More than Alive
by maireeps, somethingmorecreative

Summary

Keith and Lance band together, as the only two mildly sane people they’ve met so far and slowly create a strong bond that leaves all of their plans with loose ends as they try to survive and thrive together.

Notes

part i of this au with somethingmorecreative (rachel)!

we’ll be alternating posting with each part, so subscribe to this series to keep up! support us on tumblr too!

See the end of the work for more notes
The music faded from his earbuds abruptly as his iPhone died. He had to commend it for lasting as long as it did from his tiny solar charger. Sighing, he took out his buds and stuffed the cords into his bomber jacket pocket. Without the low thump of the same downloaded playlist over and over as his companion, he was utterly alone.

Only months ago, it had been completely different. His world, the world, had changed with one bloodborne virus and suddenly he cared nothing about how his music major didn’t match the aeronautical classes he took or that his dorm’s RA Ashley didn’t get the hint that he wasn’t interested. New York was a city, and if his obscene obsession with splatter films in the summer of eighth grade taught him anything, it was cities were to be avoided in the zombie apocalypse.

Except the government didn’t call them zombies. A virus affecting people vulnerable to pre-and-post-mortem infections of the blood stream. If you got bit, you were hit. And there was a lot of biting going around.

So Lance shoved his valuables in the biggest pack he owned - his phone, chargers, skincare routine and whatever clothes could last him and slung his guitar case over his shoulder before getting the heck out of dodge. He was smart enough not to hit the mainland, not to even attempt the highways, and set straight for the coast. It was easy enough finding a ferry - a grouch of an old man named Grits who took him as far down the coast as he could on his tiny fishing boat. Unlike the hysteria of the cities, maybe Grits and him had found some solace in one another - as seemingly the only sane people through the whole ordeal.

Not that he hadn’t freaked out. Because he did.

When the news hit, he had called Hunk immediately. His best friend, all the way on the West Coast, said he was heading for Canada with his family. The government was issuing asylum to all citizens who could make it up north while they proceeded with evacuations across the country. Hunk sounded nervous, even though the West hadn’t been hit as hard yet. That was a month ago, an endless amount of days to not hear from your bestest buddy but it wasn’t exactly the time to blow up Hunk’s phone. The government hadn’t cut the cellular yet, and Hunk would call to let him know if he made it. He had nothing to worry about, because Hunk was easily the most reliable person he knew.

Lance promised to meet him in Canada.

He would make it eventually - either if he was evacuated or found a ride up to the northern territories, but he would make it. He’d never lie to Hunk.

Unfortunately, despite his determination, shit was going just a tiny bit haywire.

Disaster made humans go crazy. It was around the third time a group had tried to loot him for his pack that he realized it was less than likely he’d be hitching a ride up to the North with whoever passed by. It was around the fourth time running into a group that he solidified that notion, watching as some right Southern ‘gentlemen’ circled him on their four-wheelers and called him ‘pretty boy’ with malicious antagonizing grins. Luckily he had found a tiny thing of a handgun in the outskirts of the last town, and thanks to growing up with his rancher father, he was one hell of a straight shot. They rolled out of there faster than they had come, their measly leader with a bleeding hole in his foot. It put him down a bullet, sure, but fuck it had felt good.
He scuffed the toe of his Converse against the road. The six lanes of traffic were deserted, littered with scattered dead cars and debris. He approached the mid barrier, hoisting himself up and over the median onto the opposite lanes of Route 1. The crumpled road map in his pocket let him know he had just passed into Virginia maybe a few hours ago, leaving him well clear of most major cities. That had been his plan, but fuck if he hadn’t thought of another one to follow it.

Now he was without a vehicle, utterly alone on the East Coast, too exhausted and scared to try any of the junked cars nearby for fear of triggering a car alarm. The last thing he needed after walking so long was a horde of undead to come lumbering out of the woods on each side of the highway. He squinted ahead in the lingering evening, spying the bridge ahead along the river. Here the cars were heavier, collapsed on both sides in various positions like steeples. One stood out to him; a large semi truck without its truckload sitting taller than all of the cars around it. He broke into a light jog, crossing the bridge edges and weaving toward the semi.

It was tall enough to buffer out crawlers, with steps too high for immobile walkers and with all windows intact. Perfect.

He slowly clasped onto the door handle and heaved it open. No car alarm, and the seats were cushioned. Perfect.

Lance hoisted himself in without a second thought, tossing his bag into the passenger seat and shrugging out of his bomber jacket. He locked both doors swiftly, setting up his solar charger on the dash and fishing for his last sliced meats and cheese from his thermal pouch. To think he used to dream about eating lobster on the Eiffel Tower in something by Coco Chanel. He almost mourned that dead dream as he ate slowly, tilting forward to turn his eyes to the sky.

It was almost sad how beautiful the stars were. Still blinking brightly for far fewer to see. His mother used to point out the constellations on their ranch, and he thought of his family in Cuba. They had been so proud of him for being accepted into NYU, no matter his misdirection in terms of majors. His father had driven him to the airport at the crack of dawn, just the two of them on the pickup truck bench as the sun rose golden pink against the darkened sky. The government radio said the islands in the Atlantic were swarmed, swamped with undead and utterly inaccessible. There were rumors of the last strongholds of the islands being Havana and Matanzas, but that was weeks upon weeks ago, when there were still few enough names of the fallen to list.

Lance counted the stars of Orion, of Ursa Major and Minor, until tears wet his bottom eyelashes and he fell asleep.

He shot up in the front seat, railing his forehead against the low hanging sunshade and groaning immediately as he hunched over. It was morning, probably not even 9 o’clock with how light the sky seemed. Even during his days on the ranch before college, he had never been a morning person. The new age had changed that.

The soft rhythmic chop-chopping sound he had woke up to was slowly getting louder. He had long attuned his body to the miniscule sounds of unrest - because being able to click into action the second you heard something meant you were able to survive.

Lance shoved his phone and charger into his pack, hauling his guitar over a shoulder. He leaned forward, slowly and steadily, to check the driver side mirror. Nothing but the bridge stretched behind, with the trees lining the highway on the other side, and yet the beats were nearing his position. He stretched over to the passenger seat, hauling himself over his pack and creeping low under the window to check the passenger side mirror. A low profile would help him dodge out of any shit bandits way, but instead of any clinky four-wheeler or reassembled military-issue Jeep,
there was just a sole figure.

The lone rider sat atop a huge horse. Slowly they approached, closer and closer in the mirror until the horse was passing by the semi truck’s passenger side. The large steed was black, huge and powerful with muscles working tirelessly under a sleek gorgeous coat. From the angle, Lance could see the supplies tied to the saddle, a bedroll, medium saddlebag and a jet Stetson hat matching the horse’s coat tied to the back saddle. The rider wore steel-toed boots and tight black pants, but the sun cast in the eyes too much to see the face of the rider.

The horse carried on, black tail flicking as it went past the semi truck, looking to weave around the abandoned cars onward.

Lance’s heart was in his throat. The first person he’d seen in a day or so - the first person who didn’t look insane. He was scrambling forward before he knew it, guitar over his shoulder and hands grabbing onto his pack as he kicked open the passenger side door and fell down to the step. It creaked lamely and loud, almost in annoyance as he leaned all of his body onto the step to close the door around him.

“Wait!” Lance called, bounding to the ground, his pack hitting his back hard. He was stiff from walking, stiff from sleeping upright and he almost lost his footing as he stepped down onto the highway. He steadied himself, arms raised and gaze snapping from his feet upward.

The rider had turned, horse prancing in pace and chuffing loudly. A diamond of white sat on the horse’s face, the only other color on the black steed’s body. He was fine with admiring the pretty pony until he looked to the rider.

The man was gorgeous, long wispy hair tied back to his nape and hanging in his handsome face. The pale expansion of his skin was dusted with patches of tan, forearms strong and sturdy under the plaid shirt rolled to his elbows. He had a split eyebrow, pierced ears and dark slit eyes that bore into Lance. If they had been at a gay bar downtown in the Upper East side, Lance would be all over the attractive cowboy.

It was then did he realize the sword strapped to the man’s back, the knife strapped to his thigh and semi-automatic with scope loosely tied around his chest. Lance wanted to weep, fall to his knees and give up because at least he’d die at the hands of some sexy stranger. But instead, the man did nothing - said nothing, just stare unreadable at Lance.

So he stepped closer, watching how the stranger’s eyes danced up and down his body. If they had been at that gay bar downtown, Lance would take it as an invitation to smile prettily at him and sit in his lap. Now he stood lamely in front of the man on the horse, with his heart in his throat, trying not to pose a threat.

“Uh, hey,” Lance raised a hand, “you might not want to go that way…”

The man said nothing again, but the prick of his eyebrow upward stirred Lance on.

“They three days walk - I mean, maybe a day’s ride, you’ll be going straight into D.C.,” Lance fished out his map from his bomber jacket, unfolding it, “I just passed through Winchester. People are saying D.C. is a dead zone - no copters have passed in days.” He gestured to Winchester on the map, attempting to hold it up against his chest for the man to see.

Slowly the man leaned forward, and Lance shuffled closer so he could point to the map, tracing his finger trip around the D.C.-Baltimore area to where he assumed they stood.
“Are you not from here?” Lance jerked his head behind them, “You came northeast, government is recommending northwest -”

“Fuck the government.” The man snorted, curling his lip,

Lance grinned, “I mean I hear you but I’ve seen it myself.”

He paused. He hadn’t been in D.C., but the piling of burning corpses left in a radius around the District of Columbia was a warning. The grey smoke had been visible for miles from the burning and he hadn’t dared go close.

“….I’d avoid it,” Lance folded up the map and tucked it back into his pocket. He looked up to the horse with a slanted smile, reaching to pat the muscles on the neck with a palm. “Wouldn’t want… Epona to get spooked, right?”

The man’s eyebrows knotted together in amusement, smirking, “Her name’s Artax.”

“Neverending Story?” Lance grinned, “That’s a bit ominous. She’s beautiful though.”

Artax seemed to appreciate it, throwing her mane and stepping lightly back and forth. The stranger snorted, shaking his head, hair curling attractively against that sharp jaw, “She’s arrogant enough already, thinking all this riding is me spoiling her. She might just be pleased to get out of the Chihuahuan.”

Lance’s jaw nearly dropped, voice weak, “Texas? Shit, you really are a cowboy.” The stranger had been making amazing time if he had made it from Texas to Virginia on horseback. Artax picked up her pretty hooves again, ears going stock straight as she turned her head to the end of the bridge.

The stranger seemed to notice, reaching on to place his palm on the horse’s mane, “I’d tip my Stetson but it’s not really mine -”

He cut off, frowning as he followed Artax’s gaze behind Lance’s shoulder. He blinked, watching the dip of the man’s handsome face and his gaze harden.

“You any good with a gun?” The man murmured, clutching and jerking Artax’s reins around toward the way they had been heading, his dark eyes never leaving whatever lay behind Lance.

That was when he turned. From the far reaches of the bridge, the trees had begun to rustle unnaturally along the sides of the highway. Lance watched, stricken and already counting his bullets as a hundred-body swarm of undead lumbered out of the trees onto the highway. They cleared the dip of the off-road easy, stumbling and crawling and groaning onto the concrete in a bloody grimy wave.

“Yeah.” Lance was breathless, choking on air almost as he spotted the sprinters, clawed and darkened by dusted decay breaking the lines of the slow walkers and running fast toward the bridge as their sensitive noses picked up the scent of the living.

“Good, let’s fucking go.”

Lance whipped back around, staring at the man as he reached out his arm to Lance. Without a second thought, Lance clasped onto it, hauling himself up behind the man onto his horse. He’d never ridden a horse, but immediately adjusted as the man handed him the semi-automatic rifle from around his chest. He was wobbly, but easily turned in the seat, cocking the gun and picking off on the sprinters as it neared the bridge. He faintly heard the soft chuckle of the stranger as he kicked the horse into a sprint, due North.
Over the wind in his ears, the footfalls of Artax on the concrete and the screeches of the sprinters as they began to chase, the stranger called out, “Name’s Keith.”

Lance grabbed onto the man’s belt, flipping himself around on the mare to sit backwards and lean his back to Keith’s as he raised the rifle again, “Lance! Nice to meet you.”
The sun was probably a few hours from setting, and the wind was getting chilly. It blew almost constantly now, sometimes harder, sometimes softer, and Lance thought that the weather was ominous enough without the sound of Artax’s hooves clopping on the empty street and the breaths Keith let out every few minutes.

They had been traveling for hours before Keith finally tugged on Artax’s reins and turned his head enough to say, “I think we should find somewhere to camp for the night. I’ve never been in this part of the country before.”

“Yeah,” Lance said, and he couldn’t really help the bitter edge to his voice, “sounds good to me, cowboy.”

Keith didn’t say anything else; Lance didn’t expect him to.

Along the way on the back of the beautiful horse, Lance had started thinking and wishing that he never would have crawled out of that semi this morning. He almost thought he would have rather dealt with the walkers on the road and his absolute lack of a plan than be on the back of a horse with the most annoying person left in the world.

Because Keith hadn’t said hardly *anything* to him. Even when Lance had started to talk to him, Keith had either ignored him or shushed him in the fear of walkers hearing them. He didn’t tell Lance where they were going, didn’t ask him for any advice, barely even bothered with telling him his name and asking him to shoot down the roamers that were pursuing them. Since then, he’d been nearly silent. Lance wondered if he wished he would have left Lance behind too.

Now, Keith silently offered him some water. Lance took it, had a sip, and handed it back to him without saying a damn word.

The road ahead of them was empty, but the road behind them was full of walkers, roamers, *biters*. There wasn’t a difference in any of the names that they called them; they walked after you, some faster than others, and it only took one raw second, one mistake for you to become one of them.

Sometimes, Lance wondered if any of it was worth it. If, the next time one of *them* was headed straight for him, if he would just stand still and wait. Then, he would at least be with his family. Then, he wouldn’t be so fucking alone.

Keith’s presence did nothing to chase away his loneliness. For however pretty he was, it was misleading because he was an asshole.

For what seemed like the hundredth time today, Lance reminded himself that he was going to find Hunk. Hunk was all he had left anymore. He would meet him in Canada even if it killed him.
Which, it very well could. But that was the thing about having nothing left; it made all the huge, terrifying risks seem like manageable options instead.

Almost an hour after Keith had suggested finding somewhere to camp, they came upon a dirt road right off the abandoned highway. Keith clicked his teeth and pulled at Artax’s reins, and she stopped easily.

“Should we try it?” Keith’s voice was quiet. It matched the wind around them.

Lance looked around. He didn’t see any tracks that could be recent—which is something he’d gotten quite good at over the past few weeks, tracking. It had helped him stay alive and avoid trouble more times than he could count.

“It’s going to get dark soon,” he said, “so it’s either try it or stay on the road in the dark.”

Keith didn’t reply. Instead, he nudged Artax, and they started down the dirt road.

They blended into the trees as they continued down the road. Lance kept his eyes sharp, looking around them for walkers, but he hadn’t seen anything in hours. He wondered how close they were to D.C. Surely Keith had lead them in the opposite direction; surely he knew how dangerous the cities could be.

Trash and debris started to litter the road. There were more footprints in the dirt too, and from the way that they had edged out of the trees and dragged in the dirt, Lance had a wild guess that they were from walkers.

The trees cleared suddenly, and in the middle of the clearing ahead of them sat a small house, a wooden cabin. Lance was surprised by how ravaged it looked, how terribly undone this place looked.

Artax hesitated and came to a stop just as a walker turned toward them.

“Stay here,” Keith ordered. He slipped off of the saddle, boots hitting the ground with a thud. Lance was stuck between pissed off at being told what to do and grateful for not having to move.

He kept watch from Artax while Keith approached the walker and reached for his sword. He pulled it from the sheath on his back in one swift motion, and the blade’s metal glistened in the setting sunlight. Keith gripped the sword in his left hand and swung upward, taking off the walker’s head in one clean motion. Then, he stabbed the blade through the decapitated head.

Keith kept his sword out and looked over at Lance from underneath the brim of his black hat. He nodded toward the house and said, “I’ll clear it. You keep watch.”

Lance crossed his arms over his chest, but Keith didn’t wait for him to reply before he set off into the house.

“Is he always like this?” Lance asked Artax. She whinnied softly in response.

The clearing was empty of other walkers. There were a few bodies, and there was an abandoned car, with the door standing open. Trash littered the ground, so Lance didn’t even hope for finding any food or supplies here. This place had probably been cleared out long ago.

Keith came back out onto the old, rotting porch moments later. He nodded and sheathed his sword, “All clear. We can block the door for tonight.”
Lance didn’t bother replying. Instead, he swung his leg over and slid off Artax’s back, groaning a little when his feet hit the ground. His hips and back were sore than he could ever remember them being in his entire life. In fact, his whole body was sore. Between all the running he’d done over the past few weeks and riding all day, he was surprised he could even move.

He looked up when he heard Keith smirking at him, “First time riding?”

Lance felt his cheeks heat up from both anger and lust. Keith’s smug expression did everything right for his beautiful face, and the way he was standing, with one hip cocked to the side, hat sitting crooked on his head, did the rest.

“No, jackass,” he replied airily. “It’s definitely not my first time.”

Keith didn’t say anything. Instead, he raised an eyebrow before walking forward to grab Artax’s reins. He shouldered past Lance, arms brushing each other, and headed back into the house, carefully guiding Artax inside.

He looked around. It was already starting to get dark, and if he tried to run right now, he probably wouldn’t make it very far.

He followed Keith and Artax inside.

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“Do you expect that thing to actually work?”

Lance looked up sharply. He had his phone in his hand, using it for the first time today. Usually, he kept it on airplane mode and played music while he was walking. It always did a good job of keeping him distracted, and honestly, it made him feel less alone.

Keith was looking at him. He couldn’t read the other man’s expression, but the tone in his voice irked Lance.

“Do you think I’m stupid?” Lance snapped. Instead of waiting for a response, he popped his earbuds in and leaned back onto the ground, crossing his arms underneath his head. He fumed silently.

Minutes later, while he was trying to calm himself down with the sweet sound of Beyoncé, he felt something kick his shoe, and he opened his eyes to see Keith standing over him.

He took an earbud out. “What?”

“I asked if you were going to help me,” Keith said, jerking his head toward the door. “But if you’re too busy—”

“What’s your problem?”

Keith looked shocked for half a second until his expression settled back into what Lance had dubbed his resting bitch face. He couldn’t read his expression, other than the boredom, and honestly, he really didn’t care. At least, he tried to tell himself he didn’t.

“I don’t have a problem,” Keith’s voice was clipped short, which infuriated Lance to no end. How did this asshole not even show emotions? Did he just not have any? What was fucking wrong with him? “Do you?”

Lance rolled to his feet and stalked past Keith, grabbing the old couch and pushing it toward the
door. Keith appeared at his side a few seconds later, and together, they shoved the couch against
the door.

Lance leaned back up and turned to face Keith. He said, “I don’t have a problem either.”

“You sure about that?”

Instead of answering, he stared at Keith. The other man was staring right back at Lance, dark eyes
wary, black hair frizzy. He’d taken off his Stetson and left it with his pack in the corner of the
room with Artax, but he hadn’t removed any of his weapons. In fact, his hand was drifting awfully
close to where he had a knife strapped to his belt.

Suddenly, Lance was overcome with wanting to leave. He needed to get out of here. He needed to
leave. Fuck, he didn’t even know this guy. He could be some creep or—

“I’m sure,” Lance said. His voice sounded weird to his own ears. Despite everything in him
screaming at him not to, he turned his back to Keith and went back to the other side of the small
room. He laid back down on the ground, curling around his pack and keeping everything close. He
kept his fingers on his knife.

He could still hear Keith shuffling around the room, so a few minutes later, he tossed over his
shoulder, “Wake me up for watch later.”

Keith woke him up with a kick to the leg and a simple, “Your watch.”

It felt like it had been five minutes from the time that Lance laid down, but when he sat up, it was
completely dark outside the poorly boarded-up window. He checked his phone to see the time,
more out of habit than anything, and found that it had been several hours and dawn wasn’t far off.

He watched absently as Keith crossed the room and settled onto the ground in front of Artax. He
rolled onto his side away from Lance and got really still.

Lance quietly pulled some food and water from his pack. He would have to scavenge more today to
be able to keep moving. Since yesterday, Keith hadn’t offered him any more water, and now, as
Lance drank the rest of his own, he decided that when dawn came, he was leaving with it.

After he made his decision, he recounted his supplies. He still had a few candy bars, an empty
bottle of water, and a pack of gum. He had the small gun he’d found at the very beginning, five
bullets, and his knife. Then, he had a few extra shirts and an extra pair of jeans, along with another
pair of boxers. He still had all his phone chargers, another pair of headphones, and the small solar
charger that his sister had gotten him for his birthday a few years ago. Plus, all of his somewhat
useless skin care products.

It was all he had now. His small pack, his guitar, his supplies, and his memories.

Dawn came quickly, and Lance gathered his supplies and got to his feet silently. He pulled the
couch back enough for him to slip out of the door, and as he set his pack and guitar case out onto
the porch, Artax lifted her head to look at him.

“Shh,” he murmured to her. She was a beautiful horse. He hoped Keith would take good care of
her. “I’ll block it back. Goodbye, gorgeous.”

She whined quietly, but Keith never moved. Lance slipped through the door and pulled the couch
after him to block the door back because even if Keith was an asshole, he wasn’t going to leave him vulnerable to any walkers. He knelt and grabbed his pack, throwing it on his back, and he slipped his guitar case over his chest too, using the rope he’d found as a makeshift strap while he looked around. The yard was empty of walkers, and the wind was oddly silent. Nothing was moving today, but Lance kept his hand on his knife anyway as he set off at a jog.

Despite the clear sky and warm sunshine on his face, something felt off. Lance had gotten used to being on his own in the past few weeks; he was used to the quiet, to the constant watchfulness that he needed throughout the day. He was capable of watching his own back and taking care of himself. He had gotten used to this weeks ago, as soon as he realized that he couldn’t trust other people anymore.

So why did it feel different today? Out of every other day, after everything else that had happened, why did it feel so weird, so different today?

Lance jogged until he got to the paved highway, and he let himself look back once before he turned and headed in the direction Keith had been leading them yesterday. He could stop and scavenge at the next place he found, possibly wait for Keith to pass by, get a plan together before he started to head northwest in search of Hunk.

He walked for the better part of a couple of hours. The day was turning out to be more beautiful than Lance could remember in a while. The sun was shining, the sky was clear, and if he was back in Cuba with his family, his dad would say that it was the perfect day for gardening and surfing when they finished their chores.

Lance stopped suddenly and ducked down to the pavement. There was a car ahead, sitting in the middle of the road. It looked like it had been moved recently. It was cleaner than abandoned cars tended to be, and Lance could see supplies stacked in the back of it through the windows.

He wondered if it was a trap. But—he was so thirsty. Maybe there was some water inside?

He would be quick, and he would only take what he needed.

Lance shoved his gun into the pocket inside his jacket where he could grab it easily in case he needed it. He hoped he didn’t—he only had a few bullets left and he didn’t know when or if he would be able to find more.

He would grab what he needed and be on his way. That was all. It wouldn’t take long, and nothing would happen. Nothing would happen.

It took him a few more minutes before he had convinced himself enough to rise and start toward the car.

Lance ran forward. His hands were shaking, and he could hear his heartbeat racing in his ears. He dashed to the side of the car and looked around quickly, crouching down beside the back door of the passenger side. He held his breath while he reached for the door handle and eased it open.

The car alarm that he was expecting never came. Instead, the door opened with just a small creak, and when he looked inside, there was a mountain of supplies. Clothes, food, knives—

*Water.* There were bottles of it.

Lance grinned to himself and reached forward, grabbing as many as he could hold. He reached around and grabbed his pack, opening it and shoving the water down into it. Fuck, thank god he found it—
He was trying to decide if he should get some of the food when he heard a gun cock.

He jumped, reaching for his knife and—

“Why don’t you just slow down there, pretty boy?”

The voice was slow, calm. It had a southern twang to it, and it made Lance think of those other men that he had faced a few weeks ago. Fuck, just the way he called him “pretty boy” made Lance think of so many of the people he’d met since the end of the world that had tried to screw him over.

“I’ll put everything back and leave,” Lance offered, finding his voice. It only shook a little.

“Now why would I want that? Especially when it looks like I’ve finally found myself some good company.”

Lance swallowed.

The voice continued, “Don’t try anything stupid, now. I’ll shoot you if you do, alright? Just turn around slowly and we can talk about this, can’t we?”

Lance took a breath and turned around.

The man facing him had obviously seen better days. He was older, beard and hair long turned gray. His eyes were dark, and the way his mouth was quirked didn’t give Lance any hope that he would just let him go. He was holding a semiautomatic pistol—a Smith & Wesson, Lance thought—straight at Lance’s chest.

“Where’ya from, boy?” the man asked.

“New York,” he said, staring at the gun. The safety was off.

“And where you headed?”

“Canada.”

The man laughed, “Shit, boy, you still think that’s gonna work out? Fuck me. Canada’s drowning in them roters just like we are.”

Lance felt his heart drop in his chest but—this lunatic didn’t know. He didn’t know for sure that Canada was gone. There was no way.

Right?

“Well then,” the man moved closer, squatting to the ground in front of Lance. He titled Lance’s chin up with the barrel of the gun. “You’re not going to Canada. Me an’ you are just gonna stay out here and have lots of fun, how about it?”

“No,” Lance muttered.

“Excuse me?”

“No,” Lance repeated, louder this time. He would rather—he would rather be shot right now, right here, than have anything to do with this man. At least then he’d be with his family, at least then he’d—

“That just won’t work, boy,” the man hummed, leaning into Lance’s space. He smelled and his
teeth were yellowing with age and Lance could feel the breath on his neck because he was so close. The pistol was digging into his ribs now and—

Then, suddenly, without warning, a single shot echoed through the otherwise empty air, and the man jerked back. Lance followed his gaze, and he must have already been dead because he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

A black figure was standing in the middle of the road, holding a semiautomatic rifle in one hand and a sword in the other. The sun was behind the figure, casting a heavy shadow onto the pavement, and there was a thin cloud of smoke rising from the gun, from where it had been fired. Behind the figure, there was something else, and it… from here, it looked like a horse.

“I believe I heard him tell you no,” the figure said, and Lance recognized the voice in less than a heartbeat.

Keith and Artax. Keith and Artax!

“Why don’t you pretend like you didn’t hear anything and just move along?” the man said, leaning back from Lance a bit and crouching in front of him.

Keith lifted his head enough that Lance could see his face underneath his Stetson. His expression was… Lance hadn’t known Keith long at all, but Lance knew enough that Keith was furious. His voice was colder than anything he’d ever used with Lance when he said, “Get away from him or I’ll kill you.”

There was a second of tense silence before the man laughed a little. “He’s mine now, son. Might as well take that beautiful horse of yours and move on. Can’t have it all, now can you?”

While the man had his eyes on Keith, Lance carefully, slowly, moved his hand to his jacket and grabbed his gun.

Keith grit his teeth and growled, “Get away from him.”

Artax huffed menacingly, echoing Keith’s point.

“No can do,” the man shrugged. “You can either move on or stay and watch.”

Tears pricked Lance’s eyes as the man leaned back toward him, ghosting his chapped lips and nasty beard over Lance’s jaw. Lance tightened his fingers around the gun, dug it into the man’s chest, and pulled the trigger.

The echo was louder than Lance thought it would be, and the blood spray was worse. It was everywhere. The man’s full weight sagged onto Lance, and he cried out, shoving at him and—

Keith was there the next second, grabbing the man’s body and tossing it off of him. He grabbed Lance’s arms and hauled him up and away from the car, sweeping him a few feet away. His hands were frantic, tracing up and down his arms and it took Lance a few seconds to realize that he was talking.

“Fuck, Lance, Lance,” he was saying, “are you okay? Are you hurt? Tell me where you’re hurt. Oh god, fuck, what happened? Where—?”

“Keith?” Lance asked, voice wobbling.

Keith nodded, and he reached up to tilt his hat back so he could see his face completely. His dark
eyes were wide, heavy with worry. His mouth was set into a grim line. Lance looked down. At some point, Keith had dropped both his sword and his gun, probably in his rush to get over to Lance after—

Lance was still gripping the gun. He hand was sticky with blood from where he had been so close, and it covered his clothes. Some of it had splattered on his face too.

He forced his fingers open, and the gun clattered to the pavement. Then, nausea swooped through him, bile was rushing up his throat, and he doubled over and puked. His pack and guitar slipped off of his back.

Keith’s hand smoothed over his back, carefully, lightly. When Lance was done and he leaned back up, he was surprised to see Keith looking at him.

“Was that the first person you’ve killed?”

Lance nodded numbly.

Keith nodded too, and his voice was serious when he said, “He deserved it, Lance. He wasn’t going to stop. Nothing would have made him stop until one of us killed him. There was nothing else you could have done. Nothing else would have worked.”

“I know,” Lance choked out.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner.”

Lance frowned. Was he… Was Keith being serious?

“I left you,” he whispered. He couldn’t get his voice any louder.

“You blocked the door behind you,” Keith murmured, matching his volume. “You said goodbye to Artax.”

“You were awake?”

“Of course I was awake,” Keith offered him a small smile, one that didn’t really touch his eyes. “You’re really loud.”

“Then why didn’t you stop me?”

Keith shrugged then, and for the first time, he looked away from Lance. One of his hands was still gripping Lance’s forearm, but his fingers were loose and careful. He said, “I wasn’t going to stop you if you really wanted to go. I still won’t. If you don’t want to stay with me… I understand. I wasn’t following you either, and I won’t if you decide to leave again. I can help you get this car started so you can go.”

Lance blinked. He was still shaking from earlier, and honestly, he couldn’t imagine what would have happened if Keith hadn’t shown up and—

And now Keith was going to help him get a car and leave. He was offering to help him and let him leave, no strings.

“Why?” Lance asked.

Keith shrugged again, and if Lance’s eyes weren’t deceiving him, he was blushing. He said, “Artax really likes you, and she never takes to new people. Plus, you’re good with a gun and—”
Artax was there then, and she huffed and shoved Keith’s shoulder with her nose.

He sighed, glaring at her before turning back to Lance with a softer look. His face and voice were both honest when he said, “I like you too. I think—I think we would make a good team. I know I have Artax, but… being alone is dangerous, and I’m—I’m tired. I think you feel the same way.”

Lance stared at him. He stared for so long that a few walkers wandered out into the road, and Keith nodded, telling him to stay with Artax while he took care of them.

Artax drifted closer to Lance, and she let him step into her, burying his face into her soft coat.

Keith was back a few seconds later, a steady presence behind him. He said, “I don’t know what I did to make you leave in the first place but—I’m sorry.”

“I thought you hated me,” Lance muttered, voice muffled by Artax. “You didn’t talk to me. I thought you wanted me to leave.”

“I didn’t,” Keith responded. “I don’t want you to leave. Unless you want to. Then I’ll help you.”

Lance took a breath, trying to calm his heart. A few seconds later, he managed to turn toward Keith. He was gripping his sword loosely in his hand, but he was staring at Lance.

“Okay,” he said, stepping closer to Keith.

He frowned, “Okay, you’re leaving?”

Lance rolled his eyes, but the gesture was soft, and there was a smile biting at the edges of his mouth. “Okay, I’ll stay.”

“You will?” There was a hopeful edge to Keith’s voice, which filled Lance with relief.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m not going anywhere.”

They went back to the cabin to stay and regroup for a few days. Lance was still shaking from earlier, and Keith didn’t act like he was in a hurry to get on the road either. Lance drove the car with the supplies back while Keith and Artax followed him, and they sat on the porch together while Artax grazed in the front yard. Every so often, a walker would stumble out of the woods, and Keith would heave a sigh and get up with his sword.

Keith sat back down on the steps beside Lance from doing just that. His voice was soft when he said, “Where’s your family?”

“Cuba,” Lance responded, leaning his head against his knees and looking up at him. Keith was leaned back on his hands, staring straight ahead, sword resting across his lap. “I was at NYU going to school. I talked to my mom right before the islands were swarmed, but after that…”

Lance trailed off, not knowing how to finish, not knowing if he wanted to.

“That’s why I’m heading toward Canada,” Lance continued a few minutes later when he’d found his voice. “My best friend and his family were going that way. I told him I would meet him there. He’s all I have left anyway.”

Keith nodded silently, and the wind drifted around them. Artax grazed silently too.
“I don’t have anyone left either,” Keith said suddenly, breaking the silence. “My dad’s ranch was overrun early on. Artax and I… we were the only ones that made it.”

“What are you doing all the way up here then?”

“I have—had a brother who lived a few hours north of D.C. He was a GI, and when everything went to shit, my dad told me to go find him. I went to his house first but… everything was gone. He was gone too,” Keith’s voice cracked over the last sentence. “I don’t have anything left.”

Fuck, Lance knew how Keith felt. Having your entire family just be gone… yeah, he knew that. He knew what it was like to be alone, to be lonely, to feel like you were the only person in the fucking world.

And honestly, why bother? Why would anyone bother with living when they felt that way?

Keith had been right earlier. Lance was tired. He was tired of being alone.

He lifted his head from his knees and scooted closer to Keith until he was right beside him. Then, he lowered his head to Keith’s shoulder and said, “You’ve got me if you want me.”

Keith’s breath caught in his chest, but Lance pretended like he didn’t notice. They’d had a hard day, both of them. Tomorrow would be better. Everything was going to be okay.

It even felt like it would when Keith leaned into him and murmured, “You’ve got me too.”
Lance was starting to regret staying.

Keith was socially awkward, quiet, and argumentative. He was too stubborn, too thick-headed, didn’t get jokes and was solely focused on necessity - like surviving. He got it! He really did! He wanted to hunt too, and rest and find fresh water but hell, it would’ve been better without having to ride a solid three hours on his sore unaccustomed ass because his cowboy partner wanted to cover more ground. Even Artax, easily, was on Keith’s side - simply adoring all the riding to combat her nearly endless supply of energy. Keith would call her a “colt” almost adoringly, but Lance was more than a little bitter about it.

He wasn’t regretting staying for conventional reasons.

Mostly, it was because Keith was too much. He was too easy to joke with, too easy to make fun of, too easy to stare at. Lance had too many instances where he had caught himself staring at Keith’s lips and idly thinking of how long ago he had last been kissed. But on the other hand, Keith was too much. He was solemn, static and hard to read. Every time Lance began to clue in on his behavior, there’d be another shift that would throw their already rocky friendship spiraling off some cliff. It was like he was locking Lance out.

He had barely known the guy for a week, but it was already starting to bother him. They had agreed to circle up back north, after Keith had saved him from that creepy prowler. There had been little in his life that had scared him worse than the undead that sprawled the country, but that man had been something else entirely. If Keith hadn’t been there…

Lance shivered, and was glad he could blame it on the cold air.

They had returned to the cabin after more supply runs into the small expansions of towns and farms dotting off of Route 1. Artax grazed on patches of green a few feet from the clearing. Between the trees, he could see Keith stack wood bundles on the porch before moving the sealed off door to carry them inside. Lance shrugged his jacket completely off, placing it by his shoes. To keep up against the roaming hoards, they took turns between work and keeping watch during the days. He almost wished for the comfy warm seat of the semi instead of the laid out bedrolls on the cabin floor as he stepped out of his ripped jeans and bundled it along with his discarded shirt.

The rocks were slippery when he stepped into the river, feeling fish jolt past his calves as he waded further into the water. Sure his skin crawled with the slimy scales against his legs, but the cool slow-moving water felt heavenly against his sticky skin.
The ride had been particularly stifling during the afternoon, and the humidity rose still as the evening turned from bronze to dark. Keith had been half-teaching him, half-smugly commenting him on his riding, especially when he had handed Lance Artax’s lead and took off to check the perimeter of clearings they had came upon. Lance hadn’t really been the best rider on his father’s ranch, on their dopey old Phillip. He had been squat and slow, and Artax was like a living Maserati. He didn’t want to ask Keith, for fear of that devilishly handsome smirk, but Artax was clearly a Thoroughbred - miles upon miles away from the stable pony his father kept.

He hunkered down into the water, cupping it up to his shoulders and running his cool hands through the back of his neck and jaw. The entire length of his body ached from the day and his breach into relaxation stalled, feeling the slick of the water against his stomach and catch on hairs he would’ve otherwise razored away the second they had appeared. He wondered if it was too late to wiggle out of the stream and grab his travel razor and some body wash from his pack without flashing Keith on the way.

Grumbling, he sank further into the water until he submerged his head. The soft rush of water against his cheeks felt like the creek down the acre of the ranch, past the small swing his father had hung for his mother and just around the clearing they had made in his elementary years for an ecosystem project. Just like the creek, the slime of scales rolled against his ankle and he breached the water, sputtering. Water ran down his face, pushing his hair, the longest it had been in a while, into his face. He swiped it back and turned back to the rocky bank. Making sure to shake his hand off, he searched through the pockets of his jacket before grasping onto his iPhone. He placed it on the biggest boulder, in the sunlight before shuffling his downloaded music.

Bebe Rexha echoed against the crevices of the rock, with soft piano and the twang of guitars to support the soft lyrics. For all the couple thousand songs downloaded to the sturdy phone, he hadn’t listened to this particular song in a while. It was one of his more odd choices, the kind that would’ve made his roommate Nyma wrinkle her nose when he placed his phone on the iPhone dock. She was always critical about his music, something about his utter lack for appreciation of trap music. He'd always reply with scathingly mainstreamed trap songs that he liked, just to make her nose wrinkle in distaste. He sunk into the water, letting it raise around his ears. He missed her. He missed their shitty RA, he missed the kid in his Earth Science class who smelled of weed or the barista at the corner café who spelled his name wrong consistently. He missed whatever horrid person dropped gum on his hair at the club, he missed his hideous husk of a Psychology professor and her shit grading curves and more importantly he missed Hunk. He missed Hunk and he missed his family.

Footfalls and then a plop. He turned to see Keith sit on the boulder a bit away, leaning over to tug off his camel boots without even untying the red laces. He hid his face momentarily to blink before Keith spoke up.

“Is this Florida Georgia Line?”

Lance looked up, eyebrows knit, “What?”

Keith looked up from his boots, blinking, “This song. Florida Georgia Line? I could recognize Kelley and Hubbard in my sleep.”

“Uh…” Lance turned to his phone, squinting at the screen, “I guess so? It’s by Bebe Rexha, just featuring them.” The tops of his cheekbones felt numb, the corners of his mouth peaking gently. Keith was utterly a cowboy, even so much as recognizing country singers in some dance pop love song.
Keith hummed but said nothing else, stacking his boots beside him. Out of the corner of his eye, Lance watched as Keith tugged his plaid shirt over his head. He wore a worn blank tank underneath, highlighting the swell of biceps and the stark line where his tan skin met contrasting pale white. Lance could’ve drown himself, just slip backwards into the flow of the stream and let it carry his otherwise naked body to the depths. Instead he sunk down, engulfing himself in the water and trying to shake the idea of Keith’s fuckin’ farmers’ tan out of his head. It didn’t help his starved body deemed it woefully attractive.

Later, when Keith had retreated back to camp to cook whatever harvest he had caught for them that evening, Lance dried off and redressed. The heat was subsiding, and he had first shift on watch duty, picking the last meat off his skewer and watching Artax doze in her patch of grass. Keith sat on the ground, turned in with his Stetson covering his face. They hadn’t spoken too much since nights ago, when Lance had killed his first man and they had inexplicably tied themselves to one another. Every time Lance tried, Keith would shuffle away after a few comments.

He was getting used to it.

Lance stood up, careful to not trip over Keith’s legs as he stepped outside and gradually led Artax to the small porch. She whinnied softly, and mouthed at his hair with her lips as he tied her lead to the cabin. She settled in immediately, but snorted almost unhappily when he turned away.

“Alright girl.” He smiled, rolling his eyes as he went back to her. Quietly he placed his palms onto the banister of the cabin and hauled himself onto it. The wood banister was rough, leaving him to wiggle for a better position as he leaned against Artax’s flank. She tossed her mane, the long blank tendrils smacking his face and catching in his mouth.

“Bleh!” He spat out, “Artax!”

She whinnied back, practically in the same tone. Her hair had dragged his chapstick from his lips to his chin, and he pawed at his chin with his jacket sleeve. The taste of hair and grass was in his mouth and he frowned.

“Aw hun,” He cooed, reaching back to comb his fingers through her hair, “I never feel the same when my hair is dirty too. Lemme get those tangles for you.”

Slowly he picked at Artax’s hair, leaning against her flank and methodically plaiting her mane in tiny braids. Lance wasn’t sure if it was what she was looking for, but she didn’t complain, and he was glad for it. She slowly dozed, and it reminded him so much of braiding his mother’s or sisters’ hair, he started to relax too.

In the distance, there were howls, groans and rustling. A hundred feet shuffled onward, the sound reverberating for miles around in the silent dark. The night came and went before he even slept a wink, listening to the echoes braced against Artax. He didn’t think Keith slept either.

He knew what Keith was going to say even before he said it.

They’d be together for a week and a half when Keith looked to him with those imploring eyes. Lance agreed, he already knew he agreed. Their rations were dwindling, their fresh water was low and the cars on the interstate near them were picked dry by either them or prowlers.
They had to go into D.C. The towns were running dry, and farmsteads were entirely encompassed by the moving hordes of rotters. It was almost migrational, like packs of birds flying north for the winter. Lance had begun to vaguely wonder if there was a pattern to it, as summer was starting to tighten its grip.

He sat on the porch of the cabin, with the rough wood sticking through his jeans as Keith suited Artax up with their bedrolls and his packs. Lance had tucked away his iPhone before anything else. On top of the food and water they needed, he needed a new battery for his solar charger, maybe a new razor and some deodorant. He was a young man sure, and it was the apocalypse yes, but hell he still wanted to smell good. He couldn’t have it like Keith, who happened to smell like a woodsly musky Old Spice expo, even if he was covered in blood and guts and rotting flesh.

He rubbed his forehead and looked up at Keith as he approached.

“Ready?” Keith tipped his Stetson back, framing out the sun and looking down at him in the shade. His black hair was stuck to his forehead from the heat, and his earrings gleamed in the afternoon light.

Absentmindedly, Lance rolled his thumb and forefinger over one of his own earrings and stood. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

Keith snorted, and hauled himself onto Artax. Lance followed, less gracefully and more or less fumbling on Keith’s shoulders to keep himself upright as he sat in the saddle behind him. The inner muscles of his thighs were beginning to steel up, but still ached furiously from their rides - as if he had just twerked in a club for 48 hours or did hot pilates with Nyma again. He shuffled forward, pressing his hips to Keith’s behind but keeping space between his chest and Keith’s back.

Keith stirred Artax out of the clearing, toward the overpass onto the freeway. They cleared the line of trees quickly as Artax broke into a trot, climbing the slope up the shoulder of the road onto the concrete. The sun stood fiery in the sky, mid east and glaring onto the back of his neck like it was angry at him for skipping on his face routine or something. He melted backward, making even more space between his body and Keith’s.

“It’s hot.” He complained, placing his palms on Artax’s haunches to keep him upright.

He could practically feel Keith roll his eyes, “You haven’t been to Texas then.”

Lance pouted, sliding his gaze to the side as they rode on. He rolled his sleeves over his forearms, glad he stuffed his jacket into his pack earlier. His guitar case was annoyingly sticking against his back. “I don’t think I’d ever want to be.”

And the most odd thing happened.

Keith laughed. It was low, but more than an chuckle. His shoulders shook, the Stetson tilting back as the musical low laughter came from him. Lance stared.

“Ain’t that right,” Keith snorted, “Shit’s a hellhole.”

Lance leaned in, “Yeah? I feel like you’d be the type to have some state pride.”

Keith’s hat moved with the shake of his head. He kicked Artax onward, weaving her between forgotten cars Lance had practically memorized the position of by now. “I feel like you get to have pride in your state if it has pride in you. Sure I grew up wrangling Mustangs but a gay son of a disgraced alcoholic G.I. and an absent mother ain’t really Texas-pride.”
This time the odd thing was all on him. He openly choked on his own spit, going rigid behind Keith on Artax. His stomach had simultaneously turned into jelly and erupted into fire. Lance was an idiot. Was his gay radar that wrong? That obtuse? Here he was thinking this cowboy was easily the straightest person he’d ever met, maybe just some Southern kid who thought pierced earrings were more of a modern thing instead of what they really thought, and -

He wanted to slap his forehead. Yeah they were partners now, each others’ family at this point but just because Keith was gay didn’t mean he had a chance. Lance pulled at his collar, choked some semblance of a hum and let the conversation fall.

Gradually they left the interstate behind for inner towns. The lines of suburbs were desolate, ravaged by fire and panic. Houses stood half-burned through or bolted up with boards and nails. Through the back suburbs, they trotted slowly around to the city center. Among the middle was a square town park, with gazebo, in front of the City Hall. Walkers milled around in scattered groups, and with no sign of runners or their crawling counterparts, they quietly took the sidewalk around the perimeter due North.

Lance watched a small girl in a tattered t-shirt bump into the General Store door repeatedly, sickness rolling in a coil in his stomach.

He turned away as they passed on, keeping his eyes down to the saddle.

By the next town, the walkers were thicker. They had to utterly pass the town completely, giving it a wide berth. The inner city was crawling with bodies, swarmed with hordes and clumps of runners like little pesky flies. Flies that could kill you in instants. Keith said nothing but Lance could feel the tension in his back, as Artax cantered nervously until Keith tugged her around. They kept silent, and Lance pulled out his handgun to load rounds into it.

After the inner city had passed, there were only throughs of walkers along the roads. Instead of engaging, they rode hard and fast past them into the suburbs. Artax was fast enough to barely alerting the walkers until they were long gone. In that moment, he was glad to have stayed with Keith and Artax. If he was alone, he would’ve surely been downed in the inner city and… God knows what.

The suburbs for this town were spaced out, with lawns that sprawled in small hills and lined with bushes. A few walkers milled in the treeline behind the houses, groaning endlessly like a constant hum. Lance kept the safety on on his handgun but settled it in his lap between their bodies.

At the end of the block, Artax stopped.

Keith grunted, kicking his heel lightly, “Artax?”

A line of panic rolled up his spine, and he grabbed onto the back of Keith’s plaid shirt with one hand, the thumb of his other hand pressed hard on the safety of the gun.

“What is it?” Lance croaked, pushing closer to Keith subconsciously.

Keith stilled, frozen like Artax as she raised her head, ears pricked to the house at the end of the block.

Finally Keith spoke, ruff and low, but enough to set the hair on the back of his neck on end, “There’s someone in the window.”
The end of the world was a good place for secrets; Keith had plenty of them.

He could feel his heart stuttering in his chest. Lance had moved even closer to him, pressing up against his back almost completely, fist ing one hand in the back of his shirt. Since they had been riding Artax together, Lance had done a good job of staying as far away from him as he could. Even though their hips were always pressed together from the saddle, Lance made sure to keep his distance other than that.

One of Keith’s secrets was Lance.

“What do we do?” Lance’s voice was low, directly in Keith’s ear. “Are you sure it’s not a walker?”

Keith shook his head and stared up at the window. The house was probably about a block from them, but Keith could see the clear figure standing at the window. He could also see the rifle they were holding in their hands.

“Not a walker,” Keith said.

Artax huffed suddenly, tittering underneath them. There were a few walkers stumbling toward them now, and they needed to move.

He tightened his grip on Artax’s reins.

“Keith,” Lance said nervously. He heard a sharp click as Lance flicked the safety off on his handgun.

“Hold on to me,” he said, jerking on Artax’s reins. She spun instantly, and they raced in the other direction, back down the street. Lance’s arms came around his waist, and he held on tight.

In the distance, there was a single shot in the air.

He urged Artax to run faster, and they spun around another street corner. Keith turned to look behind them, trying to make sure that there weren’t any walkers following them too closely in case —

Artax came to a stop so suddenly that Keith and Lance almost flew out of the saddle. She cried out and spun again and —

They ran right into a horde of walkers.

Dead hands and arms endlessly reached for them. Keith could feel the tight grips on his legs, and
he jerked on Artax’s reins, trying to get her to move or something.

“Keith! Sword!” Lance was yelling now, gripping onto his waist with one arm and aiming his gun into the crowd with the other. He shot one of the dead bodies just as its teeth were about to fall to Artax’s shoulder, and the weight collapsing against her seemed to snap her out of the fog because she turned and started running again.

Keith yanked his sword from his back, trying to avoid hitting Lance while they raced away. He swiped the walkers that got too close to them away, and Lance was still firing his gun. Keith knew he didn’t have a lot of bullets left so—

Artax ran hard and fast. She was spooked enough that she wasn’t listening to Keith anymore, even when he tried to urge her to slow down. They raced back to the main road, and suddenly, there were walkers everywhere. They were flooding the street, stumbling and reaching for them as they passed. Keith tried to keep the ones closest to them away, but Artax kept running, straight for the house at the end of the street.

“Shoot whoever is in the window!” Keith said to Lance, barely turning his head to look back at him.

“They’re gone!”

Keith cursed, loudly and colorfully. There were walkers everywhere. Fuck, Keith didn’t even know if they could make it to the house despite there being someone that wanted to kill them there. They had been shooting at them before and—

The walkers started to group up in front of them, and Artax skittered nervously again. Keith grit his teeth, swung his leg over the saddle, and jumped down to the street, brandishing his sword in front of them.

“Keith!” Lance shouted, wildly grabbing for Artax’s reins as she neighed desperately.

Keith barely had time to glance at them before he stepped in front and started running forward, clearing the walkers with every hard, deliberate swing of his sword. “Clearing us a fucking path! Stay on my ass!”

They rushed forward, Keith running as hard as he could to get to the walkers in front of them. The crowd behind them was only getting thicker, but they only needed to get a few more hundred feet. If they could get to the house, then they could deal with whatever was there. If they could get to the house, if they could stay alive, Keith would do whatever he needed to do keep them that way.

They made it to the house’s porch. Lance jumped off the saddle, keeping Artax’s rein in his hands as he guided her up the concrete steps. Keith guarded them from behind, keeping his sword up and swiping down any loose walkers. The crowd was inching closer and closer, the growling and moaning unbearably loud now, so loud it was hard to concentrate.

“Lance!” Keith shouted, turning to glance up at them.

Artax was standing right beside him, and she was making too much noise, hooves clanking against the porch. Lance was at the door, one hand on the door handle, shoulder pushing against it.

“I can’t get it open!” he screamed, close to hysterics.

Keith felt a hand on his chest, clawing at his shirt. He swiped his sword up, cutting off the head of a walker. He kicked the body away, back into the crowd and they stumbled back a few feet.
He turned and dashed up the steps, grabbing Lance by the back of his shirt and pulling him out of the way. He pushed back far enough to pull his leg up and kick at the door, and he put everything he had left into it and—

His foot went through the wood and splintered it. Lance shoved forward, and together, they pushed it in.

“Get Artax inside!” he shouted, turning back to the edge of the porch and kicking back the first few walkers that got up the first few stairs.

Lance tugged Artax inside, shouting, “Keith! Get your ass in here!”

He turned and raced inside. The door was splintered, but it had been blocked by a piece of furniture, so when Keith was inside, they shoved the heavy dresser back against it just as several pairs of hands snuck through the gap, clawing at the air.

It seemed to hold. Keith and Lance stepped back from it carefully, slowly.

“Are you alright?” Keith panted, out of breath, relieved that they were even alive.

Lance seemed to feel the same way. His blue eyes were wide, and he looked shaken up. It had been a close call, and it had also been a while since their last close call. Keith wondered if they would ever get used to almost dying at the hands of dead bodies.

“I’m okay,” he replied quietly, then he shifted his eyes to Artax.

They both moved over to her, checking for bites and scratches, but she was fine. Keith’s world tilted right side up again. Artax and Lance—they were all he had anymore.

And he had almost lost them today.

Somehow, between Artax and Lance’s heavy breathing, the groaning from the walkers at the door, and his own heartrate, Keith heard the creak of a floorboard from somewhere deeper in the house.

He froze immediately, glancing to Lance. He must not have heard it; he still had his face buried into Artax’s shoulder.

Keith gripped his sword and pulled it from the sheath on his back. He crept through the empty foyer and—

Another floorboard creaked.

He spun toward the sound, looking through the doorway into the empty, dark room attached off the hallway. There wasn’t anything in there, so where had the noise come from?

There were three more attached doorways on the foyer. Two at the very end and another on Keith’s other side. It looked like it led into a kitchen and living room, but the windows had all been boarded up because it was dim and hardly any sunlight cast into the room.

Lance’s voice was quiet when he said his name, and Keith turned around, but as he did, he caught a flash of gray in his peripheral, and then, something hit his head. He stumbled, and his vision went black right as he saw Lance’s eyes widen in horror as he looked at him.

He had blacked out by the time his body hit the floor.

;;
While Keith had been alone, nothing had really changed for him. Sure, the walkers and the “new world” were a change from how his life had been before, but as far as everything else, it had pretty much been the same.

He and his brother, Shiro, had essentially been on his own since his mother left when he was eight. He could barely remember her now; usually it was just flashes of her white hair, the gentle way she used to smile at Keith, a clip of her voice singing him to sleep if he was lucky.

His dad fell to pieces after Mom left, then, it only got worse when Shiro left too. He could still remember the day Shiro left the ranch for the last time to catch his bus to Atlanta, where he would start his military training. It had been a brisk day for Texas, the edges of winter just barely sneaking in on them.

“Take care of yourself,” Shiro had told him, more serious than he normally was. “You can call me. I’ll come if you need me.”

Keith was fourteen when he left. Their dad had already gone off the deep end, and Shiro left him behind with a few horses and a drunkard who had anger problems.

After Shiro, Keith tried to stick to his plans. Make it through high school. Join the Air Force. Become a pilot. Get the hell away from his dad and all his problems.

Nothing had worked. Keith was expelled from high school his junior year after he got into a fight with the football quarterback. It hadn’t been his first fight, but it had been the worst one. The other boy had needed reconstructive surgery for his nose and jaw by the time someone had hauled Keith off of him. No one seemed to care that he had been yelling the word “faggot” at Keith for weeks. No, nobody had ever cared.

He didn’t go back to high school, and his dad didn’t care either. Instead, he started working the ranch and breeding horses. They pulled in a decent living, just enough for his dad to waste everything away at the bar every night.

Keith never called Shiro.

He heard from his older brother from time to time. Every time he called, Shiro asked about school, asked about how he was doing, asked about their dad. And every time, Keith nodded even though Shiro couldn’t see him and lied, told him everything was fine.

Keith did his best. He worked with the horses, sold a few when he managed, found work when he could. He did a few rodeos and won some money that way, but he hated the thought of spending the rest of his life doing it. His only friend was his own horse, Artax, but he never really felt as bad about his life when he was riding her through the ranch. She was fast, excited, wild, just like him. At times, Keith thought that she was the only thing that understood him.

When the end of the world began, Keith hardly noticed. They didn’t have cable at their house, and they didn’t have internet. The only time that Keith ever really listened or watched the news was when he went into the town that was a few miles south of the ranch, and that was only a couple of times a week.

Then the big cities fell. Los Angeles, Miami, New York were all swarmed with people who had turned. Death tolls rose to the hundred-thousands, and they just kept climbing. The CDC was telling people to barricade themselves in their houses and to avoid contact with people. The government was trying to evacuate the Northern states and move people to Canada. The last that Keith had heard, which had been from an old radio that he’d stolen from the General Store when
people started leaving town, was that everyone should head for Canada.

D.C. fell not long after. Power went out everyone. Communications went down. The government had made it clear that they wanted people to head to Canada, but Keith wondered how people thought that it couldn’t be as bad there too.

Keith never heard from Shiro. The last that he had, when the first weird news stories had started, Shiro was close to D.C. in an apartment about a hundred miles north of the city. He had been assigned on protection detail for something big, but he had never told Keith any of the details. It left Keith wondering if Shiro had been working with the outbreak, trying to get a cure for it or figure out how to save people from it.

Shiro was probably dead. Keith had almost lost hope, but there was something about the end of the world that made his father get his shit together. Oddly enough, after everything went down, after people turned on people and there were dead bodies up and walking, Keith’s dad was the best dad he had been in a long time. He was talking again. He planned again. When he ran out of alcohol, he didn’t go looking for more. He prepped the ranch for everything they could think of; they reinforced the fences, stocked up on food and supplies, talked about going north to find Shiro, and just lived together.

The real end of the world happened about two months into the apocalypse.

Keith had been on Artax most of the morning, riding her around the perimeter and fixing broken spots in the fence when he found them. It had happened suddenly. One minute, the entire field was clear, nothing in site, and then the next, it was flooded with bodies and moans and groans and hands that were reaching for anything alive—

Keith and Artax had raced back up to the barn, but it was no better there. They fought through a small horde of them with the sword Keith had found in an abandoned car early on, but they had found Keith’s dad resting inside the barn, half his shoulder torn away by a nasty bite.

It was the first time Keith had cried in years. His father’s apologies and instructions to go north and find Shiro were almost drowned out by the bodies outside the barn door. His father had managed to gather supplies for him, a bedroll, some food and water, a few more weapons, that he placed on Artax. He’d taken his black Stetson off his head and reached up to place it on Keith’s, smiling lightly. Then, he’d turned away and thrown both barn doors open, and Keith watched his dad drown in the walkers while Artax carried him away.

His days were empty. Keith stopped when Artax stopped. He ate when she ate, drank when she drank. For the first few days, he didn’t say anything. They dodged walkers as they ran from everything and nothing. They avoided living people when they could.

Keith killed a person, then someone else, then another.

By the time he came back to himself and headed north to look for Shiro, he was more adept to dealing with the world. He understood how it worked. Walkers were dangerous. People were more dangerous. Staying alone was staying alive. Don’t get your hopes up. Don’t hope for anything. Just stay alive.

They headed toward D.C. Keith and Artax learned pretty quickly to avoid the cities and bigger highways when they could. Artax was fast, excited at the prospect of riding so much. She made everything else bearable.

Unsurprisingly, the apartment where Shiro had last said he was had been burned to the ground.
There were only burned bodies and remains left. Keith hadn’t known what to expect, but he never thought he would find Shiro alive anyway. He had just sat atop Artax and stared at the ruined building for as long as the universe allowed. When the bodies had started stumbling toward them, he had jerked on Artax’s reins and led them away.

Days later, he had been making his way down a major highway until he could pick his way into the suburbs of D.C. when he and Artax had been startled by the loud creak of a car door. He and Artax had both turned, focusing on the sound, and Keith had been met with one of the most beautiful boys he’d ever seen.

Despite being pretty and easy to look at, Lance was hard to get along with. The first day, he’d been so annoying and rude that Keith had assumed he was just a jackass. Sure, it did nothing to temper how gorgeous he was, but it was enough to make Keith sputter with rage. The only consolation had been how much Artax had seemed to like him. She had always been a good judge of character, so it made Keith wonder if he was really a jackass or not.

Keith knew for sure when Lance snuck out of the cabin the next morning. The other boy was so loud that Keith hardly slept at all when Lance was on watch, but when he’d started to sneak out, he said goodbye to Artax and blocked the door back so they would be safe.

He honestly hadn’t meant to track him down. He and Artax had left a couple of hours after Lance, just to give him enough time to make some ground on them in whatever direction he had decided on. Keith guessed he would head west since there was nothing left in the south, but it had been an honest mistake, a lucky miracle when he’d found Lance on the road again.

After, they’d stayed together. Keith was glad. He had been completely honest when he had told Lance that he was tired of being alone. And Lance—Keith could tell that Lance needed someone. When he had found Lance again, he promised himself that he would try his hardest to be whatever Lance needed. He had to make it work. He didn’t even really know why, but he knew that it was something he had to do. In the two days that they had known each other, Lance had somehow become his family, and Keith would die before he lost another one.

He could hear Lance’s voice before he could see anything. He was saying his name, and it made Keith squint and blink his eyes open slowly.

Even though the light was dim, it still hurt his head. There was a throbbing pain right behind his eyes, and when he looked up, he could see Lance hovering above him, face twisted with worry, voice mirroring it as he said, “Keith? Keith, wake up.”

Lance’s face softened with relief, and one of his hands was sitting on Keith’s chest. It was warm. He said, “Oh thank god, Keith.”

“Hearten?” he grunted, trying to get the room to stop spinning.

“My fault,” another voice said, and despite his headache, he jerked up, hand automatically reaching behind him to grab his sword.

Lance grabbed his wrist and stopped him. His fingers were warm on Keith’s skin. His other hand fisted Keith’s shirt, and he said, “Hey, no, stop. We’re fine. We’re fine.”

Keith blinked, almost letting a groan slip through his lips. Lance helped him sit up the rest of the way, and Keith pressed a hand against his forehead for a few seconds before forcing himself to
look around the room.

They were in some sort of living room, Keith thought. The furniture was almost ruined, covered in blood in spots, and the boards that had been used to cover the windows were falling. It looked like this house had been used for a while after the apocalypse, but it must not have lasted long for whoever was here before.

“Artax?” Keith asked. His voice was rough.

“Right behind you,” Lance said just as she nudged Keith’s neck with her nose. He reached back blindly to set his hand on her, murmuring that he was okay.

“You okay?” he asked Lance next.

The other boy nodded back at him. His eyes were wide, and he was studying Keith closely. He didn’t seem alarmed or afraid, so Keith thought that was a good sign.

Lance said, “I’m okay. Pidge didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Who?”

“Me.”

Keith finally shifted his gaze to the new voice. Honestly, the person was smaller than he had thought. Even though she was sitting on the floor beside Lance, Keith could tell that she was a lot shorter and probably a lot younger than them. Her hair was short, sticking out in odd clumps off her head. There was a thin layer of dirt on her face, and a pair of too big, wire framed glasses were sitting low on her nose.

“I’m Pidge,” she said. “Sorry I hit you.”

He narrowed his eyes, but he really couldn’t blame her. He would have done the same thing if he’d found her first.

“It’s alright,” Lance said cheerfully when Keith didn’t answer. “Keith has a hard head so he’ll heal up in no time.”

Keith looked over to Lance, “How do you know she’s not crazy?”

Lance stared at him, “It was a misunderstanding, Keith. She hit you; I almost shot her. I talked to her while we waited on you to wake up. She gave us food and water. And she has some Advil if your head is hurting.”

It made Keith feel a little better that Lance had threatened to shoot her. It was just so hard to tell how people would be anymore, or if there were any good people left. Objectively, Keith was aware that he had given Lance a chance without knowing anything about him but—this was different. Lance was his family now. They couldn’t just trust anyone they came across.

Still. If Pidge, whoever she was, had been wanting to kill them, it would have been best to do it when Keith had been knocked out.

Now, she held her hand out, presenting a bottle of Advil to him.

Keith stared at it for so long that Lance sighed dramatically and took it from Pidge. He dumped three tablets out into his hand before pressing them into Keith’s palm and shoving some water at
him too.

“Thanks,” he murmured, swallowing them quickly. Artax knickered behind him silently, and Keith felt her press her nose against his neck. He guessed that she had been worried about him.

Keith drank the rest of the water, and they waited. In the silence that followed, Keith could still hear the crowd of bodies outside. It wasn’t as prominent here, but the faint echoes of the growls and moans and the unnerving thuds against the walls were still audible.

“They should wander off in a few hours if we stay quiet,” Pidge broke the silence between them, and Keith stiffened at her voice.

“Could you leave us alone for a few minutes?” Lance asked suddenly. “I need to talk to Keith.”

Pidge nodded quickly. She stood, and her height made Keith wonder exactly how old she was. She said, “I’ll go upstairs for a while. There’s more water if you need it.”

Lance thanked her, and she slowly walked out of the room. Keith’s eyes followed her out into the hallway where she disappeared into the dark. He heard the small creaks of the stairs when she started up them.

He was snapped out of his thoughts when Lance cuffed him on the back of the head. It made his headache sting a little more, but when he looked over to Lance, he was already frowning.

“What?” he grumbled.

“Stop being a dick,” Lance said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“We don’t even know her.”

Lance rolled his eyes, “You didn’t know me.”

“You’re different.”

“Yeah, now. I get that you want to be careful, but I’m not laying my gun down either. Sure, she could be planning on killing us in our sleep or feeding us to walkers, but we don’t know that. She gave us food, water, and medicine. She had a gun when she came downstairs, so she could have shot both of us, but she didn’t,” Lance paused for a few seconds and lowered his voice. “I think we should help her.”

“What?”

Lance rolled his eyes again, probably at Keith’s tone of voice, but come on. Lance had to know how crazy he sounded right now. They couldn’t just—they didn’t even know her. Why would they help her? And what would they even help her with?

“You’re serious, Keith,” he said. While he spoke, Artax laid down behind them, nudging their backs. It made Keith realize how close he was sitting to Lance. They were barely a foot apart. Lance continued, “When you were passed out, she told me that she’s looking for her brother. He’s in D.C., and we’re going there anyway.”

“How does she know he’s alive?” Keith asked because come on, who even had family left in the world anymore?

“Keith, seriously,” Lance said, annoyed. Keith guessed that Lance had already made up his mind
about helping her. “We’re going to D.C. anyway, and we can help her get there.”

He sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. His head was still aching. “Why should we?”

Lance finally looked away from him. He flattened his palm over Artax’s leg and smoothed her coat as he murmured, “She reminds me of my sisters. If someone found them, I hoped they would help.”

Keith heaved a big sigh. He wasn’t any good at this. He had a hard-enough time connecting with Lance in the first place, and even then, they weren’t in a place where they had long talks about their families and their past. Sure, Keith knew enough about Lance to know that his entire family was most likely dead, but hearing Lance talk about them like this was enough to set Keith on edge.

He relented, “Okay. She just needs us to help her get to D.C.?”

“And help her look for her brother.”

“We could get killed doing that.”

Lance rolled his eyes, “We could get killed the next time we go outside.”

Keith sighed again, reaching up to thread a hand through his hair. Absently, he wondered what happened to his hat. “Okay, okay. So we just drop everything and go look for her brother with her?”

“Honestly, Keith, what do we have to drop?” Lance sounded annoyed again, like it was actually an effort to carry on this conversation. “We don’t have anything.”

“What about Hunk?”

Lance hesitated at that, and Keith regretted bringing it up.

It was a long few seconds before Lance said anything else, and when he did reply, his voice was firm and allowed no room to argue. “We’re going to D.C. first anyway, so we should help Pidge.”

Keith nodded and turned to look at him. Lance was still leaning back against Artax, smoothing his hand over her leg. He wasn’t looking at Keith, but his jaw was clenched, and his shoulders were stiff.

“Okay,” Keith agreed. “We go to D.C. first and help Pidge find her brother.”

“Then Hunk.”

He nodded, “Then Hunk.”

There was a heavy pause between them then. It was familiar to Keith now; it was a silence that happened when they were on the same page, when they knew they were about to do something dangerous, something that could get them killed. D.C. would be more dangerous than anything that they had done so far.

But they didn’t have another option. They didn’t have enough supplies to continue out West, and everything in the suburbs had been picked clean by other people. They would have to find more food and water in the city before they would be able to leave. Besides, they were too close now anyway, and if they were going to help Pidge, they would have to go straight into D.C.

Keith leaned back against Artax, resting against her shoulder. His head was still aching, but the
medicine was helping a little bit. In the silence, Keith could still hear the walkers outside. It made him feel caged in and surrounded, like there were no other options.

“Is your head still hurting?” Lance’s voice was softer then, more tempered to the air between them.

Keith mirrored his tone, something in him desperate to keep the moment between them. He murmured, “It’s getting better. The medicine helped.”

“We should go upstairs and find Pidge,” Lance said a few minutes later.

Keith nodded and pushed off Artax, struggling and stumbling to his feet. Honestly, he was exhausted. His boots felt too heavy, and his limbs felt sluggish.

When he was upright, Lance turned to him and sat his hat on top of his head. He had a small smirk on his face, and his voice titled upward when he said, “Can’t be a cowboy without your hat, can you?”

Keith scoffed and followed after him when he started for the stairs. He refused to acknowledge the slight blush on his cheeks. It was probably because of his headache anyway.

They left Artax in the living room and made their way through the house. A few floorboards creaked as they inched through the dark hallway and to the stairs. Blood covered the walls, and Keith was just starting to notice how the whole house smelled like death. He wondered what had happened here; then, he decided he was better off not knowing.

When they got to the top of the stairs, Lance softly called out to Pidge.

“Here,” she replied, voice echoing from a doorway to the right.

Keith followed Lance into the room. It was lighter than the other. The boards on the window had been taken off, and the front window was propped open with a book. There was a semi-automatic rifle resting against the window frame, and the room was also littered with a few cans of food and some small supplies, including a sleeping bag, a solar powered lantern, a few books, and other miscellaneous objects.

Pidge was sitting in a chair in front of the open window. She turned to look at them and met Keith’s gaze. Her eyes were narrowed, but she must have seen realized that they weren’t planning on hurting her because she nodded to him.

She jerked her head toward the window, “They should clear out in a few hours. Definitely by tomorrow.”

Keith looked past her to see an enormous crowd of walkers surrounding them. It made his throat tighten and his lungs seize up, but when he looked closely, walkers at the back of the crowd were already starting to wander away. Pidge was probably right. If they could hold out here until the crowd moved on, they could get to D.C.

“We’re going to help you find your brother,” Lance said suddenly, breaking the tense silence.

She spun around to face them, eyes wide, “You are? Why?”

Keith glanced at Lance before shrugging, “We don’t have anything else to do.”

“Thank you,” she blurted, voice heavy with gratitude and relief. “Thank you so much.”
“Don’t thank us yet,” Lance said, stepping farther into the room to lean against the wall. “We might not be able to find him.”

“But you’re still going to help me,” she said, meeting Keith’s gaze again. “That’s… it’s something.”

Keith nodded and broke the eye contact to stare out at the sea of walkers in front of them. He wondered if the universe was trying to send them a message, if this was some kind of ominous foreshadowing for what was waiting for them in D.C.

Instead of considering it, Keith said, “It’s something.”
since i don't have you

Chapter by maireeps

Chapter Summary

His skin had held up solidly for the seven months of the literal apocalypse, he’d give it that. If anything that was a testament to skincare. ‘Wash your face every day and use a night cream to stay pretty during the literal zombie apocalypse!’

Chapter Notes

we're back <3 more zombie apocalypse aus for you and you and you!!!!

song mentioned is "Since I Don't Have You" by the Skyliners ~
chapter was by me, maireeps! next one will be by rachel, somethingmorecreative! show us some support!!

Growing up, his aunt on his mother’s side and uncle on his father’s side hated each other. Every Christmas and holiday, they’d argued into the evening until his two grandmas would sit up and bring out the food. It was the warm smell, the soft aroma and comfort of a good meal that calmed them, his abuelita would say.

Lance had threatened Keith to warm up to Pidge, but he hadn’t yet. Understandably, he knew it was difficult for that scruffy faced cowboy to be a social butterfly. But Pidge was young, barely sixteen and more importantly, she was alone. Their company was no doubt everything her parents had warned her of when the world was okay. Keeping the company of two strangers, two men, no matter their orientations… Lance just knew she was a little on edge. Obviously Keith wasn’t going to help. So he would.

“Water?” Pidge wrinkled her forehead, thinking, “Well… I’ve been washing with a canister of rainwater. That’s in the bathroom.”

He hummed, looking at the assortment of canned food and packages in the small bag she had passed to him, “That would be great for later. I’d love to wash my face. Keith?”

Keith nodded shortly from his corner, which Lance interpreted as a ‘yes I will wash too’. He was ‘resting’ by sitting with a gun in his lap closest to the open second-floor window. Lance had forced him to sit in the very least, but if a lap full of ammunition would make him settle down, then so be it.

Lance rolled a can around in his hand to look at the label. It was surprisingly not expired. “We have a few water bottles so… I might be able to make this work.”

“What do you mean?” Pidge asked, her face all squished together in thought.
He waved her off and took the bag of food, “You two stay here.” Then, to the chagrin of both Keith and Pidge, he left them upstairs for the kitchen.

Artax had settled in the living room, a chunk of a horse against the barren walls. He could tell she was tired by her soft sounds and flicking tail. Pieces of hay and oats sat nearby and Artax was shiny from a good brushing. Keith knew how to take care of a horse, he’d give him that.

The small kitchen was filthy, like much of the house. It sat at the far end of the ground floor, with a door to a small backyard that was surprisingly not overrun by walkers. The grass was yellowed and rusty toys sat untouched scattered around, but along the far fence was a row of small green plants. He left the bag on the countertop to creep, careful not to swing the door too far, back down the small yard to the garden. His breath caught, and a smile tugged on one corner of his lips. Cilantro. Even some thyme! He quickly gathered the leaves and returned to the kitchen to get started.

Matches, clean spring water, and some elbow grease and they had a clean skillet pan on top of a small fire on the stove. The canned pork from Pidge’s bag was then mixed with cilantro, some thyme for flavoring, and seasoning he rummaged through in the cabinet (only pepper, salt, and some onion powder, but it was enough). He didn’t have three hours for carnitas but not-quite-carnitas was better than no carnitas, right? Lance desperately wished for some rice, but beans was better than nothing as a side dish. He placed the swizzling meat in a big pot aside and quickly warmed up the beans, knowing by now Keith and Pidge would have smelled what this kitchen was cooking - (he snorted at himself) - and had rumbling bellies just like him. It wasn’t a balanced meal like his abuelitas would swear by, but it was miles better than cold corn, soft and nearly expired vegetables, and the stringy meat of rabbits and birds they hunted.

He pulled out the fork and spoon he and Keith had taken from the cabin and found a spoon in the bottom of Pidge’s food bag before bringing the pork and beans, each in their respective pan and pot, up the stairs. He went backwards through the doorway, breaking the awkward lull of his two largely silent companions with a spin and a soft, “Ta-da!”

Pidge’s eyes were all he saw. They were round behind her classes, her cheeks flushed and lips trembling. Small tears pricked in the corners of her eyes and Lance felt the same familiar lump in his throat from earlier. He crouched in front of her and placed the pot and pan on a folded blanket in the center of the room. Keith was at his side in a split second, sitting gently down as he did. Pidge took the first bite.

“I’m sorry.” She said quietly, rubbing her face with her sleeves as the tears spilled down her cheeks, “…It’s so good.”

Keith nodded as he took a bite too. Lance watched the two eat, the setting sun casting a golden hue through the room. The shadow of Pidge’s rifle on the window ledge was forgotten, but he couldn’t shake the shuffling sounds of the walking dead outside.

In no time, they all had had their fill. The pot and pan were mostly empty now, which was a laugh considering Lance’s old astronomically bad skills in cooking when in college. Pidge sat further from the circle they had between them now, playing with her clean spoon. Keith had retreated back to rest with his back near the open window again, the rifle placed against the wall with him instead of in his lap this time. Lance leaned over his map, one knee tucked under his chin as he examined the local area.

“We need a plan to get into D.C.,” Keith began abruptly, “especially about where we need to go and what we’re looking for.”
Lance nodded, tapping his map, “We need to scavenge in the city for supplies. It’s been slim around these towns. Pidge, where did you last hear from your brother?”

Pidge shifted closer to him, abandoning her spoon in the pot. She looked at the map upside down but simply pointed towards southwest of the National Mall, “My dad and brother worked for the CDC after a leave from aerospace at NASA, so if I had to guess where they would be last, it’d either be the Pentagon or the CDC building just south of the Mall.”

Lance leaned in, tracing their route up to the Pentagon and then across the river to the Mall.

“How do you know he’s still alive?”

Lance winced at Keith’s tone. It rang out cold, though he was sure Keith was just trying to be cautious. Pidge grit her teeth and Keith went on,

“Why are you so convinced they’re there? You mentioned your brother earlier but what about your dad suddenly?”

Pidge whirled on him, snapping, “My dad’s dead. They were trying to get me and my mom from south Virginia upstate but none of the soldiers made it. Neither did my mom, if you wanted to ask about that too! Matt was - he was talking to me here from this -”

Pidge sank her hand in her bag and pulled out a radio walkie, clutching it with a shaking hand, “- but he hasn’t radioed me in 5 days and his last location was here -” She jabbed at the map, scrunching it up with the force, “and I need to get there. With or without you.”

By this point, her small frame was wrecked with shakes, her fingers gripping the military-grade walkie with force Lance was sure was going to break it. He reached forward and placed a hand on hers. She relaxed after a second.

“Okay,” Keith nodded finally, his gaze steady. He stood and crossed the room to crouch between them, studying the map from Pidge’s right side, “We can take the freeways up to Pentagon City. The Pentagon is an easy offshoot from that - we can check for life before crossing the bridge into downtown.”

He traced the path on the map and Lance followed. Pidge shifted closer and pointed just south of the Mall, “…Here’s the CDC building, we could try to get through the Mall and go down?”

Keith shook his head, “The safest way is taking outskirts. The belly of downtown will get us swarmed instantly if we’re too loud or if we run into trouble.” He rubbed his chin in thought.

“That would work,” Pidge nodded, gesturing to the waterfront of the south of D.C., “we just need to work our way around here and we’d be good.”

Bending over the map, Lance tapped along the Southwest Waterfront. It was a great wide swing from going straight through downtown toward the CDC Building, but Keith was right about swarms. Avoiding downtown would be a good bet if they could afford it, but it would save them time to go straight through. Time was important. Going fast, light, and silently through towns had afforded them security they would be quick to lose if they were slow or weighed down by unnecessary routes. Time wasn’t going to be on their side if they took the Southwest Waterfront, and it would especially be not so kind to anyone, Matt or others, trapped in the CDC without a way out... He looked up and jolted a bit when he caught Keith’s eyes.

The dark look in them felt a mirror of his own. This plan needed to go off perfectly if they wanted
to survive.

The setting sun was gone now and cicadas rang outside. The heat of the day had lessened but only by a little and Lance had long abandoned his coat and pants next to the pile of their bedrolls downstairs. It was the apocalypse, Pidge didn’t care so neither did he as he walked around in his boxer briefs. Keith didn’t have a say but hadn’t mentioned anything either when he passed by Lance undressing on the way to wash their dirty dishes in the kitchen. Keith had taken just a bit of rainwater to wash them, so Lance tracked back upstairs to give himself a good scrub.

The water was certainly not cool but felt like heaven on his face and he gently rubbed soap on his T-zone. His skin had held up solidly for the seven months of the literal apocalypse, he’d give it that. If anything that was a testament to skincare. ‘Wash your face every day and use a night cream to stay pretty during the literal zombie apocalypse!’ He snorted at himself and dipped down to wash away the soap in the sink.

“What are you laughing at?”

He jumped at Keith’s voice, slipping on the ragged tile and clutching onto the sink to hold himself steady, “Jesus, Keith!” Lance looked over sharply, glaring, but couldn’t hold it.

Keith’s jacket and plaid button-up were long gone and the tight-fitting t-shirt he wore apparently didn’t help him beat the heat because his skin shone with a sheen of sweat that had Lance’s knees weak. His long hair clung his forehead just like those small sleeves clung to those glorious - farmer’s tanned - biceps -

Lance shook his head wildly, steeling the jelly in his abdomen and trying to literally shake the thoughts of his head. And even though Keith was the weirdest person in existence (hello, gay cowboy with a katana?!), he had the audacity to look at Lance like he was the weird one.

“O-kay,” Keith went on, stepping into the bathroom and raising his hands, “do you mind?”

Lance looked down. Keith held a Swiss Army knife in his hands, the blade out and sharpened and he played with the scissor attachment with his thumb.

“There’s no mirror and - ” Keith gestured to his chin and jawline, grizzly since only recently. Lance had pretended not to notice. There was a certain allure of a (slightly) older man with a (slight) beard, and it was obvious that if he kept on this route of finding Keith utterly delectable, the spotty whiskery beard was going to accelerate that crash course.

“Yeah, uh, I don’t mind.” He cleared his throat. Whoops. Keith stepped further in and they rearranged so he could sit on the edge of the bathtub. The toilet had been mysteriously snatched by whoever ransacked the place earlier in the year. Lance washed the knife with a bit of soap and water, then, with a little of his own face wash, ran his fingers down Keith’s jawline and chin to soap up the skin.

His fingers were in bliss, and thighs and stomach easily jelly again. He knew Keith saw the creeping blush of his cheeks, but the other man said nothing - which didn’t help Lance either! He awkwardly muffled a, “nothing worse than razor burn in the middle of an apocalypse”, and quickly finished soaping up Keith’s stupidly handsome face.
Instead, he took to admiring it. Somehow the cowboy, despite the sun and heat and absolute horrid lack of a skincare routine, had skin that rivaled his own for sure. It was a little more taunt, a little more chiseled and less soft, but it was gorgeous. Lance was blushing harder now, his fingers shaking just a bit as he finished his third swipe down Keith’s right cheek. It wasn’t an easy shave with the small knife, but it was better than trying it with Lance’s travel razor. Keith was a surprisingly easy client too, turning this way and that with just the slightest brush of Lance’s fingers. He kept that stupidly beautiful mouth closed and Lance just kept his focus on the job at hand because he would definitely, definitely melt if he looked into Keith’s eyes now.

It was methodical and calming really, shaving Keith’s face in slow and careful strokes. He was pretty pleased with himself seeing no pebbles of blood or red bumps on his skin, and there was another surprise. The silence between the two of them had been more calm and comfortable than anytime before. His fingertips felt a gentle tingle every time he touched Keith, and even though every single movement of his body he was shockingly aware of, he swayed closer to Keith until Keith needed to open his knees to let Lance in.

He’d blame it on the shaving. It was an awfully intimate act, right? So he needed to get closer, right? He let a soft sigh escape his lips, carving a path down Keith’s cheek as gently as he could. The heat wafting through the bathroom window, the cicadas and breeze of the night, he was so hyper-aware of every movement and sound, so if Keith was trying to be subtle, he had to have known he was failing. Hands, large and strong from hard work, reached up from either side to press on Lance’s hips. His body immediately shivered at the touch, before he relaxed again immediately. The touch both delighted him, almost electrifying his skin, and left the sweetest breath of comfort in his chest.

The last stroke came too quickly, but so did the realization. He stepped immediately back out of Keith’s personal space, scrambling to the sink to wash off the knife. Keith’s face dipped down, hair covering his eyes but not enough of the red cheeks Lance caught a glimpse of when he turned back around.

“T-There’s some water to wash off the soap.” Lance’s voice was wrecked, of course, all squeaks and roughness. His face felt like an inferno.

Keith stood up and stepped over, and Lance readily handed the knife over. “Thank you,” Keith said, glancing anywhere but Lance’s face, “for the shave and for the food.”

Warmth all the way to his toes. “Uh! No problem!” His voice cracked again, and he scratched the back of his head nervously.

“Oh,” Keith suddenly said, reaching up to tug at the back of his head as well. His small ponytail tie was pulled out and long dark hair fell to his neck in a swirl, brushing the tops of his shoulders for sure, “Maybe you could cut -”

“No!” Lance cried, lunging forward without thinking and immediately snatched the knife back. Keith looked stunned at him, hand still hovering at the back of his head and eyebrows raised so high he couldn’t even see them anymore.

Lance had never seen that face before. Today was full of surprises. He wearily clutched the knife and practically glared at Keith, a bit frustrated at how cliche and weak he was being. But if he was going to be this way with Keith, and Keith was going to go around pawing at his hips and driving him insane, he might as well accept it right? Just be insane!

He huffed, “Keep it long!” and left the stunned older boy in the bathroom to wash the soap off his stupidly beautiful face.
After a large display of stomping down the stairs, so Keith would know exactly what he had done to him dammit (resorted him to a child! A flirting child!), he tossed the knife onto Keith’s pack and crossed the room to his bedroll.

Pidge sat, unamused, on her roll next to him. She held a book in one hand and a chocolate bar in the other. He wiggled into the sleeping bag, pulling his iPhone from his bag and fiddling with it until it powered on. He had charged it thankfully on the way from the cabin, which left him with a pretty full battery. When you only really used your phone for listening to music, the battery tended to die a lot less quickly.

He popped in an earbud, but his attention was caught by a ruffle of plastic. Pidge chewed thoughtfully as she read her book. Flipping onto his stomach, he held out the remaining earbud to her. The distance was just enough for the cord, even if he scooted a bit to give them more slack on the wire. It might take his mind off what happened upstairs to engage with their new companion.

“Wanna listen with me?” He grinned, “I mean, it’s cool if you’d rather read.”

Pidge looked between him and the earbud briefly before tossing her book aside and reaching for it, “Hell no. I’ve read it way too many times.”

He scrolled on his playlist, humming in agreement, “I’ve listened to this playlist way too many times too. I don’t get as bored of it as I would’ve back in the day though.”

Pidge snorted, “Back in the day? You’re barely my brother’s age. I bet you couldn’t even legally drink!”

Lance grinned at her retort, happy to see some life in her eyes, “I’m wise beyond my years! I’ve seen plenty of clubs in my prime. Even the ones you’d cover your baby eyes at!”

Pidge giggled and he landed on some catchy pop songs from a band he was sure she’d know. She smiled appreciatively and drooped her head to listen. They sat like that for a few songs before she began again,

“So where are you from?”

Lance hummed, “I grew up just outside of Havana in Cuba, but I was studying music at NYU for just about a year before all this. How about you?”

“Virginia my whole life. I’m an army brat…” She trailed off, her fingers playing with the cover of her book now. Lance vaguely noticed her walkie placed inside her bedroll, a sign she’d likely been sleeping with it. When she spoke again, it was with a careful and sad whisper, “What about your family?”

Lance smiled at her slow, “It’s okay. They’re all gone.”

Pidge curled forward in a ball, caging her knees to her chest and nodding, “I’m sorry… Thank you for the food. I’m glad I met you, and Keith.”

He smiled again, flipping songs for them, “Of course. Sorry if he’s been a little hard to warm up to. He’s cautious, and it’s been only us two for a while now. Despite what it may seem like, he’s handy in a pinch and has a few good jokes sometimes.”

Pidge’s brown hair, messy and fluffy, bobbed as she leaned in. A coy smile stretched her lips to high corners and her glasses flashed as she pushed them up her nose. “Oh?”
Lance did a double-take, before raising himself out of his bedroll, face burning, “Wait! No, no - okay we’re just traveling together. He’s - uh, uh - good.”

Pidge cackled, leaning back in her bedroll and giving back his earbud. “Right, totally. As if I didn’t hear every little thing upstairs.”

Lance scrambled to toss his iPhone back in his bag, thoughts rolling around his head like crazy, “Listen, Pidge - it’s just nothing okay? You know, since it’s the middle of the apocalypse , we all have more important things to think about.”

Pidge snorted as he rolled into his sleeping bag, praying to everything Keith hadn’t heard any of this from upstairs. The last thing he needed was Keith to come dashing down as Pidge decided to tease him to death. She was beginning to seem every part of one of his sisters now - right down to the annoying parts.

“Just so you know, he was staring at your ass earlier.”

He groaned and turned, face on fire, into the bedroll.

There was no time for frivolities in the morning. Whatever time they had for Keith and him to go on this stupid little dance around each other was sparse. He knew they had bigger things to pull off.

The walkers of the previous day had cleared and the streets were relatively clear from the looks of it. The packs must have moved on, and they didn’t have time to be shuffling their feet. Packing the morning was quiet and fast. Lance held Artax outside by the reins while Keith helped Pidge up onto the saddle. She wrapped herself into a large navy overcoat with S. Holt printed on the back, and while Keith insisted on her not carrying the rifle two sizes too large for her, she instead strapped one of Keith’s knives to the side of her hip.

Lance busied himself with wrapping up the bedrolls, parading between Artax and the house in a methodical dance with Keith as he strapped everything to the mare. He transported two out of three of the sleeping backs, which were easily secured to the back of Artax’s saddle, and was working on the third when Keith stepped through the front door.

“Lance,” he started, closing the distance and manually spinning Lance around to face him by the hip.

Speechless at the casual touch, Lance stared as Keith went on. No inkling of embarrassment or pleasure from the soft but firm hand on Lance’s hip showed on Keith’s face. Was he internally screaming like Lance was? He cleared his throat as he tried to school his face in a more calm expression, but knew the red on his cheeks was going to be too easy to notice the more he couldn’t help looking at Keith.

“Oh,” Keith stalled, and there it was. A swash of blush across those high cheekbones and a sudden change of demeanor.

Lance begged him to go on with a cracked, “Yeah?”

“Okay, uh,” Keith continued, scratching the back of his head, “I was thinking about the plan. We just don’t have the time to be taking any longer routes, and I know we can do this alone - we’ve
done it before.”

Lance frowned, but Keith was right. They had scavenging down to a T now, almost as well as they hunted together. It would be too slow and too dangerous for Pidge to join them. He nodded slowly,

“She’ll be safer with Artax.”

Keith breathed out a sigh of relief that showed his care for their new companion and a genuine drive for their safety, “I’m glad you agree.”

Lance nodded, trying to not feel the butterflies in his stomach as he casually touched Keith’s shoulder in reassurance. “Of course.” He stepped past Keith toward the front door, the third bedroll ready for securing. He hoped Keith knew how much he really was always on his side.

Coming up to Artax, he noticed his guitar was sitting behind Pidge, who had seemed to eagerly latch onto it as a symbol of an older time. He faintly smiled thinking about playing for her one day, but he didn’t let that distract him from surveying the streets, his eyes combing for any sudden movement. Artax was still though and so was he. Keith stepped up next to him and he swallowed the sparks that he felt in the small space between them.

In minutes, they were off. Keith led Artax out front, Pidge already adjusting herself in the rough leather saddle. He was at the rear, his pistols strapped to his side. The heat was already rising and he could feel the sweat under his jacket’s collar. His skinny jeans felt like a constructive comfort, and his boots grounded him.

The walk into D.C. would be only a few hours from the route of the highways, but the weaving between cars was already beginning to annoy him. He instead took the opportunity to check in each car, wincing at any corpse that sat inside, either slack or truly dead. Nothing good was left in any of them, as most of the windows had been broken by this time and grass and fungi had begun to grow beneath their tires. Only the quiet clipping of Artax’s hooves on pavement rang out between the three of them, and before long, the suburbs of towns had leaked them into the suburbs of D.C. The inner city was unlike any of the towns before it, taller sparkling buildings surrounding the Washington Monument - the white obelisk a beacon. He could see beyond all the changing late summer trees and suburbs clearly as they got closer. The Potomac was to the right, the waters blindly as they approached the bridge just outside of Alexandria. It had been quiet until then, but just as they crossed Route 1 into edges of Pentagon City, the hordes far ahead scrambled onto the highway. Keith stopped and Lance went to the front.

“This is where you stay.” Keith turned to Pidge, offering her the reins.

“What?” Pidge cried, shaking her head adamantly. She scrambled in the saddle, edging around to try and dismount Artax. Keith went to her side and placed a hand on the saddle behind her leg to stop her. He placed the reins firmly in her hands.

“You’re staying here. We’re going into the city.” Keith glanced at Lance and Lance smiled at Pidge, stepping forward.

“We’re going to look for Matt, okay?” He pulled his pack around and stuck his hand into the front pocket. “Listen to Keith, Artax will keep you safe out here. She’s fast and strong and she’ll lead you. Here, if you get lonely.”

He placed his iPhone into her hand, with coiled headphones and the solar charger. “We’ll meet you back in this area in a few hours. If we don’t come back…”
Keith looked away. His Stetson hat was on Artax’s saddle so he couldn’t hide. Lance smiled softly at Pidge, whose face had gone pale and blank, “Listen, we’ll come back. I promise you.”

He couldn’t make that promise. But no one said anything as he and Keith walked away from Pidge. For her sake and their own, they pretended not to hear her sniffles as they walked toward D.C.

The next hour or so was harder than the two hours toward the city in itself. Now with the hordes out to play, the fast runners and crawlers who could smell for miles had pushed them from the highway to the small roads and residential streets into the inner city. Keith, admittedly, did most of the work. Lance just felt out of it, strung thin but desperately trying to pull his own way too. When Keith would push them against walls in alleyways as runners went by, he would squeeze close to his broad back to hide. On open streets, he ran as fast as Keith, but couldn’t help stumbling. Keith didn’t say anything or complain. It made the feeling in his chest heavier. He wanted to speak about last night, about the mutual touches or even this morning, just anything. But it felt all so far away now.

It wouldn’t help either of them if he was to lose faith so suddenly now. Especially with so much ahead and with Pidge waiting behind. He shook it loose as they approached the huge complex of the Pentagon.

Off shot from the highway into D.C., the Pentagon sat restfully. Walkers milled around outside of it, stumbling across the concrete and over shrubbery. Blood streaked down the main entrance’s stairway but from across the streets and parking lots, the doors looked barred and secure. Lance dipped by Keith’s side and tugged on his jacket, pointing to the side parking lots where they could skirt around the walkers on the lawn and the concrete. Keith nodded just once before taking off, Lance scrambling to be on his heels.

They scaled small waist-height concrete walls and ducked between abandoned cars in the right side parking lot before crossing to the front of the Pentagon. It was almost dead silent as they crept up the splattered stairs. Each of the doors, five wooden in total, stood strong - even the small square windows were unbroken. Lance stepped up to the far right, peeking through the windows and only see barred wood and piled furniture. He peered as far as he could through each of the windows, only going through the first two doors on the right before Keith touched his side.

Keith’s face was grim, gesturing him over to the far left door. The windows were unbarred and clear, but when Lance peeked in, his stomach dropped. A pile of suited walkers clumped against the barricade, aimlessly thrashing at the furniture even as their bodies decayed within themselves, guts and blood splattering to the ground. Runners milled around, cackling at one another. The Pentagon had fallen, by the looks of it, long ago.

His stomach was in knots as they turned from the building. Keith led, as he did, and they crossed away from the Pentagon low and fast. They had one option left, the CDC building, and it wasn’t looking good. He nearly skinned the fleshy parts of his palms as he landed harshly after following Keith over a fence. Keith was at his side in an instant, pulling him up without a word. He felt like such a deadweight on the black-haired man but forced himself to keep pace without letting his dread pull him down.

The parks beyond the Pentagon were largely empty, scattered by a car or two. They trekked across roads in a direct shot to the Memorial Bridge that would get them to the Mall. Lance spied a pile of burning flesh, stacked high bodies all mangled together, just beyond the bridge as they crossed it. A sign of life. He dared not hope, but still threw a glance to Keith regardless.

Keith moved in, whispering, “It could be bandits. It might not be the military.”
True. Lance nodded, he knew all too well the type of people who would burn that flesh. Those bodies wouldn’t be walkers if bandits burned them. Those were unfortunate victims, survivors just like them. He sucked in large gulps of air and tried to keep his eyes off the pile as they descended onto the Mall. The last thing his heart and stomach could take was the burning corpses of humans like them.

They diverted from the Mall quickly, taking the new stacked high piles of bodies on the lawn as an indicator of life they weren’t looking for. It smelled horrible and Lance tried to hold in coughs and chokes as they went into the downtown streets south of the parks. His eyes watered at his efforts.

The main streets were ravaged by all types of walkers, runners milling and screaming about, crawlers sniffing wildly and screeching at anything. They kept to the alleyways and rooftops solely now but stopped across two separate pharmacies between museums to scavenge. Lance had just scaled, not as easily as Keith did, a wire fence when he spotted a gem. Tucked between two corresponding alleyways was a small wooden door to a pub. He knocked Keith on the shoulder gently and guided them to the door. It was locked until Keith brought his heel down on the door handle and broke it off completely.

They slipped inside to the typical Irish pub quietly. Its backside had a corridor to other stores in the shopping block, and the fridge held slim bottles of alcohol. Keith was in the backroom, shuffling through drawers when Lance found them. A few tall golden bottles, unopened, looking perfectly untouched. He smiled faintly, an idea of a relaxing night in the forefront of his brain. He placed two of the beers into his bag, swallowing down the idea that he and Keith might never get to enjoy them.

They moved onto a small corner store, gathering what little water they could find and small strips of bandages someone had left under the counter. Keith grabbed a lighter or two, tossing Lance one.

Of course, he fumbled it and had to swoop down to grab it off the linoleum like a fool. Keith however, didn’t act fast enough in turning around. as Lance caught the glimpse of a smile on his face. A jolt of happiness ran down his spine and he chastised himself for getting so happy over something a merger as a smile from Keith. However, that did mean Keith wasn’t angry or annoyed with him as he had originally thought.

Their next stop was a block over and included them scrambling up and down a fire escape. It was particularly daunting because of the walkers streaming through the alleyway. There were more than usual, all gathered around a few dead bodies that had caused a swarm and now lay ravaged, just bones, in the dark. Lance held a hand over his mouth to stop the bile from escaping.

They dropped down next to the side door and ducked in quickly into the old-fashioned grocery store. It had once been well-loved and family-owned, with weaved baskets hanging from the ceiling now tattered and ripped forgotten family photos on the cashier counter. The alcohol shelves were wiped clean, and most of the cases were too, but they still picked through what they could find.

Ducking behind the cashier counter, he ruffled through two boxes and found Advil, Vicodin, and a near-empty container of Melatonin. He pocketed all of them, scooting around in a crouch to survey the next set of counter shelving.

A few paper towel rolls and something compact and wooden. He smiled immediately and brought out the dusty box, placing it on the counter and looking around for Keith. His head, ponytail and all, bobbed around a section of canned food. Light of the day was streaking into the nearly boarded up windows, giving a glow to the dusty haven. Keith turned a corner, holding cans and reading...
labels, but suddenly perfectly outlined by the glowing sun streaks. Lance’s heart stuttered.

He ripped his eyes back to the small record player and he popped open the top. The vinyl inside was preserved perfectly, but he couldn’t read any sort of label. He surveyed the small box, found the button, and watched the vinyl spin until soft music began to play.

♫ I don't have plans and schemes
And I don't have hopes and dreams ♫

Quiet 1950’s doo-wop filled the small grocery store. He stood up straight, glancing up and catching Keith’s eyes. He immediately smiled, nearly laughing at Keith looked at him like he was crazy. It was quiet enough to not alert anything, so soft in fact that it paired wonderfully with the sunlit glow Keith still stood outlined in.

♫ I don't have anything
Since I don't have you ♫

Lance did recognize the song, faintly, and it somehow fit every aching crack in his heart. He started when Keith came closer. Some horribly romantic part of him desperately wanted Keith to ask him to dance, just like any couple of kids would’ve back then to this song. How many high school dances had the Skyliners crooning in the background? How many people fell in love with this song playing in their head?

♫ I don't have love to share
And I don't have one who cares
I don't have anything
Since I don’t have
You, you, you, you
(You) ♫

They stood, a counter separating them, as the song fell and swooped to an end.

He moved first, closing the vinyl player as the spinning record stopped. Keith stood there for a second or two longer before they moved to finish scavenging. The silence was more comfortable this time, leading them back to the side door before long. Lance peeked out first before shuffling into the alley and looking back up at the fire escape to carry them further. Keith stepped out behind him and shut the door softly.

“Lance,” he began, low and rough.

“Yeah?”
“Listen, I -”

Whatever Keith had to say there, he never finished. A sharp and loud screech whipped them both around to the mouth of the alleyway. A crawler had caught their scent and came rampaging down the alley, screeching at the top of its lungs to alert the horde. Pure, unbridled fear ran his veins cold. Keith didn’t have any time to pull his sword out as runners were there in an instant.

“Run!” Lance shouted, turning into Keith and pushing him to turn with him. Keith started into action, gripping Lance’s forearm as they raced down the opposite end of the alley. The horde screamed and shuffled quickly behind them, the runners with their near whistle-toners blowing out his eardrums as they got closer.

Cities were dangerous. One horde could be outrun out in the wilderness, out in the suburbs. In cities, one horde alerts another, which starts another.

They raced down the main street, dodging ravaging walkers who tried to grasp at anything as they pounded by. His Converse hit the pavement heavily, his breath already caught and legs pounding to keep up with Keith’s sprints. A wave of walkers from the right surged over two overturned cars and an entire bus, smashing windows and howling as Keith and Lance dodged past. The noise was too much, the screams and roars of corpse after corpse setting Lance’s teeth on edge. He fumbled for his gun, flicking the safety off seconds before putting two bullets in a crawler’s skull as it attempted to trip him. Keith dragged him forward, giving him the momentum to hop over the writhing crawler.

“Keith!” Lance called, ripping him to the right as a runner soared over his head, his pistol immediately clipping a round into the runner’s neck as it flew over. He lost his footing then, and Keith spun around, sword out, to bat at the horde on his heels.

Lance coughed, his lungs heaving as he caught himself back up. His grip on Keith’s arm never lessened and he tugged the other man after himself, struggling to regrip his pistol. He fumbled a shot as he dodged to the left, dragging them both onto the sidewalk and out of the street. Keith followed, slashing and splattered in dark guts and heavy sickly blood.

Lance dragged them back, ducking under a half-closed garage door and pulling Keith through into the parking garage. Cars were scattered around, and the walkers trapped within immediately surged toward them, but the outside mega-horde was now trapped scrabbling amongst each other to get under the garage doors. Lance offloaded all of his shots into the walkers of the garage, the sounds of gunshots making him wince as they reverberated. Keith panted next to him, and slowly the grip on each other was lessened as they got a moments’ pause.

“Farside, under the other door.” Keith gasped out, before taking off. They ran over to the far garage door, ducking under and back out onto the other side of the block. The horde was around the corner now, and they took the chance. Lance, out of rounds on his one of his pistols, transferred for the other one as they jogged. They were just a block further from the CDC building now, the garage putting them directly on the path.

“God,” He breathed heavily, “that was close and lucky.”

“We need to get out of here.” Keith said solemnly, glancing at him with hard eyes. Lance knew the same fear he felt was there in Keith too. His palms were sweating but he grasped onto Keith’s exposed forearm in a sign of reassurance.

“I know,” he frowned, however, “but we have to see about Matt, it’s just ten, maybe, fifteen minutes away.”
“Lance,” Keith bit, “that was too close. We need to take this luck and go.”

He shook his head, but he knew he was in denial. Their luck could absolutely run out… Lance breathed a sigh, stopping them both by digging in his heels, “Keith -”

An ear-piercing screech and he whipped around, Keith’s hand coming down on his arm immediately. Runners had turned the corners, their split heads open with their whistle tones, the walkers immediately following them around the corner. The mega horde had found them. Lance choked out a curse, Keith’s own flowery language in his ear.

They took off, runners hot on their heels, down the streets again. He was too exhausted, his lungs burning, as Keith dragged them both along. They needed a place to hide, to rest and escape. Keith pulled him forward, slicing a walker that stumbled, growling, into them. The cut didn’t go cleanly through, instead stuttering the blade, forcing Keith to put up a leg and kick the walker away from them. If Keith was getting tired, that wasn’t good.

Lance whipped his head around, willing for another escape route. Even a small one. Across the way, a subway entrance stood. If it was clear below ground, that could be their salvation. He grabbed the back of Keith’s shirt, dragging him around and taking the lead. With minimal help from Keith, who was focused on the runners taking jabs at their heels, claws barely catching on their clothes, Lance pulled them down through the subway entrance.

It was a miracle he didn’t trip on any steps, which would have pulled them down and the horde upon them in seconds. Instead, Keith skipped steps he couldn’t make backward, pushing all of his body weight into Lance’s side so he could balance him. With another tired slice at a leaping runner, there was enough space for Keith to spin around as they landed down at the platform.

It was clear, Lance could practically sing in happiness. He scrambled forward and hopping the turnstile, more gracefully than he had ever in his teen years when he couldn’t pay the fare. Keith followed and the turnstiles effectively blocked the sprawling horde as it spilled into the subway. Walkers slammed themselves against metal, impaling themselves and holding the rest of the horde back out of sheer will. Lance’s face was dripping sweat, his chest aching with a fury, but Keith ushered him on.

They descended another stairway, taking a few sharp lefts until they entered a station platform. So far, the tunnels of the subway had been quiet. Eerie glowing moss and fungi had begun to grow out of cracks in the old, scuffed tile of the tunnel walls. It smelled particularly musty, burning his already tired lungs, but Lance was so grateful for a second of peace.

Keith collapsed on a platform bench, shaking out his sword of the blood and guts it was coated in. The front of his shirt was soaked in sweat, like Lance’s, and he groaned when he stretched out his sword arm.

“Are you okay?” Lance asked quietly, wincing as his voice bounced in an echo.

Keith nodded, but Lance fished out a water bottle to hand to him anyways. He crouched next to Keith’s legs, a little shaky on his own tired legs, but the stretch was good for him. Keith looked at him, gulping down the water. Lance couldn’t help but stare at his Adam's apple.

“Are you okay?” Keith echoed back, finishing with the water and handing it to him.

Lance smiled, drinking the cool water quickly. The bottle was finished before he knew it, and he stood back up. “I’m fine, let’s move.”
They descended the platform, dropping onto the tracks and taking the tunnel. It was dark, the service lights in the subway tunnel blinking and fizzing out. He couldn’t help the hair rising on his arms and the back of his neck. It was too quiet in these usually bustling areas, it gave such an odd sensation. He took the lead, his Converse scuffling between the train tracks.

After walking for a good half hour, another platform came up in view. The dark had caused his eyes to dilate and the bright fluorescent of the underground station made his eyes hurt. They had been trying to keep as quiet as possible, because of how echoey the tunnel and stations were. Scrambling up onto the platform was louder than Lance had hoped. He dropped a hand down and Keith used it, pulling himself up with Lance’s help. He didn’t have the strength of Keith but was pleased to know he was still strong enough to help him up.

He must have had a dopey grin on his face because Keith smirked and rolled his eyes at him.

“What?” He began in a little above a whisper, grinning wider now, “Let me have this! You’re usually not this tired.”

Keith shrugged a shoulder, smirking wider too, “Yeah well, I’m not sure if I’ll let you have this.”

Lance raised a fist, knocking the other man’s shoulder softly, pouting now, “That’s not fair! You get to be the hero every single time! I get to say I’m stronger here and that’s that!”

Keith opened his mouth to retort, as they approached the station’s ascending staircase out of the tunnels but it never came. Lance’s heart had been so light, joking with Keith, letting off the stress and steam of a narrow escape, but it dropped the second his arm was wrenched behind his back.

A cold blade was placed against his jugular, already tearing his neck. Blood dripped down his skin and onto the mouth of his shirt, and slowly the knife forced his chin upwards. Keith had already unsheathed his blade, pointing it between the captor holding Lance and the three others ahead of them.

Lance could cry. Their right eyes were twisted with scars around the orbital bone, and blood painted their chins like markings. The “leader” of the pack had bones on a string around his neck, small and dirty and some even still bloody and meaty. He stalked forward, grin twisted and eyes wild. Behind him stood a man and woman, both of whom were splattered with blood and dirt. The man on his left clasped a rusty pipe, his mouth sewn sloppily with wire and grim chain, but even then he smiled gleefully from his leader’s side.

“Look what we got here!” The bone man cackled, trading a gun between both hands maniacally, stuttering on the grip enough that Lance was afraid he’d slip and the gun would go off.

“Let him go.” Keith rumbled, stepping up one stair so that his blade pointed at the leader’s belly.

Keith got laughter in response. Lance could feel the rumbling laughter of man behind him against his back, the knife wavering on his jugular. As casually as possible, he widened his stance, trying to steady his ripped back arms as much as possible as to not alert his captor. Musterling courage was becoming harder, and his body sagged with exhaustion.

“Sorry, pretty!” One of the other bandits, a shorter girl giggled at Keith, swinging a rusty machete back and forth, “We have new bodies to burn!”

“Shut it!” The leader growled, kicking at her ankle. She crashed into the side of the stairwell, but righted herself quickly and giggled in response. In that split second of havoc, Lance raised his knee
and kicked back, nailing his captor in the groin. He jumped forward but immediately fell to his
knees, gasping in pain, as the bullet tore through his thigh.

The knife was back, pointed inwards now, but he didn’t struggle as hands pulled him to his shaking
feet. He couldn’t stand unassisted and shagged forward away from the man who held him, his hair
in his face and neck dug onto the knife out of sheer instability. His vision was going in and out
now, but he could make out the leader’s smoking gun still raised.

“Let’s not get too hasty.”

The girl was screaming in laughter now and Lance’s head was jerked back as a hand grabbed his
hair, a knee digging into his back. His leg and spine were in enough pain for him to scream if he
could. He blinked, dizzy and gasping, at Keith. Tears pricked at the corners of his eyes.

The leader groaned, waving his gun, “Just kill that one. It’s too damaged now.”

Lance couldn’t breathe.
this is the road to ruin

Chapter Summary

The soundtrack of the apocalypse, the tell-tale moaning and groaning that triggered any sort of ending, came back, louder than before, and Keith looked up to see the first of the walkers stumbling up out of the subway entrance toward them.

Chapter Notes

hey!! it's me, rachel. this chapter got away from me, so I'm posting two chapters, both in Keith's POV. remember to come talk to us on tumblr about this fic and klance @somethingmorecreative1 and @maireeps! Good luck and I hope you like it!!

The shot was still ringing in his ear.

Keith couldn’t see anything. He wasn’t sure how he had gotten here or what was happening. He wasn’t sure he was breathing.

He and Lance had been through hell already. Times had been tough; no one said the apocalypse was easy. But just being with Lance was something, being with someone else was better than being alone and lately… Keith wasn’t sure that he could go back to how it had been before. What did Lance mean to him?

Everything. Lance meant everything to him.

Just kill that one. It's too damaged now.

Lance’s eyes were closed, though he was obviously fighting to keep them open. Blood was seeping out of the cut on his throat from the knife, but it was pouring from the gunshot in his thigh. If the bullet had hit one of his arteries, Lance would bleed out in the next few minutes, maybe before Keith could even get to him.

Keith thought back to yesterday, in the house with Lance, Pidge, and Artax. Then, being upstairs with Lance. They’d been so close. He’d wanted to say—

The bandit with the sewn mouth raised the rusty pipe and took a step toward Lance, where the other male was still holding him in a headlock.

Keith’s vision tinted red.

He moved before he realized it, launching himself down the stairs at the ugly bandit and thrusting his sword directly through the man’s chest. Keith yanked the sword out of the bandit’s chest and pushed the body to the ground. Blood sprayed his jacket.

“Give him to me and leave us alone,” Keith said, voice nothing short of a growl low in his chest.
“Or what, cowboy?” the woman giggled, twirling the gun in one hand and the machete in her other.
She took a step closer. The leader was stepping around him too, trying to circle him. Killing one of
their men had done nothing to affect them it seemed.

“I’ll fucking end you,” Keith said, gripping his sword in his hands. He was shaking.

There was a pause, and it was enough time for Keith to feel the leader step up behind him, weapon
presumably raised, but Keith dodged the attack and spun, swinging his katana directly toward the
man’s neck with every bit of strength he had.

The head hit the ground with a thud and rolled. Blood was everywhere, and the corpse collapsed
onto the ground, buckets of gore draining from it and pooling onto the ground of the already
disgusting subway.

The other two bandits, the man that was still holding Lance and the woman were staring at him
now. He’d taken out half of their group with just two swings of his sword.

The woman hissed at him, like a feral cat, and raised her gun toward his chest, “You’ll die for
this.”

Keith was moving before anyone else could. The gun fired, but the bullet missed him. He jumped
forward, grabbing the gun and slinging it away, just to get it out of the picture. She swung the
machete at him instead, but Keith dodged the blade and shoved her away. Then, he lunged toward
the last man and grabbed Lance around the waist. The other man was struggling to keep his grip on
Lance as well, but Keith wasn’t going to be the one to lose this fight. He wouldn’t do it.

Keith kept an arm locked around Lance’s waist, and with his other arm, he grabbed the small
knife from his pocket and sliced the man’s face. He was too slow this time, and the bandit turned
his head and bit Keith’s wrist hard enough to make him bleed. He jerked his arm back, skin tearing
from the bandit’s mouth, and then, he raised the knife again.

This time, the bandit was too slow. Keith plunged it into his neck, and finally, finally, the bandit let
go of Lance and fell to the ground.

Keith stumbled back, struggling to keep him and Lance both upright. Lance had already passed out,
eyes closed, body limp. Keith collected him into his arms and turned to run, but before he could get
to the stairs, something jumped up onto his back and he fell.

He pushed Lance as far as he could, trying to at least get him away from the crazy bitch on top of
him, and Keith rolled.

Suddenly, the ground disappeared, and they toppled down off the platform and back into the
tunnel. Keith fell face first into the rocks, and the bandit woman forced him down further. He felt
the gravel digging into his skin, stinging him sharply, and Keith grunted, trying to get her off him
before she grabbed a weapon.

The woman was laughing, a hysterical high-pitched trill that was fucking with his head. The sound
was horrible; Keith struggled against her, but his limbs were so heavy. He was so tired.

Get up, some part of him whispered. He realized that it sounded like Lance’s voice.

Keith kicked his legs wildly and managed to roll over onto his back, shoving her off when his
hands were free. He struggled to get to his feet, but before he could, she tackled him again. They
went down in a pile of struggling limbs right next to the tracks.
“Not so fast,” she sang, grabbing for his shoulders and pinning him down face first into the gravel. He was pretty sure he was already bleeding from the cut on his face.

