that he has no idea the things they say about him.

--
Nightmares again.

The morning they leave for the beach facility, Lance dreams of white sand, blue seas, and a surfboard.

The waves beneath turn so easily into hands, white foam creeping over the edge of the board, onto his feet, grabbing at his ankles.

Water and foam, easy to kick away, to ignore. But he can't ignore it. It pulls and he slips and the second he's underwater he's trapped again. Lurching against a wave crashing into him, currents grabbing at him, the sunlight doesn't penetrate the waves like he thought it would, and he breathes— he can't breathe.

And if he isn't breathing, he isn't alive. He isn't real the way the rest of them are.

That's what wakes him up, in the end.

--

The first sign that something is off is there is no barrier of galra ships rising up to protect the planet like last time.

Lance, trembling, tries not to think about it. Not that it's hard - it takes all his focus to navigate Red, even with her soothing voice, her gentle manoeuvres. Still, it niggles at him.

Allura was certain that since Lance got his memory shredded here and they'd all ran off, the druids would think that they'd forget about this planet, the facility, and thus activity would continue as normal, but Lance can't share that conviction. Not when he hears them in his mind, their footsteps skittering after him in the corridors, how it's their robes that shroud his dreams.

What if they know? What if they see too clearly into Lance's mind, too easily through his eyes?

What if he's more than a weapon - what if he's some kind of accidental spy?

But he tries not to think about it. The beach looks eery as they approach, the pink sand, the green sea... Lance remembers sugar-sweet scents, remembers blood spilling, remembers Keith being wrenched into the air and saying I can handle it, saying I said I'd protect you...

Remembers Keith neither handling it not protecting him; remembers himself being incapable of doing those same things for Keith. They were tricked here; ambushed, manipulated, tortured. Lance lost so much here. God knows he might lose yet more.

But others- prisoners, experiments, rooms with tables and manacles that strap you down, a hundred different instruments lining the walls, hidden in cabinets, getting cleansed from blood in the sink... If Lance is capable of saving one god damn soul- prove, for a second, that his hands aren't just good for ripping the lives out of people-

Red let him in for a reason. She sees something in him. Murmurs softly, constantly, as he pilots her towards the planet, sunbaked and soft like small waves rolling gentle upon the shore. Ocean water slips into all the cracks in his mind and softens the edges, fills him with warmth, shields him from the constant blistering heat of his own thoughts. She remembers this place, this planet. She took them down here together. Echoes back the memory of him tumbling into Keith's lap from the hatch, the smile caught on the side of Keith's mouth as he shoved Lance off, how Lance stood behind the pilot seat, as he'd done so many times before, readying his arms and armour, mumbling into Keith's ears, whispering out their battle plan.
How carefree he seemed back then, but Lance remembers how he'd sit down at dinner and lose an entire night; how he'd swim in the pool and be lost to a dozen different memories of his capture. The way he shook, slightly, at night, waking up after strange nightmares and realising fear had dug the point of its dagger into his heart.

Maybe carefree isn't the word for it. Careless far better describes the way he'd talk, how he wouldn't look at anyone except with derision, how he'd swing out his spear without looking where it fell.

Gone and done and past, Red says, whispers into his mind, hushing him down. There's no way Lance can offer an apology big enough for the heartless thing that infested his body all those months; all he can do is repent.

They know the exact location; the others had to fly down in their lions to pick him and Keith up, so the coordinates were officially logged back then. The five of them come to rest on the beach, Coran in the castleship hovering overhead in case trouble comes looking.

Lance gets out first. There is no bloodstain, no footprint in the sand, but he feels like he knows it, the cracks in the cliffs behind the lions, how, on the left, the beach curves upwards to form a bay. One moment in space, one moment in time, yet it feels suspended here forever. Lance hears the screams, he sees the druid approaching, feels the sand under his knees, watches his own blood dripping from his cracked chest armour.

Beyond it...the sea, wave upon wave, unknowingly keeping evil buried within.

"It's going to be you and I and Pidge," says Allura, crouching next to him. Clad in her pink paladin armour, visor over her eyes, hair tied back, she looks a thousand times more put together than he feels. Even if it makes him weak, it's reassuring to think she'll be by his side for this. "Hunk and Shiro have agreed to pair up and explore on their own, if the facility is big enough to demand such. Hunk found a separate entrance at the cliffs - the three of us are going to find the ocean entrance. We don't want to cause a scene, but... Well, we don't know what we'll find. Are you sure you're ready?"

He stands and nods, looking out at the sea. Sunlight ripples across it but gives no indication as to where the entrance of the facility may lie. Lance isn't even sure what an underwater facility might look like.

Pidge stands on the other side of Allura, and doesn't look at him. What is it they see on this beach, what memory does it evoke for them? What did it look like, with Lance half-dead by the water, Keith at his side, corpses surrounding them? What did it sound like? Did Lance still shake even while unconscious?

Maybe it's not important to them like it is to him.

"Once we're in the water we can scan the sea floor and find the way in," Pidge says. "We should probably look for the control and security rooms, so we can see what's going on, and I can hack the consoles."

"Agreed," Allura says. "We have no idea what exactly is going on here. It's possible it will look
nothing like bases we've infiltrated before. Pidge, focus on getting what you need while Lance and I stave off enemies. And Lance- if you feel you're losing your grip, just...look at me, okay? Just keep looking at me."

Beyond Allura, Pidge glances over at him, her eyes zipping down and back up his frame before she crosses her arms and looks back out at the water. What does she see? Perhaps she looks for the weakness Allura refers to, that she discusses shortly at breakfast or dinner if asked why she and Lance were so late to arrive. Nightmares, she'll say, every time, how often do I have to tell you? But they look at him as if they don't understand how he can have such things, not when to them he is the nightmare.

It's not the same, he wants to tell them. Dealing with him and being him are two separate things, Lance can't deal with himself either. Lance doesn't know what to do with himself just like them. At least they can ignore him. Lance is stuck here, with this body, these legs, voices, hands, nails, kill them...

"Let's go," Allura says, and steps forward. The visor of her helmet closes over fully as the water reaches her knees, and as he follows, his own helmet does the same. The guns strapped to Lance's back and hips won't end up jammed despite the water. Allura, who had picked them out and handed them over to him earlier that morning, had made sure to tell him that, her eyes locked on how easily his hands wrapped around the weapons and slung them over himself.

Underwater, Lance sees no grass on the seabed. No fish darting out their way. Just endless green, endless sand, endless rocks and pebbles and brown dirt. The lifelessness feels almost artificial, forced. Like it's hiding something.

Pidge leads them, her scanner augmented to reach larger areas than their own. She dives down and down, engaging her jets so she can cover as much distance as possible, hand held out before her.

The further they sink, the more dread creeps up around Lance. Like he's in a corridor in the castleship again, and despite the light everywhere, darkness still encroaches on his vision. He focuses on Allura beside him, Pidge ahead, the blue lights on their armour, the torches that automatically engage outside direct sunlight. There was only one druid here last time, and Keith already killed her. Will they have appointed another? Will they have left it alone? What if they're all here, waiting for him to come back? Their voices in his head, do they truly read his mind, or does he hallucinate still? He really can't tell the difference anymore. Even here, if his gaze isn't locked on Allura or Pidge, his vision blurs.

The closer to the sea bed they get, the louder his heart crashes against his ribcage.

"Here," Pidge breathes not long after they're fully submerged, blasting herself down to the very bottom of the floor. Pressing a hand against the dirt, she conjures her bayard, shoots a clump dirt on the ground, and reveals the black metal door hidden beneath.

Lance bursts forward to heave the door up, revealing a tunnel downwards, sealed from the ocean by a bubble-like layer beneath the door. Pidge tests it with her hand, and, when no water rushes in, she goes in feet first and lowers herself into the tunnel, slowing her descent with her boot jets. Allura follows, then Lance, closing the door behind him.

"We're inside," Allura is saying once Lance hits ground in a small, metallic room. "We had to come down a tunnel to reach the inside, so it must be quite far beneath sea level."

"We're still coming down through the caves," comes Hunk's voice, a little staticky through the comms. "No danger so far, though."
"We'll let you know when we're inside," Shiro assures them, then the comms zip out.

Pidge inspects the room as they speak, but there's nothing of interest around - it seems like a utility closet more than anything. Still, Lance cannot feel at ease. Black and purple everywhere, gleaming metal, a suffocating lack of light. It isn't the ship he was kept on, it can't be, but it doesn't have to be. The darkness, the colours, the knowledge of what this place contains is enough.

Do his ribs break from how hard his heart beats against them? It feels like it. Like he can't breathe, even inside his visor remains fully closed over, to keep the spray of blood off his lips. It feels like a muzzle. It feels like every step they take towards the door is another step closer to certain doom, to the druids descending on him, to being dragged down a corridor and having weapons pushed into his hands, being told to go fight.

And if there's no arena here, they won't tell him anything, except to shut up.

"Lance," Allura says, and his chin jerks to look at her. Her hair is tied up, hidden by her helmet. Her visor is open, now, but she doesn't seem to be the glowing beacon she was before. Being here sucks the life out of everyone. "Let's be on our guard. It's possible that coming through the air seal has already alerted them to our presence. Nonetheless - our mission here is to find information on what happened in this facility, whether it affects Lance in any capacity, and to save the people trapped here. Are you ready, Pidge?"

"I'm good to go," Pidge says, already at the door. She doesn't turn around to look at them.

"And you, Lance?"

He nods, steel as ever. The real answer doesn't matter - there are people he can save here. Saving people, for once. Not just killing them.

In the main corridors the only sound is of their footsteps, and the mechanical buzzing of electricity. There's nothing much on this floor except what appears to be a locker room, some kind of area for storing cleaning items, and more utility closets, so they creep around corners before locating some stairs and slowly making their way down step by step.

Silence, except buzzing. Any bots patrolling are too far away for them to hear, and the rooms must be soundproofed, Lance supposes, to keep the screaming from disrupting other prisoners. The whole place feels clinical, purple walls, violet lights, darkness lurking in all the corners. It's lifeless, suffocating, as they walk Lance is seconds from choking, over and over again, like the druids have got their hands on him and they're squeezing, they're piercing his veins with their talons and scratching out whatever quintessence is left within him. How does he know if they're here or not, if he's safe or not? Galra soldiers and bots he can handle, easily, fearlessly, but a druid? They have their claws so deep within him, if they gave him a direct order to kill, to fight, he's not sure he'd be able to refuse.

Every corner, he checks for them. Hoods, robes, smiles with teeth. Every corner, but they're never there.

No one's there.

"You know," Pidge says a few minutes in, glancing at her wrist, "I'm not getting a read of any lifeforms in the area."

No one's here.

Lance stops in his tracks.
Allura, checking her own sensors, does the same.

"Like, there's no one here but us," Pidge clarifies further, glancing back at them both. "Like...I think you were wrong, Allura. They must've..."

"No," Allura whispers, and Lance, whose mouth curls around that word without speaking it aloud, wonders for a second if she's speaking for him again. "No, that can't be... This... This is the only thing Lance has wanted since-!

"They could be scrambling our sensors, I guess," Pidge tries, squinting down at the scan on her wrist, "but we'd notice- they'd be more fucked up than this. I mean... Is it such a bad thing? That means there's nothing in the way of us collecting data."

No, Lance thinks, even as Allura starts arguing back about saving people. How could they have known... How could they possibly have known?

But he knows how they knew. In his head. He isn't fucking delusional. He isn't sick. They're in his head.

They're in his fucking head.

Have they seen everything, heard everything? How much of a threat is Lance to the team? Is he a spy? Is he a gateway for the druids to peer through whenever they desire? Did they see this singular desire of his, see the plan solidify first through Allura then with the entire team, did they feel his mind connect with Red's, did they laugh as he flew down here, so hopeful, so grateful that for once he could save people...

But there's no one to save. Did the druids kill them all? Did they move them somewhere else? All because Lance and Keith went out on their fucking own... Lance should've known better- someone should've fought them about their stupid fucking decision! If someone else had been there- the entire team, even- if they hadn't been fucking ambushed and Keith hadn't been hurt, if Lance hadn't started feeling something, if he'd let Keith get hurt instead of succumbing to his stupid emotions...

If they hadn't fucked up like that, maybe they would've made it past the druid and her lackeys without Lance getting hurt again. Maybe they wouldn't have run off back to Earth, maybe they would've reached the facility, saved the prisoners while they were still there, while they were able to be saved...

"Lance," whispers a soft voice, and he takes a deep breath. Just look at me, she'd said, so he does. He tries to. "Lance, it's okay. We'll figure out where they went. There'll still be data lying around."

He's crouched to the ground, head in his hands. When he peeks through his fingers, Pidge is stood behind Allura staring with wide eyes, her brows furrowed as her gaze roves the scene.

"Look at me," Allura murmurs, and pries his hands from his head to make sure he does so. "This isn't your fault. If this place was so important and secret as to be hidden underwater on some strange planet, then it's unlikely the druids would just kill off everyone inside, right? They must hold value. Doubtless they've just been moved to another location. Lance- Lance, listen... The Blade of Marmora are ransacking Empire intelligence as we speak! They'll have the answers, Lance. We'll save them another day. Perhaps for now... all we can try and do is save you?"

What does she see in his eyes as he looks back? The way no you can't hangs above them both, how, as he shifts his eyes to the side, he doesn't think he deserves it?

But she stands anyway, yanks him up with his hands anyway, ignores Pidge's look anyway. "Let's
be fast," she says. "If there's no one here, there's no reason to sneak around anymore. Pidge - lead the way."

The first room they find is lined with cryopods, like in the castleship infirmary, but Pidge poking around reveals they have no healing properties, that they're essentially pods to dump people when they're not being used.

Lance pours over that word, *used*, as Pidge hacks the terminal in the centre of the room, Allura standing before the pods and scanning them with her suit. The second Pidge said *used* out loud she'd winced, but she hadn't taken it back. Lance supposes she's right. The galra do use prisoners, to learn things about their people, to exploit them, to experiment.

But maybe it would've been better to say *used up* then.

The next room seems to be a lab of some sort. Pidge practically skips around in glee, scanning the interior with her suit, opening up cupboards, bouncing through the various holocomputers that are set up and downloading as much data as possible. Allura wanders through, comparing all the tech to what's inside the castleship, but Lance can't move much farther than the door. Pidge opens a cupboard door and he sees a stack of needles, Allura rifling alongside her out of curiosity and he sees beakers and jugs and he knows it's just his memory projecting but he swears he can see muddy mixtures curdling inside them, poured into glasses and shoved down his throat and the *feeling*, like fire-

His skin prickles, under his armour, under the black suit. There's nothing he can shoot at here. He can't conjure his bayard and swing it at that which he only imagines. He just has to stand, useless, and hopeless, and incapable of *helping*.

On the one mission he really thought he could help.

They keep moving.

Fear is a rock lodged in his throat.

He hasn't spoken aloud in days.

They pass rooms with big tanks full of acidic liquid, rooms with beds, rooms with crosses along the walls that have chains, and torture tools hanging along the walls like pans in a kitchen.

They go into every single room. Allura considers it, perhaps memorises it, the layout, the contraptions inside; Pidge finds the data she needs, scans various devices, looks at Lance like he's a dirty bomb about to blow any second.

But he holds it in as long as he can, pretends he can't feel ice creep up his spine with every step as fire forces itself down his gullet, burning to ash any words he could've ever hoped to say. Every bone in his body is heavy with fear, but he's been like this for weeks. Fear squeezes itself down his veins. Fear blossoms beneath his finger nails. Fear is a druid's hand clutching his heart ever tighter.

Then Pidge opens a door, and there's a table inside.

A table, and a cabinet, and tools scattered on a tray on top, and blood stains on the floor, and Lance-

*They push him through the door, and even though he knows it's coming, he still flinches when he sees that fucking table.*
-he sees the manacles on either side of it, the chains at the foot of it, how rusted they are, thick, heavy-

*The weight of chains is unlike anything else Lance has felt before. Even though he's getting stronger, the manacles never get lighter, never get easier to struggle out of. Just looking at them freezes Lance in place, paralysed.*

-surgical tools Lance couldn't name but he can *feel* them, look at a knife and recall how swiftly it split his skin, at a hammer and remember how they would sometimes break his bones for the fun of it-

*His fingers, one day. They sit and break every one of his fingers, then leave him like that for two weeks. By the time they move onto breaking his ribs, his legs, his hips, Lance finds himself missing the days he’d fight with broken fingers. Finds himself longing for them.*

-Pidge is at the cabinet, picking up a strange L-shaped tool before Allura can stop her, and when she presses the button on it, fire jumps out-

**They start to burn him.**

*They burn his hands, first. It's always hands that are first to be experimented on, because the druids can just dip them in quintessence and they'll fine again. They burn his hands and marvel as the skin melts, whitens, blackens, crumbles. They do this day in, day out, then dump his hands in quintessence and it's like they were never hurt at all.*

*They burn his back, whispering to each other, when Lance is on his front with his hands manacled above his head, while he's still just barely capable of feeling. He shakes and screams and sobs, their camera pointing down at him, and they keeping burning him until he can't feel it anymore, and Lance misses how his hands would feel, how they would scream with agony every second of the day until quintessence washed away the pain.*

*They don't wash his back clean with quintessence this time.*

*They burn his left upper arm, murmuring in unison with each other. He's on his back, and bubbles of all colours escape the druids' mouths as they speak, a miniature bomb exploding every time they pop. His lip is being cut into. When he looks down, his left leg is being sawed off. He remembers pain, as some kind of vague concept. He remembers his back being burnt, and every time he fought the skin would crack and he’d bleed into his clothes. His fingers were burnt so regularly, yet he never got used to the stiff way they would move, how he would bite his lip and squeeze his eyes shut as pain engulfed his entire body just from a few burns on his fingers.*

*But he can't feel anymore. They burnt it out of him.*

He can't feel anything.

He can't feel *anything*.

*That's what you are, Lance,* the druids hiss in his head, and he wants to sob, he wants to scream, he wants it to *stop: You're a monster.*

Because monsters don't feel. Monsters keep fighting regardless of their injuries. Monsters don't *get* injuries - everything glances off them. They're indestructible. They're *impossible* to live with.

They did that to him on a table. They crack his head against it and chain him up, feed him quintessence, and they laugh. *Film* it, shoot him up, set him wild in the arena. They take and take
and take from him until there's nothing left for him to care about. By the time he was rescued, he was too compromised. They shouldn't have taken him with them. They should've left him there.

They should've killed him.

I'm sorry, Mama, he thinks, the words coiled up inside his heart, cracking to pieces as he thinks them. A warm face, soft and tan and lined with love. Brown eyes, nothing like his own, yet could see through him so clearly. He doesn't remember her, exactly; remembers the feeling, though. Just looking at her face on Earth had provoked it, a strange heat in his chest, a burn in his eyes like he could've cried. How do I get better from this?

The others talk about replacing his legs, finding some way to heal the incision in his brain, but to Lance those goals are like the sun setting hastily over the horizon - impossible to reach. He doesn't think he wants to get better. He doesn't want to stop feeling guilty, feeling shame, because that isn't fair. It isn't right, for him to continue living his life as though nothing has happened when he has destroyed so much around him. He deserves to suffer.

He deserves everything the druids gave him.

"-the hell is he doing, wh-what-"

"Pidge, be quiet! He's just-"

Eyes snapping open, Lance first sees nothing. Drags his hands down his face to reveal Allura, crouched before him, and Pidge behind her, eyes wide open and wet, hand clasped over her mouth. He's on the floor again, like every time he showers. Every limb curled tight around himself, chest heaving, hands stiff from digging into his head.

They're in a room with a table.

A fucking table.

"It's just me, Lance," Allura says softly, combing his hair back, brushing her hands against his cheeks, "just look at me, it's all fine, everything's fine..."

"Wh-what the hell," Pidge wheezes behind her, but Allura holds up a hand, doesn't even look back at her.

"Lance, Lance, Lance," she says, and Lance nods, keeps his eyes on her. White shining hair tied back, her inner glow dimmed by the nature of the galra base, but her eyes are bright as ever, and though he can't feel her hand on his jaw, just knowing it's there feels grounding. "We're just exploring the facility like you wanted. There are no druids here. You're not a prisoner."

He looks away, jaw shifting out her hand, unable to meet her gaze. Not when she says things like that and so obviously means it, yet he still can't believe it. Not fully.

"Are you with us, Lance? We can leave if you-" She breaks off as he shakes his head furiously, heaving another deep breath into his chest. "At least...hold onto one of us, okay? Just to remember you're safe here-"

A burst of static screeches across the comms, Pidge yelling while Allura topples backwards, slamming her hand against her helmet. Lance blinks.

For a moment, it sounds like bits and pieces of someone shouting across the coms, until the static clears fully and Coran yells, "Allura!"
She jumps to her feet, grabbing Lance and hauling him up as she does. "Coran? Is there an issue?" she replies, marching over to Pidge so that the three of them are standing together.

"Someone must've triggered an alarm - galra are approaching in a large number! I can't hold them off in the castle alone - I need the paladins!"

"Quiznak," hisses Allura, and flicks her comms on. Lance just stares at the table. "Hunk, Shiro? Where are you at?"

"We're still in the caves, princess," answers Shiro. "What's wrong?"

Coran must've opened his comms fully, too: "Galra are attacking," he answers instead, and Shiro curses. "Who can come up?"

"You two have to go," Allura says quickly. "The facility is completely empty, the three of us can scout around without you."

"It's empty-" Hunk begins to say, aghast, but Coran breaks in again.

"I'll need more than two lions, princess," he says gravely. "If you could spare yourself."

"Myself? But- but Lance needs me here, I can't-"

"Princess, I'm surrounded. The particle barrier will shatter, soon. Hunk and Shiro have been down there for so long and haven't even reached the facility; it will take them just as long, if not longer, for them to make it to the beach. I wouldn't ask this if...I wasn't compromised completely."

"We'll be there as fast as possible," Shiro says brusquely, a sharp zip indicating his and Hunk's comms going offline.

For a second, Allura just stares at Lance with wide, shining eyes, her mouth twisting as she finds the words she wants to speak: "I can't leave you here," she says. "Lance, you didn't see how bad that looked to us-"

He shakes his head, crosses his arms. Stands his ground.

She turns to Pidge instead. "Can you- can you please take care of him? You saw- surely you understand what I mean, this happens every time he wakes up, he has the most awful nightmares-"

"It's- yeah, I'll, uh, it's fine. Matt tells me he has things like this too, I can... A-and I need to stay, to get data, o-or else I'd go-" Pidge says, and Allura nods.

"Thank you," she says, and takes a deep breath. "Please take care of each other. I'll see you both on the other side."

Wrapping an arm around them both, she holds them tight for a moment, then shakes her head, raises her chin, and walks out the door.

Pidge stares at Lance.

Lance stares back.

"I didn't realise," Pidge says awkwardly, curling her fists together and glancing over at the table. "I didn't- we thought you were still- all emotionless... Was it a flashback, or...?" He nods shortly, holding his arms tighter around himself. "Oh. I- it must be difficult, then... Um... Let's just keep... looking around?"
He nods again, stays by the door. This room has a table and a cabinet and tools and only that, so once Pidge has taken a scan, they leave quickly. Instead of leading the way, this time, Pidge walks by his side.

He hasn't seen Pidge much lately. She hides in the lab at all hours, eats faster than anyone and disappears again. She hates fighting him during training. She shakes when he gets too near.

That's fair, though, and she seems to be more at ease after seeing him freak out. Maybe she's just glad to know he has a weakness like the rest of them.

Without Allura, Pidge fills up the silence with nervous, racing chatter: "So, uh, this really isn't like any other base we've infiltrated. Not even like the ship you were on. So I guess we can assume that this really was a highly specific facility developed for containing and experimenting on prisoners. You know, they couldn't have just hurt you until something worked - they probably experimented on prisoners before you to hone their technique on you. I mean, they had to, right? You're a paladin of Voltron, you were so well hidden... Whatever they want you for, it has to be important. They can't afford to fuck it up. From what I've seen so far..."

It helps and it doesn't, which is as much as Lance can ask for. Pidge is too rational about the druids' motives for him to feel comfortable with, but at the same time he's glad of it, that she brushes over the emotion, the fear that had unveiled itself like a beating heart just moments before. She remarks on the rooms they've visited already, asking him if he recognises them from being imprisoned, or if there are any similar features. He tries his best to nod or shake his head as required, and Pidge hums and hems to herself as they pop into various rooms, mostly geared around some kind of torture.

During a long stretch of corridor, Pidge asks, "Do you really have nightmares?"

His eyes slide over to meet hers, frowning at the question, the unsettled manner in which she asked it, her hands fidgeting together. Nods, because at this point everyone knows he has nightmares.

"Me too," she whispers, and looks away from them. "Sucks, huh."

From her tone, it sounds like sucks is an understatement for them both.

Pidge doesn't elaborate on it - she keeps going till they make a right and discover the cells in which the prisoners were kept. She keeps sharp eyes on him, but these cells with their metal bars and cots in the corners don't bring anything to mind. There are a few monitors here and there, so Pidge gets her data, pokes around a bit, and moves through the blocks until they open a door and immediately find another door.

Inside this room is nothing.

Pitch black, nothing, the door cut too short for Lance to walk through at his full height. Hands in manacles, they push on his shoulders and shove him in, lock the door tight behind him. No light, no light, and no room, either. He has to curl up to fit, back jammed against the wall, knees nearly to his chest. He can't see, he can barely breathe. Every limb aches. No matter how he sits, he can't get comfortable.

He can't sleep at night.

"Lance! Lance!"

And then he jolts back into reality again. Stumbled back a few steps, he's backed against the wall opposite the open door, a hand slammed against the wall and the other pressed against his visor,
over his mouth. His vision twists and blurs around the black hole contained in that doorway.