He didn’t have a weapon. He’d left his knife embedded in the male bandit’s neck, and the body was too far for him to get it now. His sword was on his back behind him, but there was no way for him to reach it; the woman was frantically grappling for his neck, trying to get a steady hold on him. Between the grip she had on his shoulder and the one on his neck, she shoved him forward, pulling him through the disgusting gravel toward the track.

Keith’s eyes widened, and he panicked as he realized what she was trying to do, when he felt the heat coming off the track that must have somehow managed to keep its electric charge despite the end of the world.

He struggled harder, kicking at her and grabbing for her hands, but he couldn’t reach her. Her grip was too tight, and the way that she was squeezing his neck made it hard to breath.

The track loomed in front of him. They crept closer. Less than a step to it now.

“The end, cowboy,” the woman laughed, dragging him forward until he was right above the track. She took her hand off his neck and shoved his head down until the right side, the already injured side, of his face connected with the burning metal.

He started screaming. The pain was blinding as she held him to the track, and he could smell the way that the heated metal was burning his flesh.

_Think, think, think! Get it together, Keith! Do something!_ The voice in his head that sounded a lot like Lance was begging him to focus, to do something, but Keith could hardly hear it over his own screaming.

He tried to focus. He had to get them out of here. He had to beat this.

Keith gasped hard through his scream, fighting to take a breath.

He thought about Lance, all alone up there on the platform, bleeding out. If he didn’t make it back to get him, Lance would either die of his injuries or the walkers would catch up eventually. They had to be getting close by now.

The image was enough to make Keith move despite the agony he was in. The woman was still pressing him down, hands on his neck and shoulder, knees on his back.

Keith reached backward, struggling to grab her wrist. His shoulder strained uncomfortably, but he hooked his fingers around her arm, squeezed, and twisted downward with all the strength he had left.

The bones splintered and cracked under his grip, and the woman started screaming. She tumbled off him, and Keith surged up, pushing himself away from the track and to his feet. She was scrambling backwards, still in the gravel, and Keith stalked her.

As he reached up to draw his sword, another weapon appeared.

A walker stumbled out of the dark tunnel.

It had probably been prompted by the noise they were making during the fight. The undead body was so grotesque that Keith couldn’t tell what it had been before this, but it didn’t matter. It was hobbling toward them, reaching out for them, and Keith didn’t know what it made him, but he
smiled when he saw it.

Before he could really think about it, Keith lunged forward and grabbed the woman by the shoulders. Her arm was mangled; Keith hadn’t realized how much damage he did to it, but he didn’t care. He forced the woman to her feet and shoved her back.

“Where are you taking—”

The walker behind them let out a steady moan, and the woman’s eyes filled with rage.

“Your friend won’t make it anyway, cowboy,” she spit. “He’ll die before you can get back to him. You’ll go to hell for what you’ve done.”

She was clawing at his arms now, gripping onto him as they struggled. He pushed forward, and the walker was right behind them. One of her hands caught the end of Keith’s hair.

The walker’s hand gripped her shoulder beside Keith’s. As it started to lean in, he growled, “Then I’ll see you there,” and shoved her forward into its arms.

She screamed in agony as the walker bit down on her neck. Blood sprayed, but Keith was already moving. She screamed and screamed and screamed as Keith sprinted back for the platform, boosted himself up, and rolled to his feet, already running.

Deeper in the tunnel, Keith could hear the signs of the horde they’d been outrunning earlier. The noise of the fight had probably brought them closer, and they didn’t have much time at all. Keith had left three bodies on the platform, and hopefully, they would slow the first of the horde for them to at least get a head start.

Keith sprinted toward Lance and scooped him up into his arms, making a break for the stairs. He spotted Lance’s bag there at the bottom of the flight, and he managed to grab it on his way up, juggling Lance long enough to get the strap in his hand before he took off again. His arms were already shaking, and his legs, lungs, and head ached, but he couldn’t stop now. He hauled ass, taking the stairs three at a time, clutching Lance in his arms and praying that the bodies he’d left at the platform would be enough for the walkers.

The light at the literal end of the tunnel was welcome, and when Keith hit the last step, finally making it to the street, his knees buckled.

“Fuck,” Keith growled, pushing himself back to his feet. The growling and howling from the subway below them were loud. He wasn’t sure how much longer he had before the horde—or any other—would be after them.

He got back to his feet, clutching Lance to him, hands slick with blood. Keith looked down to him, where Lance’s eyes were closed; his face was slack, expressionless, pale. The cut on his neck was still bleeding, and it was deeper than Keith first thought, and his leg—

Just looking at him made Keith’s knees give out again.

He collapsed onto the pavement, cradling Lance in his arms as he fell. He pressed back against the wall, frantically scanning the street for any walkers. Miraculously, there were none. For now.


Something dripped down his face.
The street was empty, until the next horde moved through. Keith wasn’t sure where Lance had
been taking them when they went down into the subway, and because of it, he had no idea where
they were. He didn’t know where anything was, where he might find something, or someone, to
help Lance.

He was all alone.

Another tear rolled down his cheek.

It was getting hard to breathe. It felt like something was pressing down onto his chest. He needed
to do something right now. Lance was unconscious, probably bleeding out in his arms right now.
Keith was holding onto him as he slipped away.

He couldn’t do this alone. He wouldn’t.

“Okay,” Keith grunted, carefully shifting Lance down onto the ground. He was bleeding so much
already but—Keith had to do something before they could move. He wasn’t going to be able to get
anywhere with this much blood anyway; the walkers would smell them eventually, if they didn’t
already.

He grabbed Lance’s bag and dumped out the contents onto the street, praying there would be
something in it to work with and help him help Lance. Two beers, a lighter, a handful of pill
bottles, a couple of packages of food, two water bottles, a semiautomatic rifle and pistol, and
Lance’s jacket scattered across the pavement. No bandages, no extra material, no magic medical
device to save the day, nothing.

“Okay, that’s fine, we can still do this,” Keith muttered it to himself, pushing most of the supplies
back into the bag. He took everything except the beer because—it was too heavy, and Keith
needed every last advantage that he had right now.

Keith ripped his jacket off and pulled his t-shirt over his head, ripping it into strips to tie around
Lance’s thigh. The material was already soaked, but he carefully put more and more onto the
wound, hoping that it would do until they could get somewhere safer. And until Keith thought of
something better, of something that would save Lance.

But this was all he had right now. These t-shirt scraps soaked in blood.

The soundtrack of the apocalypse, the tell-tale moaning and groaning that triggered any sort of
ending, came back, louder than before, and Keith looked up to see the first of the walkers
stumbling up out of the subway entrance toward them.

Keith cursed and grabbed his sword and Lance’s bag, slipping them over his bare chest so they
rested against his back. Then, he slipped his arms around Lance, one under his knees and the other
around his back, hoisting the other boy’s body into his arms as he stumbled to his feet.

He rounded the corner, dodged a walker that reached out to grab him, and started running.

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When Keith first met Lance, everything had already been so fucked up that he hadn’t expected
much of anything anymore.

His entire life up until that point had been a shitshow anyway. His mom left, Shiro left, and his dad
all but checked out of his life. He’d had no one and nothing. Then, the world ended, and even
though he got his dad back for a little bit, it didn’t matter in the end. Everyone was still gone, and
Keith was still alone.

Then, Lance opened the door of an old semi-truck and jumped onto the back of his horse. He’d elbowed his way into Keith’s life more forcefully than anyone had before.

Even Lance left, though. For a minute.

It’d been hell, those few hours between Lance leaving and Keith finding him again. But then he was back, apologizing for leaving, and folding his own life right into Keith’s.

Somewhere along the way, Keith had fallen in love with Lance.

It was of no surprise to him whatsoever. Lance was the most beautiful person Keith had ever seen, apocalypse or not, and he was kind, sarcastic, good with a gun, and a handful sometimes. Lance was the only person in Keith’s life to ever come back for him, to come back to be with him. In any capacity.

The past few weeks had been the best of Keith’s life. He’d prefer running through streets filled with horrible hordes of the walking dead if it meant that Lance would be right there with him. He’d fight monsters every day for as long as he was breathing as long as it meant that Lance wouldn’t go anywhere, as long as it meant that he’d be with him for as long as the universe allowed it.

That bet with the universe must have come to an end though, and it was right at the time that Keith thought something great might have started.

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Keith was tired. He’d been running for—he didn’t know how long.

He had started coughing what felt like hours ago. He didn’t think he was getting enough oxygen at this point. He was clutching Lance in his arms, holding onto him, and the only thing he could think about was pushing himself to move faster, hold Lance tighter, keep them alive longer.

Keith didn’t know where he was going. He didn’t have any sort of answers. He’d run out of tears miles back.

He didn’t know if Lance was even still alive, from where he was carrying him in his arms. He figured he’d find out if—when the body woke up and bit him.

That would be the end that he got. He would either get them out of this, save them, keep Lance alive, or he would just wait until Lance came back for him. Keith wasn’t sure if he believed in any sort of afterlife, so if this was the best he got, then fuck, he’d take it. It wouldn’t be Lance, but it would be better than a random walker finally taking him down.

For now, he kept running.

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Keith turned the corner of a street and ran straight into a group of walkers.

He turned back, stumbling, but keeping himself upright as he dodged the groaning, reaching hands. He crossed the street and turned down another alley, only to run into another group.

Fuck.

Lance twitched in his arms.
Keith didn’t let himself look down. He promised that he’d keep going. Lance had called him a hero, had said that he always got them out of trouble. He had to do it again. He had to keep going.

He pivoted, turning back and sprinting for the last street, the last option. He made a hard left, spinning around the brick siding of a building and thankfully, the street before him was empty.

But the walkers were still behind him. Keith could hear them, following, catching up to him. They would no doubt attract the sound of a larger horde, one with sprinters and crawlers and the other nightmares that Keith didn’t have a chance of fighting off by himself, not while he was carrying Lance with him.

If he was going to do something, it had to be done right now.

Keith made another turn, this time onto a bigger, four lane road. It was full of trash and debris, random cars that were pushed off to the side, like someone from after all this had moved them. About a hundred yards away, a Humvee sat that hadn’t been ruined, that looked like it might still run.

Keith nodded to himself. This was it. Last chance. He had to make this work.

He dug in, found some last pocket of strength that he hadn’t know about as he clutched Lance and kept running. He sprinted past open alleys, past walkers that stumbled out toward him, past bodies that littered the ground already, both burned and eaten.

He was within just a few yards of the Humvee when he was stopped.

“Stop right there!”

Keith slowed, spinning toward the voice.

It was a man. In military fatigues.

Keith blinked, hard. Again.

“Keith?”

He shook his head. He didn’t understand what was happening.

The man took a few steps closer, and Keith stepped back. None of this made any sense. None of this was real. This wasn’t—couldn’t be happening.

Lance moved in his arms again, and this time, Keith couldn’t help it. He looked.

His eyes were open. Keith could barely see the blue slits, but he was awake. Lance was alive.

A loud, distant roar was building. It was familiar. The sound of a horde, complete with screamers and runners, and if they were in the middle of the city like Keith expected, there was no telling exactly how many it would be. There would be no way to fight out of this.

“Get in the Humvee.”

Keith looked back up. Shook his head again.

“If you want to stay alive,” Shiro said, this Shiro with white hair and a scarred nose, “get in the
fucking Humvee, Keith.”

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He couldn’t breathe.

The Shiro in front of him was different than the last one he had seen. It had been years though, and Keith guessed that people changed.

He wasn’t sure this was real.

“Let’s go!” Shiro shouted, making his way toward the Humvee. The street was already filling with walkers, and the longer they waited, the closer the hordes came.

Even if this wasn’t real, Keith was out of options.

He nodded and ran to the other side of the Humvee, where Shiro had already thrown the door open for him and was waiting to pull him in. Keith wasn’t sure how he got inside with Lance still in his arms, but the next second he was in the Humvee, Shiro was closing the door, and cranking the engine just as a walker pounded on the glass of the door.

The Humvee lurched as Shiro pressed it forward, and Keith tightened his grip on Lance, who’s eyes had closed again. He was pale, and the makeshift bandages that he’d wrapped around the wound were dripping with blood. Keith rearranged him, pressing him further into his body so he could reach for Lance’s neck, to feel the faint, but still-there pulse.

He brushed his hand over Lance’s hair, and when he pulled away, he was covered in blood. Keith hadn’t seen him hit his head but—everything had happened so fast, and the blood must be coming from somewhere.

Dread cinched his chest.

“I need you to help me,” Keith choked. He wasn’t sure who he was talking to.

“Who is that?” Shiro asked, glancing over to him, frowning. “What the hell is happening? How did you get here? And what happened to your face?”

“He can’t die, okay?” Keith said, voice wrecked. He felt ruined. “He just—he can’t die. Please, Shiro, please.”

“I’m not going to let him die. I—I’m going to get us there as fast as I can.”

Keith wanted to ask where it was that Shiro was taking them, but he wasn’t sure that any of this was real in the first place. He wasn’t sure that he and Lance had made it out of the subway together now that he thought about it. In fact, he wasn’t even sure that he’d been close to DC weeks ago, when he’d first seen Lance at all.

How had he made it off the ranch again? There had been so many walkers that day.

Was this really happening? Why couldn’t he remember anything?

“Hey,” Shiro snapped, looking over to him quickly from where he was still driving. “Get it together, Keith. You’re going into shock. Breathe. You have to keep breathing.”

Keith shook his head. Was any of this real?
“Talk to me,” Shiro pleaded. “C’mon. It’s me. We’re going to save your friend, but you have to talk to me. You have to stay focused.”

Focused on what? Keith thought. Lance was the only thing worth focusing on.

He’d come so close to telling Lance earlier, when they were in that shitty, run down grocery store where they’d stopped to take a break. Keith had been looking for anything that might be useful when Lance had started the music, and he’d been looking at Keith with those big blue eyes already, saying all of these things that he wasn’t saying aloud, and when it ended, he’d seemed sad. Keith honestly hadn’t been able to help it when they’d been in the alley together. Realistically, he could remember thinking that he should stop, that it was no place for him to tell Lance what he was thinking, about how much he loved him, but Keith had never been one to stop his impulses. The apocalypse hadn’t helped that situation at all.

But he didn’t get the chance. Instead, he and Lance had been forced to run, and then, the subway.

And now, this.

“Where are we going?” Keith choked the question out. He kept staring at Lance.

“Back to base,” Shiro answered. “We have a doctor there. They can help.”

The ride was long, but Keith’s sense of time was fucked anyway. He didn’t know how much time had passed since all of this started; he just knew that the more of it that went by, the less likely Lance would be to survive.

The Humvee slowed, and Keith looked up from Lance to see them nearing a fence. Beyond the fence, there was a large set of buildings, like some sort of old military base or compound. It was big, and it looked like it was still operational even now. The fence was pulled open by two people, and Shiro drove the Humvee through the gap and up into an open garage, yards behind another fence that was already open.

Shiro opened the door of the Humvee as soon as it was parked, yelling, “Get a fucking stretcher! Get Coran! Hurry!”

Keith didn’t know what to do.

His door opened a second later, and he jumped down, legs and arms trembling, but still holding onto Lance tightly. Shiro was there then, guiding him over to where two people, a man and a woman, brought a stretcher into the garage.

Keith hesitated.

“Put him down, Keith,” Shiro said. “We need to get him to Coran.”

Keith looked down at Lance again, an utter mess in his arms.

He took a step and leaned forward, carefully placing Lance onto the stretcher.

It rolled away as soon as Keith let go, and he panicked, grabbing his katana from the sheath on his back and pulling it up to—

“No, Keith!” Shiro yelled, jumping forward and grabbing him, forcing his arms back down so he couldn’t get his weapon out. “They’re taking him to Coran. They can help him, okay?”
“I can’t leave him,” Keith said, staring after the stretcher, where Lance disappeared deeper into this unknown building with these strange people.

“Oh, okay.” Shiro nodded frantically, still gripping his arms. “Okay, we can go with them, but you can’t have your weapon out. You have to stay calm.”

Keith wasn’t sure that calm was a word in his vocabulary at all.

Shiro must have decided it was okay because after a few seconds, he turned and jogged after the people with the stretcher, motioning for Keith to follow.

He did, and they jogged through a door and then down a long hallway. It was empty, all blank white walls that looked like they hadn’t been disturbed at all. Shiro turned left, took them through a gate, then another, and Keith really tried to keep up with where he was going and how to get out of here, but he wasn’t sure that he would be able to even find his way out now.

He was wheezing, lungs aching. His body didn’t feel right.

Finally, they turned into a room off one of the long hallways.

There were four people in the room already, gathered around the stretcher that Lance was on. The man and woman from before, who had rolled him away, and then another man and woman as well. The man was wearing a white coat and a pair of gloves, and he had a large mustache from where he was already looking at the cut on Lance’s neck. The woman was undoing the t-shirt bandages Keith had haphazardly fixed around the gunshot wound on Lance’s thigh. Her silver hair was tied into a tight ponytail, and her eyes were sharp when she looked up to see them.

“Shiro,” her voice was strong too, “what have you done?”

“It’s my brother,” Shiro replied, and hearing the words come out of Shiro’s mouth was weird. “This is Keith. I found him on the street with—carrying whoever this is.”

“What happened to him?” the woman asked, shifting her gaze to Keith.

He made his voice steady, “Bandits. We were in the subway. They grabbed him before I could do anything. I got us out but—you can save him, right?”

“We can try, my friend,” the man with the mustache, and a thick Aussie accent, said. “Do you know his blood type?”

Keith shook his head.

“Alright, we’ll need to use some of our universal stock then,” the man said. “We’ll do a transfusion and get started on stitching his leg up. We need to start an IV now and prepare for surgery.”

It was a long while before there was any news. Thankfully, Shiro and the others didn’t make him leave. Instead, he stood there, in that room, watching as these strangers worked over Lance. They removed most of his clothes, since they were covered in guts and blood anyway, and cleaned up his skin after they had removed the bullet and stitched up his thigh. Finally, they seemed to pull away from Lance, after they had finished, after it had been hours.

Keith never moved.

They had hooked Lance up to several different machines. One that was beeping with his heart rate, which honestly made Keith feel better just hearing it. Then, there was an oxygen mask sitting on
his nose and over his mouth. He still had an IV in one of his arms, and they were giving him blood in his other arm—

He looked so still. Keith wanted to be sick.

“Alright, my boy,” the accented, mustached man started, “it looks like your friend is going to be just fine. We’ve got a steady heartbeat on him now, and his leg should heal right up in the next few weeks. From what we can tell, the head injury isn’t as bad as it could have been. We put in a couple of stitches to stop the bleeding, and there doesn’t seem to be any swelling. You’re lucky you got here when you did. Any longer, and we might be having a different conversation.”

Keith felt like he might collapse into himself with the news. He brought his hands up to his face and just swayed there, wondering if he would be next to pass out. The wound on his face was stinging, Keith thought absently. It had been the first time he’d felt it since he’d been back in the subway.

“Thank you,” he finally choked the phrase out, bringing his hands back down to his sides. “Thank you. I can never repay you for this.”

“No worries, lad,” the man said cheerfully. “Any friend of Shiro’s is a friend of ours.”

“Yes,” the woman said, coming around to stand in front of them. “And you said he’s your brother, Shiro?”

Shiro nodded, gesturing to him, “Yes. This is Keith.”

“Keith,” the woman repeated, looking him up and down. “I’m Allura, and this is my uncle, Coran. How did you find Shiro?”

“I didn’t,” Keith cleared his throat. “He found me.”

“What are you doing all the way up here?” Shiro asked, tone turned frantic again. “What happened to the ranch? And Dad?”

Keith really didn’t want to do this right now, but there wasn’t much choice. These people had just saved Lance. Keith owed them everything he had.

“The ranch was overrun, and Dad didn’t make it,” Keith said it as flat as he could. “I came all this way, and a few weeks ago, I was probably 50 miles from here, when I ran into—when Lance found me. I was looking for you, but he told me that DC was a mess, so we headed West then, looking for his friend. We ran into a girl named Pidge who was looking for her brother, and we volunteered to help her, which is how we ended up in the city—”

“Hold up,” Shiro interrupted, and his eyes were wide. “Did you say a girl named Pidge?”

“Yeah,” Keith nodded. “She wanted help trying to find her brother. Said that he might still be alive as of five days ago. Lance and I volunteered to go look for him.”

“Where is she now?”

Keith frowned, “Why does it matter?”

“Her brother’s name is Matt, right?”

“How did you know—”
“Because he’s here, and he’s been looking for her too.”

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“Keith, you need to let Allura and Coran check on you.”

He pulled the shirt over his head and grabbed his new black jacket, shoving his arms through it and adjusting the collar before putting his sword back over his chest. They’d given him new clothes since his had been wrecked. He mourned the loss of his jacket, left back on whatever street he’d abandoned it on, and his red, camel boots, which were too disgusting for him to keep. Now, looking in the mirror that hung in the bathroom where Keith was changing, you couldn’t even tell that he’d come up from Texas. Lance was always teasing him about being a cowboy, but now, Keith looked like the exact opposite. He was fitted completely in black, black pants, t-shirt, combat boots, and a black jacket. He wasn’t sure where these clothes had come from, but it was better than nothing.

He looked like a completely different person. The scar that stretched across the right side of his face didn’t help.

Fuck, he even felt like a completely different person. Something was changing, but he wasn’t sure what it was just yet.

“I’m fine,” Keith said, frowning at Shiro in the mirror. “We need to get Pidge.”

“You’re exhausted. You looked like you were going to die when I found you and—”

Keith didn’t think he could stand hearing Lance’s name come from Shiro’s mouth.

“I said that I’m fine,” Keith repeated. “Pidge is out there waiting. I’m going to get her. You can come if you want.”

“I’m not letting you go alone.”

Keith turned to face him. “Then why are we still standing here?”

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The ride with Shiro was awkward and confusing. They left immediately, as soon as Keith had finished getting dressed. They had seen Allura again, who had nodded to them and given Keith two guns—a handgun and a semiautomatic rifle—before nodding them off and asking them to be safe. She seemed stern. Even though she couldn’t be much older than Keith himself, she seemed like she was years older, like she’d seen things that made her into the leader she acted like.

Keith and Shiro left in the same Humvee. Now that he knew Lance was safe and that everything was going to be okay, he was able to pay more attention to what was happening. The compound that they must have taken over was obviously military. It had the gear and the resources that only the U.S. government would have had by the time everything in DC went to hell. There were also a lot of extra people at the base that he’d seen so far, and Keith assumed that most of them were originally military, maybe a few stragglers from the road like him and Lance, but not many.

“You said that you met, um, Lance on the road? Somewhere close to here?”

Shiro broke the silence with the question, and Keith had been right earlier. He didn’t like hearing Lance’s name come out of Shiro’s mouth.
This was all—so crazy. Weeks ago, he’d been so close to here. He’d been looking for Shiro, and there hadn’t been any signs. And now? He just runs into him on the fucking street in the middle of the end of the world?

“Why didn’t you come to the ranch?” Keith asked instead, because now that he was thinking about it, he was really fucking pissed at Shiro. “You had to have known that things were going bad. You could have come in time.”

Shiro grit his teeth and gripped the steering wheel tighter. “I wanted to. I tried, but they assigned me to a mission.”

“So a mission was more important than me?”

“Of course not, Keith, but I couldn’t just blow it off. It was—Coran and Allura were sent here after the virus hit Europe because they’d heard rumors about creating a vaccine. The president put me and the rest of my unit on security detail at the compound, and then the virus hit North America,” he explained.

“Fuck the president,” Keith growled, “and fuck you. You just left me there.”

“Goddammit, Keith!” Shiro shouted, pounding the Humvee’s steering wheel, but keeping his eyes on the road in front of them. “Don’t you think I know that? Don’t you know how fucking guilty I feel about it? I thought of you every fucking day, leaving you there with him and after Mom… I was stupid. I took that job and just left you there when you were a kid and I didn’t think about anything else and I’m fucking sorry.”

Keith was silent. Shiro was breathing hard.

“I’ve been thinking about it for years,” Shiro continued, voice rough but quiet at the same time. “I wanted to come back and get you. I should have. I was wrong, and I left you there. I’m sorry.”

There was a long pause. The Humvee roared underneath them. Keith didn’t know what he was thinking.

They travelled in silence for a few miles.

Outside the Humvee, the road grew rougher. There was more debris and trash on the route they had chosen to get around the city to the side where Pidge was supposed to be waiting with Artax. Shiro was driving slower to accommodate the burned and wrecked cars that littered the roads, and Keith spotted the occasional walker stumbling among the wreckage.

“Things were bad, when you left,” Keith said, voice quiet too. “I was alone. I had Artax and that was all. You’d call, and I’d pretend everything was fine, but when I hung up the phone, everything was a lie. Dad was a mess. And then the whole fucking world ended and you weren’t there.”

“I’m sorry,” Shiro said again.

“Dad did get better, right at the end,” Keith said it because he thought Shiro should know that it hadn’t been all bad. “He stopped drinking and—it was like when we were really little, remember? Things were good until the ranch was overrun. That’s when I left to find you.”

Shiro was quiet too, for a minute. Then he said, “By yourself?”

“Me and Artax.”
“You rode all the way to Virginia on Artax?”

“Who do you think Pidge is waiting with?” Keith cracked a smile, and the expression felt weird on his face. It pulled at the wound uncomfortably.

Shiro actually laughed, “Holy shit.”

The silence between them shifted from the tense, guilt-ridden conversation they were having to a softer, easier place. Keith stared out the window, trying to figure out how any of this was happening. Lance was okay. Shiro had found him.

How was his life real?

“I’m glad you found me,” Keith said exactly what he was thinking because who knew how much time he’d have left anyway? “If you hadn’t helped me, Lance would—we’d be dead. So. Thank you.”

Shiro nodded carefully, “I just—still can’t believe it honestly. I guess it was the universe working in our favor for once, huh?”

“I guess so.”

The Humvee roared underneath them as they continued down the road.

“But seriously,” Shiro said suddenly, “who’s Lance?”

“He’s… I met him on the road.”

Shiro didn’t answer, but when Keith looked over to him, there was a small smile biting at his lips.

“Shut up, Shiro.”

“I didn’t say anything,” he laughed, turning the wheel of the Humvee up onto another highway and avoiding the wreckage on the ramp. “This is going to be fun though.”

“What is?”

“Watching you deal with whatever it is you have going with Lance.”

Keith rolled his eyes, even though his face heated and his heart sped up. He didn’t want to tell Shiro how right he was but—well, he was right.

They had probably made it half an hour from the compound now. Pidge was supposed to be waiting on the other side of DC from where the compound was situated since he, Lance, and Pidge had come from the opposite direction. But, according to Shiro’s directions, they should be getting closer to her location.

“Oh fuck,” Shiro cursed, pumping the brakes on the Humvee. Keith looked up to find the road blocked by two different cars and an overturned bus.

Shiro slowed the Humvee and stopped, cutting the engine. He pulled the map out, and Keith leaned over to look as well. They were only about a mile from where the rendezvous point with Pidge was supposed to be, and they were probably far enough outside of the city to avoid the hordes and most of the bigger crowds of walkers. Plus, they had weapons and supplies this time. From what Keith had just done, this seemed easy.
“Alright, c’mon,” he finally said, reaching down and grabbing the backpack Allura had given him. “We can walk the rest of the way and get Pidge.”

Shiro hesitated, looking around them carefully. He said, “We don’t know what’s ahead. If we double back and cut off the highway—”

“We don’t know what’s that way either,” Keith replied. “It could be worse, but we do know that it’s only a mile from here to Pidge and then a mile back. We’ve got weapons, we’ve got the map, and we’ve got supplies. It’s our best chance.”

“We should be careful,” Shiro argued. “We should try to get the Humvee as close as possible. We need to make it back to the compound in one piece.”

“Obviously,” Keith said, rolling his eyes. “Lance is there. I almost fucking died trying to get him there, and I’m not planning on dying now before I get to see him again.”

“Aww.”

Keith huffed, opening his door, “Jesus, shut up. Let’s go.”

He jumped out of the Humvee and landed on the pavement, shifting his katana to his back and pulling the rifle forward, easing off the safety. There weren’t any walkers that he could see, so he carefully shut his door and moved around to the front of the Humvee.

Shiro met him at the front, and he had his gun out as well. He motioned forward, and Keith took point, walking toward the wreckage in front of them.

They moved quickly and quietly through the overturned cars and debris on the highway. It was quiet around them, almost to the point of it being stifling, but Keith would take the quiet over anything else that could happen at this point. Trash littered the street, and it blew in the soft wind that overtook the edge of the city. In the distance, Keith would see plumes of smoke coming from the skyline that was downtown. Keith winced at the thought of more bandits and hoped that Pidge had enough sense to wait for them at the rendezvous point they had agreed on. If she wasn’t there, Keith didn’t know what they would do.

Few walkers lingered on the streets, but Keith dealt with them silently. The quieter they could be, the faster and easier they could get this done.

It took about fifteen minutes for them to get a mile down the highway. Keith remembered leaving Pidge here this morning. He couldn’t believe it’d only been a few hours when it seemed like a fucking lifetime ago.

“This is the place,” Shiro murmured, reaching for the map he’d folded in his pocket.

“She probably found somewhere to hunker down and wait,” Keith replied, looking around. There weren’t many buildings very close to them now, but Pidge wouldn’t have just waited out in the open. She would have found a place to wait and watch—

“There,” Keith nodded and pointed to a building a few hundred yards off the highway. It was a few stories high, so it would be easy to find a place and keep watch for when they came back.

Shiro nodded, “Good eye. Lead the way.”

They moved toward the building, pushing past the rotten cars and over the side railing into the grass. A few bodies littered the ground, but they looked old, like they’d been killed long ago. Keith
scanned the area as they approached the building. Everything was all quiet.

It only took a few minutes to cross the empty space and get to the building. Shiro waved him off and went first, opening the door and stepping in with his rifle ready.

Keith wasn’t sure what he was expecting, but it wasn’t the utter silence that echoed through the building as they stepped inside. It was completely empty, save for the destroyed furniture and blood and gore covered walls. It was a lot like most other buildings; something horrible had happened here to someone else. It was an interesting and terrifying thing to think about. Everywhere they went, everywhere they looked, every walker that they killed had been someone else that was just trying to get through this world too.

He didn’t want to think about it. He just wanted to find Pidge and Artax and get back to Lance.

Together, he and Shiro made it through the building. They crossed the floors one by one, going up the staircases carefully and quietly. They didn’t encounter anyone on the first, second, or third floor. They found one walker on the fourth that had been trapped in a closet, and the fifth was their last hope. If Pidge wasn’t here, they’d have to start over.

Shiro glanced at him and nodded before opening the door to the fifth floor.

It looked much like the others. It had obviously been an office building before the apocalypse, and this floor had the same overturned furniture covered in the same gore that coated the rest of the surfaces in the building. Papers and trash littered the floor, and when Keith and Shiro moved into the main floor, they heard a door close somewhere on the floor.

Keith frowned, and they moved forward.

It was quiet, but it was the kind of quiet that took up too much space. Keith knew they were walking toward something, and he desperately hoped it was Pidge. Even still, he couldn’t make himself call her name to see.

Shiro turned down the hallway, where all of the doors were open except for the corner office. He jerked his head, and Keith followed.

When they got to the closed door, Keith raised his gun, and Shiro gripped the doorknob, pausing for a second before throwing it open.

A shotgun cocked, breaking the overwhelming silence, and all Keith could see was the cold metal of the barrel he was suddenly staring down.

Then, “Keith?”

He looked farther, and there was Pidge.

He smiled, dropping his gun, “Hey.”

She dropped the shotgun and threw herself forward, right into his arms. Keith swept his arms around her, holding her close, feeling relieved that he’d found her and terrified that they’d left her by herself all at once.

Pidge pushed back, still gripping Keith’s arms in her hands, “Where’s Lance? And who’s that? What happened to your face?”

Keith nodded, “We got into some trouble and—Lance got really hurt. It was bad. I didn’t think
we’d make it. We’d run out of options when Shiro found me. He took us back to the military compound that he’s from, and the doctor saved Lance from dying. Lance is there now, but I had to come back and get you.”

Pidge’s eyes were wide. “But he’s going to be okay?”

Shiro interrupted, “Lance is going to be fine. He’s resting now. We came to get you as soon as we could.”

“Is Artax okay?” Keith asked, glancing around the room. He didn’t see her.

“Oh!” Pidge stepped behind the door and pulled Artax out, and Keith smiled, stepping further into the room.

Artax rushed for him, nickering softly and pushing her nose against his face. He laughed, reaching up to grab her face. Something inside him settled. Lance was going to be fine. Pidge and Artax were alive. They were together. He even had Shiro back.

Shiro appeared at his side, brushing his hand over Artax’s side. He said, “I can’t believe you brought her all the way here.”

“She kept me alive most of the time,” Keith replied.

“How does this guy know Artax?”

“Oh,” Keith glanced back over to Pidge. “He’s my brother.”

Pidge stared.

“Yeah,” Keith agreed. “It’s been crazy.”

A few seconds of silence passed. Pidge was biting her lip and shifting uneasily when she asked, voice shaking, “So you didn’t find Matt?”

Keith nodded again, “I found him, yeah. He’s at the military compound that Shiro took us too. He’s there right now.”

Tears pooled in Pidge’s eyes, “He is?”

“Yes,” Shiro replied. “He’s been looking for you. He was getting ready to leave to try and find you. I was going to go with him to help. That’s actually what I was doing when I found Keith and Lance, scouting parts of the city before we moved the search wider. Matt’s at the compound waiting on us to get back.”

Pidge was crying now, holding her hands to her face and sobbing, her entire body shaking with it. Keith reached out and set a hand on her shoulder, trying to be comforting but not overwhelming. He hadn’t even been looking for Shiro this time but—he understood.

Finally, Pidge looked up, eyes red, and said, “Can we go now?”

“Hell yeah we can,” Keith replied, reaching up for Artax’s reins.

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The following days were so different than the ones he had experienced since the apocalypse that it made his head spin. He wasn’t sure if it was good or bad.
For one thing, it was a living hell because Lance hadn’t woken up yet. Every day that he remained asleep was fucking torture to Keith. Even though Coran, Allura, Shiro, and plenty of others had assured him that the longer Lance slept the better, he still didn’t like it. Something felt unfinished without Lance here. Something felt incomplete, wrong, ruined without Lance being awake.

Naturally, Keith (being the masochist that he was) remained seated by Lance’s bedside for two days. On the third, much like the others, Shiro came into the room, followed closely by Pidge, and asked him to help out around the compound. Keith stared at Lance, imagined him frowning at him, teasing him for sitting here pouting, and got to his feet.

He’d been gripping his katana in his hands the entire two days, so he might as well check to make sure this place was secure before Lance woke up. He’d need to know what it was like, if it was going to be safe for them to stay here. Hopefully it would last long enough for Lance to recover safely.

Pidge smiled at him as he agreed. He had been seeing a lot of her smiles lately, it seemed like. After he and Shiro brought her back to the compound, she had been reunited with her brother, Matt, another scientist that had worked for the government before everything fell. Even Keith had gotten a little choked at the scene, especially the way that Pidge had hugged Matt and didn’t let go.

Shiro had set his hand on his shoulder and smiled at him, and Keith couldn’t wait for Lance to wake up.

It had been a good day around the compound when they’d brought Pidge back safe and sound. Shiro had introduced him around, in the few minutes between them getting back and Keith storming off to start his vigil at Lance’s side. He would admit that he hadn’t been paying the most attention to it; he really had no idea who anyone was. The few people he’d spoken to were people he vaguely recognized that came in to check on Lance, including Coran and Allura, and then Shiro and Pidge who would alternate in sitting with him and Lance for a while. The company was nice, but it put him on edge more often than not.

Shiro put him and Pidge on duty to take stock and sort weapons. It was a good afternoon. Pidge talked to him quietly, telling him about life around the compound and what Matt had been up to while he was looking for her. She seemed happy here, and a strange pang of sadness swept through his chest at the thought of Lance not knowing they’d found Pidge’s brother.

Yet, Keith reminded himself. Lance would be awake any minute now. Coran had assured him of it.

“I think Lance is going to like it here,” Pidge said suddenly, when the conversation lulled between them. It was like she had been reading his mind.

“Yeah?” Keith asked because honestly, he wasn’t sure. He hadn’t thought that far ahead.

She nodded, “He’s going to wake up soon. I know it.”

Keith nodded too, praying she was right.

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The noise in the compound was probably the thing that Keith disliked the most. On the road, he always had to be silent. Noise equaled walkers, and any wrong move could bring a flood of walkers to come kill you. That was why the compound unsettled him so much, he thought; it was louder than he was used to. People talked loudly, laughed together. Some people even played music inside the concrete walls. Keith was always looking over his shoulder any time he heard a
loud noise like that, and most of the time, he already had his sword out too.

Lance had been sleeping for four days now, but Coran said that he had been coming in and out of consciousness for the past few hours. When Keith heard that he’d wanted to stay put right beside Lance, but Coran had talked him out of it, saying that Lance needed the rest and it wouldn’t do Keith any good to stand and wait for him to wake up.

Shiro had noticed Keith’s nervousness at the sounds around the compound, and to make up for it, he’d asked that Keith be put on guard duty on one of the farther walls. He’d been annoyed about it at first because of how far it was from Lance and how long it’d take him to get back to his side if something happened, but when he climbed up the ladder to the guard tower, it was completely silent.

He must have had some sort of reaction because Shiro smiled and clapped him on the shoulder. He said, “I thought you’d like this better.”

Keith nodded, sighing in relief, “Yeah. Thanks.”

“Heard no problem.”

They stood in silence. Keith had a rifle with him, and even though Shiro said there wasn’t much to worry about on this side, Keith planned to keep his eyes cut for groups of walkers. A few wouldn’t bring the fences down but any more than that could pose serious problems if it wasn’t dealt with.

It was a few minutes before Shiro broke the silence. “Hey, Keith?”

“Yeah?”

“How did you get that scar?”

Keith was quiet. He wasn’t sure that he could tell the story.

Instead of answering, he said, “How did you get yours?”

Shiro sighed, and it was a sound straight from his childhood, the one that Shiro made every time Keith was being an annoying little shit. The memory made one side of Keith’s face lift up into a small smile.

“It was when D.C. fell and the evacuations began,” Shiro started, and Keith hadn’t expected him to really tell the story. “The government had already been gone at that point. In fact, the President had taken Air Force one out to Montana to a bunker, and pretty much everyone else fled the city when they’d gotten the leaked information about the virus hitting Europe.

“So the President’s office left my squadron here, at this compound, to protect Coran and his niece, Allura. Coran had been getting close to finding something for a vaccine, he’d thought, so we were told to stay put, to wait it out and keep him alive at all costs,” Shiro explained. “But then, the city evacuations started, and citizens were being encouraged to get out of the District as fast as they could, but it was too late. The virus hit the population fast, and everything went dark within two days. We watched people evacuate, and some made it out in time, but the walkers were just—swarming everything. We put up the second and third fences pretty close to that, and we were talking about digging a trench around the compound just to up security.”

“Did anyone ever make it this far from the city?” Keith asked.

Shiro nodded, “A lot did, yeah. They begged us to take them in but—we couldn’t. We didn’t have
the room to take in the amount of people that were showing up at the gates. We couldn’t even spare the food or water we had to help them out. It was terrible, having to turn them away, but we had been assigned to keep Coran alive so he could find the cure and we’d been briefed that our mission was more important than any number of survivors that showed up asking for help.”

“That’s…” Keith trailed off, unsure what it was.

“Yeah,” Shiro nodded again. “So we sent people away. They were angry too. We lost a few guys before we figured out that we needed to be more careful and get serious about what was going on.”

“So what happened?”

“I went outside the gates with three other men to run a full perimeter check on the fence and see what needed to be improved. It had been really quiet that day, and we had weapons on us, so we didn’t think it would be a big deal,” Shiro’s voice wavered the smallest bit. Keith knew he wouldn’t have been able to tell if he didn’t know Shiro so well. He continued, “We didn’t know we were being watched. A group of survivors grabbed us, thinking they could offer us up for ransom to take over the compound. They shot down the other three men. The leader of the group had a whip, and it caught me across the nose.”

Keith frowned, “How did you get out of it?”

Shiro leaned forward against the rail on the guard tower, looking out across the field. The city was in the distance, far enough that they couldn’t hear anything from it. There were a few walkers at the far edges of the field, up toward the road, but Keith guessed it was far enough for the sounds to be too muffled for them to hear the compound.

“I had a Glock in my waistband, and I convinced them to untie my hands. When they did, I grabbed my gun and shot the leader in the head. He went down, and the others ran,” Shiro said. “We thought they would come back for revenge or something but—I never saw any of them again.”

Keith remained silent at Shiro’s side. The scar on his nose was one thing, but it still didn’t explain what had happened to his hair. Keith supposed that would be a story for another time.

Shiro nudged him, a few moments later, “I told you my story. Your turn, little brother.”

Keith huffed, “It’s—nothing.”

“It doesn’t look like nothing,” Shiro argued, leaning around him to look at it better. Keith turned his face away, ashamed.

God, what was Lance going to think when he woke up? When he saw what Keith looked like now?

“Oh,” Shiro said, and something must have made him realize why Keith was so hesitant about it. In that moment, he hated that Shiro knew him so well. “It just happened then? When you and Lance were in the city.”

Keith nodded.

A few long moments passed. Keith shuffled in place uncomfortably but—if he couldn’t tell Shiro about it, then what was he going to do when Lance woke up and asked too?

Finally, he started, “We’d gone down into the subway to avoid a horde of walkers. We were heading for the CDC, I think, and when we went down into the subway, I got turned around, but Lance was leading the way. He was being slower than normal, off, I guess. Something must have
been wrong, but I didn’t get to ask him about it before we started looking for Matt. By the time we got to the subway, I was already tired from picking up the slack to watch where we were going, but everything was okay until… something went wrong.

“We were laughing, right before it happened, I think. My memory is a little fuzzy honestly, but I can remember smiling about something Lance had said, I think he called me a hero? He was making fun of me for something, maybe, I don’t know,” Keith shook his head. He’d tried to avoid thinking about this whole story. He continued, “We got back up onto the platform and we were heading up the stairs. I was following him, and Lance had been talking one second and the next it was—silent.”

“What was it?” Shiro asked, voice low.

Keith took a breath, “Bandits. One had grabbed Lance and put a knife to his throat. There were four of them, three men and a woman. They were fighting with each other when Lance tried to get out of the bandit’s arms. They just shot him, right there. He was losing blood fast, and I knew I needed to do something before it was too late, so I—I killed two of them. Put my sword through one’s chest when they tried to attack me and then took off the leader’s head, threatened the others. I thought they’d give me Lance back and leave us alone.”

“But they didn’t,” Shiro guessed.

“No. I ran for Lance. I grabbed him, killed the last man, and was making a run for it when the woman attacked me. All I could think about was getting as far from Lance as we could so, we rolled off the platform and down into the tunnel. She, um, she dragged me over to the track, and it still had the electric charge.”

“Oh fuck,” Shiro breathed, staring at him, eyes wide.

Keith swallowed, hard. He said, “I got out of it, but not before it did this to my face.”

“What ended up happening? How did you get away?”

Keith turned away from Shiro as he said, “I fed her to a walker. I had my sword, and I could have ended it there but—I didn’t. What does that make me, Shiro?”

He felt a hand on his shoulder, and Shiro’s voice was fierce when he said, “It makes you alive. You and Lance are alive because of that. It doesn’t matter what you did to her or those other bandits. They were evil people, fuck, they weren’t even people. It doesn’t matter what happened. It matters that you and Lance are alive and safe now.”

Tears were dangerously close to crawling up his throat and out of his eyes, but he nodded anyway. Shiro was right. If Keith hadn’t done any of it, they wouldn’t be here.

“What happened after that?” Shiro asked the question a while later, after they had been in silence for a moment. “How did you get to the Humvee?”

Keith shrugged, “I just grabbed him and ran. When I got to the street, I used my shirt to make some bandages for his leg as best as I could, and then I heard the walkers coming so I just picked him up and started running. I honestly don’t know how long it was, but it had to have been miles. We’d gotten into the subway pretty close to the CDC I think, and we probably didn’t walk for more than half an hour before we got back up onto the platform and ran into the bandits.”

“Damn, how did you do it? When I found you—you looked like you were going to die too.”
“I don’t know honestly. My chest is still aching from it, and my face—I don’t think there’s anything to even do about it now,” Keith’s voice turned bitter, thinking about the scar that marred the right side of his face. “The only thing I can remember thinking is that I would either find us help and save Lance or wait for him to come back and end it.”

In the distance, a walker stumbled and righted itself mechanically, searching for its next meal without regard to anything else.

A long while passed. Keith wasn’t sure if he would regret telling any of this to Shiro, but he figured it would work out somehow.

“And then you showed up,” Keith said suddenly, breaking the silence between them. “I thought you were a ghost. I didn’t think any of it was real but—there wasn’t anything else I could do. So I got in the Humvee, and when you saved Lance, you saved me.”

Shiro grasped his shoulder, turning Keith around and pulling him into a hug and fuck—it was just like when Keith was a kid. He flung his arms around Shiro, holding on tight, and the few tears he’d been shoving back since this conversation started burst through his walls and dripped down his face.

Neither of them moved for what felt like hours. Keith just stood in his brother’s arms, and for a second, it felt like everything was going to be okay.

When Shiro pushed back from the embrace, the look on his face was soft. He smiled gently and said, “You really love Lance, huh?”

Keith nodded, relieved to share this weight with someone. He loved Lance so much it hurt to breathe.

“He’s going to be okay,” Shiro assured him, and even though he had been listening to everyone else say that for the past four days, he finally felt like it was true now. “And when he wakes up, he’s not going to care about the scar on your face. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. You got it because you saved both yourself and Lance. That’s what it represents. Nothing else, alright?”

Keith nodded, unable to say anything.

“Okay,” Shiro nodded too. “When we get finished with guard duty, you’re going to let Coran and Allura look you over. If your chest is aching, we need to get you medical attention.”

Keith started to object, but the second that he opened his mouth, Shiro said, “Do you want to be healthy for Lance when he wakes up?”

He nodded again.

“Good,” Shiro agreed. “And Keith?”

He cleared his throat, “Yeah?”

Shiro grinned and held out his fist, “I’m so glad I found you.”

Keith stared for a second before he bumped Shiro’s fist with his own, smiling lightly, and said, “Me too, Shiro.”
Chapter Summary

No matter what happened, Keith thought that he would always reach for Lance. He couldn’t ever remember feeling like this for someone before, but Lance just took up his entire field of vision. Thinking that he almost lost him—

Keith sighed again, pressing his free hand to his forehead. The steady beeping of the medical equipment was the only other sound in the room, and he was just really fucking tired.

Chapter Notes

here's your second rachel chapter!! It's a wild ride, but I hope y'all like it! come say hi to us on tumblr @somethingmorecreative1 and @maireeps!! also thanks for Fall Out Boy for literally all of my chapter titles

Night fell on the compound. It became quieter and darker. Most people were herded inside, with the few men from Shiro’s squadron coming out to stay on guard duty during the night. The lights were regulated, nothing could even be seen outside, and inside the concrete walls, it was softer, quieter. Keith liked it more. If he was going to commit to staying here, then he’d have to consider being moved to night shift because—it felt safer.

He couldn’t say what would happen in the future though. He just knew that he would do whatever Lance wanted, whatever Lance needed. It was that easy. But, he had a feeling Pidge might be right about Lance liking this place, so he needed to come to terms with staying here before Lance woke up and asked him about it. Besides, Shiro was here, and that helped more than anything. He didn’t think it would be too much of a problem but—better safe than sorry.

After his guard shift with Shiro, he’d walked back into the compound to find Coran and Allura. They had been in the lab, and when Shiro asked them to look over Keith, they immediately agreed. They both seemed to be very close friends with Shiro from what Keith could tell so far.

The exam didn’t reveal anything horrific, which was good news to Keith. Coran explained that he had broken a few of his ribs, most likely in the fight, and that carrying Lance for so long could have strained the muscles in his abdomen. Keith had known that had probably been what happened and honestly, he didn’t care. It seemed like a very small price to pay for getting Lance here safely.

“I don’t think there’s anything we can do for this though, my friend,” Coran said, voice low, gesturing to the scar on his face.

Keith shrugged, “It doesn’t matter. It’s just—fine.”

Coran nodded too, shifting back to his usual chipper mood. Allura kept watching him though, and Keith couldn’t figure her out. He’d spoken with her around the compound a few times or when she
was in Lance’s room checking on him, but even from those interactions, he couldn’t get a good read on her. Not yet at least.

Since night had taken over the compound, Keith found himself back in Lance’s room. The lights were low, dimmed so it was dark enough for Keith to maybe sleep a little. Since they’d arrived, he’d been staying here at night, slouching in a chair at Lance’s bedside, waiting. Shiro had offered him a room to sleep in but—he couldn’t make himself leave Lance, and thankfully, no one asked him to.

Keith crossed the room and stood at Lance’s bedside. He was still asleep, but he looked better than he had before. The cut on his throat was already healing enough for the bandages to be removed, and even though he still had the heavy bandage wrapped around his thigh and probably would for a few weeks, it was getting better. Coran said that the wound looked much better now and that hopefully and with enough rest, it wouldn’t be a hard or long recovery.

Lance’s face was peaceful. There were wires attached to him everywhere and monitors that were beeping constantly but—this was good. Coran and the others had assured him that this was good progress and that it wouldn’t be long before he woke up.

The time that had passed already felt like both forever and nothing. It seemed like he had been here for an entire lifetime and like he’d just gotten here yesterday at the same time.

Heaving a sigh, Keith sat down on the edge of Lance’s hospital bed. He carefully, slowly, gently reached down to take Lance’s hand.

Since they’d gotten to the compound and Keith realized that Lance was going to be okay, he’d been sneaking these small touches. It was his hands mostly, but that was only because it felt like the safest place to touch him with all the wires everywhere. It was unsettling at times, to touch Lance and not have any sort of response because from every time before that he had touched Lance… Lance’s response to it was one of his favorite parts.

Keith kept thinking back to that night in the safe house with Lance. He’d been desperate by then, if he was being honest. The stress from the previous day, from them almost dying and then committing to helping a stranger had pushed him over the edge, and Keith had been looking for any excuse to get Lance to touch him for longer than a few seconds. The quickest thing he’d thought of was asking Lance to shave for him which—he thought Lance would call him on his bullshit. Keith had been shaving without a mirror for years now.

He’d gone up to the bathroom when he knew Lance was still in there, and when he’d hesitated outside the door, he had almost turned back.

But then Lance had laughed.

The sound—it was nice. Lance joked a lot, when there was time, and he teased Keith every five minutes about something. He was used to hearing Lance laugh, but it still surprised him, still infatuated him, if he was being honest.

He’d stepped through the door then, asking him what it was he was laughing about before he even realized what was happening.

The shaving plan worked then, when Keith suggested it. Lance had nodded without question, reaching out to take the knife from him and use some of his own face wash and soap on Keith’s skin. He couldn’t belief that it had worked. The only reason he hadn’t done it himself yet was because he’d caught Lance staring at him more than a few times, and he’d wondered if Lance had
started to like how Keith looked with a slight beard.

He would have to test his theory about it later though because—Lance had stepped right into his space and started working.

His hands had been… Keith was having dreams about Lance’s hands.

And then it was just everything because Lance was brushing his fingers over Keith’s jaw, soft, methodical, easy, and stepping into him and Keith was opening up his knees to let Lance get closer and then he was and just—

Keith had been being very cautious from the moment he met Lance. He had tried to respect his space, to not push anything on him, to let Lance be the one to dictate what was going to happen between them and when (and the bigger question: if).

But Lance willingly stepping into his space? Getting close enough for Keith to feel the heat rolling off his body?

He’d never understood the word *intimate* when it was being applied to a moment happening with another person. He hadn’t been able to wrap his head around what that would be like, to be so close to someone else and still want them in your life? Keith had never felt that with someone before, but those few minutes with Lance? Keith wanted to live inside that one moment for the rest of his entire fucking life.

He hadn’t been paying much attention when he’d reached up and grabbed Lance’s hips. The action was completely involuntary. Keith’s head had already been spinning, and he felt like he needed something to hold onto, and Lance was right there. But the way that Lance had shivered at his touch and then relaxed into it like it was the best thing to ever happen to him? Keith hadn’t even been able to think by that point.

It ended too soon. And if he was going to be really honest, the only reason he’d asked Lance to cut his hair was so that he could get just another few minutes of Lance touching him. Thinking about Lance running his fingers through Keith’s hair? Keith had barely managed to get the words out in the correct order, and then, he hadn’t been able to control his surprise at Lance’s reaction, which was even better. They were both already blushing furiously, obviously embarrassed and affected by what was happening between them—this moment that felt like the end of something and the beginning of something better.

The feeling stayed with him all night. When he was supposed to be sleeping in his bedroll right next to Lance, he was awake, staring up at the dark ceiling and reliving it. He’d finally managed to get some sleep after his shift on watch, but it was rough, and even when he’d woken up the next morning and approached Lance about the plan for finding Pidge’s brother, he hadn’t been able to shake the feeling of touching Lance and being touched by him.

Which is why he had just reached out for Lance again, and there must be something about his hips because Keith could not stop touching him there.

No matter what happened, Keith thought that he would always reach for Lance. He couldn’t ever remember feeling like this for someone before, but Lance just took up his entire field of vision. Thinking that he almost lost him—

Keith sighed again, pressing his free hand to his forehead. The steady beeping of the medical equipment was the only other sound in the room, and he was just really fucking tired.
“Wake up, Lance,” Keith pleaded, murmuring to himself. “I need you back with me.”

Another day passed. It was quiet in the compound. The weather was turning colder, chilly up in the guard tower on the far fence. Keith was glad for his new clothes as the temperature fell. His new black jacket was warm, and these boots were made for harsher environments than his camel boots from home. At times, he missed them something terrible, but most often, he couldn’t bring himself to really care about it. Clothes and shoes were the farthest thing from Keith’s mind now.

Keith took a sip of his water and readjusted the grip on his rifle. The fence had been quiet all morning. There weren’t any walkers in sight for now, but Keith knew they were wandering around somewhere beyond his line of sight, waiting. He was glad for the silence, and when someone came to relieve him earlier in the day, he’d sent them back, unwilling to leave the soft quiet and calm he felt on guard duty.

Shiro came later too, bringing along lunch rations late in the afternoon. They had eaten quietly, scanning the perimeter together. Shiro talked about the team that was being sent out to a small subdivision a few miles away to scavenge for supplies left in the houses. It was meant to take place in a few days, and absently, Keith wondered if he might be able to tag along.

While Shiro was describing the mission, the radio clipped to Shiro’s belt crackled.

“Shiro, do you copy?” the voice was grainy, but Keith thought it was Pidge’s brother, Matt.

Shiro frowned, pulling the radio up and glancing at Keith. He spoke into the radio when he said, “Copy.”

“Is Keith with you?”

“Yeah, what’s going on?”

There was a pause and then, “Lance is awake.”

Keith froze.

Shiro was staring back at him, and for a second, neither of them moved, then a slow smile crept up his face. He pulled the radio back up and said, “We’re on our way.”

“Okay, and if you guys could hurry—”

In the background, there was another voice, a low, frantic, “Where’s Keith?”

Keith stopped breathing. That was Lance. That was his voice.

“10-4,” Shiro said, getting to his feet and grabbing Keith’s shoulder to haul him up as well. Keith scrambled to get his feet underneath him, and they rushed to the ladder. Keith went down first, Shiro following him.

They hit the grass and started running. It would take them a few minutes to get to Lance, since they had been this far away even if they sprinted the entire way. Shiro stayed at his side, and they ran straight to the compound and entered through the garage, flying down the halls. Their boots beat against the linoleum floor, echoing against the walls.

Keith slid around the last corner, Shiro right behind him.
He stopped when he saw Pidge standing outside the closed door.

“C’mon,” Pidge smiled, bright, happy. “Lance is asking for you.”

Keith’s heart was beating too hard in his chest, but he somehow managed a nod and stepped forward. He could feel his hands shaking.

Pidge opened the door for him, and they stepped through it. Inside, the room was bright and full of people. Allura and Matt were standing on the far side of the hospital bed, checking the medical equipment, and Coran was standing right beside the head of the bed. He was saying something, but Keith’s vision narrowed because—

Lance was sitting up. He was awake.

Keith wasn’t sure that he could move. Then, Lance looked over at him, and his blue eyes were wide, and he looked nervous, but he was awake. He was alive.

Lance.

He had been scared. He had been terrified of what could have happened, but he didn’t realize how bad he had missed Lance or how much he needed him until this exact moment. Until Lance was reaching out for him after days of not knowing what was going to happen.

Keith lunged forward.

He crossed the room in what felt like one step and grabbed Lance, wrapping one arm around Lance’s middle and the other around his shoulders. One of his hands came up to rest on the back of Lance’s head, fingers threaded into Lance’s hair. He tried to be careful, be gentle, but he couldn’t believe this. If he had doubted that any moment had been real so far, then this one couldn’t be either. It was too nice, it was too perfect. Keith squeezed his eyes shut, and a tear leaked down his cheek.

“Keith,” Lance said his name, voice muffled, and the sound of his voice made Keith’s knees weak. His hands were fisted in Keith’s shirt, and he had his face buried in Keith’s shoulder. “Oh my god, Keith, I woke up and I didn’t know where you were.”

“I’m sorry,” Keith said, and his voice was shaking so badly that it was hard to understand him. “I’m sorry I scared you. I’m right here. We’re safe.”

A few seconds passed, and then Lance pushed at his chest. Keith moved back just enough to look at him. He looked better. He looked alive. The color was back in his face, and his blue eyes were bright. He reached up with one hand and wiped the tear off Keith’s cheek.

“Hi,” he whispered.

Keith sighed, shaky, “Fuck. Hi.”

Lance laughed, and the sound was soft, nervous. He smoothed his hand over Keith’s shoulder and around his neck; his other was still fisted in the material of Keith’s jacket. They were close, and Keith shuddered at the touch. He was so relieved he thought he might pass out.

“What happened?” Lance’s fingers were on his face then, carefully touching the injury on his face, the burn, scar, whatever the hell it was. A permanent reminder of what had happened, what he’d done to that woman, what had been done to Lance too.
A reminder that he’d gotten them here alive, that he’d saved them. A reminder that they had survived another day in the midst of the apocalypse.

Keith reached up and covered Lance’s hand with his own, pressing it to his face and closing his eyes. He didn’t think he could speak yet.

“Hey,” Lance started again, voice soft, “is everything okay?”

Keith nodded, looking down at him, “Now it is. I—I was terrified.”

Lance’s expression was soft as he said, “Me too, but we’re okay. I’m okay.”

Keith nodded again, more to himself than anything.

Lance tugged him forward, back into his arms, and held him close. Keith curled his arms around him, holding on tight. One of Lance’s hands was gripping his bicep, and the other was on the back of his neck. Keith leaned his forehead against Lance’s shoulder, and because of the gap in his hospital gown, Keith’s nose brushed his skin.

A long, long moment passed between them, and Keith felt every part of himself settle back into place. The stress and worry he’d been carrying around on his shoulders fell away.

Finally, Keith pulled back. He didn’t let go, didn’t think he’d ever want to let go of Lance again, but he wanted verbal confirmation that Lance was going to be fine.

Lance was smiling lightly, a faint blush dusting his cheeks.

“How long have you been awake?” Keith asked, voice gruff.

“Not long,” Lance admitted. “I was really confused when I first woke up because I couldn’t find you and then they came in and—I just didn’t know what was happening.”

Keith nodded once, “What’s the last thing you remember?”

He was quiet for a few seconds, and his bit his lip while he was thinking about it. He said, “I remember being in the subway, I think. It’s all really fuzzy, but I remember the bandits and then— getting shot, I guess. I think I could hear…”

“What?” Keith demanded after Lance paused for a second.

Lance’s eyes flickered to the scar on his face. It was enough for Keith to guess what he remembered. He absolutely hated that Lance had to hear any of that.

“But I don’t remember anything about getting here or who any of these people are,” Lance said, and Keith finally remembered that the others were still in the room watching them. He still couldn’t feel anything other than relief, honestly.

“Remember the brother I told you about?” Keith asked.

Lance’s expression shifted from confused to a hesitant smile. He glanced over Keith’s shoulder and said, “No way.”

Keith smiled too, “Shiro found me and brought us back to his military compound. Coran and Allura saved you, and after I knew you were going to be okay, Shiro and I went back for Pidge and Artax because, well, Pidge’s brother is here too.”
Lance blinked up at him. He was quiet for a few seconds, and he gripped Keith’s bicep in one of his hands still. He said, “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“I can’t remember any of that.”

Keith started to say that it was okay, but Coran interrupted him. The older man’s voice was gentle when he said, “You were very injured, Lance. If Keith and Shiro hadn’t gotten you here as fast as they did, you would not have survived.”

Lance looked back up to Keith then and said, “It sounds like you saved me.”

Lance’s eyes were so intense that Keith had to look away. He tried to swallow the heavy clump of tears in his throat as he nodded. He just—still couldn’t believe any of this.

Pidge stepped up to Keith’s side, opposite of Coran, and her smile was soft but excited when she nodded and said, “And he found my brother. We’re all so glad you’re awake, Lance.”

Lance’s expression softened, and he let go of Keith long enough to reach for Pidge and hug her. Keith knew that Lance already thought of her as a sister, no doubt carving a space into their small family for her. He just hoped Lance would be ready to add all the others as well.

Lance pushed back and smiled, “Thanks, Pidge.”

Keith kept one hand curled around Lance’s shoulder until Coran spoke up and said, “We should check Lance’s vitals again and rebandage the wound now that he’s awake and talk a little about what recovery will look like, I suppose. Keith, would you, Shiro, and Pidge mind waiting outside while we do that?”

That was the last thing that Keith wanted, but he also wanted Lance’s health to come first. They would both be too distracted by being in the same room with each other. It would be faster and better for Coran, Allura, and Matt to look over Lance now.

“Is that okay?” Keith asked Lance.

He nodded, even though he was clutching Keith’s hand. His voice was just a murmur when he said, “You’ll just be right outside though, right?”

“Right,” Keith assured him, nodding. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Lance nodded again, and he squeezed Keith’s hand before he let go.

It felt too much like a goodbye though; Keith ducked forward and pressed his forehead against Lance’s, uncaringly that everyone in the room was watching. All that mattered was that Lance was okay, that Lance knew that they were both alright and that it was safe here.

Lance leaned forward into him, hand resting on Keith’s chest, right over his heart, and after a few seconds, he gently pushed him back. His eyes were open, warm, and he was smiling lightly.

“I’ll be right outside,” Keith murmured.

He nodded, and Keith pulled back and turned around. He crossed the room quickly, Pidge and Shiro opening the door and stepping out into the hallway before him. He hesitated when he got to the threshold of the door and looked back.
Lance was still smiling, and he nodded again before glancing over to Coran.

Keith sighed and closed the door behind him.

“You okay?” Shiro asked the question a few seconds later, when the silence became awkward.

Keith shook his head and covered his face with his hands. The tears he’d been fighting since he’d heard Lance’s voice on the radio earlier were already rolling down his cheeks. He stumbled over to the wall and pressed his back to it, sliding down to the floor and resting his arms and head on his knees.

He just—he was so relieved that he couldn’t breathe. Lance was alive, Lance was awake, Lance was right on the other side of the door.


“I know,” Keith murmured, trying to stifle his tears.

When he looked up, Shiro and Pidge were both smiling, and they had tears in their eyes too. Pidge was wiping her face from where she was sitting against the wall at Keith’s side.

“I can’t believe—” Keith stopped as suddenly as he’d started.

Shiro nodded and gripped his shoulder, “He’s awake. He’s safe.”

Keith nodded too, wiping the last of the tears away. The unease from not knowing about Lance’s condition was finally abating, and something else was settling in its place, something protective, something… different.

Everything felt different. His entire world had become different in the span of just a few days, like maybe he was finally adjusting to the apocalypse and becoming someone who had something to survive for. For Lance. For Shiro, Pidge, maybe Coran and Allura, maybe even this place.

Pidge leaned her head over onto Keith’s shoulder and stayed there. Shiro was still in front of him, holding onto him, keeping him steady. They all stayed there, huddled together in the hallway for a long while, until the door opened and Allura stuck her head out, silver ponytail swaying.

Her smile was warm as she looked them over and said, “You can all come in now. Lance is ready to meet everyone officially.”

Keith hauled himself to his feet. Shiro and Pidge followed him.

Lance was standing up, even though he was clutching Coran’s arm and wincing as he took a step, he was still up, still moving when they entered the room. Keith smiled softly, crossing the room so he could take Lance’s other hand.

“How do you feel?” he asked roughly.

“Good,” Lance nodded, glancing up at him. Those blue eyes were going to be Keith’s undoing, he swore. “My leg is sore, but it’s good.”

“Lance is right,” Coran said brightly. “The gunshot wound looks much better now. The stitches are healing nicely, and there are no signs of infection. We’ve rebandaged it and expect that while walking may be difficult for a few days, the soreness should dissipate with careful use and more rest.”
“And everything else?” Keith asked, shifting his gaze to Coran.

Coran smiled and nodded, “His vitals look great. He’s going to be just fine.”

Lance was already looking at him, smiling, when Keith turned back to him.

Keith cleared his throat and glanced over to Shiro, who was smiling as he watched them. Then, to Lance, Keith said, “You’ve met everyone else, I guess, but this is my brother, Shiro.”

“Shiro,” Lance said, and hearing his name come out of Lance’s mouth was weird, like two worlds were suddenly colliding. “Hey, I’m Lance.”

Shiro nodded, “Nice to finally meet you, Lance. I’m glad you’re awake. Keith hasn’t stopped worrying about you since I found him.”

Lance laughed a little as Keith rolled his eyes. He turned his head to look at Keith, and the small smirk on his face made Keith’s stupid heart skip a beat in his chest.

“That true, cowboy?”

Keith snorted, “Not really a cowboy anymore. I lost all my shit when I was saving our asses.”

Lance stopped from where they had been taking a slow step forward. His eyes looked Keith up and down and then widened, like he’d just now realized that Keith wasn’t wearing his usual garb. Lance’s eyes lingered on the scar on his face when he got back up to it.

His voice was almost a whisper when he asked, “What happened?”

Keith shrugged, “I had to use my shirt to make bandages for your leg, and honestly, I forgot to pick my jacket back up when I grabbed you and ran. Everything else was ruined.”

“No, I guess it’s still with Artax.”

“Artax is okay?”

“Yeah, she’s fine,” Keith said, aiming for a soothing tone. He didn’t like how worried Lance sounded about all of this. “She’s in the yard now.”

A second of silence passed before Lance frowned, “I guess all my stuff was ruined too?”

Keith shook his head, motioning off to the corner of the room, where the chair he’d been sleeping in sat, which held Lance’s bag that Keith had drug back with them. He said, “I got your bag. It has your jacket in it and some other stuff but—your clothes were ruined, yeah.”

Lance was staring at him, and it was like he’d forgotten everyone else was in the room with them. He asked, “You saved my jacket but forgot yours?”

“I thought you might want it when—or if…” Keith cleared his throat again. “I just thought you might want it later, so I grabbed it.”

Lance didn’t reply, so silence fell over the room. Matt excused himself, saying he needed to check in at the lab and close what they had been working on today. Keith made a note to himself to thank Matt later for all he’d done for Lance. Pidge darted back over to their side to give Lance one more careful hug before following him out.
“Okay, Lance,” Coran started, “I think that’s enough for today. You’ll need to be very careful and not walk or stand for long periods of time on that leg until it’s fully healed. We can give you a new set of clothes, and those bandages can be wrapped up so you can take a shower later. We will try and change them again tomorrow evening.”

“Thank you,” Lance said it the same time as Keith said, “Thanks, Coran.”

“Shiro can get you set up with a room where you will be more comfortable. I imagine you’ve been in this one long enough,” Allura said, smiling softly.

Lance shook his head, “I’ll just stay in Keith’s room, if that’s okay.”

“Um,” Keith started, and Lance glanced over at him, expression alarmed, like he’d done something wrong, so he quickly continued, “I don’t really have a room yet. Shiro can give us one.”

Lance frowned, “Then where have you been sleeping?”

“In that chair over there,” he sighed.

There was a pause, and then, Lance took his hand from Coran’s grip and swatted Keith’s chest, shoving against him enough that Keith stumbled a little. He said, “You dumb bastard, you probably haven’t gotten any sleep in that thing!”

Shiro laughed suddenly, covering the sound with a cough before pressing his hand to his mouth to no doubt hide the smile there.

“I slept enough,” Keith corrected half-heartedly, trying to keep himself from smiling too. He was just—so fucking happy. Lance was awake and alive and already yelling at him for not taking care of himself.

“Yeah sure,” Lance rolled his eyes, shoving at Keith’s chest again. “I would have been fine. You needed the rest.”

He wasn’t sure what made him do it but, Keith caught Lance’s wrist and held their hands to his chest as he said, “I couldn’t make myself leave you. I didn’t sleep a fucking wink, but I don’t care. I’d do it again tonight, tomorrow, and forever if I had to. I go where you go.”

The weight of what Keith said really hit him after a few seconds, but it was too late. If Lance didn’t know what Keith was feeling by now then—well, one of them would have to put all of their cards on the table at some point. Keith was just getting an early start. Saying it in front of Coran, Allura, and Shiro hadn’t been part of any plan he’d ever had, but he would take what he could get.

But the look on Lance’s face? So worth it.

His eyes were wide and shining, filled with emotion, and his jaw had dropped down so that his mouth was open just a smidge. It was the expression he wore when he was surprised by something, surprised by Keith especially.

Instead of replying, he just nodded.

Finally, Shiro cleared his throat and said, “The room across from mine is empty, if you and Lance want to take that one, Keith.”

Keith broke the eye contact he’d been holding with Lance to look over to Shiro. He nodded, “Yeah, thanks, Shiro.”
Shiro pushed off from where he was leaning up against the wall and jerked his head toward Keith. He said, “Come with me to check it out then. Coran and Allura can help Lance change and then we’ll come back for him.”

Before agreeing, Keith looked back to Lance. He squeezed Keith’s hand in his grip and nodded.

Coran took Lance’s arm as Keith let go.

As Keith crossed the room toward Shiro, he only glanced back once.

Shiro caught Keith’s eye and laughed, glancing back over Keith’s shoulder to where Lance was standing with Coran and Allura. He said, “I was right about what I told you in the Humvee.”

Keith rolled his eyes, remembering how Shiro had said it would be fun to watch what was happening between him and Lance. He felt a blush starting to creep up into his face, and Lance had no doubt heard what he’d said. Keith shoved Shiro as he walked out of the room, growling, “Shut the fuck up, Shiro.”

Shiro laughed again, ducking his head back into the room, “We’ll be back in a few minutes,” before closing the door and catching up to Keith.

He could feel the teasing that was no doubt coming on. Shiro would never let him live any of this down.

Shiro must have decided to give him a break though because they walked down the hallway in silence. Keith had never been in this part of the compound before, but he knew that most people had private rooms here while a few of the other, larger groups of people shared bunks in the soldier barracks to all stay together. After a few minutes, Shiro stopped in front of a door and gestured to the door directly behind them.

“That’s my room, if you need me,” Shiro said, pulling open the door and stepping inside. “And this can be yours.”

He flicked the light on. It was bigger than Keith thought it would be. There was a large bed in one corner of the room, tucked into the wall and surrounded by storage cabinets. On the other side of the room, there was a large desk and chair, and then a sofa was pushed into the remaining corner of the room with a lamp sitting next to it. There was a door that led to a small bathroom, which was really nice. Keith had been using the communal showers, which was fine, but this would be much better for him and Lance to share.

This was really nice. Definitely nicer than anywhere he and Lance had stayed before.

“Hey,” Shiro said suddenly, “you okay?”

“Yeah,” Keith responded with a nod. “I’m just—tired.”

Shiro nodded, “Take tomorrow off and spend time with Lance. We’ll cover your guard rotation for a while.”

Keith wanted to object, but honestly, that sounded amazing. He said, “You sure?”

“Yeah, of course,” Shiro smiled. “You deserve it.”

“Thanks, Shiro.”
“No problem. You ready to go back and get Lance and the rest of your stuff?”

Keith nodded, and they walked back out into the hallway.

“And Keith?”

“Yeah?”

Shiro was already smiling when he started, “I like Lance. I think he’s good for you, but I’m going to make so much fun of you from now on.”

He rolled his eyes, “Well, obviously.”

Keith and Shiro carried everything over to their room in one trip since Coran and Allura were still helping Lance get changed. They didn’t have much, just Lance’s bag that he’d been carrying and then the other supplies they’d left with Artax, including their backpacks, the bedrolls, and Lance’s guitar. Keith hadn’t gone through any of Lance’s stuff, but Pidge had given him Lance’s phone from a few days ago when they had left her outside of D.C. It had almost destroyed him, that first day. Keith had kept it on him the entire time, tucked away in the pockets of his pants for safekeeping.

After they’d dropped everything off in the room, it was already late. Dinner rations were being handed out in the cafeteria, and instead of following Keith back to get Lance, Shiro headed down to get them something and bring it up to them for later. Keith was both starving and exhausted, and he hoped Lance would feel like eating something in a while.

Keith walked back to the medical wing to get Lance. When he turned the corner, Allura was leaving the room, probably heading down to get dinner.

“Hey, Allura?” Keith said.

She smiled, “Hi, Keith. Lance is waiting on you.”

“Yeah,” he glanced toward the door before looking back at her. “Um, I just wanted to say—thank you for everything. You and Coran just… I can never repay you for what you’ve done.”

Her expression softened, “Of course. I can’t imagine what it would be like to lose what Lance must be to you.”

Keith ducked his head, nodding.

She bid him a soft goodbye as she walked away.

Keith opened the door slowly, searching it until he found Lance. He was sitting on the edge of the hospital bed, wearing a pair of dark gray sweatpants and a white, long sleeve t-shirt. He had on socks, but no shoes. His hair was falling in messy waves across his forehead from where he was looking down at his lap. He looked like a fucking supermodel instead of someone who had literally come back from the dead.

Get it together, Keith thought to himself.

“Hey,” he said softly, trying to catch Lance’s attention.

He looked up and smiled, “Hey.”
“Ready to go?” he asked.

Lance nodded, “Coran is getting some medicine for me. He said he’d be right back.”

“Okay.”

The silence that took up the space between them suddenly became awkward. Keith leaned back against the wall near the door, watching as Lance bit his lip and looked at everything in the room except for him.

“You feel okay?” Keith asked, voice hesitant, soft.

Lance nodded, “Yeah but—”

“Here it is! I knew we had some in the back stock!” Coran interrupted before Lance could continue. “Hello, Keith! I was just finding some pain medicine for young Lance here. It’s best that he takes these with food for the next few days to help with the pain from using his leg. We’ll look over the stitches again tomorrow and change the bandage, but for now I imagine both of you are ready to sleep.”

Keith nodded, drifting over to Lance’s side. He took the pill bottle from Coran and tucked it into his jacket pocket.

Coran continued, “We have some crutches around here somewhere that I’ll look for in the morning, but for tonight, it might be best if Keith carries you if you’ll be walking for more than a few steps. That leg is going to be very sore, and it’s best to not overuse it.”

“Okay,” Lance agreed.

“And if you need anything in the night, Shiro knows where to find me,” the older man smiled.

“Thanks, Coran,” Keith said it again because—this was everything.

“I’ll check in on you in the morning, Lance,” Coran nodded to both of them. “For now, get plenty of rest.”

Lance nodded and thanked Coran again before he left the room. Keith stood quietly for a few seconds, hands tucked into his pockets, hesitant, excited, and nervous all at the same time.

Lance sighed, wincing as he stood up too. He reached out for Keith automatically, and Keith grabbed his arm, trying to give him enough support to take some of the weight off his leg. Keith knew that it had to be hurting.

“What’s wrong?”


“What if—I’m still sleeping and this is a dream? What if I wake up and you’re not there? What if—”
Keith tightened his grip on Lance’s arm and took his shoulder with his other hand. His voice was fierce when he said, “That won’t happen. You’re awake. I’m right here. I’ll always be right here.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I can’t stand to be apart from you and I just won’t do it. Ever.”

Lance stared at him for a few long seconds. Then, he nodded.

“Okay,” Keith said again. “Ready?”

“Is it really safe here? And what is this place?” Lance asked.

He wanted to roll his eyes at Lance’s attempt to stall. He took Lance’s arm and put it around his neck and slipped one of his arms around Lance’s waist. Keith folded his other arm under Lance’s knees and picked him up off the ground, trying to be careful not to jostle his leg too much.

“Jesus Christ, Keith,” Lance’s voice was annoyed, but when Keith glanced at him, there was a deep blush rushing up his neck to his cheeks.

He smiled and started forward, “Yeah, it’s safe here. It’s a military compound. Apparently, Shiro’s squadron was stationed here when they got word of the virus hitting Europe. Coran came with Allura and was working on a vaccine back before everything fell.”

“Is he still working on it?”

Keith turned down the hallway and started toward their room. He shrugged, “I have no idea. He’s been looking after you with Allura and Matt’s help, so I have no idea if he ever found anything. I haven’t asked Shiro about it either.”

Lance didn’t reply. Instead, he laid his head over onto Keith’s shoulder.

The rest of the walk was quiet. They didn’t pass anyone in the hall on their way, which was nice. Keith had met most of the people in the compound so far, and no one really struck him as horrible, but he’d had no patience to learn anyone’s name beyond Shiro’s closest friends, not with Lance being so injured.

They arrived at the door to their room, and when Keith hesitated, trying to juggle Lance, he reached out and opened the door for them. Keith stepped inside.

“This is nice,” Lance said, voice soft, after a few seconds.

Keith nodded.

“You can put me down, Keith.”

“Oh, right,” he said, and carefully, he set Lance down on his feet, watching as Lance winced.

Lance limped over to the bed against the wall and sat down on the edge of it. Watching him, Keith realized how alone they really were right now.

“Um,” Keith started, desperately trying to fill the silence between them. He pulled Lance’s phone from his pocket and held them out.

Lance perked up, smiling as Keith handed them over. He said, “You have it?”
“Pidge kept it with her, and once we knew that you were going to be okay, she gave it to me. I’ve been carrying it until—I could give it back to you.”

“Thanks. That… I really appreciate it,” Lance smoothed his hand over the phone’s screen.

Keith turned away, crossing the room to the desk. He took Lance’s medicine out of his jacket pocket and set it there, where he would hopefully remember to give it to Lance later. Keith grabbed one of their bedrolls and started to unroll it on the floor.

“Keith.”

“Yeah?”

Lance was looking at him when he glanced up. He shook his head and said, “We can share, you doofus.”

“You sure?”

“When’s the last time you slept in a real bed?”

Keith frowned, trying to suppress the smile that was threatening to overtake his face. He said, “Who fucking knows,” and threw the bedroll back into the pile of their other stuff.

He still hesitated there though, for some stupid reason.

Lance was watching him already. After a long moment of silence between them, he said, “Okay, tell me what the hell happened. You don’t even—you look like a completely different person.”

“Is that bad?” Keith asked.

“Of course not. I just—something horrible obviously happened.”

“You were fucking shot. You almost died.”

“Right,” Lance said, voice soft. He patted the spot next to him. “Come tell me what happened.”

Keith sighed, pressing a hand to his forehead. He’d been hoping that Lance would never ask about it but—that was a stupid thing to think. Of course Lance wanted to know what had happened to them. After all, if the situation had been reversed, Keith would be dying to know what Lance had gone through.

“It’s just me,” Lance said, somehow even softer.

It was enough to get him moving. He sat down beside Lance, just barely two inches away from him.

“I’ll tell you what I remember,” Lance started. “We were coming up from the subway tunnel, and you were so tired that you couldn’t even boost yourself up to the platform. I remember you saying Help me, Lance, oh you’re so strong.”

Keith laughed at Lance’s attempt to mimic his voice. He finally felt himself relaxing as he said, “I’m pretty sure that’s not what happened.”

“Hmm, sounds accurate to me. After you complimented my amazing muscles, which you’re right about by the way, we started up the platform to find the stairs up to the street.”
“Right.”

“And that’s when one of them grabbed me.”

Keith nodded. He’d never get that out of his head. That second when someone else had grabbed Lance and held a weapon to his throat—the image would haunt Keith’s nightmares forever.

“So then, we were… they started fighting with each other, I think. I remember thinking that it might be the only chance to get away from them, but they shot me first.”

Keith swallowed. His voice was rough when he said, “Yeah. That’s right.”

Keith remembered the exact moment. He hadn’t been expecting Lance to even move, let alone attack one of them. He hadn’t yet figured out how he was going to get them out of it or what he could do at that point, so when Lance attacked first, Keith hadn’t been ready. Lance had jumped toward him, but there was too much space in between them, and Keith hadn’t had time to grab him before the bandit pulled the trigger.

“That’s all I can really remember,” Lance admitted, breaking Keith out of the memory. “The rest of it is just… choppy. I think I could hear you fighting some of them, and then, I was awake at one point when we were on the streets, but… honestly that might have been a dream. I can’t really tell the difference.”

Keith nodded, clearing his throat. He didn’t want to tell this story again but—Lance deserved to know.

“They shot you,” Keith started, voice low, rough, “and you were losing blood fast. I killed one of them, then the leader, when they attacked me. I tried to grab you from the man who had you, and when I killed him, I thought we might make it out.”

When Keith paused, Lance prompted him with a soft, “But?”

“The woman jumped me. I was trying to keep her away from you, so we rolled down into the tunnel, and she pinned me. I cut my face on the gravel, and I can remember just being really fucking tired,” Keith explained. “She, um, dragged me over to the tracks. One of them still had the electric charge, and when she held me down, she shoved my face onto it.”

Lance’s eyes were wide, horrified, and his jaw dropped open in shock.

He nodded, “That's how I got the scar. I know it looks—disgusting. Anyway, I knocked her off me, and when I got up, I grabbed my sword to finish it but…”

“But?”

Keith looked away, unsure that he could say it to Lance’s face, “I fed her to a walker instead. I was just… I was so fucking angry about what happened and when the walker came out of the tunnel, I can’t even remember what I was thinking. I just grabbed her and then waited until it bit her.”

“What happened then?” Lance asked, and his voice didn’t reveal anything.

“I grabbed you and just started fucking running. Your bag was at the bottom of the stairs, so I stopped and got it, and by then, I could hear the horde that we’d been running from catching up, so I just hauled ass and got up the stairs as fast as I could,” Keith said, looking down at his hands in his lap. “But I—you were right when you said that I was tired. I fell on the street, and then I tried to patch you up as best as I could. There wasn’t anything in your bag, so I took my shirt off and used
“I was fucking terrified,” Keith admitted, letting out a long breath. “I kept trying to think of what to do, of how I might save us, but I literally had no idea. I thought you were going to die. So I just… I grabbed my sword and your bag and picked you up and ran.”

“How did you go?”

Keith shrugged, “I had no idea where I was going. I avoided streets with walkers, tried to outrun any that caught up with me, and got really fucking lucky. It was—god, I don’t even know how long it was because my sense of time was so fucked up, but Shiro told me later that the subway entrance we’d probably been at was at least 6 miles from his location.”

“How did Shiro find us?” Lance asked, leaning in a little closer to Keith.

“I ran right into him. We were surrounded by walkers; they were everywhere. I spotted a Humvee that looked like it might still run, and when I got close enough to it, someone started yelling at me. When I turned around, Shiro was standing right there.”

“Just like that?”

Keith nodded, “Yeah, I couldn’t believe it either. I thought he was a ghost.”

“So you got into the Humvee with him?”

“You were awake,” Keith murmured. “When I looked down at you, your eyes were open, and you were moving in my arms and—I didn’t have another option. I would have done anything right then to keep you alive.”

Lance shifted even closer to his shoulder, and Keith could feel him watching his face, but Keith didn’t think he could stand to look over to him. The room was quiet.

When Lance didn’t say anything else, Keith cleared his throat and continued. He said, “We got in the Humvee, and that’s when I noticed your head was bleeding too. I was—panicking. I can’t even remember most of it now, but I think Shiro was shouting at me to calm down and the only thing that I can really remember is looking down at you and thinking that you were going to die right there in my arms and there wouldn’t be anything I could do to stop it, that you might just slip away from me.”

Keith realized that there were tears in his eyes again, and he thought he could hear Lance sniffling beside him, but he was too afraid to check. He leaned forward, pressing his forearms to his knees and casually wiped the tears away.

He continued, “But you were okay. We made it to the compound in time. We got you to Coran in time, and they did the surgery and saved you. And it’s been five days since then.”

“Five days?”

Keith nodded, “Coran said that the longer you slept the better, especially with the head injury. He didn’t think there was anything serious about it, but you would come in and out of consciousness a lot, and then you finally woke up today.”

Lance was quiet beside him for a long moment until he said, “That’s—insane, Keith.”

“Yeah.”
Another moment and then, “I’m sorry you had to go through that alone.”

And that right there almost broke Keith. He had been agonizing and torturing himself over Lance being almost killed, then asleep, terrified that he wasn’t going to wake up at all. Keith had just missed him so fucking much. He couldn’t even express how much he’d missed Lance, there were no fucking words to do it.

Keith stood up suddenly and took a few steps away from the bed, like the space might help him calm down. He was just—so fucking tired and relieved and, and everything.

He wasn’t sure what else to say, so he stayed quiet. His back was facing Lance, and after a while, he heard Lance stand up, and then, his hands were on Keith’s back.

“Hey,” Lance’s voice was as soft as Keith had ever heard it before. “Talk to me.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say whatever you need to.”

“I don’t know how.”

Lance paused and then whispered, “Then turn around.”

He hesitated, but then, he turned.

Lance was standing at his back, and as Keith turned, he dropped his hands to his sides. He was looking up at Keith because he was standing close enough for the two-inch, barely noticeable height difference between them to be very noticeable all of a sudden. His face was open, and his eyes were bright.

Neither of them spoke right away. It was quiet, intense in the room.

Intimate, some silly part of Keith whispered.

Without meaning to, without really knowing that he was moving at all, Keith reached out and grabbed Lance’s hips, spreading his hands over the curves at his waist and holding on to him.

Lance was soft in his arms, and his hands came up to Keith’s elbows. His voice was soft too when he said, “It felt like the end of the world then they grabbed me.”

Keith couldn’t stand to look at Lance’s face. Instead, he stared down at his own hands on Lance’s hips.

Lance continued, “All I could think about was you. I just—I was terrified that something bad was going to happen to you too, and when I woke up and you weren’t there, I thought you were dead.”

“I’m sorry,” Keith murmured.

One of Lance’s hands moved up his arm and caught his chin, pulling Keith’s face up to look at him. He said, “It wasn’t your fault. You saved us. You kept us safe. You did that, no one else. I would be dead if it wasn’t for you.”

Keith nodded, and Lance’s hand came up to frame Keith’s cheek, right over his scar.

He tried to turn away, but Lance traced his fingers right down the center of it, soft, easy. Keith suppressed a shiver.
“I’m sorry that you got this scar in the first place,” Lance started, flicking his eyes up to meet Keith’s. “But I like it.”

“You what?” Keith asked, voice rough.

Lance smiled a little, “I like the scar. I think it’s hot. Plus, it reminds me that you’re alive and that you kept us safe.”

Keith squeezed Lance’s hips. Lance thought it was hot. Lance liked the scar.

A long, long moment passed between them. Keith didn’t let go of Lance, and Lance never moved back. Instead, they stayed right in the center of the room, wrapped around each other, staring at one another for—Keith didn’t know how long.

Finally, Lance leaned forward and dropped his head to Keith’s shoulder. He murmured, “You’re still the hero. Thanks for keeping me alive.”

Keith let out a shaky breath and felt everything slot back together. Lance was alive. Lance was awake. Lance was back with Keith, and everything was fine. Everything was better than fine.

He’d almost lost Lance, and he would never forget that feeling. He’d never had anything like this before Lance, but it was engrained all the way down to his fucking soul now. The apocalypse might have destroyed the entire world, but now, standing here with Lance, Keith wondered if he’d found everything that he’d ever wanted right in the middle of the end of the world.

He guessed he’d have to wait and find out, but if he had any say in it, this was it for him, and Keith wasn’t planning on letting go, apocalypse be damned.
There were only glimpses for a while. He wasn’t sure how long, but he knew from the ache in his bones and the shifting of his limp limbs that it had been a while. His first glimpse after the hazy moments of the bandits’ assault, he was pressed so close to Keith’s chest that he could smell the soft musk of him - beyond thick layers of blood twang that filled his nose. The pain was so immense he barely felt it anymore, and Keith’s bare skin - covered in a slick red haze - was brushing his cheek. There was yelling, loud and sharp, human, and he could barely make out Keith looking down at him before he was out again.

At the next glimpse of consciousness, he didn’t even open his eyes. There was the rumble of a car - something he hadn’t heard in a long time but knew instantly. There was no panic in him then, he was warm and snug against Keith. Everything hurt and tears bubbled in his eyes before he was gone once more.

The first actual time Lance woke up, it was to immense pain.

The bright-eyed man looked grim. Lance can barely focus his vision, red hot searing pain piercing up his spine and making him struggle, flimsy and weak, against firm hands.

There was ragged gasping, distant and loud and horrible. The man was instructing others onward on a stretcher, bumping against rough terrain and causing Lance more pain. He wanted to move but his body was weighed down and unresponsive. There were no familiar faces in his vision and a mask firmly descended over his mouth - sharp, hard chemical air stabbing his lungs.

When Lance passed out again, he realized the gasping was his.

The second time Lance woke up, the pain was dull and throbbing. The room was still, and dust particles float aimlessly in the light that wafted through the window to his right. He ached all over and the bed creaked when he tried to shift downward. New pain blossomed in his leg, and he remembered faintly that he was shot. There was pressure on his hand, and he turned.

Keith’s messy black hair spilled all over the side of the bed. His body shuddered with soft even breathing, a perfectly peaceful image of the man despite the iron grip he had on Lance’s left hand, fingers close to the IV in Lance’s skin.
Soft birdsong was distant outside, and there were rumblings of chatter and foot traffic beyond his window. Lance wasn’t sure where he was, but if Keith was comfortable enough to sleep here, so was he. He gripped Keith’s hand back just as tightly and drifted off again.

The compound lacked central heating, and his body throbbed with the aches and pains of surgery (unaided by whatever painkillers he hadn’t taken yet), but beyond it all, the bed was glorious. Even with its tiny height, coils, and springs, he praised all the higher powers to not be sleeping on the floor right now. It was also in that praise, that he commended Keith for the power of body heat.

Lance woke up on his second day conscious at the compound drooling down the neck of Keith’s shirt. The soft morning bled through the broken curtains in the room and leaked in streaked rows onto the ground. The air smelled of dust, a hint of mold, but heavy, deep sleep. Keith’s body was so warm the pain could almost - almost - disappear. His eyes lifted heavily, body protesting as he woke up gently, raising his head from the nook next to Keith’s shoulder and neck.

He was significantly more on Keith’s side of the bed than when he had fallen asleep last night, he thought, sleepily scratching his head and bracing himself up with one arm. Keith, ever the gentleman, had sparingly taken the edge of the bed not pushed against the wall to, in fact, give Lance enough room in the first place. Instead, Lance’s need for warmth had swindled them both. Keith’s head was turned away into the pillows, and his body was entirely relaxed - not at all taunt with nerves or paranoia like they had to sleep on the road before. Lance hummed, appreciating the moment to survey the sleeping man - from the tufts of silky black hair on his head to where the fingers of his lax left hand rested acutely under a thin blanket.

Keith was beautiful.

Faint echoes of the Skyliners played in his damaged head, god he was sure he might be going crazy, but Keith was so so beautiful. His hair was long, ink on cotton sheets and spilling like tendrils of silky black ore, and his chin cut the most fabulous line - accentuated by that damn scar, sharpening already tight cheekbones. He could wax poetic about this stupid man - who was arguably pretty stupid for him too, but it felt like such a crime that he wasn’t some master songwriter to put a beat under his stupid poetry. God. Stupid.

Keith shifted and Lance’s throat jumped.

He peeked a sliver of a glance to Lance, fingers twitching and face screwed up with sleep.

“Morning, Sleeping Beauty.” Lance grinned, flicking one of Keith’s wayward black strands of hair his way. The stuttering of his stupid heart was in his throat, echoing louder as Keith pushed himself up to a sitting position, thinning the space between them in a fluid movement.

Lance was scrambling, watching Keith scratch his chest absentmindedly and peer at him almost unbelievably. When was the last time he slept with someone? He couldn’t recall, not even after some hookups - it was part of sharing a dorm with Nyma but also because he hadn’t ever felt this… close to someone before.

“You look like you slept well,” Lance teased, hollow with nervousness, which deepened as Keith nodded, slow and almost childlike. He hadn’t seen Keith this vulnerable and well, sleepy before - he was cute.

Keith’s voice was so low, rumbly, deep, it left Lance tingling as he said, “I did,” and god -

“Well okay, um, excuse me!” Lance squeaked, limbs flying as he tried to skirt around Keith in the small bed, leg bursting with pain but his spine was prickling with stupid longing and stupider
overwhelmingly deep desire and god he had to flee. He careened himself off the side of the bed with a teetering and precarious pitch, trying not to audibly react to the small hand Keith pressed against the small of his back to help him stand.

He was too perfect - Lance wanted to accuse. How dare he know exactly when to help and when to let Lance do what he could. His face was in flames, but carefully and quickly, he hobbled to his bag. The bend was difficult with his leg pulsing angrily at him for the movement, so he kept his knees gently locked and bent to collect his toiletries.

Tittering toward the bathroom, he breathed a sigh of relief as he closed the door behind him. Lance unceremoniously dumped his bottles of face wash and product onto the small counter, steadying his breathing by setting up the bottles into a small corner. He used a small squirt of toothpaste onto his bristled out toothbrush and poked it in his mouth without water, eyes trailing over the walls. The compound was so sterile, but that bed had been heaven in so many ways. He wanted to desperately ignore the fact that he brought this upon himself - what did he think was going to happen when he suggested sharing a room or even sharing a bed?

He spit the toothpaste out after scrubbing and rinsed out his mouth, sparingly with the water. It was surprising enough that the water was running from the facet - but the compound had been military so they would have the resources and whatever mechanisms to keep them running, he supposed. Idly, as he opened his face wash and squeezed a dollop in his hand, he wondered if the shower would run. A hot shower after a long sleep in a real bed - he never thought it could get this good again.

As he scrubbed his face in slow methodical circles, he caught a flash of something out of the corner of his eye. In the tiny bathroom, right on the wall just next to the doorway as a mirror - crusted and dirty, as most of the compound was at this point. He paused, then quickly splashed his hands and used them on the dirty surface of the mirror - nails scratching at the cake of dirt and rust. Slowly his reflection became visible and he quickly splashed the face wash from his cheeks and chin before looking into the mirror’s surface.

His skin was dull, but obviously slowly becoming more lively as he recovered. His hair - god he didn’t want to think about how long it had gotten, enough to curl at the ends against his forehead and no longer fall as straight as before. He was skinny, as usual, but the slim toned muscle of his shoulders and upper arms was new and as he admired the muscle, pulling his t-shirt sleeves away, he noticed the scar.

It was long, arching, paler than his brown skin and stark against the top of his jugular in an ugly menacingly stretched smile across his neck. He remembered the slit, remember the cut of a blade against his throat in hostage. Lance just didn’t…

His throat was choked as he called, horrified, “Keith!”

And in seconds Keith was there, bursting through the door without hesitation, hair and eyes wild. Lance barely allowed himself a moment to let his eyes roam over Keith’s beautiful face before tilting his head back and pointing at the scar, “What is this?”

Keith faltered, shifting in the doorway, “What do you mean? It’s from the bandit who –”

“I know,” Lance cried, “but you didn’t tell me it was so... so ugly.”

Keith twitched, narrowing his eyes as Lance straightened and fawned in horror over the scar in the mirror again, “Ugly? You said mine was, uh, nice.”
“Yours is nice,” Lance whined, touching the scar with delicate fingertips like he could somehow heal the stupid thing, “Your scar is hot. It accentuates your cheekbones and makes your jawline nice. This one looks like a stupid Joker scar across my neck and its about a billion shades lighter than my skin tone and it utterly ruins my skin!”

Keith floundered, shifting feet and gripping the doorway still, face pink, “Lance, it doesn’t look bad … Sorry I didn’t –”

Lance flicked his eyes over to Keith, serious suddenly, “Don’t you apologize. It’s absolutely not your fault, you saved my life,” They held each other’s eyes for a beat, Lance lingering on Keith’s scar before whipping around to his in the mirror again, “But now my appeal is all gone! I was taking such pride in my skin during this whole apocalypse - ugh. How am I supposed to be the pretty one now?!?”

“You are beautiful,” Keith said solemnly.

Lance snorted, “Thanks, Keith, I get it - this is definitely not what I should be worried about but -”

“Lance.”

He wearily looked at Keith in the doorway, who was not stepping into the threshold with something intense in his eyes, “What?”

“You’re beautiful.”

Oh. Keith kept a firm hand on the door handle, the other sliding off the doorway and reaching out - the intensity in his eyes swallowing Lance whole.

It was almost comical when Coran, with hardly half a knock, burst into their room, stalling Keith in his step closer like he was a freeze-frame, “Hello my boys! Lance, I am here to redress that leg wound of yours and I have those crutches for you.”

Lance gulped, stumbling around Keith and limping back into the room, “Hi Coran, good morning. Thanks for bringing those.”

Coran stepped further into the room, placing the crutches against the wall closest to the bed and swinging the cart of medical supplies around. Lance leaned on the cart for support as he limped back to the bed, settling down on the bed and shucking down his sweatpants. The bathroom door closed as Keith retreated, and Lance tried to stop his heart from jumping rope in his throat.

He was quickly distracted by Coran undressing his wound. Dark and crusted blood clotted in the white bandages and the tightness of the wrap had left impressions on the skin of his thigh. Frankly, if the scar had bothered him, he felt like he was sick looking at the wound on his leg. He turned away as Coran began to sanitize and clean the wound, pain sharp and stinging enough for tiny tears to prick in the corners of his eyes. It was more painful than the stumbling and limping, having Coran’s deft and nimble fingers swipe the stitches with disinfectant. Sharp, prodding, and he could barely even acknowledge Coran when the orange mustached man talked to him gently through rewrapping his leg as quickly as the man could. He felt nauseous, using the stability of both Coran’s shoulder and the bed to raise himself up a bit as the man wrapped the bandages around his leg again. With a tug, Coran was done and helped him up to the crutches. Lance’s thigh was smarting, pulsing against the tight thigh bandages as he adjusted his grip on the crutches while Coran stepped back.
He slowly, as to not aggravate the wound, redressed himself in the sweatpants, adding the sweatshirt on top of his t-shirt for the extra warmth.

The bathroom door opened and Keith stepped out. He was wearing his tight black clothing, hair tied tighter back, less mullet and just long now, adjusting his jacket under the strap of his katana sheath. His new clothing was so militant Lance couldn’t help but admire them. They fit him like a glove and showed exactly how much he had changed throughout their time together. Most maddeningly of all though, Keith just looked delectable in it.

Weakly Lance tried the crutches, leg flaring up in pain and his brow furrowed to try and deal with it.

“Thank you, Coran,” Keith breathed, stepping closer but not reaching out to help Lance. Again, the other man just knew perfectly what Lance needed - it was a simple understanding between them. If Keith was in this position, he’d crave some semblance of autonomy just the same.

Coran nodded, “It’s not a trouble at all, lads. Some exercise would do Lance good now, and Allura recommended he should get acquainted with everyone. I have some repairs to get around to, but Shiro is in the common room and I’m sure he can introduce and reintroduce everyone.”

Keith colored, but Coran easily smiled, not at all troubled at the implication that Keith hadn’t care or retained any of the others around. Lance wanted to laugh but he was twisted in pain, nearly flinching physically at the idea of exercise. He grit his teeth and nodded on, sweating a bit from the strain. Coran held the door open for all of them and Lance slowly made it through the threshold, pushing more weight onto his good leg.

The hallway was empty. The air was still, and soft. The metal extended out, doors on each side of the corridor, leading one by one to a pair of double doors at the end of the hall. He used the wall as an anchor, hobbling down the half-dozen or so doors with Coran and Keith on his heels. The double doors were once a sliding pair but now were notched in the middle sloppily.

His fingers hesitated on the notches, fingering the rough grooves. Just beyond the door, he could hear faint talking. Coran reached him first, giving him a concerned look. Lance shook his head and let the older man go ahead and push the notched double doors open. With Coran facing away, Lance glanced back at Keith. Keith knew immediately and faintly smiled back, his hands tucked in the front pockets of his black tactical pants. People. People chattering. It was a sound so foreign to Lance it spooked him.

With a deep and resounding breath in, he turned back slowly to follow Coran.

The common area of the compound stretched out before him. Opposite him was another matching double doorway, and various long tables were nailed down to the right near a makeshift kitchen area with doors just beyond it. To the left, a large facade of the building featured a bulletproof, no doubt, glass entrance, currently guarded by two armed soldiers in fatigues the same color of Shiro’s. Outside, there were various vehicles, a makeshift fireplace and camping area, and covered open-air garages all in a line.

A mixture of people, the youngest being Pidge herself, were scattered along the common room benches and tables. A woman with blond ponytails was at the head of the long tables, scooping food from the kitchen area. Most of them were eating, and when Coran approached the furthest table, Lance recognized Shiro and Allura immediately. They sat next to one another conversing smoothly, with Matt and Pidge sitting across from them. Shiro stood up as they approached.

“Good morning,” He grinned, all teeth and handsome features. Lance didn’t quite like looking at
him, he looked too much like Keith in a weird, well, brotherly way. Allura stood too, grinning just as wide.

He returned the grins easily, his leg reverberating pain and making his cheeks twitch but he could mask the pain as well as feeling it, “Morning. Thank you again, for everything.”

Shiro graciously accepted the thanks and Allura was halfway through a It was no pleasure please get injured any time diplomatic speech when Pidge cackled from her seat a mighty little spiteful, “How did you sleep you two?”

Matt sputtered but Pidge squealed her mouth shut when Keith tapped her on the back of the head gently but firmly, eyes squeezed shut and grimacing, his face a dark pink. “Enough out of you,” He raised his eyebrows at her, “Or should I go ahead and embarrass you too?”

Pidge sputtered, “I...I’ve been reuniting with my brother you ass!”

Keith grinned, “I didn’t cry when I was reunited with my brother.”

“He didn’t,” Shiro confirmed, sadly. Lance laughed, snorting over the knuckles pressed to his mouth to try and contain it. His throat was dry and he coughed once, blinking his eyes open to look back at the group.

The group looked back at him, mystified. Allura smiled easily and went over to him, placing a delicate hand on his shoulder. “I’m very happy you’re feeling better Lance.”

He blinked, from her to the hand. Allura was beautiful and close, and her kindness was difficult to accept for a second - hell, he had only really met two people on the road who he could trust with the extent of his life. She, and Coran, without seeing anything to gain from the limp and broken boy Keith carried to them, had saved his life. He flushed and smiled at her, a hundred-watt smile all the way to his cheeks, “I’m really happy too.”

The others moved on with the conversation, Allura quickly gathering a small group of workers from the scattered people on the tables with Coran. Matt and Pidge stood too, along with another brunette man in a lab coat who appeared by Coran’s side.

“Ah, Bandor,” Coran mused, “before we start our day, this is Lance and Keith. Bandor here is part of our research group, comprised of some of our former units and also a group of those who found us at the compound a month or so ago.”

Bandor smiled but looked weak. Lance smiled back, but couldn’t ignore the dull shine of the man’s eyes.

Keith was unsurprisingly quiet, nearly sullen in his spot on the bench next to Shiro. Lance had lingered upright for a bit before sitting down across from the brothers, his leg stretched out with his crutches next to him.

“Moving forward, perhaps before your routines, Shiro, you could introduce the two to the rest of the compound? Keith as well needs a refresher.” Coran added, nodding goodbye as he joined the research group, led by Allura, through the opposite double doors.

Shiro raised a pointed eyebrow in Keith’s direction.

“What?” He snapped at the older man, brow crinkled, “I was a little busy worrying about something else.”
Shiro snorted, “More like someone.”

“Shut up.”

Lance watched them like a game of tennis, chuckling under his breath.

Shiro glanced at him, a small secretive smile on his face that left Lance’s brow wrinkled. Before he could ask, the older soldier rose to his feet and gestured that they get moving. Lance complied slowly, and Keith lingered near him at the ready as Lance shifted his crutches for support. His hand sought out Keith’s on its own, using the strength of Keith’s grip to readjust the crutches under each armpit. He let go to rely on them, but not without Keith’s fingers squeezing tightly around his hand first. He glanced up to catch Keith’s eye, but the man had already turned away to follow his brother.

He savored the touch and grip of that squeeze in his hand just a bit more before following the two of them to the other tables.

The men at the other tables immediately straightened when Shiro stepped toward them, one even almost out of his set. Shiro raised his eyebrows and the man settled, sheepishly smiling. “Keith, Lance,” Shiro said, gesturing to them, “these are some of the men of my squadron. Adam, Curtis, and Ryan, and the two on guard at the entrance are Ina and James. Nadia’s out on the tower.”

Lance smiled at each of them respectively, noticing acutely how Keith looked between Adam, Curtis, and Shiro with some aspect of brotherly instinct, eyes narrowed and imploring. Shiro purposefully ignored Keith’s stare.

“Call me Kinkade,” Ryan spoke up, tilting his head. Curtis, the one who nearly jolted out of his seat nodded as well, his deep brown hair bobbing. All of them had overgrown crew cuts, similar to Shiro’s. When Lance cast a look over his shoulder, the guards at the door tilted heads their way in greeting.

Keith spoke up, “Hey. Speaking of, do you need me on the tower any time soon?”

Shiro furrowed his eyebrows, “I told you to rest with Lance.”

Keith looked about to argue when Adam cleared his throat. “All due respect, sir,” Adam coughed, “I mean, Shiro, the scavenging group will be back tomorrow. I’ll need Nadia’s help for inventory. It would be great to have an extra pair of eyes on the tower in the meantime.”

Keith turned on Shiro with a grin of victory and Shiro grumbled, “Yeah, that’s fine.”

“What can I do?” Lance asked, drawing the attention of all of them now, “I mean, uh, after all of this.”

Shiro hummed, weighing the idea, but Keith was the one who spoke, firm, “You need to rest first. Your leg needs to be taken care of before anything.”

Lance opened his mouth to argue. He held it when Adam stood up, nearly Shiro’s height and just as intimidating. “What can you do?” Adam was analytical, pushing his glasses up his nose bridge with a calculated glance down at Lance. He couldn’t help but flinch under Adam’s gaze.

“He’s a straight shot with a gun,” Keith cut in, arms folded and gaze intense, “He shoots well and he’s fast.”
Lance could have choked on the lump in his throat, hoping he wasn’t turning red in front of the older men. His ears tingled with the praise and his heart practically soared at the idea of Keith thinking he wasn’t dead weight. At least, he hoped. Adam regarded Keith coolly, an eyebrow raised. He nodded once but didn’t say anything further. Curtis and Kinkade joined him as they left, pausing for Shiro who just nodded them on. Lance shifted uneasily, trying not to let the worry and exhaustion show on his face. He had barely been up for a couple of hours and he was fading quickly.

“I have to make my rounds.” Shiro said, “Keith, you can take my rations for the day from the kitchen. Lance looks like he needs the energy. The others are either off on scavenging trips or out on a mission.”

Lance wanted to protest but he nodded slowly to the older man when Shiro shot him a look that screamed, ‘Take it’. Shiro said goodbye and followed his men off to do rounds, and Keith took the liberty of grabbing the rations for them, the trays easily balanced in his arms.

“Tired?” Keith asked, softly. The distance always seemed to disappear when they were alone. When it was just the two of them.

“Yeah.” He sighed, leaning forward on his crutches as much as he could.

Keith’s smile was so tender, “Wanna go back to the room?”

That smile breathed life into him. He smiled back, all teeth and gentleness, “Please.”

The third day conscious, Lance was greeted awake by Keith, changing. It wasn’t like they haven’t changed around each other before, but it nails home the sharing a room and sharing a bed thing when the first image Lance can process is the ripples of muscles on Keith’s back as he switches shirts. He had barely enough time to commit the image to memory before Keith was out the door, Shiro waiting outside for rounds.

The bob of his ponytail swishes when he turns around to close the door after him, and only then does he realize Lance is awake. It’s that simplest burst of a smile and a wave goodbye that makes Lance rip his bottom lip to shreds and groan, facefirst into the pillows. He never pulled a muscle in his neck harder a moment later after the lingering of Keith’s musk on the pillows delightfully fills his nose.

After a couple of moments in bed, toiling among the sheets and utterly ripping himself a new one for being a creep - you can’t just stare at someone shirtless like that, Lance decided that maybe trying out the new shower would be a good idea. Just like that, and thankfully so, all thoughts of Keith and his chiseled self went out the window when the burst of water from the showerhead hit the back of Lance’s neck. Well, only for a moment. But it was a glorious moment, nothing wandering his head, and body completely relaxed as the hot water warmed him. It was difficult enough to bathe regularly during the apocalypse, but to feel clean during it was way harder. Under the showerhead, he felt like he was being reborn.

That was dramatic. But damn did it feel amazing.

Lance spent an achingly long time under the stream of hot water, not enough for him to hog the
resources really but definitely longer than any military regulated time. In all fairness, it had taken him nearly 20 minutes alone trying to find a good position to lean himself against the shower stall in a way that wouldn’t put too much weight on his leg. All in all, he wouldn’t be telling Coran of this shower regardless. He was at least nearly 95% sure you weren’t supposed to shower or dump buckets of water on healing stitches, but if anyone had tried to stop him from taking the shower, now that he was in it and knew how utterly fucking glorious it felt, he might’ve shot them.

Wow. Keith was rubbing off on him.

And just like that, his mind was on Keith again.

Which was bad for his heart and current lack of clothing. Hot water ran in tracks over him, beading across his skin and carving paths to the ground that raced, nearly every molecule, with the thoughts of Keith in his head. His inky hair, dark but bright eyes, every touch of his hands on Lance’s body, every overfamiliar look, every smile around a compliment. If Keith could go ahead and do them both a favor by kissing him, that would be great.

Lance turned into the water, eyes closed and trying to calm the nagging and tugging of his heart. It didn’t matter if Keith went ahead and kissed him, or he kissed Keith, it was a fruitless and stupid idea to go ahead and pretend that their connection was anything but… circumstantial. Keith wouldn’t like him if he was just the prissy musician, jumping parties and ignoring phone calls from anyone who wanted more from him, he didn’t know Lance, he knew end-of-the-world Lance. Even the flares of dramatics, or the connection to material things, he was sure Keith hated about him. He was too stubborn to let go of the past, and if anything could be grasped from Keith’s transformation from cowboy to hardened soldier, Keith had all but ran from the past. They were… too different, and the only connection he was sure Keith could feel towards him… god, his heart was aching at this point and his eyes stung against the shower. That connection might as well just be a certain degree of attraction because they were the only two they’d met so far with, well, similar sexuality. There weren’t exactly options or means of meeting others. He was all too aware of it.

Keith was everything, he was the hero that Lance needed. He protected him within an inch of the end of his own life, and he was stubborn, grizzly, handsome, and kind to a fault - even if he was socially awkward. Lance knew it all, and his heart ached because of how he just… liked it all so much. Keith was someone who wouldn’t bat an eyelash in his direction if they had met in some club in New York, but fuck he knew he would’ve been head over heels for the stupid cowboy the second he smirked in Lance’s direction. The least he could do for Keith was keep a certain degree of separation between them. Keith deserved better than someone who would drag him down, get himself shot, almost got them killed.

His eyes stung harder when the first of the tears fell, but the shower was running lukewarm drops of water now and he knew he had overstayed in the shower. It was hard to turn off the comforting water, but a thousand times harder to dry himself off, clean the bandages around his thigh, and then stumble into his, by now, gross and smelly, sweatpants and shirt.

From there, he had a battle between wallowing in bed, in turmoil over his angst-ridden heart, or actually being social, before the butterfly in him sent him on his way. The cool hallways of the compound were colder in the mornings, and only mildly acceptable when the midday warmth wafted through them. He shuffled, leaning on only one crutch down, down the hallway and stepped into the common room with no small amount of struggle with the door. Closed to him, Allura sat along a table, head craned over a stack of papers.

Two guards, Ina and Kinkade, were stationed at the front of the room by the entrance, and he
couldn’t recognize a few others who stood around the kitchen, a few in lab coats and a few tactically dressed. Their guns reminded him of the absence of weight of his own, and he felt oddly vulnerable for a moment or two before he made his way to Allura.

The woman barely looked up until he carefully maneuvered himself into the bench across from her. She started then, looking panicked before recognizing him, “Oh! Lance!”

“Sorry to bother you,” He smiled sheepishly, eyes picking at her tired face and messy hair, “Shiro gave us his rations yesterday, I’m not sure how to…”

She immediately perked up, voice high and precise, all the soft and careful syllables elongated, “No problem at all! Typically we trade or work for rations or food. I’m beyond happy to give you some of mine if you have anything to trade, otherwise, I see no problem in letting you have a free portion until you can work, and Keith has been working for credits for both of you.” Her eyes glittered, lighting up at the idea of trading.

Dazed from her accent, Lance nodded numbly, “I’d rather trade.” He was getting tired of receiving handouts - they had just saved his life a few days ago. In all honesty, the debt of his life was already a looming mass above his head. He wanted to help the compound like Keith was.

“No do have anything to?” She asked, soft and low. Her eyes were downcast now, almost like she was ashamed to trade with a broken man.

Luckily he was nearly a hoarder of a post-apocalyptic survivor. Taking a pause, he recounted the objects he owned. His iPhone, the solar charger… Those he couldn’t do without. His guitar was too special, and he quickly scratched out any object of clothing or equipment - he was nearly out of ammo and his pistol was the only thing he technically owned either way.

“I have face washes,” he mused, “and soap. The nice kind. I looted a Lush store near Jersey a couple of weeks out of the fall. Also Neutrogena. It’s kind of abrasive but it works as an exfoliator. The soaps are mostly soft scents, uh, like I have lavender and vanilla -”

He was rambling, and softly he trailed off, engulfed by the glittering in Allura’s eyes again.

“That’s perfect!” She grinned, and he was off limping back to his and Keith’s room with Allura in tow. He led her to the bathroom and helped her pick out a moisturizer and a bar of body butter in exchange for two rations. She insisted on giving him three but settled on two at his mini-pout. It was effective now on both Keith and Allura.

“Thank you,” Allura smiled, ducking into the hallway to place her items back into her room. Lance only had a glance but the room was happily lived in - with scarves and blankets draped around a corner of pillows - almost a little nest. He smiled brighter when she ducked back out. He hated to equate all the women he met so far as reminding him of his sisters, but the glimmer in her eyes and the soft interior of his rooms felt so achingly like his older sisters that he could have cried.

“I don’t trade often. Romelle’s the compound trader. She has tons of stuff for trade.”

“Romelle?”

“Bandor’s sister. She came to us months before you and Keith, with Bandor and a few other scientists from Nasa. Matt helped them over via comms. She’s the blonde one.” Allura added, quieter now. Her eyelashes dipped, fluttering, as a dusty rose crept over her cheeks.
Lance grinned, “Blonde, huh?”

And just as quickly, Allura snapped back, “Keith, huh?”

He shut up at that, and she laughed harder than he had ever heard from her yet. The dusty rose of her cheeks didn’t disappear, and he wiggled his eyebrows at her a bit - which sent her into a fit of giggles again. Despite his teasing, she graciously walked him back to the common room.

“What did you do?” He asked when they sat back down together in the common room, a bowl of steaming soup in front of him.

She shuffled through her papers absentmindedly, “My father was the British Ambassador for the United States. I got a job as an advisor for the United States military, on a diplomatic mission overseas escorting my father’s personal research team right as it all hit.”

He nodded, “And Shiro’s unit?”

She tilted her head, “Stationed here right at the fall. Shiro was supposed to meet us but got tied up with Lotor’s unit - a friend of my father’s personal military unit.”

“Lotor?”

Allura made a face and he couldn’t help but laugh. She rolled her eyes, “Don’t worry you’ll meet him soon when he gets back from his run. He has a handful of soldiers under his direct command. Don’t let him intimidate you.”

Lance opened his mouth but Allura quickly cut in, “Oh what about you? Before the fall?”

“Lance was the guitar-player in the university quad,” Pidge appeared suddenly, snarkily grinning, “the one who somehow attracts a circle of admirers.”

He groaned, and Allura laughed, high and giggling. Pidge wiggled into the seat next to him, placing a tray of beans and mash next to his soup. Her hair was wild, stinking in various directions. She was wearing her father’s bomber again, S. Holt in chalky letters on the back.

“I was not,” Lance muttered, taking a sip of soup, “I was a music major at New York University. I’m from Cuba though. My father had a ranch, I learned to shoot and ride there.”

“Oh,” Allura smiled, placing her head in her hand, “I’d love to hear you play.”

He tried not to grimace, his heart stuttering in nervousness, “I haven’t in a while. I’m probably not that good anymore. I just carry around the guitar as a keepsake.” He was trying to not let his insecurities drape over him, but that was failing magnificently. Pidge looked to him with odd eyes, a little at ends over his demeanor.

“Nonsense,” Allura declared, “You still have the muscle memory to play. Listen, on the first Friday of each month, we have a regulated compound night. No one can stay on high alert all the time, so play for us this Friday.”

Her eyes were sparkling and he averted his gaze down to his soup, trying not to let himself ruin the skin of his bottom lip.

Pidge cut in, brash and hard, “Lance. Play for us. I don’t know what’s going on, but I know everyone would love it. You would love it.”
Lance breathed out, looking over to the younger girl with a softer gaze. She was right. It was obvious he was letting shit with Keith revolve around his head like a little rain cloud. He’d been dying for a chance to play since he had met Pidge, she was family. He loved playing for his family, and she already knew that from however long they had spent together. That spitfire of hers was everything he needed. He laughed a bit, which broke both Allura and Pidge into a bout of laughter themselves, “Fine. Fine! I will. Jeez. You guys are harpies.”

Pidge snorted, turning back to her food and squirreling it down. Affronted and teasing, Allura gasped, “Harpies! I’ll have you know-!”

It was then that the peel of tires against gravel turned them all to the front of the compound. Ina and Kinkade were up on their feet immediately as the tear of the Humvee turned sharply right in front of the entrance. Two women, large and foreboding, were holding onto the sides of the Humvee - strapped to the nines with guns. The way Kinkade cocked the rifle in his hands made Lance unnerved, and it only unnerved him more when a slim, tall man slid from the passenger seat onto the gravel in too-large combat boots and clearly designer sunglasses. Another woman, this one nearly as tall as Shiro, muscled her way out of the front seat, closing the door with a bang behind her. A large knife was strapped along her front chest, the steel sheath gleaming in the sunlight. They approached, and Kinkade and Ina barely relaxed a muscle. Allura next to him hadn’t taken a breath since the man stepped out.

Pidge whispered, low and heated, “You were out when he was around. He’s Lotor, and he’s an entitled fuckin’ asshole.”

Allura hissed, “Pidge!”

“What?” She snapped back, “He thinks he owns you, Allura. He’s a self-righteous bastard. Even Shiro knows that.”

They approached the compound doors and stepped through easily. Lotor leading his pack of women behind him. He barely even spared a glance Kinkade and Ina’s way, pointedly ignoring them as he made a beeline, intimidating and straight, toward the three of them at the table. Allura stood up like a bullet, hands on her stack of papers.

“Allura,” Lotor’s accent was high and haughty, the same as Allura’s but far worse, “You look charming. Playing with the children?”

Pidge sparked, mouth immediately snapping open and eyebrows knit tightly. A single look from Allura kept the younger girl quiet, but Lotor didn’t even bother to acknowledge the deadly glare Pidge was sending his way, for favor of continuing on. Lance already hated him.

“Oh,” Lotor peered at him lazily, “You’re the injured one. Hm. Perhaps it was good we saved you after all.”

The look the older man gave him, a once-over from toe to head, made Lance’s skin crawl. Bile was threatening to rise in his throat. The car, the man with the car, and the look in that man’s eyes as he looked at him and then as Lance shot him came rushing at him. Lotor didn’t spare him longer than a moment to dwell on such a nasty remark, nodding towards Allura and gesturing down the other hall.

“Shall we go, princess?” He said, face a sneer and comment even harsher, “Research and inventory runs?”
Allura ducked away from the table, “Yes.” She gave Lance and Pidge a soft, sweet look, before following Lotor and his soldiers across the common room to the research hallway.

Lance watched them until the doors had firmly shut behind the group, before looking to Pidge. Her eyes were downturned, but her posture was screaming. He, briefly and slowly, touched a hand to the top of her spine, and she immediately relaxed. No communication passed between them, but he could feel the thankfulness out of the gentle tap she placed on his forearm when he relaxed it on the table between them again.

They finished their food together quietly, just settling next to each other comfortably. Pidge was done with her food far before Lance did, but had the sense to stay with him until he did. It was the apocalypse in them, watching each other eat, making sure each other had enough to move on.

Eventually, she cleared their trays and nodded to him, “I’ll see you later, Lance. I’m helping Coran with some comms devices.” He smiled and she did back before going off down the hallway to the research wing.

It was then when he noticed Romelle. Her blond ponytails swayed as she exited the dormitory wing and cut a path toward the entrance. She held a toolbox in one hand, with an errant and greasy gas can propped under her other arm - tracking quickly across the quad to the garages. He only needed a moment to sort himself out before following her.

The gravel and overgrown grass of the compound’s front yard of sorts was hard to traverse, and Kinkade had sent a look his way when he passed the two on his crutches - but thankfully he limped pretty well across the uneven terrain. The wind was blowing pretty hard, and the Humvee Lotor had just left parked in the front cut a massive shadow across the ground. Two lines of fencing, armed and blocking most of the compound from view, stood strong and silently guarded by two towers - presumably where the gates could be authorized to open. A bob of black hair in a slick ponytail caught his eye and he spied Keith, still and looking out from the compound with a large rifle in his hands, at the top of the right tower.

A flash of blonde appeared in his peripheral and he turned away from Keith to see Romelle ducking around in the covered garages to his left. She didn’t look up as he approached but hummed a bit when he limped closer.

“Lance, right?” She rolled a grease rag around her hands and finally peeked up at him from where she bent over the engine of a truck. It seemed relatively new, even the engine nearly gleaming under her hands. No doubt it would be quieter than the massive military Humvees.

He nodded, “Yeah. Nice to meet you. I heard you trade.”

Romelle’s trimmed eyebrows rose, “I do. What are you looking for?” There was a spark of interest in her eye and she tucked the rag away to face him directly.

Lance raised an eyebrow at her and she shrugged, laughing, “Listen, I didn’t know what you wanted!”

He shook his head with a chuckle, “I don’t have much to trade - just some face washes and good soap. Allura mentioned you’d have a bigger selection of sorts. I… uh, was maybe hoping for clothes?”

“I don’t have any clothing,” she frowned, “But the scalpers up north usually have a good stock. That’s where I got my selection - the last trip up to them was a week or two ago. They’re shady characters - just a big group of religious bandit types, and I understand why Shiro doesn’t like
dealing with them. But we’re running low on stuff here so another trip might be necessary.”

Romelle walked around the side of the truck, bending over the engine with a canister of fluid, “They trade in ‘green’ mostly - it’s their term for American dollars. They like to burn it, or exchange it between themselves.”

Lance’s lip was curling, and Romelle nodded in agreement, “Yeah but they’re the first band of scalpers I’ve ever seen to set up a settlement and not shoot on sight. So… for a face wash or two, I’ll give you all the green I have. I don’t need what I have now, and you can probably find some good clothes for the winter there. Maybe even switch up that sad sweatsuit outfit.”

He was already smiling, wide and full of teeth. She returned it easily, offering her hand, “Deal?”

“Deal. Thanks.”

After trading a few washes with Romelle, Lance opted to force some painkillers down his throat and return to the room. Lotor and his soldiers had occupied the common room, and after the mid-morning encounter, he had quickly followed Allura’s footsteps in the casual art of avoidance at all times. Besides, the evening was fast approaching because of the season, the early winter air already crisping up the linoleum compound floors and making the hallways freezing. Coran had stopped by to quickly check in on the wound, offering a second blanket for Lance to settle under - he needed to keep even body temperance to heal well apparently. He had half a mind telling him that was bullshit, and the genuine care in Coran’s eyes seemed to repeat that - the older man just didn’t want to see Lance cold.

And that was where Keith found him later, tucked snugly underneath their now two blankets, listening to music on his iPhone and trying to relax against the pressure and pain of his leg. Probably a bad idea to have gone clamoring all over the compound earlier in the day.

The moment Keith burst into the room, Lance couldn’t get a word in before the other man’s nice black jacket went flying. Keith was simmering with anger, not the lethal kind, but the kind that sat on the highs of his cheekbones, highlighting his scar and knitted his eyebrows together. Lance bit his lip from saying anything. This was a mood he hadn’t seen Keith in before, and flying in with a ‘you look hot when you’re angry’ might not be a good idea.

But when Keith looked at him, all the anger carried in his beautiful face melted away. That alone made Lance’s heart drop, his mouth dry as Keith approached, tenderly and slowly like Lance might bolt. Hell, he might just do that.

The panic in his head and the desire in his body were at war, and eventually, his body won, scooting quickly over for Keith to join him. The other man put his knee on the bed, anchored there for a while, and for some wild, crazy moment, with Keith bending over him, the space between them disappearing, he thought Keith might actually kiss him.

Instead, Keith smiled briefly down at him, and raised an arm over Lance’s shoulder to pull the window open - and god, he could kill him. Pouting internally, he nearly whined at the loss of closeness between them as Keith pulled back and away.

“Welcome home,” He said sulkily, and then really pouted when Keith looked at him with an
oblivious look. It was just his luck that the object of his zombie apocalypse desires was so socially awkward - and couldn’t catch the mood even if it slapped him in the face.

Lance wanted to groan out loud. The look Keith had when he so sarcastically said his welcome, dreamy and happy, was too cute for him to stay mad. He found himself matching the same simple smile.

“Thanks,” Keith ducked his head, awkwardly playing with the ends of his short ponytail, “Sorry to be so long, Shiro needed the help when uh, Lotor came back.”

Lance scrunched his nose up, “No problem. Ugh, that guy sucks.”

“You met him?”

He winced, immediately ducking his head down to fiddle with his fingers against the iPhone screen.

“Lance. What did he say to you?”

“It was nothing,” Lance sighed, “You know how he is with Allura. He actually didn’t even say anything. It was the way he, uh, looked at me.”

Keith was on fire. It was a cold, now lethal fire, and he really could only pick up on the nuances of it - that’s how angry Keith was. His shoulders were stiff, eyes narrowed. Immediately, Lance raised himself up and toward him, as much as he could before the pain got too much. Only then did Keith snap out of whatever deep hole he was in and push forward, helping steady Lance with careful gentle hands.

Keith’s hands. They were wide, not quite bigger than his own, but calloused and needy. They sought out his hips, his upper arms, his bare skin, leaving his entire skin electric. Keith didn’t know at all about what his hands did to Lance, what he would do and how he felt so safe to be held by them. The night he woke up, and Keith’s guiltiness nearly swallowed them both, they stood together in the room just holding each other - and he felt like he was utterly floating with Keith’s hands trapping him, chest to chest. Their casual touches were increasing, and he felt like he was barely grasping onto any common sense he could find, trying not to fall increasingly and hopelessly in love with Keith.

“I’m fine, he’s whatever,” Lance didn’t even sound convincing to his own ears, “Forget about him. Just come here with me.”

He ignored the dark look in Keith’s eyes at that for both of their sakes. Keith had no right looking at him like that when he was the only one of them trying to stop this stupid trainwreck from happening. He was feebly trying to stop it too, because it didn’t at all feel like a trainwreck when Keith held him or looked at him like he was going to eat him up, and that was the dangerous part. It felt like home in Keith’s arms.

Lance let out the biggest breath of his life when Keith finally slipped away, hands a ghost on his skin where they touched. He spent the meager moments of Keith getting ready for bed, consistently all of two steps and utterly outrageous for how perfect Keith’s skin stayed, just trying to calm himself down.

He went back to his iPhone, sadly abandoned and held on pause, searching through his extensive library for something Keith liked. The second Keith returned, Lance motioned him over and tucked an earbud into Keith’s ear, fingertips lightly pressing it in as he turned on Fall Out Boy.
Keith gave him the biggest grin he had ever seen, and Lance went spiraling with laughter into the pillows.

“I chose right?” He grinned, and Keith shyly nodded,

“First concert I went to with my own money.”

Lance stretched his feet out slowly, letting out a soft sound of contentment as Keith shifted into the bed next to him, “What was your first one ever? My mom took me and my siblings to see Prince when I was a kid, against my dad’s wishes.”

Keith grimaced, “Don’t laugh.”

“I won’t.”

“...Tim McGraw.”

Lance laughed, earning a sharp, but teasing, look from the taller man under his long fringe, which dangled oh so handsomely across his nose. “Sorry! Sorry, sorry, ahaha. Did you like it? How old were you?”

Keith deadpanned, “12 and I loved it.”

Which sent Lance into hysterics again, until his abdomen burned with his laughter and his eyes filled with tears. He finally straightened himself out after a second, unable to help a burst of giggles here and there as Keith looked at him, incredulously and a tad annoyed, leaning against the bedframe with his arms crossed. Lance took a moment or two to appreciate the swell of Keith’s arms before turning on his side, propping his chin on his palm with his elbow in the mattress.

“So… the ranch? Your dad? Did you work or try school?” He shifted his injured thigh out under the blankets, the weight starting to settle wrong on the wound.

Keith eyed his leg as he spoke, “I worked at the ranch for a bit with my dad, yeah. I wanted to try flight school and follow Shiro. But I didn’t end up finishing high school. I got expelled when, uh, I broke a dude’s face for calling me a - uh -”

“You don’t have to say it.” He said immediately, and Keith snapped his gaze up, “I know. Believe me.”

They shared a tiny smile before Lance went on, “I’m glad you fucked him up. You didn’t deserve to be expelled for it, but it’s cool that you stood up for yourself.”

Keith’s eyebrows rose, a new sly smirk spreading across his lips. He recrossed his arms across his chest, the movement so smooth Lance was hypnotized. “I got into fights a lot. Before that one incident, you couldn’t really say I was standing up for myself, just… punching what I could.”

And before Lance could stop his stupid motormouth, “Wow, a regular bad boy. Every teenager’s wet dream.” He laughed immediately at the wrinkled, near horrified look on Keith’s face, his cheeks blossoming with heat.

Their conversation petered out at the end of Lance’s teasing, and slowly they relaxed side by side in the bed as the night darkened the room - cool crisp winter air billowing above their blankets. It rose the hair on Lance’s neck, but that might have been the close proximity of Keith’s arms, just
barely brushing against his own over the covers. Eventually, they reached the end of the Fall Out Boy songs he had downloaded onto his phone, and he went searching for a new playlist. Keith beside him was silent, breathing even and deep. While Lance had been wimping and whining around all day, useless and broken, Keith had been picking up the slack. Just like the day he got shot. If Keith wasn’t tired from essentially dragging him around…

He crushed those self-deprecating thoughts for favor of focusing on his music selection. Playlist after playlist, usually named after activities he used to run through during the week of his time on campus or during the weekend (there was one for yoga and one for his pilates classes), until the end of the list came scrolling to a halt and his thumb lingered over the selection.

*Are You In Love Yet?*

It was dated the year he had moved to New York from Havana. He had made it in the dark of his dorm room, days after he moved in and weeks before class, trying to keep hopeful. A time capsule, of so many sorts.

He pressed play, worried his hammering heart would wake Keith somehow.

♫ I could listen to your voice all night,  
Whisper to me baby, tell me what you’d like ♫

Keith didn’t move, breath still even and slow. His heartbeat felt so loud he couldn’t decipher really if Keith was asleep or awake. Hell, would it even matter? The older boy didn’t know what this playlist meant, or the songs in it. Lance felt sick listening to them, eyes screwed shut and body rigid. Pain flared in his thigh from his clenching and he was forced to try and relax, the song humming in his one earbud. The cord of his headphones was still delicately spread in between the two of them, a barrier and distinct line of each side, each body.

He wanted to yell at himself but he turned his head. Keith had his eyes closed, short but full eyelashes against his pale cheekbones. The scar was looming and carved against the skin there, branded and so so visible to Lance. The room was a beautiful blue now, the winter night stretching the shadows out beyond their normal hideaways. A breeze ruffled his own hair and the long ends of Keith’s.

♫ You make me wait to hear you say  
"If you wanna make a move, come on."  
If I had my way, I would be yours. ♫

He let his eyes close, arguing with his beating heart against all the implications and complications. He would have to deal with his feelings silently because Keith deserved more than he could offer. But god did it hurt to know that he wasn’t enough.
Chapter End Notes

check us out !!

maireep
/ twitter (which i update way more with sneakpeeks and klance art): maireep
somethingmorecreative1

also literally reviews have kept us going the most - please please leave us some
support!!! its amazing to hear back from people about our progress with this~
Before the world ended and the dead took it for themselves, Keith didn’t have much to look forward to anyway. The ranch was less than ideal. He had Shiro for a while, until he left. He got kicked out of school, isolated from pretty much everyone except for his alcoholic father. The only thing that Keith really had was Artax and the wide open Texan ranch, and even that eventually ran out of charm.

Honestly, it only did so much to help him get through it. For so long, he just struggled to make it through life. It was like he was waiting for something. He was always looking to the horizon, wondering what was next, what life would throw at him and if he’d make it through it or not.

He never expected the world to fucking end, but somehow, the apocalypse had given him exactly what he’d wanted, exactly what he’d been waiting for his entire life.

Lance.

It was ridiculous, how warm Keith felt when he thought about Lance. The other boy was everything that Keith had ever wanted, everything that he’d ever fantasized about when he’d ever thought of being with someone else. It was just—crazy, intense, ridiculous, perfect.
Keith didn’t have the words to describe all the things he felt for Lance.

Surreal was probably a good word to describe how Keith was feeling about waking up in the same bed as Lance every morning though.

At first, he’d been surprised that Lance wanted to share a room with him. Of course, Keith didn’t want to be anywhere without Lance, obviously, but he hadn’t thought Lance would want to be that close to him. The compound was safe enough for Lance to have his own room, his own space, but he still wanted to share with Keith?

It had to mean something, right?

For days now, he had been waking up next to Lance. Some mornings he would wake up, and Lance would still be asleep, curled into his side, head propped on his shoulders, arms clutching him in his sleep. No matter how much room Keith seemed to give him, Lance always found his way across the bed in the middle of the night and rolled right into Keith’s arms. Those mornings were his favorites. He’d wake up a few minutes early, just so he could lay awake with Lance, before he had to be up for either his guard duty or briefings with Shiro. It was nice, nicer than anything in his entire life.

Other days, he’d wake up and Lance would already be awake, either watching him or playing on his phone, like everything was perfectly normal, pre-apocalypse. Lance’s smile would be soft from sleep, blue eyes gentle but shining too. There was something about Lance in the morning that particularly wrenched Keith’s heart. He was less hesitant, more open, when it was just them in bed, all alone.

It sent shivers down his spine when he thought about it.

Today was like most of the other days. Keith woke up slowly, to the soft alarm that signaled it was time for a briefing with Shiro. These meetings happened every few days, and even though it was usually only the senior members and soldiers around the compound, for some reason Shiro always wanted Keith there and looked to him for opinions and thoughts too. It was nice—that feeling of being valued.

At the alarm, Lance shifted in his sleep. Before the compound when they were still on the road, Keith had developed a bad habit of watching Lance sleep. It was kind of creepy—he knew that—but there was something almost mesmerizing about how Lance felt safe enough to sleep when he was on watch. He’d put his headphones on and just—sleep. It was reassuring, most days.

Keith looked down at Lance, who in the middle of the night, had once again shifted over to his side of the bed. He was on his side, curled completely into Keith, head resting on Keith’s shoulder. One of his hands was resting on Keith’s chest, and the skin to skin contact was enough to make Keith a little dizzy, if he was being honest.

Lance settled back into his sleep, and Keith sighed in relief. It was early, and Lance needed all the rest he could get.

He’d been pushing himself too much, Keith thought. Coran had assured him that Lance was going to be fine, that he was making good progress, but any time that Keith saw Lance up and walking around, pushing through the pain that flitted across his face every few seconds, all Keith could think of was watching Lance get shot by the bandits, hauling his body through the streets, and the terror of thinking that he was going to die.

It was good that Lance was trying and working so hard already, but Keith really just wanted him to
relax and recover. The last thing they needed was for Lance to have a lapse in his recovery and be in even more pain than now.

He stayed in bed for longer than he meant to but—he almost couldn’t make himself get up. He’d much rather stay right here with Lance instead of going to briefing but… Lotor would probably be there this morning since he had arrived back at the compound already. Shiro would need all the help he could get because of that.

Apparently, Lotor was one of the major problems around the compound. Shiro had explained a lot of this to Keith once Lance woken up. He’d just learned all of Lotor’s twisted history with Allura, the way he flaunted his pseudo-power, and his eagerness to expand the compound when it wasn’t safe. Shiro had explained it a few days ago on one of Keith’s guard shifts, and Keith had known that he’d never like the man just because of Shiro’s explanation, and once Lotor had arrived, Keith had been proven right.

And then hearing from Lance that Lotor had said something to him, or even just looked at him? It’d sent Keith into a spiraling rage that he was still itching to quell. Lance hadn’t even told him exactly what Lotor had said to him but—Keith could guess. It was probably for good reason that Lance hadn’t explained what had happened anyway. Every time he had seen Lotor since then, Keith had to restrain himself from drawing his katana and gutting him.

Plus, Lance had seemed so worried about him, when Keith had gotten so angry about it. That was another one of the reasons he hadn’t pushed Lance to tell him exactly what had happened. Every thought he’d ever had flew right out of his head when Lance reached for him and asked him to forget about it.

*Just come here with me.*

Even now, days later, Keith was still suppressing shivers when he thought about Lance saying that. His fucking voice was just—

Keith was so ridiculously in love with Lance. Shiro had been teasing him about it for days now, and he couldn’t even fucking argue with him. It was in every single glance toward the other boy, every time he clenched his fists to keep from reaching out to touch him, every time Lance graced him with a smile. It was everything, all the time. And somehow, it still wasn’t enough.

He sighed and dragged one of his hands up Lance’s back, savoring the touch before carefully getting out from underneath him. Lance stirred again in his sleep, but didn’t wake up, which was a testament to how tired he was. Sometimes, Lance had a hard time sleeping and staying asleep, but lately, since he’d gotten used to it at the compound, Lance was sleeping more than ever before. Keith was glad that he was getting the rest.

Once he was out of bed, he turned back to tuck the sheets back around Lance. Then—because he was really running late now, Shiro would be teasing him all fucking day for this—he hurried into his clothes, put his hair into a low ponytail and laced up his boots.

He grabbed his katana and handgun on the way out and managed to only look back at Lance once or twice before he quietly closed the door behind him.

;;;

When Keith stepped out into the hallway, he ran right into Shiro, who was leaned up against the wall beside his door, waiting for him.
Keith raised an eyebrow at him. Weren’t they going to be late?

Shiro smirked, “I gave you a fifteen minute buffer because I knew you wouldn’t get out of bed.”

He blushed, stalking forward and shoving Shiro, “Fuck you. What if I’d been on time?”

“Not a chance, little brother.”

He rolled his eyes, and Shiro shoved him too, still grinning.

“C’mon,” Shiro said then, jerking his head. “Time for briefing.”

Keith walked at his shoulder, through the quiet halls of the compound. Briefings were at 0600 hours here, right as the night shift was finishing for the morning rotation to take over. Keith liked the morning shifts best because of how quiet it was when the compound was waking up.

Now, the halls were silent other than the occasional echo of footsteps. It was still dark, though the sun would be rising any minute now.

“Why do you want me to come with you to these briefings?” Keith asked. “Most of the others are from your unit or have more responsibilities than me.”

Shiro glanced at him and shrugged, “I feel like it’s good for you. You’re smart and have good ideas. You’ve been out on the road in this mess longer than any of us, so you have a lot of experience.”

Keith snorted, “Just because I can kill walkers doesn’t mean that I’d be a good leader.”

“I think you’d make a good one.”

He turned to look at Shiro. He’d been joking when he said that.

“What?”

Shiro nodded, and they turned the corner, passing two soldiers who were probably finishing up their shift and were on their way to the barracks to get some sleep. They both nodded to Shiro, then, to his horror, Keith as well.

When they were gone, Shiro tipped his head to the side and said, “See? People respect you.”

“I don’t know why. I don’t even talk to anyone.”

“Well, I expect some of it has to do with the fact that you’re my brother, but it’s more than that. Everyone saw you bring Lance in, and you even brought Pidge to us. We’d been looking for her for months now. People were saying you were a hero,” Shiro explained.

Keith felt his face get red, and he jammed his hands into the pockets of his jacket.

“Plus, you started working right away. You’ve been picking up a lot of the slack around here, you know. Since…” Shiro trailed off, glancing up and down the hallway before he stopped suddenly.

“Since Lotor has been around so much, it’s been hard to get people to cooperate and feel safe,” he started again, voice low. “People were pulling away. We even had some people leave the compound and take to the road a few weeks ago. Lotor has been putting us at risk now, and people are uneasy.”
“But I haven’t done anything to change that, Shiro,” Keith said, almost desperate. He didn’t know what for.

Shiro nodded, “You’ve been here though. You brought Lance and Pidge here, and in everyone else’s mind, you saved them. You’ve been on guard rotation pretty much nonstop while also helping with weapon stocking and perimeter checks. People have noticed.”

For some reason, it made Keith uneasy. Sure, he was glad that people seemed to like him because that meant that he and Lance could stay here and be safe, but he didn’t really like the fact that they thought of him as one of their leaders. He just—didn’t know if he could do that, if he could hold that much responsibility.

The lights in the hall flickered, almost a reminder for them for where they were and what was happening. They were in the middle of the compound, and anyone could hear them talking. Something like this could cause complete disorder and chaos to break out among the people within the compound if they weren’t careful.

Shiro nodded to him, and they continued down the hall. He said, “I think you’d made a great leader for the compound.”

Keith hesitated, “I don’t know about that.”

“Just think about it,” Shiro clapped him on the shoulder as they entered through a set of double doors.

The room where the morning briefings were held was situated in the exact center of the compound. It was large and had multiple chairs and tables. The far side of the room was filled with large crates and boxes, mostly for storing weapons. Because this room also functioned as the armory, it was off limits to the civilians at the compound unless they were being escorted by one of the higher-ups, which was usually limited to people invited to the briefings.

Everyone else was already in attendance by the time Keith and Shiro walked in. Adam, James, and Kinkade were sitting at a table, and across from them, Curtis, Matt, Ina, and Nadia were talking quietly. Coran was also sitting at the front of the room, nursing a cup of coffee.

After his first briefing, Keith asked whether or not Allura came to the meetings. To Keith, she seemed like someone who would be a leader here; she was tough, strong, and compassionate, so it surprised him to find out that she never attended the briefings. Shiro had said that it was mostly out of choice, but that he was glad she decided not to. Some of the others around the compound were hesitant about including her in leadership because of her connection to Lotor and their research.

Despite not ever being invited, Lotor always appeared at the briefings every few days. Keith was surprised to see that he wasn’t already here.

“Morning everyone,” Shiro greeted, walking to the front of the room. He took a copy of the roster from Adam that detailed the day’s schedule and set himself up at the podium in the front of the room.

“Morning,” everyone echoed, and Keith ducked into a seat beside Nadia, nodding to her and the others at the table.

“Okay, thanks for coming,” Shiro started. “Looks like everyone is here so we’ll get going. Adam, you can start with the schedule.”

Adam nodded and stood, “Night shift reported minimal activity along the fences, although there
were a few corpses that built up on the west side at the fence. The report I received this morning indicated that it wasn’t loud enough to attract others, so the soldiers on guard didn’t engage or disperse them.”

“Keith and I will handle that on the perimeter check this morning,” Shiro nodded, pulling out a pen and making a note of it on his stack of papers.

“The night shift also reported some activity in the city last night. More fires and cars could be seen on the horizon. It doesn’t seem like it should be an immediate concern, but it might be worth noting.”

Keith frowned, wondering if the activity was from bandits or other survivors.

“The schedule is tight for today. We’ve got Nadia, Ina, and Kinkade on morning shift, Keith and James on midday in the towers, then we’ll put foot soldiers on for evening shift after they rotate off of weapon cleaning,” Adam finished and sat back down.

Shiro nodded again, “Thanks, Adam. Okay, Curtis, you’re up.”

Curtis stood and cleared his throat, glancing over them before he looked to Shiro to start the security brief. He said, “Security around the compound looks fine today. I’ve already relieved night shift soldiers and replaced them with the morning shift. We’ve got pairs set up at both front gates with semi-automatic rifles, one rotating between the yard and the common room with handguns, and two more sets on the front halls with body suits and semi-automatics as well.”

“And in the event of a breach?” Shiro asked.

“All units are prepared to respond to the site of the breach. Alarms will be signaled and civilians will be moved inside the compound walls, holding in the common room. Four Humvees are stocked with rations and water in preparation for removal with enough supplies to support most foot soldiers and all civilians,” Curtis explained.

“Good,” Shiro mused. “What soldiers are on the common room today?”

The names of the soldiers were unfamiliar to Keith. He didn’t know any of the foot soldiers if he was being honest even though there weren’t that many of them. In his defense, they usually preferred night and evening shifts. Only a few, the ten or twelve Curtis already described, allowed themselves to be put on day rotation. Keith figured it was because most of the soldiers didn’t like dealing with the civilians, or maybe, like him, they preferred the quiet.

The rest of the briefing went by fairly quickly. After Curtis finished with his security report, Coran discussed his research, despite there being no new developments, much like every other morning briefing. Coran seemed to have stalled on the research, but he assured everyone that he would hit a break through one day.

Kinkade and Griffin reported on weapon status and ammunition numbers, while Nadia and Ina discussed rations and other supplies. There were new supply runs going out at the end of the week that Griffin planned on leading to restock on weapons, ammo, and hopefully food.

“It might also be a good idea to begin considering hunting as an option,” Nadia ended the report. “One of us might scout a good place to do that sometime soon.”

Before anyone else could volunteer, Keith put his hand up and said, “I can do it.”

Shiro smiled and nodded, “Keith will take point on that then. You can get together with Nadia and
discuss logistics once the supply runs come back at the end of the week.”

Keith nodded, and Nadia fist-bumped him when she sat back down at the table.

“Okay, if that’s all—”

Before Shiro could finish the briefing and dismiss them, the doors flew open.

Lotor.

He stalked into the briefing room, face curled into a smirk. Bandor was on his heels, along with one other woman, who Shiro said was Axca. The three of them entered the room and stood in the center of it, and Keith had a distinct feeling that this would turn out to be more than just a simple interruption.

“Starting off the briefing without us, Shiro?” Lotor asked, eyebrow raised. “That doesn’t seem very fair.”

“You know the policy as well as I do, Lotor,” Shiro said, voice flat. Keith wasn’t sure how he managed to be so disengaged with Lotor. Just looking at him made Keith want to get into a fight. “We can’t wait all day.”

“But how would I share my report with all of you if I were to miss the briefing?”

“Unclear,” Shiro replied, bored. “Feel free to take the floor if you have anything relevant.”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Lotor said, approaching the podium. Though he didn’t ask Shiro to move out of the way, even Keith tensed up with how close Lotor got to Shiro.

Keith didn’t trust this bastard as far as he could throw him.

Bandor and Axca moved further into the room, claiming a seat at the table next to them. Axca was stiff, and she was studying the rest of them instead of looking at Lotor, like she was expecting one of them to attack right here in the middle of the briefing.

“You all know that I have been out of the compound recently with a fair few of my soldiers,” Lotor started, flourishing his hand. “We started as a scavenging mission with a specific focus on weapons and gasoline, however, we quickly found that there was a more valuable resource in the city we had been completely overlooking.”

Keith frowned. What could he have possibly found in the city worth more than weapons and gas?

“And what would that be?” Shiro asked, still bored. If he was ever going to lead anyone around here, Keith thought, he’d have to learn to be like Shiro was with Lotor. Abject rage wouldn’t help anyone.

“Why, the people of course,” Lotor said, smug.

The room was quiet, and Keith and the others exchanged confused looks with one another.

“What people?” Shiro demanded.

“The survivors!” Lotor explained. “The city and surrounding areas house plenty of survivors with their own resources. If we were to go out and bring them in, we could use them in all sorts of beneficial ways. Of course, Allura and I could use some of them for testing subjects for our research, and the rest that we find can be used to do manual work around the compound, including
guard rotation and other duties you assign your soldiers to, Shiro.”

“That’s Captain to you, civilian,” Adam snapped.

The room stilled. Keith’s hand inched down to the gun in the holster at his hip.

Shiro held his hand up to Adam but kept his gaze on Lotor. His voice was calm when he said, “Are you suggesting that we should expand the compound? How would you expect to cope with the strain it would put on resources?”

“It wouldn’t,” Lotor shrugged. “We wouldn’t need to supply resources to them whatsoever.”

There was another long pause around the room. No one seemed to know what to say.

Keith stood, and everyone turned to look at him. He stepped forward, crossing his arms over his chest and said, “That’s slavery. You know that, right?”

“A few of my sources have started using this tactic and report that it works surprisingly well,” Lotor said, turning toward him.

“And who are your sources? Bandit cannibals in the sewers?” Keith asked, rolling his eyes. “Figures that you fit in with them.”

Keith didn’t see the gun himself, but he heard the tight gasps around the room and felt the barrel pressing to the side of his head in the next second. He didn’t turn to look, but he knew that Axca must have moved from her spot at the table and pulled her gun on him. He doubted that Bandor could even move that fast at all, and she seemed more on edge when they had walked into the room earlier.

“Careful,” Lotor sneered.

“I’m not afraid of you,” Keith said it plainly, even though Shiro and the others were staring at him and the gun pressed to his head. “Your plan is wrong. Taking in survivors is the right thing to do if they make it to us, but not at the cost of their freedom.”

“And yet we took in you and your whore,” Lotor said, lip curling. “Though I will admit that he’s quite beautiful even by my standards.”

Keith’s heart stopped.

It was completely silent in the room for a long, long second.

Then, Keith moved.

He knocked Axca’s gun away and shoved her back, gun skittering across the floor. Axca aimed a punch at him, and Keith side-stepped, grabbed her wrist, and flipped her to the floor. Bandor attacked his other side, and he had been right earlier when he thought that Bandor was slow because it was too easy to kick his legs out from under him.

After he was finished with them, he stepped forward, crossing the room. He wasn’t sure if he was moving too fast for anyone to interfere or if everyone was too shocked to move because somehow, he ended up right in front of Lotor, gun pressing into Lotor’s forehead without anyone stopping him.

Lotor looked surprised for half a second when Keith aimed the gun directly at his forehead, only a
few inches away from. He kept his gaze locked onto Lotor.

“If you ever even look at him,” Keith growled, “I’ll put a bullet through your skull.”

Lotor’s lips curled into a disgusting smile.

Keith pressed the gun further into his forehead, “Or I can pull the trigger now.”

A long moment passed in silence. Keith stared in silence, easing the safety off the gun.

“Stand down, Lotor,” Shiro said finally, breaking the tense moment.

Lotor breathed a bitter laugh and kept his eyes locked onto Keith’s when he said, “Yet you say nothing to your man with the gun.”

“Don’t ever go near him again,” Keith threatened. Then, he removed the gun and put it back in his holster.

Lotor took a step forward into Keith’s space. They were about the same height, and when Lotor came closer, Keith forced himself to remain still.

“Hold a gun to my head again, soldier,” Lotor whispered, eyes flashing, “and you will wish you pulled the trigger today.”

Keith smirked, “Don’t worry. I already do.”

“Stand down, Lotor,” Shiro ordered, voice hard.

With one final glare at him, Lotor moved out of Keith’s space. He nodded to Bandor and Axca, who were standing again, and the three of them moved toward the door. Lotor hesitated there, and he turned back to the room and said, “I will have more information about my plan at the next briefing, Captain.”

Shiro didn’t bother with a response, and Lotor and the others swept through the doors and out of the briefing room.

In the silence that took over the room, Shiro stepped out from behind the podium and crossed the room to stand in front of Keith. He caught him by the shoulder and shook him. His voice was more than a little frantic when he said, “What the hell was that?”

“What was what?” Keith asked, defensive.

“She had a gun to your head!” Shiro snapped. “What if she’d pulled the trigger?”

Keith shrugged, “She wouldn’t have pulled the trigger.”

“How did you know?”

“I guessed.”

“You guessed?” Shiro exploded, throwing his hands up. “What the fuck, Keith!”

Keith’s anger bubbled in his chest, “Fuck, Shiro, you heard what he said about those people. He’s planning on taking survivors and forcing them to be slaves. Who knows what he’s already planned or done outside!”
“You reacted to what he said about Lance,” Shiro accused.

“So what if I did?” he growled.

Shiro sighed loudly, pressing a hand to his forehead, “Axca could have killed you!”

“That was probably one of the least dangerous things I’ve done since the damn world ended, Shiro,” Keith argued. “Besides, Lotor—I know that you can’t just kill people you don’t like or don’t agree with to maintain stability here, but there’s gonna be a day where all of us wish that I’d pulled the trigger today. I can feel it.”

“I know that, Keith,” Shiro said, shaking his head, “but you’re right. We can’t just kill people when we have problems. Even if—what he said about Lance wasn’t okay.”

“Of course not,” he said tightly. “That’s why I put a gun to his head.”

There was a pause then, and Curtis stood. He said, “Keith is right. Lotor’s plan is despicable. We can’t let him start any of it.”

“I know that Keith is right,” Shiro snapped. The tension between them was obvious. Shiro stared Curtis down, gaze sharp and unmoving from the other man.

Another pause in the room. Curtis remained standing, still staring at Shiro. Keith couldn’t read the look in his eyes.

Then, Shiro sighed and said, “Okay, we’re done here.”

“Wait,” Keith said, shifting his gaze to everyone else still at the tables. “What happened can’t leave this room. I’m serious.”

“Lance will try to kill Axca when he finds out she had a gun on me,” Keith explained, tucking his hands into his pockets. “Best not to say anything and avoid all of the mess.”

Matt laughed suddenly, breaking the tension in the room. He stood and walked over to clap Keith on the back. He said, “Really? Lance doesn’t seem like he’d kill anyone.”

Keith smirked again, “Put a gun to my head in front of him and see what happens.”

Matt laughed again, “Sure, Keith. Shiro, we good? I need to grab Pidge and get started on inventory for today.”

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“Keith, obviously—” Shiro started.

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Matt laughed again, “Sure, Keith. Shiro, we good? I need to grab Pidge and get started on inventory for today.”

“We’re good,” Shiro nodded. “I’ve got a radio, so call if you need me. Briefing same time in the morning. Be safe out there today.”

With that, everyone dispersed. Nadia offered Keith another fist-bump on her way out, and Kinkade and James both nodded to him as well. Coran patted his shoulder on his way out, a soft smile on his face, and Curtis and Adam left at the same time, awkwardly nodding to Shiro on their way to the doors.

“Curtis,” Shiro called when they reached the door. “Sorry for snapping.”

Curtis nodded, “No problem, Captain,” and slipped outside. Adam followed him stiffly.

There was a long pause then, where Keith and Shiro stood there together.
“What the hell was that?” Keith asked, finally turning his gaze back to Shiro.

“No comment,” Shiro replied. “You good?”

Keith nodded, “I’m fine. I’m gonna keep an eye on Lotor though.”

“Let me know if you see anything.”

“Yeah obviously,” Keith replied. “Should we go on the perimeter check now?”

His brother sighed again, “We need to talk about rations.”

“What do you mean?” Keith asked, confused. They’d just had a whole meeting about maintenance for the compound, and then well—Keith knew all about his ration credits. What could Shiro have to tell Keith about it now?

“Allura told me that Lance has been trading her for rations.”

Keith’s frown deepened. “What? I thought I had plenty of credits?”

Shiro nodded, “You do. I hadn’t bothered to add Lance’s name to the ration list until the day after he woke up, so that’s why I gave him my rations that morning. I guess he thought that we all traded for them instead.”

Keith’s mind was working a mile a minute. He couldn’t believe—what the hell was he even trading? And how much of it had he gone through already?

“Face wash,” Keith said aloud, answering his own question.

“What?”

He rolled his eyes, irritated, “That’s what he must have traded Allura. He likes that stuff, and that’s all that he has with him that I know of.”

“Oh, well—okay, but he can just use your credits. There’s plenty for both of you.”

“Right,” Keith said, distracted. How much of his stuff had he already traded away? Keith knew how much he liked it, and he’d never meant for Lance to have to trade any of it for fucking food.

God, had he even been eating enough? Keith had been busy over the past couple of days, picking up extra time on guard duty, one, so they would have enough ration credits, and two, because Shiro needed all the help he could get. Keith hadn’t really been paying enough attention to him and what if he’d been avoiding eating so he didn’t have to trade all the time—

“Fuck,” Keith cursed, shoving a hand through his hair. “Allura told you? Why the hell didn’t she tell him just to use my credits?”

Shiro shook his head, “I don’t know. She said that he was adamant about it, so I imagine he didn’t want to take anything when everyone else works. A few other people have been talking about it, how he trades instead of just taking. Everyone seems to really like him.”

“Well of course they fucking do.”

It comes out of Keith’s mouth before he can stop it. It’s just—so fucking obvious. Lance is the most amazing person he’s ever met. Who would have the fucking nerve not to like him?
Shiro’s expression morphed into a grin finally, “Alright. Just talk to Lance. I know he’s anxious to contribute, but he needs to recover fully before he strains himself. Make sure he’s using your ration credits from here out.”

Keith nodded, too annoyed and irritated with himself to even be capable of being embarrassed about what he’d said. Besides, it was just Shiro. He’d said plenty of stupid things about Lance both to and in front of him since they’d been reunited. That was the least of Keith’s problems.

He just honestly couldn’t believe that he hadn’t known about this before now. The last thing he ever wanted was for Lance to feel like he had to trade his own stuff—his face wash especially—for something as trivial as food when they were in such a safe place. It was Keith’s fault too. He should have been sure to explain to Lance how everything worked here, that Keith has enough credits for the both of them, that he could take care of him—

Shiro excused him from the briefing and reminded him to report back for his midday guard rotation. He left the common room feeling frustrated to hell and back, and thankfully, it was still early enough to he didn’t pass anyone else in the hallway on his way back to his and Lance’s room.

Maybe Lance would be awake by now because—he needed to sort all of this out.

The walk didn’t help calm him down. Instead, the longer he spent in the silence in his own head, thinking about Lance having to part with his things for food, he became even more enraged. He just—couldn’t fucking believe he’d been so stupid.

Finally, Keith made it to the door. He took a breath in the hallway, trying to steady himself. The last thing he wanted was to argue with Lance but—he had a feeling this wouldn’t be an easy conversation. There was probably a reason that Lance hadn’t asked him about rations before.

Fuck that though.

He twisted the handle and stepped into the room. It was still a little dark, the light from the rising sun just barely settling in through their window. Keith closed the door behind him softly, looking over to find Lance already awake, still laying in bed.

“Hey, you’re back early,” Lance said, voice still sleepy and soft. He was smiling a little, and there were soft creases on his face from their sheets.

Looking at Lance now, all sleepy and happy to see him, most of the anger in Keith’s chest evaporated.

You’re so screwed, Keith thought to himself for the billionth time.

“I, uh, need to talk to you about something.”

Lance stretched out, catlike, and Keith desperately tried not to watch the way his spine arched or the expressions he made. It was bad enough that Keith had to literally feel Lance’s glorious body pressed up against him at night, but watching him stretch? For some stupid reason, that was almost too much for Keith.

Then, Lance looked up to meet Keith’s gaze, patted the empty spot next to him, and said, “Come back to bed.”

Keith’s mouth went dry. That was definitely too much for him. Especially this early.

Instead of ripping his jacket and shirt off and literally diving into the bed with Lance like he really
wanted to, he sighed and shifted on his feet. His voice was low and rough when he said, “No, Lance, really. I need to talk to you.”

Lance’s expression went from soft, sleepy, and relaxed to serious, worried, and stressed in less than a second. The sudden shift made Keith’s chest hurt, and he cursed himself. He’d have been better off with his first impulse.

But—he finally remembered his anger. He needed to tell Lance about rations before he had to trade anymore of his stuff away.

“What’s going on?” Lance asked, sitting up. His t-shirt was wrinkled, and his hair was sticking up in the back. “Is everything okay? Do we need to leave? What happened—”

“Everything’s fine.”

“Then why do you look so angry?”

Fuck. Keith hadn’t realized Lance could read him so well.

He sighed, clenching his fists before letting go, trying to relax a little bit. He was so frustrated with himself for not realizing any of this sooner.

“Why haven’t you been using my ration credits?” Keith asked the question without any preamble. He’d already made a mess of this, so what did it really matter?

Lance hesitated, expression shifting again to something more careful, hesitant, wary. His voice was slow when he said, “I didn’t know I could.”

Keith nodded, “Why do you think I’m on guard rotation? I’ve been doing shifts to get us plenty of credits.”

“I can trade for my own rations,” Lance snapped.

“And what were you planning on doing when you ran out of face wash to trade?” Keith responded, just as aggressive, anger bubbling up his chest and threatening to claw out. “Begging Shiro for some work before you’re ready and then fucking up your leg?”

“I’m not—I can take care of myself!”

“I know!”

Lance stood up, too quickly on his injured leg, because he stumbled before he righted himself. He limped the few steps across the room to stand in front of him and poked Keith’s chest, hard. His blue eyes were blazing when he said, “You obviously don’t think so!”

“Yes I do!” Keith growled.

“Yes I do!” Keith growled.

“Then where do you get off storming in here and telling me I can’t trade for my own damn food?”

Lance swayed on his feet, the weight on his leg probably uncomfortable and sore. Unthinkingly, Keith reached up and grabbed his hips, steadying him. Keith didn’t let go, just curled his hands into Lance’s hips and held on.

“That’s what my ration credits are for! Us to use! It’s stupid to trade your stuff for food!”

“Maybe I don’t want to use your ration credits!” Lance snapped, unconsciously stepping into him.
They were so close that their chests were almost brushing.

Keith honestly felt like he was burning alive. Arguing with Lance wasn’t new, but this? There was something about the tension between them that was new. It was sitting right in Keith’s stomach, burning. Lance was stubborn, passionate, and just responding to Keith at every turn and it made him want.

“Why the fuck not?” Keith gripped Lance harder, thumbs sliding down into the dips of his hip bones. He desperately tried to focus on the argument at hand but—it was getting harder and harder.

Lance fisted his hands in Keith’s shirt, “I don’t want to be a fucking burden to you any longer! I can trade for my own food! I can do it myself!”

Keith opened his mouth to snap a reply but—wait.

I don’t want to be a fucking burden to you any longer!

Did Lance really think that? Did he not understand that Keith’s entire fucking world revolved around him? That Lance himself was Keith’s entire world? That nothing else even mattered to him as long as Lance was right next to him?

Keith’s anger turned into white hot rage at the thought that Lance had been thinking he was a burden. Trading his stuff for food was one thing but admitting that he thought he was a burden?

He stepped even closer, abusing the height difference that was evident when they were this close. Lance tipped his head back, staring up at him defiantly, eyes blue flame. Keith kept one hand locked on his hips and pulled his other up to Lance’s face. He bracketed his hand on Lance’s jaw and neck, fingers spread wide, forcing Lance to hold his gaze.

Keith pitched his voice low, rough, hard, when he said, “You have never been and will never be a goddamn burden to me. You are…”

“I’m what,” Lance challenged, voice still tough, eyes blazing, like he was still planning on fighting Keith, whatever it was he had to say be damned.

“The reason I’m alive,” he growled, pulling Lance in closer, so they were pressed together down the length of their bodies. “The most important thing in the fucking universe to me. The person I rely on most, the person I care about most. Take your fucking pick of what you are to me because they’re all true.”

They were so close that Keith could feel the shocked breath that Lance took. His mouth dropped open, just a fraction, and his eyes—Keith couldn’t describe it. If he was burning before, he was melting now.

He forged ahead, words spilling from him now that he’d gotten started. He said, “I don’t want you to think you’re a burden to me because you’re not. I meant what I said. I know that you don’t want handouts from other people, and that’s fine, but when it comes from me, it’s not a handout. I just want to take care of you.

“I dragged us here, Lance. We barely fucking made it, and I thought you were going to fucking die. The only thing I ever want is for you to be safe and alive and okay, and I lost my fucking mind when Shiro told me that you’ve been trading for rations,” Keith explained, finally softening. He loosened his grip on Lance’s hip and jaw, brushing his thumb across Lance’s cheek, soft, easy.

“I don’t want you to give up anything, ever,” Keith murmured. “If I can give it to you, then I will.”
Lance’s bottom lip was trembling, and tears had welled in his eyes.

“Please,” Keith begged, begged because Lance needed to understand how important this was, how important he was. “Please, Lance. Let me—let me do this for us.”

A long, long moment passed between them. It was filled with Lance’s ragged breathing and Keith’s stuttering heartbeat. The tears finally made their way down Lance’s cheeks, and Keith carefully, gently wiped them away with the pad of his thumb.

After the tears were gone, Keith looked further down, to the scar that ran across his throat, the scar that Lance hated so much.

Even softer than before, Keith moved his hand and brushed his fingers across the deep line.

Lance was staring at him when he looked back up.

Finally, Lance smoothed his hands out from Keith’s shirt. There was a second where he looked down and stood very still, like he was trying to decide something. Then, just as quickly as the indecision came, it was gone, and Lance tossed his arms around Keith’s neck and ducked his head into Keith’s shoulder.

Keith wrapped his arms around Lance and hauled him even closer. Lance was shaking in his arms.

Sometime later, Lance murmured, “Keith?”

“Lance,” he breathed.

Lance pulled back enough to look at him. Their faces were only a few inches apart, and Keith wasn’t sure that he’d ever seen this expression from him before.

“Okay,” Lance said, voice breathless and soft, and Keith didn’t know what he meant.

“Okay what?”

“I’ll use your ration credits.”

Keith paused and then, “You will?”

Lance nodded, and Keith flattened one of his palms against the small of his back. His other slid back to Lance’s hip, and he kept his grip soft, easy.

“Yes,” he said, still in that same breathless voice that was threatening to drive Keith crazy. “But I just…”

“What?” Keith prompted in a whisper.

Something desperate filled Lance’s eyes, and he remained quiet.

“Hey, talk to me,” Keith said, rubbing his hand up Lance’s back.

Lance let out a rough breath and looked up at him, “You get it, right? I don’t want to be… someone who drags you down and needs to be taken care of all the time. I want to be your… partner, someone you can rely on. I just—feel so useless and broken like this. Don’t you get it?”

Keith waited for a breath before replying, trying to consider what Lance was saying. He guessed that he hadn’t thought of it like that. If the situation were reversed, Lance would have a hell of a lot
harder time trying to keep Keith from helping out around the compound.

So yeah—he understood, but that didn’t mean that he liked it or that he sympathized very much at all. He had a time hard believing that Lance felt useless when Lance really meant so much to him in the first place. It was hard to think about.

Finally, he said, “I get it. I do, but I need you to know that you’re already those things to me. I know this is hard, but I already rely on you. When I said that you’re the reason I’m alive? I meant it. Lance, if—”

Keith had to stop. His throat closed up, thinking about it. Lance’s hands smoothed across his shoulders in the sudden pause.

He forced himself to continue when he could breathe again, “If I’d lost you, I don’t know what I would have done. I’m serious.”

Lance nodded, “I know the feeling. I just—I don’t want you to think that I can’t take care of myself.”

“I know you can,” Keith said softly. “You take care of me too.”

That earned an eye roll from Lance, and even though there was a slight blush rising to his cheeks, Lance scoffed and said, “Oh yeah? How’s that?”

“Just by existing honestly.”

Lance shoved him back, and Keith started laughing, the sound still soft, easy. Honestly, he felt more at ease here with Lance than he ever had before. He’d never felt like he’d had a home and standing here in this room with Lance, that’s exactly what he’d found.

Maybe that’s why he kept saying all of this ridiculously cringy stuff. He might as well get down on one knee with a ring. Because if Lance didn’t get what was going on by now…

“Fuck you, Keith,” Lance rolled his eyes again, crossing his arms over his chest. The action was accompanied by a deep blush, so Keith knew that he wasn’t actually angry with him, but he’d never seen Lance this embarrassed before. At least, that’s what he thought the expression was.

Keith rolled his eyes too, lightly squeezing Lance’s hip in his hand. Absently, he knew that he should probably pull away, but he literally couldn’t keep his hands off of him.

“I’m serious,” he said.

“You’re—” Lance stopped and leaned forward until his head dropped onto Keith’s shoulder. He breathed a laugh then and said, “I can’t deal with you this early.”

“Sorry,” Keith apologized because—yeah, it’d been a dick move to storm in here and start a fight with Lance before the sun was even up. Keith couldn’t say that he regretted it because, well, Keith could count on one hand the number of times he’d been able to be this close to Lance when one of them weren’t either asleep and it was just… nice not to pretend.

“I’m sorry too,” Lance said, pressing into Keith’s chest. “I should have just talked to you instead.”

Keith hummed, “Yeah, but I shouldn’t have been so angry.”

“I’d have been angry if it was you.”
“Yeah?”

“C’mon, Keith.”

He laughed again, relishing in being this close to Lance. He still couldn’t believe that he hadn’t moved away yet.

Lance groaned suddenly, shifting his weight onto his uninjured leg, leaning even more into Keith’s space and reaching up to grab Keith’s bicep to steady himself. Keith slipped one of his arms around Lance’s waist.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“My leg still just—hurts,” Lance admitted, gritting his teeth.

Keith snorted, “Yeah, you got shot.”

“Oh, shut up, Keith. Help me to the bed.”

Keith smiled and picked Lance up off the ground, carefully settling his other arm under Lance’s knees. Lance scrambled to get a hold on to Keith’s shoulders while Keith moved over to the bed.

As he was setting Lance down onto the bed, he grumbled, “I meant help not carry.”

“Go back to sleep,” Keith murmured instead. “It’s still early.”

Lance looked up at him, and one of his hands was still gripping Keith’s shoulder. His blue eyes were wide when he said, “Will you stay with me for a while?”

Keith thought about heading outside to find Shiro and get caught up on the day’s work. He thought about walking the perimeter out in the cold, huddled in his jacket until the sun rose and the temperature settled. He thought about his guard shift later today.

Then, he thought about staying right here with Lance. Maybe they could talk more, like they had done a few nights ago. That had been nice, learning more about Lance’s life before the apocalypse. Lance would probably stay close, and Keith could probably get some more sleep, curled up with Lance in their bed, before his guard shift later.

Plus, he could be with Lance.

So, he smiled and nodded, “Yeah, for a while.”

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Keith’s guard shift later was both a huge annoyance and a welcome reprieve.

He hadn’t expected him and Lance to have such a—well, *moment*. He’d been expecting them to argue, to fight about Lance using his rations, or Lance even feeling like he wanted to start working before he was probably ready to. He thought that they would talk about it and that he would be able to talk Lance into using his ration credits so he didn’t need to trade anything else for it.

He hadn’t expected anything that had actually happened.

First of all, he didn’t think that Lance would have felt like a burden to him, and now that Keith thought about it more, he felt like an idiot. Of *course* Lance felt like he was useless; all of the time they had spent together before this included both of them working together as a team. They traveled
together, hunted together, had each other’s backs. It should have been obvious to Keith that he was feeling like that but—Keith was so utterly relieved that Lance was alive that he hadn’t been able to think about anything else.

So, he should have realized that Lance might have been feeling out of place because then he could have talked to him about it before Lance had to trade away any of his stuff.

Second, Keith knew that he was angry when he went back to their room. He had been ready to pick a fight with Lance about the ration credits, and he could have been calmer about it instead of just starting in with the argument. But, Keith hadn’t really thought about the logistics of arguing with Lance. Sure, they’d gotten into arguments before when they were on the road, but there had been something distinctly different about this one. He hadn’t known that there was that much well—tension between them. He also hadn’t known how much he liked it. Even now, hours later, a shiver snuck up Keith’s spine at the thought of Lance’s gaze on him earlier.

And finally, the last thing he’d expected was for Lance to agree and use his ration credits. It made Keith feel endlessly better, knowing that Lance wasn’t going to have to trade his stuff away. It was also probably stupid, but he kind of liked the idea that he was providing for them. He’d never tell anyone, but it made his chest fill with pride when he thought about it.

Now, Keith had taken his position on guard duty. Once Lance had fallen back to sleep earlier, curled up against Keith’s side, Keith had eased out of bed and went to find Shiro. The sun had been up by then, and Shiro was just getting ready to start the perimeter check, which Keith tagged along on. Shiro hadn’t asked him about anything, but he must have been able to tell that everything had worked out because he kept smirking over at Keith every few minutes.

He hadn’t even cared. He was still too caught up in Lance to even think about it.

The guard tower was quiet now. His midday shift had started right at lunch, and Shiro had tossed him a protein bar when he’d gone on shift to hold him over until dinner. The outside perimeter was quiet too. Few walkers stumbled along in the field outside, and Keith wondered if the swiftly approaching cold weather would have any changes to their activity. What would it be like on the road when it got cold again?

Keith hoped he wouldn’t have to find out but—he had a feeling that something wasn’t quite right. If Lotor was already planning on flooding the compound with survivors he found outside and using them as slaves, then this place wouldn’t last very long at all. Lotor’s plan would destroy this place if they didn’t do something to stop him if he really tried anything.

The afternoon passed without any activity. All was quiet on the perimeter, and he didn’t even notice when Curtis was climbing up the tower to replace him on the evening shift.

“Hey, Keith,” Curtis greeted, pulling himself up into the tower.

“Hey,” he passed off the rifle and radio. “All quiet. I haven’t seen anything all day.”

Curtis nodded, “Shiro said for you to meet them for dinner.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Keith?”

He looked back up from where he had already started down the ladder, “Yeah?”

“I think you’re right about Lotor. His plan is insane, and people will die if we don’t do something
to stop it,” Curtis explained.

Keith nodded, “Keep an eye on him. I’ll do the same.”

“Yeah, see you.”

He left Curtis there for his shift and went to find the others.

On his way back up to the building, Keith crossed the grass and waved to Adam, who was checking the guard roster at the front gate. Keith would probably be on morning rotation tomorrow, which was just as well because it would be cold, but hopefully quiet. Adam nodded to him as he passed and went inside the second chain-link fence.

There weren’t many people outside, but Keith guessed it was because it was getting colder. The common room would probably be packed with people, but Keith prayed that Lotor wasn’t there. He wasn’t in the mood to argue anymore; he’d just start a fight, if not do something worse.

He nodded to the soldiers on guard rotation at the doors in the common room, and just like Keith thought, it was more crowded than normal.

Thankfully, when Keith scanned the room, Lotor and his cronies weren’t there. Instead, he found Shiro and Lance sitting at a table in the corner by one of the glass windows. On his way over, he stopped and grabbed his rations, nodding as he passed a few people he recognized and to the others who seemed to know him already.

“Hey, Keith,” Shiro greeted when he walked up to the table.

Lance looked up at him and smiled. His crutches were leaning against the wall near the table, and he patted the open spot next to him.

Keith sat down.

“Hey,” Lance said, still smiling. He reached up to squeeze Keith’s bicep, letting his hand linger there for a long moment. “How was your day?”

“Good,” Keith said, glancing him over. He was still wearing the same sweat and t-shirt with sneakers. Keith thought he looked great. “It was quiet on my shift. What did you do?”

Lance pressed in a little closer to him, enough to where their thighs were brushing on the bench. He said, “I slept for a while longer and then I helped Coran with some inventory. He checked over my leg and said that it looked a lot better.”

Relief washed over him. He nodded and said, “That’s great, Lance.”

“Yeah! Shiro was telling me embarrassing stories about you when you were a kid,” Lance said, winking.

Keith rolled his eyes toward Shiro, “Yeah sure.”

Shiro laughed, “Who relieved you on guard duty?”

“Curtis.”

There was a slight pause and then, “Did he say anything?”

Lance raised his eyebrows at Shiro’s question, and Keith frowned, wondering what he was
thinking. Instead of asking, he shook his head and said, “Nothing too important.”

“What does that mean?”

“Why are you asking?”

Suddenly, Lance threw his elbow into Keith’s side. Then, he said, “Leave Shiro alone.”

“Are you kidding me?” Keith laughed, staring at Lance in surprise. Why was Lance defending him? What was even going on here? “He makes fun of me every day!”

Lance rolled his eyes and shoved Keith’s shoulder, but his eyes were bright. He said, “You definitely deserve it.”

Keith scoffed, but before he could argue or bring it back up, Pidge and Allura sat down at their table next to Shiro.

Pidge and Allura filled the table with chatter, and Shiro was finally back to smiling once they were there. Pidge described the work that she and Matt had been doing all day, and Allura and Lance started a conversation too. Keith sat quietly, eating his rations and just listening. It was nice. At the beginning, when he and Lance had just gotten here, he never thought that he would get used to it. He didn’t know that he even had room for more people to care about, but somehow, in the short amount of time that he’d been here, he knew he wouldn’t be able to forget these people. Shiro, Pidge, Allura, Coran, Matt, and even most of the others that he knew, were just so important to them. And this place—Keith hadn’t believed that he would ever find anything like this ever again.

He would do whatever it took to keep it safe, even if it meant destroying Lotor with his bare hands.

“Hey,” Lance said suddenly, breaking him out of his thoughts. His voice was concerned, and Keith realized that everyone was silent. And also staring at him. Lance continued, “You okay?”

Keith nodded, “I’m fine.”

He looked unconvinced, and he gently knocked his shoulder into Keith’s and said, “Stop brooding then.”

Keith breathed a laugh because—fair was fair.

The rest of dinner was nice. Allura and Lance talked about skin care for a long while, and Shiro finally struck up a conversation with Keith about a mission he wanted to run in a few weeks. Talk of leaving the compound always interested Keith, and by the time they were finished, the sun had already set, and the rest of the common room was almost empty.

“I’m off to get some sleep,” Allura started, standing finally. “Lotor is demanding an early start in the lab tomorrow.”

Pidge groaned, “You need to tell him to fuck off.”

Lance frowned at Pidge and then looked up to Allura, “You need to be careful.”

Keith nodded in agreement.

Allura’s smile was tight, “I can handle Lotor. Goodnight.”
Silence filled the table once she was gone, and Pidge sighed again before excusing herself. She stopped to give Lance a hug, and she punched Keith’s shoulder on her way out.

“Briefing in the morning, Keith,” Shiro said, standing as well. “Adam will probably put you on morning rotation.”

“See you then,” Keith nodded.

“Goodnight, Shiro,” Lance called.

Shiro smiled, “Night, guys.”

Then, suddenly, Keith and Lance were alone in the common room.

It was quiet. The guards that were assigned to the common room throughout the day had already been sent to the barracks for the night. Outside, the evening guard rotation had a few more hours before it would be replaced by the night guard.

Keith was tired but—he wasn’t ready to go back to their room.

“Hey,” Keith started, “do you have your phone and headphones?”

Lance looked at him weirdly, frowning, “Yeah, why?”

One side of his mouth tipped up into a smile, “You wanna go for a walk outside?”

There was a pause, but Lance looked like he was fighting back a smile. He raised an eyebrow and said, “You know I can’t walk that well, don’t you?”

“Trust me,” Keith replied, standing. He held a hand out to help Lance up. “You in?”

The look Lance gave him was hard to read, but then, Lance smiled and took Keith’s hand.

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Outside, it was chilly and dark. The compound had a few lights mounted on the outside walls for the evening shift, but once the night shift took over a few hours before midnight, everything went dark. For now, there was enough light for Keith to see to lead them out to the gravel that led down to the fence.

Lance was on his crutches for now, and Keith tucked his hands into his pockets, strolling alongside him. They were silent as they walked outside, and when they passed the corner of the building, where Kinkade was stationed, he nodded to them.

“Kinkade,” Keith greeted, nodding too. “Everything good?”

“So far, all quiet,” Kinkade replied, then, he nodded to Lance. “Hey, Lance.”

“Hey,” Lance said.

“Kinkade?” Keith asked.

Kinkade nodded again. Keith knew he was a man of few works, which he appreciated.

“Can you watch these for me?” Keith asked again, reaching for Lance’s crutches. Lance handed them over, balancing unsteadily on the gravel, and staring at Keith.
Kinkade took them and leaned them up against the wall, “Yeah sure, Keith. Where are you going?”

“Just around the inside perimeter. We won’t be gone long,” Keith said, stepping toward Lance and turning around. When Lance didn’t move, he looked over his shoulder and said, “Climb on my back.”

“You’re crazy.”

Keith laughed, “You’re the one who said you can’t walk that well. C’mon.”

Finally, Lance sighed and put his arms around Keith’s neck and shoulders, holding on to him. Carefully, trying to avoid hurting his leg, Keith reached down and grabbed him behind his knees, hefting him up onto his back.

“You good?” Keith asked, turning his head to the side so Lance could hear him better even though he couldn’t see his face.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Lance’s voice was weird, and Keith suddenly wondered if he was blushing.

Kinkade laughed, and Keith nodded to him before walking off down the gravel toward the first fence.

The moon was rising, and even though there were a few clouds in the sky, it was fairly clear. The stars were sparkling, and without the light pollution from the city, it was bright and beautiful. The wind was blowing, just enough to ruffle Keith’s hair.

“Where are we going?” Lance breathed a few minutes later.

“Far enough where no one can hear us.”

“Oh?” Lance asked, voice hesitant, breathless.

Keith nodded and kept walking.

A few minutes later, Keith reached the fence. Instead of stopping, he turned and walked down the length of it through the grass until he was in one of the only blind spots on this section of the fence. Kinkade wouldn’t be able to see them from his position at the compound wall, and none of the guard towers had angles on this specific spot.

Shiro had told Keith about the blind spots on the fences one of the first times that they had done perimeter checks, but honestly, he’d known that there had to be places where the guards couldn’t see. This wasn’t the only one, and probably not even the best one, but it was dark, and there was no way that anyone could see them tonight.

Keith slowed and carefully set Lance down. He leaned up against the fence and stepped close to him.

Lance looked around and leaned into him, “It’s quiet out here.”

He nodded, and they fell into silence again.

“Hey,” Keith said suddenly, breaking the silence between them.

“Hey?” Lance answered, voice low.
“Can you do me a favor?”
Lance frowned, confused, “Sure.”

“Stay away from Lotor.”
Lance rolled his eyes, though he didn’t seem annoyed with Keith, which he guessed was good. Then, Lance said, “Duh. He’s an asshole. You’ve heard how he talks to Allura, right?”

“Yeah,” Keith nodded. “I just—don’t want him around you either. If I could tell Allura too, then I would but… not my place, I guess.”

“But you can tell me?”

_Uh oh_, Keith thought to himself. Something in Lance’s voice had shifted.

“Not implying that I can tell you what to do,” Keith said hurriedly, feeling panicked in his chest. He didn’t want to fight with Lance about this but… he wasn’t going to budge. He didn’t want Lance around Lotor period.

“Then why are you telling me what to do? That’s what this is, right?”

Keith sighed and covered his face with one hand, “I just—I can’t stand it. He’s dangerous, I know he is. He’s cruel and a psychopath and I… I don’t want him near you. You’re perfectly capable of taking care of yourself, and I know it. You’re smart and good with a gun, and you’ve saved my ass plenty of times on the road, so I’m not trying to imply that you’re not.

“Lotor has a plan. He talked about it in the briefing this morning and it just…” Keith trailed off, trying to figure out how to say it.

“What’s he planning?”

“He told us this morning that he wants to take in survivors and use them as slaves,” Keith finally explained. “He said that he’s already been talking to some groups who are doing it outside, and I bet he’s already started it too. Who knows what he’ll try in the future, especially after what happened today in the briefing when Shiro shut down his plan.”

Lance was quiet for a few long seconds, and Keith was honestly afraid of what he was going to say. He hadn’t meant anything by it. He knew that Lance was more than capable of keeping himself safe, but that didn’t mean that Keith wasn’t going to worry about him constantly, especially with Lotor involved.

“Okay,” Lance finally said.

Keith jerked back up to look at him, “Okay?”

“Yeah. I’ll stay away from Lotor, obviously.”

He hesitated, “You will?”

Lance rolled his eyes, and this time, his expression was something that Keith recognized, annoyed with him sure, but fond. It was clear he was fighting back a smile. He said, “Keith, believe it or not, I trust your judgement. I appreciate you reaffirming my amazing survival skills and everything, but I trust you. I know you’re not trying to boss me around. It’s fine.”

Keith let out a rough breath, almost a laugh, “Then why’d you make it sound like it wasn’t?”
Lance grinned then, “I wanted to see if you’d get nervous.”

“Asshole,” Keith laughed, nudging him with his elbow.

There was a short pause and then, “If I’m going to stay away from Lotor, then I want you to.”

Keith nodded, “Fair enough, but I have to be around him in the briefings and if Shiro assigns me to work with him on anything.”

Lance considered it then said, “Okay, but you watch your back with him. If something already went down between you two, then he’s going to be after you.”

“I didn’t say that something went down between us.”

“You didn’t have to,” Lance rolled his eyes, stepping even further into Keith so they were completely pressed up against each other. “I know you. Tell me what happened.”

Keith sighed, “It wasn’t a big deal.”

“Then it’ll be easy to tell me what happened.”

“He just… was talking about his plan, and I called him on his bullshit,” Keith started. He didn’t want to lie, but he didn’t want to have to say what Lotor called Lance. “Axca pulled a gun on me, and then I pulled one on Lotor.”

Lance was quiet for a long second, but his eyes were wide, and his face was almost angry. Then, he said, “And you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I wish I’d pulled the trigger.”

“Me too, honestly. The way he treats Allura is bad enough, but if he’s really planning all of that, then I doubt this will be the end of it.”

Owls hoot in the distance, and the soft sounds made Keith relax a little more. Even if Lotor was planning something terrible for the compound, Lance was safe for now. Everyone was okay today. Keith could worry about the rest of it later.

“So, his plan was what made you pull a gun on him?” Lance asked a few seconds later.

Keith avoided his gaze, “Not really.”

“Then was it something about me?”

“How’d you know?”

Lance snorted, “You have a handful of triggers, Keith. I’m one of them.”

Keith breathed a laugh, “Yeah, you’re right.”

“What did he say?”

He hesitated, “I don’t want to say it.”

“That bad, huh?” Lance rolled his eyes.

Keith shrugged. He could feel himself shaking a little, at the thought of trying to tell Lance what
had happened with Lotor in the briefing this morning. He wasn’t sure that he could even make himself say it.

“Please?” Lance asked, setting his fingers on Keith’s jaw and turning his head so their gazes met.

Fuck, Keith thought.

“He called you a whore,” Keith said softly.

Lance blinked, surprise written all over his face. Eventually, he asked, “What?”

Keith nodded, looking away again.

“Oh, wow, okay. That’s not the first time I’ve been called that, Keith,” Lance laughed a little, but it sounded, forced, strained.

Keith snapped his head up. He said, “It doesn’t fucking matter. He shouldn’t—I should have shot him.”

Lance shrugged and moved his hand to Keith’s face and cupped his cheek. His voice was soft and careful when he asked, “Why did it make you so angry if it doesn’t matter?”

“I just—no one should ever talk about you that way.”

Lance’s thumb swept across Keith’s jaw, the motion soft and slow. Then, he said, “Don’t feel like you need to defend my honor. Lotor’s a jackass.”

Keith didn’t know how to reply, especially with the attention that Lance was giving him. It was too intense. All Lance was doing was touching his jaw, but it felt like a million other things all at once. He really needed to pull it together.

Instead of answering, he nodded and reached out to set one of his hands on Lance’s side.

The night was quiet around them. There was an owl in the distance, and the soft rustle of the wind. They were far enough from the outer fence that they couldn’t hear or see any walkers and it was almost like they weren’t in the middle of the apocalypse.

“Do you have your phone?” Keith murmured.

Lance pulled his phone from his pocket and held it out to him.

“Can we listen to something?” he asked, soft.

Lance stared at him for a few seconds and then nodded. He unwound his headphones from around the phone and handed one earbud to Keith before tucking the other one into his ear.

“What do you want to hear?” Lance asked, almost shy. “Fall Out Boy?”

Keith shook his head and let his hand slide down Lance’s side to his hip. His voice was embarrassingly soft when he said, “You can pick.”

Lance blinked at him before looking down to the phone.

A few seconds later, music filtered into his ear through the headphones. It was a slow song, one that Keith didn’t recognize. The singer’s voice was low and steady, and the beat was soft. Keith knew that Lance liked pop music the most, but he hadn’t expected something this slow or soft.
But it was perfect for what Keith had been thinking.

He moved a little closer, bringing his other hand up to Lance’s hip, shifting away from the fence so they were standing face to face. Lance’s eyes were wide, and he was biting his lip, but it looked like he was fighting back a smile.

Keith pulled Lance closer. The song crooned in their ears.

“Is this why we’re out here?” Lance asked, and now, he really was smiling.

Keith shrugged, “Maybe.”

Lance’s arms slipped around his neck, and now, they were pressed together along the length of their bodies.

“I can’t exactly dance with my leg like this,” Lance murmured, raising an eyebrow.

“I can’t dance either,” Keith admitted.

“Then what was your plan when you lured me out here in the dark, Mr. Kogane?”

Keith’s heart leapt in his chest, and he squeezed Lance’s hips in his hands. He said, “Like I told you, to get far enough away so no one would hear us.”

“And then what?”

He paused, “Honestly, I don’t know. I just—I like being here. I’m glad that it’s safe, and we’re not constantly running and everything but…”

Lance seemed serious now, the flirty edge they’d been toeing all but gone. He tipped his head to the side and said, “But what?”

“I miss being with you,” Keith said carefully, the song accentuating his admission. “I miss it being just us. Together.”

“You do?” Lance’s voice shook a little when he asked.

“Yeah, of course,” Keith replied.

Lance didn’t say anything for a long moment, but then, he laid his head down on Keith’s shoulder and swayed to the side along with the music.

“When my leg gets better,” Lance said, basically right into his ear, “I’m going to teach you to dance.”

Keith laughed, soft, and swayed to the music with Lance. The night around them was quiet, the breeze was steady, and Lance was warm in his arms. Keith could add this moment, tonight with Lance, to the best moments of his life. The more time that he spent with Lance, the longer the list got.

“Deal,” Keith murmured.
anything you say can and well be held against you, so only say my name

Chapter by maireeps

Chapter Summary

He could barely even comprehend how early it was, with the moon still in the sky and the sky a soft dark color - all he knew was Keith’s fingers on his waistband, tucking in his familiar pistol and belt.

In exchange, he helped tighten the sheath of Keith’s katana around his back - like some fucked up morning routine shared between newlyweds.

Chapter Notes

hi! maireeps here! sorry for the delays in our schedule! i wanted to mark this chapter as important so i added some art (:)

some important notes:
playing style for lance’s acoustic cover: https://youtu.be/1OsOEt5Qpfc

you can retweet my art here:
https://twitter.com/maireep_/status/1229884648181731328?s=20
or reblog here: https://maireep.tumblr.com/post/190900376997/updated-cta-congrats-to-me-and

Nyma crossed her long legs over one another under the cafe table, her heels shining just so in the morning light. New York City bustled around them, but for Nyma’s red-bottom heels, they paused a bit just to watch.

He felt like a shit stain on the sidewalk in comparison. A hoodie three sizes too large to be fashionable, and he hadn’t shaved his legs in a month. The mimosa in front of him sat untouched.

“It’s been a month.” She said to him, polished nails tipping her mimosa back, “I’m tired of the moping.”

Lance all but whined, running fingers through greasy hair, “I got dumped, Nyma.”

“And?” A hiss in response and her killer eyes sought out the waiter from across the restaurant, “Pick it up. Your brooding isn’t you. Pluck your eyebrows, do a facial, and come out with me tonight.”

The waiter looked scared shitless of her. Nyma’s mother was a fence. Her Miu Miu purse on the table screamed that at the world.

“Two more mimosas,” She snapped and then looked back at him, “Make yourself pretty and fake
And so he would.

He asked Coran for a pair of scissors when he came to redress his wound. The wound itself and its ring of bruises were slowly fading to a less aggravated color, and Coran had given him the okay to lose one of his crutches. It gave him a sense of confidence to limp himself over to the bathroom, cold and foreboding, and try to return to his past, and ideal, look.

There wasn’t much a look currently, to begin with. His hair was long enough for it to curl, his skin wasn’t as soft as he liked or as smooth, his eyebrows had grown out to a degree. It took shuffling around and probably a gallon of water that he didn’t have the authorization to essentially waste as he exfoliated and shaved his entire body. His body hair, in general, was thin and slow to grow in, but he could feel the stickling of pit, leg, and facial hair that, for a bit, made him feel like the utter caveman he looked like. He was careful to carve the lines of his face with his razor, with quick precise movements before he stood precarious and half-naked in front of the bathroom mirror with the pair of scissors lifted to his bangs.

The last haircut he had was at a salon a month before the fall. He had paid far too much for so little of a cut, and he raved to Nyma afterward for hours about how cute the hairstylist was. This time, he grasped the ends of his curling hair and hacked carefully at it, angling the scissors down like every stylist he had been to. Slowly he made his way across his bangs, keeping the same layered look he liked but trimming the length until his fringe no longer brushed the tops of his eyebrows.

Then moving onto his sideburns, he cut the back and sides as close as he could - a pale imitation of his regular style. Delicate strands of ash brown dropped down into the basin of the sink, dusting the tops of his shoulders and his prominent collarbones, making him glad he hadn’t put back on his shirt, despite how cold it was in the bathroom.

Eventually, and with dexterity and a margin of twisting, he had finished trimming the back of his head and placed the scissors down to examine the cut. It was loads better than how long his hair had gotten in the months, and the swish of his bangs against his ears were a comforting reminder of his style. Not that he had much time to be stylish in the apocalypse, but it was nostalgic and warmed his chest. The boost of confidence was a plus as well, Nyma’s light accent reminding him to fake it.

Idly, while turning this way and that in the mirror to catch any mistakes, he began to brush off the soft hairs from his chest. Some strands still curled fluffily, and without any sort of straightener, he’d have to deal with it. He scooped the hair in the skin into his hands and dumped it into the trash can. When he returned to the mirror, he gently rolled muscles of his shoulders - loosening up the unused joints there and working down his body slowly. His injured leg he massaged in smooth strokes, glad his layer of sweatpants cushioned against the throbbing of the wound as he loosened the muscle underneath it. Raising his gaze, he tracked the movement in the mirror until his eye line was caught.

Bruises, green and turning darker, kissed the tan skin of his upper hips. They were striped in slim lines against the curve of his hips and his mouth ran dry. Keith’s fingerprints. From the other night when they fought. When Keith told him, deep and meaningful and sending shockwaves up his spine every time he lingered on it, “If I can give it to you, then I will.”

His head throbbed from how hard he was blushing. Keith’s fingers on his hips, the print of them, the weight of them in a dark and lasting mark was what he didn’t know he wanted and, well, Keith had given that to him. But the last thing he needed in this apocalypse was to mistake Keith’s dedication to any sort of confession. Those words during any other regular day in his life in New
York City would have sent him in a spiral, but this was the apocalypse - he could say that to himself all day. It was the literal apocalypse and mistaking Keith’s dedication could mean life or death, being cast out or dropped. Keith wouldn’t do that to him, but his heart would shatter if he tried one day to kiss that stupid man and the reaction wasn’t what he hoped and longed for. It was better to stay in this weird in-between, listening to the ache and throb of his heart whenever Keith all but sang soft things in his ear, touched him like he was made of glass, looked at him like he was priceless. He hated that he needed Keith’s explicit words, the exact cadence and three syllables for him to tame this evil beast in his chest. But if his heart broke now, it might never recover. He had already lost his family, his friends, everyone he had ever known since childhood, and Keith was all he had left. All he trusted to be with him throughout all of this - because even though the new people at the compound seemed nice, trustworthy even, they hadn’t killed for Lance, they hadn’t fought tooth-and-fucking-nail to keep him safe, and he wasn’t sure yet if he could do the same for them, as quickly as he would do the same for Keith.

The door to the room abruptly opened, shocking Lance out of his trance. He was still flushed, and naked from the waist up, when Keith stepped into the doorway of the bathroom, sword on his back, “Hey Lance?”

He choked, hands hovering in the air and not sure where to place them as he stared right back at Keith, who was turning redder and redder by the second, “Hey! Uh -”

His voice died when Keith’s eyes tracked down and stayed there. His eyes narrowed, not widened, all dark lashes and large pupils. Hungry, starving even, staring at the bruises on Lance’s hips. He wanted to tremble, shiver, under that look, knees threatening to give out and hands curling to dig his nails into the meat of his palm. Far away and probably from the beyond, he could hear Nyma scream at him and for once he listened.

Lance made a show of turning around, tugging his shirt from off a hanger and delicately draping it over his body, paying careful attention to keep the bruises visible until the last moment, disappearing behind white cotton. When he turned back, Keith was looking pointedly away, hands shoved deep in his front pockets and posture taunt like a drawn bow.

He wanted to celebrate, wanted to laugh and do a victory dance, but if Keith was going to go around, declaring his intent to take care of Lance but not kiss him, he was going to tease him until the older boy burst and finally did it. He was going to revel in this newfound power over Keith until the dawn of time because goddamn Keith for making him fall so quickly.

“What’s up?” He poked pointedly, grinning wide and wider still at Keith’s scowl.

Keith breathed out a soft huff, running a hand through his loose hair, still pink, “I… Wanna get out of here?”

Pause.

“I mean, uh, like do you want to come out with me? I’m going to scout and hunt. I thought you’d want to come with.”

Lance’s grin now was genuine, and he shuffled forward, grabbing at his singular crutch near the doorway and nodding almost frantically, “God I thought you’d never ask.”

He brushed past Keith when the other man stepped back, a near-identical grin on his face. Their shoulders gently brushed, and in favor of ignoring the intense electrical touch between them, he hobbled over to his pack. He sat down on the bed and dragged his Converse over, smiling at the
opportunity to finally wear something heavier than hospital slippers. He was careful in lacing up his sneakers, bending at the waist over his extended injured leg to tie the knot.

Somewhere over his shoulder, near the door, Keith asked, “You cut your hair?”

He stood and shrugged on his jacket, readjusting his crutch and tossing a look over his shoulder, “Yeah. It was getting too long.”

Keith didn’t say another word, making him frown to himself. He followed him regardless through their room door and into the hallway, shifting to place weight on his uninjured leg as soon as the weight almost buckled under him.

Lance opened his mouth, wondering whether they’d be walking. Keith beat him to it, “You haven’t seen Artax since before D.C. right?”

His heart leaped, and he spun on the other man. Keith looked amused, biting back a grin, but Lance didn’t care. He couldn’t help the smile that overtook his face, his fingers dancing rapid fire on his crutch. He hadn’t seen Artax since D.C. She was apparently near the garages on the other side of the compound, and not only did this meant a trip beyond the compound, finally, but also a good horseback ride. A sense of freedom he hadn’t be able to experience as of late tinges running down to his fingertips. Keith’s hand twitched between them briefly, and he only caught the slight movement out of the corner of his eye.

It felt like ages hobbling through the common room, which was thankfully devoid of Lotor and his crew, and through the front entrance. Keith nodded to Kinkade and Adam guarding the door, and Lance was pleasantly surprised with the warm feeling that spread through his chest. Keith? Making friends? Or kinda-almost-comrades, without wanting to nip their heads off first? Maybe the socially awkward cowboy he first met was slowly, and emphasis on slowly, becoming a little more friendly.

He barely had trouble crossing the gravel yard with Keith in tow, who stayed nearly at his elbow like a slightly taller shadow. The covered garage on the opposite side of the yard had been retrofitted with a small long garden, a small fire pit, and a log pile amidst it, along its backside. A small stall had been made, lovingly, out of dark wood and tireless hammering, including a long post out front with Artax’s saddle and bridle set on it. Lance shot a grin over his shoulder to Keith, who pointedly ignored it with a dip of his fringe.

“Don’t be bashful!” He laughed, jostling his elbow against Keith’s side, “You’re so sweet on her.”

A snort made him turn back to the stall, and Artax’s beautiful little face poked up, happily draped with a mat-like blanket across her. She knickered immediately, stamping her front hooves and pushing herself against the front of the stall. He limped over as quick as he could, crutch dropping to the gravel as he reached up with both hands to run his fingers down Artax’s face. The mare snorted happily, pushing her nose against his chin and ears flicking back and forth.

“Filly.” Keith breathed, annoyed, behind them, and Lance laughed, Artax snorting and placing her chin on the top of his head. Her musky scent pushed against his nose, soft wintery fluff on her coat brushing harshly against his face - his heart ached with how happy he was.

With a couple of last pats on her neck, he stepped back to let Keith slip Artax’s bridle over her head and lead her out. He went scrambling, slowly to not aggravate his wound, for his forgotten crutch as Keith brushed her down and saddled her up. She danced and tossed her head to and fro in happiness, bursting with energy that had Keith chuckling to reel her back in. Lance idly placed his
crutch against the stall, slowly taking steps over to the two now that Artax was saddled and ready.

Keith helped him over to the right side of Artax’s flank, and with the same hands that bruised his hips, holding him so tight, Keith raised him up onto the side with less than a heave. As if Lance weighed nothing, just like the night before, like a sack of potatoes on Keith’s shoulder. He was getting pretty thin, but still evenly keeping his weight well. He definitely didn’t want to start wondering about how Keith could easily be lifting him around like that - that could turn dangerous.

Sidesaddle, he shifted back onto Artax’s saddle to position himself more stable. His leg was already aching sharply pressed against the leather, making him wince. It did not go unnoticed by Keith, and, on this streak of getting Keith exactly where he wanted him, Lance steeled himself and worked through the pain.

Before Keith could help him fully mount, he smirked slyly and rotated his uninjured leg over the saddle, thanking heaven for the retention of his flexibility and absolutely putting on a show for Keith. Keith’s black fringe dropped low as he looked to the ground, handing Lance the rifle to place across his lap and then tucking his forgotten crutch off to the side, the skin of his neck a fiery red.

Lance grinned victoriously, happily humming and shifting in the saddle to scoot to the back and give Keith room to sit in front of him - but before he could, Keith was behind him, mounting Artax smoothly and bracketing Lance’s hips with his forearms as he reached around to grasp Artax’s reins. Immediately, he sucked in a breath and tried to relax his body against Keith’s chest - eating his stupid words over making Keith blush as heat tracked red across his own cheeks and ears.

With a soft click of his tongue, Keith spurred Artax on. Her familiar gait underneath his thighs made Lance’s chest tighter, a soft reminder of simpler times. When Keith and he had become family and knotted themselves together after nearly losing one another.

The double gates of the compound slid open slowly, manually by Shiro in the left tower. He waved as they passed through, a smirk wide and his eyes narrowed down at them. Lance waved a tentative hand, aware of Keith grumbling under his breath behind him. They moved through, and Keith barely waited for the gates to begin to slide back before he clicked his heels into Artax and pushed them into a trot. The road was blocked on either side, by manually-handled vehicles - an almost border along the main road that the compound was open to. Beyond the road was a berth of the forest, stretching for as long as Lance could see before the rise of buildings, gray and misty, poked beyond the treeline faintly. Keith pulled them into the forest, and the first-hand view of beyond Artax’s head was enough for Lance to woop, loud and happy, his hands grasping onto the horn of the saddle as the Thoroughbred picked up the pace.

The wind whipped at his bangs, cool and chilly like the winter against him, but with Keith’s warmth on his back, and the press of Artax’s superpowered mass underneath him, he felt comfortable and cozy.

Keith tucked his head against the dip of Lance’s shoulder suddenly, causing him to jump a bit before Keith spoke to him, “I’m going to take us about a mile or so into the woods.”

He nodded, relief spilling over him as Keith pulled back upright. The press of those forearms against his hips tightened a fraction before Keith flicked the reigns again and brought Artax into a canter - pushing beyond the line of trees and tucking them safely from view into the woods. The air was heavy and dank here, the trees and their needles trembling in the winter breeze. Artax tossed her head a bit, happy to be stretching her legs, her hooves pounding against the wet dirt as she took
them further through the forest.

Eventually, Keith pulled them back into a trot, as the treelines got thicker and the trunks wider and heavier with bark.

“So...who taught you the art of the blade?” Lance deepened his voice, cracking out of character a bit, imitating some hardened warrior. The amazement of riding was wearing off and he was finding it hard to keep his mind off of Keith.

Keith immediately snorted behind him, his arms surrounding Lance tighter as he laughed. Tremors passed from Keith’s chest, raining down Lance’s back and giving him the chills. They were so close, he could feel the breath of Keith’s laughter on his neck, and each single inhale and exhale brushing them closer together. He was getting dizzy from the sensation of essentially being in Keith’s arms for so long.

“My mom,” Keith rumbled, voice too deep and too close, prickling Lance’s skin in goose flesh, “She was a master in Kendo and all kinds of martial arts. That’s how my parents met. She was a big swordsman name at the time. She taught Shiro first and I threw a fit to be included. I’m glad I learned before she left.”

“That’s great,” he winced at the crack in his voice, but Keith didn’t seem to notice, just gave a soft hum behind him.

The woods ahead of them blurred on, Artax’s footfalls crunching against the leaves. So many, way too mushy things, were coming up to his mouth, threatening to leak out. What would Keith’s mom think of him? What would his family think of Keith? Were they watching now? Or wandering around somewhere - craving flesh?

The first trap they stumbled upon was triggered but empty, and Keith slid off Artax to examine it. It looked like it was left not too long ago by a different set of survivors, gently intricated with rusty mechanisms. Lance kept an eye on the forest, rifle placed heavy in his lap and finger laced through the trigger. It had been a while since the familiar weight of a rifle, or a pistol for that matter, had been in his arms. He was vaguely nervous, and Artax quickly picked up on that, stepping slightly to and fro. Keith calmed her with a hand on her neck, before pulling himself back up behind Lance and urging her forward.

A few more traps left ahead were also empty. He could feel the restlessness of Keith behind him, especially when these traps weren’t even triggered but obviously crushed by hundreds of feet. Hordes must have cleared through this area not long ago, scaring most of the animals not infected away. They would return, but it would be a while, at least he assumed. When they came upon the abandoned fourth trap, only torn flesh and bones sat in it. Walkers had gotten to the hare trapped in there before the hunters who had placed the trap had their heavy footsteps crushed in the mud around the trap. The cage itself was crushed and broken like the others, completely ruining the mechanisms of the trigger - rendering the trap useless. Keith swore and toed it with his boots. The mile into the woods that Keith wanted to take was already looking slim with its pickings and dangerous in whatever walked around here - walkers or potentially less than friendly survivors.

Artax knickered softly, and both of them went on alert immediately. Lance’s heartbeat echoed in his ears. A horde had just been through this way, it was not uncommon for them to backtrack, especially if the nearest scent of flesh was backward instead of forward. He shouldered the rifle, not quite flicking off the safety yet but hovering it.

Keith hissed, stepping forward to capture Artax’s reins and steady her, “Lance, there’s no silencer.”
A rustle in the bushes. Lance glanced down to Keith, murmuring to him, “We’ll have to be fast.”

And he was. A flash of brown, a rustle of leaves, and the safety was off and the trigger pulled. The shot was loud, but not shattering. Artax reacted well, not rearing with Keith’s hold, but still, her ears flattened and she tossed her head as best as she could against her owner. A body hit the mud just beyond the bush - Lance blinked. A deer.

Keith laughed then, all teeth, “Jesus. That was fast.”

Lance sputtered, “I didn’t - I thought it was a walker -”

“Right, right,” Keith waved at him, wandering over to the deer and looking over the body, “Shoot now, ask questions later right?”

Lance groaned, and Keith laughed again. Okay, he was just a bit giddy. It felt powerful to hold and shoot again. Keith shouldered the dead deer and brought it over to Artax, strapping the body to the back of the saddle. At least they’d be eating tonight.

Keith walked back, leading Artax behind him. This way they had just a bit more time together, and he couldn’t see really but he was sure Keith was smiling just as hard as he was.

In the next couple of days, Coran had given him the okay to do more exercise. Keith was busy with guard duty, and it was getting harder and harder to track down others as the compound tried to lock down for winter. With the deer he had shot, which had been a big hit, their rations supplies were stocked back up, but they still needed gasoline and new parts for the vehicles and equipment that kept the compound running. He basically scratched together what information he could from Keith’s version of the guard compound leader meetings, and from what Allura and Coran would divulge if he could pry it out of them. The compound was still strong, for sure, but they definitely needed supplies for the upcoming winter - pretty desperately.

In all honesty, his curiosity was spiked because he was slowly and surely getting stir crazy. Cooped up, limping still, and only slowly getting better made him feel like he was dwindling away in the wind. He could barely sleep, thrilled at how the pain from his thigh had subsided in so many ways. He could push it to and fro, to a certain extent, before he was definitely pushing the limits of his healing and had to sit for a bit.

And that’s where he was, sitting in the deserted common room, messing around with his iPhone when Shiro came strolling through. He had clearly just taken a shower, in a fresh set of fatigue pants and a white t-shirt, with a towel around his shoulders - and he was just going to nod a greeting toward Lance and be on his way before he shot up like a rocket and stopped Shiro in his tracks.

“Shiro,” he said, breathless from movement. “Uh - hey…”

“What’s up, Lance?” he asked, popping an eyebrow, a gentle look in his eye. Lance shuffled forward and rearranged the crutch under his leg.

“Look, uh,” he began, “I’m… I’m healing pretty well. But I’m also, well, losing my strength. I was wondering if you could run me through some drills or teach me close combat or - um, just something? I’m going crazy just… doing nothing.”

Shiro looked at him with unreadable eyes, and he felt all of two feet small, but then the older man nodded, a half-smile on his face, “If you’re sure you can handle it, I’ll teach you some strikes.”
“I can!” he exclaimed, stepping forward, eager. “I definitely can.”

Shiro grinned, “Okay. Let’s do it.”

That’s how he found himself on the receiving end of getting his ass kicked by Keith’s older brother, in the yard of the quad outside of the common room, in full view of Kinkade and Ina guarding the entrance - trying not to flush at every mistake he made.

“Listen,” Shiro breathed easily, as if this was the simplest thing in the world for him, throwing up a blocking arm as Lance swung a fist forward, “you need to use your speed to your advantage.”

They stopped, and Shiro gestured for Lance to come closer. He did, shuffling his feet slowly, taking minuscule steps to support his leg. Shiro grasped his upper right arm and pulled Lance into an angled stance.

“Strike when angled from the side to keep your balance,” Shiro pushed against his stance and Lance only wobbled slightly, “See? Like this, you can strike faster and harder. Now, hit me.”

Okay, so he hesitated. Shiro, both effectively the most intimidatingly sweet man he’s ever met and also the ghost of his crush’s older brother suddenly come to life, was also the size of a semi-truck. So sue Lance for being nervous about throwing his weight, his injured weight, even though he did ask for this, into a punch on this mountain of a man. A mountain of a man with a very puppy-like face, nearly begging Lance to do it - punch him. He groaned under his breath, took a shaking breath and threw a punch against Shiro’s crossed arms.

Shiro barked, “Again!”

And they fell into a rhythm. He tried his hardest to not shuffle his injured leg too much, but the movement of throwing a punch was getting smoother and smoother, and soon even Shiro was skidding against the gravel, grinning wildly like Lance hadn’t just tossed a semi-okay punch his way and instead, like, won the lottery or something.

“Harder, Lance!” he encouraged. “I’m going to front on you, you have to stop me by striking, okay?”

“Shiro - wait, oh god -”

Shiro stepped closer and panic rose harder, but instead, he steeled against it and, with about as much power as he could put into it, he slugged hard against the older man. The pop of his knuckles against Shiro’s forearms rang in his ears, and Shiro let out, frankly, a tad bit exaggerated he was sure, a puff of air from the strike.

“That was great,” Shiro grinned, shaking out his arms before pulling them back up in the cross again, “Once more, then we can move onto defensive motions. This time, I’m going to dodge though. Move fast!”

Lance nodded, sweat tracking down his neck and into the collar of his t-shirt. Sweats weren’t the best to be training in, but he was beyond glad to have actually and finally worked up a sweat. He grinned, lopsided and a bit nervously, and slid back a bit into the angle, letting Shiro advance on him for a few footfalls, before he launched himself forward and swung.

This time, with a laugh, Shiro sidestepped him, arm out to catch Lance around the elbow before he
went flying past and into the gravel.

But just their luck, it was then when Keith turned the corner and skidded against the dirt in front of Lance. Shiro’s hand missed and Lance gasped, hard, as his leg buckled just a tad bit under his weight and Keith had to step forward, fast and without hesitation, to catch him by the shoulders before he hit the ground.

There was a beat of silence, and Lance could have audibly groaned against the stiffness of Keith’s chest. He stepped away from Keith’s hands, which hovered in the air for a second before they dropped to his sides in fists.

“Keith-” Shiro tried, voice even and gentle.

“What the hell are y’all thinking?” Keith snapped, all long drawl and southern slang now that he was angry, “Are you trying to give me a heart attack? Lance, what was that? Shiro, what the fuck-”

And okay, sue him for getting a bit worked up. He had finally been cooking up a sweat and feeling confident on his feet, adrenaline pumping and chest still breathing hard with exertion. He ran a clammy hand through the front of his fringe, his other hand propped on his hip for stability.

“Keith,” he said, looking over at the other boy. “We were just training. I asked Shiro to teach me some close-combat moves. I’m getting better. My leg is loosening up. Don’t panic.” To show him, he bent his injured leg and shook it gently. The throbbing was nearly as painful as nearly a week ago.

Keith’s mouth screwed up, all attractive pouting and anger, and he flashed his gaze over to his brother. Shiro looked sheepish, almost ashamed even, with his hand tucked behind the back of his head and the other in his front pocket - a trait the two brothers shared.

“...I’m not panicking, I’m pissed at my brother. He could have gotten hurt. It’s too early.” Keith bit out eventually, “Why would you even say yes? He was shot a week ago, Shiro!”

“Don’t talk about me like I’m not here!” Fuck, he sounded shrill, but the brothers continued their stupid staring contest, and he had half the mind to step on Keith’s foot to get him to at least look at him. At least then he might be able to calm Keith down.

Shiro responded evenly, “He’s getting stronger. Lance needs to train regardless to build up his strength. And soon.”

That stiffened Keith up like a rod, but he couldn’t pay much attention to the other boy, instead whipping around to look at Shiro. Soon? Excitement bubbled in his chest.

“Why?” He prompted and Shiro shot him a smile, “I figured you guys could come with us to trade with the scalpers up north. End of this week, we leave before dawn.”

Keith opened his mouth but he cut in hard and resound, sparing the other man a defiant look, “Yes. Thank you, Shiro!”

Keith’s fists were still balled at his sides, shoulders taut and eyebrows low on his brow. Lance paid him the barest moment of a glance, raking his eyes appreciatively over the cut of Keith’s black shirt without his jacket, and how his sword sat against his shoulder - he must’ve seen them once he got back from patrol. Lance jumped his gaze from admiring his gloves to Keith’s eyes, which slightly flicked in his direction.
“I’ll be fine,” he declared, crossing his arms, unable to hide his excitement. “I want to get new equipment and help out finally. I’m healing, and it’ll be fun. I haven’t been out since collecting the traps.”

Finally, Keith relaxed a bit. He didn’t nod or agree, just simply released his fists and sighed, just a tad, under his breath. Lance smirked, knowing he had won. He dipped in close to place a hand on Keith’s broad shoulder, curling his fingers against the soft material there, a gentle and silent thank you before limping over to his forgotten crutch.

And if he heard Keith grumble a deep, “fuck you” to his amused brother as they left the yard, set back for the common room, well Lance didn’t mind it a bit. He was already swirling with the excitement of trading with another settlement, and what he could find there.

Just before dawn a few days later, Keith shook his shoulder and slipped from their bed. He wasn’t asleep regardless, pure molten adrenaline had been rushing in his veins since he had put his head on the pillow the night before. The days had all blended together, meaningless and only fleetingly better by his recovery, and now he was clambering out of the bed and tying on his shoes with next to no effort, his thigh only vaguely complaining. He still redressed his wound, sweatpants around his knees, in the bathroom while he brushed his teeth, while Keith laced up his combat boots and suited up. He could barely even comprehend how early it was, with the moon still in the sky and the sky a soft dark color - all he knew was Keith’s fingers on his waistband, tucking in his familiar pistol and belt. In exchange, he helped tighten the sheath of Keith’s katana around his back - like some fucked up morning routine shared between newlyweds. His fingers barely worked, trembling with adrenaline. They were quiet, nearly half of the compound was still dead asleep and staying behind, but it didn’t stop Keith whispering heatedly from the doorway, “C’mon, Lance.”

“Hold on,” he hissed back, as he pulled his near-empty pack on, triple checking the amount of money in his wallet, full now with the useless green bills. He could dance with how excited he was to finally have some clothing. He met Keith easily at the doorway, unable to hide his limp to Keith’s prying eyes.

He was getting better and didn’t need crutches, but he could feel Keith’s worry radiating from him in waves as they tracked down the hallway. He leaned against Keith’s broad shoulder and muttered to him, “I’m fine.”

Keith grunted, but his tension didn’t wane - not until they reached the yard of the compound and met up with the others. Allura stood with Kinkade and Adam, Shiro in the front seat of one of the Humvees and easing it back out of the garage slowly. Matt Holt, Pidge’s older brother, tracked nervously around the Humvee, helping Shiro back out fluidly - though Lance was sure Shiro didn’t need the help. Keith passed them all, leaving Lance lingering behind the trio of the group to slide up to the passenger side door. He, in a singular movement so attractive it nearly made Lance’s mouth run dry, boosted himself up to the side of the Humvee, tucking his head into the window to chat with Shiro - absolutely at ease with moving around the massive tactical vehicle.

Lance stepped closer, to Allura’s unflanked side, and she nodded to him in welcome. She was wrapped in a dark fatigue jacket several sizes too big, and silver dog tags dangled outside of the black tank top underneath. She usually wore a lab coat, like Matt and the other researchers, but now, Lance could really see she was a soldier after all - the swell of slim and toned muscles peeking out from her rolled-up sleeves. He desperately wanted to train, because from here, it was
definitely apparent that Allura was more toned and fit than he was. She raised a slim eyebrow his way and, stage whispering, she leaned in, “Stop checking me out.”

He blushed, “I wasn’t! I just… I’m jealous of your arms.”

Allura’s second eyebrow raised to meet the other. He laughed, “I’m serious! I feel like a twig. Don’t worry, Allura, we all are very much aware of how beautiful you are.”

She snorted and rolled her eyes, smiling out of one corner of her mouth, “Right. Tell your boyfriend that, maybe he’ll stop glancing over here like a wounded dog.”

Lance snapped his gaze up. Keith had dismounted the side of the Humvee and stood near Matt Holt with his arms firmly crossed against his chest. Shiro had slipped out of the Humvee and was walking their way, but Keith’s eyes lingered over towards Allura and Lance under his bangs, gaze dark and sharp.

He kept eye contact with Keith, flickering between one eye to the other, just desperately trying to understand what the other man was thinking before Keith turned away to talk to Shiro. He huffed a bit, blowing the fringe out of his eyes and nearly pouting, “He’s not my boyfriend.”

Allura nodded sagely, “Sorry, your lover then.”

“Oh my god,” he groaned, not quite sure which was worse. Allura all but cackled next to him, but the banter stopped as Shiro pulled the tactical doors of the vehicle open and they all began to pile in. Kinkade and Adam sat furthest from the driver’s seat, near the rear of the vehicle, utterly strapped with guns and rifles and looking every bit the soldiers Lance knew them to be. Adam’s glasses flashed in the darkness like a ray when he climbed in after the two, obviously noticing the stiffness in Lance’s leg but not saying much. He liked Adam for that precise but silent calculation, even if it was intimidating as hell.

Allura piled in after him, with Matt on her heels. He had also traded his research coat for a leather duster, cape-like, on top of the brown and gray gear, his hands deep in his pockets - almost an imitation of Shiro. Allura plopped down in the seat next to Lance, and Matt slid coolly into the seats across from them, clearly avoiding looking at Allura, but if Lance knew anything about chasing girls (and guys), it was the “oh-I’m-totally-not-looking-but-I-am” tactic.

He almost wanted to pipe up and tease, but even Allura had positioned herself propped against the side of the Humvee with her arm in a ceiling strap, silent and tense. They all were, and he just fed on that tension as Keith piled into the passenger seat after Shiro and they punched it through the compound gates barely before the sun began to rise.

It was a long and quiet ride up north. Shiro cut the engines at least twice, rolling the Humvee slow and silent through areas of the freeway where large blockages of cars held up signs of “DEAD NEARBY”. Keith looked as antsy as Lance felt, gripping and regripping his knees in the front side from where Lance could see. Allura had wrung her hands hard enough at this point, mindlessly, just like he was bouncing his uninjured leg in nervousness. The only people who sat still and calculated in the vehicle were Shiro and Adam, even Kinkade thumbed a clip from his waist belt in a rhythm.

The forests and town steads rolled by, getting sparser and sparser along the distance of the trip until Lance was sure they must have breezed past the Pennsylvania state border, now in the thick of the backwoods, the air so crisp there seemed to be patches of ice along the roadside. That was when Shiro finally pulled off of the abandoned freeway, turning down a dirt road toward a settlement -
clearly patched in the thicket around a town, one with a large church spire in the midst.

Lance held in a shaking breath, eyeing the reinforcement chicken wire and stake fence that they approached. It was patchwork, definitely, and compensated by a heart amount of men and women on foot just beyond, guns and weapons dingy, rusty, bloody. A pile of burning bodies lay off to the side of the entrance, two men cackling and tossing flesh into it aimlessly, eyes boring into the Humvee as it approached. Shiro spoke to no one or stopped for anything, and yet a burly man still stepped to the gate and pulled it back for them.

He was blissfully content with the idea of rolling up to whichever building they needed to trade in because the eyes of these people were beady and dark, but Shiro eased the Humvee next to the gate and cut the engine. Like clockwork, Adam and Kinkade shot up and rolled them all out, almost escorting Allura and the rest of them out, arms on their guns, fingers near the safety. Kinkade cast Shiro a sharp nod and remained next to the Humvee, and, weak on his knees and desperately trying to steel his gut, Lance followed them all into the settlement.

Shiro took up the front, Allura and Keith on his side, with Adam purposefully at the rear. Lance tried not to look around too wildly, but everywhere he looked, people gathered. A man polished a tank the size of a building, with two children using spit as a cleaner. A bar was rowdy in the middle of the morning, men with guns trading fireworks to pop at the feet of people who walked by. Young women and men sat on hands and knees in front of a tall building, their mouths sewed closed, leads tied to the chair of a guard - who grinned largely and eerily at them as they passed, his eyes lingering on Allura’s backside. The hair on the back of Lance’s neck was standing up. He anchored his eyes to Keith’s back, focusing on the strands of Keith’s long hair and trying to not let the bile rise in his throat. A woman screamed behind them, long and high-pitched, and far away. He clenched his jaw.

At last, they reached a City-Hall esque building. It was large, foreboding in its stone architecture, and nearly bathed half in dark paint. At least he hoped it was paint, but from what he had seen already, he wasn’t quite sure at all. They ascended the steps, and the guards at the top sneered at them as they passed, detached fingers and hands hanging from their necks on necklaces of braided human hair. Matt made a small noise of discontentment when they spied a NASA jacket, torn and robbed of the name on its back, shredded and laid along the pillars of the building - matching army fatigues, police uniforms, and even a small girl’s yellow dress waving like horrifying flags in the wind.

He ducked through the doors quickly, eyes now firmly on the ground. Fuck. He was sure he was going to chuck. Nerves ran up and down his arms, and his mouth was cotton, all cotton. These were the bandits. The bandits from D.C., he was sure, they were scalpers like Romelle said. He didn’t want to wonder why they were called so, but he had a vague and very horrifying idea. They went through a glistening entryway, stepped through a large doorway, and stood before what Lance assumed was the heads of the settlement.

One man sat on a large chair, high-back and cushioned and blood red, one eye gone and scarred, his hair ash gray. Beside him, an older woman stood, with long free black hair and skin so dark it was nearly purple, her lips painted gray. On his other side, a young man around Shiro’s age was bald and ripped with scars - hands on a crossbow. Various guards scattered throughout the room perked up when they walked in, and the man in the large chair rumbled with amusement.

“Ah, my friends,” he grinned, and Lance wasn’t at all shocked to see a mouth full of gold. “You have returned.”

Shiro nodded, “We have green to trade.”
“Wonderful, wonderful,” the large man clapped his hands, then paused, gaze going dark and full of malice. The guards in the room shifted as one, nearly hissing at them. The woman beside him clacked long scraggily nails against a gun on his hip.

“However…. It seems one of our scout groups in D.C. has been *scalped*. By a blade,” And all the eyes in the room zeroed in on the katana on Keith’s back. Shiro slid forward, twisting his rifle around into his hands, Adam already on alert, finger over the safety.

“A blade just like that one…” the man grinned, nearly hysterical. “What will you do, soldier? You are outnumbered, and I demand justice. An eye for… the loss of many of mine.”