Pidge, at the door of the dark room, looks at him with wide eyes, brows pulled up in the middle, mouth open and gaping and twisting round words she can't quite say.

"J-just," she says, and gulps down some breaths. "Just, just... Just look in my eyes, just- look at me, Lance, l-look at me. It's just us... W-we, uh...we're safe here. Nothing can- nothing can-" Her brows twist too far- she takes a great halting breath, looks round the room again as if to ground herself, but she looks at him and suddenly tears pour down her cheeks. "It's just a room! I don't understand! It's just a fucking room! What did they do to you? Lance, please, god, what could they have fucking done, it's just a room, it's just a..."

It's not, it's not, he shakes his head at her, it's not...but the words can't come out. The druids have sealed his throat shut. Pidge peers through the door but Lance stays stuck to the ground, trying to find his breath again.

"There's nothing even in there," she says, shutting the door. Despite crying, her voice is fairly even. "Lance, what...did they...keep you in something like that? But they couldn't have, there's hardly enough room for-" He's already nodding. "For...a whole person..."

Lip wobbling, she takes off her whole helmet and drops it on the ground, scrubbing her hands over her face.

"I hate this!" she yells, sounding more like a child than she ever has before. "I hate this! Lance, you're barely nineteen years old! Wasn't it supposed to be you and me and Hunk, running cargo missions and trying to kiss girls at the weekends? What happened? How could this happen... We can't do this, we're just stupid fucking teenagers-!"

Maybe she is. Lance doesn't feel like a stupid fucking teenager anymore. He feels exhausted. He feels a thousand years old.

"We don't even know if the data I'm picking up from here is worth anything," she mutters, running her hands through her hair, eyes still teary. "Maybe it's useless! Maybe it says nothing about you at all! Maybe it's just logs and logs of people in pain and being tortured and being hurt, a-and it doesn't actually mean anything..."

Maybe so, Lance thinks. Maybe all this, once again, has been for nothing. Even when he tries to help, Lance just makes things worse than before. Pidge still seems to fear him, but now she's been exposed to his...attacks, too. Already she's more sympathetic, more willing to talk to him. He doesn't like it. Having Allura on his side is bad enough. To fool two people into thinking he's worth any kind of redemption-

"Let's just go," Pidge mutters, swiping at her cheeks one last time before affixing her helmet on. "Let's just go already. This place is huge."

So they go. Back out through the cell blocks, and right back into the corridor they came from. Pidge moves in fast, jerky movements, her fists clenched tight, hurrying to keep up with Lance's easy stride. Every so often they get staticky clips of the others up above - Allura letting them know when she's in the sky with Coran, Hunk and Shiro, panting, saying they're nearly back at the beach. Pidge jumps at every burst of static, glancing over at Lance to see how he reacts, but he doesn't care. There's no one here. There are no enemies on the ground for him to fight. He thought he could help, but...every move he makes is overshadowed by the druids.

They don't find any more rooms, not like that. None with tables, no single-room cells. They find
more labs with blueprints on prosthetics and bits and pieces of fake limbs that Pidge hops around excitedly while scanning, and they find utility rooms full of cleaning supplies and buckets of ethanol, and they even find the control room, which is loaded with information, so they end up scanning information there for ages as Lance stands rigid and Pidge wanders around.

"It's getting nasty out here," Shiro says after some time, and through his comm they can hear the sounds of crashing and something scraping alongside his lion. "Really nasty. We might need you soon."

"We're in control right now!" Pidge replies, turning back to the countdown on the screen and frowning. "After this, we'll pretty much be done."

"Just get out of there as fast as possible and join us in your lions," Allura says, her voice thin. "Please be fast!"

Pidge nods to herself, and continues pottering around. "Cameras," she says, pointing at small screens grouped together, "to see what's happening all over. This is their mainboard, it'll probably handle communications as well as having various alarms for when things go wrong. There'll be buttons for unlocking or locking up rooms, maybe the entire facility, probably something to destroy it, too, just in case... I mean, we know what galar are like. They'll probably have some kind of PA system, I guess... I think this board seems to control the vents? I think..."

She keeps going - more for her benefit than his own - but Lance finds himself stuck on something she's said.

_Something to destroy it_, she'd muttered off-handedly. _Just in case._

Just in case what? The prisoners rebelled and they decided to blow up the whole place? If the druids had to leave it behind and move all their prisoners and get rid of the evidence? But they haven't done that. It's still standing. Do they want to come back? Maybe the druids realised Lance wanted to come back, so they left it standing, to taunt him. Look at what you didn't save, they whisper, claws wrapped around his chin. This emptiness looks a lot like the cavity of your heart, they murmur, and they're not wrong. Maybe they think once the paladins leave they'll never come back? Maybe they want to move the prisoners back in. Maybe they want to move more prisoners in. Maybe they want to use all the hundreds of torture devices they've seen so far within this facility to ruin the lives of a thousand more people.

Maybe- maybe Lance doesn't want to let that happen.

Maybe Lance _can_ help-

Static shrieks through the comms as the facility shudders around them, and Pidge has her bayard out immediately.

"What the-" she starts, before another voice breaks in:

"Lance, Pidge, you have to get out immediately!" Allura yells, and something explodes right next to her. Pidge looks at Lance with wide eyes, then back at the countdown on the screen. "They're targeting the facility! They know you're still in there!"

The screen is at seventy-six percent. "But-" Pidge says, fidgeting with her bayard, "but the upload from security isn't complete- can they even reach us from above water? We're under the sea bed-"

"The fake seabed!" Allura says, and she must hear the next crash of lasers against the facility, the way Pidge hisses, because she pauses before continuing. "Please, just- we don't know what might
"I'm not leaving until we have all the data!" Pidge says stubbornly, shoving herself into the seat before the mainboard. "They might have something that can help!"

"Pidge-!"

Pidge turns off her comms, scowling. Glancing at him, she says, "What, you want me to leave, too?" He shrugs, but something about the fury in her eyes compels him - he moves beside her and points at the kill switch she'd mentioned before. "You want to blow it up?" she asks, righteous anger turning to confused surprise. "I mean- I get why, but...we're underwater. How would you even get out?"

He shrugs again.

"We can't." Another rumble. Nothing too rough, but Pidge still winces. "I really don't think we can do that," she says, voice quiet, and, as if thinking he wouldn't notice, she slyly turns her comms back on. "I understand why, but..." Eyes drift back to the screen. Eighty-three. "But I don't think you'd survive."

Lance turns away to hide the twitch of his mouth into a smile. No, Lance doesn't think he'd survive, either. A building collapsing on him and then being flooded with water? Galra ships above aiming wildly at the facility below? No, Lance doesn't think it's possible for anyone to survive, regardless of how much their body can survive. Skin of steel can't withstand drowning.

It can't.

"Lance," Pidge whispers, but he doesn't reply. Around them, the facility begins to shake, a constant vibrating. Allura, Hunk, and Shiro all chip in, trying to get them to leave, but Pidge is indignant as the number on the screen totters up into the nineties. They even try to appeal to him, but they don't get anything back, and he's pretty sure they don't expect anything, either.

There's nothing to expect from him.

If he gets Pidge out the room...but how? She doesn't want to leave him alone, apparently. Since his- fucking meltdown, she's worried about him. Lance fucking hates it. There has to be a way to get her out - break the ceiling, lets bricks form a natural wall between them? But she could knock those over...

"Pidge- Lance- I'm serious," Allura cries eventually. "They're not backing down!"

"I'm almost-" Pidge says, hand hovering over her USB as the number ticks up to ninety-nine, "princess, I've almost got it- just a little more...a little...more..."

As another blast rattles the facility around them, Allura yells, and Pidge grabs the USB just as it reaches one hundred.

"Come on, Lance!" she shouts, jumping out the seat, grabbing his wrist, and making a run for the door. "We have to leave!"

Somehow, with her gloved hand hauling her along, Lance can't disobey. As they run, he looks back at the control room, where the button that will bury this place for good lies, untouched. He could touch it. He could obliterate this entity of evil from existence. Why won't Pidge let him?

Why won't she let go?
The galra must have figured out where they are, locked onto the facility's coordinates - walls are shaking, it sounds like, above, ceilings are caving in. They keep running, but a sudden combined attack on the facility jolts the entire thing so hard that Pidge, and therefore Lance, are dropped to their knees.

"Jesus," Pidge pants, chest heaving as she shakily gets to her feet, "jesus fuck, we have to, we have to get out-"

No, Lance thinks as the ceiling above cracks in two. No, we don't, and just as she looks up, he shoves her down the corridor. As the ceiling crumbles, as water floods the corridor, he hears her screaming.

"Pidge?" comes through Shiro's crackling voice over the comms. "Pidge, is that you?"

"Shiro, Shiro, he just-!" It sounds, a little, like she's sobbing. Lance ignores it, engaging his jets to boost him through the waterlogged corridor, back towards the control room. "The, the ceiling fell in- he pushed me, s-so I wouldn't get crushed, and n-now- we're separated, a-and we don't know the way out from there-"

"Separated?" Shiro repeats, and Pidge sniffs.

"Pidge, the galra are all trying to shoot at you guys in there!" Hunk says, and Lance parks himself in front of the mainboard Pidge had pointed to previously, and waits. "You aren't safe! You have to keep going!"

"What-?!"

"He's right," Allura says, panting too. Lance can almost imagine her, manoeuvring out the way of ships, blasting them down as fast as possible, and already considering at least ten ways Pidge could handle this situation. "I think they're trying to get Lance again, or- something. Get to safety. We know Lance has endurance qualities unlike anything else we've ever seen - you don't."

"But- I can't leave him behind-"

"They're trying to kill you!" Hunk shouts, and Pidge sobs again.

"Lance will stay alive no matter what, Pidge," Shiro says, and Lance bristles, stares harder at the destroy button. It's black. Of course it is. "You have to get out of there before the whole structure collapses!"

"I-I-"


"Fuck!" she yells, and for a while it's just the sound of her panting, sniffing, hiccuping. After maybe ten minutes, she says, "I'm back out."

Lance presses his button and turns his comms off after that.

--

It's so fucking loud.

And it takes so fucking long.

Electricity shrieks, the ground breaks beneath him, then bursts of fire, everywhere. The ceiling
gives way. Walls crumble. Within seconds seawater is flooding further the building. Equipment crashes down into the security room; into him. Smashing his visor, pushing the broken edges against his skin.

For a second, he can feel salt embedding the torn skin; then he can taste it, then he can't breathe, and-

Oh, he thinks. It's happening.

Maybe this is the better end, then. Take it back to where it first, perhaps, started. The cycle of abuse, at least, this isn't the ship he was hurt on but they started hurting other people here to figure out how to hurt him best. That's the theory, right? Considering what they saw, is it even a stretch? What if they're correct, what if, for once, they guessed it perfectly? What if the druids and their galra were kidnapping hundreds of people to torture just to see what might work best on him? What were they even doing to him?

It's happening now.

Making him inhuman. They took a body with a soul and they corrupted it entirely; stole the soul, moulded the body. Removed Lance's brain from his head and scratched their talons all over it, threw it in acid, left it lying in a volcano. His memories, his sense, his humanity...blistered away. His legs, once a gift of movement and strength, of power, are now heavy enough to keep him pinned in the water, and before long the entire structure has given away, and he's sinking, sinking, shoved further into the ocean by the weight of the building collapsing into him.

I'm going to die now.

The druids laugh, but the laughing grows distant, quiet. Explosions and flooding and crashing but it seems to fade as Lance chokes, until it is entirely silent. Is this dying? The world shutters around him. Turns grey, into ash. The water floods his lungs. Maybe it's fitting, or maybe it's ironic, that the Blue Paladin, Guardian of Water, is drowned to death.

Maybe it's just kind of sad.

Pathetic, even.

Now. Now. Now, Lance thinks. It has to be now.

But the facility is burning with him. As the world turns to beautiful, unterrifying brightness around him, he can at least tell that much. It can't survive. The one, final good thing Lance is capable of - it can't.

And Lance, trapped now beneath ceilings and walls and thick heavy tables, can't either.

--

Except he does.

--

The first time he wakes up, it's just Coran working silently above him. He's on a table again. Before Coran even realises, he shuts his eyes again and falls unconscious once more.

The second time, the other paladins are all gathered round, peering at him like they're holding their breath. Everyone except Shiro seems to have cried. Hunk has his arm round Allura, and she's
pressed into his chest, her arms round his waist. His eyes open, and they all gasp, mouths dropping with shock, and they start talking, but Lance can't figure it out. *Any* of it. So he shuts his eyes, and falls unconscious again.

The third time, it's just Allura. In her combat suit, a blanket wrapped round her shoulders. She's doodling something on Hunk's notebook.

When she realise he's awake, and unable to fall asleep again, she doesn't say anything. Not at first. Ruffles his hair for a second, dusts her finger tips over his cheekbones, his chin, then along a strange, jagged line on his face. Fetches a hand mirror from the cabinets, and makes Lance confront himself. Hair growing out a little, curly, untamed. Dead eyes. Dry skin.

A new scar, lurching from the tip of his left eyebrow and down and across his nose. It's the ugliest scar he's got.

She puts it away again, then reaches for his shoulders and lifts him so he's sat up, legs crossing on instinct.

Allura shuffles in behind him, her thighs pressed against the outside of his, legs hanging down from the knee. Her chest against his back, he thinks, because her arms wrap round his waist and when he glances back, the side of her face is against his back, her eyes shut.

She cries.

She cries, and she whispers, "I've got you, Lance," so quiet he almost can't hear it. "I've got you now, it's okay, everything's okay... We're safe, we're alive... We're fine, we're fine, we're going to be fine..."

Lance doesn't realise he's crying till he looks down at his palms and sees drops borne into existence; until he brushes his eyes and his fingers come away wet.

"You're safe now," she whispers, and Lance looks at his hands, wet with tears, stained with blood. *Now,* he'd been wishing. *I'm going to die now.* He'd been desperate for it.

Her hands against the white cryosuit are deep brown and untainted by this world. His are bigger, rougher, evil. Scarred, like the rest of him. Rigid, like the rest of him. "I've got you now. I'm going to keep you safe."

But Lance doesn't want to be safe.

He wanted to die.

He still wants that.

"I suppose you're wondering how you ended up here," Allura mumbles between sniffs, hands twining together round Lance's stomach. "It was- um- difficult... There were no druids with the galra, by, uh, by the way. Pidge thinks that us coming through the air seal automatically set off an alarm somewhere, and so the galra came to check what was happening, and, obviously, saw all the lions, and Coran in the castleship... I don't know why exactly they started aiming for the facility...trying to flush you out? Or perhaps they knew you'd survive when we did not... Regardless- Lance-" She takes a deep breath, fingers flexing against him. Her sigh escapes her in a great gust, and he's glad he can't see her, can't feel her, because then he would too clearly see what his actions, again, have done to her - taken the life out of her. "Lance... What were you *thinking*...?"

*It was the best way out.* They didn't get there in time to save the actual prisoners, so the least they
could was blow up the place they're been tortured. Two birds in one stone, right? They think he did it out of some noble desire. They're only half wrong.

"Because...we thought you were going to die."

Her voice is so quiet, so hushed, to hide the way it's beginning to crack. Lance wonders at how she can be so strong, for so long, when everyone else seems to go to pieces around her. Even now she's the one holding him, reassuring him, like she thinks he needs it. Deserves it, even. Allura is too kind, too giving, a neverending river bringing the promise of safety and survival to all; Lance is like a parasite, taking and taking and taking. Just like the druids did to him.

"It's something to do with your...bizarre healing properties, the galra quintessence, just...your strength, in general. We already knew you surpassed humanity in various aspects, but...you were drowning, and being crushed, and you were beginning to freeze, but...your body just wouldn't give up. I don't think it could. I think- I think that must've been part of the druids' plan, whatever they were doing with you... I had to- to dive in with Blue to find you. You were buried so deep, but I, I managed to drag you out, and... Y-you were bleeding, a lot, I think you sustained so many wounds for a prolonged period- but when we made it to the healing pods on the castle, they... They spat you back out."

Lance looks at the healing pods, lined along the walls. He can't remember the last time he had to use one. This body heals on its own, now.

"They don't work on you," Allura whispers, and it sounds like something's scraping the life out of her too. Like she's speaking with all her voice and yet this quiet, strained violin string is all that's coming out. "I don't know why. I don't know why. The druids, probably, the quintessence, I don't know... They d-don't work, so, we just had to leave you... I don't know why your face scarred, either, because you were underwater so long? It was your visor, digging into your skin, and- it, it took a while for me to reach you...? I just don't... I don't ever know anything..."

She must be holding him tight, he thinks, with the way her arms overlap slightly, how she shifts, every now and then, as if to squeeze out as much distance between them as possible. He hates it, suddenly and sickeningly, nausea in his throat. This isn't right. This isn't what he wanted at all! He wanted to die - he deserves to. Allura pushed herself too far and saved him as always, and now she sits here, clutching him, as if he's the only one holding her together? That's not fair. It's his existence that's tearing her - and the entire team - apart. If he was gone Keith could just come back and pilot Red, and the others wouldn't have to worry about tailoring group training sessions to him, or figuring out when exactly to form Voltron so that they make the most out of those ten minutes Lance can hold it together. Allura, waking up atrociously early to calm him down and shepherd him from shower to breakfast to training and back, prying him out of his own god damn mind so he can function.

This isn't what she deserves, not after everything she's been through. Lance can't keep doing this to her, taking from her, exhausting her mentally and physically and forcing her to look after him like he's a fucking baby. He already fucked up everything with Keith. Tore out Hunk's eye. Is Allura his next victim? When does Lance stop hurting those all around him? Like this, is it possible? Is he capable of any kind of tenderness anymore? It doesn't feel like it. It feels like the druids scooped out his heart and replaced it with tar, thick and heavy and darkness coating his insides.

It makes him sick.

His thoughts force his head lower, shoulders to his chin, hands grappling each other in his lap. As though his feelings are Allura's own, she starts crying behind him, loudly, sucking down breaths as he stares at his hands, glistening with blood, and shakes.
"I've got you now, Lance," she says between sobs, and Lance has to shut his eyes, has to shake his head. Now. Now. Now. He feels sick. He feels so undeserving. "You're safe here, I'm always going to try and keep you safe... We already lost you once... I won't let it happen again... I won't..."

He thought his grave would be in water, collapsed by that he deemed too evil to exist. Two birds in one fucking stone. It hurts him to be alive as it hurts Allura to see him almost die. Why stay stuck in the middle? Why not one or the other? Violently alive. Silently dead. Being in the middle is suffocating. It's suffocating both of them.

Allura chokes for breath behind him. She must shove her face into his back, because the sound becomes muffled, and her fingers are white where they're clutching his cryosuit.

"I won't let you die, Lance," she says finally, after what feels like hours of her crying and his eyes burning, each individual tear taking an aeon to fall. "Not after everything that's happened. Not after all we've done to save you."

And for a moment, he almost feels guilty.

--

Eventually Allura calls up Hunk through her comms and asks for dinner for them both and Pidge's computer. They eat as they watch the human shows Pidge has scoured from various stores, and he can tell that they both hate it, the normalcy depicted before them, people going about their every day lives, their dramatic fucking lives. Coran brings them both tea, and not long after consuming it, Lance finds himself drifting off.

Allura stays the whole time. Wraps her blanket around both of them, touches his face again, the scars. Lays beside him, and watches him fall asleep.

He is awoken by the sound of the door sliding opening, accompanied by two voices.

"Ah, see?" says one, and the strange consonants mark it as Coran, who seems to walk past Lance. "I told you, wherever Lance is, she'll be! I gave them a sleeping drought, her request, of course...she must've fallen asleep before she made it back to her room."

"Right," Shiro mutters, and he seems to stand between wherever Allura is - no longer beside Lance - and Lance himself. "She worries too much about him... She's so drained, all the time."

"She's made it her personal mission to look after him," Coran agrees grimly, and ice infects Lance's soul again, so easily. He knows, he knows she spends too much time on him. He doesn't know how to make her stop. "I worry that she's pinned her hopes too high on him... Whatever...humanity she thinks he's capable of, I... I don't know if it's there."

"I don't think it is," Shiro mutters. "I wish- I wish it was, but he played Keith so well, how do we know this isn't another manipulation? He's so quiet...we have no idea what he's thinking."

Footsteps wandering towards the wall. As he rummages through a cupboard, Coran says: "The silence is just awful. It makes it so easy to forget that he's a real person, like us... If he said something, at least we'd know he feels something, or has an opinion, or anything..." The footsteps return, and the sound of billowing linen. "There you are, princess," Coran murmurs.

"Sometimes it feels like he's just a robot," Shiro says quietly. "And I hate it. It reminds me of- of some of the opponents I'd have to fight in the arena. I just-" He takes an unsteady breath, and guilt wraps it's claws around Lance's heart once more, squeezing tight. "It's so hard," Shiro whispers, "watching him... I thought I could help him, but- it's not the same. We're not the same."
"Shiro-

"I wanted him to die," Shiro says suddenly, and Lance's whole body electrifies. He's barely able to keep his eyes shut as he feigns sleep. "I shouldn't- I don't- but for a second it seemed like he was about to die, and- and I thought...would that be so bad? Keith could come back...Allura could relax... Everything could get back to normal again, but..."

"But it wouldn't be normal," Coran finishes, voice even. "You know that."

"I know, I know. It was just a passing- I know it's wrong to think like that. I don't want that to happen. It would just make everything worse..."

"So long as he's alive, we have a chance to save him," Coran says, and Lance's heart twists further. Don't they know he is already dead? "We cannot give up now, Shiro. Lance can be saved. Lance will be saved."

No, Lance thinks as they leave, opening his eyes to see Allura curled up on a table near him, another blanket draped over her, I can't.

Sitting up, staring at his marked hands, at the purple glow of his broken leg, he thinks, I won't let you.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter deals heavily with lance hearing the druids voices in his minds, and him trying to figure out if they're real and essentially watching his every move, or if he's hallucinating and just losing his mind. he has multiple panic attacks, and with each one is roused by either allura or pidge (near the end) and is calmed down. he has suicidal thoughts and also recalls his attempt at self harm in chapter 13 several times. nightmares, blood, graphic fights between the galra and their monsters against lance are all, of course, mentioned.

the final third? roughly deals with the beach facility seen in chapter 7 and 8, where lance lost his memory. initially it is presumed that there are prisoners being experimented on there and the goal, which lance is hopeful of, is to save them all; they quickly discover the facility has been left empty, and they go around collecting data which lance has various flashbacks and panic attacks due to all the evidence of torture around. when he discovers a button that allows him to blow up the facility, he separates himself from the others, forces them to return to the beach, and blows up the facility in the hopes it will kill him also. when it does not, he sits with allura, who is promising to take better care of him, and weeping bc he nearly died, and reflects on how monstrous and inhuman he truly is, to not have been able to die event thru drowning. in the end, shiro and coran discover them sleeping, and lance, pretends to keep sleeping as they talk, hears shiro admit that for a moment he thought he might be happier if lance really did die. lance agrees.

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:3c

stan allurance! stan talent! stan miss estrellalancedance and her beautiful art!!! stan me on
my new remade public twt @lesbianfrogs where i often talk abt mos and post snippets of incredibly sexy writing (eg the short nightmare passage) and also uh. kpop. anyway

sorry for the long wait!!! lets pray it doesnt happen again!!! and put ur hands together bc at the end of august this fic will have existed for a yr!!!! wtf! whack!!!

lov u all pls take care of ur health dont watch s8 unless u watch it w/o using netflix, and uh. stan loonagon and join the unit
uncertainty

Chapter Summary

keith battles through growing levels of uncertainty as he accommodates to life at the blade without his friends

Chapter Notes

the amount of time this chapter took... HUMILIATING humiliatinggggg.... lets just ignore it

so first of all this chapter has a bit of a different formula from the others just bc a lot of important information is coming thru video calls to voltron, so those are separate dialogue-only passages. hopefully its not too difficult to read or anything!

second, im in a zine ! the cosmic dust zine !!!! its a voltron zine about family and im a writer for it, all sales go to the true colors fund to help lgbt people!! we've got some really great people and quite a few who've never been in a zine before (eg myself) so it's super exciting!!

third ! i got some more fanart uwuwuwu. the first is a gift from my dear friend anna, who's also a mod of the zine, who gifted me this beautiful art of the end scene of chap 7/start of chap 8 when they're at the beach facility! so tw for blood but it's sooo beautiful and my fave artist... thank u again queen.

the second is by sandra, an absolutely sweetheart who read the fic and chose to draw something for it. it's not really of a scene or anything, just lance and one of my fave quotes from the fic and i just love it !!! please enjoy it here and leaves lots of love for it!

finally...i am so sorry for the wait. hopefully 17 shouldn't take nearly as long as its got some of my favourite plot stuff coming up. additionally, ive been writing a shiro extra that's finished that takes place exactly where 17 ends, so when i next update it'll be both chapter 17 and the shiro extra. so please anticipate it!!!

as always, many thanks to my beta heather uwuwuwuwu

and enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All of his sorrow won’t fit in his chest
It just burns like a fire in the pit of his chest
And his heart is a bird on a spit in his chest
How long, how long, how long?

How Long, Hadestown
"...and you're sure everything is alright over there?"

"Yes, Shiro, I'm sure."

"And the mission went fine?"

"The mission was fine. We didn't kill a single galra. It was...weird."

"Weird? In what way?"

"I...guess I'm not used to... It's just different. Not killing them. Hiding from them..."

"...Right. I see. But you- but it went well? You got what you needed?"

"Yeah, I already told Allura and Coran - didn't they tell you?"