And god, he wasn’t sure what came over him. This was a delicate, delicate situation, and it was political too. That needed Allura, maybe Shiro, to, what, bargain over Keith’s life? He wasn’t about to sit around and let them do that, let this stranger demand Keith take a bullet for the ambush they were jumped into. So when his pistol landed in his hand, and he had stepped fully in front of Keith, cocked and loaded gun aimed precise and true right at the man in the chair, sue him.

Shiro inhaled sharply, Keith was stone, Lance’s other hand fist tight in the front of Keith’s shirt. He wasn’t trembling, he fucking wasn’t.

It was too many seconds, and there were way too many guns in the room for there to be a shoot out without all of them dead. But before he could worry too much about the consequences of his dumb actions, the man laughed - loud and jolly and liked some fucked up Santa figure. The woman’s eyes narrowed at him, appraising Lance from head to toe.

“Oh a feisty one,” he leaned forward in his chair, hands bandaged and gripping the armchairs with ferocity. “You all should be glad I hated Skinner. In fact, thank you for disposing of that runt. Now, what can I do for you?”

Finally, Shiro exhaled, but Keith still was tight as a rod until Shiro’s hand came gently down on Lance’s pistol, lowering it until Lance had stepped back and dropped his arm. Allura immediately gripped his upper arm and tugged him back, eyes rolling in mirth but her lips in a tight line. Keith barely glanced at him, unreadable.

“Yes,” Keith’s older brother cleared his throat, “if you allow us, we’d like to trade with green.”

“Yes,” Keith’s older brother cleared his throat, “if you allow us, we’d like to trade with green.”

“Your green is always welcome here, soldier,” the woman spoke up this time, all silver-tongued and raspy-voiced, her arms resting on the man’s shoulders, almost *lovingly*, “Let us talk, Emperor.”

The ‘Emperor’ nodded, flicking his fingers toward the group in dismissal, “Junk, lead them to the post.” And just like that, they were being led by the third and younger man from the room and through the wings to the other side of the large building.

Allura hissed in his ear, “What was *that*!”

He groaned back, “I don’t know - I just. I couldn’t let them threaten him like that.” He looked up, glancing in Keith’s direction. The darker haired man looked over, almost lazily, eyes imploring. Lance gave him a sheepishly, hopefully, cute in some way, smile. Matt, next to Keith, looked at him with wide, wide eyes, and Keith lifted an eyebrow back at him with a shrug.

Allura snorted, drawing back his attention, “You could have just proposed the normal way.”
Lance grumbled, trying not to let the blush reach his cheeks. They reached a storehouse room nearly the size of the compound itself, and ‘Junk’ left them to their devices under the supervision of a very short bespeckled man with long sleeves, who talked Shiro’s ear off about trading and what they needed. Allura hooked her arm with Lance’s and tugged him away from the main group, towards rows upon rows of towering shelving, rusted in some places and gleaming in others. Boxes and hangers, and every minor thing in the world he could think of, was piled in corners and on top of each other. Allura pulled him through a few rows of shelves and over to some boxes and hangers with a gleam in her eye - like they were shopping.

She immediately picked up a dotted skirt from the top of a box, holding it up to him with one eye shut, like she was lining up whether he would fit in it or not.

“Haha,” he deadpanned, swatting at the skirt but she kept it out of reach, “go find a dress or something for you to woo your blonde mechanic.”

Allura laughed, tossing the skirt back on the pile, trying to ignore how her own cheeks flushed a bit. He grinned, and she rolled her eyes, “What, you’re not confident enough to wear a skirt?”

Lance shrugged, “It’s not practical anymore. Actually it wasn’t either in New York, but I definitely did rock one in Cuba for a bit. Okay, less talking, more finding-Lance-a-good-pair-of-jeans.”

Together, they scoured through the boxes and racks, plucking and tossing options back and forth until Allura did indeed find a pretty little dress that he had to nearly beg her to get. She was still on the fence, but giggled and had plenty of time to really think about it as Lance picked through every pair of jeans he could find. Finally, he found a nice pair of dark wash jeans, in his presumed size, and in good condition. He shucked his sweatpants off, glad that he was only really necessarily stripping in front of Allura and not Shiro, Matt, and Adam (or Keith for that matter).

The jeans he slid into were tight and comfortable. The bandages across his thigh were thick and bulged a bit in his jeans, but nevertheless they were snug and vaguely nice-looking - Allura mentioned something about his “cheeky bum” and he laughed. The next thing he found was a nice thick flannel, and a light grey t-shirt, slim enough to fit his waist and shoulders, and when paired with his bomber jacket, didn’t look half bad. In fact, he felt more confident than he had in the last couple of weeks since he was shot. Allura decided against the dress in the end but happily helped him find a few cases of bullets for his pistol before they met back up with the rest of the group.

The short man took all of his dollars, which he didn’t mind. His sweatpants and dirty shirts in his bag, he immediately took to helping the others carry the resources Shiro had traded for - boxes of fuel, nonperishables, bullets, onto a collapsible cart Matt had brought along. They were wiped clean of ‘green’ in the end, but the haul was good, and they made the short trip to the Humvee as quickly as possible.

His eyes did not miss the woman from the leaders’ room, standing on the porch of the building where the women and men were tied up. Her sharp eyes followed them, gaze digging hard into his back, as they crossed and left the settlement. Jeers from the bar carried over, and he could spy Keith’s jaw tense and grip at the nasty comments. They particularly seemed to focus on him and Allura, and even ever-calm Shiro had fiery eyes by the time they reached the Humvee. Kinkade looked as eager to leave, and before long, the settlement was far behind him - and Lance finally felt like he could breathe again.

At the end of the week, the compound was so much brighter. The rations brought back from the scalper settlement were immediately put to amazing use, and so far they had re-upped on the fuel.
and burners of the compound and their vehicles. Even Pidge had been able to reconnect some of the large scale comms units, and they had gotten back to daily rotating radio channel scrambling, looking for other signs of life and news from different compounds. So far, it had been nothing, but the hope in the compound itself was higher than it had been before. Even Lotor had seemed to be quiet and under the radar lately, staying mostly with his squadron and keeping to themselves.

So when Coran busted out a case of peach moonshine he had been brewing and a record player he had brought from Britain, the compound’s bonfire got just a bit more interesting. Shiro had the grill already going on top of the firepit, the last venison from the deer Lance had shot roasting on it, and Allura had set up, with the help of a very suave Romelle, the record player from Coran. The case of moonshine, capped in mason jars, was an immediate hit with Shiro’s companions, and Adam had long since cracked open a few jars for pouring. Lance watched it all with his head in his hand, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, watching cups being passed around.

His guitar sat idle next to him on the stone bench. The fire was nice on his skin, casting a glow against Artax’s garage stall and garden near them, and bathing them all in warmth. It was barely after sunset, and the sky was a kaleidoscope of colors from blues to pinks and oranges.

Allura plopped down the bench next to him and didn’t say a word, face rosy from both Romelle and the cup of moonshine in her hand. He laughed at her, and she scowled good-naturedly. His eyes lifted, looking over to Shiro and Keith beside him. The brothers had already downed a cup each, at the insistence of James and Kinkade, and Pidge was in the middle of them, arguing for a cup of her own. Keith’s animated gestures and scowls were cute, obviously spurred on by his drinking, a flush that matched his brother’s across his fair skin. The two of them had arguably gotten more Texan now that they had been drinking, accents far more flared up than usual. Shiro’s was nearly ridiculous, so faint regularly and now thick enough for Pidge to start correcting his slurred speech. Keith combatted any correction she sent their way with a loud complaint of the New Englander’s accent. Lance faintly smiled, watching the exchange and happily bobbing his head to soulful Donny Hathaway on the record player. Coran apparently was a big fan and had a collection of records that had surprisingly survived most of the fall.

It was nice to hear music again not from his tiny iPhone, even though the record player was scratchy and barely loud enough. Allura hummed next to him, swaying and closing her eyes, a cup tipped to her lips.

Romelle, sat in a conversation between Nadia, Matt and Bandor, cast a glance over her shoulder at the other woman, and Lance couldn’t stop himself from the smirk he cast back at the blonde. Romelle returned it, a small little smirk that made him nearly chuckle, before she turned back, tipping her cup in his direction with a little nod. How cute. Idly, he wished he could drink.

Allura gasped and whirled on him, speaking aloud, “Lance! It’s the perfect time! Play for us!”

Fuck. Where was that drink?

He winced and breathed out, very very aware of the eyes on him now. Coran lifted the needle from the record player and paused Hathaway - and he wished he could easily just go ahead and refer them back to Donny to take them away, and not his fumbling fingers and nervous thumbs. He lifted his gaze and caught Pidge’s eager eyes.

Okay. Fine.

Lance pulled his guitar out of the case, and suddenly everyone had pulled in close to the fire. Which was good because it meant he didn’t need to sing loud per se, but also bad because he was
very much sweating now. He ran his palms down the front of his jeans and stripped out of his jacket and flannel - just in his t-shirt in the cool winter air to keep his confidence still.

Then, the hardest part. He idly tuned the guitar, trying to shut out the eyes on him for favor of thinking of a song. Upbeat? Soft? Not melancholy. He strummed a chord, and of course, his little baby had stayed in tune. Before, when he was alone, he would tune it every day to keep himself from going crazy without anyone around. It had anchored him, and he was actually glad to be holding her, strumming again. He flexed his fingers, he was out of practice on actual songs. He stretched them, ducked his head down and then looked up again, fluttering through the faces that stared back at him before he began to play.

One of the best feelings was getting three cords into a song and your audience knowing the song immediately. The second best feeling was the reaction, the exhale, the smiles, the awe at his fingers, and the spark in their eyes when he opened his mouth to sing.

“'m gonna fight 'em all,

A seven nation army couldn’t hold me back,

They’re gonna rip it off,

Taking their time right behin’ my back,"

He slapped for the bassline, jumping his knee to the rhythm, using fingerstyle to imitate the bass and drums. The electricity behind his fingertips was everything.

“And I’m talkin’ to myself at night,

Because I can’t forget,

Back and forth through my mind,

Behind a cigarette,

And the message coming from my eyes

Says leave it alone ,”

And he’s on fucking fire. His fingers burned against the cords, metal and stiff and perfect, and he sang like he hadn’t been to a vocal class in months and that’s because he hadn’t but it’s the rawest voice he’s ever had, and he’s giving every ounce of his soul into this song. And lord if Jack White could hear him right now, he knew he was doing him proud.

When he ripped into the fourth verse, utterly destroying both the sensation in his fingers but also the solo - meant for an electric guitar, meant for an electric bass, and just done on his little baby acoustic - he could distantly, distantly hear the cheers, the howls, disbelieving and awed laughter, the whooping, and he could see the smiles.
“- And I’m bleeding, and I’m bleeding, and I’m bleeding.

Right before the lord,

All the words are gonna bleed from me, from me,

And I will sing no more,

And the stains coming from my blood

Tell me go back home - ”

He finished with a flicker of his thumb that his guitar teacher fucking hated. It was nasty, raw, and cocky - like a stupid rock star. But if you play the White Stripes without acting like a million fucking bucks, like every lyric and every chord isn’t the last one you will ever play and ever sing, then you’re not really playing the White Stripes at all. Finally, his hearing isn’t so zoned in on his guitar, which hums nicely in his arms and sings her sweet last note with all the vibrancy of a hymn. He looked up, ignoring the sweat on his brow, on his neck, tracking down his temples, and met the look of pure happiness on his new - god, choke him, would you - family’s faces.

And he laughed, laughed and laughed. Allura shook him, exclaiming about how good he was, and Pidge was already hopping around asking to record him on her own portable - which she had designed and created in like a week. Keith’s eyes dazzled, staring at him from behind an ecstatic Shiro and Coran, with smoldering eyes. Even Adam and Kinkade, and soldiers he didn’t know the names of, grinned at him, obviously impressed. His heart fluttered at it all, and he spent a solid ten minutes taking compliments under his miniature limelight with his hand on the back of his head, playing with his short hair. Eventually, they petered out when Shiro finished the venison and passed it out on a ridiculous assortment of plates.

Lance took a moment then to stand up, tucking his guitar out of the way, and scooting along the side of Artax’s stall away from the fire. The fire felt suffocating for a second, and he relished in the chilly air on his bare arms. His leg was smarting a bit in the cold, but he leaned against the wood of Artax’s stall and relaxed, nearly closing his eyes to take a breath - wow was he shaking? - when Keith’s eyes found him again.

The blush on his pale cheeks hadn’t waned, and the dark smoldering look was still flickering there. There was a beat where they just stared, connected like a string, like a hanging question that Lance couldn’t decipher, but then Keith made the decision regardless. He dropped his plate and cup off and closed their distance in steps that seemed so languid and confident. Lance shivered, not just from the cold but from Keith’s eyes - Keith’s stance -

Oh wow, Keith was tipsy. The dark-haired man, closer than ever before, and thank god they were away from the others, slid right up to Lance, his forearm firm against the wood and barely sparing any space between them. The rough texture of Keith’s jacket on his bare arms had his skin tingling, and the gentle smell of peach moonshine drifted between him. He can barely look in Keith’s eyes when he was so close, eyes so dangerous.

“You’re good,” Keith breathed all heavy and rough accent. “Real good.”

Lance smiled, faltering a bit and laughing him off.
But Keith wasn’t biting, his eyes were so serious, a quirk of his mouth dangerously perked up, oh god, how drunk was he? The tips of Lance’s fingers and his chest went fuzzy as Keith spoke, “I wouldn’t lie to you.”

He hummed, nerves butterflying against his throat, “Oh. That true?”

Keith barely laughed, just a breath really, his teeth glistening white in the dark of the shed, “Of course it is, darlin’.”

Oh god. Oh lord. Lance’s hands pressed tight and flat against the stall, glad to be in the dark because fuck was his face on fire. Keith didn’t seem fazed a bit, raising an eyebrow at him almost lazily, almost inviting, definitely tempting.

Don’t back down, he screamed at himself, this is it, you fuck! If Keith wasn’t going to make the stupid first move and was going to resort to pet names, he’d take it on the chin and just... Hazily, he winced at the crack in his voice as he shot back, “Yeah? That come with the territory of taking care of me?”

God did Keith laugh, all wild and beautiful and free. His dark eyes, all shining violet and blue, danced, and he just kept looking at Lance - just kept looking at him, so fond and gentle. Lance’s hands jumped, and he wanted to press into Keith’s heat. He shuffled closer, tilted his chin up, his hands rising, and Keith was just so close -

He dropped his head, letting out a shaking breath. He couldn’t do it. Lance couldn’t fucking do it. He wanted to shout, yell, maybe thrash a bit. Keith murmured down to him, a soft call of his name, all cute and confused - like Lance totally wasn’t just about to kiss him.

Breathing out, he tilted his head back all the way, thumping it against the stall and looking up into the star-tracked sky. “Sorry,” he said, soft.

Keith didn’t say a word in response, just shifted so they both stayed there, backs to the stall and gazes upward. This night sky was clouded with clusters of stars, sparkling and bright and silver, all hung on strings over the clouds and at the tops of the trees in the woods. New York City didn’t have stars like these, but the sky didn’t hold the same weight knowing truly how many people might be left to look up at it.

The breeze was too cold now, and he shifted closer against Keith for the warmth. Keith welcomed him against him easily, which quelled the stupid beast of insecurity in his chest. He closed his eyes, memorizing the texture of Keith’s jacket and his warmth.

“Keith?”

“Hm?”

“I’m happy we’re here.”

Keith’s arm closed tighter around him, anchoring them both. “Me too.”
more than alive

a klance apocalypse au

written by somethingmorecreative & maireeps
more than alive

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written by somethingmorecreative & moireaps
Chapter Summary

The trees were quiet, but Keith couldn’t help but feel like someone was watching them. He and Artax had picked through the forest as quickly as they could instead of staying on the road, and Keith kept looking down at the ground, to the thousands of footsteps imprinted into the dirt, mud, and gravel. It was unsettling to be reminded of what had happened in a place before you got there.

Chapter Notes

hi friends!! rachel here and i'm back with another keith chapter. maire and I just want to say thanks for all of the love this fic has been getting lately from all of you, and we want to especially thank @eekzley on twitter for the lovely fanart of Keith, Lance, and Artax. reading the comments that you guys leave makes us so happy and we're glad everyone is having a great time reading this fic too!

one note on updating: we're going to be taking a break in our schedule, but no worries! hopefully it won't be too long! you can always find me and maire on tumblr @somethingmorecreative1 and @maireep if you wanna chat about the fic or anything else with us!

as usual, chapter titles belong to Fall Out Boy, and good luck reading xoxo

QUICK EDIT: We have separated the smut/nsfw content from this story into the next work in our series, titled "[We're] More than Alive"! It's all canon-compliant so the smut is considered part of our storyline but for convenience and to not startle our readers with nsfw content, we have separated them (: thanks to BellRiBelieveIt for reminding us to put a lil note about it!

The forest was unnervingly quiet. Weeks ago, Keith would have been used to the silence, even welcomed it, but now, it put him on edge. He’d become accustomed to the noise around the compound, the talking, the laughter, the connection to other people. It was strange, how quickly it happened, but at the same time, it was a welcome reprieve. Being at the compound was like existing before the apocalypse. It was like some small piece of the world before had been preserved within the chain-link fences and concrete walls, and Keith couldn’t believe how lucky he and Lance were to have found it.

Something ruffled the trees next to them, and Keith clenched his teeth to keep from spinning around in search of the noise. He was jumpy since he’d left the compound, and Artax would inevitably feed off his mood if he didn’t get it under control.

The trees were quiet, but Keith couldn’t help but feel like someone was watching them. He and Artax had picked through the forest as quickly as they could instead of staying on the road, and Keith kept looking down at the ground, to the thousands of footsteps imprinted into the dirt, mud,
and gravel. It was unsettling to be reminded of what had happened in a place before you got there.

They were out on a scouting mission that hadn’t *technically* been authorized. This morning after the briefing, when Keith hadn’t been scheduled for any guard rotations today, he’d dodged Shiro’s request to help him with the perimeter check and headed down to Artax’s stable after grabbing his morning rations. She’d been glad to see him, and it’d made him smile, the thought of just getting out for a while.

He hadn’t committed to the idea until he had seen Lotor and Axca head out in their Humvee. He hadn’t known about them leaving for a mission today, so when he had watched them exit through the front gate, it took less than a minute for his decision to follow them. He had saddled Artax and was about to haul himself up on top of her when Lance came around the corner of the stable.

Keith had hesitated. It was still early, so he hadn’t been expecting to see him. Lance was still in his sweats, hair swept artfully across his forehead, and he was carrying Keith’s pack and looking like a fucking apocalyptic supermodel that had just rolled out of bed.

“What’s up?” Keith asked, raising an eyebrow.

Lance eyed him, looking him up and down, “You tell me, cowboy.”

Keith looked back toward the gate, “I need to go.”

Artax knickered softly, stepping around Keith, nudging him out of the way to get to Lance.

Lance laughed, pleased, and reached up to press his face to hers. Keith was close to melting at the sight of them together. Then, Lance said, “Bring him back with you, Artax.”

“How’d you know?” Keith blurted the question, some kind of desperate.

“Shiro tipped me off that you weren’t on guard rotation today, and you’ve been antsy over the last few days. Just go.”

Keith hesitated again, “Do you want to come?”

“I think you need some time.”

Keith nodded because, yeah, he really did. He loved the compound, but it was—stifling.

And Lotor was out there. He had to know what was going on.

Lance handed him the pack and set a hand on Keith’s shoulder, squeezing tight. His eyes were wide, and fucking gorgeous, when he said, “Don’t get into trouble. Be back before dark.”

He nodded, distracted by the way that Lance was looking at him. He didn’t know what to say, so instead of replying, he turned away and hauled himself up to Artax’s saddle. She stamped her hooves under him, energetic and excited, ready to go.

Keith looked back down to Lance, “I’ll be back soon.”

Lance crossed his arms over his chest, but he was smiling a little as he said, “You better be.”

Now, Keith scanned the tree line. It was odd, he thought, that he hadn’t seen a walker since the fence at the compound. He knew that he was on edge, and Artax could feel his mood. They were creeping through the trees now, following the road but staying out of sight. Artax did most of the work, Keith admitted. She picked their way through the trees, carefully and quickly, and Keith
kept his eyes peeled for walkers and Lotor.

They had followed him as quickly as they could. Keith needed to desperately understand what was going on with Lotor. It was to the point where it was keeping him up at night. He knew that something wasn’t right, and he was determined to find out and end it before it ruined everything they had.

Lotor and Axca took the Humvee down the gravel road and up the highway. Keith saw the tracks in the gravel, and the mud had shown him which way they’d turned on the highway. Thankfully, they didn’t head into the city. Instead, they turned onto the southbound lanes, and Keith and Artax slipped into the trees to follow.

Miles later, Keith clicked his teeth and pulled at Artax’s reins.

Lotor’s Humvee was stopped in the middle of the road. As Keith watched, Lotor opened the passenger door and jumped down to the asphalt. Axca exited the driver’s side, and both of them went to the back of the Humvee where they started unloading wooden crates.

Keith recognized them, knew that they were from the compound and full of weapons. Lotor must have lifted them from the armory days ago and hid them in his Humvee. He had probably been planning this for weeks now.

What was happening?

Artax knickered and stamped her front hooves, and Keith brushed a hand over her neck before he swung his leg over and slid to the ground. He took her reins and crept closer to the edge of the tree line. Hopefully, the large tree trunks would be big enough to hide behind, but the highway was far enough that as long as they were quiet and still, they would remain unseen. Lotor wouldn’t be looking for anyone this far out from the compound, which made it the perfect opportunity for Keith to find out what was happening and maybe how to stop what was coming.

It was a long while before anything happened. Keith and Artax hovered in the forest behind the trees and waited, but Lotor and Axca stayed at the back of the Humvee with the stolen weapons.

Finally, Keith heard the roar of an engine in the distance. He ducked down, stepping back farther into the trees so they were more heavily covered.

A truck appeared on the highway traveling north toward Lotor’s waiting Humvee. As it got closer, Keith crouched lower to the ground, urging Artax back behind a group of trees. The truck came to a stop a few hundred feet away from the Humvee. It was armored with a ragtag collection of metal, chain-link fences, and outward wooden spikes from the front and sides, and when the doors opened, two people emerged.

It was far enough away that Keith couldn’t tell who they were, but their clothes made it obvious that they were bandits or maybe even scalpers, much like the scavenger’s settlement in the north. They were dressed in dark green colors, but, very similar to their truck, the two of them had a layer of armor. Even from this far, Keith could see that the armor was made up some sort of metallic chest plate and decorated with old soda cans, plastic bottles, and other trash. It also had a dusty brown and red shade, and it was obvious that it was blood splattering, both old and fresh. Their faces were covered in paint, and they were strapped with weapons.

The two scalpers stalked toward Lotor and Axca, who came out to the front of the Humvee to meet them. Axca carried one crate and set it on the ground, kicking the crate so that it skittered across the concrete into the empty space between them.
Keith was too far away to hear what they were saying, and he couldn’t risk getting closer. He wasn’t sure how he’d gotten this lucky so far. Lotor hadn’t spotted him, and he hadn’t run into any walkers either. He couldn’t push the universe in an attempt to try to get more details about what was happening. This would have to be enough.

It was obvious they were talking about something. Lotor gestured to the crate, and one of the scalpers leaned down to open it and look through it. They nodded to the other, who doubled back to the truck and opened the backdoor, reaching inside and dragging out a person.

Keith stared, unsure what was happening when two more people followed. They were obviously survivors that had been grabbed from the road somewhere. Their clothes were tattered, and they were all bound, gagged, and tied together on a chain, which the scalper used to yank them forward.

He fought to remain still. He was desperate, almost dying to charge up the highway and free them. Looking at them, he couldn’t stop thinking about what could have happened to him and Lance a few weeks ago in the subway back in D.C. Lance had almost fucking died in his arms that day, but now, staring up at these survivors—these prisoners—Keith couldn’t help but feel like they got lucky. They got really fucking lucky.

But—Keith couldn’t risk it. He couldn’t risk everything that he had with Lance by charging up to the highway and attempting to free these people. Besides, Lotor and Axca would kill him before he got close enough to help.

It still felt like a cop out.

The scalper led the prisoners over to Lotor and Axca. Lotor had his hands behind his back, and he walked in front of the prisoners, observing and surveying them like he was a fucking slave trader which—that was what was happening. Keith was sure of it. Somehow, Lotor had enacted the plan that he had boasted of days ago in the briefing without telling any of them. Was this the first time? How long had it been happening if it wasn’t?

Lotor nodded and accepted the trade, jerking his head to Axca, who walked back behind the Humvee to grab the other crate of weapons. She passed them off to the other scalper, and then Lotor took the chain and led the prisoners to the back of their Humvee, loading them inside and closing the doors.

Artax huffed behind him, loudly, and when Keith spun around to quiet her, he came face to face with a walker.

He muffled a shout as the walker reached out and grabbed at the air where he had been. He stumbled back, hitting a tree and tumbling to the ground. With the extra space, he looked over to see two more walkers stumbling through the trees toward Artax. She was skittering nervously, braying in alarm.

Fuck, Keith thought. If Artax bolted out of the trees, then they’d be spotted, and Lotor would hunt them down. There was no way that he’d let them make it back to the compound alive.

Keith grabbed his katana and ran the first walker through the chest, shoving it back and taking its head off. Black blood sprayed as the body fell, and Keith dodged to avoid it. He jumped over a fallen tree and threw himself in between Artax and the walkers, slicing through the two heads in one go and watching the bodies fall to the forest floor.

By the time Keith turned back to the highway, the truck was already pulling away and Lotor and Axca had loaded themselves back into the Humvee. Instead of turning and heading back toward the
compound like Keith expected, they followed the truck south.

He automatically reached for Artax’s reins, planning on jumping into the saddle so they could follow. When he moved to step over fallen bodies of the walkers, he hesitated. They were already so far from the compound; it would take close to an hour to ride back because of how far they’d gone, and if they ran into any trouble and Lotor came across them… Keith knew that Lotor would stop at nothing to kill him, especially with no one else to witness it.

Keith wouldn’t let that happen, and if that meant cutting his loses today, then fine. He’d go back to the compound and figure it out from there.

He sighed and turned north, leading Artax through the trees toward the compound, toward Lance and Shiro, toward home. His voice was soft when he said, “C’mon, Artax.”

The ride back to the compound was brutal, fast, and exactly what Keith needed.

Before leading Artax out of the trees, he grabbed his pack and rifled through it, wondering if he had any food with him. Lance must have known he would be out long enough to need it because he found two apples, a protein bar, and a bottle of water. He smiled. Thinking about Lance taking the time to pack lunch for him while he was out just—did stupid things to his heart.

Keith ate the protein bar and one apple and fed the other to Artax. It was quiet around them, and even though Keith kept an eye on the road, he didn’t see any other signs of Lotor. When they were finished, Keith lead Artax out of the trees and skillfully climbed into the saddle.

They started at a walk, moved into a trot, and then, when Keith guided Artax up onto the pavement, he clicked his teeth and leaned forward, grinning as Artax shot forward.

The wind in his face was chilly, but Keith found himself smiling. Riding with Artax was probably his favorite thing in the universe and definitely the only constant to ever exist in his life.

He pushed her, harder and faster than usual, but she seemed excited. Without any extra weight, it felt like they were literally flying.

Keith wasn’t sure how long it took them to get back to the compound, but by the time they got to the exit at the highway, Keith pulled Artax back to a trot, before turning off to the gravel. They crested the hill, and below them, the compound sat, normal and untouched. Relief flooded his chest.

Artax tossed her head, still eager and excited despite the near brutal pace they’d set on the way back. He smiled and flicked the reins, urging Artax into one final burst of speed.

There were a few walkers between them and the gates, but none were close enough to bother them. The cars stacked alongside the gravel road that Shiro and the other soldiers had built up a few weeks after D.C. fell acted as a nice barrier to keep walkers from flooding along the fence and to the entrance of the compound. Up ahead, Griffin was in the tower, and when Keith got close enough, he opened the gate for them to race inside.

“Whoa.” Keith murmured, clicking his teeth at Artax and pulling on her reins, slowing to a walk as they entered the second fence and then trotted off through the grass toward her stable.

Activity around the compound looked slow today. Keith waved to Kinkade, Nadia, and Ina where they were on guard rotation at the fence, and they lifted their weapons at Keith in hello as he
passed them. There weren’t many civilians out in the yard today, probably because of the dropping temperatures, but the garage doors were up, and a few soldiers were milling around, shifting supplies and moving weapons. Shiro was probably there too, if supplies were being moved then someone needed to be there to watch over and catalog the supplies.

Keith guided Artax down to the stable and dismounted. He removed Artax’s saddle and brushed her down. He hummed as he worked, and it took him a long moment to figure out that it was the song he and Lance had danced to the other night at the fence.

Artax huffed at him, knocking her shoulder into him when he froze at the thought. It was like she knew exactly what he was thinking, and Keith rolled his eyes at her.

When he was finished and she was back in the stable, he pressed his forehead into hers and said, “Thanks. See you soon.”

Artax knickered softly, and Keith smiled as he grabbed his pack and walked up to the garage.

The soldiers that he passed on his way all nodded to him, and Keith flashed back to his conversation with Shiro a few days ago. His brother was right about people seeing him as a leader around here. Even if he didn’t really want it to happen, he couldn’t ignore the fact that the soldiers and civilians in the compound were already treating him like one.

Keith walked into the garage. Like he thought before, Shiro stood at the back of the garage, behind the Humvees where he was searching through crates and cataloging supplies.

He hadn’t thought that Lance would be here, but here he was, clipboard in hand, smiling as he talked with Shiro and wrote something down. He was perched on top of a stack of boxes, legs swinging lightly, and he looked so relaxed, so at ease and happy to be helping that Keith found himself smiling fondly and opening his mouth to say _hey there, darlin’._

Thankfully, his brain pumped the brakes. _Fuck_, he couldn’t just go around saying that. The other night when he had called Lance that, it’d been a tactical move. Sure, he’d been tipsy as fuck and Lance had been so beautiful and talented that he literally couldn’t see straight, but it was—he’d planned it okay?

And Lance had responded exactly how he’d wanted him to. He’d been all wide, blue eyes and bright, red blushing cheeks as he stepped right into Keith’s arms and stayed there. He had murmured into Keith’s chest when he said how happy he was that they were here, and it just made Keith’s stupid, stupid heart skip a beat in his chest.

But—for however great that night had been, it was daylight now, and Shiro was here too. He couldn’t start this today, not with everything that was happening with Lotor.

So, instead, he copped out. As he entered the garage, he said, “Hey.”

Shiro and Lance both looked up at him, and Lance’s smile shifted, softening with relief as he looked over Keith.

“Hey, Keith,” Shiro greeted, nodding and pausing in his work. “See anything outside?”

Keith hesitated, unsure if he wanted to share anything. There were soldiers around, and Keith didn’t know enough of them to guarantee none of his information would get back to Lotor. The last thing that needed to happen was for Lotor to find out that Keith knew about his slave trades he’d already started.
For now, he shook his head and drifted closer to Lance, sitting his pack on the ground by Lance’s stack of boxes. He asked, “What’s going on here?”

“Not much, it’s a slow day around here,” Shiro said. He nodded and put the wooden crate’s lid back on. “We were re-cataloging the armory and the Humvee supplies this morning. Lance and I volunteered for the paperwork since you abandoned us.”

Keith rolled his eyes, “Abandon is a pretty strong word, I think.”

Lance snorted, looking back down at his clipboard, “Seems accurate.”

Keith was close enough to elbow Lance in the side as Shiro laughed.

While the soldiers finished moving the rest of the crates and supplies into the Humvees, Shiro updated Keith on the rotation for the night and the supply mission that had come back early this morning. Matt and Pidge were taking point on the intake of the new supplies in one of the stocking rooms in the compound, so they wouldn’t be dividing anything until they figured out how much they had. Shiro seemed pleased by the amount of supplies that had been brought back though, and he was always glad to see another mission return safely and without causalities.

Finally, Shiro closed the doors to the last loaded Humvee and nodded again. He said, “I think we’re all done here, Lance. Good work.”

“Yeah, no problem, Shiro,” Lance said, offering him the clipboard.

“See you guys for dinner?” Shiro nodded and held his fist up to Keith as he moved to leave the garage.

Keith bumped their fists together and nodded, “See you.”

Then, it was just him and Lance.

After a long moment where Lance didn’t say anything, Keith took another small step forward and murmured, “Hi.”

“Hi, Keith.”

“You okay?”

Lance eyed him, one eyebrow raised, as he leaned back, putting his hands behind him on the crate and stretching out. He looked Keith up and down and said, “You first.”

“I’m good.”

Lance finally softened, “Feeling better?”

Keith nodded, and for some damn reason, just like earlier, his body moved without the go ahead from his brain. He reached forward and carefully set his hand on Lance’s side, inwardly cursing himself for the action but not enough to make him pull away. Thankfully, he had enough sense left to crush the impulse to grab Lance by the hips and drag him off the crates and into his arms.

It was quiet. Lance stared at him for a few long seconds before he leaned forward and slipped off the crates. He reached out for Keith and wrapped his arms around Keith’s middle. The hug was sudden but somehow perfect and exactly what Keith needed.

The contact made Keith sigh, and he wrapped his arms around Lance tightly, ducking his face into
Lance’s neck. He wasn’t sure why he was feeling so out of control, but now, standing in the circle of Lance’s arms, he felt better. He felt a lot better.

“I missed you,” Keith murmured.

Lance laughed, the sound soft, easy. One of his hands was drawing circles along the small of Keith’s back. He wished there weren’t so many damn clothes between them. Lance said, voice a little breathless, “You were only gone for a few hours.”

“It felt like a long time. It was nice but—quiet.”

“And you followed Lotor, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t want to say anything just in case, but yeah,” Keith admitted. “I’ll tell you about it later.”

“Okay,” Lance agreed, then pulled back, moving his hands so they rested on Keith’s chest. His eyes were bright now, and Keith kept his arms tight around Lance’s waist.

“Have you been helping Shiro all morning?” Keith asked, unwilling to break this moment.

Lance hummed, “Mmm. Someone had to pick up your slack.”

“Is that right?”

Their banter continued for a long while, and Lance never moved away from him. He seemed perfectly content to stand here with Keith, in the circle of his arms, and just talk. It was nice. After being outside this morning in the dead quiet, Lance was exactly the thing he needed. Well, that wasn’t entirely accurate. Keith always needed Lance, no matter the time or place, full stop.

It didn’t last though. He wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but before either of them pulled away, they were interrupted.

“Lance? Shiro said—” it was Allura’s voice, and she stopped talking when she turned the corner into the garage and saw them. She shook her head and continued, eyes wide, “Um, sorry! I can come back later!”

Lance sighed and shook his head. He didn’t bother moving though, and Keith stared at Allura, wondering if there was something he could do to get her to go away so they could stay right here in this moment for a little longer.

It was a pipe dream, of course. The end of the world waited for no one.

“It’s fine. We were just—” Lance stopped too, and he rolled his eyes, like he was annoyed with himself. Then, he continued, “What’s up?”

“Well,” she said hesitantly, glancing at Keith, “it’s good that Keith is here as well because I have information about Lotor.”

Keith stiffened in surprise, hands automatically tightening on Lance. He spoke first when he said, “What is it?”

She looked around carefully, almost nervous, and stepped further into the garage. Lance moved one hand to Keith’s shoulder and softly squeezed his arm before pulling away from him and stepping toward Allura.

They stepped behind the Humvee, and Keith checked the rest of the garage, but they were alone.
“What’s going on?” Lance asked, voice fierce. “Did he hurt you?”

“No,” she shook her head immediately, “but I heard him talking to Axca this morning about a mission they were going on today.”

Keith scowled, “What did he say?”

“I was walking to the lab, and I heard them in the hallway talking about meeting up with someone and trading,” Allura explained. “It wasn’t very specific, I know, but I know that it wasn’t a mission that was cleared by Shiro.”

Keith nodded, slow, “I followed him. They headed south and stopped on the highway where they met someone.”

“Who?” Lance asked, eyes wide.

“Scalpers, it looked like,” Keith said.

Allura frowned, “And did they trade anything?”

“They did,” Keith said. “Lotor had two crates of weapons, and the scalpers gave him three survivors that were chained up.”

“Survivors?” Lance asked indignantly. “As in, people that were alive?”

“Yeah. He loaded them into the back of the Humvee and drove south. I couldn’t risk following them to see where he took them,” Keith said. “Artax and I came straight back here.”

“But what is he planning to do with them?” Allura said, still frowning.

“I don’t know,” Keith replied, “but it can’t be good. He’s planning something.”

Allura and Lance both nodded, and the three of them fell quiet. It was a long moment before anyone said anything else.

“All we can do is watch our backs,” Lance said finally, decisive. “Allura, don’t let Lotor find out that you know anything. Don’t push him either. Keith and I will keep an eye on him and figure out what he’s planning.”

She nodded and leaned in close to Lance, knocking her shoulder into his. Realistically, Keith knew it meant nothing, but it didn’t stop the sudden burning inside him. He crossed his arms over his chest and fought to keep his face neutral.

Allura said, “I can take care of myself.”

“I know,” Lance rolled his eyes, “but Lotor’s dangerous. Right, Keith?”

“Right,” Keith said, nodding.

Allura studied them for a long second before she nodded. She said, “I’ll keep watching him. He might say something that is helpful.”

Keith and Lance both nodded in reply, and Allura hesitated for a moment, glancing between the two of them before she nodded again and bid them goodbye, smiling a little on her way out of the garage.
“What do you think we should do?” Lance asked, a few minutes later.

He frowned, “Nothing. We’ll just have to wait.”

“Until it all blows up in our faces?” Lance raised an eyebrow.

He shrugged, “Maybe. I don’t know.”

Lance must have been able to tell how defeated Keith felt from it because he shifted closer. He wasn’t as close as they were earlier, but he set a hand on Keith’s bicep and kept his voice soft, “We’ll figure it out.”

Keith sighed, “Yeah.”

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When the alarm went off the next morning to signal the briefing, Keith tried his best to ignore it. Lance was curled into his side, back pressing against him, head tucked against Keith’s shoulder. They were tangled in the sheets and blankets on their bed, and Keith was warm and sleepy and fuck the briefing.

“Keith,” Lance muttered when he didn’t move to get up, voice foggy with sleep. He didn’t bother turning around, but he reached back and swatted at Keith’s chest. “Keith. Wake up.”

Keith groaned, “I’m up.”

“Okay,” Lance sighed.

Keith stretched, yawning. He carefully untangled himself from both Lance and the sheets, running one hand up Lance’s back in farewell and smiling to himself when Lance hummed at the touch and curled further into their bed.

He got dressed quickly and grabbed his weapons, strapping the handgun to his belt and settling his rifle and katana over his back. He yawned again on his way out, quietly closing the door behind him and nodding to Shiro, who was waiting for him in the hallway.

Yesterday after dinner, he’d told Shiro about following Lotor when they’d gone on a perimeter check. He’d listened and seemed concerned about what was going on, but he hadn’t offered any solutions. Keith understood that there wasn’t a lot they could do right now. It would be a disaster if Lotor found out they had been watching him—who knew what could happen and who might get killed because of it.

It was frustrating as hell, but they’d decided just to wait it out. Even though they knew he was planning something, the only other option they had was to kill him. He might be a horrific person who was planning god knew what, but they couldn’t just kill him for no reason.

When they finally had a reason though, Keith vowed that he would be the one to deliver the final blow.

Shiro didn’t say anything on their way to the briefing, and even he seemed tired. Keith was exhausted. Even though he’d technically had the day off yesterday, it hadn’t felt like it. By the time evening had rolled around and Keith had gone back to his and Lance’s room for the night, he’d been wound so tightly that he knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep. He’d been right. Lance seemed tired, murmuring a goodnight relatively early and crawling to his side of the bed, but Keith had laid awake for hours, listening to him breathe and trying to plan an escape route for when shit
inevitably hit the fan.

It was stressful, and by the time Keith felt like he managed to fall asleep, the damn alarm was going off for the briefing. It’d be his luck that they put him on morning rotation too, just to keep him from being able to go get some more sleep.

He sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face.

Shiro looked over to him in concern, “You good?”

“Tired,” Keith replied.

His brother nodded, “Yeah. I get it.”

“Any other ideas for what we talked about last night?”

Shiro hesitated and then said, “Let’s see what happens this morning.”

Keith nodded, and they resumed the walk down the empty halls in silence.

The briefing room was mostly full when they arrived. Coran was sitting in the front with a cup of coffee, like every other morning, and he lifted his mug in greeting. Adam and Matt were talking quietly, looking over the schedule for the day, and as Keith grabbed a seat at the table, Nadia, Griffin, Kinkade, and Ina filed into the room, nodding to Keith and sitting down beside him. Curtis was the last one to enter the room, dipping his head to Shiro and then Keith as he sat down at the table.

Adam started with the schedule for the day, and because the universe hated him, Keith was put on morning guard duty, ending his hopes of catching a few more hours of sleep before Lance got up to start his day. A nap would be pointless later.

Curtis reported on security around the compound, and then Nadia summed up the inventory for rations. Matt discussed the cataloging process for the latest supply run and how he and Pidge were still working on shifting through everything.

After Matt’s report, the doors opened and Lotor stepped inside. He was alone this morning, no sign of Axca, Bandor, or his other soldiers. He smirked a little, but the gesture wasn’t overly rude, Keith supposed.

“Sorry I’m late, Captain,” Lotor said, sitting at a table alone. “Please continue.”

Shiro nodded and gestured to Keith, who updated them on his hunting runs. It felt almost awkward with Lotor in the room, but he was determined not to start anything today. Besides, he was too exhausted for it to matter much.

Kinkade and Griffin updated them on weapons and the ammo stocks and suggested a possible scavenging trip in a few weeks to retrieve more weapons and gas. Shiro nodded and took notes of the dates.

Finally, Coran summarized his work in the lab over the past few days. He wasn’t very specific, but it wasn’t like they could understand much of the science behind vaccine development anyway.

“Oh yes,” he added, once he’d finished. “I’ll need Lance in the lab today. My dear boy is the best at cataloging numbers and shifting through the data results for myself and Allura. He has a lot of potential if I do say so.”
Matt shook his head immediately, “No way, Coran. We need Lance in the armory today. He’s the only one of us that can separate ammunition by weapon without taking hours, and we’re on a time crunch. Shiro, tell him.”

“Captain,” Coran urged, “the research—”

Shiro sighed, though it looked like he was biting back a smile. Keith was too. It was—honestly it was fucking amazing to hear people arguing over Lance. He knew this would happen.

“Sorry, Coran, but Matt is right,” Shiro said finally. “Lance will be with Matt and Pidge today, but you can have him in the lab tomorrow. You have my word.”

Coran sighed and glanced back to Keith, rolling his eyes, even though he was smiling a little. He said, “Very well, Captain. Thank you.”

Shiro nodded and looked out over them. His eyes shifted to the right and caught on Lotor, and his voice was hesitant when he said, “Anything to add, Lotor?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Lotor said, standing up. He didn’t move this time and kept his hands folded behind his back, trying to appear unthreatening. It didn’t work. In fact, it almost made Keith even more suspicious of him.

“I left the compound yesterday on an unscheduled scouting mission and went north,” Lotor started, and Keith fought hard to bite his tongue. He’d gone south yesterday when he’d left, not north, the lying bastard. Lotor continued, “Axca and I travelled miles north of the city, to an old depot where I believed there might have once been a Red Cross station with supplies. When we arrived, the fences were still intact, and upon closer inspection, there were stocks of supplies, including military vehicles. I would also assume that there would be medicine and non-perishable food.”

“Did you bring anything back then?” Shiro asked, expression concerned.

“Axca and I were unwilling to gather the supplies without any extra hands to keep watch in case of an attack,” Lotor admitted, and there was a hint of regret in his voice.

Shiro nodded, “So what is your plan?”

“We should take two Humvees up to the depot and load the medicine and food first. It would be a great resource that we could pick clean over the next few weeks, though we should move on it quickly,” Lotor explained. “Which is why I propose we take the most experienced of us and head out at dawn tomorrow.”

There was a pause, and then Adam stood. He was frowning as he said, “Why wait until tomorrow? If this place has all of the resources you claim then why not head there now?”

Lotor nodded in acknowledgment, “Axca and I ran into a horde on our return to the compound. If we were to wait another day, it would clear and give us ample security in the trip tomorrow.”

Keith was staring. He couldn’t believe this. There was no way that any of it was true. He was already lying about everything he’d done yesterday, so why was he getting hopes up about more supplies? What did he have to gain from lying to people and sending them on a fake mission?

Getting them out of the compound, he guessed. Lotor had asked for the most experienced of them, which meant that he needed less experienced people here for whatever he had planned. But how would he attack the compound if he was away with them on the fake mission?
There was a point to all of this. If Shiro agreed then—

“Fine,” Shiro said, and Keith spun to look at him. “Adam, Curtis, Keith, and I will accompany you on the mission tomorrow. You’ll bring Axca and your two soldiers I presume.”

“Ezor and Zethrid, yes,” Lotor confirmed, nodding.

“Alright. We’ll take two Humvees, and we’ll leave at dawn. Is there anything else?”

“No, Captain. Thank you.”

Shiro nodded again to the whole room and tapped his fist against the podium, “Dismissed. Be safe today.”

Keith was doing his best to hide the utter outrage he felt at the moment, so instead of moving, he stayed very still and stared at Shiro while the others exited the room. Lotor left first, and while the others dissipated as well, Adam and Curtis hung back, waiting for an explanation as much as Keith was.

When everyone was gone, Keith stood up and said, “What the actual fuck, Shiro.”

Shiro cut him a dangerous look, “Not here. We’ll run a perimeter check before you start your guard shift. Adam, Curtis, be prepared for the mission tomorrow. We’ll need to load and prep the Humvee this evening, understood?”

Adam and Curtis exchanged a weird look, and Keith hesitated for an entirely different reason. What was going on?

“Yes sir,” Adam nodded. “We’ll get to work.”

Curtis nodded and followed Adam out of the room, glancing back at Shiro over his shoulder once.

Keith stared at them until they were gone, and then, because he was tired as hell and his patience was gone, he turned back to look at Shiro with wide eyes and said, “What the fuck is going on there?”

Shiro rolled his eyes, and he looked pissed that Keith had brought it up. He slammed the clipboard down onto the podium and jerked his head toward the door. His voice was hard when he said, “Perimeter check. Now.”

For however hard it was, he bit his tongue and followed Shiro out of the room.

The walk did nothing to help his anger. Instead, it festered, and by the time they got outside to the fence, Keith was seeing red. How could Shiro be so stupid? Keith had told him what Lotor had done yesterday, how he was lying, and then he just believes Lotor in the briefing and agrees to the mission without even considering it?

“Just say it,” Shiro said, when they’d started at the outer fence. The sun was just starting to come up, and even though it was freezing, the rage in Keith’s chest was keeping him plenty warm.

“Lotor was lying,” Keith started, seething. “so why would you agree to go on a mission with faulty information? You’re putting everything at risk.”

“If I’d turned down Lotor, then it could have been worse,” Shiro argued as they trekked along the fence. “He could have used that as a way to garner more support among the soldiers. If he’s really
lying about it, then it was a good one to use. How could I have turned down all of those supplies like that?”

Keith hadn’t thought about how it might look to everyone else, so maybe Shiro had a point.

“You could have said we’d look into it instead of just agreeing,” Keith said, tucking his hands into his pockets.

“He wouldn’t have stopped if I had. If he’s lying about it, then we’re going to go find out. We’ll have the same amount of people with us. If something goes down, we can deal with it,” Shiro said.

“You don’t know that.”

“What do you expect me to do then, Keith?” he asked, exasperated and frustrated. “Do you want me to kill him? Do you want to kill him? Do you even know what that would do to the compound? If we let him fester and create more connections with the soldiers, he’ll have more control around here. It’s better for us to deal with it directly.”

“Jesus Christ, fine,” Keith said, throwing his hands up. “I know all that, but he’s luring us into a trap.”

“Maybe,” Shiro shrugged. “You think you can’t handle it?”

Keith stopped walking, eyes narrowing at the taunt. He wouldn’t be baited into this like some dumb teenager.

“Shut up, Shiro,” Keith said, clenching his jaw. “You don’t know how nice you’ve had it. You don’t know what it’s like to be out on the road alone. You have no idea what it’s like to be without food or water for days on end or to come across people on the road who steal everything off your back and then some and your only other option is to fucking kill them just so you can stay alive for another day.

“You have no idea what it’s like to not have a home, to not be safe enough to not look over your shoulder every second of every day, wondering if it’ll be your last,” Keith’s voice was dark, and Shiro was staring at him. “Don’t act like this is some fucking game. When Lotor ruins this place, because he will, I know he will, we’ll be right back out there, if we’re even alive by then.”

Shiro was quiet for a long few seconds. He’d stopped walking too, and he was frowning, hands tucked into his pockets.

Keith couldn’t help the next words even though he should have bit his tongue, but he was flashing back to every single day on the road, to scavenging with Lance, to avoiding walkers every second, to struggling to find enough supplies to keep them going for a little longer. He said, “When you see the person that you love most in the world starving to death in front of your eyes because you can’t scavenge enough food for them, then you can tell me how important supplies are and how important this mission might be. Until then, fuck off.”

He turned to leave, walking back up to the guard tower where he’d pick up his morning shift.

“Keith, wait.”

“What?” he asked, turning to look back at Shiro over his shoulder.

Shiro held his hands up, and his expression was serious. He said, “I’m sorry, but we have to go on this mission. I need you with me.”
“I’m with you, Shiro,” Keith said, rolling his eyes. Shiro was his *fucking brother*, of course he was with him. “I’m just really fucking pissed at you. See you later.”


The rest of Keith’s day was mediocre at best. Yelling at Shiro had done nothing to quench his anger, the rage that was burning in his chest at the thought of this damn mission. Instead, he’d been utterly pissed throughout his guard shift, and by the time Nadia came to relieve him in the tower, he still hadn’t gotten over it.

He saw Shiro in the common room when he’d gone to grab rations, and he nodded at him, but didn’t bother to say anything. Instead, he grabbed his share and went back outside, walking along the perimeter of the fence to see if he could get the anger out of his chest.

Unsurprisingly, it didn’t work. He helped with some of the foot soldiers as they moved around boxes and crates of supplies, and the physical labor took his mind off it for a while. He actually liked it; most of the soldiers were quiet as they worked, only a few talking or laughing every couple of minutes. By the time they finished, Keith felt like he’d actually done something productive, so he went down to the stable and visited Artax, and then he went back to the main building for dinner.

In the common room, Lance was already sitting at a table with Allura and Pidge, so Keith grabbed his rations and sat down in his usual seat on Lance’s right.

“Hey,” Lance smiled at him immediately, and it helped Keith’s disposition more than anything else had all day. He knew he should have cut his losses this morning and just went to find Lance instead of wandering around angry.

“Hey,” Keith murmured, low. “Good day?”

“Yeah, it was fine. I finished sorting all the ammunition for Pidge and Matt, and Coran said he wants me in the lab tomorrow,” Lance explained. Then, his expression shifted to a frown, and he asked, “You okay?”

He nodded, “Fine.”

Lance didn’t look convinced, but he didn’t push it. Instead, he nodded too and looked back to Allura, picking up their conversation where they had left off.

Dinner was all around fine. He didn’t talk much, just shifted closer to Lance and pressed their legs together underneath the table, desperate for some contact. Lance glanced at him in surprise but didn’t say anything about it.

Keith finished his rations and was planning on asking Lance if he wanted to take another walk around the perimeter. Since Lance was doing a lot better in recovery now, it would be easier even though Keith would admit he didn’t mind carrying Lance around. In fact, thinking about it, a walk outside sounded *fucking perfect*. It was cold sure, but that would mean that they could be close, maybe even closer than before—

“Keith.”

He looked up at his name and saw that Curtis had walked into the common room and was waiting in the door as he waved him over.

Keith sighed, knowing that Shiro probably sent Curtis to get him. They still had to prep the
Humvees for the mission tomorrow, which meant that he would have to probably see Lotor and his soldiers and deal with Shiro at the same time.

“What’s going on?” Pidge asked, looking between him and Curtis.

He shook his head. He wasn’t sure if the mission was common knowledge or if they were keeping it a secret from the civilians. Sure, he planned to tell Lance later, but that didn’t mean that he should just be blurtling classified information out in the common room where anyone could hear, especially if they were trying to keep it quiet for everyone else’s sake.

Keith sort of hated that he was thinking like a real leader now, mostly because that meant that Shiro had been right when he said Keith would make a good fit for compound leadership.

“I’ve got to go,” Keith said, standing up.

Lance caught his wrist before he could move away, “Where?”

“Just to the garage to help Shiro. I shouldn’t be long,” he explained, realizing the look on Lance’s face meant he was worried, which—fair point. Keith guessed that he had been being a little ominous. He’d have been worried too.

“Okay, good,” Lance nodded, squeezing his wrist lightly before letting go.

Keith hesitated before turning and walking away.

Curtis nodded to him and led the way out of the common room and down to the garage. They didn’t speak on the way, and again, Keith wondered how classified this mission was. He also wanted to know what Curtis thought about the whole thing, but he didn’t want to risk asking.

Like he was afraid of, Lotor and his soldiers were in the garage too. They were loading their Humvee, and even though they didn’t say anything to Keith, they still glared daggers his way, Axca especially. She kept her eyes on him while he walked across the garage to where Shiro and Lotor were standing and looking at a map.

“Hey,” Keith said. He might be pissed to hell and back at Shiro, but he wasn’t about to let Lotor know that. He’d just figure out a way to use it against them.

“Hey, Keith,” Shiro nodded. “Take a look at this.”

He stepped up to Shiro’s side and looked down at the map. It was detailed, and the route that they would be taking northeast was highlighted. It wasn’t as far as the scalper settlement had been, and it was further east than he had ever been before. The interstate would be impossible to use, which might have been the shortest route, but Lotor highlighted a smaller highway that they would be taking instead.

“We will take Highway 34 North and exit onto a smaller road here,” Lotor pointed, explaining. “Axca and I did not have problems getting through on either. Hopefully it will prove to be an easy trip.”

“And when we get there?” Keith asked, fighting the urge to cross his arms over his chest. He hated Lotor with every last breath he had, but he wouldn’t be the one to start anything, not when this was probably all a trap to begin with. He needed to keep a level head and stay focused.

“Yes,” Lotor nodded, circling what Keith guessed would be the supply-filled depot on the map. “When we arrive, we can get through the fence to the main hub, where we can leave the Humvees
and go in on foot. From there, we can find the supplies we need most and come back. Once we arrive back at the compound successfully, we can plan for other soldiers to take up the mission.”

Shiro nodded, “Fine. We’ll take enough rations and extra supplies with us in case we get into trouble on the way. Other than that, we travel light.”

“Why don’t we just take one Humvee then?” Keith asked. “If we’re planning on sending other missions back, why risk two Humvees when we would all easily fit into one?”

Before Shiro could answer, Lotor said, “We can bring back double the supplies if we take both Humvees. Axca and I have already completed a scouting mission and definitively know that there are enough supplies to warrant two Humvees.”

Keith didn’t argue. He’d expected Lotor to verify that they needed to take two Humvees, and he’d wanted Lotor to say it aloud, to argue for it. If anything, it was more evidence that he was planning something, and whatever it was, he needed to have his own escape route.

“Fair enough,” Shiro agreed. He glanced at Keith and nodded, “Let’s get these Humvees loaded. It’ll be an early start.”

They worked in silence. Adam and Curtis had already catalogued all of the supplies they were taking, and Keith helped load them into the Humvee while Shiro checked over the engine. They had a few extra rifles they were taking with them, just in case they ran into trouble, along with two extra tanks of gas.

Lotor, Axca, Ezor and Zethrid finished loading their Humvee first and bid them goodnight, promising to meet them before dawn. Keith watched them leave, and something uneasy settled in his stomach. He would have much rather just had it out with them right now than whatever they were planning for this mission tomorrow.

Once they were gone, Curtis said, “Why are we doing this, Shiro?”

“Because we have to find out what’s going on,” Shiro said, and he sounded tired, frustrated, and angry now that Lotor was gone. “We can’t keep waiting to see what’s going to happen.”

Adam raised an eyebrow, “Keith doesn’t agree with you on this.”

“No,” Keith said before Shiro could reply. “I don’t think we should go. It’s a trap.”

“Right,” Curtis agreed. “We can find a way out of it that doesn’t make Lotor suspicious of us. We can do something else. This feels too easy.”

Shiro crossed his arms over his chest, “I’m not budging on this. We have to do this now. He’s gaining more support around the compound, and if we pull out of the mission for any reason, then he could use it as a way to garner distrust of us. It’s been hard enough to keep some of the soldiers in line recently. What do you think will happen if we don’t go on this mission tomorrow?”

“What do you think will happen when we don’t come back tomorrow?” Keith asked sharply.

“You’re just thinking about Lance.”

“Of course I’m thinking about Lance, you jackass!” Keith exploded, letting the rage from earlier completely overwhelm him for a single moment. “You should be thinking about everyone here too! These people and this place are really fucking important. What happens when we don’t come back at all?”
“We don’t know that Lotor has a plan in the first place. It could be exactly like he says.”

“It could be,” Keith agreed, “but I’m not willing to bet my life on that. Lance and I like it here, and I’m not going to risk not coming back alive because of some damn supplies and relations among the soldiers. They’re your fucking soldiers in the first place.”

Shiro sighed, loudly, “I gave you a direct order that you’re coming on this mission. Are you going to disobey it?”

Keith crossed his arms over his chest and scowled, “No, Shiro. I just got you back. I’m not letting you get yourself killed now. Of course I’m coming on the fucking mission, and if I don’t come back alive, then you’ll have to look at Lance and tell him why.”

There was a heavy pause. Shiro stared at him for a long moment before looking over to Adam and Curtis, who were both wearing very serious expressions.

“And you two?” Shiro asked. “Are you planning on ignoring an order from your captain?”

“Don’t patronize us,” Adam snapped, frowning. “Just because we disagree with you on this doesn’t mean we’re going to let you go alone. You should know that by now.”

“You’re dismissed then,” Shiro said with a sharp nod. “Meet here before dawn.”

Adam and Curtis stared at him for a long second before they both moved to leave, leaving Shiro and Keith alone in the chilly garage.

Neither of them said anything. Instead, they stood there at the back of the Humvee.

This wasn’t anything like his childhood with Shiro. They got along so easily when Shiro lived at home with them, and the wedge that eventually came between them was because Shiro joined the military and moved. Keith couldn’t even really blame him for it either—he would have done the same thing if he’d ever had the opportunity. But, he guessed that it was weird to disagree with Shiro like this. He couldn’t understand why Shiro wouldn’t listen to him. It didn’t make any sense. It seemed so obvious to him. Why couldn’t Shiro see that?

“I’m not arguing about it anymore,” Shiro said, and he sounded tired.

“Okay,” Keith agreed. “I’ve told you what I think, and you’re not listening anyway.”

Shiro didn’t respond, but the muscle in his jaw ticked, like it did when he was angry.

Then, Keith found himself thinking back to the briefing this morning, and to everything with Adam and Curtis, and before he could stop himself, he asked, “At least tell me why you chose Adam and Curtis to go on the mission. You could have picked anyone else.”

“I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“Too fucking bad,” Keith growled, out of patience. “You owe me that much. What the hell is going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“The three of y’all are always so tense around each other,” Keith explained, accent slipping with his anger. “I don’t get it.”

Shiro sighed, “Why does it matter?”
“We’re going on a death mission tomorrow. Besides, I’ve told you everything, even about Lance.”

For a long moment, Shiro didn’t answer. Keith was tempted to storm out and leave him there, but something made him wait.

A few minutes later, Shiro said, voice tired, “Adam and I dated for years. We met at basic training, fell in love, I guess.”

At the admission, Keith’s eyes widened in shock. That was honestly the last thing he’d been expecting. Shiro and Adam didn’t even act like—

“And when I got reassigned to be his superior officer as my first posting, we broke up so we wouldn’t have to tell anyone.”

“You were in love with him and you just broke up?” Keith asked, incredulous.

Shiro nodded, “We couldn’t risk me getting reassigned and deployed to another continent, especially with rumors of the outbreak already happening in remote places in Asia. Adam thought it would be better that way. So we broke up instead of telling anyone.”

Keith was reeling. The only thing he could think to say was, “What happened after everything went down?”

“Nothing. We got word almost months ahead of any of the outbreaks in North America, and the military all but pulled focus from us. We’ve basically been operating like this for—at least a few months before D.C. fell,” Shiro explained. “Even after all of my superior officers were gone and we lost contact, Adam never said anything.”

“And you just didn’t ask him?” Keith asked, frowning. “You don’t love him still?”

“I don’t know, Keith,” Shiro sighed again. “We never talked about it, so I have no idea.”

“And Curtis?”

Another pause before, “We’ve been sleeping together.”

“You what?”

Shiro rolled his eyes, “You need me to explain it another way?”

“No, fuck you,” Keith said immediately, “I just don’t—what the hell?”

“It’s not like that,” Shiro started, running a hand along the back of his neck. “You must know how lonely it is, right? I mean—I had my team here, but you were on the road alone until you found Lance. I figured I wouldn’t have to explain what it felt like to you.”

“You don’t,” Keith nodded because yeah, he can remember the ache in his chest at being alone for so long and the relief that came from being with Lance. “I know that feeling. I guess I just—why didn’t you talk to Adam?”

“I don’t know,” Shiro said, then he frowned. “Wait, are you saying that you and Lance aren’t sleeping together?”

He shook his head, fighting the blush that was threatening to crawl up his throat, “No. I’m not—no.”
“Why?”

Keith tucked his hands into his pockets, looking away. “We just—I don’t know, we’re just not.”

“You guys share a room. With one bed.”

“Where we sleep, yeah.”

“But I mean—”

“What?” Keith asked, irritated.

Shiro shrugged, “You’re in love with him though.”

“Yeah.”

“So, what’s stopping you?”

“Oh my god, Shiro, yeah, I love Lance. He’s the most important person in the entire world to me. I’m not risking that because I want to fuck him,” Keith rolled his eyes, scuffing his boot against the concrete floor.

Shiro hesitated, “But…”

“We’re not talking about this now,” Keith said, stopping the conversation before he had to say anything else about it. “Why did you pick Adam and Curtis to come on this mission with us? And does Adam know about you and Curtis?”

“I would find it hard to believe he doesn’t know, but he’s never said anything before, so I can’t be sure,” Shiro explained. “The four of us are the most experienced. We need to be alert and prepared for the mission tomorrow.”

“And you think bringing your ex-boyfriend and current fuck buddy is the best way for us to be alert and prepared?”

“Shut up,” Shiro said, not friendly at all. “I’ve made my mind up. Go get some rest for tomorrow. It’ll be easy since you don’t have anything else to do.”

“Fuck you,” Keith snapped and finally, fed up with Shiro’s bullshit, he turned and left the garage.

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They were leaving before dawn. Tomorrow morning, Keith, Shiro, Adam, and Curtis were slated to leave the compound before the sun rose. It was going to be an early start, and Keith was honestly dreadng it.

He sighed now, turning down the hallway to his and Lance’s room. It was late, since he’d stayed to talk to Shiro and finish prepping the Humvee for in the morning, and then, since he and Shiro had argued for so long. He was exhausted, but he was also wired. He didn’t think he would sleep tonight, even though he desperately needed to.

God, Shiro just—Keith had honestly never been that pissed at him in his entire life. Shiro was being ridiculous, leading them on this suicide mission. It was so fucking obvious that Lotor was planning something, but Shiro was being too stubborn and risking everything just to make a point, which included bringing Adam and Curtis on the mission with them.
This whole thing was such a fucking mess.

Keith was still enraged about what Shiro had said to him about Lance. It was bullshit. Of course he wanted to sleep with Lance, of course he fantasized about grabbing Lance and pushing him up against the wall, but he couldn’t just—

Well, maybe he could.

This mission was a death trap. Lotor had planned something for them, and they might not come back alive because of it.

So, what if this was their last chance?

Keith could already imagine it. He’d walk into their room, where Lance would probably be waiting for him like he usually was. Lance would smile at him, and Keith would cross the room to wherever he was, grab him by the hips, and kiss him. They’d move to the bed or maybe the wall, whatever was closest, and Lance would be warm, beautiful, and so, so willing in his arms.

They’d be loud. Loud enough that Shiro could hear them.

Fuck, Keith thought, trying to stop his already wildly rampant thoughts.

Because what if he did this and then died tomorrow? What if he didn’t come back from the mission?

Keith couldn’t stand that thought. If things were different and he wasn’t leaving tomorrow, it would be easier. He couldn’t start this without more time. He wouldn’t.

Keith scrubbed a hand across his face as he entered their room, exhausted and aggravated. The room was empty, but the light in the bathroom was on under the closed door, so Lance was probably getting ready for bed already. He pulled his rifle and katana from his back and left them on the table in the corner before he also pulled the handgun from his holster, checking the safety and emptying the chamber before leaving it on the table as well.

The bathroom door opened, and Lance peeked his head out from behind the door.

His smile was bright, “Hey, I thought that was you. You’re late.”

Keith sighed, nodding, “I was with Shiro.”

“Everything okay?”

He hesitated, because no, everything was fucked, and the pause was enough for Lance to frown as he said, “Hold on, let me get dressed.”

Keith nodded, and Lance shut the door. In the quiet, Keith crossed the room to the small sofa in the corner. They didn’t spend much time here, especially since Keith worked so much around the compound, and now that Lance was almost fully recovered, he worked with Pidge, Matt, and Coran more and more. It was nice to see him out and around the compound during the day; it made this place feel more like home.

He started unlacing his boots, and when he’d finally kicked them off, Lance opened the bathroom door and cut the light off. He was wearing his sweatpants and the white t-shirt as pajamas now, and he was barefoot, which was crazy to Keith since it was so cold, even in their room.
Keith leaned back into the couch, rubbing a hand across his face and closing his eyes. He didn’t see Lance follow him, but he felt the sofa dip down beside him and could feel the warmth of his body from where they were so close to being pressed against each other.

Fuck, Keith thought again. He needed to get it together before he did something stupid.

“Okay,” Lance started, completely unaware of what he was doing to Keith. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you and Shiro get into a fight?”

It helped break Keith’s mood, how accurate Lance’s first guess was. Every time they were like this, just existing in the same space next to each other, Keith remembered how lucky he was to have Lance, how kind the universe had been when Lance had opened the door of that semi-truck and yelled at him on the first day.

That was how Keith had started dividing his life. Pre-apocalypse, pre-Lance, and Lance. It was literally all that mattered to him anymore.

Keith breathed a laugh, then, looking over to Lance with a soft smile, “How the hell do you do that every time?”

Lance smiled back at him, leaning into Keith’s shoulder, and Keith tossed an arm across the back of the sofa to let him get closer. He said, “I can read you like a book, Keith.”

“Most of the time,” Keith countered. He hoped he couldn’t read what else Keith was thinking about.

He hummed, nodding, “So tell me what happened.”

“We’re going on a mission tomorrow with Lotor.”

Lance stiffened, “What?”

“Yeah,” Keith agreed, staring ahead at the wall instead of letting himself look down at Lance. “Apparently, Lotor and Axca went north when they left the compound yesterday and found a depot with a ton of supplies, so we’re taking two Humvees to get them.”

“But you followed them, and you know that’s not what happened,” Lance’s voice was confused. “Did you tell Shiro?”

He sighed again, the frustration he was feeling before coming back all at once. He started, “Shiro won’t listen to me. We’ve been fighting about it all day.”

“It’s obvious that it’s a trap though,” Lance said. “Why is Shiro even going along with it?”

“He keeps saying that it will give Lotor more power among the soldiers and it will be more difficult to control everyone, which isn’t true. It doesn’t make any sense to me. There’s something about this mission that doesn’t feel right, and when I tried to tell Shiro that, he wouldn’t even let me talk about it.”

“What feels wrong about it?”

“Everything with Lotor,” Keith admitted, looking down at him now, “and I know that I’ve been suspicious of him for a while, but that’s because I know he’s planning something, and it feels like
it’s about to all come together with this mission.”

Lance’s face was serious, “Are you saying you shouldn’t go?”

Keith bit his lip, “Yeah. Yeah, I think so.”

Lance’s blue eyes were wide, and one of his hands came up to Keith’s shoulder and twisted in the material of his shirt. He said, “Keith, if you feel like you shouldn’t go then you just shouldn’t go.”

He sighed, “I can’t leave Shiro alone with Lotor. And besides—all of this bullshit with Adam and Curtis anyway makes it even more dangerous. The three of them can’t even be in the same room with each other. It’s fucking stupid for Shiro to think we can go on this mission and that not affect them.”

“Why?” Lance asked, eyes wide.

“Apparently,” Keith sighed again, “Shiro and Adam dated for a few years before they got reassigned to the same unit, which is when they broke up.”

“What?”

“And on top of that,” Keith continued, looking back over to Lance, who was staring at him, “since everything fell apart and Shiro lost contact with his superiors, he’s been sleeping with Curtis.”

Lance sat up, shifting even closer to Keith’s chest. His eyes were wide, eyebrows raised, as he said, “Keith. Stop playing.”

He laughed a little, “I’m not.”

“Then why—oh my god, everything makes so much sense.”

“What?”

Lance shook his head, “Just the way that the three of them act with each other. They’re all always so tense, and I always assumed that maybe there was something that happened between Shiro and Adam, but I guess I thought that Curtis maybe just had feelings for Shiro and had never said anything.”

“Apparently not.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Lance sat back, now even closer to Keith, so close that his shoulder was pressing into Keith’s and their thighs were pressed together too. “Then why does he think it’s a good idea to take both of them? I can come with you instead.”

Keith nodded and dropped his arm to Lance’s shoulders. At the touch, Lance curled further into Keith’s grip. Then, Keith said, “I can’t figure it out, and when I asked him, he just—got really weird about it. It’s like he doesn’t want to commit to only being with one of them, which… I don’t know.”

“What?” Lance asked, leaning into him and tipping his head back onto Keith’s shoulder.

“It feels weird to me. Maybe because I can’t—” Keith stopped suddenly, trying to figure out what to say.

Lance seemed to understand his hesitation. While he waited for Keith to continue, he turned into Keith’s arms, pulling his legs up onto the sofa and pressing his knees against Keith’s thighs. He
was facing Keith now, completely pressed against him, basically in his lap. It didn’t make it any easier to focus on what he was trying to say.

“I guess I don’t understand the whole situation because I’ve got you,” Keith said finally.

Lance looked up at him in surprise, “Really?”

“Yeah,” Keith said, shaking his head, tightening his arm around Lance’s shoulders. “I don’t understand. He’s got both of these people that obviously care about him. I can count on one hand the number of people in my life that have been there for me, and he’s got so many that he’s made a mess of it?”

“I think you’re being a little hard on him.”

Keith shrugged, “Maybe. You’re probably right.”

Lance was quiet for a while before he said, “I don’t think he’s meant for any of it to happen though. Could you even imagine dealing with that on top of everything else? So what if he sleeps with Curtis every now and then? If Adam wanted something serious, then he could say something about it and tell Shiro how he felt, if he even feels that way about Shiro still.”

“But Shiro just,” Keith rolled his eyes, “acts like it doesn’t bother him when it does.”

“He’s doing the best he can, Keith. Take it easy on him. Not everyone can be like you.”

Keith looked down, amused at the tone of Lance’s voice, “What does that mean?”

Lance blinked at him, like he hadn’t meant to say that. Then, he said, “I guess what I meant is that not everyone is like us. We got lucky when we found each other. That’s why you should go easy on Shiro. It’s obvious that he’s having a hard time dealing with everything, so try not to be an asshole about it.”

Keith sighed, “I know you’re right, but it doesn’t change the fact that this mission is—something about it isn’t right.”

“True,” Lance agreed, “but all you can do is watch your back and keep your eye on Lotor, especially if you’re not going to let me come with you.”

“I need you to stay here and keep an eye on everything,” Keith said. “Besides, if something does go wrong—”

“I’ll come after you,” Lance promised. “If you don’t come back, then I’ll come find you.”

Keith nodded, unsure what to say, how to respond to the conviction in Lance’s voice.

A moment later, Lance asked, “When do you leave?”

“Before dawn.”

“You need to sleep then.”

He sighed again, “I don’t know if I can.”

Lance smiled a little and then pulled away, getting up out of Keith’s grasp and turning back to hold out his hands for Keith. His voice was soft when he said, “Come to bed with me.”
*Fuck me,* Keith thought. It seemed to be his mantra tonight. Lance was too much and not enough all in the same breath.

Keith gulped and nodded, taking Lance’s hands and getting to his feet.

Before pulling him over to the bed, Lance slipped around him, taking his jacket off for him, and hanging it over the chair at the small table with his weapons. Keith almost argued that he could get undressed himself, but then realized how stupid that would be. Lance was taking his clothes off. Why the hell would he argue about this? He bit his tongue against all the words that were threatening to spill from him, feeling his heart speed up in his chest.

Lance moved back around him to his front and whispered, “Arms up.”

Keith complied, and Lance reached forward to take the hem of Keith’s shirt and pull it over his head.

The look in Lance’s eyes was too intense for Keith to describe.

He stepped in close to Keith, setting one hand on Keith’s chest. His voice was soft when he said, “Promise me you’ll be careful tomorrow.”

“I promise,” Keith said, reaching up and setting his own hand on top of Lance’s where it still rested on his chest. This was just—everything.

“Okay,” Lance breathed and finally stepped into Keith, folding himself against Keith’s chest and wrapping his arms around him.

Keith held on to him tightly and closed his eyes.

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The alarm rang long before dawn.

Keith jerked awake, slamming into consciousness in one go. The adrenaline that he’d had yesterday came back in one breathe, and his arms came up around Lance, who was curled up on top of his chest, asleep.

It took a second for him to calm down. The dark and quiet of their room helped him remember where he was. By the time his heart slowed again, Lance was awake and leaning up to look at him.

“Keith?” Lance asked, voice soft with sleep but somehow serious at the same time.

“Yeah,” he replied, dragging one hand up Lance’s back under his shirt and over his ridiculously soft skin; it was hypnotizing, if Keith was being honest. He knew he needed to get up and meet the others in the garage, but the anxiety, fear, and dread from yesterday were filling his chest again.

This mission was driving him crazy. Knowing that they were playing right into Lotor’s hands made him so angry, but there wasn’t anything he could do about it now. He had to go along with it. He’d just gotten Shiro back, and he didn’t want to lose this place either. Shiro might have been acting like a raging idiot about it, but they’d already argued. There wasn’t anything else to do but face it.

“Hey,” Lance said then, voice more awake. One of his hands came up to Keith’s face, cradling his jaw. “You okay?”
He forced himself to nod.

“You’re not,” Lance guessed. Their legs brushed together under the sheets.

The contact helped him breathe though, and he inhaled deeply. Lance was on top of him, looking at him softly, with one hand still on Keith’s jaw. It steadied him, and he let himself just feel for a second.

“I am,” Keith argued, and he was. The abject terror he felt was dissipating. He needed to face this mission just like everything else he had before.

“I’m not letting you leave until I believe you.”

“How are you planning on stopping me then?” Keith asked, pleased that Lance’s voice wasn’t so serious and that he was fighting back a smile, even if it was so dark that Keith could barely see him.

Lance scoffed, “I can hold you down.”

Keith hesitated for a second before he smirked, “I figured you would be the one that liked to be held down.”

“And why’s that?”

Without responding, Keith ran his hands down Lance’s body until he got to his hips, and he fit his hands in the same exact place he had so many days ago, when he’d left bruises on him from holding him so tightly while they were arguing.

When he’d done it first, he hadn’t realized that he’d been holding him hard enough to cause the bruises. He hadn’t even thought of it until later, when he’d walked in on Lance changing and saw the bruises, etched perfectly into Lance’s beautiful skin at his hips.

Honestly, when he’d seen them, he’d barely been able to fucking move because he was so turned on. Like—the last thing he’d ever expected to develop a thing for was seeing Lance with bruises because all he ever wanted was to keep him safe, but knowing that he put them there? And that Lance probably liked it? He’d had to hold his breath for a few long seconds that day to remind himself not to do something reckless and crazy, like grab Lance and slam him up against the wall and put his hands right back over the marks and cause more of them.

Now, almost like Lance was reading his mind, Lance’s breath caught in his chest, and a few seconds later he murmured, “Well, you’re not wrong.”

At the admission, Keith hooked one of his legs around Lance’s and flipped them over so that Lance was pressed down into the mattress and Keith was hovering above him. He was careful to keep enough of his weight off Lance so he could breathe but stayed close enough that their chests brushed.

Lance stared up at him, eyes wide. His hands caught Keith’s sides, holding on to him lightly. He looked fucking amazing spread out underneath Keith like this. Looking at him almost made Keith lean down to get even closer.

But he didn’t. This damn mission had to come first.

Still, he waited there for a long few seconds, hovering above Lance, before sighing, “I have to go.”
Lance’s voice was sly, airy when he said, “And here I thought you might want to hold me down for a little longer.”

Keith breathed a laugh and reached up to brush his hair off his forehead. It was shorter now, since he’d cut it, and Keith thought it was really fucking cute. He said, “I wish. Shiro’ll be waiting on me.”

Lance hummed, slipping his arms around Keith’s middle to hold on to him for another moment. His voice was a lot softer when he said, “You be careful and watch your back. I mean it, Keith.”

“I will.”

“And come back to me. Don’t make me come look for you.”

He laughed again, “Okay.”

Lance sighed and let go of him, “Let me help you get dressed.”

They rolled out of bed, Keith grabbing Lance’s hand to pull him to his feet, and Keith ducked into the bathroom while Lance gathered his clothes for him. He brushed his teeth and pulled his hair back quickly, and when he opened the door, Lance had already turned on the soft accenting lights so they could see. He was fiddling with Keith’s jacket, almost obsessively, like he was nervous.

Keith brushed a hand over his back, and Lance sighed, turning to hand him his pants.

He slipped into his clothes quickly and laced up his boots, and Lance helped him gather his weapons, situating them on his back and hooking the holster for his handgun around his belt.

“All set?” Lance asked, yawning.

Keith nodded, reaching back to pat his katana, “Good.”

Lance smiled a little, but the expression was empty, so Keith knew he was putting on a brave face for him. The gesture helped a lot more than he probably realized.

“Alright then,” Lance said, opening his arms again. “I’ll give you a hug for the road.”

Keith laughed and stepped into him, curling his arms around Lance and holding him close. Lance ducked his face into Keith’s neck and wrapped his arms around Keith’s waist, squeezing him a little.

Lance was the one to pull back first, but instead of going far, he leaned up on his toes and pressed his forehead to Keith’s.

“Be safe,” Lance breathed, voice desperate.

Keith was almost too overwhelmed to answer, but he nodded, shifting to press his nose along the length of Lance’s. He could almost feel Lance’s lips against his but—that’d be a dick move. It was something he couldn’t start right now, even if he desperately wanted to.

“Go back to bed,” Keith murmured. “I’ll be back this afternoon.”

“Mmm,” Lance hummed. “I’ll be waiting on you then.”

Keith took another long moment, held Lance a little tighter, and breathed him in before he let go.
By the time Keith reached the garage where the Humvees were being finalized for the mission, he was pissed to hell and back. Fuck this whole mission, fuck Shiro for not listening to him earlier, and fuck Lance for being so goddamn perfect that Keith was still hard up and bent out of shape for him.

Even though he’d been calmer with Lance, it was absolutely no surprise that he’d been filled with rage the second he walked out of their room. He was going to put all of his energy into making sure that they came back alive. Without Lotor.

The garage was already full when he got there, having been the last to arrive. Shiro was standing at the front of their Humvee, looking over Ina’s shoulder where she was checking the engine for the last time. He must have noticed Keith’s mood when he walked up to them because he simply nodded at Keith before going back to the Humvee’s engine. Kinkade and Griffin were loading the last of the boxes into the back of the Humvee since protocol called for them to recheck supplies before they left the compound, and Nadia was passing out morning rations for them. When she gave him his, he managed to murmur a small thanks.

The morning was still dark, the sun not ready to face the day either. It was freezing, and Keith tucked his rations into his pockets and moved to help Kinkade and Griffin.

They finished loading the Humvees quickly, and by the time they were done, most of Keith’s nervous energy had dissipated. He was left feeling on edge, maybe a little angry. Most of it was directed toward Lotor and his crew, who were being abnormally quiet. They’d finished outfitting their own Humvee too. Ezor and Zethrid loaded up the last of the boxes while Axca and Lotor talked at the front of the Humvee.

Adam passed off the day’s schedule to Nadia, and Curtis spoke with Kinkade and Griffin for a few minutes. Keith leaned back against the wall, arms crossed over his chest. It was getting lighter outside. The sun would sneak over the horizon soon.

Shiro appeared at Keith’s side then, distracting him from his observations. For a long moment, he didn’t say anything, but then, he pitched his voice low and murmured, “Sorry about what I said last night. That was too far.”

Keith nodded once.

“You’re still pissed at me for yesterday though, right?” Shiro guessed.

Keith snorted, “No.”

“Then what’s with your mood?”

He sighed before he said, “Lance.”

Shiro frowned, “Did you get into a fight?”

“Opposite.”

There was a pause, and then Shiro knocked his shoulder against Keith’s. When he looked over to his brother, he was grinning. He laughed a little and said, “You need to get it together. Just do something already.”

“You’re one to talk,” Keith raised an eyebrow, glancing over Shiro’s shoulder to where his brother
knew Adam and Curtis were finalizing the Humvee preparation.

Shiro’s blush was faint, and he rolled his eyes.

“Besides,” Keith continued, unfolding his arms and tucking his hands into his pockets. “I’m working on it. Let’s just do this damn thing so we can get back.”

Shiro nodded, hesitating, “You know I appreciate you telling me what you think, right?”

Keith raised an eyebrow, “What’s this about?”

“I know you’re worried about this mission, but we still have to do it,” Shiro said, and he sounded more sincere now, like he had come to terms with yesterday and what had happened between them. “Just—keep your eyes up.”

“I plan on it,” Keith said, nodding once. “Let’s get going.”
i'm back with a madness

Chapter Summary

Keith stared out the window, gripping his rifle in his hands. It was silent in their Humvee other than the rumbling of the engine and the crunching of the tires. Shiro kept his hands on the wheel, staring ahead at the road, and neither Adam nor Curtis spoke from the back.

Much like everything else in the world, the highway looked like it had seen better days. There were abandoned cars alongside of the road, and debris and garbage littered the asphalt. Off in the grass, a few bodies, probably older from the looks of them, were strewn in the ditch, limbs haphazard, blood and guts congealed.

Keith looked away in disgust.

Chapter Notes

hi friends! rachel here with an update for y'all. I hope everyone is staying safe and healthy, and maire and I wanted to post this chapter for all of y'all that might need something fun to do. hang in there! remember you can find us on tumblr @somethingmorecreative1 and @maireeps if you wanna chat about this fic, klance, or anything else

we also want to thank @zuchinni_muffin on twitter for their AMAZING fanart of Keith and Lance in Chapter 11!! Here's the link bc y'all should all go give them some love: https://twitter.com/zuchinni_muffin/status/1233078854106796032

warnings for this chapter: gore and minor character death. it's pretty violent, so take care of yourselves!

as always, the chapter title is from Fall Out Boy. please leave comments and let us know what your favorite parts of this chapter/the whole fic are. we love hearing from y'all, and we can't wait to keep sharing this story with you. you'll hear from us again pretty soon!

Good luck reading xoxo

The signs for Highway 34 were leaning precariously, spattered with blood, and rusted from the weather and exposure of the last few months.

Shiro pulled the Humvee up onto the highway behind Lotor. They were far enough back to create a gap between the two Humvees, but close enough to not see anything on the road in front of them.

Keith stared out the window, gripping his rifle in his hands. It was silent in their Humvee other than the rumbling of the engine and the crunching of the tires. Shiro kept his hands on the wheel,
staring ahead at the road, and neither Adam nor Curtis spoke from the back.

Much like everything else in the world, the highway looked like it had seen better days. There were abandoned cars alongside of the road, and debris and garbage littered the asphalt. Off in the grass, a few bodies, probably older from the looks of them, were strewn in the ditch, limbs haphazard, blood and guts congealed.

Keith looked away in disgust.

Miles passed without any change. They traveled northeast, and it was farther than Keith had ever been before in this direction. Even though the scalpers’ settlement was a good chunk of miles north of the compound, the alleged Red Cross depot was much farther east than that. They would be travelling for almost an hour before they reached it, if not more.

That was a long time to be on the road, especially with Lotor. Keith knew that anything could happen. Besides, he very seriously doubted there was a Red Cross depot at all. If anything, Lotor was just leading them away from the compound to create enough distance and lure them into a trap without the possibility of any backup.

As they travelled, Keith kept his eyes out for walkers. They passed very few that were close to the highway, and even though there was plenty of old blood and gore on the abandoned cars that they saw and plenty of footprints in the grass and mud on the side of the roads, it didn’t look anything like what Keith had seen from after a horde came through. Lotor told them yesterday in the briefing that they reason they couldn’t come sooner was because a horde had stopped them from being able to access it.

Realistically, this looked nothing like the damage a horde of walkers would cause. Another lie, then.

There were too many to count at this point.

He still couldn’t understand why Shiro was being so stubborn and idiotic about this. Wasn’t it obvious that Lotor was playing with them? That he was luring them away from the compound, planning god knew what, and then demanding to reap the benefits of them being completely out of the picture? Shiro wasn’t stupid, most of the time, but it was so ridiculously obvious what was happening.

Now, sitting in the Humvee and thinking about it, Keith couldn’t believe how stupid he’d been himself. He shouldn’t have left Lance at the compound alone. Fuck, he shouldn’t have even left at all. He’d been through hell when he thought that he had almost lost Lance with the incident in the subway, and now here he was, just taking off on a suicide mission he might not even come back from.

Everything he ever wanted was sitting at the compound waiting for him—had been in bed with him this morning, had asked him to be safe and come back alive and Keith just… got in this damn Humvee and went along with Lotor’s plan anyway.

So fucking stupid, Keith thought to himself. He and Lance had been so close this morning…

Keith closed his eyes and took a breath.

“You okay?” Shiro asked, breaking the silence in the Humvee.

He nodded once, “Fine.”
There was a pause and then, “Still thinking about Lance?”

Keith felt himself flush because *fuck Shiro* for bringing this up again. Even though he could tell from the tone of Shiro’s voice that he was smiling, that he was trying to joke around with him, it was still infuriating that he could read Keith so well and tell exactly what he was thinking at any given moment.

Which was the entire reason he was out here on this damn mission. If Shiro was going to be a raging idiot about something, then Keith was going to be right behind him, making sure he didn’t get himself killed and then making him admit how wrong he was later. He’d just gotten Shiro back, and he wasn’t planning on losing him now.

“Fuck you,” Keith said it without any real heat, but glanced over to Shiro anyway, and sure enough, there was a small smile on his face.

Shiro laughed, “I just don’t get it, Keith. You’re both so obvious about it.”

Keith raised an eyebrow, knew that there was a retort somewhere in there about how he didn’t understand what was going on between Shiro and Adam and Curtis but—this was probably a desperate attempt for them to get on the same page before they went into whatever this mission and Lotor had in store for them. Even if the joke was at Keith’s expense, he didn’t want to make anything worse by dragging all of their bullshit into it too.

He’d give Shiro hell for it later, when Adam and Curtis weren’t around.

So, because he was a great brother and had the patience of a fucking church nun, he sighed and said, “I’ve told you. I don’t want to mess anything up.”

Shiro rolled his eyes and carefully weaved through the abandoned cars on the highway behind Lotor’s Humvee. He said, “I mean, I guess that’s fair to a point, but it seems ridiculous by now. Lance has made it obvious, it seems like.”

“Well, maybe,” Keith countered, “but there hasn’t been any time.”

“If you don’t make time, then you’ll run out of it,” Shiro offered, voice gentle compared to earlier. He nodded, “Yeah I know that. I just—I don’t know. Feel like it’s better to be like this than have something go wrong and not have him at all.”

Shiro glanced up at the rearview mirror, and Keith knew that he wasn’t looking back at the road but instead at Adam and Curtis. He didn’t reply.

A few seconds of silence passed before Adam leaned forward and said, “You’re being too serious about it. If you want something, then say something. It’s that easy. I seriously doubt that anything would really change if it didn’t work out like you wanted it to with Lance.”

Curtis snorted, “I doubt that it wouldn’t work out at all, Keith. All Lance does is stare at you. Just go for it.”

Shiro laughed a little, but he sounded nervous, which yeah, of course he was. He was in an odd position with both Adam and Curtis, and all four of them knew it.

Keith rolled his eyes again, “Thanks, I guess.”

“So you’ll say something when we get back?” Shiro asked, grinning.
He hesitated before he said, “Maybe.”

“You’re the one who called this a suicide mission,” Shiro noted, steering the Humvee through a curve in the road. “It’ll be the perfect time.”

“Maybe,” Keith repeated sternly, turning to look out the window again.

Shiro chuckled, and they resumed the drive in silence.

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Finally, miles later, Lotor pulled his Humvee off the highway and onto a smaller road. At first, it was very similar to the highway with the amount of cars and debris that scattered the road, but the further they got from the ramp, the more deserted it became.

Before they had gone too far, Curtis cleared his throat and spoke again. He said, “We could still turn back. We don’t have to do this.”

Shiro let off the throttle, and the Humvee slowed. He looked over to Keith, and then back in the rearview mirror to Curtis and Adam.

“We came this far,” Adam said, the first one to speak. He was careful not to express an opinion.

“Keith?” Shiro asked, and there was something different about his voice now. Keith realized that it was finally the hesitance he’d been expecting from the beginning of all this.

He hesitated, unsure. They could turn back now, and when Lotor realized what was happening, he could go ahead and attack them here and now. It might be better than walking into whatever trap Lotor had laid out for them. At least out here on the road they would have surprise on their side.

But what if Lotor wasn’t lying about the supplies? What if this mission was part of a larger ploy? If they did bail on this mission then it would be a clear declaration of their loyalties. It would be clear that they didn’t trust Lotor, and if this mission wasn’t a trap, then there would be serious consequences when they got back to the compound.

Keith’s instincts told him to tell Shiro to turn around. He’d probably regret it later, but he stupidly ignored them.

“We came this far,” Keith repeated Adam’s words, nodding. “Might as well see what’s ahead.”

Shiro nodded too and pressed down on the gas. The Humvee lurched forward, right behind Lotor’s.

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When they arrived at the Red Cross depot, they were as silent as they had been when they left the compound this morning.

The depot was right off the two-lane road they had been travelling on for the last half hour. It was a large building, and before the virus took hold in this area, it was probably a warehouse or co-op for the community here. Before the fall, when the virus got bad enough that the government had to send in extra support and supplies, the Red Cross would often take over buildings a lot like this and set up triage in them.

Now, at this building, the large banner that had the recognizable red cross on it was hanging from the top of the warehouse by only one side. It was crooked and looked more like an x than the
significant cross. Next to the sign, a few of the windows at the top of the building were shattered. Keith wondered if it was a sign from the universe.

He didn’t let himself dwell on those thoughts. Instead, he shifted his rifle in his lap, rechecking the clip.

Like Lotor had claimed at the briefing two days ago, the fences were still standing. The parking lot beyond the fences was empty too. Other than the large warehouse, which looked like it might actually be intact, there was a trailer set up in the parking lot that also had the red cross symbol on it and had probably been used as storage for more material.

Ahead of them, Lotor’s Humvee pulled into the gravel entrance and stopped at the fence. One of his generals, Ezor, climbed out of the Humvee and jumped to the ground, stalking over to the fence and pulling it open. Lotor’s Humvee pulled through it into the parking lot, and Ezor waved them inside as well.

Keith glanced back at her in the side view mirror as they passed. Her expression was neutral, and she pulled the fence closed behind them once they were inside.

Shiro pulled the Humvee up to Lotor’s and cut the engine. He hesitated before reaching for the door handle. His voice was careful when he said, “Let’s keep our eyes up, and watch our backs. First sign of something going wrong, and we bail.”

Keith nodded once and opened his door, jumping down to the gravel.

He slung his katana over his shoulder and gripped his rifle casually, even if he had already flicked the safety off before they’d even got out of the Humvee.

Lotor and his other generals had already piled out of their Humvee as well. The sun was bright, and Lotor was wearing a pair of sunglasses as he surveyed them. It was irritating, Keith thought, that he couldn’t see Lotor’s eyes. He was much harder to read this way.

The paranoid part of Keith thought that it was just another part to his plan.

Shiro stepped up to Keith’s side, and Curtis and Adam were behind him. They both had rifles in hand, and Adam was standing at Shiro’s other side while Curtis stood a few feet behind them.

“Worth the drive, wasn’t it?” Lotor asked, a stupid smirk on his face, as he gestured to the warehouse behind him.

“Let’s hope so,” Shiro said, nodding toward the building as well. “Where are the supplies?”

“Inside the main warehouse,” Lotor replied, turning on his heels and starting toward one of the doors.

They walked closer. Lotor’s generals followed him, and Zethrid kept her eyes on Keith, glancing back at him every few seconds, noting the distance between him and Shiro. It unsettled him, but he didn’t let it show. Instead, he schooled his expression into one of boredom. He’d be damned if he let Lotor or his gang see how rattled he was already.

Fuck this whole mission.

“Should we leave someone outside on guard?” Curtis asked as they approached the building.

Lotor opened the door without even looking inside, which meant that he either wasn’t afraid of any
walkers or knew that there wouldn’t be any. Keith would bet on the latter.

“Not necessary,” Lotor said, leading the way inside. His generals followed him.

Keith exchanged a look with Shiro before nodding and motioning him forward with his rifle.

The inside of the warehouse wasn’t much different than the outside. It was bare, almost clean, like someone had been here to maintain it, but it was obvious that it had seen a lot of activity in the days before and after the fall. There were overturned shelves and tables, random chairs sitting in the space, and empty boxes and crates scattered across the stained concrete floor.

Lotor and Axca lead the way across the warehouse to another door. When they got to it, Axca stepped through first, followed by Lotor, while Ezor and Zethrid motioned Keith and Shiro in first. He hesitated, but stepped forward, finger on the trigger of his rifle, while Shiro followed him.

It was darker inside the small hallway without the big windows from the warehouse. Lotor and Axca were already walking down it, uncaring of the papers and other trash that littered the floor. Keith followed them.

They made a left turn, and then a few seconds later, a right. Keith hadn’t been able to tell from outside, but this place was much bigger than he originally thought. He kept up with the turns and tried to remember which doorways they crossed through. Lotor and Axca were silent ahead of them, but this felt like they were leading them deeper into this building for no reason.

Well, Lotor had a reason. If he was trying to lose, confuse, or disorient them in this maze of dark hallways, he’d have to try a little harder than a few turns in a dark hallway.

But, Keith would admit that it was unsettling.

He thought about Lance again. It was late enough now that he was probably getting up to start his day. He desperately hoped that everything went okay at the compound without them. Maybe they could grab these supplies and haul ass back home in time for Keith to get Lance and ask to take a nap in their room. He might even take Shiro’s advice too and finally say something. He could tell Lance exactly how he was feeling and if he was lucky—

He took a breath. *Focus now, Lance later,* he thought.

Lotor led them deeper and deeper into the depot. Ezor and Zethrid were somewhere behind him, probably bringing up the rear of their group with Curtis and Adam, while Axca and Lotor were still in front of Keith. They walked without hesitance, and again, Keith thought about how they seemed to know there weren’t any walkers in the building, which couldn’t be a coincidence.

Finally, after two more right turns and another left, Lotor opened another door and stepped inside. Through the door was another warehouse, very similar to the front where they had entered, except this one was packed to the brim with large, metal shipping containers that usually traveled on ships or semitrucks pre-apocalypse. They were all different colors, some new, some old, and there were some that were even stacked on top of each other.

The room was also disgusting. Where the front warehouse room had looked clean and well-maintained, this one was stained, stale, and dusty. Fresh blood and gore stains splattered the concrete floors and the sides of the storage units. Lotor claimed that this room had remained untouched and the supplies were intact, but if that was true, then where did this mess come from?

Keith looked around warily. There were so many containers in this room that it would be hard to see what was happening if they all got separated. He’d thought the hallways were a maze but this
—if something went wrong (when something went wrong, Keith’s gut corrected), getting out of here alive would be a nightmare.

“I would think you’d agree that we should start with the most essential supplies, correct, Captain?” Lotor asked, turning back to them. He’d finally pushed back his sunglasses, and his eyes were twinkling. It set Keith on edge.

Shiro looked around and nodded, “Nonperishable foods, medical supplies, gas. In that order.”

“Fair enough,” Lotor grinned, and Keith curled his finger on the trigger of his rifle, aching to just shoot him in the chest now. “This way.”

There was a second where Shiro hesitated, and Keith looked over to him. When Lotor and Axca’s backs were turned, a flash of fear and dread flitted across Shiro’s face, and when their eyes met, Keith was sure that Shiro would order them to bail on this mission. He’d said in the Humvee earlier that they would, and Lotor’s fucking cat-that-got-the-cream expression was worse now than ever.

Keith stared at him, begged him to do something.

Instead, Shiro seemed to shake himself and took a step forward. All of Keith’s hopes of getting out of this alive crumbled, and his focus shifted to survival. He’d get them through this and get back to Lance or else.

He braced himself and followed after Shiro and Lotor.

Lotor and Axca led them around the corner of the storage units and into a row that was full of them. They walked almost halfway down the row until they were completely surrounded by the units, and Lotor finally stopped in front of one.

“Here we are,” he said, reaching down to the metal handle at the bottom to pull the door up.

The desperate moans and groans echoed throughout the room immediately, and Keith took a step back, pulling up his rifle and aiming as the first wave of walkers flooded out of the storage unit. Axca reached forward and grabbed Lotor, pulling him back and to the side, away from the walkers, and Shiro and Keith were suddenly at the front, watching as the walkers stumbled toward them.

“Weapons up!” Shiro ordered, grabbing for his handgun and shooting the walker nearest to him. The space was narrow, but Keith kicked back the first few and pulled his rifle up, squeezing the trigger down and watching them fall.

He wasn’t sure how many walkers were in the storage unit, but they seemed to keep coming. It was at least a few minutes before they stopped, and when Keith glanced over to Lotor, he and Axca both had their handguns out too, shooting at the walkers as well.

“Back up!” Shiro yelled, emptying the clip on his gun as it jammed. A walker reached out for him.

Keith didn’t listen. Instead, he swung his rifle to his back and reached for his katana, kicking the walker away from Shiro and taking off its head in one go.

He moved forward, and Shiro moved with him. Keith didn’t need to look at him to tell that he was annoyed. Lotor and Axca were still firing, and Adam and Curtis had moved to their sides, firing into the storage unit as well, while Keith and Shiro handled the walkers that came out for them.
Once it was finished and the bodies were piled up, there was a few seconds of silence.

Then, Lotor said, “Shame. I truly thought that one was full of supplies.”

“Cut the bullshit, Lotor,” Keith growled, tightly gripping his katana. “What the fuck is going on?”

Lotor grinned, and the expression was full of malice, excitement, and joy all at once. He tucked his hands behind his back and said, “Do you really not know the answer by now?”

Dread swarmed Keith’s body. The last bit of optimism and hope he’d had flew right out of him and was destroyed by Lotor’s terrible grin.

“I was surprised that I even got the four of you here at all,” Lotor continued. “The Captain was too desperate to trust me this time, it seems. It would have been so much easier for you to turn me down at the compound when I first suggested this mission. In fact, I had been expecting you would. I’ve been dying to ask why you accepted in the first place, Shiro.”

Saying Shiro’s name was a deliberate move, and even Keith found himself fighting the urge to correct him, to put him in his place and make sure that he respected Shiro’s rank.

Lotor grinned through it and said, “I suppose you regret it now.”

“Whatever you’re about to do, Lotor,” Shiro started, and his voice was hard, fierce, “I want you to think carefully and decide if it’s worth it.”

“Oh, it’s worth it,” Lotor nodded, walking toward another storage unit.

Keith lunged forward, thrusting his katana and pressing it against Lotor’s neck. He growled, “One more move, you’ll fucking die.”

A gun pressed against his temple, and Keith didn’t need to look to see Axca there, eerily similar to their first interaction in the briefing so long ago. Behind him, there was some sort of commotion, and when he glanced back, Shiro was holding his hands up to surrender.

Keith looked further. Curtis and Adam were both kneeling on the ground with Ezor and Zethrid’s rifles pressed to the back of their heads.

Fuck, he thought.

“Not so fast, Keith,” Lotor said cheerfully, “unless your dear old brother wants to see both his lovers’ brains blown out.”

Lotor casually pushed Keith’s blade away and continued his walk over to the storage unit. Instead of gripping the door and throwing it open like Keith expected, he hauled himself up on top of the unit, walking across the top of it until he reached two chains that were hanging down from the ceiling.

“What’s the point of this, Lotor?” Shiro asked. “What do you want?”

“I thought it was obvious,” he gestured to the rest of the storage units in the room. “I want the four of you dead. It’ll be the beginning of something much bigger, I guarantee.”

With that final statement, Lotor yanked one of the chains down, and the door to one of the multiple storage units groaned loudly as it opened.

Three walkers stumbled out into the small space between the storage units. They approached from
the end opposite of Keith and Axca, and Ezor and Zethrid yanked both Adam and Curtis to their feet. Axca grabbed Keith’s shoulder and held him still, shifting around to the front of him and pressing the gun to his forehead, to the space right between his eyebrows.

*Come back to me,* Lance had whispered this morning before they left, as he was pressed up against him. *I’ll be waiting on you.*

He wasn’t sure what to do. The walkers approached. Axca had a gun to his head.

“What do you want, Lotor?” Shiro repeated furiously, shouting, eyes blazing.

Lotor laughed, “Dear Shiro. I want to hear you *scream.*”

Axca held him still, finger on the trigger, and Keith stared at her. What was the plan here? How long were they going to hold out until they moved, and how long would Keith have to get away from these walkers when that happened?

“Ezor! Zethrid!” Lotor shouted, still grinning. “Now!”

Keith looked behind them. Ezor grabbed Adam by the shoulders and threw him sideways, hard. He slammed head-first into one of the storage units and crumbled to the ground, completely motionless.

Shiro shouted and moved toward him, but Axca bared down on Keith harder and said, “One step, and I pull the trigger.”

He stopped, and when Shiro met Keith’s gaze, his eyes were dark, defeated, terrified.

It was enough to make his rage and anger simmer and boil in his chest. Keith wasn’t going to take this, he *wasn’t.*

With Adam unconscious and to the side, Ezor and Zethrid gripped Curtis by the arms. They yanked his rifle away and dropped it to the ground; then, they turned around, pushing him forward to meet the approaching walkers.

Keith realized too late what was about to happen, what he was about to see, and he struggled against Axca’s hold.

“Be still,” she hissed, gripping his shoulder tight enough to leave bruises on him.

“No, no, let me go,” Curtis started talking, struggling against both Ezor and Zethrid’s grip. He kicked at them, desperate, and when he looked back over his shoulder to see them, his eyes were wild. “You stupid bitches, *let me go,* SHIRO, SHIRO, HELP ME, HELP—”

Blood sprayed them when the first walker bit into his shoulder. The second attached itself to Curtis’s side, biting into his abdomen. The third fell to its knees and caught his leg, biting into the meat of his calf. His words turned into screams, and Keith was shaking. He was going to be sick. This was—this was—

Shiro was frozen.

Curtis screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed.

Finally, Ezor and Zethrid shoved Curtis forward into the walkers’ grip, and they collapsed on top of him. Curtis was still screaming, one hand reaching up from between the bodies, desperately
clawing at the air like he still might be able to get away.

“A great start to the show,” Lotor commented over the screaming, laughing. “Now, which brother will die first?”

Keith narrowed his eyes at Axca, “Why are you doing this?”

“Shut up,” she said, voice even. Her dark blue eyes were blank.

“You’re going along with this monster,” he continued, forging ahead. “You’re just as bad as he is. Haven’t you seen enough death?”

“Be quiet,” she said in the same bored tone.

Lotor laughed again, “Trying to reason with Axca? She’s as bloodthirsty as I am. No one here will help you.”

Keith continued staring at her. Curtis’ screams stopped.

“You’re fucking pathetic,” Keith said, staring into her eyes. She didn’t move, didn’t blink, just held the gun to his head and remained still. “Pull the fucking trigger if you want.”

“Now, now,” Lotor said from above them. “Let’s not get hasty. Remember your orders, Axca.”

Lotor’s words and tone were enough to give Keith an idea.

Keith smirked at her and leaned into the gun, “You’re just going to listen to him? Guess you are just his lap dog, huh? Or is it worse than that? What else does he make you do, Axca?”

“I said shut up,” she repeated, but there was a slight tremor in her voice. He wouldn’t have heard it if he hadn’t been listening for it.

Honestly, he hadn’t been expecting it to work in the first place. He’d never had much interaction with Axca other than fighting, and this jab had just been a shot in the dark, a last ditch attempt to distract her long enough to get the gun off him and give them a fighting chance.

It somehow made it worse that it was working, but Keith had to do whatever he needed to get them out of this alive, even if it meant driving her right through this terrible place, goading her into willingly thinking about something terrible that was happening to her.

Keith grinned, “It must be really bad then. Does he keep you up at night? Are you usually on your knees or on your back?”

“Keith,” it was Shiro’s voice this time, and when he glanced over to him, Ezor and Zethrid had moved and their rifles were fixated on him now. They were both drenched in bright red blood. Shiro’s hands were still up, and his expression was serious, jaw locked.

It didn’t stop him. Instead, he turned back to Axca and met her eyes again. They were burning now, boredom evaporated.

He asked, “Are you his favorite? He must not treat Ezor and Zethrid like you. I bet that infuriates you, right? Unless you prefer it that way, I guess.”

Axca’s hand was shaking now. Keith could see and feel the gun trembling against his forehead. Her finger inched down on the trigger.
“Axca!” Lotor warned, voice stern.

Ezor and Zethrid started shouting for Shiro to get on his knees. Keith didn’t watch.

Her gaze didn’t leave his, and Keith smirked and pitched his voice low when he said, “Is that how he says your name, Axca? I bet it never really changes, does it?”

“Be quiet or I’ll pull the fucking trigger,” she said, voice shaking too.

“That’s the difference between me and you, Axca,” Keith smirked, saying her name again because he knew that was part of what was making her come undone. “I’m not afraid of what Lotor will do to me tonight, not like you are.”

Her eyes hardened, and she stepped further into him, “Be fucking quiet.”

“Axca! Follow orders!” Lotor yelled again.

“Do what he says, Axca,” Keith said, smirking. “Just like you do when you fuck him.”

That was the last straw, Keith could tell from the moment it came out of his mouth. She took a surprised breath, and then, she glanced up to Lotor where he was standing above them on the storage unit.

It was barely a second, but it was long enough. Keith shoved forward, pushing the gun away from his forehead and throwing her to the ground. Even though there was a second where she could have pulled the trigger, she didn’t. With her hesitation, he kicked the gun away and raised his rifle in the same motion, aiming for Ezor and Zethrid and pulling down the trigger.

Bullets sprayed them, and Shiro hit the ground, rolling to the side and grabbing for Adam. Ezor grunted and took a step back, stumbling over the walkers’ bodies on top of Curtis, and it was enough to distract them from their meal. They struggled, hand to hand, and Zethrid tried to shove them away, but there wasn’t enough room in the small space.

Lotor was shouting something at them from atop the storage unit, but before Keith could understand him, Axca jackknifed to her feet and flew at him, gun completely forgotten.

Keith met her head on, and they struggled. She reached for his rifle on his shoulder and grabbed it, slinging it far away from them. After a few more seconds, Keith heard a handgun fire, and when he glanced over, Shiro was aiming for Zethrid, who was running toward him.

While he was distracted, Axca grabbed Keith by the arm and twisted, flipping him over her shoulder, and when he went down, he swiped her legs out from under her. She hit the ground too, hard.

Then, he heard the metallic groan of the storage unit doors as they opened, and groups of walkers stumbled out of them and into the narrow space between the units, flooding down the small walkway directly for them.

Keith took the small reprieve to roll to his feet and grab onto the storage unit. He hauled himself up on top of it to where Lotor was standing, still holding the second chain that was hanging from the ceiling which controlled the release of the walkers from the storage units.

He looked down. Axca was scrambling to her feet and standing to face some of the walkers. Ezor was quickly becoming overwhelmed on her side, and Shiro was still struggling with Zethrid. Behind him, Adam moved, hand coming up to clutch a nearby storage unit as he stumbled to his
feet.

“Lotor!” Keith shouted, rage fueling him.

Lotor spun to face him, still grinning. “Ready to watch your brother die?"

Before Keith could reply, Lotor raised his handgun and aimed directly for Shiro.

“Shiro!” Keith screamed, lunging for Lotor.

He pulled the trigger before Keith could get there, but the next second, Keith tackled him, and they rolled toward the edge of the storage unit. Keith batted the gun away, and it skittered across the metal surface and disappeared over the side.

When he looked, Shiro was still standing. Relief washed over him.

It didn’t hold for long. The walkers that Lotor had freed were swarming them. Ezor, Zethrid, and Axca were doing all they could to keep from being overwhelmed, but it was only a matter of time. Adam was on his feet now, standing at Shiro’s shoulder where he was pushing away walkers that Zethrid kept shoving at them. Even from here, Keith could see the blood that was dripping from the wound on the back of Adam’s head.

This was a disaster. Keith had to figure out how to get them out of here alive.

Lotor grabbed Keith’s shoulders and shoved him back, so far that he almost rolled over the side of the storage unit. He pushed himself up to his feet, staring Lotor down.

Lotor grinned and opened his mouth to say something, but before he could, a terrifyingly familiar scream pierced the air.

Keith knew it was Shiro without even looking.

He turned anyway, desperate, and when he saw it, his entire world crashed down around him.

Zethrid was holding on to Shiro’s arm and shoulder, and a walker had bitten Shiro’s forearm. Blood spurted from the open wound.

Shiro yelled again, struggling, and Adam grabbed Shiro’s handgun from his belt, aiming for Zethrid’s head and pulling the trigger. His hand was shaking so much that he missed the shot, but it was enough to send her stumbling back, and Ezor hauled her away, shoving through the walkers that were quickly overwhelming them.

Lotor laughed at the sight, turning to grin at Keith again.

Keith flew into a rage.

He lunged forward and grabbed Lotor by his shirt, throwing him down to the ground and jumping on top of him. They rolled, Lotor reaching up to grab at Keith’s shoulder, and Keith reared back to punch him, but Lotor kicked him off.

As Keith rolled away and scrambled to his feet, Lotor grabbed his katana from the sheath on his back and brandished it in front of him.

It was enough to make him pause. Lotor grinned.

“I’ll be sure to take this back to the compound for you,” he said, lips curling. “I’ll even give it to
your whore. I’ll tell him how you screamed when I took it away from you, how you wouldn’t stop saying his name as the dead consumed you.”

Keith was trembling. He wouldn’t go near Lance, he couldn’t—

Lotor raised his katana into the air, and Keith tried to find the strength to move, he really did.

Instead of Lotor slicing into him with his own weapon, he smirked again and said, “I’ll enjoy listening to your screams the most.”

Then, he lifted his foot and kicked Keith in the chest, sending him flying off the storage unit and into the waiting group of bodies below.

;;

Be safe. Come back to me.

The only thing that Keith could think about as he fell was Lance.

He hit the ground, hard enough to knock the air out of him, and he struggled to breathe. Bodies appeared over him, grabbing for him, and Keith knew he needed to move.

I’ll be waiting on you.

Lance’s voice was in his ears even as they were ringing.

Keith gasped, vision tinted dark. He wasn’t sure he was breathing. He didn’t think that he could move at all. Something in his chest was broken. He’d landed on his back, and his lungs felt like they were burning, like they were on fire. He needed a minute—just a minute to rest, to catch his breath…

But he didn’t have it. He might have felt like he was dying, but he had to go right fucking now.

Move, you asshole, Keith growled to himself, forcing his limbs to respond.

He crawled backwards, scrambling, and the walkers followed him. He was aching, sore, but he had to move. When his back hit the next storage unit, he stumbled to his feet, chest stinging with the motion. The walkers approached him, and the only weapon he had on him was his handgun.

He didn’t draw it. Instead, he ran forward, shoving into the walkers and dodging past them. Once he was on his feet, it was easier to focus through the pain, and he all but forgot his injuries in the wake of what was happening. He rushed back toward Shiro and Adam, only to find them fighting back the walkers. Adam was still stumbling as he held onto Shiro, who was already bleeding heavily, eyes drooping.

Keith looked up, expecting to find Lotor, Axca, Ezor, and Zethrid watching them, but they had disappeared.

It was the exact moment that Keith realized they had already started on their way back to the compound. What was going to happen when they got there?

God, Lance and the others were there, alone.

Keith surged forward, shoving his way through the bodies, narrowly avoiding getting bitten himself. When he made it to Shiro and Adam, he pulled out his handgun and started firing, creating enough of a gap and space for them to push forward through.
“Let’s fucking move!” Keith shouted over the noise of the walkers, getting underneath Shiro’s side just as his knees collapsed.

All of this weight fell to Keith, and he grunted in surprise. He gritted his teeth and pulled them forward, stopping to scoop up an abandoned rifle off the floor and literally shooting their way through the walkers that were coming for them.

It was slow work, but they managed to be faster than the walkers behind them, which was all that really mattered. Keith took down the walkers in front of them with one hand on the rifle while he used to his other to pull Shiro and Adam along. Adam was on Shiro’s other side, helping with his weight, but his feet were just as unsteady as Shiro’s, no doubt from the serious head injury he’d sustained.

Somehow, they made it to the door. Keith pulled them through, and just as the first of the walkers were getting through the door as well, he pushed all of Shiro’s weight onto Adam and turned to shove the door closed.

It wouldn’t hold against a big group of walkers for long, but it might give them the time they needed to get back to the Humvee alive.

But, Shiro had been bitten.

“Keith,” Adam’s voice was a sob, and he turned back in time to see both of them collapse onto the floor.

Keith lunged for them, grabbing Shiro and hauling him back up to his feet. Thankfully, Adam followed him, clutching at Shiro’s side.

“Okay,” Keith said aloud. “Okay, what do we do? What can I do?”

Shiro’s eyes fluttered, and he winced. Keith thought he’d lost consciousness already, maybe from the shock, but then, his brother’s eyes were opening. His voice was hoarse from yelling when he said, “Leave me here.”

Keith thought he was going to be sick.

“No,” he growled.

“Keith,” Shiro shook his head. “You don’t recover from bites, kid. It’s okay.”

Adam was shaking his head, tears already running down his face.

The thudding against the door grew louder, and Keith shook his head too. He started forward, pulling Shiro and Adam behind him, and said, “Fuck that. I’m getting us out of here alive.”

Shiro protested but still let Keith lead them through the hallway. They jogged quickly, and when they made it back to the front warehouse, Shiro’s knees gave out again, and they all three fell to the floor.

Shiro rolled over onto his back, reaching down to hold his arm above the bite. It was in the middle of his forearm, and it was gruesome. Blood was still pouring from it. He’d die from blood lose long before he turned.

That thought was enough to get Keith moving. Automatically, he reached behind him for his katana, only to remember it wasn’t there. Lotor had taken it.
Adam sprawled against Shiro’s side, curling into him, and Shiro looked over to him, eyes wet.

“I’m sorry,” Shiro said, voice hoarse, broken, terrified. His entire body was trembling

Adam sobbed at the words and hid his face against Shiro’s shoulder. Tears pooled in Keith’s eyes. He wouldn’t do this, he wouldn’t. Shiro couldn’t leave them here. Not now.

Keith pushed himself to his feet, looking around the room, and over by one of the chairs and overturned tables, a toolkit has been spilled onto the floor. There were a few rags, a hammer, a socket wrench, a screwdriver—

And an axe.

Keith sprinted for it. He grabbed the axe and all of the rags he could see and hauled ass back over to Shiro, sliding down onto the ground beside him.

When Shiro looked up at him, his eyes were sad. He was gasping hard, almost too hard for Keith to understand him when he said, “It’s—too l-late, Keith.”

“Fuck you,” he replied shakily, ignoring the tears that were making their way down his face. He manhandled Shiro out of his jacket, and Adam sat up, staring down at them, eyes unfocused.

Keith wiped the blade of the axe clean on his own jacket. His voice shook when he said, “Adam, hold him still.”

Adam shifted, moving to sit behind Shiro, pulling his head into his lap and getting an arm around Shiro’s chest.

Keith unhooked his belt and pulled it off, quickly and desperately tying it around Shiro’s arm, right below his shoulder.

As he was pulling back and reaching for the axe again, Shiro grabbed one of Keith’s wrists and said, “You don’t have to do this, little brother. It’s okay.”

Keith didn’t bother answering. He glanced up to Adam, who was already staring at him in horror, and then he pulled the axe back over his shoulder.

The first strike didn’t separate his arm like Keith had been hoping. The blade stopped at the bone, and Shiro screamed, louder than Keith had ever heard before.

He pulled the axe back out and ignored all the blood. He brought it down twice, three times, a fourth.

On the fifth strike, the axe crushed through the bone.

The sixth separated the limb, and Keith kicked away Shiro’s arm, dropping the axe to the floor.

Shiro had stopped screaming on one of the first strikes, and Keith took the time to grab the rags and wrap them around the stump of Shiro’s right arm. He’d cut it halfway between his elbow and shoulder, and Keith hoped it was enough to make a difference.

If Shiro didn’t die from the blood loss first, then they would find out if Keith had acted fast enough.

In the silence after he had finished, Keith looked up to Adam, who was still staring down at Shiro’s face, slack in unconsciousness. The other man was still clutching Shiro like his life
depended on it, and tears were rolling down his face.

Then, Keith heard the walkers.

He didn’t have time to question where they were coming from. Instead, he pushed himself to his feet and said, “C’mon, Adam. We’ve got to get to the Humvee.”

Adam shook his head and didn’t move.

“Adam,” Keith snapped, adjusting the empty sheath on his back. “Help me. Hold pressure onto Shiro’s arm or he’s going to fucking die.”

He reached forward and grabbed Shiro’s good arm, hauling him up to his feet, and thankfully, the motion was enough to get Adam moving too. He stumbled up, carefully gripping the rags on Shiro’s arm and holding them tightly.

He pulled them forward, holding all of Shiro’s weight on his own.

They stumbled outside, and for a brief terrifying second, Keith expected their Humvee to be gone, something else that Lotor had taken from him.

When they got outside though, the Humvee was still sitting there, no doubt a Hail Mary from the universe.

Keith pulled them over to it and flung the back doors open, crawling inside with Shiro. He wasn’t sure where the strength came from, but he did it. Once they were inside, Adam seated beside Shiro and keeping pressure on what was left of his arm, Keith slammed the doors shut and tumbled into the driver’s seat.

Walkers stumbled out of the building, just a few seconds behind them, and Keith cranked the Humvee and peeled out of the gravel lot. He tried not to think about anything except getting back alive as he smashed through the fence and barreled onto the road back toward the compound.
so show me what you got, you children of the gun

Chapter Summary

He eased to a stop, hands still high, voice higher, “What is going on?”

It was then the sirens went off, the lab’s emergency lights rotating a deep red. It wasn’t their morning call, or the lights out beep, but a deep and loud alarm, and the red of the lights washed the room in a circle, leaving them in the dark until the red swiped over them all over again.

Chapter Notes

hey all!!! this chapter was by me, mai !!! i hope all of you guys are being safe and healthy, here's another part to tide you guys by ~

warning for this chapter: violence, injury
and also this chapter takes part right after the events of chapter 1 of our nsfw canon companion [We're] More than Alive --

He dumped the bundle of bedsheets unceremoniously into the industrial washer, ears on fire and the tops of his cheekbones flushed. Just own it, totally. Except, how could he own it knowing that Keith was out there, grappling with danger and Lotor (practically synonymous at this point) at every fucking corner, actually doing work while Lance was rolling around having a romp with himself. He grumbled, playing with his fringe in embarrassment and poking the buttons on the washer roughly.

As soon as he was sure the cycle had started on cleaning the sheets (they had a pretty rudimentary washing system that was still being worked on), he fled the scene, stalking down the civilian hallway to the common room. His jacket was just starting to look normal on him again, and not hang like a bag off of his thin shoulders, and it made his walk straighten with a bit more pride. Something about looking nice in the face of this mess felt great. He opened the double doors, fully ready to be welcomed by the same normal bustle of the compound.

Usually on any normal day, after the briefings and morning meetings of the squadron, the lab team would meet in the mess hall with the others and dole out tasks to the civilians. Allura took charge of that before joining Coran in the lab later, but instead of the neat lines and clean orders Allura would usually be giving, the compound’s common room was halted in all movement and noise.

Immediately the mood prickled at his skin and he was on alert. From the corner of his eye, he could spy Kinkade and Nadia with their backs to the entrance, their usual guard post woefully forgotten as they fronted on two of Lotor’s soldiers - one of them his inner circle, Narti, and the other a large stoic soldier named Bogh. Both of Lotor’s unit were heavily armed, and Bogh wore a sneer close to Kinkade’s face. Lance didn’t have to look twice to see that Kinkade really didn’t like
that. In the center of the room, Allura’s mouth was a firm line as she looked down at a group of Lotor’s soldiers, a nasty-faced bunch that easily was ruining the natural run of the day’s task management by a firm foot placed on a stack of paperwork on the ground - ripped from Allura’s hands.

He stalked forward, breaking the standstill with a harsh and loud, “What the fuck is going on here?”

Allura barely looked at him, and the soldiers all but gave him a sly little look that set his blood on fire. He ground his teeth and slid his eyes to the side as Pidge appeared on his elbow.

“The lab team already left,” Pidge spit, “so these fuckers decided to make a move.”

One of Lotor’s men, an otherwise slender man with a nasty face, whipped forward and Lance took a huge step in front of Pidge to shield her, meeting the man’s face with less than a foot of room between them.

“Step back, civi,” the man spit at Lance’s feet, “that kid needs to learn to shut her mouth. If Lotor was in charge, we’d actually be living and not fucking playing house.”

Lance levelled a cool gaze back, “Too bad your mommy’s not in charge.”

“Fuck off, whore.”

“Wow, original,” he chuckled, “Wonder where you got that one. Why don’t you cut your losses and scatter before those really in charge hear of this.”

The man’s mouth twisted in a scowl, and he tipped a head back to his goons, and they went like puppets on a string - slamming past others on their way towards the military halls. Lance faintly tried to place his name - Throk? Vrok? - when he called over his shoulder back to the common room,

“Remember,” he spat, “the house burns without the parents around.”

And god, as much as he wanted to let the man’s words roll off of him, especially after successfully sending him packing, Lance shivered because it was true. Shiro, Keith, Adam, even Curtis, they were the strongest and highest-ranked of the Shiro’s unit - without them, they had only a few lieutenants and half a dozen soldiers in ratio to the civilians at the compound. Pidge behind him fist her small hands in the back of his jacket, and he was very suddenly and keenly aware of the eyes on him in the room.

Allura’s were particularly watery and she turned away from them all to hide them behind a shaking arm. He shifted to place an arm over Pidge’s shoulders, cocking an eyebrow down at her and easily smiling around him.

“You think all that was to make up for a lack of balls?” he joked, smoothly and all teeth as the others burst into soft laughter. Allura hiccupsed along, rubbing her eyes hard and grinning enough to stop someone’s heart. Kinkade and Nadia stalked forward, immediately flanked by the others of Shiro’s squadron. A few were missing. Lance wondered idly if they had turned.

His joking seemed to do the trick and everyone easily branched off into their tasks, Allura using a softer version of her leader voice. Romelle was close by, hands shoved in the pockets of her tactical overalls, eyes concerned. He breathed out a short huff of laughter before turning to Kinkade as the soldier stepped closer.
“Lance.” Kinkade was a soldier of few words, so instantly he knew it was serious. The firm line of Kinkade’s sharpshooter’s mouth spoke volumes.

“Pidge,” he hummed, looking down at the young teen under his shoulder, “wanna tell Allura and Matt I’ll be in the lab in a few?”

She hesitated, clearly curious and still a bit shaken, but she nodded and disappeared from next to him, following Allura’s coattails through the lab unit’s doors. Kinkade gave a nod to Nadia and Ina next to him and they all followed Griffin back to their posts beyond the front door.

Lance narrowed his eyes at Kinkade, but his expression was unreadable.

“What’s up, man?”

Kinkade placed a heavy hand on his shoulder, “I was left in charge of the unit. I think you should arm yourself until the scouting group is back.”

Lance’s mouth went dry. Civilians weren’t allowed to be armed on the compound without clearance from Shiro, and unless they were Keith Kogane in the flesh, it was hard to get clearance. Clearly this clash of units was something not to be taken lightly. He was glad to have sent Pidge away because if any of the others heard this from Kinkade, it would be panic. The last thing they needed was a shoot-out between Lotor’s unit and everyone else because they were severely underpowered and outnumbered without Shiro and his lieutenants (if Keith heard him call him a lieutenant, he’d get an earful he was sure).

He nodded, slow and easy to not spook the other civilians that milled around the common room, working here and there, “Okay. I’ll have my pistols on me.”

And Kinkade simply returned the nod before moving on, the rifle on his back gleaming deadly in the sunlight. Lance crossed the common room quickly, hands fisted at his side until he was in front of their bedroom door. His pistols had been placed away securely under his pack, wrapped in a cloth and unloaded. He strapped the first holster across his thigh, slinging it snugly against his upper outer thigh, and placed the second holster across his lower back. He clicked bullets slowly into the chambers, locking on the safety before sliding them into his holsters. The weight was achingly familiar, and his jacket fluttered over the guns to conceal them.

He shifted, the new thigh holster was nice and snug, and half restitched by scalper hands. Shiro had tossed it his way when they had returned from up north, with a smile that screamed affection. He had been so giddy and transparent about it, that Keith had laughed when he immediately tried it on - sans pistol - in their bathroom post-trip. Now with the pressure of a gun in it, the holster’s brilliance was a nice touch. He felt pretty badass, like some apocalyptic male Lara Croft. His good mood was crushed when he remembered why he was holstering up his pistols for the first time in the compound - and just to keep them on around the compound.

Deciding to skip breakfast rations, he crossed the halls and common rooms straight for the lab. The lab corridor was the second most secretive portion of the compound, beyond the leadership rooms that Shiro occupied his meetings and armory in, and was almost completely built with bulletproof glass that reached from ceiling to floor. The light was flooding, and half covered with head-height wooden boards to shield the inner workings of the lab from any prying eyes outdoors. The huge circular lab room was a second layer in, an inner room of dark walling casing in the protective workshop and bared by a hand scanning doorway with an entirely separate singular generator to ensure the locking mechanism would stay up for a while. He placed his palm on the surface and let the laser press over it until his skin prickled with heat and the doors slid open.
They closed quickly and promptly behind him when he stepped through, closing his eyes to the disinfecting mist that descended onto his clothing. A fan brushed it all away and the second doorway opened with a soft *whoosh* before the lab was finally open to him.

He slid through into the dark room, the bright fluorescent labs angled toward a few lab tables entirely covered in beakers and test tubes overflowing with red to green liquids taken from fermented walkers’ brains that sat nearby in variously sized tubs. The smell was the worst of it, a subtle lingering whiff of death and decay that clung to the clothes until you stepped under the disinfecting fan.

Lance looked around, hands in his pockets, noticing a very clear absence of the lab team.

“Hello?”

A stumble and a crash before Allura came whirling around the corner, eyes rimmed in red and hair up in a messy bun, “Lance, sorry, Coran and the team stepped out for other testing. I have your numbers to catalog right here… oh, one moment.”

She paused and then whipped around back to her office after realizing she didn’t have them at all. He frowned and followed her, leaning his shoulder against the doorway of her office as she ran through piles and piles of documents - even so far as tossing a laptop under her desk like it was nothing.

“Frazzled?” he asked.

“That’s the least of it.” She breathed a sigh, tapering off the ends with a tiny smile that had her dark lips curling. Even the lipstick she had smudged on was a bit haphazard, which was uncharacteristic for her.

“Uh, lab stuff or Lotor stuff?”

She didn’t respond because they both knew the answer. Lotor’s pressure for a cure, for results from the lab, landed squarely on Allura’s shoulders. It had taken only a few days of work in the lab for Lance to really notice it, but the pressure was suffocating. Nearly every few hours, Lotor was running a tour around the lab with his generals at his side, shouting about non-conclusive answers, non-conclusive numbers, demanding to see Allura and then talking to her so sickly sweet and condescending that the honey-sweet words would practically drip in air. He was hardly subtle about Allura and made it known to the lab team who exactly she worked for, *him*, and it didn’t matter if “her daddy said x or y or z, because he was gone, sweetie”. Just add a pretentious posh British accent to a dash of sexual aggression, and that was the slimy tackily white-haired man. Pushing thirty and he couldn’t even understand when someone wasn’t interested. Lance shook his head in disgust.

“I’m sorry,” he said, bitterly, “but he’s just the worst. I would put a bullet in his head if I could.”

“You could,” Allura said, fistimg out a bunch of paperwork finally, “but you’d start a riot. Believe it or not, but beyond us, beyond Shiro’s unit, even some of them actually *like* Lotor. They think our military status gives us an edge - as if other survivors and civilians should be licking our feet for a chance of survival.”

She continued, “This is just some sick fantasy of his. He thinks he’s owed the world. It doesn’t matter the feelings of others, the *lives of others*, if he doesn’t get his way.”

The papers crunched under her fingers and he stepped forward to take them away from her. They
moved out of the chaotic office to a station that had just a bit of room enough for both of them. He settled on a stool, hunched over his numbers, as Allura went back to her microscope and paper pad, pen scratching.

“When he gets back,” he said softly, after a while, “I’ll tell Shiro about what happened this morning. He can’t stand by when Lotor’s unit is moving on civilians like that.”

Allura’s hair bobbed as she shook her head, “Shiro won’t do anything. It would mean war between us. This tension isn’t anything new, we’ve all been together for a while. They bash heads like this constantly.”

Stubbornly, he scratched his numbers harder, “If I know anything from my rigorous examination of those two brothers, they share the same trait of hotheadedness when people close to them are threatened. Shiro and Keith know you’re a driving force behind the compound, they won’t let Lotor walk all over you any longer.”

There was a pause.

“Rigorous examination?”

His face exploded in color, and he nearly shucked his pencil across the table at her. She laughed loudly and heartily.

“Get your head out of the gutter! Was that the only thing you registered there? God, someone tell Romelle she has her hands full.”

Allura’s eyes sparkled and her dark lips stretched into a smirk that radiated a sense of Keithness that had Lance sputtering, “Oh she’s already had her hands full, she knows.”

No. No way. He whined, tipping back in his stool dangerously, “You’re joking! Already?! I can barely get Keith to look at me even though I’m practically begging for anything at this point.”

“It’s easy when you just have the guts to ask.”

Lance huffed, pointing his pencil in her direction with slit eyes, “You know why I can’t do that.”

“I really actually don’t,” she swiveled in her chair to look at him, a slim eyebrow raised. “He practically drools at the sight of you. He looks at me like I’m Lotor when I so much as touch you.”

“Aw,” he smiled, low and slow, all teasing, “You wanna touch me, ‘Lura?”

She rolled her eyes so hard he snorted.

“You’re desperate at this point,” she accused, jamming her finger in his direction with an eye closed in examination, “Are you sure you can’t just ask him?”

“Ask him what? Ask him to rail me until I can’t walk? It’s kinda hard to do that if you haven’t noticed,” he groaned, running a hand through his hair. “Like, he has to know at this point considering how much I literally try to grind on him in bed together.”

Allura breathed out heavy, eyebrows twitching. “I don’t even get that part. You share a bed with the man and you can’t just jump him one day?”
Lance crossed his arms, “No. He has to come to me. I can literally barely read his mind beyond anything mood-related, I don’t want to have to… run away like a fifteen-year-old in the middle of the night when he rejects me for coming on too strong.”

Allura snorted and he groaned.

“Out! Of! The! Gutter! Please,” He punctuated each word with a jump of his pencil, “How did you even snag Romelle with this giggling school girl attitude of yours?”

The great expanse of soft brown skin across Allura’s cheeks went flushed, and she cleared her throat twice, which was completely unnecessary, before carrying on, “She just kissed me. After the bonfire.”

He grumbled. “Wow you get a kiss, and I get sacked with a night of no sleep from the amount of teasing I received.”

“Less details please.”

“That was the least amount of details I could give you.”

Allura’s nose crinkled in disgust and she rolled her eyes, but all the same shifted her chair closer so she could prop her elbows on the table he worked on, “Why can’t you just wear something skimpy? Bend over a couple times?”

“Live up to my ‘whore’ name?” he supplied, and she raised her eyebrows in response.

“You can’t tell me Keith wouldn’t love that.”

He jostled his shoulders in a half shrug, tapping the end of his pencil against the sheets of numbers, “I could try I guess, but he’s at this point already seen me in as little clothing as possible and not done anything.”

Sparkling light blue eyes narrowed, and matched with a sly smirk, “Well, what about nothing?”

Lance hummed, stroking his chin and making Allura laugh, but then leaned forward and tilted his head to the side. The bruises on his hips had definitely lightened over the days, bruises tended not to stay around long on his skin, but they still were soft and pressed long against his hips - the shadow of Keith’s hands and fingers. He wondered if, what, parading around naked with the shadows of these bruises faintly on his skin would actually do something. Keith had left him aching and wanting in their bed this morning, before the sun was even up, the faint traces of his hands and the disappearing space between their lips hanging in the lonely air like a promise, like Keith was giving him hope and teasing him at the same time.

“It might work,” he grinned, hiding his smile behind the palm he propped his elbow up from. “He does like looking at these… uh, marks he made. I think he does, at least.”

Allura pitched forward, eyes alight, “Marks?”

He pitched forward too but mimed locking his lips with a smirk - relishing in her pout. Those fingers on his hips, Keith’s hands bruising them in, that was his alone.

“Fine! Focus on your numbers, heathen,” She turned back, waving a hand behind her as a dismissal, “Or I will somehow make you answer all those questions you’re avoiding.”
He dropped his hand with a laugh and went right back to his numbers, scribbling through them quickly - as quickly as he could run through them. He was building a reputation for being fast at things, and the thoroughness did come at a fraction more time, but he made sure to look through each line of numbers and computing with as critical of an eye as he could - occasionally blindly reaching for a calculator to crunch in accordance with small mistakes. Idly, and very slowly, his pencil hesitated on the pages, lazily looping in the air as he drifted off, day-dreaming.

Keith had so easily flipped them earlier, with one deft leg and a swing of what easily was both of their combined weights as if it hadn’t bothered him at all. Lance couldn’t outright admit to not staring at Keith and his chest, his arms, his back - but since being at the compound, that extra muscle definition and strength had been peeking out like a glimmer of fucking sun on a cloudy day.

It did things to him, man, it really did. One moment he’s imagining, with pleasure, Keith punching Lotor’s lights out, and the next moment, he’s imagining the clench of those hands, the tension in his biceps, all smooth ivory skin with delicate veins and red rough flush over his knuckles, and with a different type of pleasure, he’s thinking about Keith’s hands on him, pushing against him, pulling him.

He breathed out slowly, ducking his face into his hands and abandoning his pencil to fold his hands forward onto the table and tuck his face into them. His heart was going a million beats a minute, hammering in his chest. He couldn’t stop thinking about Keith touching him, but even worse than that, he couldn’t stop thinking about Keith never touching him again. The very real implication of Keith going into this death trap mission with Lotor, with no backup, was sitting square on his chest, threatening to squeeze the breath out of him. Oh. This was panic, pure and simple, a tremble along his spine and up each finger.

“Allura?”

Allura’s voice was hazy, and he wasn’t all there to respond. A pressure surrounded him and he realized moments later that Allura’s arms looped around his back, as much as she could reach, and he breathed slower, for her sake, so he could stabilize and not break in front of the person who needed him to be the strongest he could right now. The last thing Allura needed was to feel the hope slipping away from him, he prided on himself being able to keep up that mask. When Marco broke his collarbone falling over the fence at the ranch, Lance cracked jokes until their mom could take him to the hospital. When Veronica got dumped by the first girl she ever had a crush on, Lance put french fries up his nose at the diner near their house, and she laughed so hard she cried happy tears instead. He spent every night alone before he met Keith, in the days after the world ended, and to cheer himself up, he remembered every stupid Vine and meme he could and recreated it for himself. Some nights he didn’t cry just because of those meme recreations.

He steeled himself, sucked in every tear that was threatening to come out, and pulled himself up - straightening in Allura’s arms until they fell away. He peeked at her with a weak smile, offering his side for her to slide into, and together, took a second to really relax against each other before he pulled back from her.

“All right, I’m okay,” he smiled.

Allura’s eyes still were wide, heavy with worry and a sense of panic herself. He waved her off back to her table, and she went slowly. Instead of getting too close to rethinking about everything, he poured right into the number sheets in front of him. He hummed, really dedicating and doubling down on working the numbers, keeping an eye on Allura as she slowly worked on the microscope.

He was halfway through the seventh sheet of numbers when the lab doors opened with a swish, a
soft one that barely made a sound. Allura’s head bobbed up first and she froze, and that’s when he whirled around.

Bandor stood in the doorway, his usually white lab coat spotted with deep red and brown blood splatters, a machete in one hand and wild eyes. Lance stood up so abruptly his stool toppled over, a hand out behind him to signal to Allura to keep sitting. Her breaths were already panicked and high.

He spoke calmly, striding forward to the younger man, his palms up and out, “Bandor… what is this?”

The boy shook his head violently and pointed with the knife, “Stop moving or I’ll kill you.”

He eased to a stop, hands still high, voice higher, “What is going on?”

It was then the sirens went off, the lab’s emergency lights rotating a deep red. It wasn’t their morning call, or the lights out beep, but a deep and loud alarm and the red of the lights washed the room in a circle, leaving them in the dark until the red swiped over them all over again. Bandor moved forward, Lance stood rooted. The boy maneuvered around him, knife trembling in his hands, until he shuffled by.

Allura grunted from behind him and Lance closed his eyes tightly and angrily. Fuck Lotor, fuck all of this. Of course, it was too good to be true. Slowly, Bandor pulled Allura ahead of him, back to the lab doors, with the machete dug into her back and her arms wrenched behind her. The young researcher was still gentle with her, the tip of his wicked knife never breaking skin and still hovering mostly above the small of her back.

Lance stepped forward, pleading, “Bandor, please. You know this isn’t right.”

Bandor’s face screwed up, all wide intense eyes and crackled emotion dotting swashes of red against the tops of his cheekbones. He was faltering, the hand on his knife sliding from sweat and his forehead crinkled.

Lance tried again, “You’ve known Allura all your life. She doesn’t deserve this. I know the compound might not be… what you hoped it would be, but we can fix this. Lotor’s way isn’t the only path. You know this is wrong.”

Bandor trembled, and Allura made a small sound of distress when the knife dug in. Bandor looked stricken immediately, loosening his grip on her arms and putting more space between them, as if Allura’s noise stung him.

Allura cast a glance behind her shoulder, pleading, “Bandor, why?”

He bit down on his lip so hard Lance was almost sure it would burst. His eyes were already half full with distressing tears, but the grip on his knife tightened.

“Allotor will kill her, will kill my sister if I don’t. We don’t have any hope if we don’t follow him.”

Allura shook her head, adamantly, “I will never let Lotor hurt her. We’re stronger than him. And we do, we do have hope, my father.”

Bandor’s gaze sharpened, and he practically yelled, all fury, “Your father did nothing for us. All the money in the world couldn’t save him. He’s nothing and Lotor has something.”
Allura twisted, a sharp sob bursting out of her mouth as the tip of the blade dug in more. Blood trickled down the back of her lab coat. Lance grit his teeth and stepped forward, voice as low and soothing as he could for the situation, “Bandor. You’re hurting her.”

Eyes flashed over to him, and Lance knew Bandor was lost. The blue in his eyes were a husk of a person, his loyalty devoted to Lotor giving way to mania. “Step closer and I kill her.”

Lance was fast, but not fast enough. He grabbed the pistol at his thigh just as Bandor tracked the movement and shoved the machete through Allura’s middle. She choked a scream, slumping forward and nearly out of Bandor’s hold, Bandor’s strength not quite pushing the blade through her but still deeply twisted in her body. Lance, in a single fluid motion, uncapped the safety and put a bullet in Bandor’s arm.

He shrieked, clutching his arm, and Allura, drenched in blood and choking out gasps of pain, slipped from his grasp. Lance took barely a few steps before she fell into his arms. Her blood soaked against his jacket and he immediately put a hand over the wound, applying pressure that had Allura sobbing into his chest. He leveled the gun at Bandor, the other man backing away with furious eyes, his knife still clutching in his uninjured arm.

“I’m sorry,” Lance said, and he fucking meant it. He was working on adrenaline, on protectiveness, because if he didn’t, he would break down. This was a man, this wasn’t a walker or scalper or bandit. Bandor was a boy, younger than him, intelligent, and whatever Lotor had done to him to think the way out was murdering them - it was despicable.

Bandor spat, “Lotor was right.” Blood trickled down his pale hands, sloshing onto the carpet. He didn’t bother to put pressure on the gunshot wound, and it echoed volumes of what Lotor had said to him. Kill Allura, anyone in the way, or die trying.

He hoisted his arm under Allura’s bottom, pulling her closer and higher up his body to carry her weight. His leg, still weak and in the last bits of recovery, buckled under the extra weight. She sobbed, shaking and limp, against his shoulder, her hair everywhere, tips bloody and trickling over them both. The siren was still blaring, and he barely could stand the idea of what carnage he would see if they stepped outside.

Bandor advanced on them like he knew Lance wouldn’t shoot him twice. He didn’t want to, he bit back the weak sob that was choking up his throat, Keith was going to kill him when he found out he couldn’t kill this kid. He shuffled back with Allura’s weight and used his gun-arm to elbow the pad of the lab doors, ducking through them backward and quickly overriding the disinfecting fans by smashing the opposite doors’ pad as well.

With both doors unlocked, he, as swift as he could, tracked out of the lab hallway, keeping Bandor at bay with his gun. The boy still advanced on them, his knife splattered with Allura’s blood.

“Stay with me,” Lance whispered to her, “Allura, stay awake. I know it hurts, you’re okay.”

She didn’t respond, barely stirring against him. The blood on his face was hers and tears were already flooding his eyes. Fuck.

He hissed as they spilled over, no hands to wipe the tracks that ran down his face. Bandor let out a howling laugh that reminded him so eerily of Lotor’s and used the show of weakness to step too close.

Lance unleashed a bullet at his feet, stopping the boy and putting more space between them. The shot was still a few feet from even touching Bandor, and the smirk it put on the other man’s face
chilled Lance to the bone. He was cracking under this pressure, feet shuffling against the lab hallway’s linoleum. There was a separate door to the front, barred by glass and unlocked. He’d rather risk that then go through the common room. He hoped everyone else was okay.

With a side kick, he shattered the glass of the doors, turning his back to the door as it shattered so the glass rained down on him instead of Allura, curled and passed out against his front, her blood still trickling against his hand. It gushed between his fingers in rivets of red warmth, and he felt sick.

With the glass panes shattered, he kicked the doors open and stepped into the compound yard, Converse scrambling against the gravel as Bandor followed them out, using the obstacle to close the gap between them again. Commotion happened towards the front doors, and he tracked toward it, hoping to fucking any god out there it was Shiro’s people.

Luck was not on his side. Narti and the remaining soldiers of Lotor’s unit were packing up the last of their vehicles with supplies - nearly all of them Lance was sure. The crates were numerous, and they had even taken radios and engines partially worked on - hooking them to a cart attached to the truck Romelle had been slaving over.

Romelle. The blonde woman was struggling against the hold of a soldier, hissing and yelling as they packed her truck, but she immediately froze when they came into view. Bandor was close, armed, and Lance had a gun on him.

She ripped away from the soldier, who let her go with a malicious grin, and stalked over, yelling, “Lance, what are you doing?!”

He grit his teeth, trying to keep his eyes on Bandor but still casting a glance to the other sibling, “Nothing much, just trying to survive this fucking mutiny.”

“She ripped away from the soldier, who let her go with a malicious grin, and stalked over, yelling, “Lance, what are you doing?!”

He grit his teeth, trying to keep his eyes on Bandor but still casting a glance to the other sibling, “Nothing much, just trying to survive this fucking mutiny.”

“Get your gun off of my brother.”

She was too close, and Bandor laughed, sweet, but Romelle still cast a glance at him with horror. Her eyes were suddenly wide as she took in her brother’s lab coat, soaked in blood from his arm and from Allura.

“I can’t,” Lance spat, “He’s trying to kill Allura.”

He turned, showing the slumped body over his opposite shoulder to Romelle. Her eyes went wide and horrified, stilling over the hand he had over Allura’s wound, the blood between his fingers and the tracks it made down to the gravel. Romelle paled, her hands unclenching and clenching again into fists by her side.


Bandor stubbornly stepped closer, regripping his machete and finally tucking his bleeding arm against his lab coat to still the rush, “Lotor has a plan, Romelle. We can finally live.”

Lance cut in, hissing, “Lotor’s ideas of luxurious apocalyptic living are a pipedream. Bandor, please, I don’t want to hurt you.”

He had to admit his gun was slack, now that Romelle was here he was living on a prayer that she would somehow talk her brother down from the brink. If he didn’t die by Lotor’s unit, which was slowly tracking closer now that the vehicle was packed, and they had noticed Lance’s gun trained on Bandor, Keith definitely was going to kill him. All the apocalypse they had survived together,
all of the ground they had covered, he never hesitated after that one instance with his first man killed. Still, the hardest part of all of this fucking mess was killing humans. And Bandor’s eyes reminded him of the kindness of Romelle’s.

Narti broke from her pack of soldiers and tracked around them in a threatening half-circle, mute but swinging her rifle forward menacingly. The distance between them and him was closing, and Romelle had quickly stepped forward to Lance’s other side, her arms skirring over Allura’s body in his arms. He tossed a look at her but then back to Lotor’s unit, tracking his eyes over the men and women. Easily seven soldiers at his right side, then Bandor in front and Narti skirring around them - he was severely, severely outnumbered, weighted down by Allura, and Romelle was unarmed.

Bandor’s eyes were narrow and full of intent, his mouth perpetually in a frown as Romelle shifted beside his side, near Allura. Romelle had chosen a side, her hands pressed close to the stab wound on Allura’s back. He rolled his shoulder and tried to slide out his second pistol, but with Allura’s limp weight he struggled and slipped on the holster.

One of the women barked a laugh at his feeble attempt, and in response, they fanned out around them, crowding the three of them back to the front fence. He knew Romelle’s back touched the chainlink when a soft metal sound rang out. They were fucked.

The front door of the compound rattled open with a slam, a faraway one, but the soldiers turned all the same. He could barely peek around them, but he saw the staggering figure of Kinkade, Pidge’s small body shooting like a rocket out ahead of him, his rifle in her hands, and -

“All get away from him!” She cried, broken and damp, and shot and fired. Her small body couldn’t handle the rifle, and Lance placed one hand on Romelle’s back and pushed them all down to the gravel. His hands barely stopped Allura from being scratched against the gravel, and she groaned loudly against him - the first sign of life from her yet. He felt like crying. The spray of bullets went ricocheting but still landed in the fronts of two of Lotor’s soldiers, sending them to their knees before their bodies hit the gravel, blood seeping quickly in pools. He scrambled back, pulling Allura with him.

Pidge screamed and he snapped his gaze back up. A large man, Bogh, snatched the teen up by the hood, disarming her and yanking her arms up. Behind them, Kinkade lay on the ground, one of Lotor’s men burying kick after kick into his stomach while he was down. Pidge cried out and Lance nearly shrieked, “Let her go!”

Bogh continued to hold Pidge back, and Narti had already slithered away from the two dead men of their unit to hiss at Lance and Romelle. He staggered to his feet, dragging Allura with him, his gun twisted in his grasp and tucked against Allura’s body so he could lift her. There was no way they were getting out now. The rest of Shiro’s unit was nowhere to be found, and Kinkade lay motionless on the gravel as Bogh directed his assaulters to start the truck. Lance wished the others were alright, biting back tears of frustration and bitter guilt.

Narti slid out a pistol long and gleaming from her coat, its cool metal a cut against the cloudy midday and the blare of the red lights, which continued to cut in rotation against them all. Romelle gripped his jacket tightly, breath punching out of her and he hated to admit that he was breathing just as hard when Narti leveled the gun at them. Her small figure, framed by the towering men and women beside her, blocked out all view of the compound as they closed in.

He wanted to sob and scream. Allura’s body was cooling against him, her breath almost nonexistent. Keith’s face bubbled in his mind, all soft and clean edges, the dampness of his hair when he looked down at him this morning, wrists pressed to the bed, legs tangled. Fuck he didn’t
even get to kiss him before he died. He sucked the tears in, grinding his jaw and facing Lotor’s unit with his head as high as he could.

Narti snarled low and wide, her pale lips stretched in a manic grin. Bandor, beside her, began a sniffling snort of laughter, hiding his own smile behind the sleeves of his lab coat, breathing in the mania of Lotor’s general like air. Just before he could squeeze his eyes shut, feel the bullet press through Allura, into him, out of him, a screeching metal crash ripped out from beyond them. The far fence toppled, just beyond the hill, with one of the Humvees the easy offender.

He didn’t fucking dare get hopeful. And was glad he didn’t, because Lotor stepped out of the Humvee, spotless, bloodless, wearing sunglasses against the gray mist and overcast like he was offended it wasn’t sunny on the day of his uprising. His suit was pressed, too clean, and Lance finally did let himself hope. If Keith… If Shiro, and the others, were left alive, they could make it back. They could track their way back to them, they could find a way, somehow they would. Keith wouldn’t leave him.

Then Axca, flanked by her fellow generals, stepped out of the Humvee, kicking away at the broken and torn fence with their steel-toed boots, and he could have vomited. He choked down bile. Axca, Ezor, but particularly Zethrid, were covered in blood. It ran thick on their arms and legs, but Zethrid was head-to-toe soaked in blood, deep red, the color fresh. On the top of the hill, walkers had already begun to pool and stumble down towards the compound, towards the broken gate, hearing too much noise and smelling so much blood.

While his soldiers cheered, Lotor looked at them, at Lance holding Allura and partially shielding Romelle, like the smug murderous bastard he was. God, he was going to be sick. He tugged his sunglasses back like a model, like this wasn’t life or death, like he had just vacationed on an island and sported a tan that Lance would be jealous of.

“Well,” Lotor grinned wide, “not so pretty now, aren’t we?”

He tracked the slump of Allura’s body with his eyes like he was drinking it in, relishing in her broken and bloody. Something flashed in them that made Lance shiver, Romelle’s grip on his jacket tightened. He couldn’t stop from being afraid. Lotor had probably…

He made a weak noise. Quiet and broken, but enough for Lotor to catch. His smile got impossibly wider then, pupils nearly were blown in pleasure, happiness, like he was bathing in endorphins and threatening to sink Lance under.

No. No.

“Yes,” he said, buttery smooth, “Oh yes, Lance. You look so beautiful broken like this. I wonder what look you’ll make…”

Lotor stepped closer, a hand reaching out, nearly grasping at Lance’s face. He took a deliberate and hard half step back, flattening himself to the chain-link fence and cornering himself further rather than to let Lotor touch him. Lotor’s pleasure turned to fury.

“I wonder what look you’ll make when I tell you I killed them.”

The tears fell.

“When I tell you Keith died without his sword in his hand. When I tell you I fed them to the dead when I tell you he never stopped screaming your name until it was over.”
They tracked hot and fast down his cheeks, cutting harder than he had ever cried against the blood on his face. His knees buckled under Allura’s weight, weak and frail, all his energy gone. All his life force sucked away in a single moment. His mouth wouldn’t work, the noise in his ears was fading in and out. Pidge was screaming, Romelle was begging. He couldn’t feel. He didn’t speak. Allura slipped on his shoulder, and through sheer subconscious alone, he straightened to carry her weight, his back digging into the fence.

Keith. Keith couldn’t be, he couldn’t be dead.

His voice broke when he said, “He’s not dead.”

And Lotor laughed. His stomach dropped when he held out a hand to Zethrid, the large woman stomping over depositing a black cloth scabbard into his hand wordlessly. It was stained with blood, ripped through in spots so the hilt stuck out, and he felt faint when Lotor slid out Keith’s katana, splattered with dripping crimson blood. His eyes unfocused at the sight. He was looking at Keith’s blood.

“Oh, oh, oh, that face - that’s delicious.”

Lotor’s hand did touch him this time, swiping a finger across his chin and tilting it up to face him. He couldn’t see through his tears, only the white of Lotor’s hair, only the deep and beckoning violet, the red of the blood on Keith’s sword. The cold metal of Narti’s gun reached out and pressed to his temple. Pidge was shrieking now, somewhere beyond him yet her body suddenly pressure against his side.

The gun pressed hard against his temple, digging it almost excruciatingly. Lotor laughed at his wince, laughed at his tears. But all the same, he pressed a hand to Narti’s and lowered her gun manually. He flicked his fingers over his shoulders to the men behind him and they stepped closer, the next words from his lips dropping his stomach to his gut,

“I want this one.” He grinned down at Lance, digging his nails into the flesh of his cheeks to turn his face this way and that, “I think I’d like to take him with us.”

Lance’s throat went impossibly dry. Romelle choked out a gasp, grabbing his jacket with tugs and hardened grip like she wanted to sink them back through the fence. He tried so hard not to tremble but did all the same. That implication was something he had been dealing with since shit hit the fan, and now it was catching up to him. And Keith wasn’t here with his Stetson and rifle to save him. His throat burned, and the tears down his face went impossibly hot, burning tracks against Lotor’s painful fingers. He didn’t dare fucking speak.

Narti made a clicking noise that sounded purely of disgust and Lotor flipped his eyes her way, like he was a second from striking her down where she stood. Axca immediately crossed over to cover Narti, her arms spread wide, “She’s asking why.”

Lotor sneered, “I already destroyed those brothers. Now I want to destroy everything they ever loved, and why shouldn’t I? They took my respect from me, I will take what I am owed from him.”

He flicked his wrist and sent Lance’s chin jerking down. His skin blazed where Lotor’s touch had been, and every molecule of his body was screaming at him to run. Pidge had quieted, and Romelle had stilled like a statue at his side. It made his trembling more prominent, and he wished it didn’t. Panic was flooding up his throat again, threatening to spill over. Fuck. He couldn’t flee, he’d have to take this, one way or another. Or they were all fucked.

His vision swam. A roar went up from his ears. He didn’t recognize the streak, the flash, until the
second Humvee was roaring and skidding into the compound yard. It scrambled the soldiers, people flying this way and that to get out of the way of the vehicle. Soldiers started the truck immediately, Axca’s orders, *a getaway vehicle*, and Lotor ripped away from him, Narti spinning too, to face the Humvee as it came to a precarious and dangerous drifting stop right in front of them - barely inches away.

Lance only made a sound - a pathetic but sharp intake of breath - when the front door was unceremoniously kicked open by a black combat boot, and Keith, flesh and blood, and *burning* with a rage he had never seen from him before, burst from the Humvee, eyes wild, hair ripping around him.

The tears only tripled, and Allura’s weight sagged on him further. He fisted all of Allura’s weight onto one shoulder again and gripped his pistol, cocking it quickly to level it against Lotor’s turned head. The sound made Lotor freeze, and the deadly smirk Keith sent him was *everything.*
They crested the hill, and when Keith looked down to the compound through the windshield, he thought he would be sick.

Both fences were down, and there were already a few walkers getting close enough to the yard. There were vehicles parked in the grass, some from the garage and Lotor's Humvee, which was down close to the fence.

Where people were standing.

Please, fuck, no, don’t let that be him, Keith felt his heart drop down into his stomach. He was still too far to see but—he could feel it in his chest. That was Lance. Lance was outside. The fence was down. Lotor was there.

Keith’s blood was boiling, his body trembling, from the rage that coursed through him.

He pushed the Humvee faster. It roared underneath him, flying down the concrete and smashing through the debris on the road. He didn’t have time. They didn’t have time. They were already behind Lotor, and when he beat them back to the compound—

The Humvee crested the last hill on the highway, and Keith jerked the wheel, manhandling the vehicle off onto the gravel road that led down to the compound.
“Fuck,” Keith growled, swerving to avoid the groups of bodies that suddenly appeared in their way.

There were walkers everywhere, bodies stumbling out of the trees and down the highway toward them. Keith swerved through the walkers, pressing onto the gas and maneuvering around the clumps of bodies.

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*Please, fuck, no, don’t let that be him,* Keith felt his heart drop down into his stomach. He was still too far to see but—he could feel it in his chest. That was Lance. Lance was outside. The fence was down. Lotor was there.

He clenched his jaw and pressed the Humvee forward faster, harder. He had to get there now.

The moments it took him to get down to the compound were some of the worst of his life.

Keith plowed the Humvee through the gaps in the fence and jumped on the brakes, and when he got close enough, he saw Lotor standing right in front of Lance, ripping his hand away from his jaw, like he’d just been touching him. Even from yards away, Keith could see the tears on Lance’s face.

And the blood.

Keith saw red.

The Humvee slid in the grass, just a few yards away from them, and Keith turned back to Adam, where he was still hovering over Shiro, and growled, “Stay in the Humvee. Don’t move.”

Then, he kicked the door open and jumped out.

The first thing he saw was Lotor and Lance’s surprised expressions. They were both shocked, like they were looking at a ghost, and white-hot fury flooded into Keith’s chest at the thought of Lotor coming back here like this, at the thought of him being close enough to touch Lance.

The next thing he saw was Allura, completely passed out in Lance’s arms, and then, Romelle and Pidge, who were cowering behind Lance, obviously terrified.

Then, he noticed the group of soldiers that had surrounded Lance and the others, effectively blocking them in and allowing Lotor to stay close so that they had no escape route. But as Keith looked around, cataloging the faces and planning to destroy them, they backed off, dissipating toward the vehicles that were still close to the garage to escape for themselves.

Lance was staring at him, mouth dropped open, blue eyes wide. He mouthed Keith’s name.

“Hello, Keith,” Lotor greeted, walking toward him, which put him a few extra steps away from Lance. He was holding Keith’s katana in his hands, and it was covered in blood from when he’d grabbed it from Keith back at the supply depot. He continued, eyebrows raised, “I wasn’t
expecting to see you again.”

Keith fisted his hands, trying to stay steady. He needed to figure out how to play this. He was outnumbered and unarmed.

It didn’t matter. He was going to end this. Now.

“Lotor,” it was one of his general’s voices, calling to him from across the yard, but Keith didn’t turn to look, unwilling to take his gaze away from him. “We need to leave.”

Lotor scoffed, “Before a final sendoff for our good friend here? No, I don’t think so, Axca.”

Keith glanced past Lotor, to where Lance was standing. He’d raised one of his pistols, but he was shaking now, and it was obvious he was struggling to stand with Allura’s weight on him too. The closer Keith looked, the more blood he saw and it just—terrified him. How much time did he have?

“Pity you couldn’t go the way I planned. I vowed to the be one to destroy you,” Lotor spoke to Keith now, turning his katana and gripping it in his hands. “Maybe I will make good on my word before we leave,”

“It’s funny,” Keith growled, taking a step closer. He didn’t even have a weapon, but the burning rage in his chest was more than enough. It was sharper than any sword and more accurate than any gun. “I did the same thing.”

There was a moment that passed between them, and Keith knew he needed to move. Lance was covered in blood. The walkers were no doubt making their way to the fence by now. A standoff was something that they couldn’t afford.

Behind him, there were people yelling, presumably Lotor’s other soldiers. One truck—Romelle’s—had already fled the compound, and he could hear Axca barking orders to the other soldiers, prepping the next getaway vehicles. Lotor would have a decision to make soon.

“You should know,” Lotor sneered, “that I am taking your whore with me. I plan to make excellent use of him.”

Keith was shaking. His voice was dark when he said, “Do you remember what I said would happen if you ever looked at him again?”

Lotor’s sneer curled, but there was a flash of worry in his eyes before it disappeared again.

Keith glanced over his shoulder to Lance, where he was standing at the fence, gun on Lotor’s head, holding Allura up. He was shaking, Keith could see it from here.

Then, Lance pulled the trigger.

The shot exploded into the air around them, and Keith was moving, but so was Lotor’s other general, Narti. She must have seen Lance aim a few seconds beforehand because she dived for Lotor, knocking him to the side so that the bullet only grazed his head.

Keith dived for Lotor too, and he grabbed his katana by the blade and yanked. The blade cut his hand, but he didn’t register it. Lotor twisted, but didn’t let go, and they fell to the ground, rolling over the grass.

“What happened to your dear brother, Lieutenant? I was sorry to have to leave before the finale,” Lotor laughed, swiping Keith’s katana up between them. The blade caught him in the side, cutting
through his shirt and stinging his skin. It was enough to burn, enough to probably need stitches, but he wouldn’t bleed to death.

The pain was no match for the anger.

Keith couldn’t think of an insult or promise violent enough for him. Instead of answering, he rolled again, knocking his katana out of Lotor’s hands and pinning him.

“Fuck you,” Keith spit, using one hand to grab Lotor’s throat and the other to punch him. Hard. Repeatedly.

His knuckles were bleeding, busted, and Lotor’s nose was definitely broken from his fist, but before Keith could readjust and get both of his hands on Lotor’s neck to finish it, a set of hands grabbed his shoulders and yanked him off.

Keith scrambled, watching Lotor roll to his feet and stagger. Keith reached out over the grass and grabbed the handle of his katana, rolling up to his feet and swinging the blade in the same motion. It took off the soldier’s head, whoever it had been, and Keith whipped back around, spinning for Lotor.

The next shot surprised him, and Keith watched as Lotor grabbed Narti and ducked behind her, using her body as a human shield while she took the headshot that was meant for him.

His gaze found Lance immediately, who was lowering the gun, struggling to keep Allura up at the same time. Romelle and Pidge were behind him, still in the gravel, unable to move.

“Narti!”

The scream came from somewhere behind Keith, and he thought he recognized Axca’s voice.

When he turned back to find Lotor, it was to see him shoving Narti’s body to the ground, blood pouring from the wound so fatal her body wouldn’t even reanimate into one of the dead.

Keith launched himself at Lotor, swinging his katana and aiming for Lotor’s neck. He was going to see Lotor’s head roll or else.

Lotor ducked, and the next bullet from Lance’s pistol ripped through Lotor’s shoulder. Not fatal, but enough for it to slow him down. He yelled, and Keith used the moment to press forward and attack.

He got in one strike to Lotor’s face, but before he could press forward, the roar of an accelerating engine pierced his ears and then there was another scream, except this time, it was very familiar to him.

“Keith! Move!”

Keith moved on instinct. Lance’s voice—it wasn’t often that he heard Lance like this, giving him orders without room for argument, but it was always something he had a visceral reaction to.

He rolled out of the way just in time for Axca’s Humvee to tear in between him and Lotor. Ezor was hanging from the side of the Humvee, rifle in hand, and she growled at Keith, pressing down on the trigger and raining bullets in his direction.

He hit the ground and only looked up when the gunfire stopped.
It didn’t stop for long. On the other side of the Humvee, Zethrid was grabbing Lotor and pulling him into the Humvee. Axca slung the door open and was about to jump down to the ground, eyes set on Narti’s body.

“Leave it!” Lotor ordered as he was hoisted up into the Humvee. “Ezor, kill them all!”

But Ezor didn’t aim the rifle back at him, and instead, Keith watched in horror as Ezor grinned, turned around, and aimed toward the spot at the chain link fence, to the spot where Keith’s entire world was standing with one pistol and their injured friends.

“NO!” Keith screamed, and Ezor laughed as she pulled the trigger.

Lance hit the ground, arms around Allura and Pidge, still in front of Romelle, throwing his body over them as the bullets rained. He didn’t move again, and Keith’s chest filled with terror.

No, no, no, DO SOMETHING! Keith was frantic, and he spun, looking back to the body of the soldier he’d decapitated. There.

He raced for it, shuffling his katana to his left hand, grabbing the handgun from the dead body’s holster with his right, and aiming for Ezor. He pulled the trigger, and the next second, Lotor’s general roared in pain, blood spraying from the wound in her chest.

It was enough to turn the attention back on him, but when he looked past the Humvee, a sea of walkers was flooding into the open fence.

“Axca!” Lotor yelled, voice desperate. “Get the boy!”

Keith fired again, because there was no was in hell that they were taking Lance. He’d die before that happened. This time, the bullet caught Axca in the arm from where she was sitting behind the wheel of the Humvee.

She didn’t reply, but there was a second where her gaze hung on Keith. Her eyes were narrowed, but there was something in them that he couldn’t read, something that made him hesitate.

But she was with Lotor. She’d made her allegiance clear enough.

He pulled the trigger again.

She ducked away, avoiding the deadly headshot, and hit the gas on the Humvee, and the tires ripped through the grass as they tore away. Lotor was leaning out of the window, glaring at them, as they tore through the open fence and left the compound. Two more vehicles followed them out, tearing through the groups of walkers that were entering the compound, drawn in by the blood and noise.

Keith ran.

He thought he was screaming. Lance wasn’t moving.

When he got to the fence, he dropped the handgun and his katana and slid down into the gravel, hands grabbing at Lance’s shoulders roughly and turning him over.

Lance moved then, blinking up at him, and Keith hauled both him and Allura up into his arms and to their feet. Allura was dead weight against them, head rolling over onto Lance’s shoulder.

“Keith, oh my god, Keith—”
“Fuck,” Keith cursed, hands clutching Lance, looking him over. “Where are you hurt?”

There were tears running down Lance’s face, cutting through the blood that was just—it was everywhere. How was he still standing if he’d lost this much blood?

“I’m fine, but Allura—”

He looked closer at Allura then, saw the blood seeping out from underneath the hand that Lance had pressed to her wound. It was—was she even still alive?

“Keith!” it was Pidge this time, shouting, and when he looked down to her, she was pointing behind them.

He twisted, saw the group of walkers that were approaching.

“Goddamn it, Romelle, Pidge, get up,” he barked, grabbing his previously forgotten weapons from the ground and stepping forward in front of them.

There were too many of them to fight, Keith knew it. The walkers were still flooding into the compound from where the fence was down, but if Keith could get them to the Humvee, then they could get up to the building. Surely there was somewhere inside that was still safe, somewhere they could take Shiro and Allura—

“Oh, listen up,” Keith said, tucking the handgun into his waistband. He didn’t have time to soften his voice. He’d have to apologize later. “Romelle, get on Lance’s side and help him carry Allura. Don’t fucking move either. Pidge, you stay right behind them. Don’t run. If things get messy, we’ve got to stay in a group until I say otherwise.”

Lance struggled to pass some of Allura’s weight over to Romelle and keep his hand pressed to the wound. There was already so much blood, and Allura’s skin was so, so pale.

Pidge nodded, and there were frustrated tears in her eyes. Later. Keith would have to deal with that later.

The walkers stumbled toward them. The bodies were flooding the compound yard, and if they couldn’t get up to the compound fast enough, they’d have no choice but to leave in the Humvee. If that happened, there wouldn’t be any hope for Shiro or Allura.

“We’re moving directly for the Humvee,” Keith said, looking over the three of them. Lance’s face was serious. “Stay on my ass.”

They moved, starting at a jog. Lance and Romelle carried Allura between them, trying to stop the bleeding as much as possible, and Pidge followed behind them.

The first wave of walkers had already reached the Humvee and were surrounding it, and Keith ran forward, clearing the group with his katana as quickly as he could. He grabbed the doors to the back and hauled them open.

“Pidge!” he shouted, taking up the opposite side of the Humvee and kicking back one of the first walkers before cutting down three more. “Get them into the Humvee!”

She jogged ahead of them and hopped up into the Humvee, “Oh my god, Shiro!”

Keith didn’t have time to explain anything. He slashed and kicked at the walkers that were starting to overwhelm the Humvee, and out of the corner of his eye, he watched as Pidge and Romelle
helped get Lance and Allura into the Humvee.

“Keith!” Pidge shouted again.

He kicked another walker away and retreated, jumping up into the Humvee and slamming the doors behind him.

Lance and Romelle had spread Allura out into the floorboard of the Humvee next to Shiro, desperately pressing their hands to the wound in hopes of stopping the bleeding. Adam was still crouching beside Shiro, holding onto the blood-soaked cloth that they’d used to cover his arm. He was still unresponsive. He didn’t even look up at anyone else, not even when Lance murmured his name.

Lance looked up at him when Keith climbed over them, heading toward the wheel. His voice shook when he said, “Keith.”

This was bad. This was really bad.

Outside the Humvee’s windshield, the compound was being completely overrun by walkers. Most of the bodies were headed in their direction, and if they weren’t careful, they would get stranded in a sea of bodies without any supplies or help.

“I’ve got this,” he said, both to himself and the others, to Lance mostly. He threw himself into the front seat, grabbing the sheath for his katana and shoving the weapon down into it and then over his back. He cranked the engine, pumping the gas and turning the wheel to avoid some of the walkers. “You keep Allura alive. Pidge, get up here and help me.”

Pidge climbed up the front seat, clothes soaked in blood from both Lance and Allura. She was shaking, but her expression was more determined than he’d seen before.

Keith nodded to her, “When you’re driving like this, you can’t just plow over the bodies like the movies. You have to do your best to avoid them because if you hit any and they get stuck underneath the car, then you won’t be going anywhere either. When you get trapped in a car, it’s game over.”

“Why are you telling me this?” she asked.

“Because you’re about to drive us.”

Her eyes widened, and she shook her head, “No, Keith, I can’t—I didn’t even have my learner’s permit!”

“Doesn’t matter,” Keith said, swerving to avoid some of the larger groups of walkers. He looked out of the mirror to see that they’d left most of the big groups behind and were close enough to the building now to have a few seconds left to get inside before they were overwhelmed.

He headed straight for the body that was laying in the grass up ahead. He needed to at least check because—they couldn’t afford to leave anyone behind, not if there was a chance.

“But I can’t—” Pidge started.

Keith nodded to her, “Yes you can. You have to. When I say so, you get in this seat and put your foot on the gas. I’m going to jump out and you’ll circle around me so I can get back in. Then, we’ll haul ass up to the garage.”
“But where are you going?”

He nodded forward and stopped the Humvee a few feet from the body. He threw open his door and jumped down, “Drive, Pidge!”

He circled back behind the Humvee and sprinted forward as Pidge plowed forward. She pulled the Humvee around in the circle so that the passenger door faced him, and when Keith slid down into the grass and turned the body over, a set of dark brown eyes looked back up at him.

“Kinkade,” Keith said, shaking him. “Were you bit?”

Kinkade shook his head, dizzily, blinking, “Arm’s broken.”

“Sorry about this then.”

Kinkade shouted as Keith grabbed his arms and pulled him over his shoulder, staggering to his feet. Pidge was watching, thankfully, and she had thrown the door open to the passenger side and was waiting for him.

Keith dodged a walker and pushed Kinkade into the Humvee, slamming the door and drawing his katana. He climbed up on top of the side of the Humvee and held on to the door, slashing the walker back.

“Go, Pidge!” Keith shouted the order through the open window.

She gassed it, and they lurched forward. Keith spun to look behind them, saw the walkers still pouring into the compound and stumbling through the yard. Artax’s stable was by the garage, and he’d have to get down there soon before—

There was no time to think about it.

“Where are the others?” Keith shouted the question to Kinkade over the roar of the Humvee.

“Gunned down inside by Lotor’s soldiers,” Kinkade winced, adjusting his arm. “They were pinned in one of the hallways. I don’t know if they made it out.”

“And Coran?” Keith asked.

Kinkade shook his head. “Haven’t seen him.”

Keith nodded to himself. If they were going to help Allura and Shiro, then they needed to get inside, to the infirmary, and barricade the doors. They desperately needed to find Coran because even though Lance was good at first aid, the more help they had, they better off they’d be. Keith also needed to round up anyone left, clear the inside of bodies before any walkers came back, deal with the fence and—

Keith shook himself. First things first. They needed to get somewhere safe and help Allura and Shiro. That was the top priority right now.

“Pidge, get us as close to the door of the common room as you can,” Keith ordered. “Was the common room breached or is everything intact?”

Kinkade shook his head, “It should be fine as long as none of the glass is cracked, but it might not hold if all the corpses pile up here. We need to move farther inside.”

“If Lotor’s soldiers killed anyone earlier, we’ll have bodies on the inside already so we’ll have to
watch our backs. We’ll move straight to the infirmary and try to find Coran,” Keith planned, talking mostly to Pidge and Kinkade. “Once we get a safe zone established and get some help for Allura and Shiro, we’ll search for others.”

“10-4, Lieutenant,” Kinkade said with a nod.

Keith stopped for a second, but he didn’t have time to argue about the ranking. Later.

Pidge was nodding too, and she pulled the Humvee up to the common room doors. Keith jumped down and raced to the back, yanking the doors open. Kinkade appeared at his side, moving back to stand guard against the approaching walkers.

Lance was already talking, urging Romelle and Pidge to help him move Allura. He kept his hands pressed to the wound on her back and scrambled toward the doors, and Keith grabbed him by the middle and dragged them forward, sitting him on the ground and helping situate Allura into his and Romelle’s arms.

“Kinkade,” Keith ordered, “get them inside and stand guard. Adam and I are going to get Shiro. Pidge, go with Lance.”

“Keith,” Lance argued, “are you sure—”

“I got it,” he assured him. “Get inside. Wait on us.”

They moved, even though Lance looked like he wanted to argue more. They didn’t have the chance, and Kinkade helped move them into the common room.

“Adam,” Keith snapped, voice rough. He jumped up into the Humvee and put an arm underneath Shiro’s legs and neck. He started moving, pulling Shiro forward, and Adam looked up at him, eyes cloudy, face covered in blood.

“He’s still breathing,” Adam’s voice was hoarse from screaming.

“We have to move him inside, so I need you to help me.”

“Okay.”

When he didn’t move, Keith jerked Shiro forward and growled, “Adam. Now or we’re going to die.”

It was enough to get him moving. He scrambled forward and pulled Shiro with him, holding onto the cloth at his arm.

Keith got Shiro and Adam out of the Humvee, and the walkers were approaching quickly. It would only be a few more seconds before they were overwhelmed.

They put Shiro’s feet on the ground, and Keith grabbed his good arm and looped it around his neck, gripping Shiro’s side. He was heavy and all dead weight against him, but Adam couldn’t let go of the rag, which was the only thing clotting the wound.

Keith pulled them forward by sheer will power.

They barely made it. Kinkade was at the door waiting, and once they were stumbling in through the doors, the first wave of walkers hit the glass. The bodies smeared blood and gore against the glass, and it shuddered with the weight.
Everyone was looking at him when he turned around, and Keith shoved his panic way, way down. He needed to focus. They were inside. Now, they needed to find a space to barricade themselves so they could take care of Shiro and Allura.

“Okay,” Keith said, breathing heavily. His legs were trembling. Shiro was so heavy but—they had to move. “We’ve got to get to the infirmary. We need to watch out for walkers in case the building has already been breached or if anyone inside has turned.”

No one replied. When Keith looked over them, the expressions he saw were varied, but all were terrified. Everyone was covered in blood, and most of them were fighting back tears anyway.

Keith wished he could carry all of them but—he had his hands full already.

“Alright,” Keith tried again, shouldering Shiro, who was still completely unresponsive. “Let’s move. Kinkade, you lead, and I’m right behind you. Lance, Allura, and Romelle next, and Pidge, you keep an eye on our backs.”

“Okay,” Pidge said, voice a little stronger. Keith smiled a little.

Kinkade nodded too, moving in front of them. Keith turned back to look at Lance, and he glanced back up at him, blue eyes wide, worried.

They moved through the compound halls slowly. It was oddly silent, and the electricity had been turned off, so the only light was from the backup lighting system that kicks on with the generator in an emergency. Someone would have had to physically disable the alarm that would have been triggered in an emergency like that though, so that meant someone was still alive somewhere. The tungsten lights at the top of the halls cast an orange hue onto the concrete bricks, and the atmosphere was so different from the normal and safe hallways that even Keith felt on edge.

Luck was on their side. They didn’t encounter any walkers in the hallways, but when they got close to the lab, Keith winced.

Blood was smeared and spattered along the walls. It was everywhere, and there were bullet holes embedded in the concrete walls and even some in the glass that had been protecting the lab.

The doors were busted, completely shattered, and the scanner was broken too, like it’d been shot with a gun. Glass covered the floor and crunched underneath their boots as they moved forward.

Keith looked inside the lab as they passed and wished he hadn’t.

Bodies of the people who had been working in the lab earlier today littered the floor, and blood pooled and ran over the floor, walls, furniture, and lab equipment.

Whatever happened here had been a massacre. Keith tried not to think about it.

“C’mon,” Keith urged them forward, trying not to think of how much longer they had before these bodies turned and they had to watch their friends stumble around as walkers, intent on devouring them. “We’re almost there.”

They pressed forward. The compound halls echoed around them as they moved forward.

Finally, they turned the last corner and trudged down the hall to the infirmary. Kinkade ducked inside first, nodding to Keith as they hesitated in the hallway. A few seconds later, he called, “All clear.”
Keith hurried inside, dragging Shiro over to one of the hospital beds and dropping him down onto it. Adam readjusted too, holding up what was left of Shiro’s arm and hovering close to the bed. The back of his head was still caked with blood, but they’d have to worry about it later.

Lance moved Allura to the bed beside Shiro and set her down onto her stomach so that the stab wound on her lower back was facing up. Her clothes were already soaked in blood.

“Romelle, keep your hands pressed to the wound,” Lance said, ordered really, as he yanked off his jacket. He crossed the room and started pulling materials from the cabinets, bandages and tape for the wounds. He washed his hands, and when he turned back around, his face was serious.

“Okay, we’re going to have to do the best we can with what we have,” Lance started, talking fast. “Pidge, wash up. We’ve got to bandage Shiro’s arm before he loses anymore blood. Adam has kept pressure on the wound, but we’ll have to check for signs of infection before we bandage it.”

“And Allura?”

Lance hesitated, but he came back over to the hospital bed and started frantically cleaning the wound on Allura’s lower back. “She’s going to need a blood transfusion. Shiro too probably but...”

“What do you need?” Keith asked, anxious now. He’d gotten them here but—he didn’t know enough about this to be of any help.

“We need Coran and Matt, if you can find them. Now.”

Keith nodded, “I’ll find them.”

“We need to get to the lab and take care of the bodies before they cause more problems,” Kinkade said.

Keith glanced around the room. Lance and Romelle were hovering over Allura’s body, tugging at her clothes and trying to smear away the blood that was all over her skin.

Lance was right. They needed Coran and Matt. Now.

“Okay,” Keith said, “Kinkade and I are going to find Coran and Matt. Pidge, lock the door. Don’t let anyone in unless it’s us. We don’t know who’s left here and what’s even happening. If the building has been breached, it won’t be long before the halls are overrun.”

Pidge was staring at him, eyes wide, as she frantically washed her hands.

“Lance,” Keith said because he needed to know that they were listening. They’d made it here, were safe here for a while, but they couldn’t jeopardize it. “Do you understand? No one comes in unless it’s me or Kinkade.”

“Keith, we need Coran now.”

“Do you understand me?”

“Yes!” Lance said, nodding frantically. “I hear you! Please just—please come back.”

“I will,” Keith promised, voice dark. The anxiety was dissipating, turning back into abject rage at the thought of what had happened to the compound, what Lotor had done. He wouldn’t let them lose Allura or Shiro. Not them, and not now.

Kinkade was already standing at the door, arm clutched awkwardly at his side, but handgun out
and loaded. He was leaning out, looking down the window, and he nodded to Keith once before opening the door and slipping out.

He took one last look at Lance, who was too busy to look back at him, and followed Kinkade out into the dark hallway.

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The dark hallways of the compound were eerie and quiet, cast in the orange light from the emergency backup systems.

Keith and Kinkade ran through them without checking up.

They made it to the lab within just a few moments, and Keith stepped inside, pulling his katana from the sheath on his back. He clenched his jaw and tried not to look at the blood that smeared the walls and covered the floors. Bodies littered the floor, all still. For now.

Keith approached the first. It was face down, and whoever it had been, their white lab coat was stained red from how much blood they’d lost from the three rounds that Lotor’s murderer had left in their back.

He shoved his blade through the body’s head, fighting the rage and sadness in his chest.

Kinkade helped him. They moved through the lab, destroying the brains of the bodies so they wouldn’t come back later. They were quiet, somber, while they worked. Later, there would be time for them to mourn, to catalog these bodies and find out who had fallen victim to Lotor’s attack, but for now, all they could do was end it before they turned.

12 bodies. 12 people.

Keith took a shaky breath when they were finished, and Kinkade nodded to him, eyes wide, and tucked the knife he was using into his belt.

“Coran should have been close to the lab,” Keith started, shaking the gore from his katana, “but we’ll have to search the whole compound if we don’t find him here.”

Kinkade nodded again, and they worked their way through the main section of the lab, checking offices, closets, and the other rooms.

No signs of Coran or Matt.

They moved back out into the hallway, searching room by room. They found a few more bodies as they went. Since the lab was so large and so many civilians spent their time in this section of the compound, it wasn’t a surprise to Keith that there were more bodies here.

When Keith and Kinkade turned the corner down another hallway, there was a distinct shuffling noise from the supply closet ahead.

Keith glanced over to Kinkade, and the noise stopped.

They moved on the door. Kinkade pressed in close, getting a hand on the doorknob and leaning into open it. Keith stood back with his katana, ready for the body that must have already turned.

Kinkade threw the door open, and before Keith could move forward, there was a sharp yell, and a broomstick handle thrust up against his sword.
“Not so fast, Gentlemen!”

It was dark enough in the closet that Keith couldn’t see, but then there was another voice.

“Wait, Keith!”

He blinked, and when his eyes adjusted, he saw Coran standing in front of him, holding up a broom as a weapon. He was covered in blood splatter, and his eyes were wide, wild. He blinked too, like he was seeing something that wasn’t real.

Keith pulled his katana back, “Coran, thank god. Have you seen Matt?”

“Right here, Keith,” the other voice said, and Matt appeared at Coran’s side. He was holding a hand to his middle, where a thick bandage was soaked with blood, but they were both standing.

He couldn’t believe he’d gotten this lucky. He nodded and sheathed his katana, “We need you in the infirmary now. It’s Allura and Shiro.”

Coran frowned immediately and stepped into the hallway, dropping the broom back into the closet. “What happened?”

Keith nodded toward Kinkade, and they started moving toward the infirmary, breaking into a jog.

He explained as they went, “Allura was stabbed, and she needs a blood transfusion. Shiro lost his arm. Lance is doing the best he can but—”

Coran’s expression was serious, “I see. And the state of the compound?”

“No idea yet,” Keith admitted. “You were the first part of the plan.”

“Keith, have you seen Pidge?” Matt asked, voice desperate. “I lost her when Lotor’s soldiers turned on us.”

“She’s in the infirmary with Lance, and she’s okay,” Keith assured him. “But it’s—I don’t know how much longer we have before the compound is breached.”

“I suspect—”

Coran was interrupted when they turned the corner and ran right into the barrels of three rifles.

Keith pulled his katana from his back and shoved his way to the front of the group, even with Kinkade, and knocked the rifle barrels aside before even bothering to look at the faces of their attackers.

“Whoa, whoa!” It was Nadia’s voice, and when Keith looked up, she was in front of them, dropping her rifle and holding her hands up. Griffin and Ina were at her sides, and even though they were ragged, they were alive.

“Holy shit, Kinkade,” Griffin said, eyes wide, “we thought you were fucking dead.”

“I did too,” Kinkade replied, nodding back to Keith.

“Glad to see you guys,” Keith said because wow, this was the most convenient thing to happen to him ever. But they didn’t have time to catch up right now. “But we need to fucking move. We need Coran and Matt in the infirmary now. Tell me what’s happening on the way.”
They all moved down the hall in a tight group. They didn’t run into any trouble on the way back, and Nadia explained how they had been pinned by some of Lotor’s soldiers and gunned down to prevent them from helping any of the civilians or stopping the raid on the supplies.

They weren’t sure if there were any other survivors, but all the soldiers that hadn’t gone to Lotor’s side were supposed to be on lockdown in the barracks since Ina had triggered the emergency system.

Keith nodded to himself. If they still had some of the foot soldiers here and ready to fight, then they might have a chance to contain this mess before it got out of control.

Finally, they arrived back at the infirmary door, and Kinkade knocked frantically. A second later, Pidge was there, opening the door, scanning her eyes over them and tearing up when she saw Matt and rushing into his arms.

Coran rushed forward into the room, and Keith followed him.

Nothing had changed since they’d left, thankfully. Romelle and Lance were still leaning over Allura, and Adam was standing at Shiro’s side, though he wasn’t holding the same blood soaked rag anymore. The wound was already bandaged, and Adam was just standing at his side, staring down at him.

Lance looked up at them as they entered, and he nodded, “Oh thank god, Coran, help me.”

“Tell me what’s wrong,” Coran stopped to wash his hands, and Lance gestured down to Allura and the bandages on her back.

“I’m trying to stop the bleeding, and I think it’s clotting finally, but her pulse is slow. I think she needs a transfusion, but I don’t know her blood type or the password for the vault or how to even —” Lance rushed, and Romelle set a hand on his shoulder to comfort him.

“And Shiro?” Coran asked.

“I didn’t know what to do,” Lance admitted, voice shaking. “I just—cleaned the wound as best as I could and put bandages and tape on it. He’s still breathing for now, but I didn’t know what to do.”

Coran nodded and rushed to Allura’s side, reaching down to check her pulse. He looked up to Lance and nodded again, “That’s very good, my boy. That’s all we’ll be able to do for Shiro for right now, but you’re right about Allura. We can do a transfusion and start an IV, and as long as her pulse stays even, we can stitch up the wound. You’ve saved their lives, I’m sure.”

“I don’t know about that,” Lance said, voice low.

Keith sighed, pressing a hand to his forehead. Another thing finished. Coran and Matt were here, and they would help Lance, Pidge, and Romelle take care of everyone else.

Next step on the list then.

Keith turned back around to face Kinkade, Griffin, Ina, and Nadia. The five of them were the only soldiers left in the unit, and unless they could get to the barracks to retrieve the other soldiers and find out what happened to the rest of the civilians, they were on their own. Five of them against hundreds of walkers outside.

“Okay, listen up,” Keith started, voice heavy. “We need to establish an inside perimeter and figure out if the compound has been breached before we get trapped here. Griffin and Kinkade, you guys
take the east side of the compound, Nadia and Ina will take the west side. If there has been a
breach, then do the best you can. Meet back here in 15.”

“Where are you going?” Nadia asked, frowning.

“I need to check the common room to see if the glass is holding,” Keith said. “If those doors break,
then we’ll have to figure out a barrier to keep those bodies back from flooding directly into the
compound.”

They all shook their heads at him, and when none of them moved, Keith cleared his throat and
said, “Dismissed. Meet in 15.”

Kinkade nodded along with the others, and they paired off, taking to the hallways and
disappearing.

“Matt,” Keith called, shuffling his katana onto his back. “Keep watch. No one comes inside unless
it’s us.”

“Okay, Keith,” Matt agreed.

Keith glanced past him, to where Lance was still standing over Allura and helping Coran. He said,
“I’ll be back in a minute.”

Keith sprinted to the common room, sliding down the hallways on his boots, uncaring if he was
met with any walkers. When he burst in through the first set of doors, he was greeted with a
disturbing sight.

The bodies had almost doubled in the short amount of time they’d been inside. Walkers were
pressed up to the class, clawing at the doors, screeching to get inside. The glass was smeared with
blood and gore, but there weren’t any cracks. For now, it was holding.

Keith wondered how long it would last.

Instead of staying to watch this mess unfold, he jumped over the counter to the kitchen and
frowned. There was bright red blood on the ground, smeared into streaks like something had been
dragged through it.

He followed it. He turned the corner into the back storage room, eyes following the blood trail on
the floor.

The walker surprised him. It grabbed him as soon as he’d walked through the doorway, hands
reaching for his chest, teeth snapping. Its torso was littered with bullet holes, and its face was tinted
gray, eyes bulging and black.

Keith stumbled backward, grabbing it by the shoulders and shoving it away from him. His back hit
the wall, and the walker was on him again before he could grab his sword. Keith had it by the
shoulder, desperately trying to keep enough space between them.

When his hand slipped and the walker lunged forward, Keith remembered the handgun in his
waistband.

He dodged away and yanked the gun out, flicking off the safety and pulling the trigger before the
walker had even turned back around.

The body collapsed to the already blood soaked floor.
Keith tried to catch his breath. He tucked the gun back into his waistband and looked around the room, unsurprised at what he’d walked into.

The kitchen and storage room had obviously been sacked by Lotor’s group. They’d taken all the ration crates and water, and the only things left were a few empty boxes. There was some food and water bottles scattered across the floor, like they’d been dropped in the thief’s haste to flee the room with everything they could.

Keith grabbed one of the empty wooden crates and started tossing bottles of water into it. He grabbed as many as he was close to, probably about a dozen, before shuffling through what food had been scattered.

Sure, one of the reasons he’d elected himself to go to the common room was to check on the glass. He’d been right when he said that they would be fucked if they didn’t figure out another barrier if the glass did break. But, the more important reason was these supplies.

If the interior of the compound was overrun and they did get stuck in the infirmary without a way out, then they wouldn’t make it very long without any food or water. Sure, the compound reserve was still on for now, but it wouldn’t stay on long without the main electricity being shut off. Plus, they still didn’t know who was in the compound and where their allegiances lied. If Lotor came back or if any of his soldiers were still here, then they needed to be prepared to wait them out.

Keith was sure that this day was going to get worse before it got better.

Once the box was full, Keith was already running out of time. He’d grabbed as much stuff as he could fit, and it would probably be enough for their small group for a few days, in case they did get trapped in the infirmary.

He grabbed the crate and hauled ass back.

He was the last one. Griffin was standing outside with his rifle, keeping watch, and Keith nodded to him as they ducked back inside and closed the door.

“Update me on what’s happening,” Keith said, setting the crate down onto the floor.

“East side is clear of breaches, but there’s blood and tracks down by the library and other admin offices where we appointed soldiers to stand watch this morning,” Griffin explained. “We didn’t see bodies, but we closed off the gates and secured the interior. We checked all the rooms on this side and sealed them off as well. The hallways on that side should be clear now.”

Keith nodded, “Nadia?”

“West side is clear too, but there’s a barrier right before the barracks made out of furniture that the foot soldiers must have constructed as a last minute tactic to shut themselves off,” she said. “We didn’t dismantle it or order them to come out, but we pulled all of the other interior gates and doors that lead down to civilian quarters. If anyone is alive on the other side, they’ll be trapped.”

“Hopefully not for long,” Keith said, nodding again. This was good. “The common room is holding, but I found a body in the kitchen, and it’d already turned. I took care of it. Later, we’ll have to establish how many bodies we found and if we’re still missing any, but for now, be careful out in the hallways until we can do a full search and see who’s missing.”

“Adam gave his schedule to me this morning, so we can check it then,” Nadia said.

“Okay, good. This is base for now until we get the perimeter outside secured,” Keith said.
“We’re going outside?” Griffin asked, adjusting his rifle on his shoulder.

Keith nodded, “The longer we wait, the more walkers there will be.”

“There will be hundreds by now,” Ina said, voice quiet.

“Right,” Keith agreed. “Get me a marker or something.”

There was a pause, and Nadia moved across the infirmary toward the counter, grabbing a black Sharpie and tossing it to Keith.

It was quiet in the rest of the infirmary. When Keith glanced over his shoulder, Lance, Romelle, and Coran were all leaning over Allura, stitching up the wound on her back. Pidge was sitting on the edge of Shiro’s hospital bed, and Matt was standing at her shoulder, both watching Adam warily, who was staring at the wall above Shiro’s head, completely out of it.

“Alright, here’s the plan,” Keith started, uncapping the Sharpie and moving over to the concrete wall. It’d have to do. He drew a map of the compound, the building in the middle and two lines for the fences outside. He put an x at the square for the building and tapped it with the end of the Sharpie.

“Here’s what we know,” he said. “Lotor ran down both fences, and the gap is enough for the yard to flood. Vehicles from the garage are all gone, supplies are raided, and we’ve got a yard full of walkers with more coming.”

Kinkade stepped forward, “And we don’t know if there are any other breaches in the fences. We don’t have visuals, and we can’t get to the towers right now to see.”

“Right,” Keith agreed. “We can’t get out to the yard through the common room because it’s covered up. What’s the next option?”

“Through the front intake office,” Ina volunteered.

Griffin nodded, “If we go out through the doors and lock them behind us, we can march around the side of the building, maybe even get a jump on the corpses if that side isn’t covered up yet.”

Keith added that to his drawing on the wall. Then, he said, “Okay. We exit the compound and lock the doors behind us. Once we’re outside, there probably won’t be a way back in until we get the entire yard cleared and the perimeter secured. We’ll establish a rendezvous point in the forest due north. If things get crazy and we lose control, we’ll meet there, about two miles into the trees.”

“So it’s going to be the five of us against all those bodies outside?” Nadia asked, eyebrow raised.

Before Keith could reply, Matt stepped forward and said, “The six of us.”

“No,” Keith objected, “you’re staying here.”

“Keith, don’t be ridiculous. You need all the help you can get,” he argued.

“You’re already injured. I need you here, standing guard. I meant what I said earlier about not knowing enough about this situation. We don’t know who’s left in the compound, and if something happens to us and we don’t come back, the more hands we have here, the better,” Keith explained.

Matt frowned, “Then how are you going to do this? On your own?”

“No,” Keith said. “We’re going to the barracks, and we’re going to rally the soldiers.”
There was a slight pause, and Nadia cleared her throat, “The soldiers only follow the Captain’s direct command into battle. They answer to Shiro.”

“Today,” Keith said, crossing his arms over his chest, “they’re going to answer to me.”

The others were waiting for him out in the hallway.

They’d settled on the plan. Keith was going to take Griffin, Kinkade, Nadia, and Ina and go down to the barracks, rally the soldiers, secure the perimeter, and clear the walkers. Anxiety bubbled in his chest at the thought of the obstacles standing in their way, the danger of it all, but he shoved it down.

“Lance,” Keith called his name softly. The room was already near silent.

Lance crossed the room, and his expression was serious, eyes glinting in the low light in the infirmary. At some point, they’d have to get the electricity back on too.

He stopped in front of Keith, just a breath away. He looked nervous, worried, and Keith flashed back to this morning in their room, when he’d been one flimsy reason away from kissing Lance. There wasn’t any privacy for them now, but they didn’t have much time anyway.

“I’ll be back soon,” Keith murmured, aching to reach out and touch him but keeping his hands tucked in his pockets instead.

Lance sighed, “You said that this morning.”

“And I was right this morning.”

“You don’t have to—” Lance cut himself off, rolling his eyes. “The walkers might dissipate on their own. We could wait them out.”

“Oh they could break the glass in the common room and flood the compound,” Keith argued.

“What if the soldiers don’t want to listen to you?”

Keith shook his head. He didn’t have time to argue. He just—wanted another chance at goodbye. Just in case.

“I’ve got to go,” he murmured, moving to take a step passed him.

“Wait, just wait,” Lance stopped him, reaching out and grabbing his arm. “Don’t do this. We can find another way.”

“There’s not another way.”

There were tears in Lance’s eyes. He said, “Then I can come with you.”

“Coran needs you here,” Keith said softly.

“You need me more.”

Keith smiled a little, one side of his mouth quirking up, “I need you to stay safe. I’ll come back.”
Lance shook his head, and one of the tears fell. “You’re being stupid.”

He tried not to take it personally. He knew that Lance was pissed about the plan, and if the situation was reversed, he’d probably be feeling the same way. But that didn’t mean that he couldn’t do this. Lance was wrong. They needed to get the perimeter secured as soon as possible. The longer they waited, the worse it would get.

“Sorry,” Keith breathed. He took another step.

Lance pulled him back and tugged him in so that their chests were pressed together. Up close, Keith could see the shine of tears in his eyes, but he looked almost angry instead of sad or scared.

“If you don’t come back, I swear—” Lance’s voice was hoarse.

Keith finally reached out to him. He set his hands on Lance’s hips and dragged him in closer. Lance was shaking.

“I’ll come back,” he promised, vowed. “I’m going to take care of this, make this place safe again, and I’m coming back. And then you and I—”

There were a lot of promises in his voice. He hoped Lance could hear them all.

Lance threw his arms around Keith’s neck, arms tight.

“Be safe,” Lance breathed.

Keith held on to him for one, two, three long seconds. When he let go and walked out into the hallway, he didn’t look back.

The barricade that the soldiers built up in the hallway before the barracks was haphazard at best and easy to disassemble, but it would have done the job against a group of walkers.

Keith, Griffin, Nadia, and Ina tore it to pieces while Kinkade stood guard and kept an eye out for walkers. The furniture was mostly chairs and tables that probably came from inside the barracks, and Keith and the others flung the objects out of their way as quickly as they could. When they were finished, Keith kicked the last chair away and stormed up to the door.

“Unless you want your head blown off, get the hell back!”

The shout came from the other side of the door in the barracks, and Keith raised an eyebrow. At least there was someone still alive on the other side.

Kinkade moved in close, exchanging a look with Keith before shouting, “Stand down, soldiers! Open the doors!”

“Not without verbal identification, sir!” the shout returned.

“Officers Kinkade, Griffin, Rizavi, and Leifsdottir with Lieutenant Kogane,” Kinkade replied. “Open the doors now!”

There was a slight pause, but before Keith had to bang on the door and demand they open up, the groan of the locks echoed through the doors, and then, they were opening.

Keith came face to face with the barrel of a rifle, but he didn’t flinch. Instead, he looked passed it,
to the soldier who was holding it, and said, “We don’t have much time. Let us in.”

The soldier hesitated for a second, and then, he nodded, stepping backwards and dropping the rifle. He motioned them forward, and Keith stepped inside. The others followed him, and once they were in the barracks, the soldier closed the door and locked it behind them.

Keith scanned the room. Everyone was gathered around the first few rows of the bunks, watching them.

When Keith first arrived at the compound, Shiro had told him that he’d had roughly sixty soldiers under his command at the time, including Lotor and who he referred to as his generals. That number didn’t include any of the civilians that worked in the lab, their families, or any of the people that were taken in after D.C. fell. Including those people, there were close to a hundred people living in the compound at the time of Keith and Lance’s arrival.

Now, Keith was looking out at less than thirty.

They’d lost most of the civilians and researchers working in the lab during the attack, and it was of no surprise to Keith to learn that a large number of the soldiers had defected to Lotor’s command and turned on them. And they hadn’t escaped this attack without deaths of their own. The soldiers wouldn’t have gone down without a fight, that much was obvious from the blood on most of them.

There were civilians mixed in with the soldiers as well, but only a few adults.

“Is the Captain dead?” One of the soldiers asked the question.

Keith shook his head, “Severely injured. Out of commission for now.”

“Why are you here?” another asked, narrowing her eyes at Keith. Her fatigues were splattered with blood and gore; she’d obviously been in the fight at some point.

Keith folded his arms behind his back like Shiro did at the briefings. It always made Shiro look taller, and Keith desperately hoped for the same effect. He wasn’t going to take no for an answer from the soldiers, but it’d be a hell of a lot easier if they just agreed to his first order instead of his last.

“We’ve got work to do,” Keith started.

“Where are the other lieutenants?” someone cried angrily. “They have more seniority than you.”

Keith nodded. During his time here, he’d learned that military people were very interested in rank and seniority, which was one of the reasons that he thought it was so strange that most of them accepted him as one of the lieutenants in the first place. He knew that it was just because he was Shiro’s brother, even though Shiro claimed it was because of Keith’s experience being out on the road in the middle of this mess for so long.

“Lotor lured us into a trap,” Keith said, very plainly. He didn’t have the time, energy, or patience to lie to them. “Adam and Shiro were injured. Curtis didn’t make it at all.”

There was a distinct set of uneasy murmuring among the crowd of soldiers.

“You’re probably aware of the situation we’re in,” Keith continued, nodding. “Lotor fucked us over. The fence is down, the compound yard is flooded, and if we don’t get this situation under control, we won’t make it until morning.”
“So you want to send us outside to deal with the corpses? You want us to go die for you?” a soldier asked from near the back of the crowd.

Keith shook his head, forcing himself to stay calm and composed. He said, “No. I came to ask how many of you want to live the life you had before today.”

A pause swept the soldiers, confusion settling on most of their faces.

Keith watched them as he continued, “I came to ask if this place was worth saving. I came to see if you were willing to risk your lives for it.”

He walked forward, right into the middle of the crowd, and they parted for him, stepping back and crowding around him at the same time.

“I think it is,” he said, looking each of them in the eye as he turned. There was clear desperation and worry written over their faces. “We can take this place back. We can rebuild what we’ve lost today. It might seem like we’re facing pointless odds, but if you think it isn’t worth it, you can pack a bag and go on the road, no judgement from any of us.

“But if you want to live any sort of life similar to what you had before today, then you should be wary. You won’t find it on the road. Trust me,” Keith warned them. “I’m planning on fighting. I’ll take the compound back with my own two hands, but it’d sure be a hell of a lot easier if I had your help.”

There was a long, long pause where everyone was quiet. For a moment, Keith was worried that they’d do what he said and take their chances on the road.

Then, Ina stepped forward and raised her rifle into the air. She nodded and said, “I’m in.”

Nadia looked at her, surprised that she had been the first to speak, but nodded, “I’m in too.”

Kinkade and Griffin followed, and then, the soldiers were nodding, talking over one another in their haste to agree until everyone in the room had spoken.

Keith smirked, “Alright then. Let’s get this done.”

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They were thirty-three people against hundreds of dead bodies.

Keith led them. They went outside through the front intake doors of the compound that had been on lockdown since the fall of D.C., and thankfully, they got lucky because this side of the compound hadn’t been covered with walkers yet.

As quietly as they could, their group shuffled outside and waited silently while Griffin and Nadia secured the doors behind them.

Keith raised his hand for the signal, and they moved forward, gripping their weapons and jogging around the building into the yard.

They’d developed the plan on the way outside while they were still in the building. They were going to go straight for the fence, and while half of them worked on getting it back up, the other half would split into two more groups to defend them against the walkers. Keith hoped they could get the fence back up before they were overwhelmed, and from there, they would be able finish clearing the yard.
He wasn’t naïve. He knew this wouldn’t be as easy as he made it sound.

It didn’t change the fact that it had to be done.

As a group, they jogged down toward the fence. Most of the walkers were clumped up at the common room doors, where the Humvee was parked, and shuffling through the garage. Artax’s stable was so close to that, and Keith desperately fought against his impulse to charge straight to her.

He had to stick to the plan. They’d all be killed if he broke rank.

He led them down to the fence. Walkers were still stumbling down the hill and into the compound, and Keith jogged ahead of the group, taking the first swing with his katana at the first body they approached. He took its head off, and it thudded into the grass.

The gunfire started then, firing from the first line of soldiers and putting down the bodies at the fallen fences. They collapsed, and Keith turned to see the groups separate. Griffin and Ina led one, while Kinkade and Nadia took the other. They pushed forward, taking out the walkers that were in their immediate path, before raining bullets down onto the approaching bodies in the yard.

“Let’s move!” Keith shouted, leading his group forward. They were going to start with the outer fence before moving to the inner perimeter.

Both gates had been mowed down by Lotor’s Humvee, but thankfully, they hadn’t been destroyed. It would take some significant work to get them working again with the tower system, but that was a problem for another day. So far, it looked like they had been lucky, and if they could get the chain link back up and tied off, they might have a chance.

He pushed his group forward, taking out walkers at the front with his katana while his soldiers covered the sides with their guns. The outer fence was only a few yards ahead, and Keith lost track of how many bodies they put down before they reached the destroyed fence.

Keith kicked back one walker, stabbing it through the head in the same motion and yelled, “Grab the fence! C’mon!”

They heaved the chain link fence up from the ground, and Keith jumped on the other side of it to help pull it up, gritting his teeth and shoving back walkers at the same time.

“Lieutenant!” one of the soldiers shouted.

He turned back in time to see a walker shrieking and grabbing for him, and he brought his katana up in between them, slicing it back and using the few seconds to jump back in between the gap that was rapidly closing as the soldiers hauled the fence up.

One the fence was standing again, they started zip-tying the links together, which he hoped would be enough to hold it in place for a while. It didn’t take long with all of them working together, and when a wave of bodies hit the other side of the fence, desperately clawing to get inside the compound, it held.

The soldiers in his group let out a triumphant yell, and Keith nodded to himself. One more to go.

Before they could move, a shrill scream pierced the air.

He spun, and one of the soldiers, a young man barely older than Keith himself, had been bitten. The walker was already on his neck, and the soldier was screaming, clawing at the body like it
might get off him. Another attached to his other side, and the screams only worsened as the walkers bit into his neck and shoulders, blood spraying and spurting everywhere.

A group of walkers descended on them, blocking their way back to the inside fence.

“Eyes up!” Keith shouted, brandishing his katana and stepping forward. “Move together!”

The soldiers listened to him, and eventually, the screams of the fallen soldier behind them quieted. Keith was relieved that he was finally dead. They pushed forward, taking on the group of walkers and leaving the bodies littered on the ground.

They reached the next fence. It’d been thrown to the side when Lotor’s Humvee hit it, and even though it was bent to hell and would need to be straightened out to work properly, it was a problem for later. It’d do the job just fine for tonight.

It wasn’t as difficult as the outer fence, but they took extra caution with the zip ties and doubled up as much as they could. If this worked, then Keith would come back later with more reinforcing materials, but they needed a chance to get the yard cleared and make it safe in the compound again before anything else.

“Alright team,” Keith said once they were finished with the fence. There weren’t many walkers in the middle between the two, so if the outer fence held, theoretically this one should too. “Let’s finish this fucking job.”

The soldiers yelled and moved forward with him. Griffin and Ina had taken on one side of the compound yard, and Nadia and Kinkade were holding the other side. Keith charged his soldiers straight up the middle of them and took down two walkers in one slice of his katana.

They engaged with the walkers. It was bloody and brutal, gore spraying him with every swipe of his sword and ears ringing with every shot the soldiers fired.

Keith spun, dodging one walker and coming up behind it, slicing through its head and shoving the body down. When he looked up, he saw the next wave of bodies stumbling their way, and he desperately looked over to Griffin and Ina, who were struggling to hold their line, and Nadia and Kinkade, who looked to be in the same position.

They were going to be overwhelmed like this. If Keith didn’t think of something, then they were going to lose.

He had to figure this out. If they were overwhelmed out here, then that would be the end. He couldn’t let that happen. Lance—his family—was inside the building. They were counting on him to make this place safe again. He had to do this.

That was when he looked over the next walker’s shoulder and spotted Artax’s stable. The bodies had already cleared from it.

Keith had an idea.

“Hold this line! Don’t fucking move!” Keith shouted desperately, shoving forward into the walkers and breaking into a sprint. There were protests behind him, but he dodged through the walkers, taking out the ones who got too close to him, and ran.

He made it to Artax’s stable, and there she was. Perfectly fine. The stable had saved her from the walkers. She was fine.
She neighed at his sudden appearance, and when she looked up at him, all fire and fury, Keith grinned.

He threw open the stable door and grabbed for her saddle as quickly as he could, and in less than a minute, he was leading her out and throwing himself into the saddle, pressing his heels into her sides and urging her forward.

From atop Artax, Keith had a better view of the battle before him. He’d been right. There were too many walkers for them to overcome without some sort of advantage. They were going to be overwhelmed without an adjustment, or they’d run out of ammo long before the last walker was down.

He and Artax raced forward, and Keith pulled his katana out as they jumped right into the fray of walkers, Keith slicing the undead heads as they raced through.

They stopped behind the soldiers’ line and yelled, “Move back! Let’s go!”

“Go where?” Nadia shouted, staring up at him.

“We’ve got to split this group up,” he said loudly as they all backed up, motioning with his katana. “They’ll overwhelm us in this big group. Griffin and Ina, move left and hustle around this group. Nadia and Kinkade, you do the same on the right. Make the bodies turn around to come for you. That’ll give us more time.”

Griffin and Ina were already moving, giving orders to their soldiers and running in a half-circle around the group. Like Keith expected, most of the walkers turned to follow them, and when Kinkade and Nadia moved with their group, the walkers split in half, right down the middle.

Keith nodded to himself. Now, as long as he and Artax didn’t get shot, this would work just fine.

Even though no one could hear him, he said, “And I’ll take the rest.”

He plowed forward straight through the center of the group, slicing walkers with his sword and using his handgun to pick off walkers that were too far from him.

Gunfire echoed through the air, and it lasted for probably ten more minutes before it finally died.

Keith turned, clicking his teeth and guiding Artax back. Bodies littered the ground, piled up everywhere. Blood and gore covered the track at every turn, and as Keith looked, there were more than a few bodies of their fellow soldiers, both from Lotor’s attack earlier and now.

But the fences were holding. They’d only suffered a few causalities here; most of them were alive. And the yard was clear.

Well, almost.

One lone walker remained stumbling toward him, tripping over the bodies in the yard.

Keith jumped down from Artax, twirled his katana, and cut it down with one swipe.

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Keith’s eyes were burning. He was tired, exhausted. His limbs ached, and his ears were ringing. He was disgusting too—covered in blood and gore from the fight with the walkers. He was ready to sleep, to just pass out for a few hours and not worry about anything.
But he wasn’t finished yet.

The perimeter was holding for now. They had reinforced both fences with better material and more zip ties, and they had extra soldiers on the fence and at the breach points in the building to make sure everything stayed clear. He’d dismissed Kinkade, Griffin, Ina, and Nadia to get some sleep before the briefing in the morning, and even though he knew he should follow his own advice, there were still more things to do.

Namely, find Lance. Then, check on Shiro.

He headed toward the infirmary, nodding to the soldiers that were on patrol when he ran into them. He’d dismissed half of them to the barracks to get some rest for a few hours before replacing the current guard duty later tonight.

Once he reached the infirmary, he opened the door and stepped inside. Since Lance’s stay here, Coran had converted the room into a more traditional infirmary. There were more hospital beds, three of which were filled now. The lights were dim, but it was still bright enough to see.

Adam and Allura were in the first two hospital beds. Both were asleep, breathing evenly as Keith looked them over.

Then, Shiro.

He was in the third bed. There were several blankets covering his legs and chest, but they were rolled down enough so that the thick bandages that were covering the end of his arm—what Keith had amputated—were visible. His face was deathly pale, and when Keith looked lower, he saw that his wrist was handcuffed to the hospital bed.

Realistically, he knew it was in case of—anything. It still made him feel sick.

“Keith?”

Keith looked up. Lance was standing in the doorway that connected the infirmary to the back storage room.

He let out a rough breath, one he hadn’t known he was holding at the sight of Lance. Relief, utter relief, swept through him as Lance walked toward him. He was okay. He was okay.

“Lance,” Keith’s voice was rough, choked. It’d been—for a while today, a long while, he thought he wouldn’t see Lance again.

“Oh my god, hi,” Lance said, dropping the supplies in his hands onto the counter, and he rushed over to him. He reached out and grabbed at his arms, staring at him, eyes wide. “Are you okay?”

Keith nodded, “Yeah, I’m fine. I’m okay. Are you?”

Lance was staring at his face. He didn’t reply.

“Hey,” he said again. “Answer me.”

Lance blinked, “Sorry, I just—yeah, I’m okay. I…”

“What?”

“Hi,” Lance breathed, stepping closer.
Keith softened, smiling a little because yeah, he was feeling it too. Lance looked—Keith didn’t have the words to describe him. He said, “Hi.”

The short moment must have been enough to snap Lance out of the fog at seeing Keith because he shook his head and said, “Is everything okay? What’s going on?”

“Everything’s fine,” Keith nodded. He was aching to reach out and pull Lance close but—it looked like Lance had already taken a shower and changed his clothes. “The fence is back up, and we’ve got some of the soldiers on guard duty on the fence and within the compound until morning. The perimeter is good though. No walkers. I checked five times.”

Lance nodded, “And everyone else?”

“All good,” Keith assured him. “Tomorrow we’re going to figure out what Lotor took and what we have left but—for now, we’re okay.”

Another nod.

“What about—” Keith was afraid to ask. He couldn’t even finish the question. Instead, he just nodded toward Shiro’s hospital bed.

Lance bit his lip and glanced over his shoulder to Shiro, “Coran thinks that he’ll have a really good chance if he makes it through the night.”

“Should I—what should I have done differently?”

Lance spun back to look at him, eyes wide. He grabbed Keith’s elbow and said, “Nothing. You saved him, Keith. There wasn’t anything else you could have done differently. If you hadn’t cut his arm off, he’d be a walker. You gave him another chance when there wasn’t one.”

It didn’t feel that way right now. Looking back at Shiro, handcuffed to the bed, pale and asleep, it felt like he’d been the one that killed him.

Keith breathed, “Allura and Adam?”

“Allura’s blood transfusion was good, and we’ve got her on antibiotics to stop any infection that might happen. We stitched the wound up, and Coran thinks she’ll wake up sometime tomorrow,” Lance explained. “Adam’s head wound was severe. We don’t know how much damage was done, but the amount of blood was... concerning. Coran put him on an IV, and we’ll just have to wait and see what happens.”

He sighed. That was—he guessed it was good news. Allura was going to be okay, and Adam wasn’t dead yet. Neither was Shiro.

“And you?”

“Relatively unscathed,” Lance tried for a smile, but it didn’t go up to his eyes. “I was able to grab a shower while Coran was still here, but I offered to stay tonight so he could get some sleep.”

“You should sleep too,” Keith argued.

“I’ll sleep a little,” Lance said, “but someone needs to be here just in case.”

“I can stay if you want to go sleep for a while,” Keith offered.

Lance rolled his eyes, “Stop being an idiot. You need to sleep more than I do.”
Keith sighed, and when he reached up to run his hand through his hair, his side stung, and he winced.

“What is it?” Lance demanded, glancing down his torso.

Keith shook his head and pressed a hand to his side, frowning at the stinging. He’d totally forgotten about Lotor cutting him earlier today, when they’d been fighting in the compound yard. Hell, it’d been hours by now, but this was the first moment that he’d actually slowed down enough to feel it burning. Everything else had been so much more important before, and he hadn’t even remembered he’d been injured in the fight with Lotor until right now.

Lance reached forward and gripped the bottom of his shirt, forcing it up to reveal the cut along his side.

“You said you were fine!”

“I am,” Keith assured him. “It’s just a cut.”

“It could get infected, you lunatic!” Lance’s eyes were blazing, and even though his voice was stern and angry, it wasn’t loud. “I asked if you were okay hours ago, and you lied to me.”

“I didn’t lie,” Keith argued, almost too tired to even speak. It was probably good. He wasn’t sure he could handle seriously arguing with Lance because that introduced a whole new set of problems. He was already so tired he probably wouldn’t bother controlling most of his impulses and the way that Lance was always so passionate and intense when they fought—Keith would no doubt be grabbing him and pressing him up against the wall in two seconds flat if that were to happen.

Best just to let Lance scold him and deal with the fallout even if it disappointed him.

“God, Keith, what’s even the point of me asking you to be careful,” Lance muttered, turning back around. As he walked toward the lab, he pointed to the last empty hospital bed in the corner of the room and said, “Take off your shirt and sit down. I’ll be right back.”

Keith did as he was told. He slipped off his katana and rifle, leaning them up against the wall by the door, and then took off his jacket and shirt before crossing the room to the last empty hospital bed and sitting down on the edge of it.

He realized how tired he was once he was off his feet. His eyes threatened to close but—Lance was coming back in a few seconds, and Keith hadn’t seen him since this morning, which felt like a fucking lifetime ago.

The door to the storage room opened, and Lance came back through with a handful of supplies. He crossed the room and set it down onto the hospital bed next to Keith. He didn’t say anything else as he started cleaning the cut on his side.

It was quiet for a long moment, and Keith could tell that it wasn’t the peaceful quiet of surviving something horrible that he had become used to when they’d gone through something traumatic together on the road. Instead, Lance was angry, presumably at him.

Keith frowned, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Keith sighed roughly, jostling Lance where he was trying to clean the wound. He said, “Please just
talk to me. I’m—I can’t lose you too.”

Lance froze, and when he looked up at Keith, his eyes were steely. He said, “Don’t. Don’t do that right now. You—you could have fucking died, Keith. I would have never seen you again.”

Keith moved, reaching for him automatically, but Lance batted his hands away and pushed him back. Keith let him.

Lance worked in silence, hands soft but firm as he cleaned the rest of the cut on Keith’s side and bandaged it. Then, when he was finished, he gathered up his supplies and said, “Wait right here. Don’t move.”

He didn’t. Lance walked back through the door to the storage room, and Keith waited, unsure. He was fucking exhausted, but he couldn’t stand the thought that Lance was upset with him.

Lance came back a few seconds later with a washcloth in his hands. And still, he didn’t say anything when he crossed the room and stood in front of Keith again, nudging his way in between Keith’s knees to get closer. He didn’t hesitate when he gripped Keith’s shoulder and pulled the washcloth to his face, gently wiping the dirt, blood, and sweat away from his face.

It felt—Keith wasn’t sure how to describe what it felt like.

Lance was silent. After his face was clean, Lance swiped the washcloth down his arms and over his chest and hands.

When he was finished, he said, “Give me your hair tie.”

Keith took it from his wrist and held it out to him.

Lance put it on his own wrist and reached up to Keith’s hair, brushing his fingers through it and gently untangling it. Keith sat very still and tried not to let his eyes roll back into his head at the feeling of Lance’s nails scratching his scalp and running over his neck.

Once his hair was untangled, Lance tied Keith’s hair into a bun at the base of his neck, instead of the usual ponytail he went with.

Keith blinked at him.

“Okay,” Lance said, sighing and pulling back. He didn’t go far though, staying in the space between Keith’s legs. “Now we can talk.”

“Why now?”

“Because you were disgusting, Keith. Every time we have one of these talks, we end up all over each other, and I wasn’t about to get walker guts, blood, and sweat all over me because you didn’t take a shower,” Lance said, rolling his eyes.

For the first time, Keith reached out and set his hand on Lance’s side, just above his hip. He raised an eyebrow at Lance and said, “All over each other, huh?”

Lance blushed and crossed his arms over his chest, “Yes, Keith. You’re handsy.”

Keith snorted, sliding his hand down to grip Lance’s hip. He waited for a second before he said, “Why are you angry with me?”

Lance sighed and uncrossed his arms, pressing his fingers to his temples like he had a headache.
He said, “I’m not angry with you. I just—it’s been a long day. A long, terrible day. Lotor told me that he had killed you. I thought you were dead.”

“I didn’t know that,” Keith said, voice low.

When Lance looked back up at him, there were tears in his eyes, and Keith suddenly realized how tired Lance looked. He had been at the compound all day, trying to keep everyone here alive, and he had to be exhausted. He blinked a few times, and the first of the tears rolled down his cheeks.

Lance nodded and wiped them away before Keith could do it for him. He said, “He showed me your katana and I thought—I thought you were gone.”

“I’m okay,” Keith murmured.

“I know that,” Lance nodded again, but he was crying harder now, and Keith was aching to pull him close and hold him tight until he felt better. “But you could have been killed on that mission. Shiro shouldn’t have—He should have listened to you when you told him that, that the mission was dangerous and it wasn’t safe because you were right and—” Lance hiccupped roughly, interrupting himself.

“Hey, hey,” Keith said, eyes wide. He was wide awake now. “Lance, hey, it’s okay. I’m okay, everything’s going to be okay.”

“You don’t know that,” Lance cried, covering his eyes. “Half of the research team was murdered by Lotor, they stole almost all of the supplies, the fence is down, Allura and Adam are both hurt, Curtis is dead, you’re fucking exhausted, and Shiro lost his arm and still—”

“Stop,” Keith said fiercely, grabbing Lance by the hips and pulling him closer. “Hey, stop. Look at me.”

Lance shook his head.

Keith squeezed Lance’s hips and whispered, “Lance. Look at me.”

Slowly, Lance looked up at him.

“I’m alive,” Keith said earnestly, voice rough. “I’m alive, you’re alive, and we’re both safe for tonight. That’s all that matters.”

“I know,” Lance cried, nodding.

“Nothing else is important,” Keith said, pulling Lance in even closer. “All of that other stuff you said? Doesn’t matter. We can get more supplies. The fence is back up and the perimeter is tight. Allura and Adam are going to be fine, and Shiro—we’ve done everything we can do for him, and we just have to wait.

“We’ll mourn the people that didn’t make it,” Keith continued softly, because even though he didn’t know many of the people on the research team very well, Lance did. Then Curtis—Keith wasn’t ready to think about it yet. “And we’ll rebuild everything we lost. We’ll be okay. I promise.”

Lance nodded again, and before he said anything else, he crawled forward onto the hospital bed with Keith, settling in Keith’s lap, knees bracketing Keith’s hips and arms curling around Keith’s neck.
Keith hesitated for a second before wrapping his arms around Lance and holding him tight. He was so warm and alive and—they were going to be alright.

Keith moved back, readjusting so that he was leaning back against the raised hospital bed with Lance in his lap. It was just—everything he’d been wanting all day. Just this, and just Lance.

“I know it was a hard day,” Keith murmured, right into Lance’s ear, “but tomorrow will be better.”

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” Lance replied, curling farther into him, holding onto him tighter, like he was afraid Keith might disappear.

Keith nodded, turning his face into Lance’s neck and breathing for a long moment. “Same here.”
if you were church, i'd get on my knees

Chapter Summary

Keith sighed as he sat down at the foot of Shiro’s hospital bed. He didn’t turn to look at his brother, didn’t think he could. He just leaned forward, pressing his head into his hands and staying there for a long moment, trying to figure out what to say.

He’d been here before too. He remembered this feeling—this loneliness, this terror—when Lance had been here so many weeks ago.

They had made it through then, he guessed.

It didn’t make this any easier.

Chapter Notes

hi friends!! here's another keith chapter for y'all. there will be one more keith chapter after this and then we'll switch back to lance with maire!! we're very excited about the future of this fic and the comments that y'all leave here inspire us so much! thanks for all the support for this fic, we appreciate y'all

As usual, the chapter title for this fic is from Fall Out Boy. I also updated my klance pacific rim au today, so if that's your thing then you can check it out! maire also has the NSFW more than alive fic, so you should check it out as well if you're into it! If you wanna chat with us, you can find us on tumblr @somethingmorecreative1 and @maireep

Stay safe, stay healthy, and take care of yourselves xoxo

The alarm for the morning briefing woke him.

He jerked awake, arms coming up around Lance, and he blinked, disoriented and confused. They weren’t in their room, so where—

“Keith?” Lance’s voice was soft, rough from sleep.

The previous day came crashing down around him as he scanned the room. Allura, Adam, and Shiro were all sleeping in their hospital beds, and the infirmary was dark, dim and accenting lights still on.

Fuck, he hadn’t meant to sleep this long. He was only going to stay with Lance for a few hours, maybe catch an hour or two of sleep, but he had planned on getting back up to check on the soldiers and the shift change and run another perimeter check before the briefing. He guessed that was fucked now, and he couldn’t help the sudden rush of anxiety in his chest because of it. If anything had gone wrong—
Lance’s hand brushed over his chest and up his neck, tucking a loose strand of his hair behind his ear. The touch was nice, and Keith fought the urge to flip them over and do something about the soft look Lance was giving him.

“Keith,” Lance said his name again, voice firmer.

“Morning.” Keith sighed, squeezing Lance’s waist where his arm was still wrapped around him.

“Are you doing the briefing this morning?”

“Mmm.”

“You need more sleep,” Lance argued, yawning.

Keith shook his head and brushed his free hand over his face, trying to wake up. He said, “I’ll be fine. I need to go.”

Lance hummed and curled farther into his side, propping his head on Keith’s shoulder and making it twice as hard to convince himself to actually get up and go deal with whatever today had planned for him.

Keith sighed again, and he ran one hand up Lance’s back before shifting out from underneath him and sitting up. He shook his head and brushed his hands over his face, yawning and shaking out his shoulders.

A few seconds later, Lance followed him, sitting up and rolling out of the hospital bed they’d slept in all night. He crossed the room and stopped at Allura’s side first, checking over her IV, before moving to Adam and then Shiro. It struck Keith that he must have been doing this all night, sleeping for a while and then checking up on them when they needed it, while also making sure that Keith got enough sleep to be able to function, especially after yesterday.

The thought of Lance carefully and quietly checking on their friends and letting him sleep twisted his stupid, stupid heart.

Finally, Keith stood and started toward the door. He hesitated when he grabbed his katana, realizing that he didn’t have his shirt or jacket on.

His clothes had been so disgusting yesterday though. He still needed a shower, but Lance had helped clean him up enough last night. That didn’t mean he wanted to put on a shirt and jacket covered in gore, blood, and sweat.

Keith stiffened when Lance’s hand ghosted over his shoulder, and then, Lance was slipping in front of him and reaching for the bandage on his side. He peeled it back and nodded to himself before glancing up to Keith.

“We’ll clean it again later today, but I think it’s going to be fine,” Lance murmured, yawning again. “If it starts burning, come find me.”

Keith nodded, “Get some more sleep. I’ll see you later today.”

“Okay,” Lance hummed, ducking forward into Keith and pressing against his chest for a brief moment before pulling away. “Be safe.”