"Well- yes, but-"

"So you already know. Kolivan and the others are already planning where to start. They've alerted half the Marmora cells so that they can help."

"And...you won't go... looking for anything, will you?"

"Shiro."

"I don't want you to stress yourself out-"

"If I can find anything - about Lance or about Pidge's brother or about Altea - I'm keeping it. I don't care. It's useful information."

"Just don't go out of your way-"

"Shiro!"

"Okay, fine, fine... I miss you. Everybody does."

"I know. I miss them too."

"Okay. Okay, good. You know to call whenever..."

--

"Keith, watch out!"

Twisting round, Keith spies two galra racing up behind him, and slices through them with ease, his Marmora knife and the matching dagger Zorah made him almost as natural in his hands as his bayard. After confirming they're dead, he jogs back down the corridor to Zorah, who he's meant to be covering, though she seems to be covering him. She's by the ship's mainframe, downloading all the data through her spacechip. Around them are corpses of the galra stationed here; Kolivan reasoned that if they were going to blow up the spy ships after downloading all the secret intel, why bother keeping the galra alive? They only have to be stealthy enough to reach the control room undetected, then they can cut off all potential communication to outer galra forces, and launch their attack on the personnel of the base.
It feels more familiar than the sneaking around from before. Maybe it's just easier to kill galra when he looks at them and remembers all that they stole from Lance. From all of them.

"How much longer?" he asks.

"Oh, should only be-"

"I meant Tarandi."

"Shouldn't be long," she patches in over the comms. "A few more rooms up here to clear out and double check, then I can join you. How're you both?"

"Getting snuck up on," Keith mutters.

"I'm like, fifty percent done in control," Zorah reports, leaning over to nudge him. "Keith's more interested in watching the progress bar than watching my back."

"Keith -"

"Usually I can hear them coming up on us! They're not quiet!"

"Keith!"

"Oh, there's some more," Keith says as he spots then, tuning Tarandi's lecture out as he runs up and kicks the first one in the face, slicing through their companion's throat before stepping back and stabbing the first. "There," he says, turning back, and Zorah just waves a hand at him.

"Very impressive, cowboy," drawls Zorah without looking at him, and Keith rolls his eyes. It's her nickname for him, apparently - his mother came back to the Blade and allegedly told them tales of cowboys, and that her lover had a special hat and boots with things called spurs that jingle-jangled, and that they rode horses together. Keith isn't sure that's quite correct - his dad never owned a horse, although he did have a pair of special boots - but he also doesn't know how to explain to them that being born in Texas doesn't automatically make him a cowboy. It just gives him an accent, a fuck ton of sand in his shoes, and dry ass skin.

Zorah has no interest in this line of argument; she's already peering down at the device she's using to extract data, then back to the monitor, frowning at whatever she sees. Tarandi is silent on her end, too, so Keith returns his gaze to the corridor, shoulders high, bayard held before him. Nothing but broken bots litter the floor, intermixed with galra corpses, the low sound of buzzing, the quiet beeping of Zorah's device. No more marching, as far as he can tell, only vague bumps and shouts from upstairs.

More peaceful than he's used to, but he's more on edge. Fighting with Voltron before was easy - this is...more stressful. At this point in a mission, enemies are few and far between, but the waiting only makes Keith more anxious. He prefers the crash of blades against each other, of blasting ships to bits in Red. At least the guidelines of those missions made sense. These ones can change in an instant, from kill nobody to kill everybody to kill most people except this one general we want to question. Keith doesn't like it. Time spent in the presence of an enemy makes him jittery. He doesn't like giving the enemy the opportunity to make a fool of him.

Like he's been so often, lately.

His opinion isn't exactly valued, though. A mighty paladin of Voltron, perhaps, but still just a trainee of Marmora. He follows orders and he doesn't fight with the leader's plan. He talks to those who talk to him, listens carefully to everything everyone else says, so he doesn't miss anything.
He's a good soldier.

It's just lonely. Lonelier than he expected. The loneliness with Voltron felt different, because after a while he didn't want anyone's presence except Lance's, and what was he to do when Lance was busy? At least he could throw himself into training, into the gym, into bloodthirsty battle after battle, but he can't anymore. He's only allowed to train at set times, and they always watch him. The same with the gym. The battles aren't as loud. There is nothing now to distract him from his own thoughts. He hoped, if he just focused on the Blade enough, on Kolivan training him, Zorah and Tarandi watching him, he would be fine...but the more time passes, the worse he feels.

The lonelier he feels.

"How're you doing, baby?"

Blinking, Keith refocuses on the corridor, opens his mouth to respond automatically, but Tarandi replies, "Not bad. It's getting busy up here," and he lets out a quick breath, crosses his arms.

Unaware, Zorah checks, "Manageable?" as she continues tinkering with the monitor before her. Keith glances at her only a second, then turns away, so he can keep covering her back properly. Ignores the way his heart stings in its realisation Zorah hadn't been checking on him. Clenches his fists, embraces the anger at himself for even presuming such.

"So far," Tarandi says, then grunts as something slams into her.

Keith twists back instantly, noting Zorah's hesitation, looking away from the monitor for a second as silence reigns. Keith holds completely still, keeping an ear out for enemies as Tarandi pants across the wire.

"Manageable?" Zorah repeats, and her eyes narrow as blades clash over the comms.

Eyes peeled, Keith's heart thumps in time with Tarandi's breathing. Grunting as she fights back her opponent. Silence as her breath catches, then the sickening gasp of choking.

"Tarandi!"

"I need...backup," Tarandi pants out, weapons still blasting from her end. "I'm being over...overwhelmed."

"Go," Zorah commands immediately.

Taken, Keith says, "But you-"

" Go!" she yells, so Keith goes.

--

The infirmary is one of the few places in the Marmora base that's fully lit. Even Kolivan's office is mostly dark, with small lamps lighting up his artefacts on his shelves, his holopads of information. The infirmary is bright and white, no room for hiding anywhere. Makes the room feel too big, too empty, even though it's full of medical equipment and doctors, a few other patients. It's the way one's voice echoes round the room; how Keith can look down and actually see the blood on his armour, not just catch the gleam of it in the low light of the rest of the base.

It's uncomfortable.
Tarandi has two injuries. One on her stomach, thick and deep, cut right through her suit. The other is a gash on her arm, a river of blood dripping down to the ground. Her body is a trembling wound on the hospital bed. A medic is fussing about her, hooking her up to certain monitors, readying a needle by the sink. Tarandi is panting so shallow, like she isn't getting enough air. Zorah is stone next to her, two hands clasped round one of Tarandi's, and Kolivan stands a few steps from the foot of the bed, arms crossed. Keith, by his side, tries to explain.

"They- Tarandi said they piled up in a random training room - they, they meant to surprise her. When I got there- I-I wasn't fast enough."

"What happened next," Kolivan interrupts, eyes on Tarandi's form.

"They'd, uh, surrounded her, and she was trying to fight back, but, but she was injured - I started taking them out as fast as I could, but, but by the time they were all down, she could barely walk. They- her stomach- I could see her, see her insides -"

"I see," Kolivan says. "Well, they must have heard something about our launch of attacks and tried to combat it. Evidently it nearly worked. In the future I'll be assigning more soldiers to each squad sent out. Tarandi will heal in good time. It was a good call, Zorah, to send him away. Thank you all for your work. I'll be in my office. Send me news if her status changes."

"Of course," the doctor says, saluting, and Zorah nods, holding Tarandi's hand tight as the rest of her body falls limp, the doctor setting the empty syringe to the side and preparing his next tools.

Keith can't quite reply, and Kolivan leaves, head still high.

"She will be fine," Zorah murmurs, eyes soft on Tarandi's face. "This happens all the time, really. You remind me of her, sometimes... You both think you can balance the whole weight of the world on your shoulders."

Maybe. Tarandi can be stoic, so put together, but her neat posture doesn't hide the passion that burns like a second sun in her chest. Keith sees a little of himself in that; knows that, no matter how tightly he holds his body to himself, his anger, his thirst for justice, will leak out anyway.

Maybe she will be fine. Galra are more durable than humans. Tarandi is over twice his age.

There was nothing else he could do. They'd already hurt Tarandi well before Zorah ordered him to go find her. He went as fast as possible, killed as quick as he could. He doesn't have the medical experience necessary to have helped her; Zorah didn't, either.

Somehow, knowing that doesn’t help.

Zorah offers no more words of reassurance; she has to let go of Tarandi's hands so the doctor can work, but she doesn't move, fetches things if the doctor asks. Love softens her hands, her eyes. It is so quiet. Keith's heart aches with everything he recognises in it, in Tarandi's spectral figure, eyes shut, completely still. Zorah so caring, so obedient. When Tarandi awakens they will probably kiss and hold hands and sit together for a long time; he wishes he'd had the strength to hold Lance's hands longer, that Lance had the patience to sit, to do nothing.

His leaving seems to go unnoticed. He slips out, eyes to the floor, and finds a room with a punching bag.

This time, he doesn't stop until his knuckles bleed.
That night, Zorah joins him in training.

"You're not staying with her?" is the first thing he asks when she enters his training room, and only when she glances at him, frowning, does he realise how rude that sounds. He flushes, but doesn't correct himself. Zorah brushes past anyway, settling a selection of daggers and swords down at the side of the room.

"No, I'm not," Zorah says at length, picking up a long, heavy-looking sword and weighing it in both hands. "No... I know she'll be okay. And she'd rather I was practising, and doing something useful, instead of sitting like a statue for hours next to her. She won't even wake till tomorrow, the day after..."

"Huh," Keith says, and doesn't speak as they warm up together. How long did he spend, sat at Lance's side, waiting for him to wake up? It feels like days, months, even... Weeks of Lance in a cryopod, Lance on a table, Lance in his bed, injured beyond measure, truly fucked up in a way Coran and Shiro wouldn't stop whispering about, how it felt like they couldn't save him, how the Lance they knew was lost to them. Keith waited, and waited, and it was worthless.

He can't think about how worthless it really was.

"Let's spar," Zorah says after stretching, and Keith nods. "Keith - we've been together for many years. It comes with time."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he replies, and bends his knees, readies one of the light swords Zorah had crafted for him, and raises his chin.

Zorah lets him.

They spar for a couple hours, then stretch it out again, leave their weapons back in Zorah's armory. They don't speak as they walk together, but somehow Keith ends up joining Zorah as she returns to the infirmary, standing to the side while Zorah takes Tarandi's hands in her own again.

"You're so young, Keith," Zorah says after a moment, her eyes on Tarandi's lax face. "Everything Tarandi and I have came with so much time... You don't need to keep comparing yourself and the blue paladin to us. It's different. Completely different."

"That's not what I was-"

"No, I used to do it, too. It's okay...it's just not necessary. You don't have to be so hard on yourself."

"I was an idiot," Keith says shortly, crossing his arms tightly over himself. "I just sat with him for days waiting for him to wake up-"

"And that proves your loyalty, your patience. It's not your fault things happened the way they did. Whatever the galra were doing...the intention was always to mess with Voltron as a whole. It's not your fault it worked."

It's nothing new. It was their first idea, when Lance was taken, that the galra wanted to divide them, wanted to cause them strife, leave them unprepared. It must be their fault, since they had already predicted this outcome. They knew everything surrounding Lance was specifically designed to cause them problems, yet each problem took them aback, left them shocked, left them vulnerable. Left Lance vulnerable, too. While he was still capable of that.

"Just..." Zorah says finally, "just don't blame yourself so much. Focus on what you can do now."
Keith nods, says a few words for Tarandi, and returns to his room as swiftly as possible. He's trying, okay? He's really trying. He keeps all those ugly, sad emotions locked away in his heart and focuses on training, on lessons, on learning how to be a better Blade, a better paladin. He squeezes and squeezes his heart until the emotion is wrung out of him, away from him.

During the day, at least. At night he lays in his new bed and he doesn't sleep. How is he supposed to, when his mind races with all that's happened? He wants to move on but there is so much he did wrong. So much that haunts him through the night, in the form of Lance's spectral shape, in Shiro's angry brows, in the galra, swarming them, overwhelming them.

Nightmares that are really just the past playing out all over again. His brain conjures images of being on battleships, cutting through galra, being on new planets, searching for the way forward, standing back to back with Lance in a foreign jungle, so lost, so alone... With those images come the emotions, too, all tangled, twisted and complicated, Keith is incapable of explaining what it even was he was feeling back then. Everything at once, and so strongly. When he awakens, he can't shake it off.

No matter how hard he tries, he never can.

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"...same-old, same-old, over here. Back to missions and what-not. Good fun as usual!"

"Fun, Coran?"

"Well...not as fun without you, of course, Keith, but good enough excitement for me! Oh, watching everyone dart around bases, taking everyone out, getting information...but, well, enough about us... How are you doing!"

"Uh, fine, uh... Yeah, just learning a lot of stuff, still, training a lot, and doing missions in the secret bases."

"Ah, yes! Allura and I were so happy to hear about that development. It's allowed us a little more freedom, and I think Pidge is still arguing with the Marmora higher-ups about sending her as much important information as possible. She does make compelling points... And how was your last mission?"

"It was...okay. At first. But...someone got hurt. Tarandi, I told you? My mother's friend... So...um, her wife was stressed about that, but she had to download data, so I went up alone, but it was...too late."

"Too- too late?"

"She's alive! She didn't die... No, uh...just hurt. Sadly. And I... I couldn't do anything. So."

"Well, it happens to all of us, doesn't it? I'd question sending only a three-member team out, but I suppose if they're senior members, and, well, you are a paladin of Voltron..."

"I was ."

"Was- was?! Keith, once a paladin, always a paladin! You're both a paladin and a Blade of Marmora. This is just a little gear change for you! I'm sure when things calm down, you'll come right back to us."

"Right. And when exactly do you think things will calm down?"
"All in good time, I think! Allura seems to be making progress with our, er, rogue paladin, Pidge is garnering lots of data, even more with the help from the Blades, Hunk is working on prosthetics... It's all coming along!"

"And Shiro?"

"And...what about Shiro?"

"How- how's Shiro doing? Is he...also making progress?"

"He's- well, he's... Well, it's a difficult environment-"

"Coran, come on. Be honest. Tell me- he's my brother. Is he okay?"

"...Keith, it is very...unsettling, this whole situation. It's clear to us that he misses you a lot. And that it's becoming increasingly difficult for him to handle everything with Lance. He's easily stressed, he trains a lot, he's often with Allura or I, trying to make plans, trying to find a way forward...or he hides with Pidge, in the lab. I think... Keith, I think it reminds him too much of his own time with the galra. That he and Lance were both imprisoned and experimented on and put in the arena - that they both survived, scarred, and came to Voltron...and yet Shiro cannot seem to help. Was never quite able to help. It is...hard for him."

"I see, um... Okay. Well, tell him I miss him."

"Of course. And any other messages..."


The thing is, even though Tarandi almost died, things continue as normal. Zorah is right - after barely two days, Tarandi sits up in bed and demands to be let out of the infirmary so she can go punch something. She is allowed, after a few tests, and she disappears for a few hours, then returns for dinner. Sitting at the head of one of the tables, she regales the eight or so people sat there with the story of how she got hurt, with Zorah chiming in as appropriate.

"...went to take them on - of course - but there were more than I expected. A locked room that I thought was empty, that I was planning to check later... They were all hiding in there. And they swarmed me. And I got some of them-"

"You got a lot of them, baby."

"I got a lot of them, but suddenly, I just feel this hot boiling thing in my stomach, and I look down, and I see-"

"A sword turning your guts inside-out," Zorah sighs, and frowns at her food. "Do we have to talk about this during dinner?"

"I haven't even reached the best part-"

And they're all so entranced by it. Almost like, in turns, Zorah and Tarandi become the magical performer, full of stories to tell, full of wisdom to impart. Tarandi ends her story with a sigh also, admitting she wished there'd been more members on the team. Even turns to Keith and says it was their fault for not bringing more people, for leaving the duty of protecting Zorah and Tarandi to him alone.

Dinner ends and she stays at his side as he travels to training, and as they stand in the small room
they've chosen, measuring up the weapons they'd taken from Zorah's armoury, Tarandi looks down at her blade and says, "I hear you were worrying about me."

"Who wouldn't be worried," Keith answers flatly, and weighs one of the small, sharp swords he's chosen on the palm of his hand.

"Zorah says it affected you quite a bit. Comparisons were made, I think..."

"It's-" *Personal*, and yet impersonal at the same time. It's *his* business, but he lets it affect everything around him, and that makes it everyone's business. If he could pull himself together for a fucking *second* - just remember what it was like to be alone again, be *independent*, be unafraid... But Coran says that's what Shiro's like, too. It's not that Keith didn't notice, before, just that he was too wrapped up in his own bullshit to ever say something. Lance seems to be distressing Shiro by simply existing, and it sounds like that distress is affecting the others, too. Maybe it runs in the family.

Maybe that's just Lance's effect on everyone.

"It's okay," Tarandi says nonchalantly, and Keith blinks, pulls his head back up to glance over at her. She's wiping her long blade with her sleeve, completely composed despite being minutes from death only two days ago. "It's happened a thousand times, you know. After a while you stop being afraid of death... The Blade teaches its members to value each other more than anything. The only way to grow and learn is from others, after all. No one on this base, no one in this organisation is going to let me die. That gives me the freedom to act boldly. Sometimes I overestimate how bold I can really be."

It just... *sounds* too much like him. *I don't feel pain, I can endure anything. This body won't let me die. That means I can do what others can't.* Of course, Lance would never admit to overestimating himself, back when he was capable of that. To him, being hurt wasn't a result of his miscalculation - rather, evidence that his initial calculation was correct. What merely sliced his skin would've broken the bones of the others. What turned his memories to fuzz would've killed them.

It's not the same with Tarandi, of course, but the words are too similar. She even reminds Keith of him, her height - taller than Lance, of course - but Lance towered the same way she does. The way she moves in a fight - so precise, so powerful, so focused on every head she is slicing off at that moment. And how selfless she is, too. In the later weeks of their relationship, Keith really had thought Lance was motivated by that same selflessness, that his body's endurance was just an excuse to hide how strongly he wanted to protect the others. It wasn't, of course. Lance really believed he was a brick wall no one could crack. He was, of course, completely right. Now more than ever before.

They're not the same.

Keith just sees echoes of Lance in her shadows, that's all.

"Keith, really," she says now, and Keith looks her in the eye, as if he's been listening the whole time. "Kolivan's going to send out larger teams from now on. And I wasn't even hurt at all, at least not permanently. This is a good thing. If not me, someone else would've gotten hurt. Maybe they wouldn't survive. At least we know better now."

"I know," Keith says, and looks down at the dual blades in his hands. "I know that."

Even without looking, he can feel her gaze on him. Like she's measuring every aspect of him against herself, perhaps, against his mother. What, exactly, is he lacking in comparison? Age and
experience, wisdom and temperance. A good reason, even, to be with the Blades at all. His desire to help people through the Blades is only a mask, hiding the truth, the shame, of leaving Lance with the rest of Voltron. Keith's father used to tell him how brave he was, and Shiro always had to tell him that even though his recklessness meant he did brave things, that didn't mean he shouldn't be more careful. What he did with Lance wasn't brave, absolutely none of it. What would his father have thought? When he tells his mother - and surely, to explain himself, he must - what will she think? Will she be ashamed he joined this great organisation out of a desperate need to escape? Will she not care at all? Or will she be more interested in Lance, and the monster the galra have made of him, and everything he has now come to be?

It's a thought he can't entertain. Tarandi stands opposite him, having finished stretching out, readying her stance and her long, thick blade. Keith takes a step back, bends his knees, and the spar begins.

--

The missions get more intense as time goes on. The more data they bring to Kolivan, the graver his face becomes. He'll participate in one mission to see the secret galra bases himself, then retreat to his study for the next five, sorting through everything they send him. Keith thinks he has in fact chosen to send Pidge the data too - he's certain that sometimes, upon arriving at Kolivan's door, he can hear her voice over the comm talking to Kolivan about something. Is there anything on Lance in those bases, or are those too completely devoid of the mention of him? Is there something else secret they're hiding from the rebel alliance? Other secret plans they've concocted? As far as they know, Zarkon is down for the count, and since his vanishing, Haggar, too, has disappeared. Their main opponent this past year has been Lotor, but even he has gone quiet lately. Does the secret data explain all this?

If so, why hasn't Kolivan told them anything of it? Does that mean there's something else on all those databases? Is it coded? Is that why Kolivan needs Pidge's help? Is it important? Is it all junk data, like those fucking videos of Lance they found?

Should Keith worry about it? Surely, if it's important, Kolivan will tell him. But he doesn't really believe that. And he can't keep going on these missions, fighting all these galra as various Marmora agents download the data, and watch the bases being blown up to pieces afterwards, without knowing why he's doing it. He needs to see concrete results, he needs to understand the work he's doing.

He doesn't voice these concerns to the others. Not yet. He's still wary of how they view him, just some ex-Paladin who ran away from his problems instead of joining for any honest, noble reason. He doesn't want them to lose what little respect they may have for him - doesn't want to speak without thinking, doesn't want to act too rashly for once. Maybe there's a reason they're not telling him anything. Maybe they want him to concentrate on learning more about their culture first. Maybe they just...don't think it's his business.

But how can't it be his business? The empire wants to defeat Voltron more than anything. Whatever they're finding in that data is surely about ways to stop Voltron, ways to take them down. Is it because the data talks about Lance? Is that why they're hiding it from him, they don't want to upset him? That's even worse ...

The only way to let out his frustrations is to train. He sits in his private classroom for hours, learning the alphabet and words and symbols, reading galra military packets side by side with a digital dictionary, and it's hard. He had such an instinct for flying that even written work was never too difficult in the galaxy garrison, but this is a whole new world, a whole new language,
and he was never that good with words. He trains afterwards, but it never feels like enough, it never works out all the anger, all the fear. When he goes to bed, he twists and turns with excess energy, his mind whirling with thoughts, what ifs, what could've beens.

He hasn't felt this useless in a while, to be honest.

At lunch, a few days after another big mission, he sits with Zorah and some of her friends, Tarandi busy with Kolivan looking over the new data. The other Blades seemed to have warmed up to him somewhat; they nod, at least, when he passes, make small talk when they're stuck together on a ship heading over to a mission location. They're nice to Keith, but they love Zorah.

More than that, they love making fun of her.

"Look," says one of her friends - a tall galra man with long hair and dimples named Canis, Keith thinks - as he points his spork at Zorah, "I love you and Tarandi. And you're excellent on a mission. But I don't want to hear dirty talk when I'm trying to extract data in an unsecured environment. I just don't."

"We have other things to focus on," a Blade called Mira agrees, and Zorah rolls her eyes as a few more people chime in.

"That happened once," Zorah says, and is met with loud, vehement rebuttals from every Blade sat with them. Keith disguises his smile by shoveling more food in his mouth, glancing at Zorah out the corner of his eye. Her cheeks seem warmer than usual, but she's shaking her head, laughing with the others.

"Too many times to count, is how many times it's happened," the guy says. "What happened to professionalism?"

"Professionalism?" Mira repeats. "In this base?"

"Professionalism doesn't exist," Zorah replies. "The only person who thinks that is Kolivan, which is why he works here instead of with his husband in his fancy top secret unit."

"Zorah, sometimes I wish you would go work in a fancy top secret unit without Tarandi so my life could know some peace."

"That would not result in peace, Canis, and you know it."

Brows raised and eyes a little wide, Keith keeps his gaze on his food still, trying not to give away to everyone else that he had no idea that Kolivan was even involved with someone, let alone another man. Maybe it's just nice to listen to happy love stories, even if it is his superiors. God, Kolivan, having a husband... Like a wild fantasy, the story branches out before Keith, him leading the Blade of Marmora, Lance as strong a force as ever in Voltron, all their friends complaining about how in love they are whenever they do missions together...

Of course, it's impossible. But Zorah and Tarandi, and apparently Kolivan and his husband... Their lives seem so enriched, so much warmer with their loved one on their side. That's all Keith wants. That's all he ever wanted.

All Lance brought was a hollow, bone-aching cold. The kind that sticks, that hasn't quite left. Even now, in this soft, relaxed moment, it doesn't leave. It's driven to the marrow, frozen up the core.

Lance had no heat, he was just solid. And even that, only temporarily. In the blink of the eye, in a ritual of...a half-day, maybe? Just like that, vanished from beneath Keith's hand. As though there is
nothing to rely on, not fully, not with his heart. Even Shiro... It's not the same.

"...regardless, telling my wife I think she looks stunning in the glittering moonlight isn't dirty talk. Y'all are just lonely," Zorah finishes, and Keith eats his food, tries not to react outwardly. Inwardly, his heart thuds. Lonely, he already knows.

"It's inappropriate," Mira says. "I mean, it's cute sometimes. But I was in the middle of a stealth mission to take out the boss. Do you know how hard it is to concentrate when you two are going on at each other like that? I have to focus -"

"Mira? Focus? I wasn't aware that was possible," Kolivan states as he approaches their table, raising a brow at them all as he folds his hands over his torso. "You must inform me of such developments before I plan your missions, Mira, or I'll simply factor in your usual level of idiocy instead of your new focused self."

"Hilarious, sir," Mira mutters, and turns back to their food.

"What's up, Kolivan?" Zorah asks, shifting in her seat to face him, her elbow propped up on the table with a drink dangling from her hand. "And where'd you put my wife? I need her back, you know."

"I know," Kolivan says drily. "I came to pick you and Keith up. I have some news I'd like to share with you both."