Keith smiled a little as Lance turned away and went back to the hospital bed, curling up on his side and stilling almost immediately. He was probably exhausted.
That made two of them. Keith was still so tired that his bones were aching.

But, he had work to do. He guessed that included finding a new set of clothes too, so he grabbed his weapons and quietly slipped out into the hallway.

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Being at the front of the briefing room was disorienting and made Keith want to throw up.

It didn’t help that he was shirtless.

After leaving the infirmary, he’d gone to check on some of the soldiers inside, and they’d assured him that the shift change went over fine last night and that there wasn’t a breach in the perimeter outside. It’d made him sigh in relief, and as he was leaving, he told the soldiers to hold their position for a few more hours and that they would get a relief team soon. Most of the soldiers that Keith told this to didn’t seem to mind. In fact, it was most often them telling him not to even worry about it, that they were good, which helped a lot more than Keith could even begin to admit.

He stalked into the briefing room, and the room wasn’t as full as Keith was expecting. Coran was sitting at a table in the front of the room sans coffee cup for once, and he was rubbing a hand over his mustache. He nodded to Keith as he entered the room.

Kinkade, Griffin, Nadia, and Ina were all sitting at their usual table, around the seat where Keith sat when Shiro ran the meetings. Matt was at their table too, but without Shiro, Adam, or Curtis, the room felt surprisingly empty.

At least they knew that Lotor wouldn’t join them by surprise this morning. It was probably the only consolation of this whole mess, if Keith was being honest.

“Morning, guys,” Keith said, clearing his throat, hesitating at the podium before stepping behind it.

“Morning, Keith,” Matt called, grinning, “did you forget something?”

Keith rolled his eyes as Nadia giggled under her breath. Coran hid a smile behind his hand, glancing up at him.

“My clothes were ruined yesterday, and I didn’t have an extra set. I’ll need a new shirt and jacket,” Keith explained, trying to keep himself from blushing.

“And the bandage?” Kinkade asked, all business.

“Lotor cut me in the fight yesterday. Lance was worried, so I let him bandage it.”

Nadia grinned at him, wiggling her eyebrows, and Keith did his best to ignore her, but when he looked to Matt, his expression was almost the exact same. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“Okay,” Keith cleared his throat, trying to get them back on track. It was bad enough that Shiro constantly made fun of him, but Matt and Nadia too? Honestly, he wasn’t surprised. He was so fucking obvious about everything with Lance that it made sense they’d caught on by now. He continued, “Tell me something good.”

Kinkade stood first, “The perimeter held throughout the night, and it’s still standing. No breaches. The soldiers outside should be ready for shift change in a few hours.”

Keith nodded, relief pinching his chest even though he’d known that already, “And the inside
perimeter we set up yesterday?"

“Also holding, and no signs of walkers,” Kinkade replied.

“Okay, we need to search the rest of the building and find the bodies that we’re missing. Nadia, do you have a list yet?” Keith asked.

She nodded, “Yes, but I need to double check it with the civilians to make sure it’s accurate. I’ll have it to you by this afternoon.”

“Security inside the building and holding the perimeter on the outside are obviously the most important things we should focus on today, but we also need to establish where we are with supplies and what we have left after Lotor raided everything,” Keith said. “Matt, you take point on that. We need a full inventory of what we have left, including the crate that I carried to the infirmary yesterday. Food and water need to be first on the list. Ammo next, medical supplies, and then any extra material at the end.”

Matt nodded, “Yes sir. Can I have Pidge help me?”

“That’s fine.”

They talked for a while longer. Instead of planning for the day, they were still mostly dealing with the fallout from yesterday. Matt and Pidge were going to take point on cataloging the inventory that was left in the compound, and Keith was absolutely dreading seeing the results. He hoped that they would have enough food for at least today, maybe tomorrow. If they could just hold out until they got a plan together—

Nadia would work on piecing together the civilians and the list of people they’d lost, both to Lotor and the walkers. Ina would check over the compound’s permanent resources, like the electricity grid, the water reserve, and the emergency systems and alarms. Griffin and Kinkade were going to work on searching and clearing the bodies in the building before moving to the yard with the soldiers to start clearing bodies.

“Coran,” Keith said then, “I know the lab was ruined, but is there anything left? What was Lotor looking for when he trashed it?”

Coran sighed and stood up warily, tucking his arms behind his back. He started, “There’s nothing left. Lotor and his men took every last sample and all of the data that we had collected. It was a clean raid.”

“And what is he planning on doing with it?”

“That’s unclear.”

Keith frowned, “What about your research now? What will you do?”

Coran heaved a sigh, “Well, I’m afraid we won’t be able to continue. But—this was a long time coming, not just because of Lotor’s actions and robbery.”

“What do you mean?”

“There was never any hope for a cure,” Coran said it casually, like he was talking about the weather, and Keith felt his heart stop in his chest. “I’ve known for months now. The virus that infects the brain and causes the change is unstoppable because the host is already dead when it truly takes effect. It spreads through bites as well, but we are all infected already, because as we’ve
observed, when we die, we come back as one of them.”

The room was completely silent, and even though Keith felt like they should take a moment to really pause and consider what this meant—that there was no cure whatsoever—he didn’t have time to stop, nor did he even want to. He’d never admit this aloud, but he hadn’t seen the point in the research. A cure would have been nice to have, but it didn’t seem possible at all when the walkers could bite you and you’d die anyway.

Survival was about staying alive and fighting as hard as you could. Research and vaccines wouldn’t change that now.

“Then why did Lotor take everything with him?” Keith asked. “Did he find out there’s no cure?”

“The opposite actually. I was leading him to believe that we had created a cure. He was well on his way to demanding that he and his unit receive it first.”

Keith raised an eyebrow, “And what was in that cure, Coran?”

“A nasty little virus that kills one’s brain, I’m afraid.”

“So you planned on poisoning Lotor and his unit,” Keith nodded to himself. “Why?”

“I would do anything to protect Allura. I wish I had executed the plan days ago.”

Keith agreed. Then, he said, “So now, Lotor thinks he has the materials to create the cure himself. Why would he take it out of the lab? All of the equipment that he would need to do that is here, right?”

“Not necessarily,” Coran said. “There are plenty of places in this immediate area that would have the same sort of equipment as the compound lab. He could very easily set up his own lab.”

“How long would it take him to figure out that there’s not a cure?”

Coran shrugged, stroking his mustache, “Weeks, months, maybe longer.”

Keith nodded again, trying to make sense of this all himself. He said, “If Lotor took everything from the lab and all the resources here, we can assume he was trying to destroy the compound altogether, which would theoretically mean that he doesn’t plan on coming back. Even if that’s true, we need to be aware that it could change at any time.”

“So we’ll question the soldiers,” Griffin suggested, “and see what they know.”

“I can pull the security footage as well,” Ina offered, expression serious. “It might take a while to recover, but I’ll find it.”

Keith knocked his fist against the podium in agreement, “Alright, is there anything else?”

Coran nodded. “I’m going to need Lance’s help today with monitoring Allura, Shiro, and Adam. They’re conditions are... worrisome, at the moment.”

Keith felt his chest tighten, but before he could agree, Nadia stood.

“I’ll need Lance first thing this morning, but only for an hour or so,” she said, waving her clipboard.

“Is that alright, Coran?” Keith asked.
Coran nodded again, “Of course.”

“Okay, let’s get to work then. I’ll have a radio, so keep me updated on what’s happening,” Keith said, pausing awkwardly for a second. Then, he said, “Dismissed. Be safe today.”

Most of them smiled, knowing the statement was an echo of Shiro. He said that at the end of every briefing, and it felt almost wrong to not end with it today.

Everyone filed out of the briefing room except for Matt.

“I’ll take you and get a new set of clothes,” Matt offered, glancing him up and down again, one eyebrow raised.

“Thanks,” Keith said, and on their way out of the room, he asked, “How’s Pidge?”

“She’s doing okay, I think,” Matt frowned. “We were in the armory when Lotor attacked, and I told her to hide when the soldiers busted down the doors. I got stabbed there, and we got separated when they cut the power. I had no idea where she went, but Coran found me before I could get outside to look for her.”

Keith nodded, “Yeah, by the time I got back she was outside with Lance.”

“She said that she’d grabbed a rifle that she found in the hallway and went outside to try and stop them,” Matt shook his head, rolling his eyes. “I’ve tried to talk to her about how reckless that was, but she won’t listen to me.”

“I’ll try to talk to her,” Keith said, because yeah, from what he’d seen yesterday, Pidge had been terrified and nervous, and that was no doubt because she’d seen her family and friends murdered by Lotor’s soldiers in front of her. But, it was important to make sure that Pidge knew that she’d been acting recklessly. Even if she could take care of herself and did okay on the road for a while, she needed to be reminded that her safety was important too.

“Thanks, Keith,” Matt said.

They chatted as they walked through the halls, mostly about what Matt was expecting from the inventory cataloging later today. They also talked about the clean-up that they were going to have to do around the compound and what the future was going to look like. Matt was easy to talk to. Keith could see how he and Shiro were such good friends.

Thankfully, the storage room that held clothes and other linens hadn’t been raided by Lotor’s crew. Matt opened the door and stepped inside, flipping the light on and crossing the room to the stacks of clothes.

“Do you really think Lotor will be back?” Matt asked, tossing him a new shirt and jacket.

Keith set his weapons down and pulled it over his head, frowning at the long sleeves, but he was sure he’d been glad for it once he was outside in the cold wind. He tugged his arms through the jacket. It was the exact same as his other one, which he guessed was the nice thing about having the option to wear these clothes as one of the lieutenants.

“I think it’d be naïve of us not to think that he might,” Keith admitted. “Especially if he ever found out we were all still alive.”

Matt considered it, and then, he turned, passing Keith another extra set of clothes. He said, “Take these for when you need them next time. I think you’re doing a really good job of leading.”
Keith nodded, “Thanks, Matt.”

“No problem,” he replied, clapping Keith on the shoulder as he headed out of the room. “Pidge and I will get started on the inventory.”

He nodded again and gathered his weapons and new clothes before heading back into the hallway. He turned and headed back to his and Lance’s bedroom, fighting the impulse to stop in the infirmary and ask about Shiro again.

The hallways were silent as Keith walked. It was still early, and the sun would be up by now. Hopefully it wouldn’t be too cold on the perimeter check and outside while they worked on moving the bodies from the yard.

A few minutes later, he ducked into his and Lance’s room. When he opened the door and stepped inside, the accent lights were on, casting the room into a soft light as the rising sun streamed into the window. The bathroom door was closed, and the light was on underneath it. He listened closely, and he could hear the shower running.

Keith set his clothes down onto the table, hesitating. He had work to do. He needed to go.

But then again, he could also make some time for a break. He could wait on Lance to get out of the shower. Coran was probably back in the infirmary, and Lance probably had some extra time before he needed to meet Nadia. They could probably have at least half an hour—

Fuck, Keith thought, rolling his eyes at himself. He couldn’t believe he was even considering it.

His cheeks felt hot as he left their room, leaving Lance undisturbed in the shower, and thankfully, he didn’t run into anyone else in the hallways or common room on his way outside either.

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It was cold outside, colder than it’d been so far over the past few weeks, and Keith stayed huddled in his jacket as he finished his second walk around the perimeter.

The fence seemed to be holding, but the gunfire from yesterday had been enough to attract dozen more walkers, and the bodies had piled up against the fence in several places along the outside barrier. The crowds were getting large enough now that they were drawing in more walkers from the trees and down the hill, and if they let this problem continue, then they would have a horde on their hands before long.

Keith had already decided that they would have to go outside and deal with these walkers, putting them down as quickly as they could after drawing them off the fence. There were too many for him to do it by himself, which would have been easier, so now he would need to ask Nadia to send some soldiers down to help.

He stopped at the front gate, examining the zip ties and extra materials that was holding it together. It still looked strong, and if something happened to the outside fence, then this one would catch all of the walkers that flooded inside. Keith wasn’t sure that it would be able to withstand a large group of bodies though.

He sighed heavily, tucking his hands into his pockets. He’d been hoping that the dark and quiet of last night would be enough for the walkers to disperse before this morning, but he now realized that was incredibly stupid of him. He’d have to go outside and deal with the bodies by hand because there were so many.
Griffin and Kinkade were already out in the yard, moving bodies and trying to clear them from the compound yard. Keith walked over to meet them.

“Hey,” Griffin said, huffing a little as he dropped one of the bodies and looked up at Keith. “The corpses on the fence are a lot thicker than they were last night.”

“Yeah,” he said, “I’m going to see if Nadia has some soldiers that will come with me to clear them.”

“Outside?” Kinkade asked, frowning.

Keith nodded, “They’ll tear down the outer fence if we don’t deal with them soon. If we can handle them in small groups then I think we should be okay.”

“We can help, if you want,” Griffin offered.

He shook his head, “We’ll put some soldiers on the inside of the fence to keep the walkers’ attention while we’re clearing them. That should make it a little safer. Just keep your radios on and keep your eyes up. I’ll let you know if I need you.”

“10-4,” Kinkade said.

Keith nodded again and left them to the bodies, walking up to the compound building to find Nadia.

Keith ducked into the common room, but when he got inside, he noticed that almost all of the civilians that were left in the compound where gathered there, and it hit Keith that they usually did this every morning with Allura for her to hand out assignments.

Nadia was there, pointing down to her clipboard and comparing notes with Lance, who was already dressed and frowning.

They both looked up to him as Keith awkwardly made his way through the civilians. Most of the adults were smiling at him and thanking him and it was just—weird.

“Hey,” Keith said when he finally got away from the incessant civilians. It wasn’t that he didn’t like them, it was just that it felt too weird.

“Perimeter check finished?” Nadia asked, scribbling on the clipboard.

He nodded, “It’s holding for now, but I’m about to go outside and deal with the bodies that are piling up on the fence.”

Lance frowned, “By yourself?”

“No, I’ll need probably 6 or 7 soldiers if you can spare them, Nadia.”

She nodded too, “Shouldn’t be a problem. Everyone has been briefed on being stretched thin today. I’ll tell them to meet you at the back gate in an hour.”

“Thanks,” he said, then shifted his gaze back to Lance. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to be Allura,” he admitted, waving his clipboard. “I figure it’s better to keep people busy while you and the rest of the unit sort out everything today.”

“Thanks,” he said again, meeting Lance’s gaze and holding it. “I appreciate it.”
“Sure,” Lance’s voice was distant while he stared back at him.

Nadia cleared her throat, and when Keith looked over to her, it was obvious she was suppressing a smile. She nodded to Keith and said, “I’ll prep your soldiers and have them meet you. We’ll keep you updated on the radio.”

He nodded to her as she walked away.

Lance stepped around him then, moving to the front of the crowd and catching the civilians’ attention. Keith took a few steps back, leaning up against the wall and watching.

“Okay, guys, good morning.” Lance started, offering them a small smile. “I know yesterday was rough, but thanks for being here. First, we’ll start with some good news. Allura is doing okay and should be awake sometime later today or tomorrow we think.”

There was a small moment of clapping from the civilians before Lance shrugged.

“I don’t have much other good news, so I’m just going to tell you what’s happening,” Lance started. “Nadia informed me that the perimeter is holding, and the yard is clear of walkers. The soldiers are going to be working on clearing the bodies, holding security measures, and cataloging the supplies. Because of that, we’re going to divide up and work on cleaning the inside of the compound, specifically designated areas like the lab and the kitchen.”

Keith watched as Lance handed out assignments, and he’d be an idiot to think that it wasn’t impressive to watch. Keith might have been doing okay at leading the soldiers, but that was a much easier task than working with civilians, especially after the loss they’d taken yesterday. Most of the casualties they’d suffered were people who had been working in the lab.

But no one complained. No one rioted or even talked back to him. Lance just handed out the assignments with complete confidence and urged everyone to be safe and stay within the inside perimeter.

It was incredible. Lance was a natural leader and way better at it than him.

Once people were filing out of the common room to get started, Lance walked back over to him, settling against the wall beside him.

“What?” Lance asked, staring at him.

Keith bit back a smile, “Nothing.”

He rolled his eyes, and a short moment passed between them.

“You look tired,” Lance’s voice was soft.

“You do too.”

Lance rolled his eyes again, “I’ve barely done anything.”

Keith shook his head, “You kept everyone alive yesterday. Allura would be dead without you, probably Pidge and Romelle too.”

“Yeah but—” Lance cut himself off, which was good because Keith would have done it if he hadn’t.

Another pause settled between them. Keith tucked his hands in his pockets to keep from reaching
out and grabbing him. They were alone for the first time since yesterday morning, and the idea was tempting.

But, Keith had to go outside and deal with these walkers and the bodies. Lance probably had work he needed to get to as well.

His radio buzzed at his belt, another reminder of the piles and piles of work facing him today. He pushed off from the wall and stepped closer to Lance, reaching out to grip one of his hips and pulling him in a little closer. It was really all he had time for right now.

“I’ve got to go,” Keith murmured, squeezing Lance’s hip in his hand. “Have a good day. Stay safe.”

Lance’s hand ghosted over his chest as Keith pulled away, and he smiled, a little shakily, and said, “Follow your own advice, Keith.”

Keith laughed and glanced back at him over his shoulder as he walked out of the common room.

The sun had set hours ago, and Keith finally trudged back to his and Lance’s room, exhausted and covered in gore.

He had spent pretty much all day outside the fence, moving bodies and taking care of the remaining walkers that had been built up along the perimeter. After he’d killed the walkers, he’d gotten Kinkade to send down some extra soldiers to help him with moving and burning the bodies. Even though Nadia had told him that it was a job the soldiers could handle on their own, it didn’t feel right to just leave them to it alone. The only other thing he had to do was wait on reports from the others anyway. It just didn’t seem fair.

So he’d stayed and helped. All day. Even when Kinkade had switched out the groups of soldiers for new ones who were rested, Keith stayed on, taking a quick break for a protein bar and some water. Nadia came down with the rest of the reports, and they, including Kinkade, Griffin, and Ina did the evening briefing at the fence. Thankfully, everything seemed to be going okay. Well, it was okay as it could be right now. Keith felt like he was holding everything together with his own two hands.

And he was tired.

His limbs ached, and his eyes were burning. He hadn’t slept for what felt like days now, and he essentially stumbled down the hallway, glad that it was late enough no one was out in the hallways.

After dark, Keith did a few more perimeter checks, skipping dinner, and then checked on Artax. He’d also stopped by the soldiers who were posted on guard duty for the night and checked on them because it felt like something Shiro would do, so that was probably right.

He was tired and pissed off and he hadn’t got to see Lance for more than five minutes in fucking days. He’d done his best to temper his mood when he was around everyone else because they really needed him to keep it together, but it was shot to hell if he was being honest.

Finally, he got to their room and found himself literally praying that Lance wasn’t already asleep.

Thankfully, the universe gave him a break. When he opened the door, Lance was standing in the middle of the room, looking down at his phone. He’d already showered and changed into his
sweats, and his feet were bare.

“Hey,” he said, smiling, and it helped Keith’s mood more than anything else had all day. “Where have you been all day? I was waiting for you at dinner.”

Keith sighed, long, and dragged himself passed Lance to the table, dropping his weapons down onto the surface carelessly. He kicked his boots off, and he was near out of breath when he said, “I was outside clearing walkers from the perimeter and dealing with the bodies. Sorry I didn’t make it for dinner.”

“That’s okay,” Lance said, frowning. “Are you alright?”

Keith nodded and headed back over to their bed, planning on crashing and sleeping for a few hours, at least until the briefing in the morning.

But, before he could, Lance caught his hands and kept him on his feet, pulling him away from the bed.

Keith groaned, “I’m tired.”

“You’re disgusting,” Lance argued gently. “Shower first.”

Keith groaned again and shook his head. Sleep. He wanted to sleep.

“Keith, I’m not getting anywhere near you until you get out of these clothes and take a shower, which means you’re not getting in our bed until that happens. So, you can either take a shower and I’ll wait on you, or you can sleep on the floor. Your choice.”

“That’s mean,” Keith grumbled, tugging his jacket off and letting it fall to the floor. He pulled his shirt over his head too.

Lance nodded, “Sorry, buddy, but that’s the way it is. Quick shower and then you can sleep.”

Keith grumbled, but he tugged his pants off on his way to the bathroom. He left all his clothes in a pile in the floor—he’d have to deal with them later—and stumbled over to the shower, turning the water on and getting in.

He just stood underneath the water, and he’d admit that it did make him feel a little better.

Lance opened the door a few seconds later and said, “Rinse your hair!”

He hurried through his shower, but it did make him feel a lot better by the time he was scrambling out. Lance had left a new pair of boxers on the counter for him when he’d opened the door, and Keith dried himself off as best he could before sliding into them and throwing the door open.

Lance was sitting on the edge of the bed, waiting for him, and he smiled, “Now you can come here.”

Keith didn’t bother with a response. He just crossed the room and flopped over onto the bed, collapsing across Lance’s lap and knocking him backwards.

“Oof,” Lance grunted, catching him and wrapping his arms around Keith’s middle. It was enough to make him hum. He was so, so sore. His arms still felt like they were trembling.

Keith’s eyes were already closing. Lance was warm.
“Are you okay?” Lance asked, voice soft. One of his hands traced up Keith’s back.

It must have been because he was so tired because all of his impulse control went right out the window at Lance’s touch and question. His voice was rough when he said, “’M so fucking sore.”

Lance was quiet for a few seconds before he started moving. He shifted out from underneath Keith and pulled him to the middle of their bed, rolling him over onto his back. Keith blinked up at Lance, watched as he slung one leg over Keith and straddled him, carefully settling on Keith’s chest.

It was a good thing he was too tired to even think at this point. He blinked up at Lance.

“This okay?” Lance asked, soft, careful.

“What are you doing?”

Lance smiled, and even his smile was soft around the edges, “I’m trying to help you, but you’re being stubborn. Close your eyes.”

Keith did as he was told.

With his eyes closed, it was almost too easy to drift off to sleep, but then, Lance’s hands were on his shoulders and drifted up and down his arms, touch featherlight, and he was wide awake for the first time today.

“Relax,” Lance hummed, and the touch become firmer. Lance smoothed his hands across Keith’s biceps and forearms, even down to his wrists and hands, gently kneading the muscles and working away the knots and aches that had festered over the past few days.

When his hands made it all the way back up to his shoulders and did the same thing, Keith felt his mouth drop open. He didn’t even fucking care. This was just—no one had ever touched him like this before.

“Go to sleep,” Lance murmured.

Keith shook his head, even though his eyes were still closed. His voice was a mess when he murmured, “Feels nice.”

“I wasn’t sure if you’d like this,” Lance admitted, voice soft.

He breathed a laugh. How in the hell could Lance think he wouldn’t like this? Fuck, this was just—Keith would be thinking about this every minute of every day for the rest of his fucking life.

“I don’t know why you’d think that,” Keith muttered, eyes still closed. He was so tired he wasn’t sure he could get them opened again if he had to without getting some sleep first.

Lance swept his hands underneath Keith’s shoulders and up to his neck, working his thumbs against the back of Keith’s neck, and he bit back a groan. A few seconds later, he murmured, “You’re picky about where I touch you.”

Keith felt himself frown, “How?”

“You always duck away, if you don’t start it,” Lance kept his voice soft and easy, but Keith knew that his expression would be clouded with doubt if he were to open his eyes.

Keith sighed as Lance’s hands worked over his biceps again, “Not true.”
“Okay, fair, but sometimes you do.”

“Maybe sometimes but,” Keith had to stop talking when he felt Lance’s thumbs slide down into his palms, massaging away the tension in his hands.

Lance hummed in reply, working his way back up Keith’s arms and to his neck and shoulders again.

Eventually, Keith murmured, “I always like when you touch me.”

He hesitated for a second before he said, “Yeah?”

“Mmm.”

Lance breathed a soft laugh and slid his thumbs across the crease of Keith’s elbows before sweeping back up to his shoulders.

Another long few moments passed, and Lance whispered, “Go to sleep, Keith.”

He didn’t need any other encouragement. With Lance’s hands gently running over him, soothing both his sore muscles and his mood, he fell asleep.

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Keith cleared his throat, “Alright, dismissed. Be safe today.”

Griffin, Kinkade, Nadia, and Ina nodded and left the room, filing out to head to work. Matt and Coran followed them, Matt heading out to check the inventory catalogue and Coran going back to the infirmary with Allura, Adam, and Shiro. It left him alone in the room, and Keith sighed before knocking his fist against the podium and turning to leave too.

It was early, and the briefing this morning was short. There were some good reports so far. Security was tight around the compound. The building had been fully cleared and was clear of any breaches. The perimeter was also finally cleared. They had burned the bodies outside of the compound, and there were only a few walkers in the clearings beyond the fences.

Even though they were safe from an immediate threat by the walkers, things were quickly falling apart inside the compound. Yesterday, Matt’s report had been the last thing he wanted to hear. After cataloguing every last drop of inventory in the compound everywhere that he and Pidge had found, Matt reported that there was about 2 days-worth of food.

2 days. That was all they had.

Keith grit his teeth, trying to push the worry down again. He’d ordered that Matt re-catalogue the food they had and ration it more harshly, but even with that order there wasn’t much hope to extend their supplies beyond a third day.

On top of problems with the food, they barely had any ammo left. Taking back the compound from the walkers had almost decimated their ammunition, and if something like that happened again, they wouldn’t have enough resources to keep everyone safe.

Lotor had completely cleaned the compound out. He’d taken everything from the compound except for most of the medical supplies, which Keith had been relieved about. He wasn’t sure if Lotor had just run out of time or he’d forgotten about the large medical stock the compound had, but thankfully, it was all secure.
A lack of food was big problem though. Keith knew what it felt like to be hungry, but he had a feeling that most of the people in the compound had no idea what it was like. Shiro had always been very prepared and dedicated to rationing, and now that there wasn’t anything at all, Keith felt like he was failing them.

Realistically, he knew that it wasn’t his fault, but he couldn’t help the guilt that was gnawing at him.

Matt was going to report back to him later about rationing, and Keith needed to figure out a plan fast. People got dangerous when they were hungry, and he couldn’t let this situation spiral out of control even more than it already had. Relations at the compound seemed like they were okay in the wake of Lotor’s betrayal, but Keith knew that he needed to keep a tight grip on everything. His dad used to tell him that if you acted like you knew what you were doing, no one would question you. Keith guessed he was going to see how true it was because he had no fucking idea how to lead these people.

He walked through the compound halls, heading outside to do the perimeter check and then check on the soldiers that were posted around the fence. Yesterday he felt like he made a lot of progress with the soldiers. It’d helped that he had stayed outside with them and got his hands dirty. In the apocalypse, bonds were built by fighting for survival, and Keith knew that the best way to keep the soldiers behind him and on his side was to build a good relationship with them.

Yesterday had been exhausting. They’d fought walkers all day, and when they weren’t fighting, they were hauling bodies away and piling them up, which was a huge physical task. By the time he’d stumbled back to his and Lance’s room, the last thing he had been expecting was—

Whatever the hell had happened between him and Lance last night.

It was just—he’d never been touched like that before, not by anyone in his entire life.

He had already been so tired, and then when Lance had rolled over on top of him, straddling him, Keith had assumed he’d already been dreaming.

Then, Lance had reached out and started touching him and Keith just—there were literally no words for him to describe what it’d been like.

This morning, Keith had woken up with Lance sprawled across his chest, hands still laying on his chest, like he’d fallen asleep that way. It made Keith’s heart ache for him, and he’d stayed in bed longer than he’d meant to, just running his hand up and down Lance’s back and listening to him breathe as he slept.

Last night with Lance had solidified Keith’s resolution to make the compound safe again. He knew that he and Lance could make it on the road together—they’d done it before—but Lance… he deserved everything under the sun, and Keith was determined to give it to him.

Keith took a deep breath, shaking himself. He needed to wake up.

The perimeter check was fine. Keith walked the fence twice, then climbed up into the tower with his rifle, checking the outside perimeter and the trees with his scope. They were stretched so thin with soldiers that they wouldn’t have someone up here for a few hours, but it wasn’t the most important thing. As long as the immediate perimeter was clear, then they would be okay.

On his way back up to the building, he checked with the soldiers on watch, and everyone assured him that they were fine. It didn’t really help to settle the worry in his chest, but it was one less
thing on his checklist.

Next, he checked over the Humvee. It was still covered in blood, both inside and out. Once he got the other immediate problems figured out, he would need to do something about this too. But it could wait.

He sighed again, heading toward the common room doors. It was late already, and when he stepped inside, Nadia and Matt were there, handing out rations to the small crowd of civilians. Keith tried not to wince at how small the portions were.

Lance was standing at one of the tables, clipboard tucked under his arm. He was wearing his jeans and jacket, and he looked a little more well-rested than he had in a couple of days. He was talking to Pidge, where she was seated at the table beside—

Allura. Allura was awake and in the common room this morning. She was in a set of sweats like Lance had worn after his surgery, and even though her skin was paler than usual, she was smiling softly and carefully eating from the plate in front of her.

Lance turned over his shoulder, caught Keith’s eye, and smiled, and Keith’s stupid knees felt weak.

On his way to see Lance and the others, he stopped to check in with Nadia and Matt.

“Everything good?” he asked.

Nadia nodded, “We’re fine. Matt has those numbers you wanted.”

“Already?”

Matt frowned, “It didn’t take long to recount.”

Keith sighed, reaching up to rub his hand across his forehead, but then, he realized that everyone was probably watching, and he made himself stop and tuck his hands into his pockets. He nodded slowly and said, “Okay. I’ll figure it out, and we’ll talk this afternoon. Anything else?”

Nadia handed him a plate, which was a few crackers and a protein bar. She said, “Here’s your rations.”

Even though he was starving and hadn’t eaten since sometime yesterday, he shook his head. Nadia frowned, opening her mouth to argue, but he turned away before she could say anything else.

He crossed the room to get to Lance’s side, who was still talking to Pidge and Allura.

“Hey,” Keith said, smiling a little, almost dying to reach out and take his hand when he finally reached Lance’s side. “Allura, how are you feeling?”

“A lot better,” she said, smiling at him.

He nodded, “That’s great, I’m glad.”

“Thanks, Keith.”

“Hi,” Lance said, catching his attention again, voice soft. “You look tired.”

“Not as tired as yesterday.”

Lance’s smile widened, all the way up to his eyes, “Last night helped?”
Keith smirked a little, nodding.

Lance laughed and reached up to gently shove at Keith’s chest, leaving his hand there, hovering over Keith’s heart.

“Ugh, gross,” Pidge complained, rolling her eyes even though she was smiling too. Allura pressed a hand to her mouth, giggling.

“Hey, Pidge,” Keith said, glancing down to her. “You okay?”

“I’d be better if you guys could stop eye-fucking in front of me. I’m trying to eat breakfast.”

Lance laughed again, loud, and a deep red blush filled his cheeks. Allura was laughing too, the sound bright, happy. Keith didn’t even bother to feel embarrassed about it. He knew it was probably true, and he definitely didn’t care.

Keith stepped a little closer to Lance, letting him lean against his chest carefully. He was still smiling a little when he said, “Glad you’re alright, Pidge.”

She nodded, “I’m still a little hungry, but I’ll be okay.”

Lance stiffened against his side, turning serious again. He looked up to Keith and asked, “How’s everything?”

“It’s okay,” Keith said, unwilling to discuss it when so many of the civilians were still here and listening. He didn’t want anyone to panic, so he’d have to tell Lance about their situation later. Maybe by then he would have some sort of idea of what they could do about everything, and if he didn’t Lance would probably be able to help. He was always the better scavenger of the two of them.

Lance nodded, “Did you already eat?”

Keith shook his head, “I’m okay for now.”

“You need to eat.”

“I said I’m alright.”

Lance didn’t reply, just looked at him, blue eyes wide, serious.

“I’m good,” Keith assured him, voice low, looking away. “Someone else can have my share.”

Lance moved his hand from Keith’s shoulder and reached up to grab his chin. His grip was firm on his jaw, and he turned Keith’s head until their gazes met.

His voice was low enough to match Keith’s when he said, “If you stop eating, then I stop eating. I need you to take care of yourself. We need you to take care of yourself.”

Keith was quiet for a long moment, considering the shake in Lance’s voice, before he nodded carefully. Lance’s fingers brushed over the stubble on Keith’s jaw.

“Okay,” Keith agreed.

“Okay,” Lance echoed.

Most of the civilians were filtering out of the room now, small breakfast rations finished. Matt and
Nadia were chatting, looking down at Nadia’s clipboard together. They would be working on more of the management within the compound today, and Keith needed to figure out what the fuck they were going to do about the limited amount of resources here.


He shook his head and brushed his hand over Lance’s arm, “I’m alright.”

Lance didn’t look like he believed him, but he didn’t say anything. Instead, he cupped Keith’s jaw. The radio at his belt buzzed with Griffin’s voice, asking for his location, “Keith, what’s your 20?”

He sighed, and Lance moved back. Cursing the radio’s existence altogether, he pulled it from his belt and replied, “I’m in the common room. What’s going on?”

“Can you meet me at the tower?”

“10-4,” Keith agreed. He hooked the radio back to his belt and sighed, “I’ve got to go.”

“Not before you eat.”

Keith nodded, “I’ll get something on my way.”

Lance hesitated for a brief moment, but then he nodded too, “Okay. Be safe.”

“Yeah. I’ll see you later,” Keith took a step forward, running a hand down Lance’s side briefly, uncaring that there were other people in the room watching them, desperate for some sort of connection with him.

Lance smoothed his hand over Keith’s shoulder, smiling lightly and then letting go. He said, “Go work. See you tonight.”

“Gross,” Pidge complained again, sipping some of her water, pointedly rolling her eyes. Allura was still smiling too, and Keith made a note to check up on her again later.

Keith laughed, ducking his head as he turned and walked away. Matt tossed him a protein bar on his way out, and he ate it on the walk to meet Griffin at the tower.

By the time Keith was finished with his work for the day, it was late. He’d missed dinner again, not that there was enough food to really call it dinner, but he’d had to meet with Nadia and Matt to make a plan for finding enough food to keep them going for a while longer.

The halls were empty as he made his way to the infirmary. It was his last stop for the day, but it was also the one he’d been most anxious about.

Since Allura was feeling better, she had been moved out of the infirmary and back to her bedroom where Coran, Romelle, and Lance were keeping an eye on her from time to time. Adam still hadn’t woken up from the head injury that he had received either.

Shiro’s condition was up in the air. Coran wasn’t sure why he hadn’t woken up yet. He’d suggested that it was from shock, exhaustion maybe, but whatever was happening, Keith was worried. It was enough to make him feel sick when he thought about it.

The infirmary was empty as well when he stepped inside. Coran and Lance took turns checking on
Shiro and Adam throughout the night, but they didn’t stay here. Other than Adam and Shiro, who were both unconscious in their respective hospital beds, Keith was alone.

He felt it too. Sure, he had Lance. He even had some other people around the compound to help out, but this burden felt so heavy. He wasn’t sure he was making the right choices. He wasn’t sure that he was doing the right thing for everyone. What if he was just messing everything up? What if he got them all killed because he made the wrong call?

Keith sighed as he sat down at the foot of Shiro’s hospital bed. He didn’t turn to look at his brother, didn’t think he could. He just leaned forward, pressing his head into his hands and staying there for a long moment, trying to figure out what to say.

He’d been here before too. He remembered this feeling—this loneliness, this terror—when Lance had been here so many weeks ago.

They had made it through then, he guessed.

It didn’t make this any easier.

Keith sat at the end of Shiro’s hospital bed for a long moment, holding his head in his hands, trying to bite back the tears that were threatening to crawl up his throat and leak out of his eyes. He was so tired and so worried.

“Please wake up, Shiro,” Keith whispered sometime later. “Please. I can’t keep doing this without you.”

He knew that Shiro wouldn’t reply, but it was still a swift punch to the gut when there was no answer.
i got rage everyday, on the inside

Chapter Summary

Keith rolled his eyes and set the box down. He pulled his katana from the sheath on his back and approached the walker, listening to Artax knicker in warning behind him.

He was so angry that he let it get close enough so he could grab it by the shoulder and stare at it for a long moment.

“Stupid motherfucker,” Keith growled after he was sick of hearing it groan at him. He kicked it back and raised his katana, taking its head off in one swipe and turning before the head hit the pavement.

Chapter Notes

hey friends! rachel here! this is the last chapter in this keith section, so after this we'll be swapping back to maire with lance POV, we're gonna take a short break on updating for a while, but we'll be back soon! the comments that you guys leave inspire us so much, so please keep leaving them! tell us your fav parts of the fic and what you hope/think will happen in the future.

As per usual, chapter title is from Fall Out Boy. Also, if you want to chat with us about the fic or anything else, you can find us on tumblr @somethingmorecreative1 and @maireep

Stay safe, stay healthy, and take care of yourselves xoxo

Days passed. Keith wasn’t sure how many went by, but it was the same pattern every day. Wake up. Run the briefing. Perimeter check. Grab Artax and head out to scavenge food, bring back small game if he found any. Make it back to the compound in time to see Lance for five minutes. Another perimeter check. Plan with Nadia and Matt about supplies and food. Clear the fence of any walker build up. Final perimeter check. Check on Shiro. Find Lance in their room, already asleep.

And fucking repeat.

He was exhausted, and he was pissed. If he didn’t have this nagging voice in the back of his head telling him to do the right thing, he’d take Artax out right now, track down Lotor, and take his fucking head off for what he’d done to them.

But the damn voice in his head sounded a lot like Shiro, and it kept him grounded here. If this all worked out, then Keith would go out and hunt Lotor after, when everything was more stable, when Shiro was awake.

Then he’d make Lotor pay for what he’d done.
This morning, he was just now getting back from his scavenging trip outside. When he’d woken up, it’d been earlier than normal, before the alarm, and he took advantage of not being able to fall back to sleep. He’d carefully pressed his lips to Lance’s forehead and slid out from underneath him, quietly grabbing his clothes and weapons before heading outside. He finished the perimeter check early, headed to the briefing, and let Coran know that he would be back in a few hours.

He’d grabbed Artax from her stable, and with the help of two of the soldiers at the fence, he’d gone into the forest to check the traps he’d set up a few days ago.

It was strange, being out when it was still dark. But, the sun was coming up quickly, and it was getting lighter by the minute. Thankfully, the universe was looking out for him; most of his traps were full. He’d snagged a few rabbits and squirrels, and it would hopefully be enough for dinner tonight, if they were careful with it.

He and Artax headed up to the highway after they were finished with the traps. Because they’d always had enough stock at the compound and could go after more supplies with the bandits up north, these cars hadn’t been picked clean before. Over the past few days, Keith had found a few cans of food here and there, along with some crackers and chips. It was better than nothing, and it only took an extra hour of his time.

Today, the haul was good. He’d found a whole box of canned goods in the trunk of an old Honda, and since he wasn’t far from the compound, he decided to cut his losses and head back early.

Just as he was getting ready to climb back onto Artax, cardboard box clutched in one hand, a lone walker stumbled out between the cars, reaching for him.

Keith rolled his eyes and set the box down. He pulled his katana from the sheath on his back and approached the walker, listening to Artax knicker warningly behind him.

He was so angry that he let it get close enough so he could grab it by the shoulder and stare at it for a long moment.

“Stupid motherfucker,” Keith growled after he was sick of hearing it groan at him. He kicked it back and raised his katana, taking its head off in one swipe and turning before the head hit the pavement.

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They held another briefing at lunch, since Keith had ducked out early this morning.

The food crisis was far from being solved, but the game and canned goods he’d brought back this morning helped morale around the compound. The soldiers had been excited about it, and the civilians that Keith had seen in the common room earlier all looked well. Either they were all actually okay or they were great at pretending for Keith’s sake.

Pidge raised her hand now, “Why don’t we just go to the bandits up north and trade for supplies like we usually do?”

Keith frowned, “Theoretically we could, but Shiro is the one who knows them so well. I don’t—”

“Plus,” Matt interrupted him, glancing at him in sympathy. They’d already talked about this yesterday, but for appearance’s sake, they should answer in front of everyone else too. He continued, “We don’t have enough American dollars to make the trade for the amount of supplies we would need. We don’t even have enough gas for the Humvee to get there anyway. Keith and I have discussed running a mission up there in a few weeks when we can get more gas and money.”
There were several nods around the common room, including Pidge. Matt had brought her along to the lunch briefing today since they were still working on rationing and creating a better plan that would keep them alive longer than just the scavenging trips that Keith was doing every morning. Eventually, he would run out of places to look, and they would go hungry until he found something else.

“Right,” Keith agreed. “We don’t have the gas to go on a trip like that. The Humvee only has what’s left in the tank, which means that we could probably go maybe fifty miles. If that.”

“Which is why I propose we take out a scavenging group to look for supplies closer to home,” Matt said, standing up from his spot at the table.

Kinkade and Griffin frowned, exchanging a look with each other before glancing to Keith. They had both already offered to go out and look for more supplies, sans Humvee and without any backup, but Keith had turned them down. He didn’t want them out of the compound at all because if something happened and he needed reinforcements, the two of them plus Nadia and Ina were the first people he would call.

“Who’s we, and how many people are you expecting to take?” Keith asked, even though he, again, knew most of this already. In fact, Nadia did too, but for now, they were keeping information as secret as they could, especially since Ina was close to getting the security footage and questioning the last of the soldiers to find out who exactly had been behind Lotor’s plan and if there were any moles in the compound.

Keith really doubted it, but he had to be sure that Lotor wasn’t controlling anyone here.

“I’ll lead the mission, and I can take three or four soldiers or even if any of the civilians want to volunteer,” Matt suggested.

Pidge raised her hand high, “I can go.”

Keith shook his head before Matt could even object, “No, sorry, Pidge. You’re staying here.”

Pidge spun to look at him, eyes wide, “But I can do it. I used to scavenge all the time when I was on the road. You know I can do it.”

“I know,” Keith argued, trying to make his voice gentle, but he wasn’t sure if it came through. He was tired and worried and angry that they were even having to do any of this in the first place. “But we need you to stay here this time.”

“I’m not sure that it’s a good idea to take any civilians with you,” Griffin suggested, crossing his arms over his chest and glancing to Keith. “If you get in a tight spot then they might not know how to handle themselves.”

Kinkade grunted in agreement.

“Nadia, can we spare three soldiers for the mission?” Keith asked.

She frowned, glancing to her clipboard and rifling through it before nodding, “It’ll be tight, but we can manage. How long will you be gone?”

“As long as it takes us to come back with enough food to keep us going for a few weeks,” Matt said.

“When do you want to leave?”
Matt glanced to the clock on the wall. It was still a few hours before noon. After a short pause, he said, “We can leave now.”

Pidge started to interrupt, “But—”

“Alright then,” Keith spoke over her, unwilling to waste the time on an argument now. “Nadia, pick three soldiers and have them report to the garage in an hour. Ina, you take Griffin and Kinkade and start to prep the Humvee for the mission. Matt, you can grab your stuff and do whatever you need to before you meet us in the garage.

“Pidge,” Keith continued, “you’ll come with me. We’ll grab some emergency supplies for the mission and take them down to the Humvee.”

There were nods around the room. Their expressions were serious.

“Alright, dismissed,” Keith said, knocking his knuckles against the podium. “See everyone in the garage in an hour.”

Kinkade, Griffin, Nadia, and Ina all shuffled out of the room, which left Keith alone with Matt and Pidge. Matt was frowning, and Pidge had her arms crossed over her chest, head tucked down, like she was angry.

“It’s not fair,” she said, looking up to Matt. “I can go with you. I can help.”

“Like Keith said—” Matt started.

“It’s not fair,” she said, looking up to Matt. “I can go with you. I can help.”

“Like Keith said—” Matt started.

“Keith doesn’t know anything!” Pidge’s voice was nearly a shout. “I’m good at scavenging!”

“Hey,” Keith said warningly, voice rough. He didn’t want to snap at Pidge, but she couldn’t be shouting about this. Any sort of tension within the compound would just make everything more difficult right now, even if Pidge was coming from the right place. If their situations had been reversed, he wouldn’t want Shiro to go anywhere without him either.

She glanced over at him and dipped her head a little, “Sorry. But it’s true! I can go!”

“I’m not saying you’re not good at scavenging,” Keith assured her, walking over to her side and getting in front of her so she had to look up at him. “All I’m saying is that you’re not going this time.”

“But—”

“Listen to Keith, Pidge,” Matt said, voice a lot softer than Keith’s.

“I want to go with you,” she argued. “I want to help.”

Keith nodded to Matt, “Go get ready. We’ll meet you in the garage.”

Matt agreed and headed out of the room and into the hallway. Pidge sighed and moved to follow him, but Keith set his hand on her shoulder and kept her from going anywhere.

“What’s your problem, Keith?” she asked, jerking out from under him.

“I don’t have a problem. I said that you’re going to help me.”

She rolled her eyes, “I don’t want to help you.”
Keith grit his teeth. She sounded exactly like he had when he was younger. Keith wondered if Shiro had ever been this pissed at him before for saying shitty things to him when he was a kid. Probably. No, definitely.

This had to be the universe paying him back for that shit.

He brushed it off and turned toward the door, “Too fucking bad, I guess. Let’s go.”

Even though she huffed, she followed him and caught up to him in the hallway, walking at his shoulder. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and he could feel the anger rolling off her in waves. Instead of trying to soothe her, he didn’t say anything. Sometimes you needed to learn to deal with your anger and take orders when people needed your help, and today, Pidge was going to learn that lesson.

Keith hoped he wasn’t being too harsh but—his mood was shot to hell anyway.

They finally arrived at the infirmary, and when Keith opened the door and stepped inside, Pidge right behind him, he saw Coran and Lance looking down at Shiro and rebandaging his arm.

Lance looked up at them. He smiled, and it didn’t reach his eyes, mostly because he looked absolutely and utterly exhausted.

“You okay?” Keith asked, stepping further into the room, wanting to be closer to him.

Lance nodded, stepping away from Shiro’s hospital bed as they finished the bandages. He removed his gloves and said, “Yeah. Let me wash my hands.”

Keith nodded, “Hey, Coran. Everything okay?”

“As good as we can be, my boy,” Coran said, and his voice was cheery, even though he looked tired too.

Keith knew that Coran and Lance had been taking care of Adam, Shiro, and Allura pretty much nonstop since this whole thing started, even waking up in the middle of the night multiple times to check on them. Plus, Lance had also been dealing with all of the civilians and keeping up with their work and how they were all feeling. It was a lot for them to handle on their own, and Keith felt guilty, like he wasn’t doing enough on his end.

“How’s Shiro?” he was almost afraid to ask at this point.

“No signs of infection, and the amputation was clean. We won’t be sure what kind of nerve damage he sustained until he wakes up,” Coran explained. “We’re not sure when that will be.”

Keith nodded.

Lance appeared at his side, having washed his hands in the sink at the counter. His voice was soft when he said, “Hi, guys. What’s up?”

“We need a bag of emergency medical supplies,” Keith said. “Matt is going on a scavenging mission with three soldiers, and we thought they might need some supplies just in case. Coran, can you fix something basic for them?”

“Yes, of course, Keith. Give me just a moment.”

Lance looked between him and Pidge and narrowed his eyes. He asked, “Everything okay?”
Pidge didn’t say anything, and for some reason, her not answering Lance made him really fucking angry.

He nudged her with his elbow, “Lance is talking to you.”

She shot him a heated stare before looking up to Lance, “Keith won’t let me go on the scavenging mission with Matt and the others.”

Lance kept his expression neutral, he nodded and said, “Okay. It sucks that you don’t get to go with him. I know you just want to look out for him.”

Keith hadn’t been expecting Lance to say that, but as soon as the words were out of his mouth, Pidge was nodding, and tears pooled in her eyes.

She reached up to swipe them away angrily, “I know. What if something happens and I’m not there to help?”

Lance nodded again and reached forward, setting a hand on her shoulder, and she turned into him, throwing her arms around his middle and hugging him. Watching them, Keith felt like a huge asshole. He knew that Pidge wanted to go with Matt, of course he knew that, but he wasn’t going to change his mind.

“It’s okay to be angry,” Lance said, voice soft, as he ran his hand up and down her back comfortingly. She was shaking. He continued, “But Keith knows what he’s doing, and if he says that you can’t go on this mission with Matt then it’s for the best. Keith has his reasons, and he’s right. He’s trying his best to keep us alive and safe, right?”

“Right,” Pidge cried into Lance’s chest.

“Keith wants you to be safe, just like the rest of us.”

She nodded.

Lance smiled a little and glanced up at him. Keith didn’t know what to say.

It was just—hearing Lance say all of that really, really made him feel better about all of this. Knowing that Lance thought he was doing the right thing made him feel like he could keep going.

“It’ll be okay,” Lance continued, patting her back gently. “If Keith didn’t think it was important or if he thought it was too dangerous then he wouldn’t have agreed to let Matt go.”

She nodded again and pulled back from him, wiping away the rest of her tears. Her voice was small when she said, “I just got him back, you know? What if something bad happens and I’m not there?”

“I know,” Lance said soothingly. “That’s the thing about the world. We don’t know what will happen, but everything will eventually work out the way it’s supposed to. The only thing you can do is make sure that your people know how much you love them every chance you get and that you always say goodbye when you have to, just in case.”

Keith clenched his jaw.

Pidge took a breath and then turned over her shoulder to look back up at Keith. Her voice shook when she said, “Sorry.”
“It’s okay,” he said, forcing his voice not to shake too. “I’d have been angry if someone told me I couldn’t go on a mission with Shiro.”

Pidge nodded, “But we can see Matt before he leaves, right?”

“Of course,” Keith assured her. “I won’t let them leave until you get to say goodbye.”

Lance smiled, and just as he was opening his mouth to say something else, Coran came back into the infirmary from the back storage room with a small crate in his hands.

“Here we go, Keith,” Coran said. “I’m afraid it’s not much, but it’s all we have to spare right now.”

Keith reached out and took the crate from him, nodding, “This is great, Coran, thanks. Hopefully they won’t need any of it anyway.”

“Better safe than sorry!” Coran nodded, smiling a little. He turned back to check on Shiro.

Lance was still smiling a little, arm around Pidge’s shoulders, when Keith looked back up to him.

“We should get to the garage, Pidge,” Keith said. “Ina might need our help with the prep work before Matt and the others can leave.”

Pidge nodded, and Lance brushed his hand over her shoulders as she stepped away from him. She reached out and took the crate from Keith and murmured, “I’ll wait for you in the hallway. Bye, Lance.”

“See you later, Pidge,” he replied, voice soft, expression softer. “Remember what I said.”

She nodded again and left the room. Over Lance’s shoulder, Coran spared them a quick glance before he disappeared into the storage room, a small smile on his face, as he left them all alone.

“I didn’t mean to start something with you and Pidge,” Lance admitted, stepping a little closer to him.

Keith sighed, “You didn’t. Talking to you was probably the only thing that kept her from stowing away in the Humvee and going with them anyway.”

“You think she would have done that?”

He hesitated, and then, “Yeah. I do. I know that she was out on the road on her own for a while, and she probably is good at scavenging, but I don’t think she has any experience fighting walkers. If they got into a bind and she got pushed into a corner with one—”

Lance didn’t need him to finish the sentence. During Keith’s pause, he stepped closer to Keith, and his hand circled Keith’s wrist, squeezing lightly.

“It’d be too dangerous. Matt would be too worried about her instead of focusing on the supplies, which is what we really need. He needs to take the soldiers, get the supplies, and get home. He doesn’t need to be focused on anything else,” Keith finally finished.

“You don’t need to explain yourself to me,” Lance said, glancing down to their hands before looking back up to him. “I’ll back your play no matter what.”

“Yeah?” Keith asked, fighting against the lump in his throat. “Even if you think I’m being an idiot or an asshole?”
Lance rolled his eyes, “I might argue with you a little, but yeah, I’m your partner. I’ve always got your back.”

Keith fisted his hands. He was struggling against his impulse to grab Lance by the hips and back him up against the wall.

He took a deep breath instead. Then, he said, “Same. I mean—me too.”

Lance’s smile was wide, and he squeezed Keith’s wrist again.

A moment later, Lance’s smile faded, and he said, “Are you going with them? Do I have to say goodbye?”

“No,” Keith breathed, shifting a little closer, tilting his head down to stare at his blue, blue eyes. “No, you don’t have to, but I wouldn’t mind if you did.”

“Oh yeah?” Lance leaned in, close enough that their noses brushed.

Keith was sure he might explode. He nodded and whispered, “Yeah. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Good to know,” Lance murmured, pushing himself up on his toes to press his forehead to Keith’s. His other hand settled against Keith’s chest, and Keith closed his eyes.

The Humvee was packed and ready to go, soldiers loaded, engine running.

Keith stood a few feet back from it, arms crossed over his chest. The driver’s side door was open, waiting for Matt, where he was saying goodbye to Pidge. He had his hands on her shoulders, and it looked like he was explaining something to her. She nodded and ducked forward into his arms for a hug.

Once he pulled back, he climbed up into the Humvee and waved at her again, then, nodded to Keith. He pressed down on the gas pedal and eased the Humvee toward the fence, where Griffin was pulling it open with the help of a few other soldiers.

Keith walked forward and wrapped an arm around Pidge’s shoulders. She leaned into his side, wiping away the last of her tears.

They stood there for a long moment, watching as Griffin and the soldiers closed the gates behind the Humvee and then as it headed up the hill and to the highway. Keith sent a small prayer to whoever was listening. They needed this to work out. It was one of their last options.

“C’mon,” Keith said finally, nudging Pidge, “let’s go to the tower and take watch for a while.”

“Both of us?” she asked.

He nodded, “Yeah.”

“Don’t they need you somewhere else?”

“Not for a while,” he jerked his head toward the tower. “Let’s go.”

Finally, she nodded, and Keith shouldered his weapons again and walked through the yard and to the tower.
Once they were up and seated in the tower, legs dangling over the side into the air, weapons pushed away, Keith said, “I’m sorry I wouldn’t let you go with them.”

“It’s okay, Keith,” she ducked her head. “I know I would have just gotten in the way.”

He sighed, “That’s not why I didn’t want you to go.”

“Then why?”

He hesitated a little, and then said, “Do you remember when we were out in the yard with Lotor and those walkers? Right after I got back to the compound?”

Pidge looked over to him, eyes wide, and nodded.

“You looked absolutely terrified, and you should have been because that was scary as hell,” Keith said, hoping that he was explaining this right. “But you froze. When you saw those walkers, you were frozen. I had to yell at you to get you to focus.”

Pidge ducked her head, like she was ashamed, and Keith cursed himself. He wasn’t trying to make her feel bad, he just—needed her to understand.

“You took good care of yourself out on the road,” Keith continued. “You kept yourself alive, but you did that by avoiding the walkers. You outran them and outsmarted them, which is exactly what you should have done, but that’s a lot easier to do when it’s just you that you’re looking out for.

“When you’re with a group of people, you can’t just bolt and outrun the walkers. That’s how people get killed. Sometimes, you have to stand and fight them, and I don’t think you have any idea how to do that.”

Pidge was quiet next to him.

“That’s why I didn’t send you on the mission,” Keith said. “You’re great at scavenging, and you’re amazing at surviving, but the way that you’ve survived is different from what we needed on the mission. Do you understand?”

She nodded.

“Okay,” Keith said, and he picked up his rifle to scan the perimeter with the scope.

“Keith?”

“Yeah?”

“Will you teach me how to fight them?” Her voice was small when she asked the question.

He pulled the rifle down to his lap and looked over to her. Her eyes were wide, and she was biting her lip, like she was nervous to be asking him about it.

“Of course I will,” he replied. “Once we get the rationing problem solved, I’ll help you.”

“Thanks, Keith,” she said.

It was a long while before she said anything else. In fact, Keith had been considering leaving the tower altogether. The wind was chilly, and he knew there were a million other things that he could and should be doing instead of this.
But then, Pidge said, “I’m really glad you and Lance found me.”

The words were like a punch to Keith’s stomach. Pidge had been the one to lead him to his brother, to the compound, and oddly enough, to this new place he was in with Lance. He owed everything he had to Pidge, no doubt about it.

He set a hand on her shoulder and nodded, unable to say anything at all.

A long while passed, and they sat in the tower on watch together. Pidge pulled her knees up to her chest, and Keith kept his eyes on the outer perimeter, watching a few walkers shuffling around at the edge of the forest.

His radio buzzed at his side, and he winced at the sudden noise.

“Keith, what’s your 20?”

He frowned at Ina’s voice. It was rare for her to be contacting him directly on the radio. He grabbed the radio and said, “I’m in the tower. What’s wrong?”

“I’ve got the security footage ready,” she replied.

Pidge was looking at him, eyes wide, and he nodded once, then said, “10-4, I’m on my way.”

“Can I come with you?” Pidge asked.

“Sure,” he said, “let’s go.”

They climbed down the ladder and headed back up to the building. It was a long, cold walk, and by the time they got back into the common room, Pidge was shivering a little. The common room was empty, but there were a few civilians in the kitchen, still cleaning the room since it’d been essentially destroyed in Lotor’s raid.

As they walked down the hallway to the administrative offices where the security base was located, they ran into Allura. She was still dressed in sweats and socks, and she was gripping a bottle of water, one hand pressed to her side, as she walked toward them.

“Hi,” she greeted, smiling. Her hair was tied back into a ponytail, and her eyes were clearer and more alert today.

“Hey, Allura,” Keith said, “how are you feeling?”

“Okay, just trying to loosen up a bit,” she explained. “Coran and Lance have suggested I walk for a few minutes every hour or so to prevent my back from stiffening.”

“You can walk with us,” Pidge suggested, glancing up at Keith. “Right?”

“Sure,” he nodded.

“I don’t want to slow you down,” she argued, but the hope in her eyes was evident. It was obvious that Allura was tired of bedrest.

He smirked, “Then don’t. We’re just going to meet Ina in the security office. She recovered the footage from the camera during Lotor’s attack.”

“And you’re going to watch it?” her voice was incredulous.
“We’re having a hard time piecing a timeline together,” Keith said, nodding, and they started walking. Allura fell into step between them, and she was slower than normal, but not near as slow as Keith had been expecting from someone who had been fatally stabbed days ago.

“I hadn’t thought of that as an option,” she said. “Is it okay if I come along? My memory has been somewhat fuzzy.”

“That’s fine,” Keith agreed, and they turned the corner of the hallway down toward the administration offices.

Allura nodded, and there was a lull in their conversation before Pidge started talking, filling in the gaps as she explained what had been happening around the compound lately.

Once they reached the security office, they stepped inside. Ina and Nadia were there, seated in the two chairs in the room, looking over the various computer monitors in the room. There were enough screens to showcase all the security cameras that the compound had, so they completely covered one wall of the room. Ina was at the computer, typing at the keyboard, and the footage paused as they walked in.

It was rare for anyone to be down here, at least in the past few months. The literal walking dead outside made it hard to care about security on the inside of the compound, and since Keith and Lance had been here, he didn’t think anyone had really used this room at all. Realistically, in their situation now, it was lucky that they had this option at all.

Nadia looked over to them and got up out of her chair, offering it to him, “Hey, Keith, you’ve got to see this.”

He pulled the chair out and motioned for Allura to sit down, and she hesitated, but when Keith didn’t move, she sighed and carefully moved into the chair, openly wincing. Pidge held onto one of her hands, and Keith kept the chair steady for her.

Nadia closed the door behind them, tucking them away from prying eyes, just in case.

“Ready?” Ina asked, voice serious.

He nodded, “Ready.”

“I’ve been trying to sort the timeline as best as I could, so I went all the way back to the footage that started right after you left on the mission, and from what I can see, the best place to start is in the common room that morning after the lab team left,” Ina pressed her hand onto the keyboard, and the screens started playing the footage.

The top row of screens was various hallways in the compound, which were the hallways with the most traffic. The middle row held various angles on the common room, the kitchen, and the one security camera from the garage. The bottom row showed the multiple views of the lab and one angle of the armory. Only the most important areas around the compound had the security cameras that recorded on the current electricity system.

In the common room on the morning that they’d left for the mission, Allura and the rest of the civilians were handing out assignments for the day when a group of Lotor’s soldiers entered the common room, filing into the room and shuffling around. It was only a few seconds before it looked like complete chaos had filled the room. Kinkade and Nadia looked like they were about to fight with two of Lotor’s soldiers, and Pidge and Allura were completely surrounded by them.

“What was going on?” Keith asked, turning to look at Allura.
“They were just being huge assholes,” Pidge said, shaking her head.

Allura nodded. “They wanted to take control of the compound. They were threatening us.”

Keith frowned, “What stopped them?”

Ina pointed to one of the screens, “Lance comes in right here.”

Sure enough, Lance appeared on one of the screens, walking down the hallway, hands tucked into his jacket pockets, like nothing was bothering him. Keith watched as he walked down the hallways and jumped from screen to screen until he turned and pulled open the common room door, stopping suddenly once he was inside.

One of the camera angles was adjusted so that Keith could see Lance’s face perfectly, and even though the footage was being fast-forwarded for the sake of time, Keith caught the exact moment Lance realized what was going on. He stepped forward, and his mouth was moving, like he was yelling something. The motion in the room stopped, and Lance walked forward, getting in between one of the soldiers and Pidge.

A few seconds later, the soldiers all left the room, filing out one by one.

“They just left?” Keith asked, confused.

“Lance threatened them,” Allura said. “I think that was the only reason they didn’t attack us then.”

Ina nodded, “The soldiers leave, and so does everyone else,” pointing to the screens while it happened. Even Lance turned to leave, but Kinkade called him back, and the two talked for a moment before they both exited the common room.

“What was that?”

Ina shrugged and adjusted the speed on the video, pushing it faster, “I’m not sure. Kinkade exits outside and walks down to the perimeter, but Lance turns here and goes down the hallway. We lose him after a few minutes, but he walked in the direction of your room, so he might have gone to get something.

“He comes back here,” Ina pointed, and Lance was back in the hallway, walking toward the lab now. “But he doesn’t have anything with him. He goes into the lab with Allura, and they stay there for a long while.”

“That’s where we were when Bandor attacked,” Allura added.

“Right,” Ina pointed to the screen, where Lance and Allura were sitting at the counter, looking through data. It looked like they were talking about something, but he didn’t bother to ask what it was. “You and Lance were lucky because this is when Lotor’s soldiers attacked the lab.”

Sure enough, on the other screens focused on the other side of the lab from where Allura and Lance had been, five of Lotor’s soldiers appeared in the hallway, rifles in hand. Bandor was with them, carrying a sharp machete.

The massacre was hard to watch, but Keith didn’t let himself look away.

Bandor slit the last standing civilian’s throat, and blood sprayed him, while the other soldiers started raiding the lab, once all the bodies were on the floor. Then, Bandor walked through the lab, and opened the last door, to the section where Lance and Allura were working.
Ina slowed the footage down because now, there were soldiers flowing into the compound hallways too. Some were still raiding the lab, more were in the common room and kitchen, taking all the supplies, and they were emptying the armory, where Pidge and Matt were being held hostage, and carrying crates out through the common room and to the garage.

It was a lot to watch all at once. Keith suddenly understood why it had taken so long to gather all of this and make a timeline for the attack.

“It was obviously a coordinated attack,” Nadia said, pointing from screen to screen. “We assume it was supposed to start in the common room, but something Lance said must have pushed them back. We think that was one of the only reasons that we still managed to have some supplies and survivors. Lotor’s original goal was most likely complete destruction of the compound.”

Keith kept his eyes locked onto the screen where Lance was sitting. As soon as the door opened and Bandor stepped inside the lab, covered in blood, machete in hand, Lance jumped to his feet, lab stool skittering out from behind him, as he stood in front of Allura protectively, palms up.

They talked for a second, but the camera was too far from Lance for Keith to read his lips. Then, Bandor moved past Lance, machete up, and grabbed Allura, pressing the weapon into her back, obviously threatening them.

The cameras flickered all of a sudden, and then, there were red, blinking lights on the screens that recorded the lab.

“What is that?” Keith demanded, on edge from watching the attack.

“That is the lab security system,” Ina explained. “It was triggered when Lotor’s soldiers started breaking in and raiding the locked samples and vaccines.”

Keith looked back in time to Lance’s screen to see Bandor shove the machete into Allura’s back, and then, Lance pulled one of his pistols out and shot Bandor in the arm, moving forward to catch Allura, where blood was already spilling from the wound on her back.

Ina cleared her throat, “Matt is injured by one of the soldiers on their way out, once the armory is cleared, and Pidge and Matt disappear from the armory camera a few seconds later. By this point, most of Lotor’s soldiers have completely raided the compound and are on their way to the garage.”

“Soldiers on guard duty on the inside were killed in several locations, and civilians that were in the kitchen and some of the hallways were also killed by Lotor’s soldiers,” Nadia confirmed.

“This is where we see the soldiers split off,” Ina added. “The soldiers that survived hunker down in the barracks now, right after the electricity is cut.”

It happened on the screens, too, and most of them were completely dark until the emergency lights flickered on. Lance was making his way down the hallway now, having smashed his way out of the lab, dragging Allura with him and keeping his gun on Bandor at the same time.

He should have pulled the fucking trigger but—Keith grit his teeth. Bandor was Romelle’s brother, and really, he was just a stupid kid. By not shooting him between the eyes, Lance had been trying to save him.

Time and time again, Lance proved he was a much better person than Keith. His compassion was one of the damn things that Keith loved about him. His conviction was another, and watching Lance drag Allura down the hallway, trying to keep her alive and them safe, was just a fucking sucker punch to his chest.
Keith should have been here to stop all of this. Lotor was going to fucking pay, one way or another.

“When the electricity is cut, the security system starts to power down, so this is the last thing that we see,” Ina pointed back to Lance’s screen.

Lance backed up against the last glass door, one of the doors that led down to the compound yard from the back side of the lab. He turned, shielding Allura with his body, and pulled his leg up, kicking the glass and letting it shower over them.

Keith shoved a hand through his hair, nervous, angry, everything.

Bandor followed him and Allura out, and Ina drew their attention to one of the hallway cameras, where Pidge was running, rifle in hand.

That was where the cameras cut out.

“Where the fuck were you going?” Keith demanded, turning to look at her.

“To the yard so I could help,” she said, biting her lip nervously.

When he glanced down to Allura, she was staring at the screens, eyes wide, frozen, and Keith cursed himself. He shouldn’t have let either of them watch this. It was probably traumatic enough, having lived through it once, and he should have made them wait outside even if they’d wanted to watch.

“Allura, are you okay?” he asked.

She blinked and looked back up to him. Instead of replying aloud, she just nodded. It was obvious she wasn’t okay.

Keith sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. His voice was rough when he said, “Is that all, Ina?”

“Yes sir. We’re finishing with the soldiers tomorrow, but so far there hasn’t been anything said to convince us that anyone still inside the compound is working for Lotor or has any sort of allegiances to him,” she explained.

Keith nodded. He was just—even more exhausted after watching that. He’d known that it’d been bad here, while they were gone on the mission, but he hadn’t expected it to be anything like that.

“Okay, update me tomorrow when you finish with the soldiers, and we’ll talk more then,” he said with a nod.

Ina and Nadia agreed easily, and Keith held out his hands to Allura, carefully helping her up out of the chair. She winced, and Pidge hovered beside them nervously.

“Do you want to go to the infirmary to see Lance and Coran?” Keith asked. “Maybe they should check your wound.”

She shook her head, “I think I need to lie down.”

“Okay,” he agreed, keeping one of her hands in his while they made their way out into the hallway. She clutched at him and pressed her other hand to her side, wincing as they walked.

He would need to get Coran to go check on her in a little bit, once she made it back to her room,
and then he could check on her again after dinner tonight.

For now, he needed to find Lance.

“Pidge,” he asked, when they were getting close to Allura’s room, “will you make sure Allura gets back okay?”

She nodded, “Then what should I do?”

“Try and get some rest before dinner.”

“Where are you going?”

“I need to find Lance,” he said, voice neutral despite the desperation swimming in his chest at the thought of what he had seen on the security footage. He carefully let go of Allura’s hand and patted her shoulder before turning to go down the hall to the infirmary.

“Wait, Keith!” Pidge said, catching his arm as he started to turn away. When he looked down to her, her eyes were wide. Her voice shook as she continued, “I don’t remember much after the— after I got to the yard, but when Lotor came back and told us that you were dead…”

He waited quietly, and tears pooled in her eyes.

“He kept threatening Lance,” she whispered, tears overflowing and running down her cheeks, “and touching him, saying that he was going to take him away and, and—”

A quiet rage settled in his chest.

“Pidge,” Keith kept his voice low, soft. He set his hand on her shoulder and squeezed, saying, “Thank you for telling me.”

She nodded, one hand reaching up to swipe away some of the tears.

“Now, stop worrying about it,” Keith said, ordered, gently. “I’m sorry that you had to see that, but I’ll never let it happen. I promise.”

Pidge nodded again, and she ducked forward, wrapping her arms around his waist and holding on tight for a few seconds before letting go and stepping back.

“I’ll stay with Allura,” she offered, voice small.

Keith smiled, “Atta girl. I’ll check on you at dinner.”

She nodded and went back to Allura’s side, taking her hand and leading her down the hallway.

Keith turned and walked toward the infirmary. He tried not to think about anything on his way.

When he finally turned the corner, Lance was coming out into the hallway, closing the door to the infirmary behind him. He scrubbed a hand over his face, and when he looked up to Keith, he smiled.

“Hey,” Lance’s voice was rough, a tell for how tired he was.

Keith didn’t bother to reply. Instead, he closed the space between them and wrapped his arms around Lance’s middle, pulling him into his chest and holding him tight.
Without pausing or questioning him, Lance slid his arms around Keith’s neck and ducked his head into Keith’s shoulder. He was warm and he was breathing and he was alive.

Keith hadn’t realized how much the security footage had scared him until right now. Having to watch Lance in the middle of the attack just—he didn’t have the words to describe how it made him feel. Terrified was probably the closest.

And thankful that Lance was still alive.

“Everything okay?” Lance asked, voice muffled against Keith’s shoulder.

Keith nodded, turning his face into Lance’s neck.

A long moment passed before Keith felt like he could move. He felt like he was shaking, and one of Lance’s hands was smoothing up and down his spine. Keith wished there were less layers between them.

He sighed and moved one hand up to cradle the back of Lance’s head, sliding his fingers through Lance’s hair. He just—couldn’t believe they’d come so close to losing each other. Again.

It made all this space between them feel so incredibly stupid.

Lance pushed back from him enough to look at him. His expression was tight, eyes wide, worried. There were even a few tears in his eyes, and Keith curled tighter around him, unwilling to let go.

“Something’s wrong,” Lance guessed, blinking back his tears.

“I just,” Keith cleared his throat and met his gaze, “needed to see you.”

Lance pulled one of his hands up Keith’s back and around to his face, cupping his jaw. It was obvious that he realized something was up just from the way he was looking at him.

“Tell me what’s happening,” Lance breathed.

Keith shook his head, squeezing Lance’s hip in his left hand. “Do you have a minute?”

“Yeah, of course, Keith.”

“Then can we—can we go somewhere to talk?”

Lance bit his lip, “You’re scaring me.”

“I’m fine, everything’s fine,” Keith reassured him, voice desperate. “I just—need a few minutes with you. If you have time.”

“Okay,” Lance agreed, nodding frantically. “Did you have somewhere in mind? Or—”

“Our room is fine,” he murmured, holding on tighter, reluctant to let him go, even if they needed to walk to their room. It just—everything felt like too much.

There was a small pause, and then Lance was nodding again and moving out of his arms, maneuvering himself out of Keith’s grip and turning to walk toward their room. Keith caught up with him and stayed a breath away from his shoulder the whole way back.

Finally, they got to their room, and Keith closed the door behind them.
“What’s going on?” Lance asked again, wringing his hands together. “Are you okay?”

Keith nodded and closed the distance between them again. He physically couldn’t stand it. He didn’t care either, he just wanted to be right next to Lance for the rest of his fucking life.

“I watched the security footage of the attack,” Keith said, voice rough. He kept his eyes on Lance’s hands, unwilling to watch the nerves in Lance’s expressions.

“You did?”

He nodded again.

“Why?”

“We’re trying to put together a timeline of the attack and make sure that we don’t have anyone in the compound that has allegiance to Lotor,” Keith explained. “Ina and Nadia finished with the footage today and wanted me to watch it.”

There was a slight pause, and then, Lance asked, “Is that why you’re acting like this?”

“Acting like what?”

“Keith.”

At Lance’s voice, the sheer desperation over the sound of his name, Keith looked up at him.

His eyes were wide, expression serious, as he continued, “You look like you’ve seen a ghost. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you like this before.”

Keith let out a rough breath, “I was terrified that you were going to die.”

“Me too, obviously. Lotor told me that you were dead. We went through this a few days ago, remember?”

“No, I know that,” Keith stammered, looking back down to the floor. “I just… watching the footage of you—it fucked with my head.”

Lance frowned, “Why?”

“Because I don’t understand why we’re doing this.”

Lance’s eyes widened, “Doing what?”

“This,” Keith gestured between them, frustration leaking into his voice.

There was a noticeable shake in Lance’s voice when he asked, “What are you talking about?”

“I—”

A new sheen of tears worked their way to Lance’s eyes, and he barreled over Keith, frantic, worried, nervous, “I don’t even—I don’t understand you. Why would you say that? Why would you say that now? With everything else that’s happening? And before, you just, you’re always—I don’t get it—”

Keith realized what was happening, what he’d said and what it probably sounded like, a second too late. Lance was already crying, hard, and tears were running down his cheeks and chin. He was
visibly shaking when he reached up to wipe the tears away.

He was just—he couldn’t express the horror he felt, at the thought of Lance thinking Keith didn’t love him, that Keith didn’t need him to exist even more than he needed to fucking breathe.

Anger filled his chest, at the thought of being so stupid he’d made Lance cry. He—fuck, he needed to fix this.

Keith reached out and grabbed Lance’s arms at his biceps, gripping him tight and shaking him a little as he said, “Holy fuck, no, no, no, that’s not—I meant why the hell aren’t we… I have dreams about you, Lance.”

Lance blinked, and more tears fell. His voice was small when he said, “You… what?”

Keith nodded frantically, gripping Lance tighter, “You’re everything to me. How could you even think that I meant anything like that?”

Lance shook his head, but he still looked panicked, “I don’t know, none of this makes any sense —”

“What doesn’t?”

“You and me,” Lance sobbed, pulling his hands up to his face, hiding from him.

Keith shook him, distraught, fighting back tears of his own, “What the fuck? What the fuck are you talking about?”

Lance shook his head and kept his face covered with his hands. His voice caught over a sob when he said, “None of this has ever made any sense. You’re so—and then I’m just…”

“Hey, no,” Keith’s voice was shaking, and he was aching to do something else, to do something to make Lance understand what he meant but—he didn’t know what else he could do. “No, just—fuck.”

There was a slight pause between them. Lance was still crying, struggling to catch his breath, and Keith grabbed one of his wrists and pulled one of his hands away, holding it to his chest, right over his heart. He was sure that Lance would be able to feel how hard it was beating.

“You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” Keith whispered.

Lance sniffled, rolling his eyes, “Sure, in the fucking apocalypse, maybe.”

“I’m serious,” Keith said, and desperate didn’t cover it. He was so far past that now, he wasn’t even sure what to call it. He continued, “All of the things I’ve said to you? I don’t know what you thought, but I don’t say things I don’t mean.”

Lance still shook his head, ducking away from Keith, and for some reason, it made him really fucking angry.

Keith shook him again, and he knew that he was holding on to him too tightly, that he needed to let go, loosen up a bit, probably take a step back, but Lance wasn’t listening. He was in the middle of a full-blown panic attack right now, and Keith was worried that he was going to stop breathing.

He made himself stop, slow down, and take a breath.

Keith moved his hands and brought one up to Lance’s shoulder and the other to his jaw. He waited
quietly, staring, just watching him, and eventually, Lance slowed down too, back to unsteady, hiccupping sobs and breaths instead of complete panic.

He pitched his voice low when he asked, “You with me?”

Lance nodded, and his hands came up to Keith’s chest, fisting the material of his shirt.

“I’m sorry I scared you,” Keith started slowly.

Another nod, and Lance eyes were wide. A stray tear fell.

“I—I’m sorry too,” Lance’s voice was small, and he looked down as he said it. “I freaked out.”

“It’s not your fault. That’s not what I was trying to say.”

Lance took another breath, shakily, and nodded, “Okay.”

There was another small pause between them, and Keith waited. He kept his hands still, trying not to overwhelm him any more than he already had.

“Can I have a hug?” Lance whispered.

Keith didn’t answer. Instead, he pulled Lance into his chest and wrapped his arms around him, leaving one against the back of Lance’s head, cradling him carefully, easily.

Lance murmured something that Keith didn’t catch against his chest and moved in closer, pressing completely against him and wrapping his arms around Keith’s middle, holding on to him tightly.

They stood there, in the middle of their room, not talking, and just held on to one another.

In the silence of their room, Keith couldn’t help but think about all of the other times they had been here before, holding each other, saying things they never seemed to acknowledge later. Keith was tired. He just—wanted everything, all the time, and nothing else was enough.

“Keith,” Lance murmured his name sometime later. He wasn’t sure how much time had passed.

“Lance,” he breathed in reply. Keith slid his hands down to Lance’s hips, fitting his palms into the dips of Lance’s hipbones like they were fucking made to be there. He never wanted to let go of him.

“What did you mean? When you said that you didn’t understand why we were doing this?” Lance asked, voice soft, careful, hesitant.

Keith hesitated long enough to take a breath, and then, he pulled back to look at him and meet his gaze. He steeled his nerves and said exactly what he was thinking, feelings be damned, time be damned, literal apocalypse be damned.

“I get so frustrated sometimes,” he started, soft, brushing his thumbs over Lance’s hip, wishing for skin to skin contact instead, “when I think about how I haven’t had any time with you lately.”

“We have time right now,” Lance offered, one hand sliding up his spine and settling at the back of his neck.

Keith scoffed and rolled his eyes, “Until my radio interrupts us. I’m surprised it hasn’t already.”

“What does that have to do with what you said though?”
“I feel like there’s so much distance between us right now,” Keith admitted, glancing up at him.

Lance squeezed the back of his neck, “You’ve been busy with the compound, but I don’t—that’s not your fault.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” Lance’s voice was sharper, and when Keith looked up at him, his eyes were red from crying, but he looked steadier, angry even.

Something about his expression made Keith feel close to snapping, and his hands tightened on Lance’s hips. He nodded once and said, “I’m doing the best I fucking can.”

“I’m not saying you’re not.”

Keith rolled his eyes again, and this time, he was way more annoyed than before. He said, “Sure sounds like it.”

“Don’t even—don’t go there with me, Keith.”

That was it, the last of Keith’s resolve dissolved as Lance rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Go where?” Keith growled, pulling him into his chest even closer. The nagging voice in the back of his head that sounded an awful lot like Shiro was telling him to let go and back up, to take a few minutes and think this through before he did anything reckless.

But the other part of him, the impulsive, angry part, shoved that voice way, way down.

“Assuming that I think you’re doing a shit job of leading!” Lance said, annoyed, rolling his eyes again. “I know that you have some hero complex happening, but you’re the only reason any of us are alive! Stop beating yourself up for everything that happened because it wasn’t your fault!”

“I’m not,” Keith argued even though Lance was right. That was exactly what had been happening.

“Wow, okay, you don’t have to lie to me.”

Keith sighed, shaking his head, “Why do we always do this?”

“God, what now?”

“It just seems like we’re always fighting.”

Lance pushed Keith, hard, but not hard enough to make him move. He left one of his hands on Keith’s chest, hovering just below his shoulder, and said, “Normal people fight, especially when one of them is being an asshole.”

Keith scoffed, “You?”

He rolled his eyes again, and Keith was tempted to tell him that his eyes were going to get stuck like that and wouldn’t that be such a fucking shame, but he miraculously held his tongue because wow, that would have pissed him off even more.

“You were the one acting like we were about to fucking die with all your dramatics earlier, Keith,” Lance hissed, but there was something about his mood that was shifting, and Keith was pleased to know that he could read him this well, that he could tell that Lance probably wasn’t seriously
pissed at him like he had been imagining.

“Yeah sure, I’m the dramatic one.”

Lance pitched his voice low in a cheap imitation of Keith’s and leveled a heated stare at him, another imitation of the way that Keith had probably been looking at him earlier, and said, “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Keith felt his face heat up, and he shoved even closer to Lance, tightening his grip on Lance’s hips and growling, “Shut up.”

“Make me,” Lance replied, eyes narrowed, cheeks flushed.

Keith almost leaned forward, but something—he wasn’t sure what—made him stop.

There was a long pause between them, and the space in their conversation was enough to make Keith realize how ridiculous it all was. They were fighting about nothing. It was stupid. But thankfully, the pause was enough to break the tension between them because Lance leaned back as far as Keith would let him go and laughed softly, blush worsening, almost like he was embarrassed.

He got quiet after a few seconds, and the silence between them was suddenly more comfortable, more peaceful that it had been in days, probably even since before Keith left for the mission. He smoothed his hands out, loosening his grip on Lance, but not letting go.

“Sorry for making fun of you,” Lance said, voice soft, a minute later.

“Sorry for giving you a panic attack earlier.”

Lance shook his head, “Not all your fault. I don’t think I’ve slept enough. Coran told me to take a nap and come back to the infirmary later.”

“Fuck, sorry,” Keith apologized, starting to pull back, “I shouldn’t have—you should have told me you needed to sleep.”

Lance caught his arms and stopped him from going anywhere, shaking his head, “Hey, it’s fine. I’m fine, just a little tired. No big deal.”

Keith nodded, but the guilt still ate at him.

“But seriously,” Lance said a few seconds later, looking at him evenly, eyes wide, “what’s going on with you? You seem so worried, and it can’t just be because of—how it’s been lately. I know it seems like we haven’t gotten to see each other, but you’ve got to keep the compound safe, and Coran needs my help in the infirmary with Shiro and Adam, plus Nadia needs me to check in on the civilians. I know it’s not like it used to be with us, but there’s nothing I can do to—”

“No, no, it’s not you,” Keith interrupted him, not wanting to play the blame game with Lance because it wasn’t either one of their faults. Keith had just—he’d freaked the fuck out when he’d seen the security footage and really come to terms with how close he’d been to losing Lance, how close he’d been to dying himself throughout all of this. He continued, “I know that you’ve been busy, and so have I, but it’s just…”

After a slight pause, Lance ran his hand over Keith’s shoulder and murmured, “Talk to me.”

Keith glanced up at him, and just to be an asshole, he said, “You’ll make fun of me.”
Lance scoffed softly, smiling a little, and shoved him again, but this time, the motion was gentle, just a push against his shoulder before his hand smoothed back out again. He said, “No I won’t. C’mon, tell me.”

“I really fucking miss you.”

There was so much conviction in his voice that it even scared Keith a little, and he’d been the one to say it.

Lance blinked at him, “I’m right here.”

Keith nodded and looked down, eyes catching on his own hands on Lance’s hips. He cleared his throat, “I know that. I’m glad you are, but I just really miss you anyway.”

A pause settled between them, and Keith was afraid to look up at him, afraid to see any sort of hesitation on Lance’s face like he knew there would be. The silence urged him forward; he was desperate to get rid of this distance between them.

“Sorry if it’s too much,” Keith murmured, keeping his head down. After all the things he’d said to Lance before, this part felt like too much. He wasn’t sure why. “I guess I just… everything that’s happened has caught up to me, I think, probably because of that damn security footage.”

Keith cleared his throat and finally looked up, and Lance was already looking back at him, eyes wide, expression careful.

Keith shrugged and said, “Call me dramatic or make fun of me for it, but I just really need you to know. You… are my entire fucking world. There aren’t words strong enough to describe how I feel about—what you mean to me.”

Lance’s hand came up to his face, cupping his cheek and tilting his jaw back until Keith met his gaze again. Tears had come back to his eyes, and his other hand smoothed over Keith’s chest, right to his heart.

His voice was just barely a whisper when he said, “Keith.”

“Yeah?”

Before Lance could answer, the radio hissed with Griffin’s voice, “Keith, do you copy?”

Lance sighed first and reached down to Keith’s belt, grabbing the radio and replying, “Keith’s busy right now, can it wait?”

Keith raised his eyebrows at Lance, who just looked back to him evenly.

There was a slight pause, and then Griffin replied, “Uh, yeah. Sorry, Lance.”

Lance said, “No problem. He’ll let you know when he’s available,” before turning and tossing the radio onto the table in the corner of the room.

Keith groaned, pulling one of his hands up to his face. Everyone with a radio had heard Lance and would be making fun of him for it for fucking days on end now. Nadia and Matt were already smirking at him every time Lance’s name so much as came out of his mouth, and now, he’d catch hell about this for sure.

“They might need me,” he argued, desperately hoping that Lance would see through him.

Thankfully, Lance did. He shook his head, “I need you here with me, to rest. For a little while at least.”

It made something stupid flutter in his chest, at Lance’s words. He nodded carefully and stayed quiet.

“C’mon,” Lance murmured then, reaching for Keith’s hands, and then pulling him toward their bed.

“Lance—”

Lance shook his head, already reaching for Keith’s jacket and pulling it off, dropping it to the floor before shedding his own. He kicked off his Converse and grabbed Keith’s hand, tugging him closer to the bed and then climbing up onto it.

He barely had time to step out of his boots before following Lance, rolling over onto his back and groaning. He was just—exhausted.

Lance curled up next to him, propping his head up onto Keith’s shoulder and tucking his legs against Keith’s. He was still holding one of Keith’s hands.

Keith closed his eyes.

“Keith?”

“Hmm?”

“You mean everything to me too.”

It was enough to make his breath catch in his chest, and when he opened his eyes and looked down, Lance was looking back up at him, blue eyes intense. Then, Lance brought their hands up to his mouth and pressed his lips to the back of Keith’s hand before settling down against his shoulder and closing his eyes.

“Go to sleep,” Lance hummed, shifting further into him.

Keith sighed and let his eyes close again. Lance was warm against his side, their room was quiet, and they were closer than they had been in days, which was everything Keith had been wanting.

You mean everything to me too. Lance’s voice echoed in his head, and even though it made his heart speed up in his chest, he felt himself finally relaxing, like maybe this was all going to be okay someday.

;);

The days were blending together.

Realistically, he knew that it hadn’t been long since the mission and Lotor’s attack on the compound, but it felt like a lifetime had passed. Leading everyone and trying to keep everything together at the compound had been rough on him, but since yesterday, with Lance, he’d been a little more focused, less tired, ready to keep fighting.

It was like another life had started when Lotor had lured them out on the mission, when Keith had come back to find the compound destroyed. He’d changed then, and it was probably for the better.
because he’d kept them all alive. Lance had been right about that.

Yesterday with Lance had been— exactly what he’d needed, fairly close to what he’d been wanting.

They had stayed in their room for longer than Keith had meant to. He’d fallen asleep and later woken up to the radio crackling on the table again. It must have been a few hours at least, but when he’d woken up, Lance had followed him, saying he needed to get back to the infirmary before dinner to check on Shiro and Adam.

When Keith had gone down to the garage, where Nadia, Kinkade, Ina, and Griffin were gathered, Keith had walked in and both Griffin and Nadia had been smirking at him, and even Kinkade and Ina looked like they were hiding smiles. He’d grumbled under his breath before directing the conversation to the perimeter security. Thankfully, they’d let it go after that.

The next morning, this morning, Keith had just been finishing the perimeter check at the fence when he’d heard the distant roar of an engine.

The first thought that he’d had was that Lotor was coming back to finish the job he’d started. Keith had panicked and gotten on the radio, ordering more soldiers for backup, rushing to the tower himself, and they had been in the middle of assembling all the rifles they had when Keith spotted the familiar, blood-soaked Humvee rolling down the hill toward them.

Keith had barely managed to keep it together when Matt and the others rolled into the compound with the Humvee. When Matt had opened the back of the Humvee and showed him the other soldiers and the stacks of boxes of food, water, and a few weapons, Keith had been close to falling to his knees right in front of everyone. In fact, they had spent the rest of the day cataloging and reorganizing the supplies, and Nadia had reported that it was going to be enough to keep them going for weeks.

At the news, he’d stepped outside into the hallway and took a moment to breathe, completely relieved and overwhelmed at the news.

Since then, it had been a hectic day. Keith and the others unloaded all the supplies, and Nadia, Ina, and Pidge had started work on expanding the rations to a reasonable amount of food per day per person.

Keith had to admit, things were looking up, but he wasn’t going to be overly positive. This was still the apocalypse. There had to be a curve ball coming soon, and Keith would be damned if it caught him by surprise.

Instead of taking a break to celebrate, Keith had spent the rest of the day working. He’d looked over the Humvee and checked in with Nadia and Pidge multiple times, talked to Coran and Lance about Adam’s condition earlier since he’d woken up that morning, and checked over the soldiers before starting in on the evening perimeter check.

It was quiet. A few walkers were clinging to the fence, but they would dissipate in the night, when silence settled over the compound again. If they didn’t, then Keith would deal with them in the morning.

“Keith, what’s your 20?”

He frowned, grabbing for the radio at his belt, “I’m at the fence doing a perimeter check.”

It was Nadia’s voice on the other side of the radio, and she said, “They need you in the infirmary.”
Keith froze. His heart all but stopped in his chest, and his voice was choked when he said, “What’s wrong?”

Keith could hear the smile in Nadia’s voice when she said, “Shiro’s awake. He’s asking for you.”

He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t breathe.

Then, his heart started again, and he said, roughly, “10-4, on my way.”

He started running.

Keith wasn’t sure how long it took. The only thing he could think about on his way up to the building and then as he ran through the hallways was how they’d done this before, how Lance had woken up, how everything had been fine, how it had all worked out.

He wasn’t sure who he was praying to as he sprinted to the infirmary, but he hoped it worked.

Moments later, he burst through the infirmary, throwing the door open and almost stumbling into the room.

Unsurprisingly, the first thing that Keith saw when he flung the door open and took in the room was Lance. At this point, Keith’s gaze was constantly and consistently drawn to Lance at every point and without regard to the space between them. It was like fucking magic, Keith thought, the way his eyes just always found Lance without prompting.

Now, Lance stood at the end of the hospital bed. At the door opening, he turned, and his smile was wide, bright, and all the way up to his blue eyes for the first time in—fuck, Keith didn’t know how long.

Behind Lance, the room was full, and Keith was apparently the last one to make it there. Matt and Coran were standing on one side of the room, close to the wall, and Pidge was at the end of the hospital bed, turning back to smile at Keith once the door had opened. Allura was sitting in a chair at the side of the bed, dressed in sweats, but smiling.

Adam was standing, near the head of the hospital bed where Shiro was sitting up. His eyes were open.

He looked over to Keith and smiled.

Keith’s knees felt weak.

“Keith,” the voice was soft, and when he blinked, Lance had come closer to him, holding out his hands. He was smiling lightly, “Come say hi.”

Keith took a careful step forward, and then, like Lance knew Keith needed him, Lance moved with him around to the side of Shiro’s hospital bed, standing close enough that their shoulders were pressed together.

Shiro was looking up at him, and he smiled, “Hey, little brother.”

Keith swore that he was a breath away from crying.

Lance gripped his shoulder, and the touch kept him from breaking. Keith pulled one of his hands up to his face and covered his eyes for half a second, blinking away the tears that were threatening to overflow and roll down his face.
“Hey,” he said finally, looking Shiro over. His chest was bare, and there were a few wires tapped to him, monitoring his vitals. He still had the IV in his arm, and his other, the one that Keith had cut off, was bandaged tightly.

Shiro grinned, “Hey. They told me you’ve been holding it together around here.”

“Barely,” Keith sighed, breathing a laugh. This was just—he couldn’t believe he was even talking to Shiro. He’d thought—he had thought that Lotor had taken him away, that he would never get this back again.

“Not from what I’ve been hearing,” Shiro said, raising an eyebrow. “How’ve you been?”

“Tired,” Keith admitted, uncaring that everyone was listening. “Worried.”

Shiro hummed, “Sounds like everything has worked out though.”

“Yeah. It’s all okay for now.”

“Thanks to you,” Shiro said, so sincere that Keith had to grit his teeth. “You’ve been strong, brave. You saved us.”

Keith shook his head, and one of Lance’s hands brushed his hair back and tucked it behind his ear. He sighed and said, “I’ve been trying to act like you would. It’s been—terrible. You’re too thorough and you care too much.”

Shiro laughed, shaking his head, “Look in a mirror, Keith. You saved the whole compound on your own. You did this, no one else.”

Keith sighed again. He’d just been trying to keep all of them safe. He hadn’t really planned any of this but having Shiro talk him through it was just… reassuring and exactly what he’d needed this entire time.

“How are you feeling?” Keith asked, glancing to the bandages.

Shiro smiled, “Alive, thanks to you.”

Keith just nodded, pushing down the guilt that was threatening to swallow him. He was the one who’d cut Shiro’s arm off but—Lance had been right that first night. Shiro would be a walker by now if he hadn’t done something to stop it. It still hurt his chest to think about what he’d done.

Shiro glanced back behind Keith’s shoulder, to where Lance was standing, and said, “Did you get that thing worked out like we talked about?”

Keith rolled his eyes, feeling his cheeks get hot with embarrassment suddenly. “No. I’ve been a little busy since you got yourself bit by a walker on a mission that was obviously a trap.”

Shiro laughed, loudly, and it made Keith grin. Then, Shiro said, “Better get on it then.”

“I’m working on it.”

His brother kept laughing, and when Keith glanced around the room at the others, they were all smiling too, which was just—it made Keith’s heart ache.

“Think you can hold it together for a little longer while I get some rest?” Shiro asked, smirking at him.
Laughter broke out among their friends, and Lance slipped his hand into Keith’s, lacing their fingers together and shifting around his side to aim a soft smile at him.

Keith turned back in time to see Adam roll his eyes and brush his hand over Shiro’s shoulder. His voice was sharp but fond when he said, “Shiro.”

Keith laughed too, and Shiro reached up with his good arm, catching Keith’s hand and holding him there for a long second before leaning back against the hospital bed. His eyes were bright, he was smiling, and everything that Keith had done since the beginning of the apocalypse was worth it for this moment, this moment with his family, with his brother, with Lance.

So, Keith squeezed Lance’s hand, nodded, and said, “Yeah, Shiro. I’ve got this. Get some rest.”
He was on hour eighteen or nineteen of work when he finally saw Keith.

It had been a long day. Fuck, it had been a long week since they’d managed to drag the compound back to its feet, and even now, with him, Keith, and the others working what felt like day and night, they were still barely treading water. Lance sighed, brushing his hair back from his forehead. He still had so much more to do today before dinner. They were making headway on the water filtration system that Matt had presented during the last meeting, and the drawing of plans meant more of the lab had to be decommissioned so the main compound could be outfitted with the generators and technology that had previously kept the lab so safe.

It was a smart move, but he could really see the toll decommissioning the lab had on the former lab
workers - Allura had all but shuddered at any mention of that wing of the compound, and Coran had spent several dinners by himself for multiple days. But they were making great headway on fitting the main compound back up to a state they could be proud - and safe - in.

Food was steadier but not by much. They had handfuls of veggies that were beginning to crop up in the garden that Allura and Romelle had started, but the growth wouldn’t be major enough to eat until summer hit - and the dead of winter was already around the corner. Keith had been hunting so often he had been nearly blood-soaked every single time Lance had seen him come back to their room. He had been itching for time outside the compound too, but without Adam on inventory checks on the military side, and with Allura only well enough for a small handle on the civilian checks, Lance was still working long hours. Adam had been in and out of the hospital wing treating his concussion and recurring issues, Shiro was getting stronger but slowly - they had the medications, thanks to Matt, and the care, but it was still steady progress.

He was hopeful about that progress. Really hopeful, like startlingly hopeful. It was rewarding to see how much the compound was flourishing under Keith’s leadership and his own help.

Lance turned the corner to the hallway and nearly bumped into someone, and when he looked up, ready to apologize, Keith was there, already reaching out to stabilize him with an easy grip on his side.

Lance almost laughed, but the sound got caught in his throat when he noticed Keith holding his guitar.

“Oh sorry,” Keith said, gesturing to it. “Shiro asked me to…”

“You play?” Lance asked because of course this was happening to him. How much more perfect could Keith get? And how had he not known this before? His heart soared; Keith’s grip on his guitar was gentle and careful.

Keith smiled, soft, “Why do you think I let you haul it around the whole time?”

Despite his exhaustion, he found himself smiling too, reaching up to grip Keith’s bicep, weak with the desire to be close to him. He rolled his eyes, playfully, and said, “Fine then.”

“Sorry I didn’t ask first though,” Keith continued. “I wasn’t sure where to find you. You’ve been so busy all day.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Lance waved him off. “What’s mine is yours, or whatever.” He was so tired he didn’t realize he’d actually said that, but as Keith stared at him, he felt heat rush into his cheeks.

Keith smiled, soft, and nodded. He hesitated for a second before he said, “Do you have a few minutes? Shiro’s been asking about you.”

Lance nodded, one hand raised to show the clipboard in his hand, “I was coming to check on him actually. Coran updated me on him and Adam this morning.”

Shiro was slowly getting better, and Coran had been working with him daily on some sort of a physical therapy routine, and with the medication they had, Shiro’s arm was starting to heal over the amputation at the top of his bicep. All that had to be done was more work with his muscles and constant dressings so that the healing wasn’t hindered by an infection.

He helped Coran daily by redressing Shiro’s arm around mid-day, and Adam was around during it on most days but didn’t sleep in the hospital wing anymore. It was hard to ignore the chill between
the two of them whenever Lance would come in to redress Shiro’s wounds - like he was
interrupting something every time even though neither of them seemed to have spoken in a bit.

Now, Keith propped open the infirmary door for him, and Lance entered, Keith hot on his heels.

Shiro smiled when he saw Lance and Keith enter the infirmary. He was sitting up, blankets
covering his chest, and his eyes looked clearer than they had in days. He said, “Lance, hey, how
are you holding up?”

“I’m fine!” he replied, happy to see Shiro engaging with life. He crossed the room ahead of Keith,
washing his hands and checking on Shiro’s bandages. Keith sat down on the chair beside Shiro’s
bed, casually holding the guitar in his lap.

After Lance finished with the bandages and checked Shiro for a fever, satisfied that he was okay,
he realized that they were both watching him, obviously waiting for something.

“Um, I’ll go,” he suggested, “and give you guys a minute. I just wanted to say hi.”

“You should stay.”

It was Keith that objected to him leaving, but Shiro was nodding, enthusiastically, smiling a little.

Lance bit his lip, “Only if you’re sure.”

Keith settled into a chair close to Shiro’s bed and swung Lance’s guitar into his lap, scooting
forward until he was pressing his knees against the bed frame. The exhaustion was giving him
rose-colored glasses, or something, because watching Keith lean in, jacket rolled up his forearms,
to tune his guitar was wildly attractive.

With a gentle strum, Keith’s fingers slid across the strings in the beginnings of a melody Lance
couldn’t place, and Shiro immediately perked up. Lance slid a chair over, sitting down in it and
watching the exchange happily.

“Oh man,” Shiro mused, smiling, “I haven’t heard that one in a while.”

Keith glanced up with the shyest smile, one that twisted Lance’s heart like a vice, his fringe
dangling in his eyes, which jumped between the two of them with a sparkle, “I doubt I’ll play it as
well as Dad but I’ll try.”

Keith picked at the strings. It was easy, a soft tune, and Keith’s head dropped to glance at the
guitar as he played. In all his life, Lance had never met the same reaction to another’s music as he
was right now. Now, the wash of music from Keith, plucking gently with rough fingers, felt like
the air in his lungs had been punched out. If he wasn’t already sitting, he would have dropped to
the floor.

And if the gentle plucking was enough to reduce him so, the words softly sung from Keith’s lips
were everything.

He didn’t know the song. It was that kind of soulful country, the mournful but hopeful noise, with
lyrics sung so gently. Whether it was the gruff noise from Keith’s throat, untrained vocal chords
that caressed the air with just enough finesse to really press Lance’s spine straight, or the careful
strumming that Lance hadn’t even known Keith could do - it was the fact he didn’t know the song
that topped it off over all. His hands scrambled across Shiro’s bedsheets of his own accord, like he
was trying to find something grounding, and Shiro reached out, eyes still trained on Keith, to grasp
his hand gently.
Each line of the song rang in the air between them all, the stuffy compound air, hanging with the death and life they were clinging so to - and god he was getting misty-eyed. Poetic and misty-eyed, but so aware of this personal moment he had stepped into.

It was a short song, but even when Keith finished, the edge of his voice ran like a small final note.

Shiro reached forward, hand slipping from Lance’s, the blissful emotion in Keith’s voice leading him to place a firm hand on Keith’s shoulder.

“You sing just like Dad,” Shiro laughed, gleefully smiling and stole a look over to Lance. He blinked back and grinned at the brothers, laughing with Shiro as Keith went bright red.

Lance shifted, suddenly wanting to shrink away from the moment. He felt like an intruder, a stark reminder of the brothers and the unnatural circumstance they found themselves in. Deep down, beyond all of that, he felt the bitter beast of jealousy rear its head and, god, he didn’t want to think about it but… even if he had just had Veronica. Just him and Veronica, just like Keith and Shiro.

He sank back and gulped down the stone of emotion in his throat, standing and crossing to the door quickly. He wasn’t sure if Keith or Shiro called out after him; he couldn’t hear anything over his already racing heartbeat in his chest. His eyes were beginning to sting, and he didn’t at all want to answer the swell and burn of loss that fought to tangle itself in his throat. Lance pressed his palms against the wall the second he passed through the infirmary doors into the hallway, shaking off the desire to have Keith be the one to talk him down from his impending panic attack, and regulated even, exhausted breaths between his lips slowly.

It took a few minutes, but he was cooling against the compound wall now, shoulders sagging. The range of emotions he had just gone through in the last, what, fifteen minutes alone was enough to set the hairpin trigger of his nerves and body off.

He rolled his neck in a slow circle to work out the cricks, releasing the pressure of his body from against the wall so he could stand. God. He needed sleep, desperately.

The door opened with a fast push, with no indication that there was any movement beyond it and therefore startlingly the shit out of him. He nearly yelped, just nearly, but enough to make Keith raise an eyebrow at him, amused.

But the amusement vanished when Keith caught sight of the lingering red eyes and flush of a panic attack on his face. Keith all but shoved the door closed behind him and pressed closer until Lance was, eagerly, pushing against the front of Keith’s jacket and shirt.

“I hope my singing wasn’t bad enough to make you cry.”

He immediately laughed, a bit watery and shaky, already shaking his head against Keith’s chest, “No, oh my god. It was really good.”

Keith’s voice was so achingly soft and low, “Then what’s wrong?”

Lance paused, gnawing at his bottom lip and more than happy to just spend moments against Keith’s chest instead of talking, but he sighed, “I don’t know. I guess I just… miss my family.”

He shifted back from Keith, quick to avert his eyes and avoid eye contact. The last thing he wanted to do was make Keith feel uncomfortable showing affection with his brother, the brother he almost lost, because Lance was feeling the grief of the loss of his family.

But instead of an outburst of anger or sorrow, Keith held tight but pulled just a bit back so they
could hold each other's gaze, his voice careful, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry you miss your family. I wish I could - I wish we could find them too.”

Lance nodded a little, heart till aching, and Keith pressed forward, whispering, “You’re my family.”

And god was Keith beautiful, tilting his head forward, imploringly and gentle in the low light of the compound. Lance nodded, immediately, and stepped forward to shove himself into Keith’s arms again to avoid tearing up where Keith could see. Keith’s arms, broad and strong, wrapped around his shoulders and he hummed happily against the opening of Keith’s jacket where he had tucked his face.

“You’re my family too,” Lance replied, a bit late but it was thought that counted, and he laughed when Keith’s arms tightened around him.

They were interrupted before it could go anywhere else, as usual, since they could never really have a moment too long for themselves. The double doors at the end of the hall were pushed open, and he spied Kinkade walking briskly toward them.

“Goddamn it,” Keith muttered, seeing him too, and Lance snorted.

Instead of Keith pushing him back like he expected, he tightened his grip on him, and they stayed embraced for a bit longer until Kinkade approached them.

Kinkade cleared his throat, and it was only then did Keith release him, still standing closer than necessary, especially in front of others, and brushing their knuckles together gently.

“Sorry, Kogane,” Kinkade really did sound apologetic, and it almost made Lance smile. “We need you in the barracks for evening guard rotation. Holt needs an escort to the back of the lab to retrieve mechanical parts.”

Keith grunted in response, one hand moving up to rub at his forehead. A surge of affection tore through Lance’s chest, seeing Keith’s eyebrows bunch and his lips tugged in a painfully handsome scowl. Like every single time he had those washes of affection for Keith and his beautiful face, it came with a huge, screaming urge to kiss him. Instead, but also because he couldn’t help himself, he bundled himself against Keith again, turning his head upward so their faces were so tantalizingly close.

“You better go before…”

Keith raised an eyebrow, “Before what?”

Lance rolled his eyes, even though the heat in his face was furious, a blush sneaking up his neck and across his cheeks. Pushing gently against Keith’s chest, he murmured, teasingly, but so aware of Kinkade right over Keith’s shoulder, “God… Don’t make me say it out loud.”

Keith’s expressions twisted, eyes fluttering nearly closed and pulling on Lance’s waist until they were impossibly closer again - the exact opposite of what they needed to do right now. He so _so_ wanted to say _leadership be damned, Keith, let’s make out in this hallway until Kinkade gets uncomfortable_ , but the very real implication of them ignoring these new duties meant putting the survival of the entire compound in jeopardy. The last thing he wanted was to fail everyone. He breathed in Keith’s air, a soft sigh that Keith echoed, just lips inches apart from each other.

Keith hesitated there, and like they were in tune, because of course they were, they _always_ were,
let out a small breath, and whispered, “See you later?”

Lance hummed, almost disappointed, as he agreed softly, “Later.”

Keith slowly pulled away from him, threading a hand through his hair and shooting a small smile his way before he turned and followed a red-faced Kinkade down toward the military barracks.

When they finally passed through the double doors, Lance sank back against the corridor wall. The range of emotions he had just gone through was a wild ride alone, but every time they seemed to be on the edge of them, sealing the metaphorical deal, the universe stalled it for them. Which would have been fine and dandy if he didn’t need Keith so badly, if he didn’t also know that Keith needed him so badly. It really was at that point where he just… knew. It was the way Keith was protective over him, gentle and sweet but also so aggressive with how he grabbed, how he alluded. He just kinda knew.

It would still be nice for Keith to say it, but he knew, and it was better than not knowing at all.

Lance took a breath and shook himself. He needed to run a stock check on their medical supplies and see if they could reroute some of the internal compound water systems to supply clean water. At least they had the Holts, because he, for one, couldn’t even comprehend how to start with that. Head aching again from the long list of stuff he needed to do before evening, Lance turned on his heel and headed toward the common room. If he was lucky, he wouldn’t have too many problems cropping up to solve before the end of the day.

About a week later, they had the compound water system up and running smoothly. Lance had been genuinely stacked to the roof with stuff to do, people to see, supplies to run and crate, and it was kind of impressive how he kept it all going. He had been working closely with the Holts and a few soldiers from Keith’s division to clear out the lab and move it into the main compound, and while it had taken the good part of the week, they had finally counted in and moved all of the supplies and equipment over. By the time that had been done, Coran had the official diagnosis for Adam and needed him to set aside the medications. They had been working on his pretty obvious concussion since Shiro had woken up, and Adam finally let them turn a bit of focus onto him, but it was the diagnosis that was the hard part.

When he had entered the infirmary, Adam was already sitting near Shiro. Coran ushered him in with a hand, and Lance crossed the room to wash his hands before approaching them. Shiro was up, and Lance shared a glance of concern with them. Adam was already clearly agitated.

“Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” Coran read softly from the chart on the clipboard in his hand, “Manifesting specifically in bouts of physical and emotional reactions - arousal symptoms - that place one in a state of disassociation due to guilt -”

“Bullshit,” Adam snapped, standing from the bedside of Shiro abruptly, “We all have that. This is the goddamn apocalypse -”

“Adam,” Shiro started, but the other man continued, rambling and stalking back and forth,

“What, huh? You got your fucking arm amputated -”

“Adam.”
“Allura was stabbed. Curtis is dead. And I’m supposed to -”

“Adam!”

“-What, take a pill? It’s a vital resource, by the way, we don’t even have our filtration system up and running, and Coran’s just going to prescribe me a *daily* pill like it’s -”

“Adam!” Shiro snapped, and finally, Adam froze, stilling once he realized the commander was sitting up from his resting position, the hospital blanket sliding to reveal his amputated arm. Coran was gripping the chart with tight fingers, mouth in a straight line.

“Adam,” Coran stepped forward, “your mental health is as important as any physical ailment.”

Adam frowned still, but sat down at Shiro’s bedside again, his arms crossed and angled away from Shiro, “Coran. We’re in the midst of a crisis. To risk sounding like my superiors,” he cast a small glance over to Shiro, “we’re only as strong as our weakest link. I will drag down the compound if I need to take medication *daily*. How am I the only one who sees this?!”

Gripping his own clipboard, Lance slowly placed it down on the bed next to Shiro, taking a stabilizing step forward to drop a hand on Adam’s shoulder. The older man looked startled, mouth already opening to speak when Lance cut in -

“Adam,” Lance said, “please listen. We’re down a senior officer, our commander, and compound manager until we get clearance from Coran. Without Curtis, Shiro, and even Allura, we only have you. Keith is doing everything he can, and I am too, but we need you. You won’t be a pressure on our limited supplies - we have a reasonable amount of SSRIs and most importantly, it doesn’t matter. We can sustain your medication, we’re already well on our way to restocking a lot of our lost inventory.”

Adam sighed, dropping his head forward to cradle his forehead in his palm. Shiro leaned forward to stroke Adam’s back, and the touch seemed to startle him a bit until he relaxed again.

Coran stepped forward as well, “Your health *is* important, Adam. You have experienced a lot of trauma - all of us have, but you’re not weak for needing this.”

Adam snapped, “I know I’m not weak I just -”

“You won’t be a burden,” Lance cut in again. “You won’t be.”

Adam breathed, dropping his head again into his hands. Lance slid back, watching Shiro slowly inch forward to rub at Adam’s back again. As Coran walked forward, file open and chart ready, to no doubt figure out which medication of their stock would work best for Adam, Lance cast a small smile over the scene and retreated from the room. After closing the door softly behind him, he leaned a hand against his chest, clipboard loose in the other as he breathed. Absently, he leaned his clipboard up - scanning the inventory stocks.

He sighed, rotated his neck to crack some of the pressure along his shoulders, and moved down the hallway toward the common room in long strides.

The common room was devoid of others, guard and supply rotations was keeping everyone busy, and he barely glanced at the clock before crossing to the resident quarters. It was past noon, and hopefully, Keith would be back around soon with more meat for dinner - otherwise, they might have to kill the last of the granola bars.
He was really trying to think about solutions to this problem when he cracked open the door to their room and shimmied inside, keeping the door angle small to avoid letting the warmth out of the room. Humming, he crossed to the desk and placed his clipboard atop the growing pile of papers there and kicked off his shoes. Slowly, he arched his back and raised his arms high above his head, cracking his back slowly and twisting his way and that, releasing noises the whole while. It was then that the bathroom door creaked open behind him and he turned, pivoting on his heel and dropping his arms.

Keith paused, hand on the door handle and the other tangled in a towel pressed to his hair. “Hey.”

Any attempts at responding stalled in Lance’s head immediately, his mouth just dropping a soft, “Uh.”

Keith was naked. Wet and naked, with a skimpy white towel hanging from his immaculate hips. Drips of hot water tracked down his chest, pale but striped with tan lines along his forearms and around his neck, skin red along the tops of his shoulders and cheeks from the heat. The rivets of his muscles collected the water, rolling down them until the drops trailed deliciously past the deep V-like muscles that barely held his towel up.

The second he glanced up, his face already furiously blushing, Keith had begun to smirk. The hand still lazily rubbed his other towel through his hair, wet and long against his neck, and the other released the doorknob.

“Don’t,” Lance started, raising his hands to cover his face and spinning around, “say anything!”

“I wasn’t going to,” Keith all but fucking purred, walking over to the bed where his clothes were laid out. How did Lance not catch that? He groaned into his open hands and ripped his face away from watching as Keith dropped his towel to get dressed.

“You totally were,” he whined, the sound of towels smacking against the ground almost scaring him out of his skin.

“I totally wasn’t,” Keith chuckled, and the bed squeaked as he sat on it. Lance whirled around, hands propped on his hips as he watched Keith begin to lace up his boots again, having already slid into his underwear and pants, which were left unbuttoned for some damn reason, probably just to torture Lance more.

“When did you come back from hunting?” Lance asked, biting his lip. He needed to figure out something else to focus on and fast before anything got out of control, before Lance crossed this line they had been ignoring for weeks now. It was getting harder to not take this time for themselves and act on… this.

“Just a bit ago,” Keith replied, getting to his feet and jutting his hips out to one side. “Came back early, I got a buck.”

Lance grinned, spinning back around to grab his clipboard and scribble some notes about supplies and dinner rations. Keith’s hunting was already helping so much, and now with all the extra meat, they were going to be in really good shape for the next few days. Lance told him this, as he was bent over the table, taking notes.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt Keith’s hands slide down his sides and settle on his hips. The heat of Keith’s body was a stark surprise against the chill in the air.

“Can we not talk about work for a few minutes?” Keith asked, voice low. His hands squeezed
Lance’s hips again. His air punched out, the position was, uh, scandalous to say in the least, and for a second he felt vulnerable with Keith’s body hovering above his own, his hips bent. He gulped, face flaming.

Lance went very still, and slowly, he leaned up and turned around, Keith’s hands dragging across his waist before settling against his hips again, and Lance took his time running his eyes up from Keith’s stupidly attractive hips and unbuttoned pants, his broad chest and shoulders, sharp jawline, and finally, twinkling eyes.

“Then what do you want to talk about?” Lance murmured, carefully setting one of his hands on Keith’s shoulder and dragging his fingers down the line of Keith’s collarbone. He was getting goosebumps from Keith’s touch, and his own fingers touching the soft swell of his pale-skinned bones, the black of his shirt so beautifully stark it was hard to not admire when he was this close.

Keith stepped in even closer, so close that the height difference between them that was normally only a few inches seemed like it was so much more. His voice was low and rough and perfect when he said, “Doesn’t matter. What are you thinking about?”

A shiver snuck up Lance’s spine, and his eyes darted down to Keith’s hips again. He leaned back against the table, and Keith lifted him suddenly, setting him up on top of the table and moving in closer, nudging his way in between Lance’s legs.

Lance hummed, both pleased and shocked at the contact. He reached out for Keith, getting his hands up to his shoulders and curling his fingers into the ends of Keith’s hair, wondering how hard he’d have to tug to get Keith to lean down to kiss him.

“What are you thinking about?” Keith whispered again.

Lance wrapped one leg around Keith’s, hooking his foot behind Keith’s knee. He leaned in closer and said, “I don’t know.”

Keith raised an eyebrow, “You don’t know?”

“I’m thinking that you’re warm,” Lance murmured, ducking in close to him.

“That all?”

“No.”

“Wanna tell me the rest then?”

He breathed a laugh, a little hysterical at the thought of telling Keith everything he was thinking. Instead, he shook his head and leaned forward to press his forehead into Keith’s neck. Then, he murmured, “Not really. You tell me what you’re thinking.”

One of Keith’s hands brushed up his back and to his neck, carding through his hair. He stayed quiet for a long moment, and Lance closed his eyes, leaning against him. It was nice, just to have a quiet moment with Keith, even though his stomach was flipping hard and his skin felt feverish from how close they were.

Their lips were so close. A gentle press forward, Keith’s hand on rising to touch his cheek, and their foreheads touched. Keith’s eyelashes, effortlessly long, fluttered close, and he took just the barest of a second to admire their shadows on his slightly sun-freckled skin before his own closed again. Until they were just breathing in time, against each other, melting.
Slowly, inch by inch, they pulled away, the space between them widening, the breathing they shared picking up again. Keith squeezed his hips once more before pulling away, Lance’s own hands falling from Keith’s broad shoulders.

He relaxed the second Keith pressed a hand against his shoulder, sliding it over until the tips of his fingers touched the barest rise of Lance’s shoulder blade, a lasting touch - and god did he have stop from shivering just at the press of Keith’s fingers.

“...I’ve got to get going,” Keith half-mumbled, a stark impression of a kicked puppy, his eyes barely peeking out from behind his fringe.

A traitorous smile tugged at one side of his face and Lance nodded, “I only have a bit of time for a shower before we’re running through repurposing some lab equipment and then I’ll probably try and get your buck on for dinner.”

Keith nodded, leadership already straightening his back and stealing his face, “I’ll make sure to dress and skin it for you after my perimeter check.”

Lance hummed, tossing a soft smile Keith’s way, “Thanks. Will I see you later for dinner?”

“Yeah,” and with a gentle pat on his shoulder, Keith pushed past him for the door. The stretch of his back, covered by his black jacket, was still pulled taunt, highlighting the broadness of his shoulders, the roundness of the tops of his arms. Lance watched as Keith exited the room, trying not to unabashedly stare but failing miserably.

With Keith gone, it seemed the room got colder, and he huffed, immediately heading to the bathroom, stuck between a warm shower to ease his muscles or a cold one to clear his head of Keith.

If he didn’t have to keep track of the weeks for inventory, they would have certainly blended together. Days were getting short during the wintertime but still dragged with how much he had stacked up for them to rebuild. Their power issue was stabilized, giving them a steady water and energy source for the compound, which meant their heating system was back online and they had begun the process of hooking up a hot water filtration system to provide clean, reliable water for cooking and cleaning. It meant that their showers no longer gave off the smell of rusty pipes, because Romelle and a few soldiers had spent all of a week reworking the piping system with some of the unused areas of the compound. Allura was getting stronger every day, and so was Shiro. Adam had already returned back to his post as part of the upper management and as a senior officer, which was a blessing for Keith for sure.

Hunting had been steady as well, and they were easily stocked on buck and rabbits for most of the winter, but the vegetables, canned foods, and medications were getting low where they were considering a few scavenging runs once the snow let up. It had only recently begun to actually snow, not at all like any of the heavy fall from what he first experienced in New York, but enough for Lance to absolutely pile both his and Keith’s jackets onto their bed.

By the time December rolled around, there had barely been any time for any celebrations of kind. They had no alcohol, because of course Lotor had deemed that stock important enough for it to be stolen, and it was too cold for the compound to set up the firepit, but Keith - fucking Keith - had
been late that Christmas night and strolled in, covered in snow like some scary woodsman, with pounds of slabs of elk between him and an astonished Kinkade. He had shaken off the snow in the doorway of the compound entrance casually, like he had just passed off a chopped up 1000 pound elk to Griffin, Nadia, and a few other soldiers like that was totally no big deal. Even though half the compound was in tears, and they had somewhat of a holiday feast singlehandedly because Keith Kogane had gone out of his way to hunt something special, something he definitely had to build a sled for and chop it and skin it in the woods on the coldest days yet. If there ever was a time Lance would have kissed that man, full on the mouth and in front of the entire compound for fuck’s sake, it would have been then. But he had bellies to feed and Keith was already half-buried in a bear hug from Pidge and a few others, so he merely chewed on his lip in utter happiness as he started up a feast for their family.

And when the compound had been full and happy, he dragged Keith to bed, where they sat huddled and listened to what little Christmas songs he had on his iPhone until Keith had long passed out, hand curled loosely around Lance’s waist.

Just as it hit January, the light snowfall they had experienced was already beginning to disappear. It made their gardening a bit easier, and thankfully, a good portion of their plants had survived the winter, which had put a smile on Allura’s face that was brighter than the sun. Even Keith had particularly laughed, a near giggle, when Allura’s flurry of excitement over the garden had reverberated through the garage. And fucking sue him, because despite it all, their lack of so much, Lance was so hopeful. The compound was brightening, the smiles were returning, Shiro was healing, Allura was laughing, and all of the work that had been so much, so difficult to maintain, was getting easier.

The compound, late in the day, with the light fading and the dinner rush cleared out, lately felt so comforting. It was just when the day was winding down, and his belly was full of food, the weather mellowed out and he was warm and happy. It took a toll on his body though, and because of the long hours he had been putting in on the compound - day in and day out, he worked so hard to keep up - that by the time sunset rolled around, he was exhausted.

Utterly sleepy. Almost sluggish, definitely dragging his feet a bit. He still was on his toes, completing the last of his list and checking over the infirmary and Shiro, like Coran needed him to, but he was just a little bit tired doing it. Just a little bit.

It was especially important that he made it to the infirmary today, even though the sunset was golden and the compound was warm, and he was wrapped up cozy in a thick jacket. Shiro’s wound was showing signs of infection, and they needed to up the times they took to change his dressings - dousing it with alcohol when they could, and being careful on his joints to minimize the damage of the growing redness and leakage.

Coran had reported to him in the morning that it was likely that Shiro would sustain the minor infection for a week or so and that his stay in the infirmary would need to be extended. Shiro hadn’t been happy about hearing that, apparently, but it was best to keep him on bed rest as he healed through this then to have him push himself when he really needed to conserve his energy. It was looking to be not an easy task to lose an arm during the apocalypse, and though they tried, Lance couldn’t help but feel for Shiro. It was hard to sit and watch during the stress and work of the compound, he knew that firsthand.
Padding softly down the infirmary hall, he gently pushed a yawn into the crook of his arm, tears gently prickling in the corner of his eyes. Lance fumbled blindly, humming through his yawn, on the latch for the infirmary doors, and gently slid through.

The room was dark, like usual, and Shiro was sitting up in bed. Keith was across from him, a stock straight black shadow in a chair. He must have just been back from hunting because he wasn’t at dinner. Keith’s chair creaked just a bit as he turned in it, throwing an arm over the back of the chair as Lance stepped further into the room, door closing behind him.

“Hi,” Another yawn threatened up, and he buried it in the sleeve of his double jacket, “Sorry to interrupt. Shiro, I’m here to redress your wound.”

Keith watched him with a careful look, and Shiro sat a bit straighter, “No worries, Lance.”

He shuffled over to the sink and washed his hands, dutifully rolling his sleeves up to the elbow and cleaning under his fingernails. The alcohol jugs and bandages were set aside on the counter, and he quickly dipped some cotton pads into the alcohol jug.

When he approached, Shiro leaned forward and Keith scooted his chair over to the side. Slowly, and trying not to let his tired fingers fumble and hurt Shiro, he unwrapped the dirtiest bandages over Shiro’s arm. With the dirty bandages set aside, he slowly cleaned and placed the cotton pads to soak in on the wound. Shiro winced, but not much, jaw clenched and his fingers tight around the sheets pooled at his hips.

Meticulously, he wrapped the new clean bandages after letting the cotton pads soak just a bit. Wrapping the wound was difficult to do with soft touches, and Shiro really tensed then, so much so that Lance tried his hardest to zero in and focus on his movements. The infection was definitely causing deeper pain in the already vulnerable wound on Shiro’s arm. He stepped back to gauge the tightness of the wrap, which was just enough to help but wasn’t his best by far, and dispose of the dirty bandages.

His second hand washing was slower, methodical, and Lance let himself, just for a second more, indulge in the warm water. It took a second to realize he was nodding off, and he didn’t quite snap onto it until Shiro softly called, “Lance?”

He turned around, water shutting off, “Yeah? Sorry, I’m pretty out of it.”

Keith spoke up then, leaning back in his chair with a raised eyebrow, “How many hours have you been working without a break?”

Lance pouted, without energy, his eyes already dropping slowly, “I could ask you the same.”

Shiro covered a snort, and Keith rolled his eyes. With one hand he urged Lance closer, until Lance was stepping well into Keith’s space, knees touching the chair.

He hesitated, until Keith was beckoning him closer, murmuring a soft “C’mere” until Lance was perchimg himself onto Keith’s lap. Strong arms wrapped around his waist, shifting him into the cradle of Keith’s lap fully, and he was flushed to Keith’s chest. The warmth and familiar smell was immediately comforting, and he hated how audibly he breathed in Keith’s scent as he cuddled closer against the other man’s neck. He felt safe, and warm, and even though Shiro, Keith’s older brother, was very much watching, he pressed impossibly closer.

He tucked his knees inward, and Keith accommodated for it easily, wrapping his arm around Lance’s knees as Lance turned to press his cheek to Keith’s shoulder.
Slowly and softly, the brothers continued their conversation, a little toned down but still as comfortable as what he assumed they had been talking before he came in. The tightness of Keith’s arms around him never waned, and the lull of their voices - similarly deep tones so gentle it made Lance’s heart utterly full - was sending him quickly to sleep against Keith’s chest.

Happy, and with Keith’s heart thudding gently under his ear, Lance let himself relax and doze in Keith’s lap.

With their newfound stability, the compound was growing. Slowly, Adam and Shiro had begun to sanction training of civilians and handed the sentence down to Keith as a new drill instructor and while Lance knew how Keith felt about being regarded somewhat of a senior officer without actually “working for it” (which was bullshit, they all knew that), the official order was enough for Keith to sit up a bit straighter, walk a bit brisker, knowing his brother had encouraged and needed him to lead and that he wasn’t just second place where others could have done better. At least that was what Lance had assumed because even Keith was smiling nowadays, he fixed the fences faster, shirt sleeves rolled up even though it was still chilly when he worked on engines with Romelle and Matt.

Even though he hadn’t started training yet, Lance knew he was pretty stoked about it. Something about fulfilling a promise to Pidge, is what he gathered, and it was becoming a normal occurrence for Lance to wake up, at his brisk time of 5 A.M., to find Keith at the desk pouring over tablets of military drills, all chalked up with Shiro’s personal notes. In fact, he had started studying practically two weeks before the last of the ice and slush on the grounds had melted away.

That first week of February, Lance woke up with the rest of the compound and joined the few other recruits in the front of the compound. He wasn’t necessarily a recruit, in the sense that he was permitted to be armed when he needed to be, and often did supplemental rounds when he was needed, but Adam had needed him to oversee a part of the training in accordance with the managerial branch of the compound. So he went.

The late winter sun was rising slowly, and it was chilly, but the recruits were up early and in thinning military fatigues. Pidge, Romelle, Slav, a few other of the civilians, and even Coran had opted to go through with training as well, both as a refresher and for Allura to build the strength she had lost two months prior. Keith, despite the cold, watched them in a tank top and fatigue pants, as the recruits warmed up with a mile run - breaths of air coming out in clouds around their mouths, in the warming sunlight.

As he stepped through the compound doors, Lance shuffled his grip on the rifle that Keith asked him to bring to training as he walked down to where Keith had gathered the recruits.

“Alright, break into groups of two, I want a hundred sit-ups,” Keith called, crossing his arms over his chest as the recruits fell into groups and dropped to the ground.

Lance slid up beside him, wordlessly raising his rifle with a half-shrug. Keith perked an eyebrow at him and smiled, “How’d you sleep?”

He leaned in, pressing against Keith’s side, “Alright. You?”

One small glance from Keith and Lance was stifling laughter into his palm. They had slept like
kittens last night, flopped all over each other and huddled under blankets and jackets against the cold winter chill until both of them had been sticky with sweat when they woke up this morning.

Keith snorted, “You nearly ripped my arm off this morning trying to get me to sleep in.”

“I couldn’t help it,” Lance laughed, “I was cold!”

Keith leaned in, and just then, from feet away, Pidge pulled up into an upright position mid-sit-up and called, “Stop flirting-”, back down, up again, “-sirs.” and Romelle gently chastised Pidge with a slap on the boot.

Keith grinned, all sharp teeth and quirked pointed eyebrows, “What was that, Holt? Sounds an awful lot like back-talk.”

Lance laughed as Pidge mimed a zipping of lips on her next upright motion. He jostled Keith’s shoulders with his own and turned, “Oooh, very military of you. Don’t let this go to your head.”

As stoic as he could be, Keith rocked back to push his shoulder against Lance’s in retaliation, and only when he was close enough, murmured hotly, “I think you’d like that,” before standing back straight, directing the recruits into fighting stances and moving forward to work with them through close combat drills.

Lance stared after him, jaw agape. His ears were on fire now, as was much of his face, not from the cold but from the implication. Grumbling at Keith’s sexy audacity (really, where is he getting this?), he turned away from the yard and went by the empty guard post by the front door to sit and watch - spying a smirking Allura, watching from afar, out of the corner of his eyes. He huffed at her, rolling his eyes, and bundled into the cold chair, balancing his rifle against his thigh.

Keith had them running drills to and fro, well in the settling of the morning, and only those with boundless manic energy, just Pidge really, were left level and not panting for air at the end of their drill session. Keith clapped Coran on the back in support, but Coran went ramrod straight from it, masking his heavy breathing with a very official-looking salute - which sent Keith into a scramble of At ease! At ease! and had Lance covering his laughter by coughing into his hand.

The next sets of self-defense and close combat drills were a success. No one was struggling to keep up, and Keith was extra thorough with teaching each movement. For a while, Lance didn’t realize exactly why he had been called down here until Keith went to set up glass bottles on rocks in the far corner of the compound yard away from the stable and garages and half in the shade.

Lance stood and followed the group over, his rifle gripped tight in one hand. Keith paused and gestured for him to come closer, and he crossed the distance with a light jog, smiling at the recruits. Pidge waved enthusiastically, and Keith raised an eyebrow at her.

“For a beat, he stood still, smiling before realizing everyone was watching him carefully. Then, he shook his head, hitching up the gun to show it to the recruits, “Oh! Sorry! This is a Ruger rifle. The unit traded for these with the scalpers, so we have an… okay supply on them right now.”

He passed it to Keith, who easily began loading the rifle with a cartridge of bullets from his
pocket. Slowly, though he wasn’t sure exactly what else to say, he smiled and continued, “I learned to shoot on my dad’s ranch in Cuba. Shooting is all about keeping calm and focusing on a target, and learning how to shoot quickly is important - so training your reflexes and focus is the biggest thing about marksmanship.”

Keith turned back and handed him the rifle again, continuing from where Lance left off, “He’s right. Now, we’re going to go through how you hold and shoot a rifle. Lance, if you could…”

Shouldering the rifle, he planted one foot in front of him and stabilized his back foot, grounding himself and cocking the barrel toward the targets. The glass bottles glimmered in the light that speckled through the fence onto them, making them sparkle green and brown. Keith came up next to him and patted his raised elbow, a test for strength that Lance didn’t fail. His elbow stayed steady and level, ready to bracket the recoil of the rifle if and when he fired.

“See this?” Keith patted his elbow again. “Lance has a firm stable arm here. The shoulder helps the butt of the rifle stay steady, but the elbow is where the recoil hits hardest. Building your strength here is crucial, especially if you’re firing a heavy gun and you’re on the lighter side.”

Next, Keith poked at the curled fingers of Lance’s trigger hand. He held fast, steeled against the touch as to not react and slip, but also trying desperately to be a good example, cheeks a little pink from the attention.

“Lance also has his grip tight on the trigger guard,” Keith directed the recruits closer. “Don’t keep your trigger finger out unless you absolutely know you’re going to shoot - that minimizes the risks of accidental fire.”

Keith walked to his side, leveling with Lance and pointing at the small safety lever just at the front of the trigger guard, “This is the safety. Most of our rifles have this type of metal lever safety. Whenever you’re in the compound, keep the safety on. If you leave on a supply run, or what have you, you’ll want to keep the safety off. A walker can get the jump on you in an instant, and normally you’d want to have the safety on in all circumstances, but…”

He trailed off and glanced at Lance out of the corner of his eye. Lance paused in his position and loosened, lowering the rifle and facing the recruits. A soft feeling rolled through his middle knowing Keith trusted him enough for this, that he was encouraging him to teach his new recruits.

Lance smiled, a bit sheepishly, and nervously rubbed the back of his head, “My papa always taught me to keep the safety on. I would agree with that, but... this is the literal apocalypse. I haven't kept it on for at least half of the times I needed it anyway.”

Keith nodded, satisfied, and crossed his arms over his chest as he continued, “Keep in mind that accidents do happen and minimizing those by keeping your safety on around others and the compound is important. Now, if Lance wouldn’t mind, he’s going to demonstrate shooting while I explain aiming.”

Keith ushered the recruits back a few yards so that Lance would have plenty of room. He turned his gaze back to the range and settled the rifle back onto his shoulder, squinting down the barrel and lining up with the first bottle on the left. He didn’t bother to wait for a sign from Keith before he clicked off the safety and pulled the trigger. A second later, the bottle exploded in a showering of glass, and he slid to the right to continue, one by one, aiming and shooting each glass bottle until he had reached the end of the line of five.

He pulled the rifle from his shoulder, clicked back on the safety, and turned back to face the others. Keith’s grin was evident, almost blinding even from a distance, hands in his pockets, casually
leaning on one hip. The others were jittering, looking at one another and nodding, and Pidge’s motormouth exclamations were muffled from the distance.

Keith approached, the others in tow, and Lance passed the rifle over almost shyly. Keith was still smirking, and the others seemed to admire both Lance and the rifle with a newfound glimmer. One by one, each of the civilians stepped forward as Keith helped them learn the weight and positioning of the gun. While he could have watched Keith lead all day, midday was quickly approaching, and his own list of stuff to do was long.

Lance lingered a bit more before shuffling over to Allura, “Hey, I’m heading out.”

She nodded, blinking toward Keith almost wordlessly. He grinned and shook his head, not really wanting to interrupt as Keith taught Pidge how to angle and hold a rifle without too much recoil outweighing her.

“See you,” Allura mused, happily smiling, and Romelle waved over her shoulder as Lance turned and headed back to the compound entrance.

He was halfway through the glass doors when an achingly familiar call of his name stopped him. Keith jogged over, bare arms glistening in the sun and hair swept from his face in a ponytail - fuck Keith, he knew Lance was weak to his ponytails. Chewing on his bottom lip, he turned to face him anyway.

“I needed to duck out,” Lance explained. “Adam needs me to run a supply check of the lab.”

Keith nodded, “Yeah you did great, thanks for helping me out.”

He offered a small half-shrug in response, trying not to completely show how distracted he was by Keith’s exposed collarbones, how dark the tank top looked against his pale striped skin, how good he smelled when he stood so close.

Whoops.

Keith definitely noticed, eyes dark and jaw set like he was holding back, because they both were, they always were. He knew Keith felt the itch under his skin when they had brushed, when Keith’s fingers pressed against his hand and elbow, leaving the faint press of searing fingertips in his wake. Lance breathed out a shaky sigh, gently folding his own fingers over Keith’s ponytails as his hand came to rest on his hip. It was getting harder and harder every day to avoid touching each other, to avoid the pull between them.

“I’ll see you later?”

Keith frowned, annoyed, “I have an overnight shift, Nadia’s coming down with a cold.”

Lance nodded, swallowing disappointment so Keith wouldn’t hear or see it. With Keith on an overnight shift that meant that Lance would be restless all night, unable to sleep without Keith in the bed with him. It would be fine, obviously, it wasn’t the worst thing to happen, and he could handle one night without Keith even if he didn’t want to.

Instead of voicing this, he nodded and said, “Then tomorrow. I’ll catch you in the morning before rotation.”

When Keith smiled now, and recently, it was with the smallest breath of relief, a bit hopeful, soft on the edges, eyes alight and dancing. It was the kind of smile he gave Shiro when Shiro would
work on his exercises, the kind of smile that the compound was rewarded with once the generator was fitted with solar power or the water filtration system started to run clear, the same kind of smile that sent Lance spiraling when Keith crawled into their bed at some ungodly hour. Only with him was it accompanied with touch.

As he turned away and let Keith go back to his recruits, it was with a fierce and selfish desire that he wanted to keep that smile constant - as hopeful, as gentle, as possible. They had so much good going for them and the compound was starting to really feel like home.

Spring was fresh, and the compound, finally having pulled through winter, was renewed. It had been taken so much time, so much elbow grease, so much fucking dedication and sacrifice to get where they were, where they had built themselves back up to be. All claws, all teeth, all the blood, spit, tears, until there was nothing left to give. But the reward was everything.

Their vegetables were thriving in the new garden, the snow was gone from the compound grounds, the surrounding forest was beginning to teem with life. With the snow gone, the traps in the woods were fuller and fuller, but each trip back out was more dangerous because the walkers were more active in the warming weather. But they were still safe, sound, thriving.

And even though it was now early March, the compound was still freezing in the mornings. The birds were up earlier than the sun, the mourning doves cooing gently at first light, and it was one of those perfect mornings where Keith hadn’t taken an overnight or morning shift. His warm body was pressed so close against Lance’s back, like a giant full-body heater that was a dozen times more comforting than the extra jackets Lance layered on top of their blankets. Where he ran cold, Keith was like a furnace, and was already half pushed out of the covers and sticky with sweat.

The whips of the doves outside roused him further and he grunted when he flipped over, under the weight of Keith’s forearm, turning into the warmth of his side. They had gotten so comfortable in the same bed, in the same space, that, even unconscious, Keith opened his arms easily for Lance to slither in. His skin was tacky a bit but smelled amazing, and Lance blessed every star in the goddamn sky that Keith had started to sleep shirtless, stripped down to his underwear without a care in the world. Lance sighed against Keith’s skin, breathing in his musky smell until his lungs were filled with it and he was dizzy.

There was a rustle from above and Lance raised his head to peek. Keith grumbled and rolled his neck again, one hand rising to rub at his eye.

He stared, unabashed and melting, as Keith woke up slowly. He scratched his chin and yawned, rolling his shoulder that Lance wasn’t pressed against, his other arm tightening around Lance’s back. They had gotten so accustomed to waking up earlier than the morning alarm, but not often rising together recently. It was hard when Keith either had a shift on patrol or early training or Lance had a busy day ahead, and it had been such a long time since they had both woken up together that his heart literally soared when Keith nudged his chin forward and met his gaze.

“Hey,” Keith mumbled, voice that rare deliciously sleepy gruff, his eyes crinkling in the corners with the softest look.

Lance cleared his throat, already threatened by a wave of pure fucking emotion, “Hi. It’s been a while.”
Keith nodded, sinking back into the bed and curling his free arm under his head, “Yeah. It’s nice.”

The other hand pushed on his back more until he was propped closer on Keith’s chest, Keith’s face dipping to bury itself in Lance’s hair. He laughed, short and sweet, from the half-hug, trying not to stab his chin into Keith’s chest.

“What are you doing today?” Keith asked, muffled as he stayed buried in Lance’s bedhead.

He wiggled forward on his stomach to push against Keith’s collarbones, his hands sliding up to hold onto Keith’s waist, fingers curling around his sides.

Lance spoke directly against Keith’s skin, happy to have an excuse to trace his lips against the bones of Keith’s clavicle, whiny and just a bit heated, “Running the compound without you.”

Keith chuckled, and propped back onto his arm again, “It’s just a simple trip.”

He pouted and rolled his forehead against Keith’s chest before propping down on his chin, “A simple scouting trip without any military backup.”

Keith’s eyebrows quirked, “I’ll be fine. I’ll have Allura with me, don’t you -”

He snapped, “Of course I trust you both. I’m just… There are a lot of walkers now that the weather is warmer. If you meet a swarm -”

Keith cut in, a palm sliding up to settle between his shoulder blades, firm and grounding, “If we meet a swarm, it will be fine. We can outrun them, we won’t have anything weighing us down. We’re only going so far past the perimeter, checking traps, doing a quick run through town, we’ll be close.”

Lance grumbled, chewing on his bottom lip and then turning onto his cheek, away from Keith’s dark gaze, “Okay… First sign of trouble, you’re back, okay? Just… be safe.”

Keith’s voice was so soft, so deep, “You know I will.”

He nodded stiffly against him, relaxing only when Keith began to rub his back again, the path of his palm in intoxicating circles against the back of his shirt, until they were both drifting into deep relaxation against each other. Keith’s face fell against his curls again, and he traced his thumb absently against the skin of Keith’s sides, eyes slipping closed, and focused on their synced breathing and the calling of the doves outside.

When the morning alarm reverberated through the compound, Keith let out a groan into his hair that sent Lance laughing. It was so genuine, their mutual hesitance to get up, and it resulted in a bit of a tug of war with the covers until Keith finally won and flung the bedsheets off of the both of them. Lance hissed at the cold air and went rolling back toward the mess of blankets, detangling from Keith’s legs and arms. The bed dipped as Keith got up, chuckling under his breath, and busy with trying to crawl back under their blanket mound, Lance turned his face outward just to watch as Keith crossed the room, shirtless and barefoot. His briefs were riding spectacularly low, all lean muscle on display.

Keith stretched, and immediately pulled his ruffled hair into a low ponytail. He spied Lance’s staring from the corner of his eyes and smirked, but continued to scrape together his clothing and step into them without a care.
Keith was already shrugging into his jacket when he finally unwrapped himself from their bed and stood too. His skin prickle with goosebumps from the cold, he scrambled over to his own clothing pile and all but jumped into his jeans and shirt. Bundled finally into his jacket, he followed Keith into the bathroom and received his toothbrush from an extended gloved hand.

It was a nice ritual to brush their teeth together, half in their own worlds, and half-startlingly aware of how their hips brushed together from the close quarters and their elbows jostled above the sink. When Keith dipped down to spit and rinse his mouth, the long hairs gathered at his nape in his ponytail shifted across his neck. Lance didn’t bother hesitating and immediately raised his hand to play with them gently, grinning when he caught Keith’s soft smile in the mirror.

“I’m meeting Allura in the garage,” Keith backed up so Lance could bend over the sink and spit as well, “Walk over with me?”

“Yes,” Lance wiped at his mouth, “right behind you.”

With the softest brush of their knuckles, Keith passed him on the way toward the door. He followed shortly, and they quickly crossed the still-barely rising compound for the garage. The first people they spotted were Allura, Romelle, Adam, and Kinkade, packed into the garage and sharing a pot of coffee.

“Hey,” Allura perked up, Romelle next to her absolutely grim-looking.

Lance eased into a smile on impulse, but he could really sympathize with Romelle. It was the first time Keith and Allura had left the compound since Lotor had ripped it apart from the inside out so… of course he would be worried. They all were from the looks of it. Adam shifted, anxiety obvious in the grip of his coffee cup, his gaze trailing Keith as he went around the garage for their packs on the far wall. Allura received the pack passed to her, her coffee cup immediately set aside and swung it on quickly, her boots scuffling in the garage as she stood by Keith’s side.

Kinkade nodded once and rolled up the garage door manually, just enough for them to duck under. Adam placed his cup down and crossed his arms, leveling a look at Keith, “1145 hours. Not a minute after.”

Keith nodded, gesturing for Allura to go ahead of him, “Not a minute after.”

And with one last look between them, the hint of a glance that Keith drawled up and down Lance lazily, he watched Keith duck after Allura under the garage door and out to the compound grounds - where the gates already were shifting noisily open and then finally shut.

They all stood there a moment after Kinkade dropped the garage door. He hated to admit how his eyes stung for a second, just as the panic flowed and then ebbed, and forcing himself to smile positive and small, Lance turned to the others.

“Well,” he said softly, placing a hand on Romelle’s shoulder and then looking at Adam. “We’ve got a ton to do before noon, let’s run through civilian checks and start working. No use just waiting.”

Romelle nodded, and Adam and Kinkade looked a tiny bit relieved by his smile. He was good at that, making others more at ease. With the herding ability of a sheepdog and the soft tutting of a mother hen, he rounded the three others up and out of the garage - until Romelle was giggling, Adam snorting, and even Kinkade smirking just a little bit.

Even though Lance had plenty of work to do, it was going to be easy working through the day.
knowing that when Keith came back, they could really have some time for themselves, and god was he excited for it.
Before the apocalypse, Keith never felt like he had a home. He was out of place, awkward, confused, and angry everywhere he went, every time he so much as turned around.

The ranch in Texas he’d grown up on had some memories that were worth holding on to, but most of them were from when Shiro was still around. More of them were from before his mom left. After those things, it was hard to find a good memory at all. He’d had Artax and his dad, sometimes.

It was strange to think that Keith had finally managed to carve out a place for himself in the world. It was stranger to think that it took the literal apocalypse to make it happen.
that he had a home behind him, that his people, his family, *Lance*, were waiting for him there, made everything so much easier. He’d gone his entire life without that feeling, and he’d be damned before he lost it now.

The sun inched up slowly toward the horizon, brightening the sky with every second. They were quiet as they eased out of the gates, the soldiers on guard nodding to them in respect, Keith waving a hand once they were past them.

Allura shifted the pack on her shoulders and flicked the safety off her rifle. Over the past few weeks in training, she’d gotten exceptionally better at marksmanship and shooting. She excelled in hand to hand training too, which Keith had expected, but it was still pleasing to see. She had come a long way in the past few months, especially since Lotor’s attack on the compound and the strain it caused on her relationship with Romelle. Keith hadn’t asked too many questions about that in particular, but Lance had filled him in on it more than once, telling him that they’d had some problems over the past few months in the wake of everything that happened with Bandor, Romelle’s brother.

It made Keith hold onto Lance tighter every time he thought about it. He just—Keith wouldn’t be able to handle it. There was barely any distance between him and Lance now, and even that was too much sometimes. He couldn’t imagine the pain that would come with something like that separating them.

The mission this morning was going to be a quick one. After talking with Kinkade, Keith had decided a week or so ago that they needed to do another scouting mission, and after looking over the supply logs and activity reports, Keith suggested it would be easier to just go on foot with one other person. When Kinkade offered to come with him, Keith had appreciated it, but he’d caught Allura staring out the gates with something like longing in her gaze for weeks now. He knew she hadn’t been out of the compound since Lotor’s attack, and this mission would be the perfect opportunity to get outside for a quick trip.

It’d been quiet since Lotor’s betrayal. After the initial struggle of getting the compound back on its feet and Keith taking over as acting commander—that was another can of worms on its own, but Keith guessed he’d done okay even if he hadn’t wanted to at first—there hadn’t been any signs of Lotor coming back for them. Keith had done plenty of scouting, investigating, and tracking outside the compound over the past few months, and there was nothing. The survivors he encountered hadn’t seen anything either, which was strange. How could someone disappear without a trace after causing so many problems?

It was like he was a ghost intent on haunting them. Keith still woke up from nightmares featuring Lotor’s laugh and Shiro’s screams. He wasn’t sure if Lotor would be back, but Keith wouldn’t be able to relax until he knew Lotor was dead, one way or another.

He wasn’t sure that he would ever get that chance though. Sometimes it felt like he would be living on this edge of uncertainty forever.

“Are we heading straight up the road?” Allura asked, interrupting his thoughts and breaking the silence. It was the first thing either of them had said since they left the compound.

He shook his head and nodded toward the tree line, “We’ll make our way through the trees. There’s been some walker activity on the highway that we should try to avoid.”

Allura nodded, and they ducked into the trees.

It was darker as they weaved through the large trunks and branches on the ground. They made
their way carefully, the sun brightening the forest slowly but surely. More than once, they passed
walkers shuffling on the pine needle covered ground, and Keith quietly led the way past the
bodies. They continued, footsteps silent.

The trail was one that Keith took often when he was out on scouting missions. He tried not to take
the same one too much in case it became obvious there was a path that someone might be able to
track back to the compound, but he tended to stay in the same general area for the sake of
familiarity, especially when he headed into town. Today was no different; they eased north through
the trees toward the small town square that sat miles from the compound.

It had been raided for supplies long ago, but Keith often used it as a sight to monitor both walker
and survivor activity. He would visit the town every few weeks, checking on the positioning of
cars, doors, and more for any sort of activity that came through the town. He’d even taken the time
to make a few signs, just spray painted on the side of buildings or big road signs that pointed into
the city. His favorite said *Fuck the government* with an extra warning to avoid D.C.

It wasn’t the perfect system, but it was better than nothing. Every time he came back through the
small town square on a scouting mission, it was obvious that survivors had been through at some
point. Some cars were moved, some doors and windows positioned differently than when Keith
left the last time. It was both comforting and terrifying, knowing that there were other people, other
survivors, who were out in the world making it too.

He’d often considered making one sign with directions down to the compound, but in the end, he
wasn’t willing to risk the safety of his family. He knew that the road wasn’t kind or easy, but
nothing about the apocalypse was. Every choice was a chance, and sometimes, chances proved to
be risks that ended badly.

Maybe it made him a bad person, but at night, when he was in bed with Lance in his arms
breathing softly, he found it really fucking hard to care about anything other than his safety.

Suddenly, the trees ahead of them rustled with movement. Keith held out a hand to stop Allura, and
they crouched down behind a large, old oak tree.

A few yards ahead, a small group of walkers shuffled through a clearing in the trees. The bodies
were heavily decomposed, limbs dragging as they stumbled and shuffled in circles. Keith scanned
the rest of the area, desperately hoping that they hadn’t walked right into a horde, but this small
group seemed to be the only threat in the immediate area.

“Should we go around?” Allura murmured.

Keith shook his head and drew his katana. He motioned to Allura’s belt where she had stashed a
knife.

Her face was grim, but she nodded and pushed the rifle behind her shoulder before drawing the
knife from her belt.

They moved together, stalking forward quickly and silently into the clearing.

Keith jumped the first walker, stabbing it through the head with his blade and quickly swinging
around to take off the second walker’s head.

Out of the corner of his eye, Allura took down the third by stabbing her knife into the back of the
walker’s head and twisting the blade. She ripped it out and shoved the body into the next walker
that advanced on her, just like Keith had trained her to do, and he moved onto the fifth and sixth,
easily and quietly taking them down.

When he turned back, Allura was already wiping the blade of her knife off on her pants and tucking it back into her belt.

“Good work,” he said quietly, and they kept moving.

Half an hour later, they were closer to the highway as they moved through the trees. It wouldn’t be long before they reached the point where Keith usually left the forest behind in favor of the road that led into the outskirts of the small town.

“You never mentioned what we were scouting for,” Allura commented quietly, “and we haven’t checked any traps yet. Will we do that on the way home?”

Keith shook his head, scanning the empty trees in front of them. He said, “We’re not on a hunting mission, so we won’t be checking the traps at all. We’re looking for something different.”

“What are we looking for then?”

He ducked under a tree branch that was hanging down in their way and held it up for Allura to pass. Once she crawled under it, he replied, “We’re looking for potential escape routes.”

She froze, eyes wide as she looked up at him, “Escape routes?”

Keith nodded.

To her credit, she kept her voice low when she continued, “Escape for what? What’s going on? Are you leaving the compound? Has something happened?”

“Nothing has happened, and we have no active plan in mind,” Keith explained, keeping his voice even and steady. “Kinkade and I are the only ones who even know about the real reason we’re out on this mission.”

“You didn’t tell Lance?” Allura asked, surprised. She gripped her rifle as they eased through the trees.

Keith shook his head, scanning the trees around them as they moved forward, “No. If it gets out that we’re looking for escape routes and planning for potential emergencies, it will be much harder to control the compound, especially with me personally being on this mission.”

Allura paused, “Do you think Lance would say something to someone then?”

“Of course not,” Keith said immediately, “but I didn’t tell him because I don’t want him to worry. Lance easily handles more than his fair share of work around the compound, and even though he’d be on my side with this, there’s no sense in letting him worry about this too. Besides, we have no evidence that we’ll even need an escape route, like I said earlier.”

“Yet we’re out here now.”

Keith nodded solemnly, “I don’t want us to be caught off guard like we were last time. We got really fucking lucky. I won’t let us be in the dark like that again.”

“So you think Lotor will return to the compound?”

“Whether or not Lotor comes back doesn’t matter,” he replied.
“What do you mean?”

“Lotor’s not the only enemy out there—out here,” Keith corrected. “We have something that most people on the road wouldn’t hesitate to kill for back at the compound. We can’t be caught off guard if something else happens. I’m not willing to risk anyone else.”

Allura was quiet for a long, long moment. They continued along the path, ducking through the trees and bushes of the forest.

Then, she said, “I suppose you’re right. Since Lotor’s betrayal and attack, I’ve thought about him coming back more times than I can count. I almost wish he would, just so that we would know for certain whether he intended on hurting us again.”

Keith nodded. He knew exactly how she felt. He thought the same thing every day.

“But, and I guess this is naïve of me, I hadn’t thought that someone else, or even something else, could happen that would affect us the way Lotor did,” Allura moved into the space at his side and cast a heavy look toward him. “I realize that there are dangers on the road, that you’ve seen things I could not imagine.”

“I hope you never have to,” Keith said seriously.

She nodded too, “You’re a good leader, Keith. We are very lucky to have you and Lance at the compound. Without the two of you, we would not have survived Lotor.”

“You’re stronger than you think, Allura,” Keith argued, voice low. “That’s why I brought you with me. There are few people in the compound that I think could handle this type of mission right now, but you’re one of them. You’ve gotten so strong over the past few months.”

She ducked her head, “I don’t know about that.”

“I’m serious.”

“Training has been good,” Allura agreed. “I felt powerless when Lotor attacked, but now, I think I could be an advantage to the compound if something like that were to ever happen again instead of being a liability.”

“You weren’t a liability,” Keith objected. “Lotor had deep support within the compound and that made it easy for him to take control of everyone else. You were stabbed by Bandor, and you almost died. That doesn’t make you a liability. And even if it did, then all you can do is get back up and keep training, which is exactly what you’ve done.”

Allura was quiet, and when Keith looked over to her, she was biting her bottom lip and blinking heavily, like she was trying to keep tears at bay.

“I’m proud of you, and I trust you,” Keith continued, repeating himself because Allura needed to hear and understand this. “That’s why I picked you for this mission.”

“I’m starting to understand that, I think,” her voice shook as she replied. “It’s been hard since the attack. I keep wondering if there was something I could have done differently, if I could have stopped it before it truly started. I could have saved so many lives if I had recognized what he was planning and done something to stop it.”

Keith remained silent. Allura had been struggling with this for months now, but talking about it, saying it aloud, would help more than empty reassurances from Keith. There were times where
Keith couldn’t help but think back on his past actions too and consider what he should have done differently and who would be alive because of it.

In the end, those thoughts never helped. Keith knew from personal experience.

“I know they are futile thoughts. Being with Romelle helps though,” Allura said, looking up at him, and her eyes were less sad now, he thought. “She reminds me that there is good in the world. Even though we are lucky, I suppose.”

Keith nodded, “We are. We have food, protection, a place to sleep at night, and a family. That’s why we have to fight to keep it safe.”

Allura nodded, ponytail bobbing behind her.

They were silent for a long moment. The continued through the trees, and the morning sunshine filtered into the forest floor through the tree branches.

“And Lance?” Allura asked a while later. “Does he help you deal with… this?”

Keith paused for a second, considering her question. Then, he said, “Lance is the most important thing in the world to me. He keeps me alive. He keeps me sane. He’s the reason I work so hard. Knowing that I can help keep him safe and give him a place to live without having to run and scavenge and worry about staying alive is how I keep going every morning.”

“But you’re not…”

He shook his head, “No.”

“I suppose I understand why it’s taken so long,” Allura said. “You are both so busy.”

Keith sighed, “Yeah, every time we get close it seems like something gets in the way. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad to have the compound, but it’s frustrating as fuck because Lance and I are working so much. It just… it’s been so long that I feel like it can’t be a quick thing.”

Allura hummed, agreeing, “What if you took Lance on a date?”

“A date.”

“Yes.”

“In the compound.”

“No?”

Keith rolled his eyes, “No one would leave us alone long enough to even have a conversation about something that wasn’t business related.”

A soft laugh filled the silence between them as Allura giggled. Despite the topic change and sudden focus on him and Lance, he was glad that she was finally getting away from the blame and self-torture that she had been experiencing since Lotor’s attack. She said, “I guess you’re right.”

There was a short pause, and then, Keith sighed and said, “I’ve been thinking that it might be okay to take Lance out on a scouting mission for a day or two.”

Allura raised an eyebrow, “Just the two of you.”
Keith nodded once. “I thought we could take Artax. I don’t know.”

“That’s a great idea, Keith!”

“You think so?”

Allura nodded enthusiastically, “Of course! You two can handle yourselves outside, and we can take care of the compound for a few days while you’re gone.”

Keith guessed she was right. One of the only things that was holding him back about mentioning it to Lance or even just going ahead to plan it was the thought that something could happen to them while they were outside. Even with the two of them and Artax, it could be—it would be—a risk, and an unnecessary risk at that.

But, the thing was, Keith was getting really tired of this almost thing with Lance. It had gotten way out of control, and Keith felt… he’d been in love with Lance for so long, and he didn’t really care how or when it happened, but Lance had to know how he felt by now. And if there was any indication that Lance felt the same for him, why hadn’t he made a move already? Why hadn’t he said something? They were all over each other, all the time, but they’d yet to acknowledge anything beyond that.

And Keith was just—at his wit’s fucking end with it. He couldn’t take it much longer. He was going to literally snap from how bad he wanted Lance if he didn’t do something about it soon.

Keith knew that Lance stressed about the compound and their safety pretty much every waking moment, and it was hard to get him to focus on anything except for work and the compound’s status. It was warranted of course; without Lance, the compound wouldn’t be anywhere near as successful or strong. Keith had done his best to be the leader they needed over the last few months while Shiro and Adam were out of commission, but if he hadn’t had Lance, they would have crashed and burned on the first day.

He just—he wanted Lance to know how important he was, how much Keith loved him. He had to tell him. It had to be now.

He’d been thinking about it for the past few months, and it seemed like the best thing to do was get away from the compound for a little bit, leave everything behind except for them—Keith and Lance—for just a little while, just enough time for Keith to get his shit together and tell Lance everything he’d been thinking since Lance crawled out of the semitruck and saved his life so, so long ago.

“Maybe,” Keith finally said as they arrived at the tree line where they would exit to take the road into town. He looked back at Allura, and she smiled gently. “I’ll think about it.”

Allura grinned, “Okay.”

“First we need to get back to the compound in one piece,” Keith smirked, pulling his katana from the sheath on his back and nodding toward the road. “You ready?”

She gripped her rifle and nodded, “Ready, Lieutenant.”

The road into town was littered with debris, trash, and bodies.

Keith and Allura jogged down the road at an easy pace. Being out in the open and exposed for an
extended amount of time didn’t really add to the danger they faced, but it was still daunting and nerve-wracking. It felt so much safer even with the small amount of cover that the forest and trees provided.

But, the road was the fastest and easiest way to get into town, and Keith chose it every time despite the risks.

After a few miles of traveling on the open road, buildings finally came into sight, and they entered town. The small town square and community on the outskirts of the bigger city was run-down. The windows of the surrounding buildings and cars were shattered, doors were flung open, trash blew over the street with the soft breeze. It looked like many of the other towns Keith had travelled through since the end of the world, beaten down and broken, scavenged and picked over until nothing was left.

They passed the first building. Two stray dogs skittered away from them nervously, running in the opposite direction.

The sudden noise caused both Keith and Allura to jerk in surprise, weapons ready. After the dogs vanished around the corner of another building, they shared a small smile before moving forward.

Except for the occasional rustle of the wind and trash on the road, it was silent as they walked into town.

It had been a few weeks since Keith’s last scouting mission through the town, but nothing much had changed in the time he’d been gone. There weren’t any obvious signs of disturbances or other activity so far, but Keith knew it wasn’t that simple. There could be other people—other survivors—and walkers anywhere. Without constant monitoring and surveillance, they would never be able to know for certain that this town was a safe or that there weren’t other dangers here.

Which was the exact reason they were on the mission today.

Keith stopped at one of the corners of the buildings, holding out his hand to get Allura to stop. For now, it was quiet, and there weren’t any signs of walkers or other survivors.

“If we had to leave the compound today and you were leading the group,” Keith started, breaking the silence and looking to Allura, “what would you do first?”

Allura hesitated, “Leading a group up the road would be dangerous, especially without cover.”

Keith nodded.

“But it might be even more dangerous to stay in the forest with the possibility of being separated if a large group of walkers attacked,” she continued, eyes roaming the buildings around them. “I could see that this place might be a good landmark for us to regroup and gather our bearings, especially after an attack or problem with the compound of some kind, but I don’t think this would be a good place for the long term.”

“Why?”

Allura looked around the buildings, “It’s obvious that this place sees walker activity and maybe other survivor activity, and it wouldn’t be safe to set up a camp here with those threats. Also, it’s too close to D.C. because there could be a horde that comes from the city, and we could get trapped in these buildings without supplies.”

Keith nodded again, “Good, that’s right. We couldn’t stay here long-term, but it would be fine to
regroup and use it as a place to count heads and develop a plan, especially if we had to do an evacuation from the compound.”

“And that’s your plan?” Allura asked. “To use this town as a place to regroup if we needed it?”

“I think this town could be a good rendezvous point to offer us enough shelter and time to get our bearings,” he explained.

Allura was quiet for a few seconds before she continued, “And after that?”

Keith jerked his head toward the road in front of them and started walking again. As they headed farther into the small town square, the buildings became taller and bigger, the tallest being seven stories and what looked like an apartment building. The other buildings in the small downtown area seemed to include more apartment buildings, municipal buildings, and a fire station. Nothing was intact. From the first time that Keith had passed through this small community, it was obvious that it had been overrun and forgotten long ago.

They walked toward the middle of the town, where one taller apartment building stood above the others. It was the tallest building in the small town, and Keith often used it as a vantage point to see farther.

The roads were empty as they walked toward it, and the breeze was soft.

“After that,” Keith continued after a long moment, “we would need to leave this area. If something happened that destroyed the compound, either Lotor or another threat, then we would have to leave and find another place to settle and build our own camp.”

Allura blinked at him, obviously surprised at the thought. She didn’t let it hinder her because in the next second, she said, “Which direction would we travel?”

“West.”

“Why?”

Keith grinned a little, “It’s the only direction I haven’t been.”

She stared at him for a moment before giggling softly.

He laughed too, scanning the streets around them, but still, there was nothing. He kept walking toward the apartment building, Allura at his shoulder, rifle out and safety off.

“Until now, I haven’t thought of us needing to leave the compound,” Allura admitted, voice soft. She gripped her rifle and looked over at him carefully, “What was it like? Being on the road, I mean.”

Keith hesitated, realizing that Allura had never faced anything like that before. She and Coran had been at the compound before the fall, and they’d stayed inside the gates through all of this, until Lotor’s attack. Allura would sometimes go on missions to the scalpers with some of the other soldiers to trade when Shiro had the extra room and needed more hands, but other than that, she had little experience being outside in the middle of the apocalypse. Over the past few months throughout her training, Keith had worked with her on being outside and confronting both the undead and other survivors.

Keith knew that Allura would be perfectly capable of surviving—and *thriving*—outside on the road if it was necessary.
“It was rough,” he started. “When I left Texas and started looking for Shiro, I relied on Artax to keep me alive. After I lost my dad, I was a mess. I never had a problem killing walkers, and when I got into situations with other survivors, I had to fight my way out of those too. I travelled probably more than 1,500 miles to the last address I had for Shiro, and then when I found it burned to the ground, I just… lost it, I guess.”

Allura was quiet, and the street in front of them remained empty.

Keith had only ever shared these stories, the struggles he faced while he was alone on the road, with Lance and later, Shiro.

He didn’t mind adding Allura to the list. She might not have spent months and months on the road alone like Keith had, but she knew of tragedy and loss. She had seen it just like the rest of them.

“I didn’t know what else to do,” Keith continued, voice even. “I just headed toward the city, thinking that I could look for Shiro, even though I had a pretty good idea that he was already gone. I was just trying to hold onto something, onto anything. I’d been alone for so long and it just—it was getting to me.”

“What happened?”

Keith shrugged, “A lot of things. I fought a lot of people and a lot more walkers. Artax and I scavenged and tried to survive the best we could. If I hadn’t had her, I wouldn’t have made it off the ranch, and I definitely wouldn’t have made it to—anywhere near here.”

“How did you and Lance meet?” Allura asked.

Keith raised an eyebrow, “Lance hasn’t told you the story?”

She shook her head, “I’ve never asked him.”

“Why ask me then?”

Allura didn’t respond, and when he glanced over to her, she kept her eyes ahead to the street in front of them.

After a long moment of silence, Keith cleared his throat and said, “I was heading into the city on the highway, and Artax and I passed a semi truck. The door opened, and Lance leaned out of it and warned me not to go into the city.”

She looked surprised at that, “And you just believed him? Even though you had no idea who he was?”

Keith breathed a laugh, “Honestly, I didn’t even hear the first thing he said. All I could think about was how gorgeous he was.”

There was a pause and then Allura laughed too, the sound of it echoing off the buildings next to them.

“Then what?” Allura asked, excited, eyes bright.

Keith rolled his eyes, “Well, I asked him to come with me. There was a horde coming up the highway, and I asked if he was good with a gun. When he said he was, I held out my hand, and he took it. That first day was rough.”
“It was?”

“Oh yeah.”

“That seems hard to believe,” she commented.

“Why?”

Allura blinked then, turning shy, as she said, “You two… you seem like you’ve known each other for lifetimes.”

Keith tried not to let himself blush at that but—yeah. That was what it felt like to him on most days too.

“We didn’t talk a lot that first day, and I think Lance resented me for it,” Keith explained, not willing to comment on her very correct observation. “We travelled on Artax for a long while, and when we stopped for the night, everything seemed to get worse. Lance was angry, and then, he got really quiet. In the middle of the night, after it was his turn for watch, he got up and left.”

Allura came to a complete stop in the middle of the road at his words. Her eyebrows were raised, and her eyes were wide as she said, “He left you?”

Keith nodded, “He did.”

“But…”

He let her trail off, and it was silent between them for a long moment.

Eventually, she asked, “What happened then?”

Keith cleared his throat, “I was awake when he left. He said goodbye to Artax and even blocked the door back so we would be safe. I was—upset about it. I thought everything was fine, that maybe we just needed to get used to each other or something. But… everyone in my life before him had left me too, so I wasn’t surprised.

“Artax and I waited for a few hours to give him a head start so we wouldn’t run into him again,” Keith continued, clenching his fist around his katana’s handle. He remembered that morning, fighting with himself not to chase after Lance. He hadn’t even known Lance, but for some reason, him leaving had felt like another major loss in his life. He shook his head then, trying not to think too much about it as he explained to Allura, “I didn’t plan it, but Artax and I travelled the same direction as Lance had gone, and we walked right into him.”

“He was just standing there?”

Keith frowned, “No. He was—he ran into another survivor. One of the bad ones. The man had him pinned to a car, and when Artax and I showed up, we distracted him long enough for Lance to shoot him. It was the first person he’d killed.”

Allura was silent next to him, and Keith didn’t let himself look over at her.

They walked another few blocks into the town, passing by empty buildings. The closer they got to the end of the street, the closer they were to D.C., and while there were still plenty of miles from even the outer suburbs of the city, it wasn’t the safest area to make any noise in case it carried much farther.
“I had no idea that happened,” Allura said a few moments later. “Lance never told me that.”

Keith nodded, “He’s been dealing with that shit for a while. It’s not just Lotor.”

Allura nodded too, hair bobbing, mouth pressed into a grim line.

“And after that, I asked Lance if he would stay with me. I was tired of being alone. If he hadn’t stayed, I’d be long dead by now.”

There was a small moment of silence between them, and then, Allura smiled, solemn, small, hesitant, “I would be too, if I hadn’t met Lance. He’s miraculous.”

Keith returned her smile, joking softly, “Honestly. It’s hard to believe. He’s… like the fucking sun.”

“An angel in the flesh.”

A snort, “You’re gonna give him a complex.”

“You already did that.”

At her words, Keith laughed loudly. She wasn’t wrong. Since they’d met, Keith had promised himself he’d give Lance anything and everything he could possibly give. The way he loved Lance was just—so overwhelming.

And Allura wasn’t far off the mark from saying that he’d probably given Lance a complex from it but sue him. He didn’t care.

They fell into an easy, comfortable silence. As they rounded the corner to turn down another street, two walkers stumbled in front of them, headed in the same direction as them, and Keith pushed himself and Allura back around the corner silently. Thankfully, the walkers moved on without noticing them.

Keith leaned out around the corner while Allura covered their backs. These two walkers were the first that they’d seen so far in the small town, but instead of stumbling aimlessly, it was clear that they were headed in a specific direction, like they were following something.

When he listened, he could hear the low moaning, groaning, and growling that meant there was a crowd of the undead near. It was a low roar, and Keith guessed they hadn’t heard it while they had been talking.

Allura was already watching him when he turned back to look at her, and he jerked his head in the direction of the walkers. She nodded, gripping her rifle, and they silently crept around the corner and followed the two walkers ahead of them.

As they moved forward, the roar of the undead grew louder, and Keith realized that there must be something up ahead that had caught the attention of enough walkers to create a small horde. He wasn’t sure what it could have been, maybe a dog or another animal, or even other unlucky survivors. Either way, Keith knew that he and Allura needed to check on the situation before they could continue with the mission in case the group of walkers would dissipate soon and cause more problems for them here or even later if they managed to wander down to the compound and pile up at the fences.

The low sounds from before turned louder, and when he and Allura stopped around the corner from whatever was happening, he realized that the walkers were frenzied in the worst way.
possible. Walkers were always dangerous, but when they were in a big group with food in front of them?

He and Allura needed to be extremely careful here. If any other walkers were to break away and lead a bigger group toward them, they would be in deep shit.

Keith squeezed the handle of his katana and leaned around the corner.

The sight in front of him was exactly what he expected at first glance. A large group of walkers were gathered just a few yards in front of them underneath a window of the building across the street. The crowd of bodies jostled each other roughly, each trying to rush forward to the object of their attention.

A person was hanging from a flagpole outside the second story window. Underneath them, bodies—a large group of bodies, one that would be impossible to fight through—gathered. There were also walkers reaching out of the open window, trying to get to the person clinging to the flimsy, metal flagpole, and as Keith watched, one walker pitched out of the window itself and tumbled down into the crowd below.

The thing that Keith wasn’t expecting was to recognize the person hanging there, and out of everyone he’d met in the apocalypse, it was the last person he expected to ever run into in a position like this.

Because it was Axca that was desperately gripping the flagpole above the undead.

At his hesitance, Allura leaned out around him too, and she gasped quietly when she saw what was unfolding in front of them.

In the next few seconds that passed, Keith thought back to every interaction with Axca he’d ever had. They were few and far between, but they were laced with contempt, hatred, and determination to kill one another. Axca had helped Lotor destroy the compound. She’d been willing to take Lance away, to let Lotor take him, use him, and kill him. She’d stood by silently while Curtis had been feed to walkers and Shiro had been bitten at Lotor’s orders. She had tried to kill Keith more times than he could count, and she threatened everything that Keith was trying to protect.

None of it explained why he felt responsible for what was happening in front of him now. He knew that he and Allura should walk away. There was no way out of this for Axca. Eventually, her arms would give out or the flagpole would break from her weight, and she’d plummet into the arms of the undead below. It’d be one less person for Keith to worry about if Lotor ever made another move at the compound.

Why was he rethinking it though? He knew letting her die was the best option, the safest option. Axca made her allegiances clear to Lotor. She would follow his orders, and when it came down to coming back to the compound for them whenever he finally decided, she’d put a gun to Keith’s—or Lance’s—head and pull the trigger just because Lotor told her to.

Why was he fucking hesitation then?

Allura’s hand gripped Keith’s shoulder, and he turned back to look at her.

“Should we…” Allura trailed off, whispering, and her eyes were wide, conflicted. “Should we leave her?”

“She’ll die if we leave her.”
“What if Lotor is here now?”

Keith didn’t have an answer to that question. He wasn’t sure he even wanted to know.

He tried to think about Lance. What was the safest choice for them and the compound? They could leave Axca here for the walkers. He was right earlier; leaving Axca here to die would mean that there was one less threat to the compound when all of this came to a head.

Then, Keith tried to think about what Lance would do. If he was standing with them right here, right now, what would he say? What would he want?

Keith thought back to the mission again, the trap Lotor forced them into. Axca had watched that day while Lotor ordered Curtis to be throw to the walkers. She’d held a gun to Keith’s head while Adam was injured and Shiro was bitten. She’d already tried to kill Keith multiple times. After all she’d done for Lotor, she deserved to die today. She deserved to pay for all the pain she and Lotor had caused them.

Still, watching her struggle with the walkers underneath her, imminent death upon her, one of his enemies, Keith felt conflicted, and then pissed as hell about it.

He sighed. He nodded to Allura and started forward, jogging toward the building, “C’mon. Let’s go.”

To her credit, Allura didn’t object. Instead, she followed him silently, taking out the walkers that stumbled too close to them with the butt of her rifle if Keith didn’t slice them down first.

They crossed the street without drawing any attention from the group gathered under Axca’s and ducked into the building. The inside was completely ravaged, furniture toppled, blood spattered against the walls and floors. Keith didn’t pay any attention to it. Instead, he led the way through the first floor and toward the stairs. The door was open, and in the concrete stairwell, there were more bodies, both already on the floor and still stumbling on the stair landings. Keith and Allura moved up the flight and to the second story quickly, exiting the stairwell and jogging in the direction of the roaring below.

When the noise grew to a steady and loud roar, Keith and Allura turned into a room on the left. Trash littered the floor, and dried blood covered the rest of it; across the room, at the window, there was a small group of walkers clawing out of the window where Axca was dangling from the flagpole.

Keith sighed and brandished his katana. A few of the walkers at the back turned toward them.

He traded a glance with Allura and nodded once before moving to the window.

They cleared the walkers with ease, fighting through the undead until they were only bodies on the floor.

Keith turned toward the window.

“Be careful,” Allura said, eyes wide.

He nodded again and leaned out of the window. Axca was already staring up at him, expression neutral, not at all terrified. Keith wasn’t sure he had even expected her to be afraid of dying so it was no surprise. She’d lost her grip on the flagpole, so she was hanging from one hand now, and the bodies below here were growing and stumbling and climbing on top of each other in their haste to get to their meal.
Keith glared at her, “Is Lotor with you? Is he here now?”

She shook her head once, eyes narrowed. Below her, one walker managed to stumble on top of the pile of growing bodies and grabbed her boot and clawed at her leg. The flagpole groaned with the extra tension, threatening to break at any moment.

“How do I know you’re not lying?” he asked again, yelling the question over the deafening noise of the horde below.

Axca’s eyes narrowed, and as calm as anything he’d ever heard before, she said, “You don’t.”

Keith waited another moment. The flagpole tipped lower, almost wailing as the metal strained with the weight that the walkers added by pulling Axca down toward them. She just stared at him. It was like she didn’t care if she died.

Or, she knew that Keith wouldn’t watch her die, and she was biding her time.

Keith broke first. Just as the flagpole’s bolts sprang loose from the concrete building, Keith reached down and offered his hand to her.

She swung her free hand up to clasp his arm and kicked the walker off her in the same motion. The flagpole finally snapped, and Keith hauled Axca up through the window and into the building. As soon as she was inside, Keith jerked his hand out of her grip.

There was a moment of silence between them, and Axca’s hand twitched toward the gun at her hip.

“Don’t even think about it,” Allura growled, lunging forward and pressing the barrel of her rifle into Axca’s chest.

Axca raised an eyebrow as she looked Allura over, glancing her up and down before looking back to Keith and saying, “You brought the princess with you? What if Lotor had been out here waiting on you?”

“I would have taken his fucking head off,” Allura snarled, moving forward again, finger easing down on the trigger. Keith wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her back, keeping his hand on his side to hold her steady. He hadn’t pulled Axca back into the building and saved her life just for Allura to shoot her in the heart.

Yet.

Axca surrendered, holding her hands up, but her eyes were still dark. Her expression was neutral as she stared at Keith, and her voice was almost bored when she said, “I’m not sure why you bothered.”

“Me either,” he admitted, voice even.

“I wasn’t lying,” she said. “Lotor is not here.”

“Then where is he?” Allura demanded, eyes alight with fire.

Keith squeezed her side, willing her to calm down.

Axca tipped her head to the side, “So you can kill him? Is that what you want?”

“Yes,” Allura’s voice was hard, unforgiving.
“We need to know what he’s planning,” Keith continued. “Why are you here?”

Axca looked between them for a long moment. The silence lasted so long it became unsettling, and absently, Keith wondered if she was trying to buy time. Maybe Lotor really was here. Maybe this entire thing was a trap. Maybe Lotor had set this up to see if Keith would take the bait and now he was on his way to—

Just as he was getting ready to grab Allura and bolt, Axca asked, “Did you see what happened to Narti?”

Keith blinked.

It took a moment for the name to register. Narti, one of Lotor’s lower generals, had been scarce around the compound. Keith had very little to do with her while she was around, and she unsettled him with her intense gaze and quiet way she moved. In fact, the most he’d ever dealt with her was the day at the compound that Lotor attacked.

“Your lover shot her in the head,” Axca said before he could reply, and her voice shook the slightest amount, a small break in her composure.

Keith narrowed his gaze, “Lance was aiming for Lotor.”

“He shot her in cold blood. Lotor told me what happened.”

“If you’re asking me, then you must not believe him,” Keith replied evenly.

Axca’s gaze narrowed. She didn’t move.

He continued, “Lance shot once, and Narti knocked Lotor out of the way. When Lance fired again, Lotor grabbed her and used her as a shield. She took a headshot.”

Her hands curled into fists at her sides, “Lotor used her to save himself.”

“Yes. You were there.”

“I couldn’t see. Lotor told me she jumped in front of him.”

Keith shook his head. He could very clearly remember Lotor grabbing the general and ducking behind her, even as she attempted to roll them out of the way together. Lotor had let her die, just like that. It was no surprise to Keith.

“Why would Lance want to kill Narti?” Keith asked her. “He had plenty of opportunities to shoot her, and he would have done if it he wanted to. He was aiming for Lotor. He was trying to kill Lotor.”

Axca was quiet for a long moment. Allura lowered her rifle.

Keith pushed a little farther, “We’ve had this conversation before, Axca. Lotor lies. He’s been lying to you this whole time.”

She glared at him, “Stop trying to manipulate me. If I wanted to kill you today, then I would have done it already.”

“I’m not manipulating you,” Keith argued, rolling his eyes. “I don’t care what happens to you. Go back to Lotor. Tell him you found us, whatever, I don’t care. But I won’t save you again.”
“Then why did you save me today?”

Keith hesitated, and then, he let out a rough breath, “I don’t know. It would have been safer for me to let you die.”

“But here we are.”

“Here we are.”

There was another small moment of silence before Allura interrupted. Her voice wavered once when she asked, “Why do you stay with him?”

Axca’s eyes glittered with silence, and she looked away as she said, “Because I have nothing else.”

“Having nothing would be better than having Lotor,” Allura argued, disgust apparent in her tone.

Axca growled, turning to glare at Allura, “And you would know, princess? You sit in the compound with your family, your blonde girlfriend, your military lapdogs. You know nothing of loss. You know nothing about me.”

“Do not tell me of my own suffering,” Allura started sharply, gripping her rifle tightly. “You have no idea what I have been through, nor what the people at the compound have suffered at your hands. You and Lotor have caused so much pain to me and to my people. You deserve nothing.”

Keith squeezed Allura’s side where he was still holding her, but he didn’t interrupt.

She continued, “Keith should have left you to die. I should have shot you in the chest the moment you stepped in through the window.”

“Then why wait?” Axca mocked, holding her arms out. “Take your shot, princess.”

For a second, Keith was convinced Allura would do just that.

But Allura didn’t raise her rifle. Instead, she lowered it completely.

“It would be too quick,” Allura said, voice stuck somewhere between rage and sadness. “Keith has made it clear about what will happen to you in the future, but let me make sure you understand. Do whatever you need to. Go back to Lotor. Like he said, we don’t care what happens to you.

“But when you show up at the compound again with Lotor, intent on destroying everything we’ve built,” Allura’s voice turned dark, and Keith found himself suppressing a shiver, “I will not give you anything else, not even a swift death. That would be much too kind for someone like you. I will make it slow and painful, and my face will be the last thing you see before I feed you to the undead.”

Keith stared. For a long moment, that was all he could do.

Axca stared back at them too, expression careful. She considered them before she nodded once and took a step forward.

In an instant, Allura drew her rifle while Keith yanked them both backwards out of Axca’s reach. She barely acknowledged them, moving toward the door of the room instead.

She turned back before she left, “I don’t know what Lotor is planning, but I would bet my life on him returning to the compound to finish what we started.”
“Why,” Allura demanded, growling the word.

“To kill both of you,” Axca responded, glancing between them before her eyes settled on Keith, “and to take your lover away.”

Keith felt his heart stop. That would never happen. He’d die before he let Lotor anywhere near Lance.

Somehow, his voice was steady when he asked, “You expect us to believe you don’t know what he’s planning? You’re his first general.”

Axca’s mouth quirked into a grimace as she shook her head, “Not anymore. Lotor has made it clear he doesn’t trust me.”

Her statement set off alarms in Keith’s head. He asked, “Why?”

She hesitated, pausing before continuing, “Because I didn’t stop the Humvee to grab the boy, your lover, when we were leaving. It was a direct order from Lotor, and I ignored it.”

“How?” he said again, hoping his voice didn’t shake.

She shrugged, “Same reason you saved me today. I don’t know.”

It was silent.

“I would leave before it happens,” Axca said, glancing at them again as she turned toward the door. “I would take my chances on the road before waiting to see what he has planned.”

“Lotor isn’t the only threat out there,” Keith replied. “We can’t leave because we’re afraid of one person.”

Her gaze narrowed, “Then prepare and wait. He will come back for you, but you’re right. If it isn’t Lotor, then it will be someone or something else. The world is full of people like Lotor now.”

Without another word, she turned and disappeared into the dark hallways of the abandoned building.

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Keith didn’t know what to do next.

“Should we follow her?” Allura asked, looking up at him. He still had his arm around her waist. “She could lead us right to Lotor.”

“We could walk into a trap,” Keith said, shaking his head. He pulled away from Allura and turned back to the window. As he watched, Axcaducked out of the building’s entrance and sprinted down the street, disappearing from his sight as she rounded the corner.

“We would know where to find Lotor,” Allura argued. “We could attack him before he attacks us later.”

“And if we get caught and Lotor kills us today?” Keith challenged, turning away from the window. Below them, the walkers were already starting to fan out and wander away. Hopefully, they would disperse enough for them to finish the mission and get back to the compound without anymore trouble. He continued, “If we don’t get back to the compound today, then Lance and Romelle will come looking for us. What if Lotor finds them?”
She pursed her lips, frowning. “Then what are we supposed to do? Axca confirmed that Lotor will attack the compound again. We can’t just sit around and wait.”

He shook his head. “No, we can’t, but we weren’t planning on doing that anyway, remember? The whole reason we’re out here today is to plan for potential threats against the compound. If Lotor is planning on coming back for us, then that’s all the more reason for us to develop a plan to prepare the compound and our people for it.”

Allura was quiet. The low growling of the walkers outside persisted.

“Things change everyday in the apocalypse,” Keith continued, trying to keep his voice up and his head high. Despite Allura’s rage at Axca and the news of Lotor, it was easy to see that she was losing some of her fire now. He said, “We don’t know what will happen tomorrow, and that’s why we have to keep going with the plans we have for today. It’s more important to see if we can establish an exit route from this town to head west in the event of an emergency. Lotor could come back to the compound tomorrow, or, he could be bitten by a walker and die tonight. We don’t know what will happen.”

“We are not lucky enough for Lotor to be eaten by a walker,” Allura mumbled, avoiding his gaze.

Keith bit back a grin. She was right.

“Still,” he said a few seconds later, “we can prepare, and we can wait. We don’t know what will happen, but I don’t want to force his hand. Not right now.”

Finally, after a long moment, Allura sighed and nodded. She said, “I know you’re right, but… I do not like the idea of sitting idly by while we wait for Lotor to strike.”

“It’s not just about Lotor,” Keith reminded her. “We need to prepare for anything that could threaten our safety at the compound. If something happens and we need to go on the road, then we need to do our best to make sure the people under our care know what to do and how to take care of themselves. That’s our job as their leaders.”

Allura nodded again, adjusting the grip on her rifle. She stared out the window at the walkers below.

He turned around and motioned her closer, and she filled the space at his shoulder. The large group of undead underneath them had already significantly thinned. If they were quiet, they should be able to slip out undetected and finish the rest of the mission.

“There’s a building a few blocks from here,” Keith started, “and it’s the tallest building in the town. If we can get to it and climb up the fire escape, then we’ll be able to see for miles in every direction. It might help us develop a better plan.”

“Allura nodded again, adjusting the grip on her rifle. She stared out the window at the walkers below.

“Which is to travel west,” Allura said.

He nodded once.

“You said we would travel west because it was the only direction you have not been,” Allura turned to look at him, gaze unreadable. “Is that the only reason?”

Keith was quiet. He thought back to his promise to Lance at the very beginning of all this, that they would look for his best friend, Hunk. Lance had given up so much already, and Keith would go to the ends of the universe to make him happy. It might be a ridiculous hope, but in spite of everything, Keith had found Shiro again. He’d found Lance, and he’d built a life out of the
hopelessness that surrounded them every day.

Who knew what else was out there waiting for them?

The streets were silent again, a stark contrast to the horde that had gathered earlier.

Keith and Allura made their way toward the building, crossing the remaining blocks between them with ease. The streets had emptied out, bodies disappearing as they stumbled away.

They reached the building and ducked into the side alleyway, where an access ladder for the fire escape ran up the side of the building all the way to the roof. Keith often climbed the ladder despite the fact that it was worn down, rusted, and probably couldn’t hold a lot of weight at once. He knew it was a risk, but it was the fastest way up the side of the building without going inside and potentially walking into a group of walkers unprepared and in close corners.

Realistically, the ladder was fine, Keith thought. He just wouldn’t trust more than one person on it at a time.

They hesitated at the bottom, Allura looking up at the seven story building and eyeing the ladder suspiciously.

Keith adjusted his rifle on his back and sheathed his katana. He nodded toward the ladder and reached up to grab the first rungs as he said, “Wait until I’m at the top and then come up after me.”

She nodded once, and Keith hauled himself up onto the ladder, taking the steps swiftly but carefully.

More than halfway up, almost to the sixth story window, one of the ladder rungs broke underneath Keith’s foot and his feet disappeared from underneath him, leaving him to cling to the metal ladder desperately with his hands.

“Allura!” Keith shouted in panic from the ground, voice echoing loudly in the alley below him.

He floundered for a second, hanging from the ladder with his grip on the rung above him, but he got his feet back under him on the rung, pushing himself up above the broken section of the ladder.

When he was steady again, he looked back down to Allura and grinned, “Watch that section when you come up.”

She laughed a little, shaking her head at him.

Before he could turn around to the ladder and keep climbing, there was a low growling from above him, and when he looked up, a body was falling off the roof.

Allura shouted again from below, and Keith clung to the ladder, barely pressing himself against it enough for the body to fall past him without grabbing him and knocking him off, and when he looked down, Allura jumped out of the way, brandishing her rifle toward the body.

Despite the seven story fall that should have incapacitated it, the runner stumbled to its feet and lunged for Allura. She backed up, pulling her rifle up with an accuracy and quickness that made Keith proud of her training, and squeezed the trigger.

The runner fell to its knees and toppled to the ground, bullets punching through its chest and head.
Black gore seeped out of the body and onto the concrete, creating a large, dark puddle underneath it.

“You okay?” Keith called.

Allura nodded, ponytail bobbing. When she looked up at him, her eyes were wide, but she didn’t look afraid, more surprised than anything. She replied, “I’m fine. Did it come from the roof?”

Keith turned back to the ladder and kept climbing as he said, “I guess so. Let me look.”

He only made it up a few more rungs before Allura was shouting at him.

He whipped around, looking toward the ground to find walkers stumbling into the alleyway from the streets. Allura pulled her rifle up, shooting the first wave of them, but it wasn’t just a small group. They kept coming, kept spilling into the alley, hands up and clawing the air to get to her.

“I’m coming up!”

Just as Keith was about to agree, another body fell from the roof. Then another.

He ducked into the ladder, holding on as hard as he could, but one of the walkers clipped his shoulder on the way down, and he lost his grip with one hand.

Fuck, he thought, scrambling to catch himself on the ladder.

More walkers tumbled from the roof, splattering against the ground on the other side of Allura. Few managed to make it to their feet after the fall, but they were still boxing her in, and if Keith didn’t do something, he was afraid of what might happen.

He couldn’t watch another one of his friends go like this.

He was already up so high. By the time he climbed down the ladder, if he even made it in time to begin with—

Keith jerked as another body tumbled past him, falling to the ground below, and his gaze caught on one of the platforms a few stories down that hung over the windows on the third floor of the apartment building. It was wide enough and close enough that Keith could theoretically use it as a jumping point to make it to the ground without shattering his legs.

Instead of thinking about it too hard, he pushed off from the ladder and jumped for it.

It was quick, but it was messy. He hadn’t been as close to it as he thought, so instead of landing on his feet, his chest caught the edge of it, taking the full blow from the three story fall, and the breath was knocked out of him.

The pain in his chest was sudden, and Keith was positive that he heard several cracks from his abdomen.

It was so intense that he couldn’t get his arms up quick enough to grab for a hold on it, and he plummeted the rest of the way to the ground.

He landed on his back, and for a second, his vision blacked out.

“Keith! Keith! Get up!”

Allura’s screaming was the first thing he heard once his ears stopped ringing. His chest was
burning, his lungs were screaming. He wasn’t sure he could even stand. Fuck, that had been a stupid decision. Holy shit—

A walker appeared in his line of sight, only a few feet from him, and Keith, despite the burning hell in his chest, reached back for his katana and thrust it up through the walker’s head. He stumbled toward the wall, catching himself with one hand and gasping for breath around the fire in his chest. Something was wrong. Something was really wrong.

A hand caught his shoulder, clawing, and Keith gathered every last bit of resolve he had and bunched it up. He gripped his katana and turned, taking off the walker’s head and moving in closer to Allura, who was mowing down the walkers on her side with her rifle. They weren’t thinning out any, and some bodies were still falling from the roof of the building, exploding into bloody, gory chunks around them.

They had to get out of here, and they had to do it now. They were making so much noise from the gunfire that they would draw every walker, runner, and horde right to their position if they hadn’t already.

Once the last walker was down on his side, he sheathed his katana and pulled his rifle out, spinning to help Allura clear out enough of the bodies to give them a head start.

They’d have to run for it.

“We’ve got to haul ass!” Keith shouted, pain ripping through his chest at the words, but he didn’t have a choice. When they got out of this alive, then he could worry about his injuries. Until then, he was fine. He had to be.

“Which way?” Allura kicked back a walker that stumbled too close and then shot it in the head.

Keith grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back, and they sprinted for the opposite end of the alley. As they ran, they swerved to avoid the few bodies that still tumbled over the side of the apartment building. Over their shoulders, the large group of corpses stumbled after them.

They turned out of the alley and onto one of the bigger roads, and like he expected earlier, bodies were already covering the streets, moving toward the noise they had created in the alley while they were fighting off the walkers.

“Where do we go?” Allura asked breathlessly.

Keith panted, unable to answer. Instead, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her forward, and they ducked past the walkers that were reaching out for them and adding to the growing horde behind them.

They had to lose these bodies, and they needed to do it fast.

Keith tried to remember where they were. His head was cloudy with pain, but he pushed it down, forcing himself to think.

All the working vehicles had already been taken from the town. There weren’t any supplies here to let them camp out for more than a few hours, and if they got pinned down in a building with this many walkers on them, they wouldn’t get out for days, and in that time, someone from the compound would come looking for them and walk right into a trap.

It wouldn’t work. They’d have to outrun the bodies on foot.
Their best chance would probably be to get back to the forest. Even though it would be slower moving through the trees, they’d have the advantage of both stealth and speed. They could travel a lot faster than walkers could in the forest.

That meant they needed to get to the edge of town, which was still blocks from here.

“Next left,” Keith ground out, and Allura nodded.

They flew around the corner together, running directly into two walkers that were reaching out for them, and Keith stumbled right into a set of undead arms.

Allura blew its brains out with her rifle before the thing could open its mouth.

There was a sharp twinge in his chest, and he fell into a painful coughing fit.

Allura grabbed ahold of him up to keep him steady and on his feet. When he pulled his palm back from his mouth, it was covered in blood.

He swallowed nervously, and Allura’s eyes were wide, panicked, as he looked up.

Keith coughed again, shuddering in pain, knees quaking with it. He felt like he was burning from the inside out.

He tried to take a breath, but it was too much. Instead, he reached for Allura’s forearms, holding onto her while he tried to collect himself. He needed to get it together so they could get moving. They were about to be overwhelmed.

Allura didn’t wait for him though, which was good. She grabbed one of his arms and slung it over her shoulder, grabbing him around the waist and jerking him forward into a jog. She was carrying most of his weight now, and it took some of the pressure off his chest and eased some of the burning.

As he tried to get his feet underneath him, his knees buckled.

Allura stumbled too, but she regained her footing before they fell to the ground. She jerked him back up and kept running.

“Keith!” she scolded, voice trembling, “Don’t do this! C’mon!”

He nodded roughly and shoved back against the pain, and finally, he got his legs to cooperate again, and they moved into a smoother run, boots pounding against the asphalt.

“Right!” he coughed at the next corner, and Allura pulled them around the corner in a dead sprint.

The street in front of them was thankfully empty, but Keith could hear the moaning and growling of the horde that wasn’t far behind them. Thankfully, this road led out of town, directly parallel to the forest, which was few yards behind the buildings on the left side of the road.

Up ahead, the fire station sat on the edge of the town. One of the garage doors was open, and Keith knew from exploring it before that there was a backdoor that was only a few yards from the tree line of the forest. If they could get into the building and close the garage door behind them, they might be able to get to the forest without drawing the walkers’ attention. Then, it would be a straight shot back to the compound through the trees.

Hopefully without any other complications.
“Straight ahead,” he croaked, struggling to breathe. “Fire station.”

Allura nodded, and somehow, she seemed to run even faster. Keith was struggling to keep up.

Keith didn’t let himself look over their shoulders, but he could feel how close the horde was. Instead of thinking about it, he kept his eyes forward and gripped Allura’s side. She could easily outpace him, especially with his injury, but she stayed right beside him, eyes fixated on the fire station in front of them, expression serious.

She’d really come a long way. There was no one else Keith would rather be in this situation with right now.

Finally, finally, they closed in on the fire station. They went straight for the garage door, and Allura pushed him forward first, kicking back at the first walker that was too close to them, and rolling under the garage door just as Keith pulled it down.

The bodies on the outside slammed into the metal door, easily denting and bending it in. Keith stumbled on his feet, vision swimming as he pressed a hand to his chest.

“Okay,” he wheezed, chest burning with it, “y-your partner is injured… and there are w-walkers everywhere. W-what now?”

“Don’t turn this into a survival lesson, Keith!” she nearly shrieked, and when he looked closer, there were tears in her eyes.

He shook his head, “What do we do?”

“We don’t have time for this,” she scolded, one tear dripping down over her cheek. “You’re injured!”

He coughed again, loudly. When he pulled his hand back, there was less blood, which was probably a good thing, but it was still dizzying to see.

“Okay,” Allura finally caved when she realized he wasn’t going to answer, looking around the building. The garage had a few tools scattered on the floor, but there was nothing useable for them here.

The pounding outside increased in volume. The garage door groaned from the weight of the undead.

“Okay,” she repeated, coming closer to him and grabbing his arm to hook around her shoulders. She started moving, dragging him with her toward the hallway that led into the building. “There has to be another way out. There aren’t any vehicles here, which means we need to get back to the compound on foot.”

He nodded. Good.

“A backdoor,” she realized, looking over to him. “This building must have a backdoor that leads to the forest, which we could use to get ahead of the horde and then lose them in the trees.”

Keith smiled and wheezed, “That’s my girl.”

Allura blinked, bottom lip trembling suddenly, but she stubbornly hauled him forward, and before he knew it, they were standing at the backdoor of the building that looked out over the near fifty yards between the building and the trees.
They stared out at the open space between them and the forest. It was far.

“Can you run?” she asked, looking at him.

He nodded, and after taking another breath and adjusting her grip on him, Allura threw the door open.

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“S-stop,” Keith gasped finally, gritting his teeth, “just a-ah, wait a second.”

Allura scanned the trees around them again, frantic, and then, she carefully lowered him to the ground, letting him rest and lean back against a large oak tree.

He panted, breathing shallow, as he tried to get more air. He was lightheaded, his vision was swimming and dotted with black stars, and he was shaking. His chest was burning so badly but—he really needed to get it under control. They had to get back to the compound, and as much as he was hurting, Allura couldn’t carry him the whole way and fight off all the walkers they encountered.

She kneeled in front of him, hands going for the hem of his shirt, and he moved his arms to his side, looking down at his own chest as she lifted his shirt.

“Oh my god,” she whispered.

His abdomen was already bruising and swollen. Deep red and black bruises were forming along his sides and over his ribs, and it was easy to see that some of them were out of place and pushing against his skin.

He’d be lucky if one of his lungs hadn’t been punctured, but he figured he would have been able to tell that by now. More blood would probably be coming up when he coughed, right?

Keith pushed her hands away and let his shirt fall. There was no sense in getting worked up about it out here. Right now, they needed to focus on getting back home.

“I’m so sorry!” Allura blurted, tears pooling in her eyes again.

He frowned and wheezed, “Sorry? For what?”

“If I hadn’t got caught in that crowd then you wouldn’t have had to jump—”

Keith reached forward and grabbed her hand, “Allura, this wasn’t your fault.”

She nodded, “Yes it was! It is! And now you’re injured and the compound won’t have you to lead us—”

“Hey, I’m not dead yet,” he coughed again, pleased to find that there wasn’t any blood coming up anymore.

It wasn’t the right thing to say. As he watched, Allura’s bottom lip started trembling, and the tears that had been pooled in her eyes spilled down onto her cheeks.

He stayed silent for a long second while she tried to wipe the tears away, but they kept coming. Keith suspected that it was more anger, frustration, and stress than actual sadness that was causing the tears, but he didn’t comment on it. Instead, he just held onto her hand with one of his and kept an eye out for walkers.
“You could have died from jumping off that building,” she cried a few minutes later, holding her free hand over her eyes.

He nodded, wheezing as he took another shallow breath, “You could have been bitten by those walkers. We take risks when we leave the compound.”

Allura shook her head, but she wouldn’t look up at him.

A few seconds later, he tried again, breathing out a rough laugh when he said, “Lance is gonna be furious with me.”

Another wrong thing to say. Allura sobbed suddenly, shoulders shaking, as she cried, “He’s going to be furious with me! I couldn’t keep you safe! You almost died!”

Fuck, Keith thought, wincing as the pain in his chest flared up again as he shifted against the tree.

“Lance would never be mad at you,” Keith explained, trying to force himself to take a deeper breath. “You’re the one who’s kept me alive.”

“You’re hurt because of me,” she argued.

Keith leaned forward, ignoring the terrible burning in his chest and carefully wiped a few of the tears off Allura’s cheeks. He said, “I jumped off that building to get to you because I couldn’t watch you get hurt. I’ve got your back, and you’ve got mine.”

Allura stifled a sob, still shaking her head, and distantly, a low moan ripped through the otherwise quiet trees.

Keith smiled a little, “Time to go. We’ve gotta get back before noon or else Lance really will kill me.”

She didn’t laugh at his joke, but she wiped away the rest of her tears before reaching forward to grab him. Allura pulled him to his feet and wrapped one of her arms around his waist, her other hand gripping his wrist to keep his arm over his shoulders. He pressed his free hand to his chest, trying to move through the burning that was eating him alive.

Her voice shook when she asked, “Ready?”

He nodded, and they started forward.

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It took every last bit of strength that Keith had left to help Allura get them through the forest.

It was long and hard. Every few minutes they had to stop to fight through a small cluster of walkers, and when they weren’t fighting, Allura was leading them through the trees at a sprint while Keith stumbled at her side as they tried to make up the lost time. It had taken them hours to get back because they had ducked into the trees so soon, and at this rate, they would be lucky to get back before noon anyway. If they were late, Lance would demand to come after them. That thought, that Lance would be in danger on the road out looking for them, was the only thing that kept him going.

Allura was tired. She was gasping for breath too, and every time he glanced over at her, it looked like she was fighting back tears. She was the one that was having to haul Keith’s ass all the way back to camp through dense and confusing trees and fight off the walkers they ran into on the way.
Keith was trying his best to help. He kept his feet under him and watched the trees as they moved forward, doing his best to bite back any groans that threatened to slip from him. He didn’t want Allura to know he was in pain.

By the time they finally made it out of the trees and onto the highway that led directly to the compound, Keith’s head was hanging limply between his shoulder blades, and all he could do was keep his feet moving in small enough steps to help Allura drag him forward.

“’Lura,” he wheezed.

“Yeah,” she gasped, adjusting her grip on his side. Her fingers were digging into him and making his abdomen ache even more, but he didn’t want to tell her that.

The compound was in sight now. They only needed to make it another mile before they were at the gates, and thankfully, they had managed to lose the rest of the walkers in the forest so they weren’t leading any back to the fences.

“We’re gonna be okay,” he murmured, fighting to lift his head to look at her.

“We’re almost there, but you’re still injured and we didn’t make any significant plans for the compound, what if something happens to us and we don’t have—”

Keith interrupted her panicked reasoning and said, “No, we didn’t, but it’s okay. You kept us alive today. That’s all that matters.”

As far as Keith was concerned, the mission had been a success. He and Allura had developed a plan—as small as it was—for them in case of another emergency at the compound, whenever it happened and whatever it was caused by. They would use the town as a rendezvous point, and then, they would head West. Keith was sure it was coming someday, and now, he knew that Allura would be prepared to deal with it and fight to keep everyone safe.

She was quiet as she dragged them forward, arms gripping him tightly.

The closer they got to the compound, the more activity they could see. As they approached the first gate, Keith looked up to see Lance sprinting down the hill toward the gate, blue eyes wide, expression terrified, followed by Kinkade, Coran and few others. The soldiers were scrambling to open the gates now, some even climbing down from their position in the tower to help.

Keith bit back a laugh, knowing it would only make his chest ache more. Now that they were back and safe, he could admit how stupid he had been earlier. Jumping off a seven story building? Lance really was going to kill him, no doubt about it.

But maybe in between Lance’s anger and frustration about him almost getting himself killed on the mission, he could snag some time alone with Lance. That would be really nice.

“I’m so sorry,” Allura whispered again, taking even more of his weight when his knees buckled.

“Not your fault,” he wheezed again. “We’re home. We made it.”

She sniffled, but she dragged them forward still.

Lance threw himself at the inner gate, clinging to the fence and already shouting as they got close enough for the soldiers to open the outer gate, and Keith’s heart settled in his chest. Everything was going to be fine.
“We’re good, ‘Lura,’ Keith repeated. “See? Lance always comes when there’s trouble. Nothing gets past him. We’re gonna be fine.”
Chapter Summary

But Coran wasn’t smiling back, and Kinkade, from his guard post at the door, had stood up abruptly. Even without looking, he knew something was wrong.

Chapter Notes

Phew!! here's a new update!! this was written by me, maireep!! you can catch me and rachel mostly on twitter nowadays - we have some amazing chapters and plans coming up! this will be the first of a lance POV saga so buckle in~

After watching Keith leave for the day, he spent most of the morning doling out duties to the dwindling crowd of civilians, trying to avoid the lump of nerves in his throat that threatened to come out of his mouth if he dwelled a little too much on his worry. With the last assignment out, as they were trying to clear out the back of the compound and reinforce the back fence, Adam led a small group to the back exit and Lance was left lingering around the common room.

Coran had asked him a day or two ago to check on Shiro this morning, and he grabbed a few granola bars for the task. It was the last of their stock, but if anyone deserved a crunchy treat it was definitely Shiro. A small infection had rolled over his healing wound and was holding him back from being formally discharged for a bit as they curved the infection from spreading. It was lucky, in hindsight, that the infection had started now and not later - they were running low on antiseptic and alcohol to clean wounds.

With the granola bars in his pocket, peanut butter and chocolate respectively, he plopped the last of the bottles of antiseptic out of its storage space in the back and headed for the infirmary. It was always a tiny rush going through the compound when the day was rearing up because everywhere he turned, there was the hustle and bustle of work.

Romelle was hammering a small metallic plate against a gaping hole in the ceiling, which had been ripped apart for the repiping of their water system, and she smiled down at him as he scooted past. One of the others, a taller woman named Merla, helped steady the ladder and also gave him a tiny wave. He grinned back, shooting a “Good work, ladies!” over his shoulder as he headed to the infirmary door. The sun poured through the windows as he propped open the door with his shoulder.

Shiro turned to him, and he pulled up his hundred-watt smile, holding up the granola bars with a wiggle of his eyebrows, “I brought snacks!”

Shiro laughed immediately, and Lance crossed to set the bars on his bedspread before washing his hands quickly. Shiro was already leaning on his side, propped on his other arm so that Lance could carefully unwrap the bandages over his amputated arm. It was a clean-ish cut, with nearly healed
patches of skin, but still, the bandages had been stained with red and brown. With every dab of a cotton pad soaked in alcohol, Shiro shivered - minimal compared to before - which was a good sign that the infection was slowly waning.

Lance made sure to clean it as thoroughly as Coran taught him, but with the extra speed that he knew Shiro appreciated. By the time he was over with the cleaning, Shiro was already relaxing against the press of cotton.

“Sorry,” Lance breathed, “I’m gonna wrap it now.”

Shiro waved him off, but grit his teeth as Lance wrapped his arm tightly. With a final tug of the last tie, Shiro groaned and Lance pulled back.

“You’re getting the hands of a doctor now,” Shiro teased. “Jesus, I don’t think Coran even ties that tight.”

Lance laughed and went to wash his hands again in the small utility sink, “Not true. Coran has the grip and wrap of a parent telling you to suck it up.”

Shiro snorted, rubbing at his face, “Stop, I can already smell the Tiger Balm.”

And that sent him reeling. Laughing loudly, gloriously accompanied by Shiro, he tossed himself into the chair next to Shiro’s bedside. He handed the older commander one of the peanut butter bars, ripping his own open absentmindedly.

He froze though when Shiro lifted a singular eyebrow at the bar in his hand and then went straight for his teeth to rip open the wrapper.

“Holy shit, I’m so sorry,” Lance rushed, almost dropping his bar. “Do you want me to get that for you -?”

Shiro shook his head, extracting the bar carefully with his fingers, letting the wrapper flutter to the bedsheets, “No, I’m so good. I haven’t done that since I was a kid. Refreshing kinda. I feel less like an old man now.”

Lance swallowed a snort and, with the straightest face as possible, went, “Oh I wouldn’t jump that far.”

There was the smallest beat of silence before Shiro nearly howled with laughter. He leaned over hard and fast to ram his shoulder against Lance’s, body shaking with laughter in such a spectacular fashion that Lance nearly felt himself, also spurred and trembling with laughter, tear up.

“Christ! You and Keith,” Shiro bit out, shaking his head with the softest smile. “Now I’m getting that from both of you. I’m not gonna lie and say I hate it, mind you, this is easily the happiest I’ve been since…”

Lance blinked, sucking in his breath and they let it hang between them.

“Are you okay?” Lance looked down at his bar, forgotten and slightly crumbling onto Shiro’s hospital bed.

A soft sigh, “I will be. It’s not the arm that hurts the most… I, uh.”

“Curtis?” Lance provided quietly.
Shiro nodded, pulled in air through his nose, and turned away. He caught a glimmer of tears in the older soldier’s eyes.

Lance reached forward, tipping his bar to touch Shiro’s in a sibling-like show of affection. A tiny harrowing laugh burst from Shiro’s chest.

“I’m sorry,” Lance looked to him, “I’m so sorry. I know you were close, and he is so dearly missed here. He was a really great guy, always helpful. And I know it makes your, uh, thing with Adam hard.”

When Shiro didn’t respond, Lance pulled back just a bit, hesitant but soft, “If you don’t want to talk about it, I understand.”

He let that hang for a solid couple of minutes, content to just sit with Shiro until the soldier felt more comfortable - either to tell him to leave or just to change the subject. As much as he felt closer to Keith’s older brother now, it was hard - so hard - to lose someone you adore during the most harrowing thing the world had ever gone through. Seeing your loved one fall, most of all, was enough to scar, he knew that. If he had to watch his family go…

Eventually, Shiro turned back to him, face a bit more tinted, eyes wet, “I… It’s hard because Adam… and I - we both have this guilt. Survivor’s guilt, really, knowing that as we get closer, it’s without Curtis, it’s because Curtis isn’t here and we are. It doesn’t even…”

Slowly, to not put any pressure on his wound, Lance slid closer and wrapped an arm around Shiro as carefully as he could. The words died in Shiro’s throat, and he tilted forward until Lance was holding the commander up gently.

Lance closed his eyes, eyebrows knit as he tried his hardest not to cry, voice breaking just a tad, “Shiro… Curtis would want you both to be happy. You know he would, and it’s hard to hear that. I can’t even comprehend my mami telling me to be happy without her in this world, and we will always carry this guilt knowing we survived, but…”

He pulled back from Shiro, and the soldier laid back against the head of his bed, eyes crinkled with tears.

“Curtis wanted you to survive,” Lance said, soft and slow, wiping at his own face before tears could run down his cheeks. The mental stress, the hardship they were experiencing daily, was a task beyond all of them. Lance couldn’t heal Shiro like he could the infection on his arm, and similarly, his own guilt could never be healed - but carrying with him the love, strength, and goodwill and adoration of his lost ones, it was easier. Not easy at all, but in the very least, easier.

When Shiro nodded finally, sad but acknowledging, the barest smile on his lips, Lance leaned forward on his elbows. Teasingly he grinned up at the older man, “You know Keith would absolutely kick your ass for thinking like that.”

Shiro shook his head good-naturedly, his hair growing out of the soldier cut to softly brush against his sides and forehead, “Of course he would. But then I’d pull out the… hell he raised as a teenager. Every day was a new argument or fistfight, I swear I was picking him up from school early at least five times a week.”

Lance gasped dramatically, “Who? Keith?”

“You seriously wouldn’t believe the shit he would cause. Of course, he had some justifiable reason
sometimes, but I swear he just liked to cause a riot sometimes - for the helluv’ it.”

Propping his chin into his palm, propped on the bedside, he grinned, “That’s Keith for you.”

Shiro chuckled, and finally took a bite of the granola bar, chewing with a thoughtful eye before swallowing, “He’s changed now.”

“We all have,” Lance said evenly, before taking his own bite.

“He’s changed because he’s met you.”

With a hack and a choke, he slammed his fist into his chest and worked hard against the chunk of granola lodged in his throat from Shiro’s abrupt declaration. Tears bubbled a bit before he forced the granola down, Shiro chuckling gently.

Weakly, he protested, “Okay first, don’t just say that. And secondly, he has not changed. He’s out on some reckless mission again, I mean - he’s literally the only one pulling our bootstraps up right now so like, where does he think he can just go out with no backup? He’s crazy -”

Shiro’s eyes dazzled with happiness, face open and eagerly gentle and Lance stalled.

“He’ll be fine,” Shiro reached out and placed his hand onto Lance’s shoulder, heavy and comforting. “He has a very reliable partner he knows will take care of the place while he’s out. Plus, I don’t think he’ll let anything stop him from coming back to see you.”

Lance went slack-jawed, already flushing and whining, “Shiro - what’d I just say!”

The commander began to laugh, but heat was washing over his face spectacularly now. Shiro had just… essentially called him reliable enough to be comfortable with the compound in his hands and was also heavily implying that - that -

Well. Nothing like the intimidating military commander brother teasing you to really nail home how obvious they were to probably everybody in the damn compound.

He plopped his head into his hands, which only made Shiro snort and chuckle more, and blindly, he went and swatted his hand at the soldier’s chest.

Lance stood after a second, hands on his hips, and face tilted away from Shiro in a mini pout, “Well, enough out of you. I’m heading out - lots to do in Keith’s reckless absence.”

Shiro grinned at him and he rolled his eyes back, shoving the rest of the granola in his mouth as he tossed both wrappers into the bin near the sink and started for the door. He turned, hand on the doorknob, narrowing his eyes at the commander.

Swallowing, “And you better eat that peanut butter bar, ‘cause I’m sending Adam in after we run through rations and if he sees you haven’t eaten, he’s gonna kill you and me.”

Shiro promptly, and humorlessly, shoved the rest of the bar right into his mouth, sending Lance into hysteresis so loud he could’ve upheaved his own bar if he really tried. When the laughter subsided and Shiro was happily chewing, which had sent Lance into another fit of giggles because of the sheer absurdity of the usually stoic and strict leader, he tossed a wave and closed the infirmary door behind him.

He went chuckling the whole way to the kitchen, settling beside Adam as the lieutenant went about directing cartons to be slowly accounted for and rifled through.
The man looked down at Lance with a raised brow, glasses shining, “What’s so funny?”

Lance grinned, “I changed Shiro’s bandages, gave him some granola. He seemed awfully serious about you giving him grief if he didn’t eat it.”

Adam gave him a smile, eyes a tiny bit brighter, “I swear he doesn’t eat enough.”

It was then that Griffin, one of the three on kitchen duty, cut in, “And we all won’t if we don’t get this rationing under control.”

Adam quirked both eyebrows now, smile turning just a bit dangerous, “Talk back to me like that again and I’ll have you take the brunt of it.”

Griffin shut up immediately, paling just a tad at the renewed vigor in Adam’s face. The lieutenant was slowly working back into the same character they were all used to - a strict, no-shit taker, with a mouth to match. Lance tried to hide his smile behind a carton he strode over to help Griffin pick it up, but it didn’t go unnoticed by Adam, who smirked a bit.

One by one, they consolidated each carton and combined the dry foods together in one wooden crate. The meats went in another, placed within a walk-in freezer that was slowly getting bare. Their meat situation was easy to account for, as there was plenty of hunting out to be done in the forest, but as far as canned foods and grains, they were running low. Adam went over the numbers, braced against the counter, as Lance rifled through and called out which exact resources were accounted for and which were dwindling down.

Adam paused with a hum, flipping papers back on his clipboard, “We’re missing how many cans of greens? We should have 12 from last week, and we didn’t serve any since.”

Lance furrowed his brow, redoing the count, “We have 8.”

There was a pause and then Griffin cursed brightly. The other soldiers, Olia and Te-osh, looked at each other in concern.

Adam sighed, “We’re not going to go pointing fingers. It’s hardly a crime to be hungry right now.”

Griffin rubbed at his face, “How could you say that? We only have so much for all of us. It’s not… It’s breaking our protocol.”

Lance raised his eyebrows in Griffin’s direction, and Adam immediately snapped, “Oh so what? You wanna throw hungry civilians through the fence? There is no protocol, soldier.”

“If we let this slip,” Griffin argued, which really spiked Adam’s annoyance, “what’s to stop others from taking what they want?”

Adam took a definite and deliberate step forward that had Griffin’s metaphorical hackles rise, and immediately, Lance shoved himself between the two of them, hands raised.

“We’re all on the same team,” he reminded them, firm but gentle, “We can go ahead and make a small announcement about rationing being enforced, stricter, without pointing fingers - and still make our point across. We don’t need people to panic either by announcing that people have been overtaking,” he pointedly looked at Adam’s triumphant gaze, “but we can’t really let it slip.”

Griffin nodded immediately, slinking off, but Adam still stood rigid.
Lance shrugged, “You’re right, Adam, but so was Griffin. Let’s let it go. The faster we finish, the quicker you can visit Shiro.”

And finally, the lieutenant relaxed, a tiny nod sent to Griffin in the smallest form of apology available. The other soldier still giddily went to work all the same, almost refreshed and energized by the smallest acknowledgment of a good point - which left Lance, Olia, and Te-osh laughing a bit, and Adam even smiling.

He was halfway through the supply line check with Adam, nestled back in the kitchen at the end of the common room, when the gates screeched open at the front of the compound. Adam almost immediately ripped his wrist upward to look at his watch, but Lance? Lance was already whirling around on his heel and heading for the compound doors. It was close to 1145 hours, according to the common room wall clock, and he was eager to see what Allura and Keith had brought back. As he was getting closer to the door, Coran popped out of the military wing, and Lance shot a smile his way, “They’re back, Coran! Hopefully we -”

But Coran wasn’t smiling back, and Kinkade, from his guard post at the door, had stood up abruptly. Even without looking, he knew something was wrong.

He burst through the front compound door and set out sprinting toward the gate, tunnel vision narrowed in on the two silhouettes dipping through the outer gate and toward the inner. Every footfall in the gravel went slipping, and the soldiers posted on the gate towers were scrambling down as Allura and Keith came into view - Allura very clearly holding Keith up and dragging him along.

His legs pumped faster, arms pushing, chest burning until he was pressed tight against the inner gate, fingers interlacing in the chains and physically dragging the gate back as it slowly opened - as if he could use his own strength to rush the opening of the gates. Allura looked up as he slammed into the gate, and fresh tears welled into her eyes. Keith’s head was limp but he raised it slowly and gave a weak smile.

“Allura!” Allura choked out, and he all but pushed through the inner gate’s opening, arms already outstretched for Allura and Keith.

“Allura, Allura - What happened?” His voice was panicked and high-pitched, and he folded Keith immediately into his arms, keeping up Keith’s weight, “Oh god, Keith?”

The tears spilled over Allura’s cheeks, running down her face anew, “I’m so sorry, Lance, it was me -”

Keith coughed, a wretched broken thing and rolled his head upward, “It definitely wasn’t. I was being stupid.”

Lance ran his hands up and down Keith’s chest, brushing over his ribcage and feeling the damage there, watching as another cough wracked Keith’s chest, nearly grinding his teeth out, “What happened?”

Kinkade and Coran had reached the inner gate now, and Lance dragged a half-limping Keith their way, Allura tight on his other side. Kinkade brushed past them to take a position at the back, eyes
alight and directed to the forest beyond - they had no idea what could have hurt Keith yet, and taking chances could mean disaster. Keith noticed this and tried to turn in Lance’s arms, but he held tight and dragged their literal commander onward.

“Uh-uh,” Lance hissed, “Nope, no orders now. Kinkade’s got it. You tell me what happened right now or I’ll - I’ll -”

Allura, from his side, broke into a hiccupsing, half-laughing sob. Keith swiveled his neck to shoot her a sly grin, a very obvious See?

“We got caught up on a fire escape, side of a building, in town,” Keith chuckled weakly. “I was climbing up and Allura was watching my back, but a runner came over the wall and was on her heels so I jumped. Landed pretty bad.”

Lance closed his eyes tight, holding his tongue. He wasn’t necessarily mad that Keith was hurt, not at all, he was kind of devastated that he wasn’t there to help Keith out - but it was the recklessness, the undisturbed way he brought it up. Well, and also that he got hurt. Coran, from Allura’s side, cut in to raise Keith’s shirt, and Lance stopped the half-shuffle so that the older doctor could look over Keith’s ribs.

“Definitely broken and dislocated,” Coran nodded, “and won’t be easy to fix after breaking them the second time in six months.” He gave Keith a stern look, and the other man had the courtesy to look somewhat guilty, very much akin to the look of a sad dog. Lance had to practically bite through his bottom lip to stop a smile from betraying its way onto his face.

“God,” he hissed instead, “what are we going to do with you?”

And the second that slipped out, he regretted it. Keith turned to him with the most mischievous smile on his lips as he looked over to Lance, eyes dark, dangerous. Allura, from their other side, hiccuped a soft sob, and Coran went to put a comforting arm around her.

“I will drop you,” Lance hissed, close to Keith’s ear, face aflame as both the soldiers crowding closer, Coran, and Allura seemed to turn away innocently as if they weren’t hanging onto every word passed between the two of them. Keith, in response to the dwindling space between them, just leaned in closer, those same eyes dragging down Lance’s face and lingering around his mouth.

Lance barely suppressed that smile again, trying not to let his leaping heart distract him from the anger of how Keith was very much broken in his arms at the moment, “I seriously will. It’ll be very embarrassing.”

Keith rumbled, avoiding a chuckle but still letting out a wheeze, his own hand coming to touch his chest gingerly, “You won’t.”

Lance hissed, dragging Keith’s fingers away and resuming the walk toward the compound doors, “Don’t aggravate it. We need to get you to the infirmary.”

Keith thankfully nodded and they crossed over into the compound threshold, the door propped open quickly by a stricken looking Nadia. Idly, as he all but dragged Keith down toward the infirmary, he noticed how the soldiers gathered, worried, looking after Keith until literally Coran had to begin shooing the crowd away and back to their jobs. Allura followed, worrying her bottom lip and looking anxiously over Keith’s slumped body, and helped immediately push open the infirmary door for them.
Adam was inside and stood up so quickly his chair almost went knocking over, and Shiro went to immediately try and get out of his hospital bed - Adam immediately instead going over to keep Shiro from standing. Lance shuffled in, propping Keith close until he could slowly lower him down onto the hospital bed next to Shiro.

“What happened?” Shiro demanded, leaning against Adam to look over, get closer, to his younger brother. Coran went to the back of the room, toward the sink immediately, and Lance ripped himself away from Keith’s side - though his chest burned doing it - to help Coran pull out the antiseptic and alcohol. He grabbed a few rags, dipped in solution, and returned back to Keith to pull up his shirt.

“He was acting stupid and re-shattered his ribs probably before they had even healed the first time,” Lance hissed, wincing as the shirt revealed the upper half of Keith’s chest was bruised deeply, darker and redder than all those months ago when Keith had pulled the compound up during Lotor’s betrayal.

Coran walked up, leaning immediately over Keith’s chest with clean hands and pushing against the sides of his ribs, feeling for the damage. Keith hissed, wincing and jerking against the bed and half of the room winced with him.

Weakly, with his eyes anchored on the ceiling, Keith said, “It’s not that bad.”

And Shiro, faster than Lance although he was about to do the same thing, promptly reached over and swatted at his arm. That itself sent Coran chortling a bit as he felt in-between Keith’s ribs, stealing the exclamation from Keith’s mouth and tightening his lips from pain alone.

“You should have been more careful,” Lance admonished, unable to hold back as he watched Coran literally move Keith’s broken ribs under his skin, “God, Keith, you’ll need bed rest for at least a week.”

Keith grumbled, throwing an arm over his eyes and burying his fingers into the bedsheets next to him, their knuckles subtly brushing. His own fingers twitched in response, and he couldn’t hold himself back from brushing them together again. Lance was half preoccupied with watching the quirk of Keith’s lips at the touch, that when Allura’s sob broke, it nearly startled him.

Shoulders hunched high, she gasped out, “I’m so sorry, Keith. The compound won’t be - can’t keep - It’s all my fault. ”

Lance turned from Keith’s bedside and grabbed onto Allura’s hand, squeezing as he softly said, “It’s not your fault at all, ‘Lura. We’ll be fine without Keith for a bit -” Even as he said it, he could see the nerves on the faces of Kinkade and Nadia in the doorway, and Allura’s fearful expression, “And it’s not like he’s gone. He’ll be up within a couple of weeks - Hell, both of the brothers might be. We’ll be okay.”

Shiro gave a short but reassuring nod from his bed, and Keith raised a weak thumbs up from the arm slung over his eyes, as Coran went about resetting his dislocated ribs back into place.

After a particularly harsh crack, Keith gasped through his teeth and raised his head when Coran stepped away to get an ice pack, “Mm-yeah. I’ll be fine, Allura. Kinkade knows how to run the shifts, Adam is on top of paperwork. Hell, you guys don’t really need me -”

“Okay, I wouldn’t go that far,” Lance muttered, jutting out a teasing hip.

Keith’s eyes glittering dimly in amusement as he continued, “ - when Lance is around. He basically
knows most of the compound’s inner-workings. We’ll be fine, and progress won’t slow with him around.”

Suddenly, attention throughout the room was on him. He shifted, opting for an easy and carefree smile, although his heart was pounding in his chest. It was true he had the inner workings of the compound padlocked practically. He knew the rotations for patrols, the stores for inventory and what they had to get done versus what they had to upkeep, sure, but... doing that without Keith felt wrong somehow, like he couldn’t bear that burden without Keith helping out. Allura, and the other soldiers, even Coran, Adam, and Shiro were nodding though, pleased and *satisfied* with knowing that he could… stand in Keith’s place.

He walked back over to Keith’s side, as Coran went on to shoo the others out of the room, and soon Shiro had laid back in his bed and pulled the curtain so it was just Keith and Lance as Coran wrapped Keith’s chest and placed ice packs just under the end of his shirt.

“What was that?” he murmured to Keith, plopping into a stool next to the head of the bed. “Do you really think that?”

Keith sent him a fluttering weak smile, hair pooled against the hospital covers as he turned his head toward Lance, “Of course I do. You know I do. You’re the best thing that’s happened to me and to this compound. You’ve been here through it all.”

He bit his bottom lip immediately, sparing a look to see if Coran and Shiro had been paying attention before turning back to Keith, hoping that his shiny eyes weren’t too obvious. It meant a lot to know that the unofficial, but so beloved, leader of their compound, no matter their connection and these… *feelings*, recognized that he was working so hard for the compound. That he was worthy of leading them, like at all, in general, and that was enough to nearly push him to tears. Well, that and also the stress of seeing Keith in a hospital bed.

“Thank you,” he breathed, flopping his head into his hands and peeking out over the top of his fingertips, “but I’m still mad at you for getting hurt.”

“Mad?” Keith grinned.

“So mad,” he nodded, pouting a bit into his hands. “You promised me you’d be careful.”

Keith sighed, “Yeah I’m sorry. I just… I couldn’t just stand there and watch. You know what it’s like.”

Lance snorted, smiling a bit, “I know. You better rest so you can be on your feet again. The compound needs you.”

Coran stepped forward then, with a glass of water and a pain reliever. Keith took it gratefully, and Coran nodded down at him sagely as he helped tip the glass into his mouth.