"Both?" Zorah says; both? Keith thinks, but he pushes his food back and stands up anyway. News could mean anything. Kolivan just nods at everyone know, seems remarkably cheerful, even, for a man who isn't even smiling. Zorah beams at him as she gets to her feet, and Keith trots behind the pair of them as they walk out the dining hall and along to Kolivan's office. "News?" Zorah asks helpfully, and Kolivan nods.

"Good news," Kolivan assures them. "Related to the rebel movement, in fact. Some opportunities have opened up. I might be adjusting your mission schedules..."

"You've been in contact with the rebels?" Keith demands, pushing forward so he's between Zorah and Kolivan as they walk. Zorah rolls her eyes, moving to the side, while Kolivan slowly turns his end to stare down his nose at him. "Are we going to be working with them? Have you found them? Or- one of their bases? Are they nearby? Do they know something about- everything?"

"Yes, I've been in contact," Kolivan says slowly as they gather in the elevator and start moving down. "The galra information has revealed some fascinating observations on the rebel movement, in fact. Important enough that I hope no other galra except those on the base we procured this from is aware of it. Details about the likelihood of rebels moving bases, how they react if they think they're being watched, and so on... I've already sent the data to the rebels - that's not what this meeting is about..."

Zorah hums, but says no more, and Kolivan stares ahead at the closed elevator doors, so Keith shuts his mouth, crosses his arms, and follows them out once the doors open. It takes maybe a minute for them to reach Kolivan's office, but it doesn't feel like it - every second invites a new question reeling round Keith's mind, about this new data, its place with the rebels, why it's important for Keith of all people to be there... It can only be something about Lance. Right? Nothing else with the rebels is important to him, not like that. Did they find something?

If they found something...would it even matter? To Keith, at least. It might help Lance, help the others deal with him, but what can Keith do with any new knowledge? Be even sadder about what
could've been? Think back on those long months Lance was gone, perhaps now knowing perfectly what he went through, what the point of it all was? Like a pendant, Keith swings from wanting to know everything about what happened to Lance to wanting to know nothing at all. The more they learn, the more devastated they all are. Wouldn't he rather it all be over? Perhaps it's a selfish thing to wish for. The others, at least, can help Lance where Keith fell.

He doesn't ask, though. Even by saying the word *everything*, Keith knows he sparked something tired, *disappointed* in Kolivan. Keith's single-mindedness has been failing him more and more, lately. He knows Kolivan has spotted this. That he sees Lance as a distraction for Keith, a failure of his character.

If it is Lance, then, it makes no sense for Kolivan to seem *cheerful* about it.

It must be something else.

So they walk, and Tarandi is sat in Kolivan's office, but she jumps out her chair as they enter, standing behind it and resting her hands upon the neck of it as Zorah takes that seat. Kolivan sits behind his desk, Keith in the other seat, and when Keith looks towards her, Tarandi glances over and winks at him.

"What I've discovered," Kolivan first says, "is not to do with the blue paladin, so you may breathe a sigh of relief, Keith."

Ashamedly, he does.

"No, this is about...another paladin of yours. The green one."

Eyes wide, Keith says, "Pidge? Something about- what could there possibly be-"

"Rather," Kolivan interrupts, "something else important to her. *Someone* else. Does the name Matt Holt ring any bells?"

*Does it?* Keith almost gasps in astonishment, but manages to shut his mouth just in time. *Matt Holt*, what do they have on Matt Holt? His status, is he alive or dead? He can't be dead, Kolivan is *cheerful*. Alive, then? They know he's alive? They know *where* he's alive? What unit he's with? What quadrant or, or something-

"Her brother," Keith finally manages to get out, eyes still round, unable to quite believe what he's heard. "Her older brother. What do you- what *information* do you have that- can I- will you *tell* -"

"His exact location," Kolivan says.

"You're *kidding me* ," Keith breathes, and yes, that's definitely a smile from Kolivan. A glance reveals Zorah beaming, Tarandi grinning brightly behind her. "His location? He's alive? Are we- are we going to get him? Is he- where is he?"

"Safe and sound with the rebels, don't worry. He's a person of notable interest to the galra - listed as a dangerous and intelligent alien individual. He leads a squad with the rebels, and recently relocated to a planet not far from here. I thought we might meet him, discuss some tactics with him... We should coordinate with the rebels anyway, if we want to build up a solid resistance to the galra. I believe the paladins of Voltron are also working towards that...? And of course you are free to discuss this with the green paladin herself. Doubtless she will want to know everything, so tell her to contact me directly... I can send her the files we recovered, pinpoint the base's location for her... This should be important in building bonds within our three organisations..."
As Kolivan speaks, he doesn't look at any of them - rather, the files on his desk, the tablet propped up in front of him. He scrolls through it slowly, but his eyes don't move, he isn't reading off it. His mind no doubt already racing with ways to strengthen the relationships between the three groups, or how to capitalise on finding such an important piece of information, but Keith's mind follows a different path entirely. Pidge's brother...found, at last. Safe, and a rebel. And Kolivan thinks they should go and meet him.

And Keith wants to go and meet him.

More than that, Keith wants to tell Pidge.

"Permission to leave, sir?" he requests, and Kolivan simply nods, waves him away with a few fingers, and starts talking to the girls.

--

"...and Pidge? Is she here?"

"Oh, so you don't want to talk your buddy Hunk right now? After he cooked you your favourite pancakes when you left? Alright, I see how it is."

"Don't- Hunk, come on. I have a surprise for her."

"I'm sorry, bro, but she's in a lab lockdown. She said she'll stab anyone who goes near her with a screwdriver."

"It's important. She'll want to know about it."

"She's actually locked the lab down. Like, I can't get in. I won't see her till tomorrow, honestly. I can relay a message if you want?"

"...It's fine. I'll tell her tomorrow then. How, uh. How are you doing?"

"Me...? You know...adapting. Everything is...a little bit harder than usual, huh."

"Yeah, I can't...even imagine. Is Shiro and everyone helping you out?"

"Yeah, Shiro... Coran... Allura's busy a lot, but she always finds moments to make sure I'm alright, and she always knows what aspects of Altean tech might be useful to integrate into my suit and stuff, so... And, you know, I thought people might get weird about making me get a prosthetic eye, but...everyone's chill about that, so. That's cool."

"Well that kind of thing is your choice so- I mean, Shiro would never dictate how you deal with that. And Coran always just tries to help, so..."

"Yeah, everyone's been cool about it. But, uh- god. Don't, uh, tell anyone else, but... And I thought you'd understand, since your family- well, I mean, I guess they weren't- well, it's been a long time since you- and you have Shiro, but-"

"It's okay, Hunk, just spit it out."

"I just miss them. Everything would be so much easier if they were just here, and I could talk to them, and... And I miss my moms, and, you know, we have Coran, who's like a weird uncle, and Shiro is like everyone's big brother, but there's no one like my moms. No one can even pretend is like either of them... And my baby sisters, I worry so much, even though I know it's a waste of
time, I just- but everyone is so worried about everything already, and, like, at this point it kind of feels like we should all be over missing our families, but I'm not, and I- and I used to talk about this stuff with Lance, 'cause he did understand, but now he doesn't even remember his own family, and Allura's entire planet is dead, and Pidge's brother is still out there, and-

"Hunk! Hunk, buddy, calm down, it's... It's okay. I understand, too. You're allowed to... miss your family. I miss Shiro. I miss my mom, and I haven't even met her. I miss my dad... But- well- all we can do is...lean on the people around us. Maybe you don't feel like you can talk to the others but...you can always talk about this kind of stuff with me. Okay? I already told you, didn't I? We're friends, Hunk... More than that. We're family. We have to be."

"Family... You're right. You're right. Keith, I have... I'm just so... lost."

"And so am I. Do you want to tell me about it?"

"I- yes. Yes, I do. Allura, she's so busy, a-and Shay is so far away, and...you know, she speaks to Lance more than me. And we’re in love. Really in love. She’s like the sun to me. And she speaks to him more than me."

“Hunk…”

“He doesn’t even talk back… All those hours, she… He doesn’t even talk back.”

“He doesn’t? Why doesn’t he…?”

“Yeah, he, uh, he doesn’t talk anymore. So.”

“Oh. Well.”

“It’s fine. And I have been talking to Shay a bit, she’s fine, uh, her family are actually…”

--

Keith is there the first time they attempt communications with the rebel base where Matt is located. In Kolivan's office, a large screen projected behind Kolivan's desk, so Keith, Kolivan, Tarandi, and Zorah are all stood opposite it, waiting for a response. Tarandi, as a senior member of the Blades, is one of their allied communication officers; Keith's pretty sure Zorah's only here because she feels like it. He tries to ignore them, though. This isn't about them; it's not even about him. Pidge didn't show up during his nightly videocalls to the castleship yesterday, so he isn't sure what exactly to say to Matt when he appears, but he can tell her tonight. Explain to her how Zorah had stumbled right upon the data - as Keith stood guard, no less - but had no idea how important its contents were until it was returned to the base. Keith didn't know it at the time, but he helped Pidge.

He found her brother.

Sort of, at least.

He's the only one who seems at all pleased with this situation. The others were happy before - for Keith or for the potential ally, he doesn't know - but Tarandi, though smiling somewhat, has her arms crossed tightly against her chest, her foot tapping incessantly. Zorah keeps pacing along the wall, muttering to herself, holding up fingers then turning them back down as if mentally crossing things off her to-do list. Kolivan is still as stone, arms folded, absolutely silent. Keith shoves his hands in his pockets, and waits. What are they so worried for? The Blade of Marmora are officially partnered with the paladins of Voltron. Planetside peoples might not take their allyship so well, but
the rebels want the same things they want - they know the difference between evil galra and people who can help.

Besides, Keith's there. Shouldn't that count for something?

Maybe five minutes after they gather there, Kolivan's wrist device starts buzzing and, tapping on it, he says, "Call incoming. Keith, you can talk if, and only if, the green paladin's brother is actually on the call. No interruptions, otherwise."

Keith rolls his eyes when Kolivan isn't looking, but grunts out an, "Alright," when Tarandi raises a brow at him.

Then Kolivan picks up the call, and the alien leader of this rebel base blinks onto the screen. They're almost entirely canine, with pointy ears and fur all over. They're dressed in a vest, eye goggles, sat up on their desk with a few other rebels standing behind them, all of them looking at the screen that the four of them must be projected up on.

What the others don't know is that Keith actually met Matt. Multiple times, even. Sometimes he would come home with Shiro, and they would discuss their upcoming mission, comparing their medical knowledge, double-checking each other's competence in their role. When they got too deep into mission talk, sometimes Matt would slip up and call Shiro 'officer', and Shiro would laugh it off, say that they're friends, not just colleagues.

Mostly, Keith just remembers them getting pizza and playing Nintendo together, but he never said anything about it. Felt insensitive to bring it up to Pidge when Matt was still missing; seemed unimportant with Kolivan asked him how much he knew about the green paladin's older brother.

But Keith can see him. Looks just like Pidge, but older, jaw a little stronger, hair a little longer. A new scar, but that isn't surprising. He's in a big cloak, a staff strapped to his back. He seems...fine, far as Keith can tell. Quiet, though. Solemn. Like everybody else.

"Commander Kolivan," the rebel leader finally says, inclining their head. Behind him, the other representatives of the base do the same.

"Captain Olia," Kolivan replies, nodding back, and Keith does the same as frantic glancing reveals Tarandi and Zorah repeating the motion. "I'm sure you're interested to know how, exactly, I uncovered the location of your base."

"I already know," Olia lashes back. "You tracked down a galra base that had our location? Destroyed the ship, took all the information off it?"

"Well- yes," Kolivan says, and Tarandi closes her eyes briefly, Zorah stiffening as she stares up at the rebels. None of them seem happy about this at all; one of the reps is clenching their fist so hard it looks like they might break the datapad in their hand. "We found information on secret galra bases and have been setting out to procure their data and destroy them. This is...an unwelcome development?"

Olia rubs at her forehead, shakes her head. "Not unwelcome, no. Honestly, in time, I'd like to go through the data with you - see what, exactly, they know about the rebel system. However...we were attacked, several movements ago, by galra - one runt of a ship managed to escape back to their base, so we followed. A few of us were able to infiltrate and hide devices all over the ship, got out unscathed, unnoticed... We were attempting our own investigation into acquiring galra data. There is much they speak of aloud that is not kept on any datapad, on any chip... And much they spoke of that made little sense without any other data. It is merely...frustrating."
"I see," Kolivan says, and there is quiet as he takes it in. Another thing ruined in an attempt to do good. Keith doesn't know why he's surprised by it anymore. It seems every good deed never does go unpunished, every attempt to battle the galra somehow ends up damaging some other part of the resistance. "Are there notes on what they spoke of?"

"Of course."

"Then I'd like to see them; and I'll send the data we received from the ship, also. If any new conclusions are reached, I'd like to hear about it. And now we know each other’s locations, it would be wise, I think, to perhaps collaborate on missions."

Olia crosses her arms, but nods.

"Unrelated... You have the human Matthew Holt within your ranks?"

Matt himself steps forward, and glances at Keith before setting his gaze back on Kolivan. "Right here, sir," he replies, bowing his head again. "You've been in contact with the paladins?"

Gesturing towards Keith, he says, "Clearly."

"A-and- and you know- that must mean you know-"

"Hey, Matt," Keith says, and Matt beams. "I tried to tell Pidge last night that I knew where you were, but she’d locked herself up in the lab."

"Of course," Matt says, laughing a little, and Keith smiles despite himself. "And how is she? Is she okay? Apparently she's a paladin! That's crazy! Aren't you a paladin? What the hell has been going on? You know, the news can take a while to reach us, sometimes."

"Pidge is fine," Keith replies, and all worry and tension just expels itself from Matt's body, shoulders dropping, chest expanding as he breathes a sigh of relief. Behind him, his fellow rebels smile, watching their interaction with warm eyes. "She's safe, she hasn't hurt herself in any permanent way... I think she's just stressed, mostly. Do you know what's been going on?"

"What's been going on...?" Matt repeats, frowning. "Going on with...what?"

"The- us," Keith says, shifting his eyes away at the last second. Humiliation seems determined to burn a second sun beneath his cheeks. "With the paladins..."

Matt just shakes his head, looking back at the others, who seem equally bewildered by the question. When even Olia looks confused, Kolivan steps up again.

"The paladins have been struggling the past deca-phoeb or so. It's true we've seen them recapture planets and expand the alliance throughout this time, however it's been little known that...the galra kidnapped one of the paladins." Olia's eyes fly wide open, brows jumping up her head, and Matt's jaw drops. "The blue one..."

"Lance," Keith says, just barely, throat closing around the name as he speaks it. "Lance Hernandez. He was- Matt, he was a cargo pilot until I was kicked out."

"Lance Hernandez?" Matt repeats, eyes dazed. "I know the name..."

"A-after you guys were taken- I, uh, got in a fight with Iverson, uh, you know. And Lance became a fighter pilot, and teamed up with Pidge and Hunk. So."
"Right," Matt murmurs, "I see, I see..."

"Yes," Kolivan says shortly, throwing an unimpressed look Keith's way. "So this paladin was kidnapped and tortured for five phoebs, so I'm told. Returned an entirely different person. What the galra appear to have done to him is...beyond explanation. The paladins have been struggling, lately. I thought, if our alliance was stronger, we could make up for what they, at current, are lacking."

"I didn't realise," Olia says, looking back round at the other rebels, who in turn are looking at each other, a couple drawing close to each other and whispering. "Perhaps."

"Wait!" Matt exclaims, and Olia raises a brow at him. Cheeks reddening, and scrubbing a hand through his hair, Matt says, "Wait. Is Pidge- she isn't- h-how is she- dealing with all this?"

"About as well as the rest of us," Keith mutters, and Matt's face falls. "I don't know, she's trying to help him or something. She's so busy, I...haven't talked to her. In a while. So."

"She's building him new prosthetics," Kolivan says, and Keith spins to look at him, mouth half-open in betrayal. "His legs- they cut off his legs. He has galra prosthetics, now. The running theory with the scientific-minded of the paladins is that the druids have injected the legs with their own tainted quintessence, which in turn is causing problems for the blue paladin. She's creating blueprints, decoding data, a whole host of things... We speak briefly."

"Briefly," Keith mumbles, and Tarandi sends him a sharp look, so he shuts his mouth, crosses his arms again. *Sure*, Pidge doesn't have time to come talk to Keith when he knows where her *brother* is, but she speaks to Kolivan on a regular basis? That's fine. That's understandable, whatever. They talk about things deemed too important - too *painful* - for Keith to handle. Whatever. He can prove his competence elsewhere.

"Of course..." Matt mumbles after a moment. "That sounds just like her."

"And how much do you estimate the paladins are lacking? Is it serious? Tortured teammates, sending a paladin to the Blades... These are all cracks the galra could exploit. That they *predicted*, even. What else explains their motivation?" Sidor says, and Matt backs up a little, looking away with distant eyes, no doubt wondering about Pidge and her wellbeing. A couple of the other rebels are looking at Keith, like he knows all the answers, and he should, he thinks. Wasn't he with the team only movements ago? But from the inside, everything had been so complicated. Emergencies kept cropping up, there was no time to examine everything as closely as perhaps they should have. Didn't they keep making mistakes? Getting drawn into traps, getting Lance's memories burnt away because they didn't study his prosthetics properly?

For some reason, those were never quite the primary concerns for Keith. Suddenly the secret had taken over, had seemed like the only way for Lance to get better. Standing on the outside, it all seems very stupid now.

It all seems... *careless*.

"And this blue paladin - is he receiving adequate treatment? The galra hide tricks up every sleeve. He could very well be some kind of sleeper agent."

We're aware, Olia," Kolivan breaks in. "The paladins are in great distress, from my gatherings. They isolate themselves, they run away... The blue paladin receives treatment, haltingly. Some kind of quintessence ritual was performed... Nothing since then."
Olia scoffs. "Send him to a doctor! A psychiatrist, even! What are they thinking...? They have enough paladins for one to disappear for a while."

"Evidently not," Kolivan says, and settles a cold glare on Keith. Keith bristles, spikes protruding from his tense shoulders, his clenched jaw, but he says nothing. Send Lance to a doctor? To do what? Fix him? Lance can't be fixed. It has been proven countless times. "I've spoken with the princess about this, they are, belatedly, trying to seek help for him. An incision on the back of his skull, they want a specialist, and someone to handle his legs. Other than that, nothing else."

"Defenders of the universe or not," Olia mutters, "there's no reason not to send a tortured teammate to a doctor. For a movement, nothing less. Who knows what the galra have implanted within him? But - tell them they can send him here, if they like. We know a variety of specialists in various species, I can have someone here at a moment's notice. We could provide refuge, even, if the team requests it."

Kolivan looks briefly surprised. "How convenient," he says, genuinely sincere. "I'll let them know as soon as possible. I also suggest you contact them separately, and keep them abreast of what you know. We can only survive this if we work together."

"Much agreed. I'll gather my contacts and get in touch again later tonight. And do invite them here - if nothing else, at least Matt can see his sister again."

Matt smiles, warm round the eyes, as Kolivan nods. Both leaders move to end the transmission, and just before it cuts off, Matt glances over at Keith and waves.

The screen goes dark just as Keith waves back.

Silence falls as Kolivan turns back to his desk, various datapads and holoscreens lighting up as he taps them. Neither Tarandi nor Zorah move, likely considering the past conversation, so Keith follows their lead, despite the questions begging to burst from his lips. How exactly does Kolivan think the paladins are lacking? Does he think it's due to Keith leaving? Or some kind of medical mishandling of Lance?

Send him to a doctor! the rebel leader had exclaimed, but not once had that ever been a thought of Keith's own. To the infirmary, sure, for a check up by Coran or Allura, to see what welts the blasters created on his skin, to figure out exactly how much damage had been done to his memory this time. But for psychological issues...? Lance had none. Lance didn't care. What was the point?

And what is the point now? Lance is nothing more than another glorified gun, something fatal, something inhuman. Maybe Allura believes something else... Keith can't do that to himself any longer.

But perhaps Olia is right. They didn't know about Lance's legs till his memory was shot. Didn't know about his ability to be invincible until the quintessence ritual had been performed. What many more secrets lurk just below the surface, yet somehow too deep to penetrate? Lance's body, no longer human, no longer functions like a human's, either. Secrets that would swim to the surface of mindmelds and infirmary tests remain hidden, locked away behind stone skin. Perhaps they need more advanced technology, or opinions from a species that isn't human or Altean... The galra could've programmed Lance with all sorts of things and they just wouldn't know. How could they? The infirmary tests never revealed anything important. Lance himself has no idea what's been done to him. Even Pidge, hoarding data from every avenue she can reach, seems to know little more than the rest of them.

"Had you thought, Keith," Kolivan says at long last, and Keith's head whips up to see that, at some
point, Tarandi and Zorah left the room, "that the blue paladin was a sleeper agent?"

The memory of it is so strong. Rescuing Lance itself is a blur, Keith didn't even see him till he was in a healing pod, but when he stepped out? So different, a thousand times different from the boy Keith thought he knew.

"Of course we did," he says, because they'd spoken, for hours, in the first few days of Lance being awake. It was an obvious solution to the problem before them. "But he was so different - when we saw what the galra had done to him, we... It... It stopped being possible."

"What they had done to him..." Kolivan murmurs, and sweeps his eyes over his collection of datapads. "Wouldn't that make it even more likely? Perhaps Lance was different because he was a sleeper agent, or perhaps he was different because the galra tortured him so much...but can't both be true? And the latter used to distract you from the truth. From seeking the truth, at all costs."

"But..." But while it was happening, Keith was so convinced of Lance's love that it seemed impossible. Even now, it just doesn't make sense. There were plenty of times when all of them were vulnerable to Lance - and still are. Why keep waiting to let Lance attack? "We would know, wouldn't we? The tests would've detected... He could've killed us all by now."

"The empire may be preparing for something... Waiting to use him. And how could tests detect such a thing? How can any of us know, I suppose, without evidence from the druids themselves?"

Well, isn't that the question. Not one Keith knows the answer to. Nor is that something he is particularly prepared to find out. Maybe that's cruel of him, but as was just highlighted in the call, there are better-minded people than him in Voltron who can tackle that issue. Pidge, huddled over prosthetic schematics, or Hunk, showing Keith his upgraded helmet, built himself. Coran, who knows everything, Allura, whose resourcefulness is limitless. Even Shiro's input, considering his arm, would be more useful than anything Keith could add.

It seems he is only a nuisance. To Voltron, to Lance, to the Blades, to every effort being made to help Lance. Without Shiro by his side, Keith's anger seems so unjustified, even though he can see every event that led to this as clear as a frozen spiderweb, Keith's shattered heart trapped in the centre. It all led to this. It was always going to. There was no way out other than to leave completely.

He and Kolivan stand together a while more, Kolivan muttering things every now and then and Keith trying his best to answer, but it's so hard to know what to say. Did you make enquiries about a doctor, Kolivan asks, but how does Keith reply that within days of Lance's awakening that was so far from their minds? What was it, exactly, that stayed their hands when they could've called up any number of rebel or allied bases and requested help? Lance's demeanour, the way he didn't seem to give a shit about any of it? Because they saw those videos, they'd seen the damage inflicted. If Lance had come out of that pod the slightest degree different than how he did, would they have called those allies immediately? If Lance had been sad, lost, angry, or damaged. But Lance had seemed...more whole than ever. Like there was nothing that could ever take him apart again.

When people act like that, it's hard to imagine that under all that certainty, all that bravado, there is a crevice of vulnerability. That there is anything that can be touched, or reached, or made broken.

But Keith believed that, didn't he? He thought there was a beating heart under all that stone. And yet it never occurred to him that they needed a doctor, that they needed someone to fix Lance...

So no, Keith replies eventually. Visits to the infirmary, a few tests, countless theories tossed onto
the table then discarded, but nothing about a doctor.

Kolivan just says *hm*, and Keith takes his queue to leave. When he makes it to the training room, he doesn't leave until his knuckles are bleeding.

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"...So. That's how the missions have been going, Allura. But you probably knew already."

"Well, yes... I won't deny Kolivan and I have been speaking every movement or so. But I- but Keith, how are you? The others reassure me that you're doing well, but- well, it means nothing unless I can see it for myself."

"I'm fine... What else have they said to you?"

"They don't- they don't say much else. Nothing I don't know from Kolivan, anyway. I know you're improving in your lessons, that you're adapting to their manner of handling missions, that you're certainly honing your senses in a fight... I'm glad, Keith. Maybe in time, you can come back, join us again..."

"In what lion? With what bayard? I'm not going to run around killing enemies planetside like he did."

"So you'll stay with the Blade indefinitely? But what if we need you?"

"*Need* me? What can I do that he can't? Keep a stupid secret that ends up fucking up the whole team again?"

"Keith, come on-"

"Allura."

"...Shiro misses you."

"I know."

"Hunk, too. He talks about you a lot. Says you're getting closer."

"We are."

"And Coran says... Never mind what he says. Is this how you're going to be the entire call?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"You're being rude. What have I done wrong, here? I am trying my best to lead this team, splintered as it is, and I am trying to keep an eye on you but- you're being intentionally difficult!"

"Is that what you think?"

"I think you're being defensive. And it's making you difficult."

"...I can't just accept whatever shit you're pulling, Allura. Babying him like that, as if he's not the same monster that did all those things-"

"Don't call him that! Heaven's sake, Keith, can we not do this? Can we please... I know you're angry. Fine, okay, I understand! What he did to you was terrible and I'm not going to dispute that. I
just think there's more than meets the eye. What's wrong with that? What's wrong with digging deeper beneath the surface? We have no idea what the druids did to Lance...

"Then why didn't we deal with that before all this happened? Why wait till now to care about him this much? If you think dealing with his fucking psychological issues is a priority now, what stopped it from being a priority before? Nothing's changed! He's gotten worse!"

"I know that! It was just so different before - I know that makes me stupid and careless, but now I have a chance to fix things!"

"Like Lance? He can't be fixed! He isn't fucking human anymore! There's nothing we can do to save him!"

"Keith -"

"And you know that! He's literally fucking invincible. He can't die! And he can't feel, still! It's been fucking months and we still don't know how to make him feel anything! He made me think he was human and that was my fucking mistake. You can't, he took out Hunk's eye."

"You don't think I know that!? I was there, Keith, it was my plan and I let Hunk join me and then when Lance started fighting him I couldn't stop him! I couldn't get in the way, I couldn't prevent anything! I just let it happen! I'm not going to keep doing that! I don't care what you, or anyone else for that matter, says about him! He took out Hunk's eye. Isn't that my fault? He was still asleep - he thought it was a nightmare - can't you see he needs help, Keith?"

"Not from me. Not from us."

"Then who from? I just- I just don't know -"

"Then give it up, Allura! You don't need to exhaust yourself over this! Lance. Isn't. Human. He doesn't care about anything. You shouldn't, either."

"You're wrong. I won't listen to anymore of this. I understand that you're angry, but I just can't listen to this! You haven't seen what I've seen. In the mindmeld, in Voltron - you haven't seen, Keith-"

"I've seen enough! I was just like you, Allura! I thought I understood him like no one else. I thought he trusted me. That's - he's - going to kill you."

"Whatever you saw from your discussions with him are nothing like what I've seen! I've seen inside his mind, Keith. I've felt some small measure of whatever is going on inside him. It's chaos. I won't ignore it! I'm sorry, Keith. I just won't."

"He's faking it. He's obviously faking it -"

"He isn't! He isn't, Keith! I just told you - are you not listening to anything I say? Are you so angry, so heartbroken over what happened that you can't even listen to what I'm saying ...? Why am I even bothering. Goodnight, Keith."

"Wh- Allura, you can't just-"

"I will not converse with someone ignoring every word I say. When you're ready, we can have this conversation like adults."

"Wait, but- but I have to talk to Pidge, her- Allura, her... her brother..."
Allura ends the call before Keith gets the name *Pidge* past his lips.

Keith can't breathe, he's so full of rage. Can't she see what she's being led into? Are they really so doomed to repeat history, even when this particular history is so recent? Lance isn't *human*, he just isn't! His body certainly isn't, and he doesn't look it, he doesn't act it, and he doesn't - he *can't* - feel it. He can't feel anything.

For some reason, that's the worst part. It really has been months - almost a year, surely - and yet this one problem, that has existed from the start, remains unsolved. They can't figure it out. Lance is just no longer capable. Emotionally, physically, on any other plane that exists...Lance cannot *feel*.

Not touch. Not empathy. That makes him dangerous. That makes it *easy* for him to *play* with people.

To eat up all their time and all their youth. Lines round Allura's brows that didn't exist before. Altean marks that seem dulled, almost, as though they've lost some kind of glow that once radiated from her. Despite all this evidence of *age* she is still so naive, it just doesn't make sense. She should know better. She should see what Keith sees; Lance playing a long, painful game, trying to sway her to his side, to *use* her for himself. Maybe it's so he can do whatever mission he wants without question. Maybe it's so no one else bothers him. As long as Allura sees something worthy in Lance, there is no stopping her, no getting *through* to her and preventing her from charging deliberately into danger.

It's just *stupid*! It already happened to him! He already did this dumb shit so that the warning would blare from Lance constantly, like a neon sign hung above his dead: *apathetic monster, do not approach*. And she approaches. And she ignores the warning. She doesn't *believe* it.

Even though she was right there. Even though she saw it all unravel, Lance silent in the aftermath of the ritual, Keith's heart in pieces on the ground at his feet. He doesn't *understand*. What could possibly move her to defend Lance's name so consistently? What did she see in that mindmeld that made her think Lance deserved some kind of forgiveness? Maybe she thinks Lance can divulge to her his reasons for his actions, or perhaps go to her when confronted with a once-forgotten memory. Maybe it's some kind of tactical move - protect Lance so he values her, will protect her in turn.

Or maybe she's just kind, and full of endless empathy and love. Maybe she still believes love will save the world, the universe. Lance.

To Keith, they're kind of the same thing.

Still.

Even now, separated and full of anger and hatred and a horrible, crushing shame, Lance is everywhere, entwined with everything. His relationships to his friends, to his brother. His work here in the Blades. Even the rebels, now.

He just wanted to *escape* ...but there is no escape. Lance is bigger than love, bigger than some relationship. The enormity of what was done to him - how intensely he was changed, right down to the bone - it encapsulates everything. Like an ink drop in water, it spreads, it *consumes*. Like poison, it infects. Like venom, it kills.
He has to get it out of his head, his skin. This anger, this fury, it's too strong. It burns in his chest like something physical, too hot to touch, bristling with spikes, but moving, a living thing. It's not unusual, this feeling, this extraordinary pain masked in a fury too intense to get close to. It's easy, actually. Like putting on his dad's jacket. Slipping his mom's knife into his belt. As easy as walking out his room, following the corridors to the elevator, and making his way to the armoury. Blade in one hand, a new dagger from Zorah in the other. Then he takes two swords, just in case, and finds a small practise room to train in.

And then he forgets in the only way he can. With every strike against the gladiators he ousts a thought of Lance from his mind, exterminates a feeling, frees his skin of the halting way Lance's fingers would move sometimes, as though he wasn't sure if he might break something.

Eventually all that's left is a mind clearer than Shiro's meditation ever quite managed. Emptied of all worries, all fears. The only concern is syncing his body to his mind, until he doesn't have to think to be deadly. Until he wins battle after battle with the singular gladiator, and swaps the dagger for a one-handed sword, and calls for a second gladiator to fight.

And he doesn't think about Lance. Fighting the same, training the same, because it wasn't the same. Lance just wanted to get rid of that awful energy, that tainted quintessence in him that drove him to kill. For Keith this is an exercise in venting his emotions until they no longer matter, until he and his weapons are one and the same, and Keith remembers, slowly, all that he is capable of.

What's important now, he starts reasoning to himself a couple hours in, is that this rebel base is now their ally. Not just any ally base, but the one with Pidge's brother - Keith's own friend - on it. Maybe having the three rebel groups working together will have a real effect on the galra. They may have saved many planets from galra rule, but that wasn't a strategy - it was just a thing to do, a way to pass time, to appear like they were still focused on their goal when their main problem was within their own ranks. They haven't had a solid strategy against the galra since Lance was taken, and they spent months scrambling to find him, then months scrambling to find him again. How long will it continue? The original plan was to help Lance get better and return to their duties, but that's impossible.

If all three groups work together...maybe something serious can come together, though god knows how much actual help the paladins will be. Maybe they can do something. Keith doesn't know what. Concentrate on the liberation of people from galra empire rule? Fight Lotor, Zarkon, Haggar, the druids? Hunt them down and demand some kind of explanation for the thing that walked out the healing pod all those months ago? How important is Lance in the grand scheme of things? A mess just for Voltron, or is there potential for some kind of universe-wide chaos? Or did the former lead to the latter because the paladins couldn't handle the situation effectively?

But it has to help. Right? Things have to get better, somehow. More planets rescued, more allies gained, more people saved... So much more than they can manage alone.

It's only these thoughts surfacing that make Keith feel better at all, let him breathe in relief and not exertion for the first time in hours. Things are pretty bad right now, and there's always the potential for worse, but the union of three resistance groups must surely bring about some good. Things will improve, even if it not for him, personally. The universe that they, as paladins, as rebels, as Blades of Marmora, are fighting for...surely, if they work together, it will be within their grasp.

Tomorrow, he'll speak to Pidge - insist on it, bellow her name until she is forced to see him - and tell her about Matt, about everything. How happy she'll finally be - to know he is alive, and safe, and fighting for the same reasons she's been fighting.

As happy as Keith was when Shiro was dropped onto Earth.
Maybe even as happy as he was the first time Lance walked out that healing pod again.

"...been ages, hasn't it? It's good to see you, though. How is...everything?"

"Good, uh, pretty good. We do missions regularly, I train a lot, study a lot...but Kolivan talks to you about this stuff, right?"

"Uh, some of it. Mostly it's future plans, or if I need a second opinion, or data stuff... He doesn't really- he's not, like, telling on you. Not that there's anything, to, uh, well- you know what I mean."

"Yeah, well...good. But I had something- I wanted to tell you something, Pidge. It's important."

"Do you? I have...something I wanted to tell you too, Keith."

"Something you want to tell me? About what? Pidge-"

"Would you be mad if I- Keith, something- happened, today, and I... I want to..."

"What? What happened? Did something- did he do something-"

"We- w-we went back to the beach planet, Keith. Where he lost his memory. Again. Back to the facility, because, because he wanted to go, apparently, Allura said that-"

"You... What? Why would he even want to-"

"Just listen to me! Allura said he wanted to, okay? He wrote it down. She showed us. I don't know why. So we went. And...the three of us went down alone, and I thought... It seemed strange, from the start...and...the facility, it was... It must have been evacuated, or something. And all that was left was data for me and rooms for Lance, and he- Keith, I think we were wrong. I think we were all wrong."

"Wrong about what."

"About his feelings, about his being- everyone keeps calling him a monster, and I know what he did to you was monstrous, but-"

"You don't have to call it that."

"I don't. Keith, he... You-you know he was... He was tortured on a table, right? And- and when he first got his brains shot out by the druids, and he woke up on the table in the infirmary, and he'd forgotten- and he thought he was with the druids because he was on a table? And that was the most scared we'd ever seen him? We...were walking through the place. And- everyone was on edge, even him. And I opened a door- there was a room, a-and all it had in it was a table, and- and I didn't think, I thought- we all thought Lance was- is- that something is wrong with him, so I didn't think. But then I heard something hit the ground, and I-I turned around and he was on the ground, freaking out, Keith, I... Like, I think he was having a panic attack. A-and it shouldn't be possible because he isn't supposed to have emotions anymore, but- but it looked real. The way he was after... Like he was really scared. Like he really feels things. Everything."

"We already knew that."

"Wh- Keith."

"He was having panic attacks before the ceremony. We sat there and talked about it. You and
"Hunk talking about that time you were working on his leg in the lab? When he had nightmares? And who's to know he wasn't faking it?"

"It- I don't think that's something you can fake!"

"Yeah, well, that's what I thought."

"Keith, please. This is important. Isn't there anything- did he ever say something."

"No, because all he ever told me were lies! I already did this with Allura. I won't- I won't help him. Or whatever you think you're doing. I'm not interested."

"Keith, you didn't see it the way we did-"

"I saw enough, on my own! You didn't see anything I saw! You didn't hear him when he told me to fuck off!"

"What if he was faking that instead?"

"For what? For fucking what, Pidge? I'm not fucking having this conversation."

"Can't you just consider -"

"No. We found your brother Matt on a rebel base nearby. We've been in contact and he's fine. Contact Kolivan if you want to know more."

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It just doesn't make sense.

It just doesn't.

And no matter how long he thinks about it, tossing and turning in his big long bed fit for a proper galra and not a half-breed like him, it never does.

That Pidge would sympathise with Lance? After what he did, to Keith, to Hunk, to everyone? He fooled Keith, why can't people see that it's all just an act? Maybe it looked real. Keith thought it was real, too.

What about it was so convincing? Pidge, entering a room, finding a table, then turning round and there's Lance on the floor, having a panic attack? How did he make it so real as to convince her and Allura both of his innocence, of his honesty?

And if it is real - and perhaps Keith doesn't want to confront this - then what was it about him that made Lance send him away instead of sharing that vulnerability with him, too?

So he doesn't sleep that night, obsessing endlessly in purple light about ifs and if nots. What is he missing here? How can he be wrong about this?

He can't. Hunk agrees, Shiro agrees, Coran...is never quite sure. But Lance isn't and can't be who he was before. Keith doesn't want him to be. To carry all of what the galra did to him on his back, human like the rest of them? He has to have changed. The incision on his brain, slicing his humanity to shreds. Scars littering his body that document everything he's done to stay alive... Lives taken, torture endured, endless blows, grenades and fists and swords, etched onto his skin. No one human is capable of that.
No one like who Lance was, anyway.

Subdued, he eats breakfast. Obediently he attends classes. Quietly he sits, lost, among a dozen other people. He only has this one truth to cling to, that Lance is monstrous and nothing else. Without that, he loses all reason to be here, away from Voltron, away from his friends.

That they went back to the facility, without Keith. To that beach, where Lance near bled out, where any human would've perished. His memory struck from his mind, laid there with sand in his hair, pink grains stuck in the blood on his armour. He had seemed so human there, even when the attack proved how invulnerable his body really was. Eyes closed, that lightless gaze hidden, he had seemed so young, so alone, so nearly dead. It had broken Keith's heart to kneel there, helpless, begging for help. That they returned...and found nothing, no one. No druid creeping out the ocean, no ships blanketing the planet, no prisoners locked away...

Keith doesn't want to go back, so why is he so angry about it? He was there the first time - he should have seen it the second time, he should've watched Lance closer than Pidge or Allura possibly could, because then, at least, he might understand whatever is going on in Lance's head. What happened after the panic attack? Did they leave, or keep going? Did Lance keep panicking, or did he tone the act down? What if they were ambushed? What if they were tricked? Wouldn't have Pidge mentioned that?

Or did Keith not let her finish the story?

Maybe he doesn't want to know how it ended. The prisoners were gone. What else was left for them but data and emptiness, the reminder of what they couldn't save? Lance, endless experiment subjects?

His emotions churn in his chest, he is a sailboat left in the ocean, and it's storming, he's seasick, he's alone. He's good with fire, with passion, anger, razing evil to the ground, but water? It doesn't belong to him, nor him to it. He's never had control of his emotions. That's his whole fucking problem.

He can't control anything. Running doesn't help. Training, no matter how many hours, doesn't help either. Not for long.

Shiro used to say he was envious of Keith. Just a little, just when it was quiet. Days on the castleship where they had no missions and training had been concluded, and they'd find their preferred observation deck and sit for a while. There were days Keith was tenser that usual, all uncontrolled, barely bound energy pumping through him, and Shiro would say nightmares? And Keith would say yeah.

And Shiro would say how many hours or how many punches or how many levels and Keith would say I don't know.

I lost count.

Like Lance would, training alone, eyes closed to everything but whatever he was fighting.

But those conversations with Shiro came before Lance was anything more than an insecure braggart who was unstoppable with his rifle. When Keith said I don't know Shiro would laugh, shake his head.

Shiro couldn't punch the nightmares out, he'd say. So many times, on the castleship and before, in their youth, Keith had gone to wake Shiro only for him to be on his side, eyes wide, fingers
clinging to his pillow. Swamped in a duvet he would shake, lain before Keith he saw nothing. The whole day he'd be slower than usual, more cautious, more afraid.

Keith's never been anything like that. Still, he doesn't know if that's worse. He always punches till his knuckles are bruised, bleeding, till he's so worn out, so overwhelmed with physical pain that he no longer has connection to any emotional pain. He carves out his pain and sets it aside, and in return makes himself a punching bag for bots.

At least Shiro's nightmares didn't drive him to physical agony, Keith had thought, but he's not so sure he thinks that anymore.

After the call with Pidge, Keith goes to the training room. And he trains. *If I just train hard enough, he thinks, I'll stop thinking about it. I can't think about it. I don't want to think about it.*

But why had the facility been evacuated? Because its location was known? Because the druid in charge died? Because Lance set foot on its shores, and so it became forfeit?

Was it something else?

If Keith had been there...how different would the outcome be?

If it was any different at all.

After a couple hours, he gives up. Training used to help, maybe, months ago, even days ago, but now...? It's all too tied up in Lance, all of it, all of him. And he can't stand it, so he leaves, glares at the doors as they slide open before him, wishing there was something on hinges he could at least slam behind him so someone could hear how angry he is, and stomps down the corridor.

What, exactly, does he keep doing wrong? Because every solution he has created has led to something bad, something painful. The secret romance, his decision to commit to Lance, his decision to leave... Why does happiness elude him no matter how much he chases? Why is every choice he makes somehow the incorrect one? Is life some kind of cosmic test that he's failing? Why can't things just be normal again, how the hell did they get so fucked up to begin with?

How did they lose Lance...? *How* did they not bring him back?

...How could they go to that facility without him? Keith said he would protect Lance on that goddamn beach and he doesn't even get a second chance to do it. He should've been there, he should've kept watch, he should've never left at all!

And now Pidge is caught up in this, this lie, this foolishness Allura is deluding herself into about Lance and his many hidden depths. It's unbearable to talk about, concrete stacking in his throat, sealing him silent, crushing his sternum. Why does everything have to so complicated? Can't Lance just be a liar, evil and monstrous and everything the galra made him? Can't everything be fake, a ruse to gain sympathy, to suffer no repercussions for his wrongdoings?

If it isn't fake - what the fuck's Keith meant to do? Take everything back? Return to Lance's side and try and fix him again?

He can't be fixed. You can make a monster out of a man but you can't take it back. The evilness and cruelty slithering through his veins can't be expelled so easily, can no longer be extricated from the blood, the flesh.

Lance, a paladin, a monster.
It's sad. At the core of everything, it's just sad.

"...think it'll heal properly?"

"Uh...no, they don't think so. The infection... Look, it's not my first scar."

"No, but..."

Lance. Not the only person by far harmed by the empire's rule.

To his left, a half-open door - through it he can just barely see Zorah, hands shaking as they move to something out of Keith's view. Her face- her eyes-

He takes a step forward, just so he can see what Zorah sees.

The scarring isn't as bad as Lance's. That's about all he can say.

"The second you saw the infection, Tari-"

"I know, but all this new intel, and everything with Keith, I'm just trying to-"

He only takes a step back when Tarandi says his name, but her head whips up, her eyes catching on his figure and reeling him in without a word.

The scarring isn't as bad as Lance's.

It's still pretty bad.

"It's okay," Tarandi says, to him or to Zorah he's not sure. "You can look. You can be angry. I fucked up, alright? The second it felt strange I should've gone to the infirmary. I know."

"But you didn't," Keith says, and his voice comes out strangled, a bit, like his throat is too tight to get the words out. "Because I was here. Wasting your time-"

"Don't be so self-centred," Zorah reprimanded, cuffing his shoulder. He begins to frown, but her hand immediately slips down his arm to take his hand, clutching it between both of hers, and they both turn to Tarandi.

"She's right," Tarandi says, "it's not all about you. It really was my fault... I've been trying to take on too many things, prove I was still okay after the injury. I never said I was perfect, did I?"

"No, that was me, babe."

"Ah, I knew someone said it."

Zorah's hands don't loosen around Keith's. He says, "But it was my fault. You went up there alone... I should've followed you when we heard trouble- none of this would've happened-"

The scar. Cutting across her stomach, big, thick, some of it still partially bandaged up. No, it's not as bad as Lance's scar, but why should he be the measure of it? It's horrible despite that. It's- it gave her an infection. She could've died.

"Oh, Tari, he's stupid. Just like his mother, he's stupid, this is a tragedy, what will we ever tell her-"

Covering her scar with her top again, Tarandi just rolls her eyes and shakes her head at Keith. Stupid, sure. "You're not stupid," she says.
"Well," Zorah says.

"Your mother's not stupid, either."

"Well."

"But it's not your fault I got hurt, you know that, right?"

He can say it, and he can know it, but it doesn't feel that way. It feels like he was dawdling with Zorah while Tarandi was attacked by at least a dozen soldiers. Paladin Keith wouldn't have let it get to that point, paladin Keith wouldn't have listened to orders. If something felt wrong, he would've abandoned everything to make sure all was right. Why didn't he listen to his instincts? Was he so involved in standing guard for Zorah that he forgot he needed to defend Tarandi, too?

They're his mother's friends.

What would she think if she came back - if she ever comes back - and saw him without them? How could she be proud of him?

"Maybe he's a little stupid," Tarandi murmurs to Zorah, who rolls her eyes, maybe, and hops up on the table she fixes equipment on. His hand still locked in a vice grip with both of hers, Keith is forced to do so too, and Tarandi stands before them, eyes deep, dark eyes endlessly safe and warm. The dark walls, the purple lighting, it makes the room feel smaller, safer, like it's just them. "Well, I bet you think this whole situation is your fault because you didn't prevent me from getting injured to begin with, right?"

"I'm better than I was on that mission - I could've done it."

"It's not a matter of how good, or how fast, you were, Keith. There were fifteen of them and one of me. Even if you had been there..." She shakes her eyes, gaze wandering for a moment. "No, this is better. I bet you think this whole situation is your fault, too, right? Being here at all. If you'd...gotten through to the blue paladin like you wanted to...maybe you would've never had to have come here at all."

Maybe, Keith thinks. Maybe.

"But most of all...maybe if you'd never let him be kidnapped at all...everything would be better."

"Maybe," Keith says, and his voice is strangled again, as though to strip the words of his voice. "Maybe-"

"You're only one person, Keith," Tarandi whispers, and the words wash over him but he doesn't comprehend them, not fully.

"The rebel leader," he says instead, and he has to swallow, has to take a deep breath. He's the one holding Zorah's hands tight, now. "She said we should've taken him to a doctor. To a psychiatrist - if we'd just- but he was so- so- Lance wouldn't let us tell him anything was wrong with him. You know?"

"Oh, I know," Zorah says, and Tarandi flicks her knee. Again, that strange corner of Keith's heart feels wronged, or- hurt by this interaction, shrivelling into itself even as another part of his heart blossoms to see such a small, heartfelt display of love. Of intimacy.

He really thought he had that, huh? Maybe he is stupid.
“We know, Keith,” Tarandi murmurs again. “But you are one person. One person.”

“Oh, he says, he’s one person. But there were six other people on that castleship, and Keith is the one who screwed up the most. One person can cause a lot of damage.

“Look,” Tarandi tries again, straightening up, “who else was on that ship? Coran, right? One of the last living Altean men. How many years has he lived? Centuries? Or what about your brother, Shiro? He’s older than you all, isn’t he? Did he say something?”

“He did. He told me to break it off. He was right. Besides, Shiro does have nightmares and panic attacks and everything Allura says about Lance. If Lance really was - really is like that, wouldn’t Shiro notice?”

“Right,” Tarandi says. “Wouldn’t he? What if he’s too busy to notice any symptoms? What if Lance hid the symptoms? What if Shiro...just isn’t paying attention?”

The air feels too hot around him, heavy, bringing a flush to his cheeks. Like he’s some little kid, getting in trouble again for punching some jerk in the face. Keith was not the one throwing punches in this situation. Why the hell are they blaming him? “So- so what? You’re on his side, too?”

“Did we say that?” Zorah asks, nudging his shoulder with her own. “We’re saying: look at everyone around you. Older people, wiser. People who should know better than some teenager tossed into space. Did they say anything? Did they realise anything you didn’t? What if your relationship did help in some way we just don’t know yet? No one’s saying you’re right or that you’re wrong.”

“There were- it was seven of us. Including Lance. So.”

“So if there’s blame to be had, it’s to be shared with five other people. And if there are any celebrations, either, it’s to be shared with you, too.”

The bristles on his shoulders die back down a little. It still feels hard to breathe, like he can’t quite get the air down deep enough, but Zorah’s body is so soft and warm next to him, so alive, and Tarandi rests her hands on each of their knees, squeezing for a second, and yeah, okay, he’s one person. Whatever those galra did to him - those four druids, and whoever else was involved, they count, too. They take the blame, more blame than anyone else.

“Look, I’m sorry about your mother,” Tarandi says finally. Her gaze is cool and consistent upon Keith’s face, and even Zorah nods beside him. “I’m sorry she isn’t here. I’m sorry we can’t bring her here. I’m sorry we can’t tell you anything about what she’s doing, but if she could fly here right now and see you, she would.”

“But she can’t.”

“No. But you don’t have to worry. We’ll be by your side until she gets back.”

“We’ll still be by your side even after she gets back,” Zorah corrects Tarandi, bumping Keith’s side again, and winking. It reminds him, a little, of Hunk.

Even a little of Lance.

“So if you want to talk to us about...Lance, or training, or your mother...you can talk. Okay?” Tarandi asks, peering into his eyes.
“Okay,” he says, but what else is there left for him to say? The same thoughts circle his mind every day...giving voice to them won’t help now. Still, Tarandi looks so sincerely into his eyes, so ready to take on any burden he has to share; Zorah still squeezes his hand, providing every comfort she can. So he looks at them, both of them, and mutters, “It’s not fair.”

“Which part?” asks Tarandi.

“Any of it.”

“Yeah,” Zorah says, and wraps her arm around his waist, pulling him closer to her. Without armour, she really is soft, like Hunk, even when he can feel her muscles against his torso. “Sounds about right.”

Tarandi flicks a look at Zorah, but she doesn’t say anything, and Zorah rests her chin on Keith’s shoulder, shutting her eyes, like she trusts him enough to be this vulnerable with him. Tarandi’s eyes shut, too, her hand still tight round his knee, her other hand now clasped in Zorah’s.

It’s not like Voltron. Not weird and stupid like it was before, not even grim and scary like it was after. Something else, newer, maybe a little more stable.

A little, he imagines, like a family.

Chapter End Notes

uwu... i hope u dont mind my ocs, i dont rly like using them bc i dont want to make it like...all about me and my fantastic creations etcetc but also...we need more blade members. and lesbian wives? yes yes yes yes yes...

any comments would be appreciated!! many thanks for being patient !!!!!
Chapter Summary

lance awakens, and wishes he hadn't.

Chapter Notes

:))))))

u kno usually i dont worry too much about taking a while to update bc unfortunately i just live this way but a couple weeks ago i checked and realised i hadn't updated since april... now that's embarrassing ! no real excuse but uni was busy this term and will probs be next term so apologies in advance!

but ! after this chapter u can read the 3rd piece in this series that takes place directly after this chapter.... it's the extra from shiro's pov which i mentioned ages ago. it's his perspective on a few past events and like. i would say a mandatory reading since it continues after this chapter ends. so it's a two for one deal this update! i hope that makes up for how long it all took TT

trigger warning time! it's a bad one today. i would say this chapter and then 19/20 are kind of the worst but for different reasons. there is explicit suicidal thoughts, explicit self harm, explicit suicide attempt(s), panic attacks, memories of torture etc...all the usual but the first ones are the most important. i would like to repeat this is all pretty graphic unfotunately, since it's very important to the plot. it's very much the perspective of something who is so deep into suicidal ideation and fear and trauma and trying to navigate to their goal so. it's not just what lance does, it's everything he's thinking so the whole chapter is rough.

so my apologies and as always please take care! if the above warnings concern u, u probs shouldn't read it D:

and other than that....enjoy :) it's a :) fun ride tonite :))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Maybe you've been slaughtered
Maybe you've been kissed
Either way means nothing
I simply don't exist
American Psycho

--

Waking up on a table in the infirmary reminds him of waking up with the druids.
It's not like a flashback, not like before. It doesn't pull him in, it doesn't play over real life. It's just a memory, brushing over his face like a cool breeze, nothing like the hurricanes he gets dragged into usually. He just remembers it, waking up with cold steel beneath him, wrists and ankles locked in place, how terror sped his heartbeat, his breathing, how he could never break free, not once, not on his own.

He can no longer feel the press of the table against him, but he knows it's there. Sits up and presses his palms against it, surveys the room, the bright white-blueness of it, how different it was, how it still feels the same. Darkness everywhere the galra were, but the lights on all the walls keep the shadows away. He isn't shackled into place, he isn't even that afraid.

There's nothing there. How is he supposed to feel something now, stripped of every grain of sand that clung to his fingers? The remnants of his dignity, his will, his independence...shredded by the collapsed facility, disintegrated in the ocean salt. How pathetic. He gave his *everything* trying to die, and it just didn't happen.

And he tried hard. He tried *really* hard.

He really thought it would work.

Allura sleeps on the table nearby. A pink blanket over her shoulders. On her side, facing him, like she was trying to keep watch over him and exhaustion overtook her instead. Not wanting to bother her, he slips off the table, and inspects himself briefly in the mirror - bandages mostly everywhere, so he tears off the ones on his face to reveal the scar, hideous, etched in deeper than the others. His hair's getting a little longer, but the coil of curls against his temples feels like some kind of intrusion, looks wrong with the serious, emotionless face it's attached to.

So he stops looking. He stops thinking. He tried to kill himself - put himself in a situation no one else could survive - but he's still here. Pads out the room with ease, scurries through the corridor without looking back at the shadows, and doesn't stop until he's in the only place where he can't think anymore.

Where he doesn't have to.

He takes a spear off the weapon rack, calls down the gladiator, and starts fighting.

--

The others come eventually. All in a panic, of course.

He doesn't realise it at first. Doesn't see them, or hear them, or comprehend their existence at all. Opposite him is a bot. They look kind of like the galra, same shape, same colour, but the metal glints in the low light, and their footfalls are heavier, and they don't stop coming.

*It* doesn't stop coming. And he's- you know- he has a spear now. Okay? They let him start training in weapons. He'd finally killed enough people. They don't give them to him outright, though, not when he's in the arena. It's part of the fun, part of the eternal mockery beset on him and part of the endurance tests they drag him through - the audience throws down whatever they want, and Lance has to figure out how to use it.

It's a pretty big spear. Useless against a bot. Who brings a spear to a gunfight anyway? It gives him more distance than a knife, but it's still closer than he'd like to be. He prefers guns. He could always shoot onehandedly and use his other arm to draw up his shield if things got dicey. The spear requires two hands. Nothing resembling a shield has been delivered.
They haven't given him armour yet.

Still, he fights. He wouldn't survive the alternative, even though he's survived till now. If he gives in, the opponent fires at him until the druids get bored and drag him away, and then they overload his system with quintessence and chain him up in his cramped box of a cell, and he'd shake all night, fires burning through his skin, raging in his eyes.

That, more than any fight or any test, is the closest he's felt to death. Like one more choked gulp of quintessence would scorch his throat and disintegrate his heart. Even this bot, invincible and relentless and triggerhappy as it is, doesn't come close. He'd rather die fighting than with his jaw clamped open and quintessence flooding his veins.

Despite the lack of armour, despite only having a spear, Lance doesn't give up. The bot, too, never falters, as if it's too strong for Lance to take down but not strong enough to take Lance down either. An impasse. The audience finds them boring. Even though Lance is grasping for his life at every turn, the novelty wears off after the first ten times. It becomes lacklustre.

Often, the druids will intervene. Release another opponent, maybe, inject a different kind of weapon. Sometimes they haul him off and juice him up. Sometimes they juice up the opponent instead, like they think his opponent's increased strength will trigger his fight or flight responses properly. Sometimes they force his hand - strip his agency - and surrender him to the beast. Sometimes they use magic.

It's just a streak of something pink blasting past his ears, but it's enough. His vision darkens, his knees drop to the floor and the bot, the audience, the spear on the dirt in front of him all fade away.

The magic doesn't burn like the quintessence, but the magic isn't often the actual punishment. It's a warning shot, a threat to get down and be silent before they do something worse. Somehow they coded it into his programme, back when he still laughed and made jokes and talked to the cameras above him - he'd crack some stupid quip and bright pink would sear his eyes, and then something else would overtake him, and when he'd regain conscious he wouldn't remember how to speak for a while.

Days, sometimes.

The something else never comes, no matter how long he waits.

And he waits.

And when he finally opens his eyes, he's surrounded by people. Hands on his shoulders, arms, trying to yank him upright, but he can't feel them, they can't move him. Quietly, their voices echo back into existence; slowly, their outlines clarify, their faces become familiar. Allura and Pidge and Coran, Shiro's hand on his shoulder, Hunk's face in the periphery.

How many more realisations, he thinks, as he sits upright and looks at his hands. Uninjured. No blood that he can see. How many more times will this happen, will visions and memories overload his system and throw him out of orbit? He's spun out of control, and everything he crashes into hits him harder. He just wanted to fight a bot. He didn't even think about it. Hasn't he done it before? Is he getting worse?

With nothing to cling to, no sense of home or family or love, is he spiralling frantically into the end? Shadows hunting him down hallways. Druids' voices where none should exist. Dreams and day time plagued by everything he's done. And this guilt, this shame, burrowing into his core,
filtering into his blood, his heart, his soul. Oil that drowns every hope that lived there. All he does
now is just the spark that ends with him burnt whole. Every gunshot he endures, every bloody
descent to fight armies of galra on the ground. It's taking from him like nothing before.

And now...it was Allura, he realises. Tears in her eyes. Her hands tremble like she's the one who set
him on fire. No one else has the power she does. Was she aiming for him, or did she intentionally
miss? Surely the latter. But what if she was afraid, so afraid it knocked her off balance, so afraid
her vision blurred and her target existed in three different places at once?

But surely she wouldn't... Allura, the only light in this hellhole, the one person the darkness doesn't
seem to touch...

His gaze fixed on her, she finally says, "L-Lance? What's... Are, are you alright?

What did you do to me, he wants to ask, but knows it would be wrong. What's happening to me, he
could say instead, if words remembered how to unbury themselves from his chest. What's
happening to me to make me act like this? Is this how it's always going to be?

He can only look at her. Perhaps beseechingly, because she drops down before him, graceless as so
often they are all now, and says, "Lance, I'm sorry. You wouldn't snap out of it - we didn't want to
fight you. A-and- I didn't know what else to do. I didn't realise it would frighten you so much, oh,
Lance, please-"  

Frighten... Is he frightened? He must be. Only fear could induce a reaction so stupid, so
unnecessary.

He nods, shrugs, unsure what he's even trying to be convey. That he's okay, but not really. That he
understands, that he accepts her apology.

But as she helps him stand up, he can't quite meet her eyes. Hers are so large and tear-filled, so
clearly guilty, upset, distressed. Lance's in contrast are no doubt voids of emptiness. Somehow,
these past few months, this long, long year, he had forgotten about her magic. She uses it so rarely,
so sparingly, and Lance, when fighting, never notices what else goes on around him. Not only is
Allura talented with weapons, fast on her feet, and intelligent in every subject needed in a leader,
but she is exceptionally powerful in magic.

And so are druids. And it's such a small thing, but trapped in that flashback, it had meant
everything. It told him he was not safe.

In the one bright, open, unshadowed place he felt a ray of safety from. By the one kind, glowing,
understanding person who sat with him always in his constant fear. As they leave the training
deck, a great huddle trekking through the corridors with their heads down, it's all he can think
about. Allura was the only person he felt a degree of safety and love from - and now she, too, will
be poisoned by what the druids did to him? Her actions - meant to save him from himself - filtered
through the lens of his torture, are now also torturous? It isn't fair. She's a good person. She is the
only person he would bear to speak to if he could.

The druids take her also from him.

The others walk in silence. Coran tries to get Hunk and Pidge to leave, but they glare, raise their
eyebrows when Coran tries to convince them, but the silence is heavier for it. Only when they're at
the infirmary, Lance sat back on the table and Coran standing by Allura's chair, does anyone say
anything at all.
"Lance," Coran says, because Allura's hands are knit tightly together, her eyes still wet, and Shiro is close-mouthed and unyielding opposite her. "You left the infirmary before Allura awoke, and no one saw you in the corridors. Have you been in the training room all that time?"

He nods.

"And your wounds, your- injuries... Nothing caused you trouble?"

How would he know? He doesn't see when he's fighting. He doesn't feel, either. If he's not bleeding out enough for them to notice, then he's fine, right? He shakes his head.

"W-well... Alright. But- really, you should've awoken Allura, or found one of us - I'll do a check up now, but I was meant to do one this morning. But, lastly, Lance... has that ever happened before when you were only fighting a bot?"

The thing is, he can't remember. It's not even a matter of having half his life or more burnt out his brain - but training every day just runs together. He doesn't pay attention half the time. In a fight, his body often moves without his mind ever consciously granting permission for it. As for what he fights - typically, the higher the level, the more bots there are to fight. Did he switch it to a different setting, had someone else and not turned it back? Has he fought singular bots before and descended into- Surely he'd remember if he did.

But he doesn't know. So he just shrugs.

Coran looks to the others, but they're only frowning at Lance, or five centimetres away from his head. Besides, it's not like any of them have answers, nor can they make him reply in any more definite terms.

So Coran just instructs Lance to undress various parts of him, and starts removing bandages, frown deepening when only scars remain.

"He's never done that before," Allura whispers at long length, and then she glances back at him, shirt off and unmoved as Coran peels a bandage off his gut. The arch of her brow, still, is terrified. "Been triggered by a bot, it's usually- it's usually only humans."

"Maybe he's getting worse," Shiro mutters, and Lance's heart lurches even though he knows it's true. "But has he ever fought a bot on its own before? It could be the first time..."

"I don't- I don't know... Certainly never when he trained with us. But we don't know what he does on his own... I don't- usually I just leave him on the training deck for a while. I don't like to...watch."

"It's possible... I just don't see how he could get himself out of this state on his own. He seemed completely immersed in the flashback. It feels like...if he did do this while training on his own, he'd only stop if he died or if he was found. But that's- that's useful. Now we know it's all one-on-one fights that trigger him, not just humans."

"Which means he probably fought robots in the arena..."

*I'm right here*, Lance wants to say as Shiro hums in response. *I'm right fucking here!*

But he can't say anything. Despite the desire to scream and shut them up, he can't even move a muscle, show in any manner what their idle chatter does to him.

He doesn't want to know. Being triggered by any possible opponent if he's fighting them alone -
that could mean anything. That could mean if some child tried to playfight with him he would
slaughter them without even realising. He'd be afraid of them.

Has that happened before?

In the ring, while training...?

How would he know?

God, even if they do fix him, somehow, what would even be the point of it? Fighting feels like dying, now. Everything feels like dying. He can't even go back home and pretend to be normal. What if his niece or nephew tried to play with him and he took it the wrong way? What if his mother tried to hold him but all he could see was some kind of villain?

What if this - this, this specific issue of losing himself to past memories and reacting to them in actual reality - what if it just never goes away?

What, he must labour, is the point of it all? Quintessence rituals, searching for someone, anyone, to fix the five dozen things the druids did to him, the seven dozen things that have developed since his return, to point at every other part of him and say with such finalty: nothing can be done.

Why even bother?

Why didn't he just die yesterday? Or any other day before that? Surely there were plenty of times death could've snatched him away. Why didn't it? He feels as close to death as inhumanly possible. Is this punishment?

Is he being selfish, wishing to escape it?

Is it not selfish to live on, taking and taking and taking from everyone around him?

Coran finishes the check up in silence. Pidge departs within minutes, citing lab bullshit, and shortly thereafter Shiro takes his leave, nodding only at the others before striding out. Hunk sits by Allura and wraps himself around her, and she grips his hands tight, knuckles pale as she examines Lance alongside Coran.

"Well," Coran says, "you've recovered quite alright, to no one's, ah, surprise I'm sure. Your visor left that big scar on your face, we think perhaps the contaminants of the lab may be causing the permanent damage. The legs are fine, no damage to vital organs, no other, er, sign of damage at all. You may carry on as you were."

As expected. Even as he suits back up and turns to leave, the other three just stay, Allura staring beseechingingly at Coran at Hunk rests his head in her neck. Lance doesn't know what it means. The weight of himself drags him so deep he can barely see that it crushes the others as well. Even now, Coran's head bows like a tree trunk in a mighty wind, barely able to stay rooted.

They say nothing as he leaves. Perhaps, at this point, there is nothing else left to say.

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He doesn't go straight back to the training deck. Instead, he takes the elevator and finds his way back around to the observation room, where he can find the advanced controls for the deck.

It's even worse than going to the deck. The corridors get narrower, darker. He gasps for breath the entire time. Like a child, he stands in the observation room with the lights on and his eyes shut to
ward off the shadow monsters chasing him, but they slither into his head, burrow under his eyes. In a corner he crouches and panic-sobs until he can gather the courage to hit the right switch and sprint back to the deck.

Definitely getting worse, then.

He tries not to think about it.

--

It's impossible not to think about it, though. Fighting is so instinctual, so easy that it leaves the rest of his mind superbly clear, a shallow pond in the sun. He sees straight through himself.

He really is getting worse. He knows it, he feels it in a way the others can't comprehend. It's his bones that are growing heavier. It's the chasm in his chest that's chiselling itself larger, enveloping his organs, his throat, his eyes. They don't even know how much worse he is. Allura, Pidge... What they see can never accurately reflect how the monster inside him is swallowing himself whole.

They think they can separate Lance and the monster, pretend it takes the shapes of druids or Lotor or tables in empty rooms. But there is no way to separate the two. They don't realise it's in him, that it uses his hands, points his gun.

It sees with his eyes. For a moment when Pidge steps into the room, she looks like another enemy, a galra bot, a gladiator. Lance can barely break through and recognise her. Even as he ends the simulation with a raised hand, as he looks to her and tries to focus only on her features, her outline blurs and shifts, it isn't real he wants to tell himself - but it looks real.

And it feels real.

The more she approaches, the less her features twist, the clearer she becomes. His pulse calms down, he relaxes his grip on his weapon, then tosses it aside. Pidge comes to a stop beside him, and takes a seat.

"You can keep training, if you want," she says, resting her head against the wall. "I didn't realise you'd come back here."

Like he has anything else to do. It feels worthless, but at least his keeps his body moving. This thing needs to move, otherwise it'll start wanting to kill. Still, he sits beside her, lays his legs flat out before them and crosses his arms. Pidge looks tiny and fragile next to him. He knows he'd be able to kill her, the druids don't have to whisper it in his ear. Unprepared, it wouldn't take long to overpower her.

That's not what's important. He doesn't want to do that.

He just wants to sit. Pidge has a compulsion to fill the silence when she's uncomfortable - it doesn't take long for her to turn to him, head angled awkwardly, trying to extract something from his features. Then she looks away, plopping her head on her hand. Lance doesn't look at her long, just into the overwhelming whiteness of the deck lights. No monsters here, no room for shadows. They can't take him now.

"I..." Pidge says, and rubs her jaw. "It would be nice, um, to talk. I have some cool news. Some... Uh, some really incredible news, actually. The, uh, the Blade of Marmora have been picking off these top secret galra bases, you know, picking up intel - and they came across- they found- In these, special enemy rebel data files they found my brother. They know where he is. I think they're going to contact him. I think we're going to contact him. Isn't that crazy? It's been so long... I
always wondered - but there was no time to search. We never found any data about him. But now...now...

Pidge looks up at him, then bursts into laughter. He can't tell if she actually means it. It is funny, though, that in the midst of the depressing spiral some good news surges through. Pidge's brother, of all people... Did he come to space with them? Lance's memory is so grim to sift through, lik an ash-drowned cemetery of tombstones he can't read. Did he go missing, too? It can't have been like this...

"It's so crazy!" Pidge says to him, and he just blinks at her. "That we'd find him? Here? Now? Like this? What if Keith never went to the Blades? I guess they'd find out eventually, but would they tell me? Would they even know? And now? I thought you were going to die, but instead, I- I got my brother back. Oh, god... I always thought we'd find him and I'd be his cool little sister fighting off all evil..." She chances a glance at him, then pulls her knees to her chest, frowning. "Probably won't be like that now."

No, instead she sits beside all evil condensed into one body, and doesn't even try to fight. Is she expecting him to reply, or does she only chatter because she can? He doesn't even know what to say. An apology, maybe. He has a thousand apologies to give, if his jaw could move a muscle. A hundred thousand, probably.

Well, she must expect nothing from him. She says, "I don't even know what to say to him... He was captured, too, but he was sent to a work camp... And now he's with the rebels. Maybe they saved him? But maybe he fought his way out... I hope he fought his way out... But there was no mention of Dad, so... So maybe he isn't with him? Maybe he was never with Matt. Maybe he..."

Died? In a work camp? How would Lance know?

"Ugh, I just don't know. At first I didn't know where Matt was, then I didn't know where Shiro was, then I didn't know where you were, and now I have Matt but I don't have my dad. I have so many things to do, all the time. How do I even...?"

For a moment, it is silent; Pidge sighs and stares glumly ahead, picking at some thread on her jeans. There are dark skies beneath her eyes. The starry freckles on her cheeks seem dimmer than usual. The longer he is on this ship, Lance knows, the more he will suck the life energy out of everyone else on it. He sees it everywhere, in everyone. If he looked in the mirror, perhaps he would see it in himself.

"I read the files on him," Pidge mumbles finally. "He's an active agent of the rebels. No kind of obvious physical or mental trauma observed, but he has a scar on his face. But he's- he's a good fighter. A good tactician. It doesn't surprise me, actually. I'm just glad he's- he seems to be okay."

He nods when he looks at her, only because he can't say me too.

At least someone, somewhere, is okay. Jesus, isn't that all they can ask for at this point? That someone, some people, are okay because of them?

That's all Lance can do, anyway. He can't go near someone without somehow infecting their soul, but he can kill the bad guys and stop them from hurting others. That's all he can do.

"It would be nice," Pidge murmurs, gazing into the distance, "to hang out with him properly when all this is over. Find some nice planet and pretend it's real... We could even go back to Earth, you know? We should... Mom doesn't know he's alive. Maybe if there's ever time, I'll ask... I would really like to just...relax, you know?"
Lance knows. He would find no peace from any planet, Earth or not, nor does he think this will ever really be over until he's dead in a ditch, but maybe that doesn't matter. Lance could make the end come so much quicker. Pidge could plot a course to Earth with her brother before the week is out.

He doesn't smile; he can't. But he sits a little longer, comforted by the bright lights, by Pidge's intermittent wonderings. It would be nice, wouldn't it? For them to all relax together. And more than anything, they deserve it.

This, too, is a way Lance can help.

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The comfort recedes the further he walks from the deck, but he doesn't break into a sprint, just paces himself, breathes deeply, holds tightly to that one pearl of hope Pidge has handed him.

The warmth dissipates entirely within the shower. He is bare before the world and in turn the world bares itself to him, a deep, rotten core that grows arms and grabs for him. He drives his hands into his hair and- it feels too long. Too much. Like it might get in his eyes, become easy to yank on. It feels...wrong.

And the druids won't stop muttering because of it.

It seems- stupid, so Lance ignores it as best he can. He runs his fingers through his wet hair, tries to measure the strands of hair round his face, but it's meaningless. It keeps bothering him, though. The feeling, like something's off, somehow, like he's doing something wrong. Something...incorrect. He hadn't noticed it before, but looking in the mirror after he woke up - seeing that scar down his face, but more than that: this bright, exuberant glow upon his skin; his hair, curly and imperfect, tickling his neck, his ears; and these...human eyes.

He notices it now. In the corner of his eyes, strands of brown catch the light. He goes to tuck a lock of hair behind his ear, but his hand has forgotten the memory and continues pushing through his curls. His fingers return with a few loose hairs wrapped round his fingers, and they look- a couple inches, more?

He doesn't remember why he got the undercut, but the more he trains, the more he notices the colour, and motion, and shine, where he once noticed nothing at all.

Dinner passes easily. He goes to the gym, but upon finding it empty he just sits, staring at the wall by the weights and trying to understand why it feels so wrong. So different. His skin glows with vitality where before it looked dead, but that makes sense - he did the quintessence ritual, he got all that energy back. And he got a few new scars but that's... They barely even register as personal. They exist because Lance exists. They're essential to him being what he is.

But his hair...

But his eyes...

There is no mirror in his room. The bathroom mirror is still cracked. Where else can he go?

Where else has he ever been forced to confront himself, time and again, this sculpture the druids have eroded him into? Where does he see the consequence of battle - where does he gaze helplessly at the lack of consequence?

The infirmary is quiet this time of night. He doesn't even know how late it is, really, but there's a
red light on the lab door when he passes it, so Pidge must still be walled up in there. The mirrors
are behind the pods, but more importantly - knives kept in a drawer.

The creature lumbering towards the mirror barely registers as himself, even though he can see his
features, his scars, the hair curling into his eyes. Like with Pidge earlier, its outline seems to
disappear, he blinks and his outfit is a suit of galra armour, blink again and he can see bare, human
legs, stares long enough to watch the vision change itself, shifting so miniscule into the next image
he barely realises it.

His fingers twist round the handle of the knife. He grabs some hair away from his neck and drags
the sharp edge of the knife up the back of his head, moving slowly so he doesn't accidentally stab
himself. Some hair comes loose, and Lance stares as it drops to the floor. It can be done, then. He,
too, can shape himself back into the visions of the druids. Even if he doesn't want it, he needs it.
The druids built him to fight battle. It only makes sense to keep his hair short, so it doesn't distract
him. And it feels...good. Correct. Like he's doing something right. He knows it's the druids,
proving somehow that he is still theirs even in these tiny, invisible moments. He knows, but he
can't fight them anymore. He has no shield, no barrier, to stop them from ripping into his skin
directly. They want his hair to be shorter, so Lance will cut it shorter.

Besides...he couldn't fight back even if he tried. The second he stops pretending he wants this, he
can feel their grip within his fingers, pulling the knife up without him, and what that means - all the
things that could possibly mean - terrifies him too much to do that. So he keeps cutting his hair,
holding the knife so tight he's surprised it doesn't break in his hands, and air hisses out his nose, his
chest expanding and compressing rapidly.

He doesn't think about it. He needs shorter hair. It's more efficient for hygiene. It won't bother him
in any kind of fight, regardless of if he has a helmet to tame it in. It makes sense. It makes sense.
"Lance?"

He spins and has the knife at his enemy's throat before he sees Hunk's face, registers Hunk's voice,
his eyes- his eye wide and mouth half-open. Blinking, Lance drops the knife to the side.

And then he steps back.

"Lance," Hunk says, a corner of his mouth dropping into a frown. "Uh... What's...going on, here?"

He looks away, as if by searching he can drag a response out his own throat, but Hunk gasps and
bounds forward before Lance can even draw breath.

"Bro, what did you do to your hair?" Hunk exclaims, eye darting rapidly around his head while his
mouth tries to decide if this is funny or not. "Oh my god, bro... If you wanted to cut your hair you
could've just...asked...somehow... Or- well. Look, uh....why don't you come up with me and I can
fix it? I keep some hair stuff in Allura's bathroom, and you know, she was saying earlier that she
hadn't really seen you much, so... Yeah? You want- the, the undercut, right? You want me to cut it
down a little, too?"

Taken aback, Lance can only stare at his old friend, who's clearly trying not to laugh at what Lance
has done to his hair while also reckoning what could have possibly provoked it. Well, Lance can't
explain it either. It's probably better, anyway. His hands keeps shaking. He'll do something stupid,
if he keeps trying alone.

"L-look," Hunk says, glancing down at his steepled fingers for a moment, "just let me try, okay?
And then... And then you won't have to worry about it. Okay?"
Okay, he thinks. Yeah. He'd fuck up anyhow. If he lost focus for a second he'd end up jamming the knife in his head without even realising. And besides, Hunk actually knows what it's meant to look like. Lance avoided his reflection so much he barely remembers how his hair looked before.

Hunk doesn't try to make conversation as they go down the corridor and get into the lift. Instead, Lance just focuses on Hunk's breathing, the little noises he makes like rubbing his hands together or sneezing. Anything to tie him to reality. Lance strays further from it with every waking moment, and yet somehow Hunk seems so immersed. Checking a little holopad he has tucked in his pocket, tapping at it for a bit before he puts it away again. Sniffs a bit, taps his fingers endlessly against his thigh. To Lance it seems like they spend an eternity in that elevator, even though it can't have been more than a minute. Is this what a living, human person looks like? Hunk's chest expands just a little with inhale. He shifts his weight onto a leg, he stretches his fingers then resumes tapping them. Miniscule motions that Lance can't seem to replicate, can't seem to indulge in the same way.

Lance has walked this path before. Allura takes him to her room sometimes, when she's worrying, when she's lonely. She's already there when they enter, sprawled on her front on the bed, cooing at her mice. Her smile shines on Hunk, then wavers as she sees Lance, and leaps up immediately.

"Is something wrong?" she asks, looking from Lance to Hunk, her hands reaching for his as her face solidifies into a frown. "Did something- is-"

"No," Hunk soothes, slotting himself against her side. "Nothing's wrong at all. Lance, uh, wants a haircut."

Delicately raising her brows, Allura looks back to Lance and says, "He wants...a haircut?"

Despite Hunk's confirmation, Allura doesn't relax until Lance nods.

"And he...communicated this to you...how?"

"I'll explain everything," Hunk says, and smiles at her. "I'm gonna get some stuff from the bathroom. Is this...okay?"

"Yes, of course," she replies, and she squeezes his hands tight before withdrawing one of her own and pressing it against Hunk's cheek. "I'd rather be with the both of you than alone, anyway."

Allura doesn't move away once Hunk has retreated to the en-suite bathroom. Instead, she steps closer, look up at his face and mapping out his features. Lance can't bear to look at her looking at him and keeps his eyes decidedly straight, staring at the universe outside Allura's window.

Somewhere out there is a whole ship full of prisoners they couldn't save. Lance hasn't forgotten. He failed both goals he set out to reach by revisiting the beach facility.

"I'm sorry, Lance," comes Allura's voice instead. She's looking down, now; at some point, Hunk left and Allura took his hands. "I think I should apologise to you. What happened to you... I know you're fine, but another scar... It was my fault. I pushed you to pick a mission, I took you down into that facility with me, and I didn't take you out when I had the chance. If you want to blame someone, blame me. No one else is at fault."

Suddenly he can't stop looking at her, eyes wide in horror. What is this, an apology? From Allura? For- for doing what he asked her to do? The one thing he has been capable of wanting since the ceremony? How can she say that? How can she believe it?

"Pidge has been deciphering data all day - the fact it exists proves they left in such a rush as to leave valuable info behind. I don't know if it'll provide their new location, or what ship they're on,
but- even if it doesn't, we'll find those people again and save them. And I won't let this happen to you again, Lance. Every time you get close to death, I- I feel like dying, too. What's the point, if I can't protect those I swore to protect, if I just keep not saving you?" Her eyes are shiny with tears. Lance wants to say you don't have to save me anymore.

Lance wants to say I'm no longer going to be a problem.

It would just hurt her more. She wants so badly - so absurdly - for him to live. She deserves as much blissful ignorance as possible, even if it's just a few hours, maybe even a few days, Lance hasn't decided.

Maybe it would hurt less if Lance could tell her that she did nothing wrong, but the druids have infected him too deep, and he can't even shake his head to rebut her words. He just stares, helpless, as Allura draws in short, deep breaths, blinking rapidly.

Then Hunk reappears, a towel over his shoulder and some gadget in his hand. "Don't say that!" he says, and as he comes closer, his features clarifying, Lance can see his furrowed brows, how he clutches the towel and clenches his other fist. "How could it be your fault? How could you know what they had done, what traps they left behind? Lance wasn't wrong for wanting to go back; you weren't wrong for encouraging him. Don't you see? It's their fucking fault."

"Oh, Hunk," Allura says, her tears finally overflowing as she hurries over to him, taking the towel from him and smiling. "You make it sound so easy to believe."

"It is easy," Hunk murmurs, and Lance looks away. The tenderness in his voice is unbearable. "It's the truth. You can't fight the truth."

"...I can fight anything," Allura finally says, turning away, and Hunk snorts. Allura's eyes are dry as she passes Lance, setting the towel down in front of her wall-to-ceiling window. She's smiling, actually, the warmth flowing into her eyes like fire. Maybe, somehow, this entire mess has brought them closer together. Lance doesn't remember what they were like before. The only memories that surface show them always as a pair, sat together, huddled over Hunk's notebook or laughing in the kitchen, cooking dinner for everyone else. Even her mice like him - they run to the edge of the bed and shriek at him until he cups them all in his hand and pets them.

"I'm just gonna make it how it was before, right? That's what you want," Hunk checks, picking up Allura's desk chair and setting it down perpendicular to the window, so he can face Allura on her bed and still look at the galaxy outside.

Lance digs his hand into the hair at the back of his neck, and nods sharply.

"That's fine," Hunk says, picking up a comb from the vanity and eyeing Lance's hair. "I'll do the undercut then, uh, then trim up the top?"

Lance nods again, and settles into the chair, watching Allura tell the mice about her day. Looking for Lance, of course, then breakfast and a morning swim, some paperwork, a conference call with some allied worlds, lunch with Hunk in the lab, a few hours in the gym with Shiro, a mission overview with Coran, and so on. Contrary to what Lance believed, she has an entire life outside him and his bullshit. She is not swamped with misery all the time.

Good. Her and Hunk, together...it'll probably make things easier for them.

They talk as Hunk shaves Lance's hair. The gadget he brought buzzes lowly the entire time, and Lance sees locks of his hair drop onto the towel below. With every strand that falls his breath
filters out easier, the weight on his shoulders lessens minisculely. This is how it's meant to be. He's meant to be the druids' plaything, their ace in the arsenal. He can't be anything but. He can't even stop himself from cutting his hair so he looks how they want him to look. Even here, away from them, with his supposed friends, he has no control.

He's a ticking timebomb. Something's going to happen, and he doesn't know what, but it can't be good. Maybe the druids will overpower him entirely and he'll start killing the way they want him to. The people they want him to.

No. He won't fight anymore, and it's not even worth trying.

So he just sits, stares out the window, and waits. Hunk cuts his hair and Allura faces him but they're in a world of their own, discussing the discovery of Pidge's brother, watching Allura's mice do tricks on the bed. Lance isn't part of that. The joy they share, the comfort and warmth and love encircling them - it doesn't touch him. Despite all that's happened, they have each other, and are doing they're best to move forward and be cheerful and get work done. At this point, Lance is just circling the drain. He's spiralling into certain death. He can't move forwards when the druids still yank on his chains. There is no life for him in a world where they have such a grip upon him.

Lance remembers dreaming of the others leaving him behind. Sometimes it still feels like that. Watching them walk away from him, going somewhere he couldn't follow... The distance between them only grows bigger and more treacherous. There is no possible boat he can fashion of his own two hands to cross such a chasm. There is no possible way he could want to.

Sitting with them becomes unbearable with that image of them in his mind. Every time Hunk faces him Lance has to contend with what he's done; he can't even fully meet Allura's eyes, not after the training incident this morning. It's stupid. He's being stupid. But he can't control it anymore. He'll do what the druids want. He'll do what Voltron wants. He'll do as much as is feasible, whatever he can humanly or inhumanly take, and then he'll be gone. Done. Nothing.

He just has to figure out a way how.

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He considers purposefully losing a fight during a mission. Swamped by galra on a base, or alone on an alien planet - but it just doesn't happen. He tries it, tries to lower his weapon, power down his shields, but this body doesn't let him, continues fighting regardless. Besides, would the enemy really be capable of killing him without taking him back to the druids? Wouldn't it put the mission in jeopardy, endanger innocent lives?

So he gives that up pretty quick.

His next thought is to try drowning again. Fills up the bathtub he never uses and dunks his head in, but, as if someone had grabbed the back of his shirt and yanked his back, his body pulls away, and no matter how he searches, he can't find anything to weigh him down.

So that doesn't work, either. Not that he really expected it to. He just thought it might be poetic. Funny, almost.

That night, his next plan comes to fruition as he creeps into the infirmary when no one is around and steals every kind of medication he can see from the back cupboard and hoards it back to his room. The labels are all Altean, so god knows what any of it does, but he starts popping capsules and unwrapping pills and drowns them all in a bottle of water, and as his head hits the ground and his vision darkens, he thinks, Oh. That was easy.
And he wakes up in the morning like usual, like nothing ever happened. He locks Allura out his room before she can come in and see everything, but she's still waiting outside his door after he hides it all away, though she frowns at him when he comes out. He pads beside her to breakfast, but he doesn't hear a thing she says; what is wrong with him, that none of this is working? None of it's permanent, none of it sticks. He cannot be contained so easily.

What other option does he have? Is there anything, anything better than this? Any way to exist more peacefully, more kindly? Because it seems like the druids will chase him across the universe to get him back, to return him to his rightful use. Lance doesn't want go back; Lance doesn't want to discover the purpose of what's been done to him. If they get their claws in him again, there's no way out. They would take complete control.

If he stays, he's going to disrupt everything around him. He'll ruin relationships, wear people down, and the druids will arrive eventually and decimate them.

The thing they want is him. He just has to take himself out the equation. It makes sense.

Dinner breaks through when Allura finds him sitting in the training room, examining a knife. Just thinking about it. The blade cut right through his skin, that night after he ruined Hunk’s eye, but the wound healed. Lance still felt pain near the end of his capture, but it was...different from the start. Dimmed down, never intense, never searing. Not on its own…

Lance doesn’t remember. Magic? It must’ve been. Perhaps they invented more and more vivid, brutal methods of torture, just for him. Is it sad, to wish to remember? He probably spent the whole time desiring it to be scrubbed from his memory.

Maybe he thought he would never end up like this. Maybe some part of him clung to the light at the end of the tunnel, to the hope that help would come. By the time it did...that part of him must have already died.

The others talk about Matt Holt during dinner, just as Pidge had been. Lance gleans a little more information; some kind of mission Matt and Shiro were both on, and though Shiro returned to Earth Matt never did. Not like Lance’s situation at all, not really. Sent to workers’ camp, Pidge says. Got out, freed the rest, and got to safety.

She says Matt started fighting back, and she smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. They burn with a mixture of fury and pride Lance can’t quite understand, but regardless he feels some deep, painful shame churning in his gut. Matt fought back, and Lance didn’t. Not by the end. He relished what he had become.

He doesn’t understand. He doesn’t know that person he became. Some soulless husk… Some thing to be tossed around by the druids…

That's all he is, even now. It's more obvious now more than ever - that same tension from before, with Hunk and Allura, amplified - these mostly-healthy, mostly-normal people sitting around and beside him, eating so fast their cutlery hits the plate, that Pidge's drink spills after she slams it down in some passion, how Allura shifts in her seat, sometimes, leaning in to talk to Shiro or resting her head on Hunk's shoulder momentarily.

And Lance cannot do these things.

He settles for sitting, and listening for anything else useful. Apparently the rebels are offering to house them if they come to visit Pidge's brother; Shiro doesn't think there's time, and thinks Matt and some others should fly out to the castleship instead. Pidge argues, but Coran is incredibly
enthusiastic over the idea: "We could make a whole day of it, really! Show them around the ship, the lions, we could even do some training drills! Oh, have them bring a strong contingent. We could mix up training styles, teach each other some lessons...then a feast! A good occasion as any to bring the old nunvil out, don't you think?"

And the memory hits like fire.

"That would be amazing!" Pidge exclaims, beaming, and Hunk grins, but theirs face slowly blur, skin melting into white teeth.

"That sounds...fun," Shiro says quietly, and there's a softness in his brow Lance hasn't seen since Keith was here, but he can't focus on it over one word echoing louder and louder through his mind.

Nunvil. He knows what that is. Alcohol, right? He knows what that is.

He knows... He remembers... The last way he could feel pain, outside of electrocution. He'd had nightmares of it, of burning. Of burning...even when pain no longer existed. They'd beat him to hell and back. They'd slash up his skin like crazy.

And then they'd douse him.

It was the only thing that hurt. It was the only thing that hurt.

And if it hurts...it's doing damage. If it hurts, it- but what if it heals? His healing properties have overcome a lot. What if it didn't hurt? Isn't it worth trying?

He remembers. The scent alone burns. But if it works...and it could work. If it hurt even when nothing else hurt...

The others keep talking, Lance doesn't hear it anymore. Where would nunvil be kept, anyway? Maybe the fridge? Or a wine closet? He could rummage through the cupboards, at night, so no one would know. He could train... Swim. Swim, then shower the darkness off him, as much as possible. If he wears an Altean wrist device he'll have a flashlight. He'll take a bottle or two, find his favourite dagger, and see what works. It's his only possible hope of getting out of this. Of escaping.

So even though it hurts - even though it burns - he keeps that memory close to him. Of being on his knees, blood everywhere and tears dripping onto the ground, encapsulated in absolute agony. That is what hope looks like for him.

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He can barely breathe for the next few hours. He swims more urgently than ever before. He shuts his eyes in the shower but his body trembles, unable to contain the energy boiling up within it. The image is so close, so precise; the curt blade of the knife, the light refracting off the liquid as it pours... He remembers knowing pain, and he wants it back. More than anything he wants it back, to make himself to pay, to even the score just a little bit. To have something human to hold on to, to exploit. If he's human he can be killed.

It's as simple as that.

So he prays he is human and creeps out at midnight, focusing on the bright light of his flashlight and navigating the corridors he has crossed a hundred times before. It's not scary anymore. The shadows, the druids at his shoulders - they're silent. They can't reach him anymore.
In fact, everything seems strangely clear and incredibly precise to him in a way it's never been before. Maybe because now, finally, he knows his path: he has the certainty that it's the best choice. It's the only choice. Lance isn't compatible with this world. Not since the druids took him, and changed him irreversibly. To exist would be to spread the poison they infected him with further; to die would eliminate every single possibility that anyone else will get hurt because of him.

And there are so many possibilities for him to hurt people.

The long hallways are quieter than he's ever heard, too. The ever-present low buzzing of the chip, Allura's mice scuttling around on their nightly patrols, even the hum of the lights seem barely more than a whisper, as though granting him a moment's silence. The world - galaxy - everything around him feels so distant now. A million thousand lightmiles away. All that exists is this useless body and a knife shining in the light of the kitchen, a fridge full of bottles of nunvil, and the intent to cut evilness out by hand.

His heart beats so slow. Like it knows what's coming. Every step lasts a thousand seconds. The druids hiss and whisper in his ears, but the actual words are inaudible. Nothing they say can change his mind.

The kitchen, so usually full of life and spice and clutter, is ominous in the night - cold blue lights on the ceiling, empty cabinet tops, all utensils and dishes put away. It feels even like an intrusion, but Lance has come too far to turn back. The dagger he has is plain but long, thick, and the blue light reflects off the metal and back onto him. The sleeves of his top are short. The six-pack of nunvils sits patiently on the floor, and Lance lowers himself down slowly, sitting cross legged against a cabinet, knowing he should move elsewhere yet unable to.

He hasn't felt pain in so long. He hasn't felt anything - he doesn't remember what that's like anymore. He wants to know. The concept of actual physical sensation is too precious, and the nunvil is right here - the dagger is right here. The body, resting the back of its palm on its knee so the wrist faces upward, is here also. And it is so, so willing.

The first cut - like those he attempted after taking Hunk's eye - doesn't hurt. In fact, it heals up before he can even do anything, so he puts the knife back down. A little blood drips to the ground. He thinks nothing of it, and takes a bottle of nunvil from its packaging. He nudges the cap open, terrified he'll break the bottle in half before even using it, then pours just a little onto the skin of his arm.

Then he picks the dagger back up, and cuts in the middle of that small pool.

It - prickles.

It feels almost ticklish.

It keeps the wound open long enough for Lance to pick up the bottle again, and pour more directly onto the wound.

And it hurts.

And it burns.

And something escapes his mouth - some kind of noise, dragged upshore from the cave in his throat, his voice rough, the sound distressed.

But it- but it hurts.
Like a miracle grasped from god's fingertips, it hurts. Like the sun pulling back the curtain of cloud and spilling back upon the earth, it hurts. Like Lance, still breathing after a nightmare that felt like death - after a thousand fights and a thousand battles, imagined or in training or in dreams or on the battlefield - it hurts.

It's real. The blood, too, is real, droplets running down his arm, diluted slightly due to the nunvil. The wound, also, is now real. The healing process is delayed, the knife's shape preserved momentarily in the flesh of his arm, blood bubbling to the surface before overrunning its boundaries.

Lance just sits and stares at it.

The rest of his body seems so heavy now, so empty and useless in comparison to the sharp, sweet point of pain measuring three inches vertical along his arm. Despite the quintessence ritual boosting his overall health to unimaginable heights, despite hair growing back and glowing skin, the body feels dead. Like it is a corpse Lance is just dragging around with him. That single cut is the only part of him that feels alive.

So he watches it die again. He wants to see how long it takes for the wound to heal itself again - and it does, in stutters and starts, but once the skin is pulled together again, a mark is left in the knife's ghost's place - another scar.

...As if he gives a shit about those.

This time, he implants the knife into the opposite arm, adds a little more nunvil, leaves the knife in longer.

The pain is so liberating - he might really die from this. Could he? It hurts. It scorches his bones. It's like nothing... Nothing like Lance even remembers. The burning from his memories is so pale and out of focus, now, that it is but a shadow besides the real thing. He knew it hurt, but he didn't know what pain really felt like.

And now he does. And he wants more. He needs it.

Like fire, the urge consumes him. Like fire, the pain does, too. Something else has been living this life this past year for him. And now, here, in this moment with this open diamond of pain, he has awoken and reemerged as himself, eyes wide open. The more he cuts, the closer he hacks towards that true self, that real, living person with joy and love that somehow still exists within him. He wants to reach it. All this time he thought he was some kind of statue of stone, unbreakable, unmoving, but he's just the dull rock of marble, thrown like a brick at the enemies attacking them. With his dagger, he himself chips closer towards that true realised version of himself. And he will do that, even if that means hacking until there's absolutely nothing left.

It's not nice. It's not kind. But it's necessary. It's just.

And it feels so good.

The more he hurts, the more he feels hurt. From the cracked open hollows of his arms up to his hands, fingers twitching, tensing with pain; back to his shoulders, tingling, shuddering. An ache forms around his spine. His head feels sore.

The knife, once light as air, now drops like a guillotine onto his open flesh. He has to drag it out with his fingernails, toss it to the side so he can heave the nunvil up and tip it straight into the wound like salt. Sound escapes him, mutilated; every word has been stretched out and cut into bits
then wrangled until at last, it leaves him, mangled, choked, incomprehensible. Do the others really feel like this, all the time? Not just the pain, which must be inflicted upon them with every mission, but the cold night air against his skin, how hot the blood is in comparison, even the ache in his neck from holding his head over. This humanity...weighs so incredibly much. He feels it, in every nunvil filled wound, and everywhere else, just quieter.

The druids' whispers are everywhere, too, but he can't hear them. The thumping of his heart is so loud, the river of his blood too close to his ear, to the open air.

He can't hear anything, only his breathing, only the delicate slice of flesh, the pouring of alcohol. Monstrous noises seem to rip out of him, uncontrollable, unquenchable. He doesn't want to stop though he knows he should. He can't stop. He needs to see how far he can go, how long he can tread this path till it drops out from under him, and the path no longer exists. He must be both Zeus and Titan, lock himself somewhere no one can breach, and rot away there.

The world fades from him, narrows down to a bottle and a knife and a body.

Which is why it takes him so long to realise someone else is present.

Shiro, sputtering, shaken, unseen. "Lance-" he says, voice breaking through only when Lance makes the conscious effort to crane his neck and look at him. "Lance, what- what- how can I..."

He gets to his knees, so sudden and so close, his galra hand making an aborted move for the knife before hanging uselessly at Lance's arm.

"What is this, Lance?" Shiro asks, his eyes so wide and watery and unwarriorlike. Lance is forced to meet him, to bear not just his ashen soul, but the blood, and the wounds, and the nunvil sat beside him, to Shiro's unstained judgement.

The truth is only this: it hurts, he thinks, and then those exact words are dredged from his own tongue, and Shiro blinks rapidly, eyes darting down to his arms.

"I know, Lance," Shiro says, but his voice reaches Lance like a cliff edge crumbling into the ocean: too unsteady.

"It really hurts," he says, and like the noises from earlier, the words come out wrong, incomplete in some way. Shiro frowns at him, his brows drawing tight as he regards the situation - and what is it that he even sees? Lance's hands shaking? The tension in his shoulders, the heaviness of his breathing? Something painful, something terrible, because his eyes grow somehow wider, his mouth dropping open with slow horror.

"It hurts," Shiro breathes, eyes searching Lance desperately for a cause. "What did you do, Lance? What is this? What is- stop- what are you-"

The knife is still lodged in his arm. As Shiro watches, Lance raises a bottle of nunvil, removes the knife, and pours the alcohol straight into the open wound. And it hurts.

The sounds crawl out of him. A tear drops from Shiro's stunned eyes.

"Lance," Shiro says again, but the word just deflates from him, his chest sagging. Shiro can't quite meet his eyes. "Lance, please, you have to stop."

"I can't," he replies, and sets the nunvil back down. His arm is gutted with wounds. It still isn't enough.
"You have to," Shiro insists - pleads - reaching forwards again, trying to grab the knife from Lance. His fingers slip on the blood. "Lance, please! You're hurting yourself!"

"Yeah," he mumbles, pushing the sleeve of his shirt up. "It hurts so bad, Shiro..."

Shiro makes another move for the knife, but Lance is too fast, knocking his arm back then driving the knife into his own arm in one swipe. Shiro's skin is grey and shiny, the bags beneath his eyes darker than ever, aged a thousand years older than he deserved to be. Every action Lance makes is amplified through the lens of Shiro's own past; he doesn't seem able to breathe right. This must be his worst nightmare, right? That something like what happened to him would happen to someone else. Did Shiro ever cut quite this figure, though? Hunched and shaking and delirious over the sharpest proof of living - actual, real pain?

Or is this a hell he could not descend into?

Should Lance feel bad?

Because Shiro is begging, "Please, Lance, please don't do this," and god knows his hair will only get whiter. He should just shut his eyes and leave. He should remember Keith, and what Lance did to him, and not let this bother him. Isn't this justice? Isn't this the closest he can reach with his own mortal hands to what he deserves?

"It's only right," he says, voice rusty and ragged. "It's only fair."

"How can- what does that even mean, Lance? Why would you do this? What's wrong? Just talk to us, please, just explain-"

"I'm a monster," Lance says, trying to summon anger, but it comes out hollow. "What more do you want."

Again, Shiro's eyes dissect him, as if trying to extract any information possible from Lance's very profile. What is he trying to find? A genuine explanation? Shiro knows more than most what Lance has put them through, after all.

"You've been lying to us," Shiro says, eyes driving into Lance's with an unquestionable, unbearable grief. "You've been pretending."

Lance shakes his head, but Shiro only bows his head, takes a deep breath.

"Something happened," he continues, voice strong only because he holds something else back. "When, at the quintessence ceremony? After that, you stopped speaking, right? You broke my brother's heart. So what was it? Lance? You've been acting like...nothing exists...ever since. Do you...really think you're a monster?"

"It's not what I think," Lance grits out, tightening his grip on the knife again before dousing a new wound with nunvil, "it's the truth."

"You're a human, Lance. I know the druids can make it seem like they changed you, but they can't. Not everything. Not what matters."

"Yes they can," Lance hisses. "Don't fucking lie to me. I am different. I am not a fucking person anyone knows. The Lance you knew is gone. And I'm a stranger."

"Only because you won't tell us the truth. Lance, if you told me what you're going through, what the druids did to you, how you're feeling...we would be brothers. Not strangers. What they did to
you...some of it they did to me, too. They took part of me and changed it - made it their own. I can still feel them, you know... When I sleep, I dream of them holding me down. With magic, or chains...but usually they didn't need that. Usually I was too weak to fight."

We're not the same, Lance can only think, breathless, heart pounding. We are not anything alike.

"Shut the hell up. You don't know anything..."

"We saw videos - Lance, they kept me for a year! There has to be something I can understand—anything!"

God, but he is so desperate, it would break Lance's heart if it wasn't already decimated to pieces. He wants so badly to help. There is no way to help.

"We're not the same," Lance says, low and gnarled and bitter. It is only the truth. It shouldn't be this painful, this upsetting. Shiro is crying. "You don't understand."

"You really think I don't understand," Shiro scoffs, and his lips tremble, his eyes twist with a turmoil of feelings all too familiar to Lance. With a vehemence Lance has never before heard from him, Shiro sneers, "Look at this thing!"

He thrusts the galra arm out, the metal coloured rust from the blood, but clearly unnatural, its seam hidden by Shiro's clothes. Even the arm shakes midair, Shiro's humanity affecting him everywhere, every piece of him. Lance can't do that. He is made of stone. Humanity cannot touch him.

"It's not the same. It's not the fucking same! How can you keep saying that and actually fucking think it's true? You said you watched the vids - can you honestly say our situations were alike? I was never weak Shiro - that was the whole fucking point! It didn't matter how shit I felt or how much I was bleeding or how fucking close to death I felt, I kept fighting! Because anything else would mean I was weak, and I wasn't supposed to be weak! I was supposed to be end lives! We are not the fucking same!"

The knife raises without intention, but it falls deftly marking its target - splitting the veins of the hand open, driving through the bone, ripping the skin in twain. Shiro lurches back, weak just like the druids always told him not to be. Lance wipes the blood off the knife and smiles. Violence even here, woven into his veins, into his blood. By violence born, so now even at the end. Shiro makes noises of his own. In no way do they compare to what rips from Lance's own throat when he drives the knife in, deep and long, and pours alcohol upon the gaping wound.

It hurts so much. The smile turns to joy, pain melting like snow to softness.

Coran's entrance is far easier to recognise, his voice breaking like a crack of lightning over the other monstrosities: "Shiro- Shiro, what happened to your—"

Shiro shakes his head, and his eyes are so wide, so bloodshot and tearful, that Coran's gaze swings like a light to Lance, and the same horror consuming Shiro overtakes Coran's features.

"Lance-"

As if words can be spoken. Coran collapses to his knees like the weight of the world has just gotten too damn heavy to take. His hands waver in the air, trembling and terrified to touch. The knife is still in Lance's hand.

"Why...?" is all the crawls out of Coran in the end, and Lance wants to laugh. Why... Why not, at this point? Why not, at any point previous? There is no point to him outside the druid's clutches, no
point that isn't based in evil to him at all. The rot is coming from inside the body. It's something
physical, something that courses through every part of him and influences every action he makes.
It's breaking the dam. Every day it gets a little harder to still his hand from straying to a weapon,
his fingers from making a fist or tearing out a heart. The evil lives every breath with him. He
cannot exist without it.

And it doesn't bear living for.

"Just let me do it," he begs, and Coran's hands drop to the ground. "I don't care anymore. I'm done."

"Lance - if you let us help, please, we can- we can fix it, we can change things-"

"It isn't worth it, Coran," and the use of his name blows Coran backwards, tears finally
overflowing. Lance can't care. He's in too much pain.

"How can you say that," Shiro hisses out, clutching his hand but shuffling forward on both knees,
determination flowing from his eyes. "Are we supposed to take your word for it, when you've been
lying to us, keeping secrets? If you explained, we can show you that your future is still worth
fighting for!"

"Explain... I can't explain it! And you won't understand. The druids wanted me to fight for them.
They wanted me to kill. That is the fucking point. And then I get rescued, and everyone wanted me
to fight, too. The quintessence ritual did change everything. I became myself again, and I-I can't do
it, Shiro. I can't fucking do it anymore. Don't you know what it's like to tear an opponent apart with
your bare hands? And it's easy...and it's fun...and I'm so fucking good at it. And they want me to
kill you, and they keep trying to make me, and I keep feeling it, all the time, whenever I'm with you
and even when I'm not. Even when I'm asleep. It would be so easy, Shiro. I can't be killed, and I
can't be beat. All of you...and they want it so much. I'm so scared... If you're too far away, you look
like galra. And it's hard to think straight, to- not fight back. They want me to kill you. I'm going
to fucking kill you."

"You don't know that," Coran whispers, fists clenched. "You don't. We can make you feel safer -
we can take you off missions."

"I'm sure Allura will understand - we can call back Keith, we can solve everything," Shiro rushes
to assure him, but the hope in his eyes grows dimmer the longer he looks at Lance.

"What is the fucking point of me being here," Lance asks lowly, "if I'm not on fucking missions. If
I need to kill people - and I need to kill people - I want to do it for a good cause."

"In that case, we can- call doctors! Visit family! Do more social events- Lance, anything-"

"You don't understand," Lance repeats. "The druids are inside me. It's not like I'm just hearing
voices, I can feel them, I see them everywhere, in the shadows, in nightmares... You think I cut this
hair because I wanted to? It's better for battle, less hassle. And I- and I-" He takes a deep breath.
"And I couldn't fight them. If I didn't go and cut my hair, the druids would've done it. They
would've used these hands...this body...but it would've been them. I can't control it anymore. I'm so
tired, all the time. Nothing makes sense. I couldn't- I couldn't speak- they wouldn't let me."

"But Lance..." Coran murmurs, and his eyes are so warm and gentle and always, at the core, that
immutable sadness that lives like a well inside of him. "It doesn't have to be this way-"

"There is no other way," Lance says, and picks up the knife again. Shiro lurches forward with his
bleeding hands, but Coran stops him before Lance reacts again.
And was it really Lance when he drove that knife through Shiro's palm? It felt instinctual. Is it him or isn't it?

"Lance, please," Coran begs, but no words exist that could change his mind, no anguished voice that can rise above his own. He doesn't want anything except this. It isn't sad, he wants to tell them. It's good. It's freeing.

It's the only way he can be free.

He examines the knife once more. The blood covers it and drips from the point, but it is beautiful in the soft blue light, illuminated above all others, radiating a holy power Lance cannot help but embrace. Freedom, finally. Peace, finally. Here, at the end, pain, finally.

And death, so soon, so close it brushes against his ears and whispers down his throat, closing its soft fingers round his heart. It is whole now he is dying. Every little problem, every little agony instantly healed, ready to die without grace, without dignity.

"Lance, Lance," Coran is saying, but even the name means nothing to him now. His mother called him Leandro back home. That boy is dead. Whatever constituted Lance is dead. And now...this hollow shell, this untouchable machinegun of a body, is breaking apart. Finally.

So the knife raises with intention this time, but Lance hesitates in choosing the target - should he attempt the heart, is it worth it, will it work? Should he ruin his arm some more, cut into his stomach? So many possibilities, the touch of death hovers only to make its choice perfect.

But Lance hesitates too long - Shiro coming at him again, but this time he doesn't stop. Lance once punched a hole almost right through him, almost killed him on the spot. The instinct swallowed him up so quickly, the druid's urge to kill overwhelming him instantly. Lance had spent so long cultivating the restraint, learning how to channel that urge towards actually improving the universe, but he sees now it was the bare minimum required to prevent the druids from taking control. While he went killing, lost hours on the training deck, and followed Allura around the castle, thinking he'd found control and a future and some kind of hope, the druids were slinking into every crevice, every nook in his brain and taking hold of every cell. There is no light these days. There is no possibility to move forward. All this time, thinking he could've lived and won...

But they captured him. The war was already over. There was no point in putting up a fight.

In moving forward, Shiro doesn't realise what he's done - he doesn't understand! - by pitting himself against Lance. His desire to keep Lance alive only aligns him with the druids.

Lance doesn't let go of the knife the first time Shiro yanks. Nor the second or third, ninth or tenth, hundredth or more. Coran throws his weight alongside him, trying to pry Lance's fingers from the handle, trying to hold on and pull alongside Shiro. Every time Lance tries to take control, Shiro holds on with all the force of his prosthetic arm.

"Let. Go," Lance says, trying to grasp the knife fully, but it's so slippery and his hands shake, unbidden.

"Never," Shiro responds with the same ferocity, his grip tightening. Coran pants from sheer effort, forehead gleaming, cheeks soaked with tears.

"Shiro!" Lance yells, louder than he's spoken in weeks or longer, and all that desperation and misery and monstrosity he'd choked up inside himself spills out in a single word.

In a single name. Shiro is also sobbing. He does not let the knife go.
It is of no consequence now. Lance raises his other arm and readies his hand to singlehandedly rip through Shiro's prosthetic - but before anyone can quite comprehend what's happening, something cold and sharp jolts in his neck.

And then the rest of him, shooting outward like a thousand shards of ice avalanching his insides. Shiro and Coran collapse, having ripped the knife from him. His hands are on the ground, and the blue light no longer suffuses him.

"I'm sorry, Lance," says Allura, and Lance only just sees the light illuminating the needle in her hand before the entire world is gone altogether.

--

They never named the drugs they flooded him with. He wonders if they had names or if they were the result of something more sinister, of experiments or magic or a combination of unnameable things meant strip him of himself until he was something else. Quintessence was used to get him fired up, enraged with energy and desperate to get the awful burning of it out of him; the drugs at least never hurt in the moment.

It was always after the experiment, after the limb had been cut or after they'd scored a dozen scars on his chest, when the lightness in his body would dissipate and the bubbles in his vision would pop, as the world shifted back on its axis and Lance realised every exposing second of it.

Removed of his senses, pain made him laugh and the druids made him cry, he'd babble nonsense and struggling against the restraints to pop the bubbles himself.

It was so, so awful. They would laugh at him after. Weakness, it was all weakness and Lance couldn't rid himself of it because he couldn't prepare for it. They were the ones making him strong, but they could make him weak, too. Weaker than anyone could. Everything ever given to him tainted before it reached him, it's no wonder it seeped in everywhere around him, blood soaking the ground all around the corpse.

Was there any real point to it? Lance still wonders. To tame him, to slow him down? To discombobulate him, to torture him further? Because it was funny? Sometimes they'd use needles.

Sometimes is enough.

--

The entire team is there when he wakes up.

Except Keith.

Obviously.

There's no way of telling how much time has passed, and there's no way to find out that doesn't involve making the others think he wants to talk to them.

Because he doesn't. He won't speak, not after what happened; and regardless, he can't.

Removed from the immediate danger - from one or twenty cuts away from death - the druids have permeated his mind once more, and sealed his tongue back down his throat.

"Lance," Allura utters as his eyes flutter open, and by the time her form has crystallised, she's already crying.
Something in his neck... He goes to press his fingers to the spot, to check it's real, that Allura did that to him - but he can't move his hands.

Lance looks down and examines his current position; sitting on an upright hospital bed, like he could be having a perfectly normal conversation with the others except for what they've done to his ankles and wrists.

He isn't sure what burns in his stare as he looks back up at them, but Hunk steps back, Pidge shuffles so she's half-hidden behind Shiro's frame.

"Lance," Shiro says, his voice rough and low like Lance's the last time they spoke, "Lance, please - we don't know if you'll hurt yourself again- Lance-"

He tries to wrench his arms from the restraints, but they don't budge.

*No*, he thinks. *They can't.*

They were supposed to rescue him - didn't they rescue him, wasn't he saved? Wasn't he supposed to be happy? Wasn't he supposed to be free?

But they took that from him.

*They* did that.

Why... Why bother trying, why bother to still try? He is a *weapon* in their hands, and they *know* it, just like the druids did. They take him out when needed and throw him to the dogs, and when he comes back *victorious* they lock him up, lead him to the training deck or gym like he's a puppy needing entertained.

And now... *Now*...

Why? Why are they doing this? Who cares if he hurts himself again? Jesus christ, who *cares*? It isn't worth it. None of this...is anything he can hold in his hands, he is but a spectre cast upon the world, casting darkness only until it is gone.

Don't they see that?

"Lance, why don't you just tell us-" Allura begins, and he can't help the vehemence with which his gaze swings to her - didn't she love him, didn't she always want the best for him? The only kindness she can grant him now - despite all she has done, despite everything already given - is death. And it was her hand with the needle, her tear drenched gaze begging him to forgive her. Lance doesn't want to vilify her. Her white hair shines like a halo even now - he can't help wanting to give in, *wanting* that kindness and warmth, but he knows he will not feel it.

And besides. His heart rattles when he looks at her. He remembers pink magic and needles, and her at the fore of every mission, leading alongside Shiro, coordinating with every planet they ever set foot on, discussing at length every galra base they were primed to take. It isn't *fair*.

It isn't right.

None of this is.

This body, alive when it should be dead a thousand times over. Scars permeating every inch of skin, a silent warning and a humiliation at once. These restraints... The looks in everyone's eyes... Every attempt to entrap justice comes to this - absolutely *nothing*. 
He doesn't realise he's crying till Allura says, "Lance," and tries to come to him, but Hunk holds her back. Even he cannot look Lance in the eyes. His eyes instead are affixed to the restraints, or maybe to the scars on his arms. Maybe he's wondering where it all went wrong. Maybe he's wondering if any of it was worth this.

That's all Lance can think of. He shouldn't have stayed in that damn kitchen, that's for sure. Should've locked himself up somewhere, should've kept silent, should've died alone and cold before they could ever find him. It wouldn't be nice. It's not the way he wants to depart the world...but there is no other way.

There is nothing else he can do. Can't they understand that, even a little? If they knew... If they could feel that weight on Lance's chest, those hundreds or thousands of deaths he can't even recall, blood on his hands from people and monsters and creatures he has forgot...wouldn't they feel like this, too? Like nothing can make it right. Like nothing can make him right.

Something justice comes decked in blood. Sometimes it is as violent as the crime that bore it. And it is never easy.

Lance didn't think it would be this hard, though. The failure to die only increases the desire more. And now...his shame, his secret, visible to those whose opinions he values the most. He doesn't need to know what Coran or Allura or Shiro told the others. He sees it on their faces. They see it all over him. With this act, the performance is cut short. Over before Lance could die in retribution as all great villains do. Stripped of his disguise before he was ready for it - and he intended never to be ready for it - prevents him from forming any correct reaction. They know; it's over. Everything Lance wants is falling further away by the second. He can't even move, can again no longer speak, and he can't even pretend. It's all over.

"I'll talk to him," Shiro murmurs as though Lance can't hear him. "It's okay, Allura. You did your best."

He doesn't look up to see her expression, be it pain or remorse or regret - anything, anything at all except disdain would be too much to bear. *Everytime you get close to death, I feel like dying, too.* Allura had once said. Does she still feel like that now? Would one suicide really take two lives so easily? Lance doesn't think it's possible. Maybe next time...he can explain, somehow. They feel such pity and sympathy for him now. It is undeserved. Lance suddenly doesn't want to leave this world without saying that.

But how?

"Lance?"

Even now, as Shiro approaches, no words attempt to remove themselves from his throat.

"Lance...come on..."

And there is no way to explain that, either. His dreams were dark and uneasy, and their whispering resurfaced there as though it had never left. Now, their words split apart his mind - *do it,* so harsh and strict that Lance is glad, suddenly, that he is chained. He doesn't feel his hand jerk against the restraints, but Shiro spots it, and his brow grows heavier as he sits aside the bed.

"Are they back again?" Shiro asks, and Lance blinks at his astuteness before attempting a response. The druids want to hold every bone in his body hostage, entrap every muscle with their strings - Lance can't manage words, and he can barely manage a nod against their will at this point, but he focuses every last bit of energy that's his and his chin dips a centimetre or so. Enough, somehow. "I
see," Shiro says, and sits back, frowning.

Without anymore words, Shiro turns to a panel on the wall and presses a couple buttons; within seconds, the restraints glow bright and insubstantial for a moment, before disappearing altogether. Lance jerks his hands towards himself, examining them for any sign of harm like he used to, but of course there is nothing there.

There's just nothing there.

The scars mean nothing. The skin and flesh and bone don't even feel like his own anymore. How is he supposed to live like that? What could he possibly do to explain that to them?

"Can I tell you," Shiro begins, and Lance's eyes alight to him once more, "about my time with the druids?"

An unexpected direction. Lance admits he has no recollection of what really happened to Shiro. His arm druid-made, his skills druid-honed? But it wasn't the same. Shiro weak and afraid... Maybe Lance felt that way too. But physically there became no doubt about his strength. Their purposes were different. The two of them are so different.

So he gives a slight nod, all he can muster, and sits back. What else is there do to? If he runs too fast the others will try to catch him. He needs to walk slowly to his death, just while they're watching him.

"I- I'm sorry for what I said before. I know their...methods...of training us were- quite different, but...I think it was for the same reason. They were trying to make us stronger by making us more like them. They gave me the arm and tossed me in the arena, but- maybe they didn't have the technology. Maybe I wasn't that important or...because you're a paladin, it's different. I don't know, Lance. But I am here for you. I understand some of it. And I can imagine the rest. What they did to you...must be unimaginable. What happened to me was also...pretty unimaginable, Lance."

Lance can only frown, and wonder. Keith's big brother and their original black paladin, always so solid and strong wherever Lance can remember seeing him. Right now, his fingers curl tight round the arms of his chair, no fear that he could break the thing by doing so. It's all these quiet, invisible things that amount to too much for Lance to express, even if he could speak. He does want to know, every detail, as if examining it close enough will reveal what Shiro lacked, or Lance lacked, that harshened the druids' methods.

"You know they put me in the arena," Shiro starts with, and Lance does his barely perceptible nod, because it's sort of true. The others had to remind him, though, of what exactly he said about taking Shiro's title. By Christ, what had possessed him? Something different that what inhabits this body now. But then, he had said such awful things to Keith. But then...what was he supposed to do? Pretend everything was the same? That things were better? It wouldn't be so easy to lie to Keith; hadn't he already given too much of himself away?

It's too late for that now.

"They...wanted me to fight everything. I still don't really know why. To make me better, stronger. More ruthless, maybe. More like them."

And that's where they failed.

And where they succeeded with Lance.

"They did, you know, the classic torture...starving me, not letting me sleep, forcing me to fight for
hours till I was going crazy... It's hard to remember all of it. Mostly it comes back in dreams...
Nightmares- that's...how we found you, um, last night...sort of."

Lance blinks, and looks up at him from where he'd been glaring his knee. Shiro has this
inexplicable tenderness simmering in his eyes, twisted somewhat with his own turmoil, his own
five million fears nearly spilling over. If only Shiro would let Lance soothe his sorrow. He can't do
much as is. But soon... And sooner rather than later.

"And," Shiro sighs, "it was always cold." For him, too. At the start. It used to bite, dig deep at his
neck and feet and fingertips. It didn't take long to gnaw its way to his heart, coldness enclosing him
till nothing else could touch him. Maybe it never reached Shiro so deep. Burning inside of him, the
core of a leader, a hero, a real champion. Lance is some pale imitator and yet the most polished
version of him. Shiro puts a hand on the bed, near Lance but not on him, and it's only then that
Lance realises his chin is bobbing of its own accord.

"I guess it started the same," Shiro says. "And then they...went further with you. It's strange, isn't
it? And so unfair... That I was there so long and yet... And when we were searching for you, it felt
like years longer than what I spent captured. Like centuries...just lost looking for you. All we
wanted to do was find you."

And was it worth it, Lance wants to ask. Was it worth the time and the pain and the conflict, those
centuries of uncertainty and fear and grief, gone only for a fleeting few weeks before they were
transmuted towards a new horror? How much of the druids did he already reflect? Moving like a
king and careless like one too, and nothing at all like whatever he used to be. He doesn't need to
remember precisely what that was. He sees it in their eyes every time they look at him. All they
can see is that ghost, encased in this tomb of a body. There must be little of him left to recognise at
this stage.

"I'm so sorry, Lance," Shiro says, and his voice also breaks, hurries over the words to hide it.
Lance catches his jaw gritting, his ferocious blinking. The words don't quite reach him; apologies
are nothing, now. Everything is nothing. "All I see when I look at you is everything they did to me.
I can't sleep half the time. All I can think about is...how couldn't I have stopped this? How did I
allow this to happen? When they took you...it felt like every joy in the world was gone. Allura
didn't sleep. Pidge was in the lab nonstop. Hunk never laughed, Keith never smiled, Coran never
stopped working... And when you got back, it felt like every worst nightmare came true. Who were
you? Why couldn't I recognise you? Where had you gone? What hadn't you come back from, what
did the druids do to you that drove you from yourself? Was it anything like what they did to me?
And we found out, and it was worse... I didn't want to think anything worse existed, let alone had
been done to one of my paladins. One of my team. You only come back when you're so hurt
anyone normal would die. How the hell is that possible? How did they make that possible?"

Lance can write a list, if he wants. What he remembers, which specific wounds rip open with every
nightmare. It wouldn't be enough. Head in his hand, eyes hidden, Shiro truly looks like the great
warrior pushed too far. If anyone were to apologise, it should be Lance. If he could find a way...
They all deserve better than what he's pushed onto them. Shiro is so deeply unhappy these days. At
least before he had Keith, some kind of home to always retreat to. Lance hurt more than Keith in
his desire to protect himself. He ruined things, over and over... It's only going to keep happening.
Isn't this proof? Shiro is in tears, again. Wasn't he angry, before? The ruthless rage was far
preferable to this. Lance doesn't know what to do with this.

"I just want to understand. Where did we go wrong? How could this all come to be? How could
last night happen, what led you to... What were you hiding, what haven't you been saying?
Something changed... How couldn't you tell us something changed?"
Shiro won't get a response. Lance isn't sorry for it. He's only sorry they ever found out. Sorry Pidge saw him break down, sorry Allura knows as much as she does, sorry Hunk ever caught him with a knife to his head. None of it was wanted.

"Lance, I know it's hard... but you can recover from this. We can do it together."

It wouldn't be enough. Lance can't function if he doesn't kill things. How can he recover from that, like that, with that? It's not a future worth living. Besides, even now the urge to kill boils in his veins, wicked and hot like the druids know what he attempted before. Shiro is so weighed down with grief. Poor Atlas never bore such an invisible, visceral toll.

"Look... just think about it. Okay? It won't be easy... Nothing ever is. But it's better than anything - anything - you wanted last night. Believe me." He speaks like he can see the future so clearly, some made up world where the druids' influence on him suddenly vanishes and he toils through the trauma with the team - but it's a wisp of madness. Lance is too far away from them all now. His path is so clear, the only thing he can see for miles. It glows like heaven's light. It is more tantalising than any chance at living. Shiro doesn't understand. And he's never going to. If Lance could explain... Shiro deserves to know it was Lance's choice, Lance's only and Lance's favourite. That nothing else could ever bring him joy. Who'd want to live like that?

Shiro sighs, and eventually stands. "Look," he says, and rummages for something in his pocket. "I know you can't speak - the druids - I can't imagine. But you wrote us something, once. I couldn't explain it, before. I figured you were mad the druids got you the last time you went. I didn't realise... you were trying to save them. From whatever you went through, I- so I..." From his pocket appears a notebook and pencil. He sets them down on the bed, by Lance's leg, and steps back as though awaiting Lance to write him a novel. He doesn't move. "Well. Just in case. It could be anything... Anything you want to tell us to know. We all... would appreciate it."

Maybe so, Lance thinks, and waits until Shiro nods at him and leaves before reaching for it. Holding a pencil is still difficult - even opening the notebook to the first page. His name comes out too big and wobbly, so he leaves it at that, and gets up. No one sees him on his way to his room. Just like that, they've dispersed and vanished into thin air. He hurries through the corridors, saved only by that one burning image of his path, his only thought how he will reach it. The shadows are still there, but they aren't real anymore. Nothing is.

The words come immediately when he sits at his desk and starts. Too big and barely legible, but Lance can't stop. Every person needs something, some kind of explanation. He has to tell them, like he's never done before, why he wants this path. Why he needs it, why it's all he's worth. He barely has breath to write it all out. Like an ocean wave it roars out of him and submerges everything. I'm sorry's pour out of him like a flood of tears. It isn't enough. But nothing from him is ever going to be. As long as it's there. As long as something's there.

Anything to explain. If they think it's their fault - if they believe the responsibility lies anywhere except with Lance - it would be unfair. And it wouldn't be true. Lance... has done a lot of things wrong. He's okay admitting that now. Lance has lost complete control. And all he's done is inflict more pain and suffering, even when he tried to help. Every time he tried to help. It isn't worth trying anymore. The people around him don't deserve it.

The day unfolds as most days do - except he is never alone. Allura accompanies him round corridors and to meal times, but she couldn't stay with him all the time. Nor would he want her to. And nor does he want this, a constant face in the corner of his vision, its exact features twisting and blurring whenever Lance steps too far away. Didn't Coran listen to him last night? It isn't safe. Especially not when he's training. The only place it's okay to lose control is when he's fighting,
because that saves lives. But now...the very knowledge that they're sat watching him digs into his shoulders, his hands, clutched too tightly onto his weapon. It isn't safe. What if someone gets hurt? What if Lance forgets- what if he can't see them- what if something just...goes wrong?

Will it be like this every day, he has to wonder. Until he achieves his desire, will they throw themselves straight into the fire when before they hadn't even seen the smoke? They try to talk to him, all of them. He can't look at them, can't say a word. There's nothing left inside him to give. Isn't it obvious?

Can they see it, now?

At dinner they try to talk to him, try to lay out future plans on dealing with his bullshit, but none of it is of any consequence to him. Their voices tremble. The more he doesn't cooperate with them, the more obvious his real desire will be - but even now, he can't hear them. The words melt and fold together before they reach his ears, scrambled into nothing by the time they hit his brain. Is it the druids, or is it him? Is this what getting worse just looks like? The nothingness encloses him like a shroud, like a warm blanket lulling him to sleep. Compared to that explosion of pain and feeling last night, everything else is dull. He just wants to feel it again. He just wants to die feeling something.

And he can't apologise for that. He can only wait. The more they try to reach him, the further from everything he feels. These hands...this body...this existence... He can barely call it his own. None of this has been his for a very long time.

And he can't carry it anymore.

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So he waits. Time slips through his fingers. The others no longer reach him. Shadows in the hall, nightmares in his bed, dreaming of Cuba in the shower... It all just fades away into nothing. The only thing keeping him tied to reality is his desire to die, and his will to make that a reality. He doesn't care about anything else.

It takes a while to find the chance. The others alternate sleeping outside his bedroom, so he works around that. Instead of training every second of the day, they ask him to embark on cleaning the castle. He spends mornings on the training deck and afternoons slowly siphoning the supply of rubbing alcohol he found in the supplies closet back into his room. The mission seems easy enough. He already has a dozen weapons lying around his room. Over a few days of Lance cleaning and Allura rejecting missions and Shiro hovering like regretful ghost does Lance gather the lethal component, sneaking bottles of it up his sleeve until a small collection has gathered in his bedroom.

The last thing he does is lock his door and put the note he wrote them all on top of his bed.

After that, he just waits for it to be over.

Chapter End Notes

onto the next on onto the next one (the shiro extra please click)

hope u enjoyed it or at least was touched deeply emotionally in a way that positively
reflects the power of fiction and specifically, my power of fiction

and for everyone who couldn't wait for shiro to figure it out abt lance...... i hope that was sufficiently intense for u

End Notes

if u enjoyed, i would love some feedback! esp since this is a little different from what i usually write ;; catch me on tumblr at my main blog or my (mostly voltron) side blog !!!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!