“You better rest up, young man,” Coran said sternly, “or I’ll bring in the sleeping pills. Don’t try getting on your feet for at least three days. I don’t want any of your resistance like from last time. It weathers me, you young ones.”

Lance laughed and stood. Keith gave a last amused grin, before Coran shooed Lance right out of the infirmary. He had a lot to take care of, and Keith needed rest, and knowing that Keith trusted him so much with the compound, there was a lot to get started on doing.
The compound hallways were dark and empty, and just a bit cold. His hair was ruffled, curls menacingly fluffy, from turning this way and that alone in the bed in his and Keith’s room. It was surprisingly large without Keith in it. Even when they were busy going their separate ways during the day, he had always felt somewhat better feeling the dip of Keith’s weight in the sheets when he finally crawled in after a long overnight shift, but knowing Keith wouldn’t be there that night had him restless. He had spent what felt like ages under the windowsill of their room, staring out at the night when he finally realized he couldn’t catch a wink of sleep.

So eyes crystalized with worry, feet absolutely fucking freezing on the metal of the hallways, he made his careful way to the infirmary. It was going to be empty that night, because Coran had finally and carefully discharged Shiro back to his rooms. The infection was waning, and he was healing properly now, which meant he didn’t need to be confined to the sickbay. It would be a welcome reprieve for Shiro, and also a happy little circumstance that made it all the more easier for Lance to slip through the infirmary doors undetected.

The infirmary gleamed in the moonlight, and a digital clock in the corner blinked back ten minutes after one in the morning. He was already relaxing hearing the soft breathing of Keith, before there was a creak in the bed and Keith’s face turned to him.

“What are you doing here?” Keith asked, with the softest sleep-rumbled smile. His hair was messy and still tugged halfway in a ponytail, and he turned fully as Lance padded over.

“I can’t sleep without my portable heater,” Lance breathed, heart choked on the wispy hair that curled around his jawline, cut with moonlight and the softest haze.

Keith laughed, almost soundless, eyes so full of feeling Lance had to bite down on his bottom lip to stop himself from choking up. With a gentle wince, a tiny smile from the corner of his mouth, Keith lifted an arm out to his side, beckoning Lance closer.

He shifted to sit on the bed, pulling his knees in close and tucking himself into Keith’s side, but giving enough room for Keith’s ribs. Immediately he sighed against Keith’s shoulder, the warmth and smell of the other man, knowing Keith was alright, was enough to relax him for the first time that night.

“You sleep without me a lot of the time,” Keith rumbled.

He shook his head softly, “This time is different. You’re hurt, and I can’t sleep without knowing you’re okay.”

Keith tugged him closer with a hand on his shoulder, pulling him close enough for him to bury his face in Lance’s curls. The hug was brief, the tension painful on Keith’s chest in the way that both of them could feel it - the spasms of his muscles and the gasping intake of breath.

“Don’t push yourself,” Lance admonished sternly, propping himself up on an elbow to look down at Keith, “I’m right here, not going anywhere. You can hug me when you’re better.”

Keith gave the smallest of pouts in response, and Lance squeezed a pale cheek to get rid of that puppy dog pout from his lips.

“You’ll be fine without a hug for a couple of days,” Lance teased, grinning slightly and lidding his gaze as he looked down on Keith.
He was looking better rested than he had in months. His eyes were shining, skin was smooth and light, and his body almost jumping with energy despite the hour. Granted, he must have been sleeping for most of the day, but it was nice to see Keith was healing fast and resting for once. He was studying Keith with a keen eye, wondering just how many days he’d have to be without him, when a hand, warm and soft, reached up and tilted his chin back to look into Keith’s eyes.

Pools, dark and burning liquid, gazed back at him, and the thumb on his cheek caressed his skin in small circles. His stomach jumped, but he leaned into Keith’s palm all the same, the corner of his mouth just inches from Keith’s thumb.

“Your eyes are beautiful,” Keith said, not once tearing his eyes away from Lance’s.

He chuckled, “Coran gave you some medicine, didn’t he?”

“No,” Keith said immediately, his thumb brushing lower until it just gently touched Lance’s bottom lip. “But if he did, it wouldn’t mean I was exaggerating.”

Lance hummed, his heart threatening to burst, and cheeks already blossoming in color. Gently, and without much effort to make it pronounced, he pressed a small kiss to Keith’s thumb. He bit back a sigh. Beside him, Keith was still, quiet, as he watched him. Finally, Keith murmured, “You doing okay?”

Lance nodded immediately, looking down at Keith where he was propped up on his elbow. With his free hand, he reached up to tuck a strand of Keith’s hair behind his ear and kept his hand there, enamored with the softness.

“I know I said I’d be careful,” Keith continued, voice low, careful as he spoke around his injuries. It was no doubt that Keith was in a lot of pain, especially if he’d already refused pain medicine. “I’m sorry that I worried you.”

“It’s okay,” Lance replied quietly, keeping his eyes on Keith’s hair. A lump crawled into his throat, and he bit back tears. Just the thought of Keith—if something worse had actually happened while he and Allura had been out on the mission and Lance hadn’t been there...

Keith readjusted his grip on Lance’s chin, thumb brushing against his bottom lip again. His eyes were intense when he said, “You look tired.”

Lance nodded, “I am tired.”

“Sleep then?”

He hesitated, threading his fingers through Keith’s hair, “I really just… want to talk to you.”

Keith’s gaze softened even more, and Lance was melting just from looking at him. Keith was lucky that his ribs were broken to hell and back or else Lance would be all over his ass right now, confession or no confession. He settled closer, playing with the edges of Keith’s lengthy strands. They slipped through his fingers easily, like silk.

“Shiro is suffering from survivor’s guilt,” he recounted slowly, “because of Curtis’ death. I tried to be there for him, like I was for Adam when he was diagnosed. They’re… well, obviously you might hear it from him, but it hurts to see them force each other away because of the death of Curtis.”

Keith’s brows twitched, “Curtis would want them to be happy.”
Lance nodded, “That’s what I told him. I hope it reached him, but I know personally how slow of a process grieving and forgiving yourself is.”

Keith sighed, bringing a hand up to curl around the back of Lance’s neck, stabilizing and gentle, “Reminds me of Allura. She mentioned her own guilt with the Bandor situation. I guess her and Romelle are, uh, together?”

He couldn’t help but giggle, quickly suppressing it at Keith’s raised eyebrows, “You’re so slow on these things. I guess they’d been flirting right when Romelle, Bandor, and a few others came to the compound, and now they’re together - or, were?”

Keith shook his head, “Definitely still a thing. Allura said it’s just hard now that we’re living with the aftermath of what Lotor and Bandor did.”

Lance trailed his fingers up Keith’s shoulder, tangling his fingers in the small hair laid there and adjusting his chin on his palm a bit more, “She told you that? That’s really good, I’m happy to see you guys bond.”

A black eyebrow rose, and then Keith hummed softly in agreement, “Yeah… Ready to sleep?”

Lance softly wanted to curse him for noticing. His eyes were slowly drifting closed, just listening to the hollow sounds in the room, the deep breathing of Keith’s chest rising and falling. The shadows in the room were much longer, the moonlight much lighter, and his elbow was slowly drifting down into the bed.

“Kinda,” Lance yawned, “but I wanted to keep talking.”

Keith’s eyes dipped and he tucked a hand against Lance’s cheeks again, “I’m here, I’m back, we can talk more later. Let’s rest.”

And how could he deny that? When the moon was so high that it reflected in Keith’s dark eyes and sleep was nagging at him already? So he let Keith tuck them both under the covers, taking deliberate care to not aggravate his wound, and then shifted so Keith could rest against his shoulder this time. Inky black hair tickled under his chin as Keith barreled in, the angle just a bit reaching so they could rest against one another.

Lance spent the rest of the quiet in the room just absently playing with Keith’s hair, listening to his whispering voice coo him to sleep, satisfied and comforted by Keith’s familiar body heat and weight.

His first time handing out jobs to the soldiers went as smoothly as it could have been. They had to be assigned while in the common room, because he wasn’t quite sure he was ready to attend the lieutenant meeting - hell, he had almost died when Adam asked if he’d like to lead the meeting - and it somehow made the soldiers a bit more at ease with him, as he joked and passed around their sheets.

“Well, happy to have you guys,” Lance said evenly. “Keith is healing, but he’s restless, as you can imagine.”
There were a few giggles, and Matt wiggled his eyebrows from the back next to Nadia. Lance rolled his eyes, but continued, “Thankfully we got the back fence pretty secure, so we don’t need any patching today.” A weak cheer, “- But we’ll need some extra rotations on the shifts. Olia spotted a couple of hordes near the right fence. Everyone stay on high alert today, we’re gonna need some keen eyes so we’ll be rotating every hour to keep everyone on their toes.”

As easily as they had joked, the soldiers were immediately nodding in unison - quick on the upkeep of their jobs. The civilians, who had already been handed out jobs before, still stood crowded, mixed along the back of the soldiers easily, watching with the same amount of seriousness. Lance took the slightest moment to survey their group - a ragtag but strong unit. They could continue to survive, together.

Lance cleared his throat, “And before I dismiss you… I just wanna say. Both Shiro and Keith, all of our lieutenants really, couldn’t have done it without all of you - all of us. Our leaders are strong because we are.”

He grinned down at them from his heightened step on the bench. It took a moment, the smallest echo of his last word, because the common room burst into a round of howling and clapping. Flushed and laughing, he eased down from his stop with calls of, “Alright - alright! Dismissed!”

The crowd dispersed slowly, a few soldiers drumming up another round of whooping on their way out to the yard. Matt clapped him on the shoulder on his way past, and Nadia shot him a smile from beside Ina as they took up guard at the front entrance. Flushed still, his ears an utter red mess, he dropped the assignments onto the stack of papers under his clipboard on the table. His heart still hammered at the reception, and he took a steadying breath.

“Keith would’ve loved that.”

He jumped and whipped around on Allura with a whine, “Jesus, ‘Lura. Warn a man.”

Allura grinned at him, rolling a shoulder, “I wasn’t about to let you bask in that glory by yourself. You were amazing.”

Lance bashfully shrugged, “I mean, I just wanted to say what I could. Everyone deserves the praise, there’s a lot of hard work going on, I just wanted to… say something.”

“You put it perfectly,” Allura nodded. “Where are you headed?”

“I’m off to do some checks in the garage - I wanna see what Romelle has done in scavenging vehicle bits,” Lance reviewed his papers. “We need to know if our remaining Humvee is ready for trips soon.”

“Do you mind if I tag along?”

“Sorry, what was that?” he teased, already walking toward the front of the common room. She rolled her eyes and caught up easily, lingering by his side as he shuffled through the front entrance and headed across the grounds to the garage.

“What’s up?” he asked, softer now that she was quiet.

When they were a good distance from the front entrance, Allura sighed, “Lance - I really am sorry about Keith -“
He cut in, “Allura, you know I don’t blame you. It’s not your fault at all.”

She pouted, “I know but I just wanted to… reiterate.”

“You don’t need to,” he shook his head, looking at her softly. “I’m serious too. I’m sure you tried this with Keith and you really don’t need to apologize to either of us. I would’ve done the same for you, and I’m sure you would’ve done the same for Keith.”

Allura nodded, solid and firm, “I would. Absolutely.”

“Then you have nothing to apologize over,” he ushered her into his side with an arm, tucking Allura, only just a bit shorter, under his weight and dragging her along like he would Rachel back in the day, until Allura was laughing and pushing away from him.

“Anyways,” he smirked, “why so keen on coming with me to the garage?”

Allura blushed but finally pushed away from Lance, gaze falling a bit, “I mean… Things haven’t been the same since Bandor. Romelle is really upset about it, she won’t take breaks or talk to me, just works. I think it takes her mind off of it.”

He frowned, “I mean I have seen her taking a lot of shifts. When was the last time you guys talked?”

“Probably,” Allura paused, “two days ago? It was brief. She’s really… torn that Bandor hurt me.”

Lance frowned, because of course she would. If Rachel had… what, basically shanked Keith in the back, he’d be pretty upset about the whole thing himself. Nevermind that Bandor actually defected and left with Lotor. Considering that piece of work, who really knew if Bandor was safe at the moment? Especially since Lotor had been planning on basically enslaving any new survivors they came across, was Bandor really safe from that? None of them could really reassure Romelle that was or wasn’t the cause.

“If we catch her at the garage,” Lance settled, “let’s talk. I don’t want her to go through that alone. We’re all in this together.”

Allura smiled, hopeful and small, and tucked herself back against his side as they approached the garage. Alone in it was Romelle, her blonde head tucked under a lifted engine - thankfully not busy with any of her tools, but still already speckled in motor oil. The Humvee was practically in pieces next to her, but the engine was looking better than it had in days - probably, he couldn’t really tell but he had heard Matt going on about it earlier at breakfast. With the pace Romelle was working, Matt had said the Humvee should be finished and “good as new” in only a couple more days.

Watching how diligent Romelle was, pressed in against the machinery, Lance had no doubt it would be.

He stopped just a little bit into the garage, Allura at his side, “Hey Romelle? Do you have a second?”

The blonde paused, and turned. She took a second to take off a worn pair of protective glasses and her gloves before coming over, “Hey Lance, Allura.”

And really before he could say much, Allura had started forward and wrapped Romelle into her arms tightly. Their hair mixed, fluffy and laced together, and Romelle made a soft sound against Allura’s chest, questioning and maybe a bit embarrassed.
Lance laughed, tucked his clipboard under his arm and bundled up the two girls in his arms, swooping them up a bit off the air. Romelle floundered and laughed, Allura making a little squeaking scream, before he waned and plopped them back down on the ground with a huff.

“Right to the point, huh, Allura?” Lance laughed, and the older girl rolled her eyes, arms tucked around Romelle still.

“Everyone knows a little mix of Lance is bound to cheer anyone up,” Allura stated plainly, and pulled back then from Romelle.

The blonde girl looked between the two of them, gnawing on her bottom lip to try and stop a smile from breaching her lips. Allura caught her fingers in her own, lacing them gently and looking to Lance.

“Why don’t you guys take off today?” he suggested softly. “Romelle, you’ve gotten so much work done on the engine, you’re like… weeks ahead.”

Romelle weakly frowned, “But…”

Allura shook her head and cut in, “Romelle, please. You need a break.”

Romelle took a second, staring hard down at her shoes, and when she spoke it was with an achingly bitter voice, “…To mourn? You want me to mourn him already?”

Allura blinked, shell shocked, but Lance stepped closer immediately and placed a hand on Romelle’s elbow, squeezing gently.

“Never,” he said. “It’s not to mourn. It’s to celebrate the hard work you’ve accomplished. You have absolutely nothing to be making up for. Bandor’s actions were not your own, and your brother isn’t lost. He’s still here, the brother you really know.”

Romelle broke immediately, gasping out once before the waterworks hit. He smiled at her gently and tossed his arm over her shoulders immediately, tucking his chin on top of her head. Allura held her hand firmly, eyes already watering as well.

“I’m sorry,” Romelle breathed a shudder. “I’m so sorry for everything.”

“You don’t need to be,” Allura said, unwavering and holding Lance’s gaze for just a firm significant second. “You have nothing to apologize over.”

“We’re healing together,” Lance added. “We’re all in this together, we’re not gonna let you continue to work to appease something you didn’t do and aren’t responsible for.”

Romelle nodded slowly and he stepped back so the two could gravitate towards each other, hands easily intertwining. Romelle’s face, now streaked with tears, was already relaxing, and Allura looked so happy she could cry. His heart soared knowing how he had helped them already, and with a laugh, he tapped Romelle and Allura forward on their backs.

“Get out of here, lovebirds,” he teased. “Run off on your merry way. I’ll catch you at dinner.”

Romelle smiled at him, rosy cheeks and happy eyes, and Allura shot him a gentle “Thank you” before she led the blonde out of the garage and toward the common room. And if the afternoon was that much easier to get through and bright and easy, well he would absolutely chalk it up to that alone. There was something so special about helping this family, his family.
Keith was well enough to start walking after a few days - and by well, he had annoyed Coran enough to essentially facilitate his own break-out of the infirmary, just enough to actually take turns of the compound when he could. Lance had only really learned that Keith was allowed out by basically running into him at the gate towers, lingering around with Kinkade without a shirt, his chest wrapped up in bandages.

He skidded to a graceless stop and whipped his head around to do a double-take, and sure enough, Keith in all his shirtless glory, was standing with his hands in his pockets, chatting slowly with Kinkade feet away from him. He immediately ditched the garage check-in and crossed the yard with purpose. Kinkade, from Keith’s other side, caught sight of him immediately and very nearly paled.

As he should.

Lance placed one grip on Keith’s bicep, and the older man jumped slight enough for him to just know it was Lance.

“What are you doing up?” Lance said, demanded really, already looking over Keith’s bandages and ribs. “Did Coran authorize -?”

Keith breathed softly, looking down at him with the gentlest gaze, not at all perturbed, “Hi Lance.”

Lance nearly dropped the issue, and his clipboard, but twisted up his mouth in determination and whirled the man around in the direction of the compound, “Nope, none of that. We’re going.”

Unceremoniously, he began to escort Keith right back to the infirmary, dead set on ignoring the very real temptation of Keith half-naked, sweatpants slinging low on his hips, hair artfully ruffled and tied in a small ponytail at his neck.

“I was just checking on the front gate,” Keith supplied, but he shook his head immediately. “You should be resting, Keith. You told me I could handle it while you were resting.”

Keith, absolutely on some sort of painkiller, half shrugged, his arm slipping around Lance’s waist too easy, as if he had no care in the world, “I was bored. I can’t just do bedrest for a week.”

Lance snaked his own arm back and placed Keith’s arm higher on his back, where it had been slipping dangerously down the small of his waist, “I did it for like three weeks. Shiro did it for a lot longer, you can do it for a few days.”

And finally Keith pouted, eyebrows drawn together as they crossed into the common room, through the front doors, and already making their way toward the infirmary hallway.

“Coran let me out,” Keith said with finality, “To get out of his hair. I just want to see the compound, iz’ that so bad?”

He sounded so broken and, clearly the painkillers were making him surprisingly soft. With a small leaning press, Keith pushed his nose and mouth against Lance’s neck - very much in the middle of the infirmary hallway, where Merla and a civilian turned bashfully away as they worked at the end
of the hall. He was already heating up from Keith’s traveling hands, but this was too gentle - which was gonna get really bad for his heart.

Lance huffed and led Keith into the infirmary, which was thankfully empty. He hauled Keith over to his bed as gently as he could manage with how angry and flustered he was from Keith’s stupid actions. Keith groaned as Lance helped him back into his hospital bed, situating him against the pillows so he could sit up.

Just as Lance was getting ready to pull away, Keith caught Lance’s hips in his hands and jerked him forward. Lance’s clipboard cluttered to the ground, and in his haste to catch himself before crushing Keith and causing even more damage to his ribs, Keith managed to grab one of his knees and pull a leg completely over him so that Lance’s knees settled on either side of Keith’s hips as he hovered over him, hands pressed to Keith’s hospital bed on either side of his head. The bed creaked with the action, and Keith’s hands immediately trailed down the small of his back, rolling from his hips down.

Lance spluttered. Keith smirked up at him.

“Keith!” Lance whisper-shrieked finally, trying to lean back and put some space in between them. Fuck, they were in the infirmary. Anyone could walk in. Anyone that walked past the window in the door could probably see them!

A low laugh filled the small space between them, and a shiver snuck down his spine at the sound of it. Taking advantage of this, Keith leaned up and pressed his mouth into Lance’s neck, right at his pulse point, the muscles of his abdomen clenching gorgeously in Lance’s peripheral.

Even though Lance’s heart was literally singing and all he could think about doing was leaning forward into him and catching Keith’s stupidly attractive mouth with his own, he tried to remember where they were and why they were here. Keith was injured, and injured badly enough to need bedrest. He should be resting not… whatever this was.

“Oh my god, stop,” Lance whined, hoping his words sounded more like a command than a desperate plea for Keith to keep going like they did to his own ears. “Someone could see us.”

“So?” Keith hummed deeply, one hand snaking around Lance’s waist to sit at the small of Lance’s back, fingertips dipping underneath his jeans.

Lance reached back and grabbed Keith’s hand, pulling it off him and holding his hand to the hospital bed at their sides. He shook his head and tried to make his gaze stern as he looked down at Keith, “So you need to cool your jets, Keith. You’re injured. I don’t know what you think you’re capable of right now--”

Keith breathed a laugh against him, mouth and lips brushing his skin slowly, and Lance’s traitorous body shivered again as he interrupted, “You want me to show you what I’m capable of?”

Oh god.

Abort mission! Run! Lance was almost screaming at himself to climb off of Keith and scold him again for getting up and possibly worsening his injury with all these stunts he had pulled today. Instead, the bigger part, the part of him that had been longing for Keith since that first day on the road, whispered at him to stay.

His cheeks felt hot. God, he probably looked like a disaster right now.

“Shut up,” Lance replied weakly, his voice shaking.
Keith pulled back from him suddenly, lifting an eyebrow and looking up at him with those dark, intense eyes. His voice was rough and low when he said, “You really want me to stop?”

No! Lance wanted to scream. Of course not, you idiot! I want you to fuck me right here, right now!

Thankfully, Lance bit his tongue and nodded slowly. Yes. They needed to stop.

Keith nodded back, slowly with his eyes softly lidded. He pulled back from Lance, relaxing against the headrest and letting Lance sit back. He settled on Keith’s bedside, letting the mattress dip and his own heart start to mellow. Keith looked to him still with a dark glimmer, but strictly kept his hands at his side, like a child forcing himself to sit still. Lance chewed on his bottom lip, smile already threatening to burst through just a little bit.

And on a whim alone, he scooted closer so that their faces shared air. Keith breathed in, and his fingers twitched, eyes already hovering around Lance’s mouth. He wasn’t trying to tease Keith, but it was already becoming fun to see how his dilated eyes bounced between his lips and his eyes.

“We can pick this up once you’re back on your feet,” Lance murmured dangerously.

Keith raised an eyebrow, pausing before smirking, “That so?”

“Mmm.”

“Well, let me at least make sure to take you out first,” Keith replied, voice slow, steady, and stupidly Southern - all low sexy drawl.

Lance pretended that the offer didn’t get to him as much as it did when he offered Keith a smirk of his own and said, “Going all gentlemanly on me all of a sudden?”

He dropped his hand closer to Keith’s, fingers touching slightly, until Keith was slowly intertwining and steepling their fingers through one another’s.

“You deserve it,” he said, plainly, like it was obvious, dark eyes pouring into Lance’s.

“Do I?”

“You deserve everything.”

Lance’s eyes were already closing, breath paused, heart hammering, and he was so sure Keith was going to lean in - lips so close it felt like they were already brushing gently together, but instead, Keith’s palm rose to cup his cheek - and he was already mourning the lack of that kiss when his eyes fluttered open again.

Keith placed his forehead gently against Lance’s, soft and caring, but still flushed from painkillers and just a bit handsy with his arm around Lance’s waist. He relaxed happily against Keith nonetheless.

“I want to do this right,” Keith murmured.

And who was he to argue against that? When Keith was so softly touching him, eyes raw and full of the gentlest emotion, and god - Lance was smitten. Lance nodded, steady but slow, and opted to relax against Keith’s palm. His cheeks and face felt hot against Keith’s warm skin.

“Okay,” he replied, “but you need to get some rest, okay? No more wandering. You need to use this time to heal.”
Just to sweeten it, he fluttered his eyelashes open to look up at Keith and added, “Please.”

Keith nodded immediately, bangs flopping in his eyes from the eagerness. He settled back, pulling Lance slightly up the bedside, settling both hands around his waist, a tiny smirk growing on his face.

“Only if you nap with me for a bit.”

Lance blew out air from his nose, a tiny laugh, and rolled his eyes, “Keith, I can’t just ignore my duties.”

“You can’t,” Keith agreed, “but it won’t hurt to get some rest with me. Remember the other night? I slept so good with you here with me.”

Damn him. He sighed and curled closer, bracketing back over Keith with a hand on each side of his body before tucking himself into Keith’s side. Keith hummed, so happily it made Lance’s heart squeeze, and the soft smell of fresh sweatpants and Keith’s body wash lingered around him. He was already, undoubtedly, getting a bit sleepy. Obviously, he hadn’t gotten much sleep without Keith last night.

“Fine,” Lance whispered, late, “but if I’m behind and Adam chastises me for not going through my clipboard, I’m absolutely throwing you under the bus.”

Keith chuckled, breathless and faint, turning his face into the top of Lance’s head - already his breathing was becoming slow and even, “What clipboard?”

Lance snorted, already feeling the other man drifting off, and in the golden afternoon that peered through the infirmary windows, he let himself settle into Keith’s hold and close his eyes. He fell asleep absurdly fast, both because of the exhaustion of the last couple days, working without Keith, and because of just how safe and loved he felt in Keith’s arms.

The weather was slowly warming, and less rainy and overcast. Keith’s ribs had been aching from the change in temperature, and the healing process was slowing down just a bit. Lance had made sure to clear a ton of his schedule to allow for longer time for him to check on Keith’s ribs, pressing around them just a bit with delicate fingers to check on the process. The bruising had begun to start forming from dark purple to reds and yellows - almost nearly a yellow and green thankfully. As the bruising faded, it meant that Keith was beginning to really heal. It was a slow and steady healing, and that meant Keith was getting antsy. Confining him to the infirmary was like locking Keith in handcuffs in the closet and swallowing the key in front of him, and every time Lance went to move on from the infirmary to other tasks after checking on Keith’s ribs, the other man tried his hardest to scramble after him.

Thankfully as he stepped into the infirmary this time, Keith was not on the edge of ripping out his hair from boredom. Allura was sitting at his bedside, her hands folded primly in her lap, and her head pressed against the flesh of Keith’s shoulder. Keith’s hair, gentle and black, had been tugged over one shoulder and sported a nice checkered scrunchie that was definitely Allura’s. They had been talking, with Keith leaned against the frame of the bed with his eyes lidded low and relaxed. His chest couldn’t help but twist at the sight, because of how cutely they had pushed together, their
heads close so that their long hair blended together. Keith looked at home with Allura, like she was like the sister Keith never had.

They both perked up when he stepped into the room, and Allura was on her feet and helping Lance pull out instruments and gloves as he washed his hands.

“You don’t have to help,” Lance insisted, smiling her way as he scrubbed his nails.

“Nonsense,” Allura shook her head immediately. “Keith lay down.”

The bed squeaked as he slid down onto his back, his ponytail flipping up against the frame as he dutifully hiked up his shirt, “Yes ma’am.”

Lance laughed, biting back a grin, “Maybe you should be the one ordering him around.”

Allura grinned, placing her hands on her hips at the end of the bed, “Oh, I bet I could whip him into shape!”

As he approached, Lance regarded the bruising on Keith’s ribs before gently pressing in on them from either side. Keith stirred just a bit at the pressure, instead shooting off a disgruntled, “I’m in shape, Allura,” before groaning when Lance pushed in on his broken ribs.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, smiling as Allura huffed over his shoulder, “Hey ‘Lura? He’ll need some pain medication, can you grab some from the kitchen?”

Allura nodded, her silver hair flouncing as she crossed to the doorway, calling a soft, “Be right back,” over her shoulder before closing the infirmary door behind her. Gently, Lance rolled his fingers against the base of Keith’s ribs, around his side, poking at the tender bruised flesh there. The color was fading to yellows and greens already, which was good.

Keith shifted a bit, uncomfortable and wincing, before Lance glanced up to him.

“Are you okay?” he asked gently, retracing his fingers and just laying his hands on the bedside.

Dark eyes lingered over him before Keith responded with, “Are you okay?”

Lance blew his bangs from his face, “Fine, I guess. Tired, working, and you?”

“I was talking with Allura,” Keith started, and Lance paused his examination of the pale skin near him to look up. Keith hesitated, reaching a hand up to tug at his ponytail. The hesitance made Lance’s stomach drop, and he sat back in the chair by Keith’s bedside, already frowning.

Keith started again, “When we were out in the town, we saw Axca.”

He reeled for a second. Keith reached over and grasped Lance’s wrist, the pressure a comfort among the anxiety that settled deep in his chest.

“...No Lotor?” he hated how his voice cracked, but the nerves were coursing through him like fire.

“No Lotor,” Keith confirmed immediately. “Just Axca. We... She was in trouble with a horde. I couldn’t just stand there. I know what she... what Lotor did to you and Allura was horrible, but I still couldn’t watch her die like that.”

He squeezed his eyes shut.

“Are you...”
“I’m not mad at you,” he said, quick and firm. “I - I’m proud of you really. She doesn’t deserve that, even though she’s… helped Lotor in the past.”

Keith’s hand trailed up his arm under it was placed, grounding, on his shoulder, “I don’t want to guess anything. Lord knows people can be bad. But… she thought you killed Narti. Lotor told her you killed Narti.”

Confused, he frowned at Keith, eyes jumping from Keith to the bedspread, “I didn’t. Lotor did.”

“I know,” Keith was quiet, “and the look she gave me when I told her… Lance, she might not leave Lotor, but I know what I saw. She was doubting him.”

Lance chewed on his bottom lip, folding his own hand over the one on his shoulder and taking Keith’s hand between his in his lap, “I don’t know what to think about this. I want to hope so badly that he’s gone for good. But she was there in town, and I can’t help but be scared.”

Keith shook his head, “Don’t. His numbers must be dwindling if even Axca is doubting him. He can’t come back without meeting us head-on, and you know I’d fight tooth and nail for this.”

He couldn’t help but smile at that, small and bursting forth, tangling their fingers together, “I will too, but I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

A hum. “It might not,” Keith conceded, looking out the window with furrowed eyebrows, “Lotor would be an idiot to come back here now - with how much time has passed, we now have the upper hand.”

Keith was right. Their stability, now more so with Shiro and Adam back, and with the various reinforcements they had added to the compound as a whole, was both much to be desired and would help protect them. Lance relaxed just a bit, still holding fast to Keith’s fingers.

“Am I gonna get that hand back any time soon?”

“Nope,” he grinned instantly, and shot a wink to Keith as the infirmary door slid open and Allura stepped in with a jar in her hand. The tension faded from the room, as she nearly force fed the pain pills to Keith - until the three of them were nearly squabbling like children and laughing up a storm. Lotor was a long gone threat now, even if Keith had saved Axca’s life, Lance had no choice but to believe in this sanctuary they had built up themselves - and god did he believe.

Weeks later, Keith had recovered for the most part from his injuries and moved out of the infirmary to do limited physical work around the compound, and Shiro had begun to leave bed rest and return to duties. That alone sparked both a flurry of positivity and activity within the compound - where soldiers had been working harder, they worked harder. The whole compound worked with new passion, new desire, and it was so heartwarming to see. Every meal was spent in laughter, shared together, devouring every last drop because the sanctions were so tight, and then the crowd dispersed back again - to work harder, sweat faster, bleed and breathe into the compound with vigor. It was infectious too. When Shiro took turns around the compound, Keith and Adam supporting him from a bit of a distance, Lance could feel the energy spike. They were truly healing and thriving now that Shiro was back up on his feet.
As spring eased in, and the days got warmer, they were bringing to grow vegetables and wheat along the sides of the fences in the compound yard. Without Keith, they hadn’t been able to schedule a time to check traps outside in the forest, but the second he was up, they had gone around to collect and clear. The rabbits and small mammals were enough to feed everyone for the month, and with the growth in the gardens, they had finally added a little more flavor to their meats in the evenings. Coran, with help from Matt and Allura, had begun to plant and ferment some wheat for beer as well.

It made Lance happy to see the growth in their garden during his round in the morning. The grass was crisp under his shoes, and the sunlight barely peeking out from the clouds. Keith had done an overnight and he had already brewed a pot of coffee from the guards, handing a mug to Nadia at the compound door as he made his way past the garages to the gates.

Up on the gate tower, Keith stood, leaning coolly and wrapped up in his jacket, with a rifle - looking out beyond the compound. The stillness of morning was cold on Lance’s cheeks as he ascended the tower, easily balancing the last two mugs and coffee pot in one hand - somehow the skills from his two month waiting stint at an Olive Garden during college had lasted through the end of the world - as he climbed.

The wood and metal creaked under his weight as he stood finally and stepped into Keith’s vicinity. There was already the easiest, smallest smile on his lips, pale from the cold, and Lance mirrored it immediately. It was his favorite ritual of theirs - meeting up at the end of Keith’s overnight shift to share a cup of coffee.

“Hey,” he pushed against Keith’s side to hand him a mug, pouring the last of the coffee in the pot into both of their cups. “We’re out of that honey and sugar so it’s just black today.”

Keith crinkled his nose cutely, but tipped the cup to his lips regardless, the steam from the mug warming his cheeks to a pink.

Lance grinned, allowing himself just a second to admire Keith’s face before turning around to look back over the compound grounds, “You never complain about it.”

Keith wiped at his mouth, his voice low and crackly from a night of unuse, “No sense complaining. I’m lactose intolerant anyways.”

Lance hummed, “That sucks. We could’ve never gone to an ice cream shop together.”

Keith quirked an eyebrow because it totally was silly to think about them pre-apocalypse, but he still went with it, and that made Lance’s heart soar, “I dunno. New York probably had a lot of non-dairy options.”

“Oh definitely,” he laughed. “Nyma stocked our mini-fridge with almond milk only. It was so good I only went for nut milk whenever I went to Starbucks.”

Keith nodded slowly, “Nyma was your roommate right?”

“Yes, she was a riot. You guys…” he paused, then laughed, “probably wouldn’t have liked each other. Like maybe a begrudging respect but she’s... was pretty high maintenance.”

He turned a bit to watch Keith out of the corner of his eye, watching a tiny smirk pulling at his lips as they leaned closer together, Keith’s jacket brushing close against his. Keith’s eyes were so soft, gentle, prying even than Lance continued, happy to unload precious memories in the morning air to him.
“Nyma was both the worst and the best,” Lance mused. “She introduced me to a lot of things when I moved to New York the first time. Like, on one hand we got in trouble way too much, but on the other? I used to have a coconut milk chai latte year-long addiction because of her.”

Keith snorted, “I think if you ordered that coffee in front of me I would’ve laughed at you. That’s way too much sugar for any time of the day.”

Lance pouted immediately, “It was good! Literally the best thing I ever tasted.”

“It’s coffee. You drink it to wake up, not have a heart attack.”

“Oh whatever,” Lance teased. “You would’ve loved it, I bet. It was so good.”

Keith just hummed into his cup at that, jumping his eyebrows gently and looking back out toward the forest beyond the fencing. He took his own sip of his mug at that, looking over the compound grounds with a half-lidded gaze. The sun was still slowly rising, casting golden light across the gravel and bathing the compound’s gray cement walls in bright rays. His skin prickled with gooseflesh and he shivered just a bit, the barest amount of movement in the cold air, and Keith immediately pushed closer. Their arms pressed against one another’s, firm and unyielding, and the coffee smelled perfect as Lance took another sip, closing his eyes like a cat when the sun came dancing across the guard tower and onto his face.

A rustle of Keith’s jacket to his left meant Keith leaned in closer, his elbows now planted against the fencing that Lance leaned against, and Keith’s face turned softly into his hair - the breath of the other man warm on his face and head.

“I need to take a patrol trip out,” Keith muttered. “Scouting, and the like. I was gonna bring Artax. Did you wanna come?”

Lance opened his eyes just a silver to glance at him, but Keith had tucked his face against Lance’s head so that their hair mingled - black and deep brown, Keith’s silky and long against his shorter curls.

“Just the two of us?”

Keith shifted, so the tops of his deep eyes peeked over, dazzling in the morning light, “Yeah.”

A tremble ran up his spine, and he snapped his eyes closed again, trying to wish away a blush that was absolutely coming on. It had been a while since they took a ride together, a long time, and now that Adam and Shiro were back, Allura getting stronger, all of them finding stability again, they finally, finally had a chance to have some time alone - not confined to sleeping the bare minimum hours in their room together and splitting up quick visits and meals.

He chewed on his bottom lip absently, “I need to assign jobs and do some checklists first, but once we’re all settled, I’m sure Adam wouldn’t mind.”

“He won’t.”

Lance popped an eyebrow, glancing at Keith again as he turned away, ears a pretty red, “He won’t?”

“I asked him. He won’t.”

The laughter was bubbling up in his chest, alongside that gorgeous, startling feeling of hopefulness,
and he pulled away from the railing to duck in and catch Keith’s gaze. There was already a barely concealed smile on Keith’s mouth, and he ran his eyes over each dip of his lips, mesmerized.

“You asked, in advance?” Lance breathed. “For us to patrol together…? Alone?”

Keith dragged a hand across his forehead, nodding slow and careful, “Well, yeah. We haven’t in a while, and I want to, uh, have some time with you.”

His chest was going to burst surely, his heart felt so full, and quickly, he piled together the pot and their empty mugs, “Cool, uh, yes, totally excited for that. I’m gonna - go… finish, like as quickly as possible. So meet me in the common room? When you get off?”

Giddily, he brushed past Keith for the stairs, shooting him the smallest smile, unable to stop the peak of a toothy grin from his excitement alone. Keith, in turn, grinned back, the sweetest smile he had ever seen, and, sure, he slipped on a ladder step when he was shimmying down, and Keith poked a concerned look over the side of the tower - which was embarrassing if Keith didn’t look so damn endearing - but nothing could have dampened his spirit knowing he essentially had a date with Keith later. A very apocalyptic, non-explicit, patrol date, but a date nonetheless.
cruising on your thighs, leave my fingerprints

Chapter by maireeps

Chapter Summary

Keith,

In the shower. See you soon.

<3 Lance

p.s. I’m so excited

Chapter Notes

AHHHH ITS HAPPENING !!!!

a long time coming but I hope you guys are as excited as we are <3 a special thanks to rachel for first letting me be the one to write this amazing chapter and also for helping me through it!! the song in this chapter is "Let's Stay Together" by Al Green - but the chapter title, as mostly always, is Fall Out Boy~

please leave your comments, reviews, screaming, anything below! celebrate with us!! : D

By the time Lance had finished all of his duties, Keith was a little late. It was nothing major, and he was happy to have a couple minutes to essentially get ready for their trip. It was probably more so that he had finished absurdly early. The second Adam released the soldiers for the other tasks due around the compound, Lance had taken one look over to Shiro - watching from a chair nearby and utterly amused - before booking it for his room. Adam hardly tried to call for him and left a big sigh in his wake, which had both Shiro laughing and him turning over his shoulder to call a sweet, “Bye guys!”

Who was gonna blame him for being excited? He had been cooped up in the compound for ages now, and they finally had backup for the leadership roles that both he and Keith had stepped up to fill. He had even spotted Adam and Shiro, hands entwined this morning, which was a good sign that there was a stronger front for them now to rest easy leaving behind the compound for a couple days.

Which was a surprise in itself. Keith hadn’t mentioned much of how long they were leaving, but Adam had pointedly picked it out during their job assignments - “We’ll try to get through this fast so you can pack. You’re being way too eager and bright in my vicinity.” And Lance, because it was Keith and Keith was apparently taking him somewhere overnight, he ran with it.

Ducking into his room, he barely let the door close before ripping off his shirt and pants and
heading straight for the shower. He needed a thorough shaving and to smell pretty, if he was going to survive this unscathed and unembarrassed. Dating in the apocalypse? Of course lots would go wrong.

He stopped midway through brushing his teeth, shirtless and in his briefs, with the toothbrush drooping in his mouth, to tear a corner of a piece of paper from his clipboard and haphazardly write a note for Keith - in case the other were to walk in while he was showering.

It was going to be a long one after all.

Keith,

_in the shower. See you soon._

<3 Lance

p.s. I'm so excited

Lance tucked it on top of their messily made bed and went for the shower, eager to turn on the hot water and sit under it until his skin felt raw and clean. He spit out the toothpaste in his mouth, gargling a couple times before turning on the rickety shower system - which was slow to start and slower to heat - before hopping under the fairly weak stream. He used one of the last of his face washes to scrub at his face, chest, and all down his legs, soaping his skin up enough to start shaving. With clean, long strokes, he shaved across his face pretty quickly, since his facial hair had been relatively slow to grow in. His legs, in contrast, he spent extra time delicately shaving, using extra face wash to exfoliate dead skin and soften his legs. Not quite like his perfectly primed self pre-apocalypse, but close enough.

Washing his hair was the next step. They had been running through shampoo at the compound, so Keith and Lance had been sharing a bottle between them. It was the same usual musk of Keith’s - heavy, spicy, good smelling and long-lasting, and he tried not to breathe in the sweet smell too deeply or else the shower would take a lot longer than planned.

When he had used as much water as he could guiltily forgive for the morning, because realistically he could definitely stand for hours under the shower head if he had the chance, he cut the spray and stepped out of the bathroom to envelope himself in a towel. Huffing, he swiped at the mirror to clear the fog so he could carefully dry his hair in a tousled manner. With tiny tweezers and clippers, he cleaned each nail, picked every stray hair from his eyebrows, and toned his face until it gleamed.

He made sure to dry off slow and with meditative circles against his skin. It was ritual-like almost, and he tended to take more than a couple moments alone managing his legs and body - taking time to moisturize and let what little cream he had left sink into his skin was the best aftercare and personal time he had. It was little effort for huge reward as well, considering just how much better he felt about himself when he stood to wiggle into new briefs, his jeans, and a fresh shirt.

Better, he thought to himself, turning his chin in the mirror and angling his neck to look at the scar across it. It was still stark against his skin; no amount of lotion was going to fade it.

Biting back a sigh, he hung his towel over the curtain bar and gathered minimal toiletries for the trip. With his toothbrush and paste in hand, he shouldered back into the room through the bathroom door.

Keith’s back was turned to him, angled over the bed and lingering there.
Lance was already grinning, “Hey.”

Keith turned, hands tucking into his pockets, a cooling smile on his face when he noticed Lance’s fluffy drying hair, “Hey back.”

Lance crossed to his pack on the desk and tucked his brush and paste into the inner pockets. He reached in and pulled out the holsters from Shiro, safeguarded within his pack like he needed to leave any moment - a kind of failsafe he had just begun to do out of anxiety alone, something he didn’t quite need but still did as a reminder of the road. Keith tracked his every moment with low lidded eyes, his gaze piercing in the best of ways.

“Almost ready?” Keith murmured into the room, already shouldering his own.

Lance leaned over to strap his holsters on, pulling his pistols from the desk and clipping them with bullets one by one, “Geez, you’re eager. Probably already as eager as Artax.”

Keith snorted, “You’ve been grinning since I asked you earlier.”

He straightened, slipping his pistols into their holsters and slipping his arms through the pack straps, “I won’t argue with that. What, did you hear from Shiro or something?”

“Oh yeah.”

Lance pouted, “Wow I see where Shiro’s loyalties lie.”

“He’s literally my brother,” Keith deadpanned.

He tutted and raised a finger in Keith’s direction, “He’s your blood brother but also my compound brother. Water is not thicker than blood.”

Keith laughed at that and came closer so that they brushed against one another, familiar and sweet, as Keith pressed his fingers against his hip. He sighed, soft and relieved alone from Keith’s touch, as Keith tucked in close in somewhat of a hug and murmured, “Fair enough.”

And as much as Lance loved being there, in Keith’s arms, the feeling of his body pressed against the plush wall of Keith’s chest, the smell of him enveloping, the brush of his thumb pads against the vulnerable skin of the back of Lance’s neck - he was too excited to get out of the compound, he pulled away from Keith and eagerly tugged on his pack’s straps. Keith mirrored his excitement in the dazzling of his dark eyes, the lopsided grin on his pretty face.

“Let’s go,” Lance urged, whirling around and pulling Keith along by the sleeve of his jacket, gleefully laughing along with Keith as they burst from the rooms and into the hallway.

Each step flew by, and before long, they were approaching Artax’s stall. She was already geared up, eagerly pacing as they stepped closer, tossing her head and very nearly rearing as Keith got a hand on her bridle. He cooed at her, nonsensical and sweet, as Lance went about tying their packs to her saddle - just like before when they were on the road together. The blast of achingly familiar nostalgia trembled up his spine when Keith helped him up into the saddle.

The only jarringly sweet and different thing was Keith saddling up behind him, his hands reaching for the reins around Lance, caging him in securely. They never used to sit like this before on the road, especially considering how closely pressed they were, sweet and tight, with Keith’s mouth ruffling the hairs behind his ear and Artax surging for the gate under his legs. The soldiers on the
tower raised hands in goodbye, Nadia even leaning over the railing, Ina holding her waist, to whistle as they passed. Keith murmured curses next to Lance’s neck, kicking Artax through the gate slowly, and he laughed heartily, waving back as they passed through each gate.

Artax traveled easily, tail swishing happily as she padded down the gravel road to the streets. The gates screeched closed and locked shut behind them, and Keith clicked the thoroughbred into a swift gaunt across to the highway. Artax sidestepped the small barricade of overturned vehicles and buses that formed the semicircle at the end of the driveway. The saddle, after being out of it for so long, was rough on Lance’s inner thighs, especially as Keith urged Artax into a faster pace down the freeway.

He scrambled a bit to get a hold on the horn of the saddle, Keith laughing in his ears, as Artax broke into a gallop - mane wild, hooves hitting the pavement, tail streaming behind her. There were no signs of hordes ahead, but Keith pulled them into the forest anyways, heading toward the small town nearby. He kept Artax steady and pulled her beyond the town, heading west through the forest.

They rode on for a few more miles, until the rocks turned to silt and the foliage parted for the desolate suburbs of another town.

“We picked the nearest town clean, right?” Lance turned just slightly to speak to Keith, their cheeks brushing.

His heart hammered at the contact, especially at the brush of Keith’s stubble against his smooth cheek. Absent-mindedly, almost so absent that he barely caught Keith’s reply, he wondered if Keith liked the touch of his smooth skin, liked if he was smooth all over, and soft to the touch.

“We have,” Keith said back, short on his breath from the adrenaline of Artax under them. “This is another town beyond it, an easy 5 miles or more. I want to take us in and see if there’s anything of note.”

Lance nodded, “Makes sense, especially since Axca was at the other one. I’m sure Lotor wasn’t far behind.”

Lance paused, gripped the horn tight, as Keith sent Artax jumping over an overturned fence on the outskirts of town. He stuttered on a whoop as the mare landed, gracefully and wildly, snorting through her nose and shaking out her mane.

Keith chuckled, “Sorry. I had to.”

He burst back with a, “Of course you did”, just to tease, and Keith laughed more, pushing close so that his chest lined up against Lance’s back. It was the easiest slide of their bodies, but it sent Lance’s heart into overdrive, especially as Keith plopped his chin right down on his shoulder fondly.

This new town was just ahead of them, but Keith led the way around the side of the town, avoiding the front entrance and bigger streets littered with cars and overturned vehicles. Artax was firm, but her ears flickered back and forth, listening for any activity.

Keith led them further around, through a small alleyway, cleared of walkers but still littered with dumpsters and obstacles just spaced enough for Artax to clop through and around. The change from the forest area, where Artax’s hooves were gently muffled, to the brick and stone of the town’s streets felt echoing and haunting. The stillness of the town was harrowing, and as they broke through the alleyway into the main town square, the stillness was also a comfort. No
walkers milled around near the square, only further and farther down the streets towards the area they had avoided. Artax snorted happily as she spied a particularly delicious patch of grass in a small round central park, which was watered and freshly green from a broken pipe jutted out and still dripping.

Lance was a tad surprised when Keith led her to it. There was a small park area right before rising apartment buildings - only a few floors higher than the storefronts around the main square. Artax stamped her hooves as they approached, and Keith pulled the reins back to still her. He jumped down smoothly, and Lance adjusted his seat on the saddle as Keith led Artax to the small park and its patches of grass.

When Artax had artfully bent her neck down to the grass, and begun to chomp on the green there, Lance slid off the saddle to the stone next to Keith. Keith leaned in and gestured to nearby cars and storefronts.

“Let’s keep it pretty quick,” Keith tugged his pack down from the straps of Artax’s saddle, “I wanna make sure we get into this building for shelter before the light fades.”

Lance nodded, adding with a soft concentrated frown, “Especially since we don’t know who’s around here.”

Keith was already nodding along with him, and together they started towards the nearest stores, “Obviously from the run-in with Axca, we can assume Lotor’s team has at least been around these parts recently. It’d be a smart idea to keep our heads low.”

Lance desperately tried to ignore how Keith rolled his jacket and sleeves up his forearms, settling instead on the task ahead as they started to rifle through abandoned cars, stepping in through the broken windows of stores.

It was easy work, because the pickings were as slim as they come. Most of the cars and stores had been raided probably five times over already, yet they still had a few gems here and there - mostly medication stashed away in the unlikeliest of spots, and canned food not entirely in the worst of condition. It was easy to pack what they could because they had both brought along a third pack stashed in Keith’s. For a few hours, they were meticulous and quick as they wandered through the main section of town - not eager to travel too far from Artax and the main square, which seemed the most quiet and therefore the most safe.

None of the cars had anything of note, and it frustrated Lance to spend minutes carefully looking through them to turn up nothing. Eventually, he happened upon at least one or two metal reusable water bottles, which was better than nothing, and therefore somehow vindicated him of his frustration at the dumb, sensitive cars. Any jostling could potentially mean a car alarm would call attention to their location faster than anything, but it was easy to remember his experiences on the road so he stayed careful.

Keith was better at scavenging, having gone through the entire far side of the square’s storefronts by himself while Lance tended to the cars. The two packs were heavy and filled on Keith’s shoulder when he returned, stepping through a broken glass door, on his way back over to Lance.

The other man slowly raised his bare forearms up and tied his long hair in a ponytail against his neck. Lance tried not to make it too obvious that he was checking Keith out from his vantage point as he rested his shoulder against the wall of the apartment building in the shade, but the way he lingered following Keith’s movements, opting to watch his thighs and ass, caught Keith’s eye.
A single black eyebrow raised and Lance pouted a tad bit, “Oh come on. You ask me out on a date and I take… a second to look at you? Is that criminal?”

Keith cut in, “It was definitely more than a second -”

But Lance continued, propping himself up on the other side of the truck he had been going through easily, “What’s really criminal is how you have me working to the bone in this heat when I thought we were supposed to have some fun.”

Keith laughed from the other side, breezy and so careless, as he lifted himself back through the driver side window and checked the busted lockbox for anything, “We will have some fun, just gotta do some work first.”

Lance hummed, skeptical, and trailed down the truck’s side to the bed where he propped his forearms on the truck’s bed side and dropped his chin to the cradle of his arms, “Right. I bet your idea of a date is… hunting for the compound for two days straight.”

Boots hit the ground on the opposite side, and Keith appeared on the other side of the truck’s bed, amused and looking at him closely, “Nope. Already did that. The compound should be good for three days.”

“Oooh,” Lance cooed teasingly, “wow, look at you doing an extra day.”

“Mhm, just to get us off the hook,” Keith settled an elbow on the side of the bed and sat his hand in it.

“Then if it’s not hunting, I bet it’s,” Lance paused, “scavenging? We’re moving through to another town?”

“Nope,” Keith popped the ‘p’ and brushed his bangs back from his forehead, unfairly attractive.

“Trapping?”

“Nah.”

“Then what?” Lance narrowed his eyes, tracking the movement of Keith’s hands and his eyes, steady on his face.

“Dinner.”

He raised his eyebrows incredulously, “You’re taking me to dinner?”

“Mm.”

“How is that gonna work?” Lance waved a hand lazily. “There’s not exactly a jazzy sushi place we could go to.”

Keith stepped around the back of the truck, with precise steps and determination in his dark eyes. Lance’s breath caught in his throat as Keith approached, deliberate and slowly stopping in front of him, barely space between their bodies, fingers already tangling with Lance’s.

“C’mon,” Keith murmured, a small carefully lopsided grin tugging at Lance’s heartstrings, “I’ll show you.”
The main apartment building must’ve been really nice once upon a time. The front entrance was lavishly furnished, with nice rugs and wallpaper and a front desk that would have looked beautiful if it wasn’t rifled through and turned over. The elevators probably were once seamless and gleaming, and the plants were probably still potted and not ripped from their planters, sitting pretty flanking each doorway. It was an apartment complex that reminded him of his own in New York, softly modern and quaint, with good windows and nice fixtures.

Even though the building was trashed beyond belief, even though it had obviously been picked through, ravaged, secured, and then not secured, it still had the barest hint of that charm left. Keith led Artax through the entrance and they explored across the lobby, her hooves echoed off the vinyl stretched across the floor. Lance followed behind, hand on his pistol on his hip, and trailing through the rubble of the entryway. Beyond the entryway, Keith ducked his head through each doorway of the hallway, checking this way and that for anything unexpected. Artax’s hooves met carpet now as they made their way down the hallway together - the large thoroughbred almost the width of the hallway itself, down to another wing of the building.

Beyond the last door, it was more residential, perhaps previously a common room. There was a cooler, plants, and a broken meeting table with tons of rusted chairs. Keith made his way to the cooler at the far wall, which had a glorious amount of water left in it. He started to hack the top of the cooler off for Artax, and Lance busied himself clearing the room of the broken potted plants and jumbled chairs. He was just about to start planting their bedrolls against the carpet when Keith waved at him from across the room.

“We’re heading upstairs.”

“Are we leaving her here?” he asked softly, pausing then to survey the doorway.

“Yeah, she won’t fit up the stairs of an apartment complex,” Keith breathed, and with a last powerful swing, hacked the top off the cooler, plastic splintering with a crack.

Curious, Lance hummed, but still went about placing the jumbled chairs and tables against the doorway, creating an effective barricade almost as high as the doorway itself. The only crack he left was just a tiny sliver between two ends of a table, which they could easily push back together once they were back through. Marveling at his work, hands on hips, Lance barely took a second to really ponder what exactly Keith had in mind when the other boy stepped from behind him - a casual palm on Lance’s lower back that had his skin prickle as Keith maneuvered around him.

“Nice work,” Keith complimented, leaving Lance with fuzzing edges, nearly vibrating at the praise.

With a quiet goodbye to Artax, who was already happily settling near the water cooler and eyeing fistfuls of oats and hay Keith had pulled from their packs with a keen look, Lance wormed his way through the crack of the barricade at Keith’s nod. Keith followed, and with a quick tug, pulled the barricade close behind them.

“Where are -” he started, stopping as Keith grabbed onto his arm and led him down the hallway towards the front lobby, a kind tug to one side of his lips.

The words died in his throat, dipping down under a sea of fluttery feelings in his chest. Keith’s body brushed against his as they walked, and their height difference was just so that Lance’s eye line landed right at the soft skin under Keith’s strong jawline. He was tied up in that patch of softness right there, that Keith pulling him up the front stair nearly uprooted his feet from under
him, but of course - of course Keith was right there to catch and lead him along.

The soft daylight was waning, their work at scavenging had eaten away much of the day, and the sun was all but hazily dancing along the line of the horizon as they climbed the stairs. They were nicely framed with glass, broken in places and with creeping vines, but perfect enough to let the sound of the birds at sunset carry through. He was torn between looking at the sunset as they rose higher into the sky, or staring at how the golden light cut across Keith’s fair skin, highlighting his dark hair and eyes in luminous dancing rays.

And every time Keith caught him, a glimpse of his eyes at the corners as they turned into another case of stairs, lingering just briefly at the landing of each floor, he looked like he wanted to say something but didn’t.

Just like the lingering whisper of compliments, gently admonishing for being so damn pretty, was on the tip of Lance’s tongue, threatening to burst every time Keith blew a bang from his eyes or smiled just a tad as they climbed.

By the time they reached the top of the stairs, Lance physically felt like a pile of goo. Keith was so gentle with his touch on Lance’s skin, even against his clothing, that it genuinely felt like he was floating after Keith, his stomach barely containing about a million butterflies.

The hallway at the top was hazy with the sunset, and most of the landing’s usual confines opened away to a spacious unit - trashed of course, with vines and plants spilling around broken glass - but otherwise an echo of a very nice suite indeed. Keith led him through, careful to avoid broken glass, until they stepped into the living room. Large front windows, barely broken, looked out over the main square, and if Lance craned his head over enough, he could see the beginnings of their work earlier. Keith shuffled behind him, dragging the largest of the furniture to make a small waist height barricade through the entryway - protecting them from the otherwise open floor plan. Lance turned to watch, just as Keith topped the turned over sofa with a chaise, lifting it like it was nothing, and plopped down to sit on the window’s wide sill.

Keith pulled back, satisfied, and clapped his hands as he looked over to Lance.

“I knew there was gonna be a nice suite or somethin’. Stay there,” Keith said softly, tossing a thumb over his shoulder to the left, “I’m going to make us dinner.”

Lance was already halfway standing up, but Keith had crossed the room in two strides, and placed his hands on Lance’s broad shoulders. With the sternest, softest look Keith could probably manage, which was already bringing a small grin to Lance’s lips, he nudged him back down until Lance was sitting on the sill once again.

“Rest,” Keith urged, “please. I promise it’ll be at least halfway decent.”

Lance laughed, already cupping the hand Keith had placed on his cheek, “Oh stop, I’m sure it’s gonna be good. With a place like this, too? They might even have spices in the cabinets still.”

With a chuckle, Keith slipped away. The space in the apartment left the kitchen easily viewable, only really a handful of feet away and tucked behind a nice island, so he could spy Keith’s back as he stepped into the kitchen and went for the cabinets. He placed his pack on the counter of the island and was pulling packages out when he caught Lance’s prying eyes.

“Rest,” he repeated, with a tiny smile, and Lance rolled his eyes goodnaturedly.

The window sill was nice, not as cushioned as a true window seat, but it still tucked him nicely
against grounding wood. It was great to sit, and lord knows he was more than okay to really relax for once. It was nice of Keith to give him some reprieve. The stove crackled from far away, and Keith had begun to chop something rhythmically, and as much as they cooked regularly at the compound, there was something so special about the sounds and smells of food wafting from a kitchen, while he rested nearby, that felt so much like home in Cuba.

When the meat started to sizzle, and the sun was beginning to tuck itself under the line of the horizon, so the only light was the subtle twinkling from the kitchen, his eyes betrayed him. Drooping slowly into a half-aware sleep, he tucked his forehead against the pane, and even though the cold twinkled at his skin, he began to relax.

The square was peacefully quiet and still, and Lance could truly almost believe there wasn’t anything plaguing them - no undead bodies in hunting packs, no deadly humans with the wrong ideas and too much firepower, just the stillness of an apartment and the warmth between him and Keith. Curled into himself, hands and feet tucked close, with the wispiness of his hair tinkling against his face, he could feel every whistling breeze and wafting smell of Keith in the kitchen, the sounds of kitchenware and a flag beyond the windows in the square waving on a post ultra sensitive to his ears. Everything was fuzzy, but honed too.

He stayed like that for a while. The sun was gone, the shadows were longer, and it grew darker beyond his closed eyelids, but the rest was welcome. His bones were weary, and his muscles felt so heavy.

It didn’t even register that his pack was replaced from the sill and the kitchen was silent until one of Keith’s palms smoothly inched up his shin to his knee. He cracked his eyes open slowly, and Keith was the first thing he saw. Gently grinning at him, cheeks pink, and sitting on his heels with his other hand propping up a plate. It already smelled delicious, and it was unfair how beautiful he was, staring at Lance.

“Sorry,” Lance murmured, “I dozed off sort of.”

“No, I’m glad you did,” Keith rose to stand. “Any rest is good. You really need it.”

“We both do,” Lance corrected and untangled himself from his position to follow Keith over to the center of the living room. A rather split up coffee table still sat there, but it was stable enough for Keith to place a pot and a plate on the wood. The smallest nub of a candle sat on the table in a tiny mug and with a quick strike, Keith lit a match in his palms and bent to light the tea candle.

Lance stared for a bit, between the candle and the rosyness on Keith’s cheeks when he turned to look at him.

“Sit?” Keith so carefully said, like a request, almost begging even, and how could Lance ever deny him?

He folded his legs criss-cross and scooted closer to his end of the low wooden table, Keith following. They both had forks this time, and even with the single plate, Keith had somewhat created the echo of a normal fancy dinner with two cloth napkins and two small glasses.

Lance sucked in a shaky breath, “Wow.”

Because wow. Keith had seared some venison and cooked some brown rice, with even some sprinkled seasoning on top and some carrots. And despite being more of the hunting than cooking type, granted they already had a line of civilians for the cooking back at the compound, it looked pretty damn perfect.
“Yeah?” Keith propped an elbow on the table, already burying a burningly infectious smile in his palm.

Lance was already nodding furiously, “This looks really good, Keith. I… don’t think I’ve ever been on as nice of a date as this.”

“You’re joking,” Keith snorted, grinning still as he reached over to start dishing rice onto the plate with the venison, “Even in New York?”

“Especially in New York,” Lance corrected, eagerly receiving the plate. “No one’s cooked for me before, and I never really went on a date to a restaurant surprisingly enough.”

One of Keith’s eyebrows raised, a little deviousness turning the corners of his smile into a smirk. Lance laughed and shook his head, “My priorities were not on nice classy dates, admittedly.”

Keith popped a bit of meat into his mouth, chewing for a moment before swallowing, “And is this classy?”

“So classy,” Lance shoved a bit of rice into his mouth, already melting at the ginger and cayenne. “Oh man, this is good. What I wouldn’t give for some wine for this.”

Abruptly, Keith stood, snapping his fingers and swallowing another mouthful, “Good catch.”

Keith was already striding away toward the kitchen before Lance could finish chewing. He cleared his throat and tried to peek this way and that as Keith ducked behind the kitchen island and began to rummage in his pack.

“What is it?” Lance asked, cutting a slice of the venison, “Keith this looks so tender, did you learn to grill or something? I keep forgetting how much of a cowboy you are.”

Keith’s voice was a bit distant, amidst the rustling, “Where’d you think I learned how to skin and dress a buck? Or even just hunt?”

Lance hummed, forking in a bite of the venison and nearly moaning at how good it tasted. Maybe they should consider putting Keith on cooking duty because god, this was good. He was halfway about to shovel in two more bites when Keith made a content noise and began walking over.

He chewed and watched the other man cross to his seat again, one hand behind his back innocently.

Lance narrowed his eyes, smiling a bit around his fork, “What’s behind your back?”

“Nothing special,” Keith said nonchalantly, before grinning and pulling a beer bottle out from behind his back. “Just a little gift from Shiro.”

Laughter bubbling in his chest already, Lance leaned in, thrusting his glass toward Keith’s as he popped open the bottle with his teeth and began to pour the golden liquid into their glasses.

“Oh my god,” Lance chastised, “you barbarian! How did Shiro even get this? Oh, it’s an IPA?”

Keith squinted at the label before pouring again, “Looks like it. He just mentioned that it was a stash he had before the fall. I know it’s not exactly wine but -”
Lance cut in immediately, “I’m stopping you right there. This is amazing, seriously Keith, I couldn’t be happier. The food is delicious, we have beer, and you even found the cutest, tiniest, babiest candle just for me.”

Keith flushed, shrugging, and passed Lance’s glass back, “You just deserve this. I’m - y’know just trying to, uh, provide.”

He blushed back in turn, already half ducking behind his raised glass to find his grin. His stomach was in happy knots, fingers of his other hand drumming absently against the coffee table. Keith reached for his own glass and tilted it in his direction. He reached out in turn and they softly clinked glasses, the flickering of the tiny candle casting golden fire across the glass and streaking the dim room. The fire alone reflected in Keith’s dark eyes was setting his heart racing, holding each other’s gaze like a vice.

Keith’s lips parted to accept the rim of his glass, to take a sip, but softly he murmured, a firm and tempting toast, “To us.”

It wasn’t moonshine, that’s for sure, but the beer was nice and frothy - strong and sour, and he had never been much of a beer-lover, but Keith had all but drained his glass and he couldn’t excuse that. He had tipped that glass back as easy as any other night at the club, and it felt like molten warmth all the way down. So it was no wonder how happy he rose to his feet, grinning like a fool, a tipsy fool, and tugging Keith to his feet.

Keith swayed a bit, cheeks pink and smirk all lopsided and soft, “What are we doing?”

Lance rose a tall slim pointer finger at Keith, went, “Shh, hold on,” and retreated to where Keith had placed his pack. His iPhone was tucked in the bottom, and he snatched it up, not bothering with the headphones. They were alone after all.

Keith was watching him with vulnerable easy eyes, and his hands tucked in his pockets. He set the iPhone on the coffee table and went for his favorite playlist, scrolling with a hum. A black-haired head popped over his shoulder, an arm slung around his bent back.

“What’s looking for?” Keith asked.

“Something with a beat,” Lance chewed on his bottom lip, hesitating over a song before scrolling past it, “something to dance to.”

Keith turned his face into Lance’s bare neck, breath brushing over his skin and raising his hairs. The arm around his body tightened.

“You’re gonna teach me to dance?” the rumble reverberated against the column of Lance’s neck, and he couldn’t help the flush on his face - a deeper one to match the tiny spread of tipsiness.

“I’m gonna try,” he laughed, and Keith’s arms tightened, a snort buried against his neck that made Lance stifle his giggles. There was so much pop in this playlist, and it was gonna be hard to try and remember how to do anything beyond salsa, bachata, even just a bit of danzón his siblings and him had learned at a young age.

“You got any country?” Keith was stubborn apparently, popping his head back out and reaching out to scroll on the iPhone screen with his own finger, “I can two-step. Poorly. But I can.”
Lance grinned, “I don’t really have any country but please show me.”

Keith slipped away, stepping closer to the windows, with his hands back in his pockets. Lance just shuffled the playlist after all, eager to follow Keith and take his hands when the other man offered them.

And oddly, he seemed a bit shy now. Keith looked under his bangs with a mixed expression, eyebrows furrowed and cheeks flushing brighter, which wasn’t helping Lance from stopping his own blush. His hands felt a bit clammy in Keith’s and he hoped to literally any god above that Keith didn’t notice.

“I’m going to have to lead,” Keith mumbled, adjusting his grip on Lance’s hand and sliding one hand away and to Lance’s back, fingers dancing along the plane of Lance’s shoulder, “I didn’t learn how to follow.”

Lance laughed breathlessly a bit, adjusting to touch his fingers to the top of Keith’s shoulder, “Okay, but when we salsa, you’re gonna have to follow.”

His nerves lightened just a bit as Keith snorted, lips pulling lopsided in that gorgeously sly smirk. Keith ducked down to look at his feet, gripping Lance’s hand and back tight, and then gently, against the softest music from the iPhone on the table, “Step back when I step forward.”

Lance stepped easily, to the faint beat of the music drifting over to them, and, while Keith stepped forward to lead, the rhythm was clearly conducted by Lance. In gentle time with the music, they took two long steps back before two shorter, Keith nearly strong-arming him to the side with a grin - almost wrestling back control that sent Lance snickering.

“I said I’d lead,” Keith scowled teasingly.

He shrugged the shoulder Keith wasn’t holding, smothering a smile with a bite of his bottom lip, “I can't help I have a bit more rhythm than you.”

“Hey,” Keith laughed, whirling Lance around on a turn, “we already knew that. I’m trying.”

He ducked down again to watch his feet as they stepped back and forward. Their chests brushed at the steps, closer than any proper two-step Lance was sure, and he gently spun as Keith did - twirling out as Keith offered, gingerly gripping Keith’s fingers as he did so. The spin back into Keith’s arms was clumsy, perfectly so, and sent them both reeling with laughter against each other.

“She,” Lance giggled out, pressing his hands around Keith’s waist instead. “Salsa is like the same steps but faster, hold onto me.”

And Keith did, slipping his arm along Lance’s as they clasped hands once more. There was a lot more hip movement in the steps Lance showed Keith, but the other man got it just fine as they began to turn about the room. It was more fun, with their chests pressing closer and closer together until it was hardly any good form of salsa at all, and Keith was laughing against the skin of Lance’s neck - the giggling infectious as Keith shimmied backward with Lance’s forward steps.

It was then that the song changed, flipping on a dime and stealing the breath from Lance’s lungs.

Keith didn’t perk up in recognition, laughing and stepping slower in time, head craned downward to look at their feet, until Lance had slowed. He couldn’t help how the soul of the song immediately caught his attention - the iconic rhythm filling his heart. The smoothest tones of Al Green as he began to sing, even from the crappy iPhone speakers, felt so much louder now.
I’m in so love with you

Keith’s dark eyes were on him, and his hands were definitely clammier than ever now. They were so close. A whisper of a breath between them, space dwindling as Keith just shifted ever so closer.

Whatever you want to do
Is all right with me
Cause you make me feel so brand new
And I want to spend my life with you

Oh god. He stepped forward, just as Keith stepped back, that gorgeous smile back on his face as he led them slowly around the room. And suddenly Lance was the rigid one, stumbling forward and flushing so hot his ears were on fire - until Keith gently leaned his forehead against Lance’s, steady and tender, and that molten gaze was drawing him in.

“Easy,” Keith murmured, wrapping a broad arm around Lance’s waist, “We’re just dancing. You’re just showing me how to dance.”

He choked on a gulp, but nodding slowly, keeping their foreheads just lingering together. Lance readjusted his grip on Keith’s palm, and brushed his fingers across - inch by inch - until he had slung his other arm around Keith’s shoulders. Al Green played on as they swayed, taking turns of the room at the most leisurely of paces - dwindling footsteps until the shadows of night crept across the building and they slowed down to stop in place.

Times are good or bad, happy or sad
Come on
Let’s stay - let’s stay together
Loving you whether, whether times are good or bad

When the song ended, Lance released the gasp he didn’t know he was holding, until it came out in a gentle swooping breath. Keith cast that same heart-wrenchingly captivating smile down on him, moving closer until he had slipped his head forward to rest on Lance’s shoulder. Their hands stayed tangled together, fingers intertwined tight and steepled, lowering until they swung down at their sides, still pressed close in that embrace.

His chest hurt. Lance combed his fingers of the arm slung across Keith’s shoulders through the
thick black hair brushed across Keith’s back - and he tried not to relish in how the arm around his waist tightened but *god* did he relish in it. The tiny sigh was not lost on Keith, who hummed gently against Lance’s neck, like it was no big deal and he wasn’t experiencing the same onslaught of butterflies in his belly like Lance was.

He released the lip he had been absently chewing on, wearing that soft flesh with his teeth, and with that release, breathing out, “Keith, I haven’t felt this way before.”

Keith’s dark eyes snapped up from where they trailed along the fullness of Lance’s lips.

He didn’t let that stop him, and gasped forward, “Like, pre-apocalypse or anything. I really, *really* like you.”

The grip on his waist tightened, and he dropped his gaze to the press of their bodies between them because he couldn’t bear to look at Keith’s face until it was surging forward, and their foreheads slid together, a hand torn from his side and cupping his cheek so delicately.

“Lance, god, we’re so...” Keith croaked. “This is so backwards. You know I adore you. I would do *anything* for you.”

The breath he didn’t know he was holding pushed out of him nearly violently, and his body instinctively relaxed into Keith’s all over again.

“I know,” he said, around the bubbling of a laugh. “But I just… I needed to finally say it - and hear it, you know?”

Keith nodded, his bangs dragging upward, and his cheeks the rosiest color Lance had ever seen. He was so soft when he spoke again, like he was afraid any sudden movements would scare Lance away, “I’ll say it again and again. I think I’ve always been saying it, but you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Lance.”

Lance smiled, his eyelashes fluttering a bit to blink away the emotion threatening to spill down his cheeks, “Yeah? You would let me come along with you on that bridge all over again?”

“I’d practically beg for you to come with me a hundred more times,” Keith breathed to him, bringing his other hand up to cup Lance’s other cheek.

“You would?” Lance asked, and even though he’d been almost joking before, he was serious now.

Keith’s eyes narrowed, the action so small that Lance would have missed it if he hadn’t already been staring. He nodded again, solemnly, completely matching Lance’s energy, and his hands slid down to his hips, fingers curling against his figure there.

His voice was slow, soft, and steady when he finally said, “I am nothing without you.”

Lance clutched Keith’s shoulders, gripping the material of his jacket tightly, and he stupidly felt tears prickle his eyes. It happened every time they had a conversation like this.

“I know I’ve said a lot of this before,” Keith started again, before Lance could say anything else, “but you’re the reason I’m alive, the reason I’m still breathing. The world is a shitty place now, but as long as I have you, it’s perfect. You’re all I’ll ever want, forever.”

Lance’s breath caught in his chest at the intensity in Keith’s eyes. Keith was right - he had heard a lot of this before. It seemed like they were always having these conversations, Keith gripping his hips and telling Lance how much he meant to him. They were always here.
But they never made it very far past this point. What was on the other side of Keith’s words? Without interruption from the compound or something else, what could happen?

He took a breath and wrapped one arm around Keith’s neck, arching into his body so their chests were pressed together. His other hand found Keith’s cheek again, fingers tracing over his scar before cupping his jaw.

Slowly, Lance nodded. His voice was low enough to match Keith’s when he said, “Me too, Keith. I know I don’t say it as much as you, usually because I’m swooning in your arms--”

Keith snorted at that, and it made Lance grin shakily.

He continued, “But I’m serious. You’re like… remember when I first woke up? Back at the compound that day when you saved us?”

For a second, Keith looked confused at the sudden mention of it. That had been so long ago, and honestly, that day had been so stressful, so crazy, and Keith had looked so exhausted and terrified that it would be a miracle if he even remembered it at all.

In the infirmary that day though, Keith had said something that made everything so fucking clear.

“I remember,” Keith nodded, hands squeezing Lance’s hips.

“It was right after I woke up, and I asked you where you’d been sleeping the whole time I was out. You had just stayed in the infirmary, like a dumbass, when there were plenty of rooms open with comfortable beds.”

Keith narrowed his eyes, arching an eyebrow.

“Do you remember what you said?” Lance asked, biting his lip.

“I told you that I would have stayed there as long as it took,” Keith murmured, gaze heavy. “That I couldn’t make myself leave you.”

He nodded, tightening his arm around Keith’s neck, pulling himself even closer. He said, “I go where you go. That’s what you said.”

“It was true then, and it’s true now.”

“I know,” Lance smiled a bit, softly. “That was when I knew you were serious. Everything before that day was like a dream. I was afraid it wasn’t real, that maybe we were just… partners. Maybe friends with benefits or something, if we stayed alive long enough to get there.”

Keith looked like he’d been hit by a car or thrown from another building, when Lance focused on his expression. His eyes were wide, pupils blown out too, and his mouth was open just the slightest amount, like he hadn’t even realized his jaw had dropped at some point during Lance’s small speech. It was so fucking cute.

“But then, you said that in front of everyone,” Lance continued, smiling more now, thinking back to how Keith had just popped off that day, in front of Shiro, Coran, and Allura, and told Lance straight up how much he meant to him, no games, nothing. “You didn’t even look embarrassed afterwards either. I was just--I couldn’t believe you’d said it at all. And then, while you were gone for those few minutes, I kept thinking about it and repeating it over and over in my head…”

He took another breath.
“I go where you go,” Lance murmured it back to him now, steadily meeting his gaze. “Forever.”

Keith clenched his jaw, gaze almost watery, and there had been very few times when Lance had seen Keith this close to tears.

Slowly, Keith leaned forward until their foreheads were pressed together. He let out a shaky breath and clutched Lance’s hips when he breathed, “Promise?”

It wasn’t easy to make a promise like this in the apocalypse, not when there were so many risks and horrors waiting for them around every corner, but Lance would die before he stopped trying.

So, he nodded, nudging his nose against Keith’s and murmured, “I promise.”

They stood there for a while longer, until the shadows in the room stretched further than before, and the air was chillier. It was time to stand in the circle of Keith’s arms, breathing in time with him slowly and indulging in their wandering hands just a bit - only teasing at the end of hems and the openings of sleeves, fingertips gentle and fleeting.

He sighed softly, letting his eyelids slip close and his forehead go to rest against Keith’s shoulder.

“Are you tired?” Keith’s voice was rough and low when he asked, breaking the silence.

Lance nodded.

“Let’s get into bed then,” Keith whispered, and Lance felt his toes curl in his boots.

He must have blushed heavily at that because Keith had swiped a thumb over one cheek with a chuckle before stepping away. The packs were placed beyond them, in the kitchen, and Lance went about his way - on trembling legs, like a maiden for Jesus’s sake - to turn off the soft crooning on his iPhone. Keith stepped back, with their bedrolls in hand, and together they returned beyond the living room and went in search of the other rooms.

One of the rooms had a very large bed - probably once with some gorgeous threaded king mattress to go with the unique ironwork of the frame, but it was torn apart, much like the curtains and other fine things in the room. Some of the wallpaper was peeling here, but even the dust around the room had a fanciful gentle element to it, especially as the high moon shone into through the windows. Most of them didn’t have planes of glass any longer, but the night was a happily warm one, and the breeze was amazing as they stepped into the room.

Keith went to the bed right away, “No mattress, but this pad looks fine. Might not even need the bedrolls.”

And sue him okay? He gasped outright, brow furrowing and immediately crossing his arms, “Keith Kogane. I am not sleeping on that thing without a bedroll. Oh my god, just imagine the bedbugs in that thing.”

The chuckle from the other man was so endearing it made Lance’s ears turn red. And for all his high maintenance, Keith immediately went to lay out the bedrolls - making them nice and spread out so none of the edges of the pad would come creeping to get them in the night, he assumed. Watching Keith be so diligent, so caring, made his heart sing and stutter at the same time.

Slowly, he made his way across the room and around the bed to his side. There, at the edge, he bent and tugged off his boots before pulling off his jacket and laying it on the edge of the bed.

Keith’s eyes were tracking his every movement, almost predatory and enough to make his spine
tingle in *that* way, and he had promptly tucked himself into his normal bedroll. Keith shucked the bedrolls closer - and, in that startlingly soft way that was so sweet, tucked his jacket over Lance’s bedroll like a little blanket.

“Thanks,” he said, and Keith shrugged it off with a tiny smile. Keith plopped his elbow down on the bed, hovering over Lance, with their sides aligned, nearly touching everywhere they could.

The room seemed so much warmer with Keith against his side. The ceiling, damaged as it was, and the collected dust and dirt was so far from his mind, just the echo of Al Green playing on repeat in his head and the heat of Keith’s body within reach.

“I feel like this is a dream right now,” Lance breathed, turning his head in the bedroll to look at Keith, “And we’re gonna go back to… whatever normal is when we’re back at the compound.”

Keith’s voice was soft when he said, “I won’t let it. This isn’t a dream.”

Lance reached over to Keith’s chest, tracing his hand over Keith’s collarbone and then settling it over his heart. He tried to ignore the shake in his voice when he said, “It feels like one.”

“You’ve been dreaming about me then?”

He blushed and rolled his eyes, avoiding the heavy smirk that graced Keith’s face, “I’ve been dreaming about you as much as you’ve been dreaming about me.”

“Every night? I had no idea you were so obsessed.”

Lance couldn’t stop the delighted laughter that bubbled out of him at Keith’s words. He reached up and looped both arms around Keith’s neck, holding onto him tightly. He kept his voice low when he said, “Well, it’s not because of your mullet.”

Keith laughed, eyes crinkling and burying his head into the tuck of Lance’s neck. He sounded breathless when he asked softly, “Then what is it?”

“Hm,” Lance continued slowly, “The way you treat me? The way you touch me? You’re a fiend on my beauty sleep, Keith, just let a boy rest for once!”

The chuckle from Keith against his throat went through his entire body, a soft rumble that really warmed his insides. Keith twisted in his arms so that they were facing each other once again, “Nope, definitely not gonna leave you alone.”

“Good,” he smiled, lopsidedly and easily, tangling the tips of his fingers in Keith’s long hair. “So all of this means... Well, actually what do you want this to mean?”

Keith tugged a hand out from around Lance’s waist and trailed it through his short brown locks, “I want… *us* .”

Lance shuddered, involuntary and deep, squeezing around Keith’s neck tight, gnawing back his words until they were practically bursting from him, “...So we’re together.”

The bedroll under Keith rumpled and crinkled as he tugged low to catch Lance’s eyes again, dark orbs peeking out from under his bangs, “We’ve always been.”

A pause, then he sighed briefly, “It’s hard when we have… our *family* relying on us like this. I really want this new stability to last but I’m so nervous it’ll just… fall apart if we don’t give 100%. Is that crazy?”
Keith shook his head and pulled back so they could talk with more space, Lance’s arms slipping back down to the bedroll, “No, that’s not crazy. I know exactly what you’re talking about. It felt for so long that if we took any time away from the compound, for ourselves, it’d be at the risk of everything we built up. But with Shiro up now…”

Lance’s heart caught in his throat. Shiro and Adam were up and running now, Allura was already freely taking a portion of the compound management again, and Coran, without patients in the ward, was working diligently on other aspects of the compound. They were practically running too smoothly now, with so many senior officers and leaders helping out, would it be possible for him and Keith to…?

“I’d really like to,” Lance burst forth, head turned to watch how the breath seized in Keith’s throat, how his eyes jumped from the ceiling to Lance, back again, until Keith was turning his head over so they could look at each other, “… to….”

He hesitated, gnawing on his bottom lip, but Keith’s eyes were so steady, loving, full of that comfort he craved and adored about Keith.

He took a deep breath, “I’d really like to have more time for ourselves, to have more nights like this. I know that’s -” Oh here comes the babbling, “that’s hard because it’s literally, y’know The Walking Dead, significantly lacking in the cool crossbow region though but like, end of all days and stuff and I’m asking for dates? That’s -”

“I’m not going to live my life after the fall without you,” Keith interrupted. “You deserve dates and everything, and I’m gonna give that to you.”

The smile they shared was so small and blossoming, like a flourishing of gentle feeling between them.

“Thank you,” Lance smiled. “I’ll try and whisk you away as much as I can - knowing you and your workaholic tendencies.”

Keith snorted, grinning wide and opening his arms for Lance, who immediately scooted forward to tuck into his open arms. He tossed his arms around Keith’s shoulders so he could place his temple to Keith’s chest, right above his heart, listening to the thump of the beating there. It was remarkable how alive Keith was, how alive they both were, with the stars sprinkling the sky outside the windows in relative quiet amidst everything they had faced.

Keith shifted, burying his face into the top of Lance’s head, into his curls, with the gentlest of sighs. Just like that, they were pressed just so much closer, and he felt more relaxed, with Keith curled so happily around him as he was around Keith.

“No kiss goodnight?” Lance breathed up to Keith, losing himself in those dark eyes already. Keith’s lips were so close, tantalizing, with the peak of his white teeth dragging closer and Lance’s eyelashes were already fluttering closed - sharing and stilling in that moment just right before a kiss, trying so desperately to suppress the shiver of Keith’s fingers dancing their way up under Lance’s shirt around his waist.

“Goodnight, Lance,” Keith murmured, a smirk tugging along his lips - the action alone brushing the softest touch against Lance’s lips - teasing and taunting, a ghost of a kiss.

And even though he wouldn’t be sleeping any time soon, his eyes slid closer and he whispered back, “Goodnight, Keith,” with the bite of a smile on his lips.
The ride back was harder than waking up - and waking up had been pretty hard. Their jackets did nothing to keep warmth in, especially with the windows of the suite room smashed and the early morning breeze harsh, but under the bedrolls together, it had been so blissfully warm against Keith. It was the worst thing to wake up to, knowing that the outside of the bed was freezing but they couldn’t stay inside for very much longer. Pre-apocalypse, he would’ve whined and whined to sleep in, and Keith would’ve let them, maybe even let themselves indulge a little - but the compound was waiting, and rising early was always better than rising late during the end times.

He stretched, catlike and long on his tippy toes, once more as Keith tacked Artax up and tugged on the straps holding the packs and bedrolls in place along her back. The dew looked good on this new town, with its pretty central park and green leafy tangles that were creeping up along the cobblestone. Lance almost wished they could stay a bit longer, even enjoy the sunshine of a late morning on a park bench, but even he knew they needed to clear out and make it back.

“I’m sure Allura has stuff under control,” he said as he approached Keith and let the other man sling an arm down to help him onto the saddle. “Especially with Adam’s help, but knowing the soldiers, they’re lost without you.”

Keith scoffed, “That’s not true. You’re as much a leader as me - as much of one as Shiro even. It doesn’t matter that the soldiers like me, everyone looks to you. You unite the compound.”

He stillled, blushing like a sinner in church and grumbling as he settled into the saddle ahead of Keith, hands on the horn.

Keith’s face popped over his shoulder, tucking them flush together with the cage of his arms around Lance’s as he clicked Artax’s reins and took them down the front streets, “It’s true. Don’t bother denying it.”

Lance huffed, and turned inches so that his face angled close to Keith’s. The action was surprising enough apparently because Keith colored and tightened up on the reins - making Artax a bit jittery, but he stared back evenly as Lance titled his chin up haughty-like.

“Careful, Lieutenant,” Lance teased, “I’ll dethrone you then.”

Keith’s breath came out in a rush, “You should. You’d look better on a throne anyway.”

Lance laughed then, tossing his head back and nudging back against Keith, not getting far against the wall of Keith’s toned chest, but giggling all the same, “Stop flirting with me, cowboy. Take us home.”

And Keith did.

They crossed through the forest with no issues. The hordes along the highway paid them no mind, and Artax was stable and strong all the way to the compound. She was eager to take walking along the trees back out to the open road - where Keith could really run her, but still they took it fairly calm and steady to make sure not to alert any passing hordes or other enemies along the paved roads. When the first town, nearest to the compound, passed in the shadows beyond an exit to Lance’s right, he knew they had only about a half-mile before the gates would rise ahead. Artax seemed to know as well, and she stamped her hooves a bit and tossed her mane.

It was then that Lance tossed her a bone, a laughing gasp of, “Oh, just let her Keith!” before they
were off, galloping at breakneck all the way to the chainlink.

The rush of air, the whistle against his ears, it all felt like the long days before D.C., before Shiro, when it was just the two of them and the press of their bodies, the laughter shared between them. And whereas all times he thought of those days had felt some bittersweet before, this was just sweet - like all the honey, sugar, and drips of candy they didn’t have to flavor their coffee with.

Kinkade was on the tower today as the gates opened for them, just wide enough to let Artax and her girth slip through before they were closed again. Lance smiled like a little maniac all the way through.

He had gotten a date, a confession, and definitely a boyfriend in one night. Allura was gonna freak.

Keith’s boots hit the gravel first in front of Artax’s stall, and Lance dropped down after him. The grip Keith had on his hand, a bit of a helpful step-down, didn’t loosen and Keith worked, diligently, one-handed through untacking Artax and leading her back into the stall. That alone made a burst of fireworks go off in his belly.

He leaned against the stall as Keith went to begin to brush her, their hands slipping away with a tiny smile from Keith.

“Keith,” Lance prompted, bracing his elbows on the low stall door, “I probably should get going. Need to catch up with rounds.”

Keith was nodding already, smiling just as gentle as always, “See you in our room later?”

He ran his teeth over his bottom lip, eyebrows jumping as he glanced to Keith’s mouth. A searing giddiness was landing in his stomach now, excitement running up his spine. Keith noticed, he must have, because he leaned in closer to the door - brushing forgotten - with a burning look in his eyes.


Then, he leaned in, over the stall door, and pressed his lips against the side of Keith’s face - right along where the seam of his full lips ended at his cheek. The skin underneath was soft, but ragged with tiny hairs, and his fingers curled in on the wood just as a reaction to how sharply Keith breathed in - like the anticipation of that night was already threatening to explode out of both of them.

But before he could let that sizzling pot of sexual and romantic frustration breach, and they somehow end up rutting in the hay near poor ol’ Artax, Lance tore himself away and all but pranced away.

“Bye, Keith,” he sang with a wink, waving over his shoulder and delighting in the red wash of Keith’s pale face, “I’ll see you later.”
They returned to the compound with everything Lance had ever wanted. He felt finally like he had a foothold on something known and official in so many ways that he and Keith were together. The compound seemed to sparkle so much more knowing that this morning. The success of that date was glowing so visibly on his face made him both just giddier and giddier, but also very aware of their mushy display in front of Artax’s makeshift stable. He was happy and felt more secure than ever with Keith.

From across the yard, as he literally all but pranced toward the front of the compound, soldiers jostled one another and laughed merrily as they snuck peaks between Lance - on his way into the compound - and Keith - who seemed more than happy to pause almost in a trance in front of Artax’s stable and watch him go.

Feeling his gaze, Lance turned and called over his shoulder to Keith, “Get to work, Kogane!”

Keith perked up and rolled his eyes, immediately locking Artax’s stall and going to pick up his pack. Slowly, Keith crossed the compound yard with his hands in his pockets - ready to start the rotation on the guard towers by speaking with the soldiers. Lance, in turn, reached the doors and passed through them on the way to their room.
He put his pack away quickly but opted to keep his holsters pulled tight across his thighs. They were already halfway into the morning, and he hadn’t started on any of his duties. Finding Adam would be easy if the usual schedule was correct. He just needed to grab his clipboard and get his duties out of the way and then he and Keith could have some more time alone.

His stomach flipped.

It was crazy how ready he was for this new chapter. He and Keith - they were in sync more than ever, and he was more than okay with the slow progression of their relationship. He was so sure of Keith’s feelings now, and that alone made him dizzy.

Crossing through the compound’s lodging hallway, he pressed through into the common room and headed for the back. Adam wasn’t there, but it wasn’t that uncommon, especially at this time of day.

He checked over some of the papers left in the kitchen, and realizing Adam had moved on to the garage, he turned on his heel and opted to go through the service hallways. Shiro and quite a few soldiers were noticeably absent from the compound that morning, especially from the military wing, but Lance didn’t mind the quiet walk over.

Romelle’s blonde hair was starkly visible from the inside of the service hallway, and he pressed open the garage door with a hip.

“Hey, Lance,” she grinned a little, perking up an eyebrow. “How was your night?”

Adam, who had been peering into the engine of their last Humvee, popped his head up to listen, his glasses shining and teeth peaking out of his smirk.

“It was beautiful,” Lance boasted, grinning. “We went to the finest restaurant money can buy.”

Romelle snorted. Adam chuckled a bit.

“But,” he continued, stepping closer and tossing an arm around Romelle’s shoulders, “I’m glad to be back.”

Their faces melted into a soft mush, one that Adam tried to hide via the engine again. Romelle slapped him softly in the side, her eyes glittering, “We’re always glad when you come back.”

Tickled and grinning a bit too wide for it to be absolutely not gushy, Lance laughed and set to work beside them. Sorting through some of the supplies and checking their resources was dull and a bit concerning, but he was happy to work with Adam and Romelle nearby. Slowly this compound had settled his heart and made him remember how wonderful it was to have a family. Even if it was more like a family of a dozen siblings and no parents to keep them in check, it was perfect.

Eventually, his head swimming with numbers, Adam sent him back to the kitchen to recheck supplies there. They were having a mild shortage of canned and perdurable foods. The slow and steady decrease of rations before was giving way to a pitfall. He knew people were hungry, and it was hard to blame them for over rationing. The soldiers alone needed a good helping of rations in order for their health and fitness to keep up. Adam was concerned; even though he didn’t say it, Lance could see it.

Making his way back to the kitchen was fast and lonely, and he was halfway checking the numbers and wondering if they would need a trading or scavenging trip scheduled soon when the first bang erupted in the air.
It was loud and the ground shook beneath his feet, hard enough to unsteady him.

Lance ducked out of the kitchen immediately, but he barely got to the front doors when a second bang rocketed through the air.

His sneakers hit the cut between gravel and concrete just within the threshold of the glass doorway, Kinkade resting in the chair just beyond them, when he caught the first glimpse.

Rhythmic thumping, the hum of engines in droves.

The hair on his forearms went up before he could even move, and Kinkade was already out of his chair when the Humvees and trucks flew over the hill from the highway.

There were easily six or so vehicles, a terrifying fleet, stacked with scalpers piled on their sides - hanging from doors, latches, weapons in the air. Their clothing, dark and ruddy, was utterly blurred in front of him - but he could see the bone white face of the scalper leader in the front on one of the Humvees. Next to him was Lotor, grinning manically from Zethrid’s side as she drove the Humvee onward. The weapons in the air glinted in the sunlight, and as one, at the Emperor’s rousing gesture, the scalpers shouted a war cry.

The vehicles teetered with the weight of scalpers hanging off their sides, and many tore off from the main Humvee toward other sides of the fence. They were in a fast gear, dead set on tearing toward the compound from the highway. The impact was incoming, and when they finally met the fence, the war cry reared up again as the collision shattered through the air.

The fences screamed, metal on metal, as the first Humvee, flanked by two rearing trucks with beds of scalpers, slammed into the chainlink. The guard towers teetered dangerously, and the soldiers on them barely had time before the outer fence was careening forward with the slam of the second Humvee. Kinkade started toward the dangerously teetering guard towers, but it was too late. Two more trucks, flanking the back of the squad, joined in ramming against the outer fence, and the inner fence shuddered once, twice, three times, before toppling over at their incessant pushing.

The infrastructure of the guard towers crumbled, and they hit the ground in the splintering of wood and rumble, burying the soldiers that had been on guard duty there.

The Humvees roared into the compound, crushing the gates and fences under their tires like nothing and paving the way for the trucks. Kinkade disappeared in the upheaval of dust from the impact, but with the guard towers down, Keith’s black hair was a wisping shadow whipping in the air. The fleet of vehicles immediately poured into the compound yard, circling them and the remaining soldiers under the rubble of the guard towers.

Screams pierced the air, but Lance could still hear Keith when he yelled, called backward, certain someone - maybe even certain Lance would hear him as he roared, “Get the others! Alert the compound! Kinkade, let’s go!” His sword shimmered, blinding even through the whirlwind of gravel as he drew it from the sheath on his back.

Tears already fresh in his eyes, stinging with the horror in his chest, Lance whirled around and slammed back through the front doors. The common room was empty, but civilians were already spilling out of the kitchen and storage rooms. Adam pushed to the front of them.

“We’re -” Lance stuttered before shouting at them, “We’re under attack. Alert the soldiers. Grab something to arm yourselves!”

The civilians broke into wails, shouts, the pounding of footfalls as some sprinted for the military
hallway, and a few crumbled against each other. Adam looked horrified, his clipboard clattering to the ground.

Lance grabbed his shoulder, shaking him, voice desperate, “Adam, where is Shiro?”

Adam was foggy, “It’s Lotor.”

Lance swallowed a choking sob, tears spilling over, “Adam, Adam. Where is Shiro?”

He pushed against Adam’s lean stature with all he had, shoving him into action toward the military wing, grabbing a civilian woman’s arm and pulling her to Adam, “Follow Adam. He’ll keep you safe - All of you, go!”

And without even seeing for sure, Lance broke away from them to the lab wing, shouting as he ripped the last civilians from the floor and nudged them on his way, “Go, go!!”

Adam plastered himself to the military wing’s doors, guiding the civilians through the doors with trembling hands. His glasses were dirty and scratched, and his voice was weak, “What about you? Lance -”

Lance shook his head, helping another man to his feet, “I can’t find Shiro. Someone needs to alert those in the back. I have to hit the alarm, someone has to -”

There was a beat before Adam choked out a hard sob, “Shiro’s - Shiro’s in the forest with a squad, in the back, they were gathering -”

Lance grabbed his shoulder, “Lead the way, Adam, I’ll get the alarm. Shiro has to know.”

They shared a frantic but solemn look before Adam ripped away from the doors and headed after the crowd of civilians. With the exit at the end of the military wing, they’d be able to avoid the main compound’s entrance and work their way around the fence. Hopefully, they would be safe in that direction.

Turning on his heel, Lance broke out toward the lab. He needed to alert the others, and hopefully create a bit more chaos for Lotor to be distracted with as the others escaped. Walkers were surely already coming from all the noise, but with the alarm, maybe they’d be able to draw more in. For once in his damned days, it seemed like a good idea to attract in some of the undead. If Lotor had to think about saving himself and his men, they might be able to escape.

His lungs burned when he tore through the hallway, footsteps on the metal clanging rhythmically, and he set a goddamn prayer with every fall of his sole. The lab was empty, but he could hear the beginning roar of gunfire in the yard - and the screaming to accompany it. The Humvees were breaking through, he knew it, from the screeching of the chainlinks on all sides - the howling, animalistic shrieking and crying from the scalpers coming up in waves like a sick chant at a long-forgotten sports event.

He pumped harder, tears freely falling now, and the round of the lab gave way until his hand slapped the alarm on the wall hard - palm burning and shoes squeaking in his haste to stop. Immediately the alarms began to blare, and the lab was bathed in the red that had haunted his damn dreams since the first time - the first damn time. Allura in his arms, heavy and lifeless, Bandor’s crazed eyes, Shiro bleeding out from a missing limb, Keith, standing against Lotor all alone.

Lance shook from his bones, terror already coursing through him. Lotor was here to finish the
compound. They couldn’t stay. With that many scalpers, with that many of Lotor’s men, they wouldn’t be able to win this time.

He took shaking step after shaking step until the lab was a blur in his peripheral. The glass doors he had dragged Allura through months ago were shackled closed now, but bore a horrifying sight. He barely paused to look, the chainlink was already to the ground and the trucks were pulled into the yard and doing circles, scalpers dropping to the gravel and rushing the main entrance. Already the bodies of soldiers, most of their own people and only a few of Lotor’s, littered the gravel with pools of crimson.

Clapping a hand over his mouth to stop the bile from rising, Lance tore himself away and rushed back to the common room. His left hand grappled with the snap on his holster, before he had a good grip and was ripping his handgun out, trying to ease his shaking as he paused before the doors to the room. He could barely hear anything before the screech of alarms and the shuddering of the ground from the utility vehicles ravaging the yard, and his hands were trembling as he clicked off the safety of his handgun. Gripping hard and grinding his teeth, heshouldered through the doors with a two-second countdown, slamming into the common room with his gun brandished outward.

It was a bloodbath. The doors and glass were already shattered, littering the floor and bodies there with sparkling particles. He choked audibly, gasping out a shuddering breath. Civilians, faces he knew from every day, lay in pools of dark thick blood - eyes unseeing, bodies already cooling. A few jerked with the last remnants of life. Lance dropped to the nearest, dropping his gun and holding the body’s face in his hands.

Te-osh’s eyes were duller than he had ever seen, the older woman looking up beyond his face. Her body settled and she blinked once, slow, passing away before his eyes.

He bit through his lip to hold in his wails as the light finally faded. There was nothing he could do in those mere seconds, where Te-osh had taken her last stand for their compound, and with shaking fingers, he closed her eyes.

With quivering knees threatening to buckle under him, he stood and tried to make his way to the other bodies, tried to give them that last peace of closing their eyes before they reopened and turned to something else, but he was interrupted by rapid rounds of gunfire, the shrieking started back up in the yard. Then, the building shook with an explosion.

The ground under his feet swept him up, and Lance tumbled to meet it, landing hard on his palms before another explosion racked the compound again. The alarm was still blaring, and he barely had a moment to grab for his gun when the source of the explosions - bottles of alcohol set on fire - sailed through the front common room windows.

He ducked into Te-osh’s side as fire erupted from the bombs, setting alight on some bodies and the tables of the common room. Smoke immediately filled the room with thick dark clouds, and glass rained down onto him, cutting what skin was available. He couldn’t wait for the bomb’s sound to stop ringing in his ears because the fire was already licking at his boots.

Lance, with lasting strength, made a mad scramble for the doors, bursting through the broken glass and rolling into the gravel. His face crunched, blood already spurting from his nose, because of the bad landing, but he was up in a heartbeat.

Over the screech of the alarms, the blaring pulsing red, the roar of the tires was deafening as the vehicles ripped across the compound yard - physically dragging walkers in chains into their safe haven, the ripping of machine gun fire raining down through the barrack walls by scalpers hefting
heavy guns.

Scalpers and Lotor’s soldiers tossed molotovs and fire bombs in wide arcing sails over them, like streaking red claw marks in the sky, rolling in air and breaking and shattering against the walls and through the windows, which shook the compound further as they exploded. The fences, torn from the ramming of utility vehicles, were ravaged and drooped as a new horror, a gathering mass of walkers approached, never-ending and steady, walls of dead flesh stumbling closer.

Groups of soldiers, their soldiers, tried to usher civilians through the gates and into the forests, but the scalpers were swift and ruthless - tossing machetes through the air, and swinging wildly at the limbs of any close enough. Bodies went down one by one as Lotor’s agents, led by Zethrid, took targeted shots like a firing squad at the fleeing civilians.

It was a massacre.

His fingers bore into the gravel as he curled his hands into his fists, slamming them against the ground and screaming. He couldn’t see Keith anywhere, with the thickness of the scalpers moving through the compound yard. Lotor’s stark white hair shone from where he stood - howling in laughter as he slung attached to his Humvee, Zethrid and Ezor - as well as a throng of scalpers - flanking him from all sides. His panic was rising, Keith had to be alive somewhere out here, but it looked bad. Terror gripped his throat.

His legs were aching, his body already battered and still vaguely in shock from the explosion, but he spied Kinkade, hand gripping Nadia’s waist tight, returning fire as civilians - Seok Jin, Hira, Sanda - crawled over the toppled fence. Kinkade was no match for the incoming scalpers, their blades and pipes, as bullets went flying and struck Sanda down.

Lance’s hand shot out for his pistol and he pushed off with his hands, tucking a knee under him and pushing off hard toward their direction. He couldn’t make it in time, footfalls slapping into the dirt hard, but his aim was good and with a shot, he put a bullet into the skull of the scalper nearest to Sanda.

Her body was already tousled over the chainlink and bleeding from the scalper’s abuse, but she pushed Hira onward into Kinkade’s grip on the other side of the broken fence. Nadia’s body was jostled in the action but Kinkade caught Hira well before Sanda was surrounded again by the scalpers.

Lance sobbed loud, aiming again. Where was Keith?! Where the hell was Keith? He didn’t get far when one of the Humvees came ripping in front of his path and scalpers sprinted at him from his other side.

It was then that his pistol jammed.

“No, no!” he yelled at it, before gasping and tossing it aside, pulling his body back and up and delivering a strong kick to the chest of the first scalper that got closer. The scalper howled and went flying, his dirty body hitting the gravel and rolling. His friends slowed but sneered at Lance, stalking closer slowly.

Seeing the distance between the scalpers gathering closer, the one he had just felled was still paces in front of them. The impact of his kick, thank god Shiro taught him to utilize his legs, had left that scalper without his weapons. A bow and a few arrows were scattered on the dirt in front of him. Lance tossed aside his jammed pistol and scrambled for the bow.

It was a leathery thing, with cracks and unsmoothed wood, but the string was fine and strong - and
it was relatively his size. The pack of scalpers, seven in front of him, were flanked by one of the two Humvees behind them. He notched one of the discarded arrows and sent it flying through one of the scalper’s eyes. Six.

The second arrow wasn’t as good of a shot. It skeetered off from the bow haphazardly, embedding itself in the dirt just beyond the felled scalpers. One of the women giggled as she took a huge second and crushed it under her boot. The others flanking her thought looked a bit hesitant, looking between themselves and the man bleeding out before them through his eye socket.

Lance notched another arrow. He had two left to make an impact on the enemies approaching him.

He wanted to yell at them to stay back, to give them a chance at realizing how quick he’d have to defend himself. He wanted to be the same Lance that teared up at his first fatal shot on a man, no matter how that man had crossed him. But he wasn’t, and he didn’t, just taking space to ground himself, stepping away to give himself the room to draw the bow. His chest felt cold and hollow, the brink of his humanity waning like ocean waves. He didn’t care if these scalpers lived or died, they were barely human in his eyes - mindlessly following bloodlust.

The Humvee roared in a circle around him, tires squealing and dust being kicked up. One of the companions of the Emperor from before was behind the wheel, grim-faced, as he strategically pulled the Humvee up behind Lance - cutting off his exit. Lance hissed and turned forward again.

The hesitant ones lingered, but the woman scalper stepped forward almost giddy. True to his word, he let the notched arrow fly into her chest. The thump of the arrowhead in her body was audible, and she went to her knees. Five.

One of the scalpers sliced closer with a rusty pipe, aiming for Lance’s head, but he dropped and kicked out at her ankles - yet just as she fell forward, another scalper jumped over her body and tackled him down.

With the air knocked out of him, and his face in the gravel and dust, he choked, gasping out before the scalper’s hands went for his neck. Hands that squeezed - hard, tighter -

The bottom of a black boot hit the scalper’s head, a direct kick that saw the scalper slamming into the dirt beyond Lance with a sickening crack. The air flowed back against his abused neck in waves and he choked and coughed, hyperventilating and turning over on his side to hack onto the ground.

It was barely a moment before a hand grabbed onto his forearm and hiked him up to his wobbly feet. Keith’s face, half-covered in sticky blood, swam in his vision and he could barely gasp out a broken version of his name, a very pathetic “Ke-ith,” before the other man hooked him around the waist and hauled him up. In his other hand, his katana was splattered in filth, and together, they pushed through the fallen scalpers who had surrounded Lance toward the fence. Behind them, the compound exploded with shrapnel and flames hot enough to burn the back of his neck.

“It’s Lotor,” he heaved out to Keith, scrambling to grab the gun in his other holster. “Where’s - Where are the others?”

Keith’s lip was split. Lance couldn’t help but linger on it when he talked.

“Shiro is out with the others,” Keith’s voice was wrecked, and some of his bangs had been sliced somehow, “In the treeline. The Humvees can’t follow us there and - Duck.”

Lance dropped to his knees, slipping out of Keith’s arms as Keith swung wide over his head and slashed clean through a walker’s neck. Lance scrambled forward away from the falling walker’s
body and popped back up with a planted knee on the ground. His shin was smarting from the abuse but he still directed a good shoulder shove against a walker that tottered closer. It was then that a whinny pierced out, and Keith’s head whipped around toward the garages. Pidge, with Matt, were attempting to wade out to Artax’s stable - but the flow of walkers was pushing them back and scalpers were pouring from a truck nearby. Matt’s arm was tight around Pidge’s waist, and she was scrambling to get a hold onto him as a crawler nipped at her heels.

They burst into action immediately. Keith’s fist gripped the back of his shirt and pulled him up hard, and the extra support had him flying forward, hands tightening on the bow and last arrow he had. The walkers ahead of him went sideways as Keith sprinted forward with a hard sideswipe of his sword. Blood splattered, but nothing stopped them as they soldiered on.

The scalpers were next, and they were more deadly than the overwhelming crowds of walkers that had poured near the garages. The truck they had jumped from was a welcome distraction for the undead, who smelled the presence of the human driver, and were now rocking the Ford to try and get through to the meat inside.

Artax, nearby, was throwing herself against the stable’s doorway. Keith broke toward the scalpers faster than lightning, like he was fresh and not absurdly wounded like Lance was, and he clashed with the first few head-on. Matt and Pidge cried out, but Keith ripped forward in front of them, sheltering them from any onslaught and pushing them to the fallen gate and the treeline.

Lance skidded in the dirt just beyond the stable and let his last arrow fly through the abdomen of a nearby scalper - a close enough range for the spray to hit his face. The woman behind the man shrieked out as the arrow exited and hit her as well with a sickening thud. He barely had a second to register how he had just felled two scalpers with a single shitty arrow.

With a leap, he swung his legs over the stall’s door and grabbed onto Artax’s mane.

“Steady!” he gasped, crying out against the Thoroughbred. “Steady, Artax!”

She was untacked, and they had no time, but he swung the saddle pad and huge leather saddle over her nonetheless, the bow tucked over his arm in his armpit as he ducked under her to tighten the straps. All the steps Keith had taught him were a blur, and Artax was too worked up for much more, already kicking out as walkers abandoned the truck nearby and came closer.

“Keith!” he called out, desperate, gasping as he slung a foot into the loose stirrups and tried to haul himself up onto Artax’s back, fist around her forgotten bridle.

He tossed her bridle over the horn of the saddle, and attempted a second time to haul himself onto Artax. She whinnied and nearly reared, kicking forward and shattering the stall door. Lance scrambled onto her back just as she took off. The compound yard was a disaster zone, and she was immediately spooked, rearing and skidding backward as scalpers flooded forward.

Keith was still in front of Pidge and Matt, his boot against the shoulder of a scalper as he pierced through the man’s chest. “Lance!” he yelled, ripping a canister of arrows from the scalper’s shoulder and hurling it in the air.

Lance kicked Artax on, arm outstretched as he grabbed onto the canister midair. Coordination on Artax’s back alone was never his strong suit, especially as she ran bridleless toward Keith. He barely had a stabilizing hold on the saddlehorn. But, he still notched an arrow into the bow and aimed, thighs tight around Artax’s middle as he stood straight and tall and caught a scalper right in the back as they tightened in to strike at Keith.
Artax went straight to Keith, and he was able to catch her mane in his hands. She still pranced in place, as explosions rocked the compound behind them. With one hand, Matt passed Pidge over and Keith threw her up in front of Lance in the saddle.

She gasped but Lance caught her quickly, bow and bridle still clenched in his one hand.

“Keith -” he started, frantic.

But Keith shook his head and called, “Right behind you, don’t worry!”

Artax reared as a crawler pulled closer, and Keith gripped her mane tighter, “Get to town, we’ll be right on your tail. Go!”

And with that, Keith slapped Artax’s rear, and she spurred onward. The lack of reins meant Pidge and Lance both went scrambling for a handful of mane, just as Artax took a running leap over the felled fence and cleared it. She landed hard, and for a second Lance was sure he was gonna go flying off, but he gripped his thighs tight, gripped Pidge harder, and they took off through the trees.

Machine gun fire started up again, and Lance winced. The trees ahead of them were cased in waist-high bush and Artax leaped again. They broke through the foliage, dropping to the dirt and grass after the gunfire was turned back towards them, the barrage of bullets thumping into the trunks of trees and splintering the wood loudly.

He fisted his hand in Artax’s mane, his other hand going to pat her neck. She cantered on forward through the treeline, weaving between the trees expertly on her own. A wave of undead stumbled through the trees to their left, and as the gunfire paused, Artax weaved to the right, neighing and snorting in terror.

Silhouette after silhouette of trees passed in a blur as they ran through the shallow forest for the town nearby. Gunfire started back behind them, raining again back at the compound, distant now but still echoing loudly. His thighs burned with every pump of Artax’s legs, but with Pidge in front of him, gasping wildly as she held tight to the saddle horn and both of them completely trusting Artax, they were making it.

Through the trees, the bodies of the walkers disappeared from their pace, and when they pushed through - the town looming right ahead of them - Lance spotted them. A small group of survivors from the compound leaned up against the backsides of brick buildings at the edge of town. Artax slowed, only when the face of Shiro burst out from the crowd and came to them. She reared a couple times, right as his grip was truly fading and he really was sure she was gonna throw both him and Pidge off, but Shiro gripped onto her mane and whispered in her ear, and slowly, she settled from her prancing in place.

“Is this it?” he whispered, broken, voice burning as Shiro looked up at him sadly.

Fuck. Those who had survived were not in good shape. Many bodies were lined near the building, close and in the shade, with Coran leaning over them. They were mostly a handful of civilians, clinging to life. The rest were the few lieutenants, with Nadia in Kinkade’s arms on the ground. She was out, eyes closed and breathing shallow. Allura had a piece of her t-shirt against Nadia’s legs, cleaning her wounds. Adam immediately launched forward off the building to stand as they approached, Shiro with his fist in Artax’s hair.

Pidge slid off first, with Adam’s help, before he did. With shaking legs, that really almost gave out under him when he hit the ground, Lance slipped off her. He tossed the bridle over Artax’s
haphazardly sideways saddle, and looked to Shiro.

“Keith?” Shiro prompted, with a frown.

But just at that, Keith burst from the treeline, Matt at his side. They were panting, dripping in sweat, but in one piece. As they made their way over, Keith paused and lingered by Lance’s side for a moment before he went to the wounded.

“How’s Nadia?” Keith asked immediately, eyes dropping over to Allura and Kinkade. Kinkade looked grim, but Allura nodded slowly.

“She’ll be okay.” Allura murmured, hair a mess and utterly covered in dirt and blood. “But it’s close. We don’t have any supplies.”

Adam cut in then, “We barely have food or water, and Lotor could find us at any minute.”

Shiro agreed with a nod, “We need to keep moving.”

Lance was inclined to agree, already beginning to nod and weigh out the options when Keith snapped, “We can’t run when Lotor’s on our heels. He has vehicles, he has tons of men.”

“Well, what do you suggest we do?” Adam hissed coldly, clearly frustrated, and twitching with pain when he put weight on one foot. “If we stay here, we’re all sitting ducks. And if we fight, we’re dead.”

There was a heavy pause, before Allura got to her feet from Nadia’s side. She stared, righteous and deadly, at each of them before speaking, “Lotor has to die.”

They were all quiet then, as Allura looked to Keith, narrowing her gaze.

Keith’s tone was even and firm, “You’re right. That’s why I’m heading back out.”

A chorus of objections rang out then, and even Coran turned from his tasks to Keith. It was like Lance’s lungs stopped working right then, the air completely gone as he stared at Keith. Going against Lotor alone was a death wish.

“Keith, no,” he wheezed weakly, just as Shiro’s tight face was split by an impressive frown and a hiss of, “No, you aren’t.”

“I can’t have this hanging over our heads,” Keith snarled, fists shaking at his side, “I can’t have this hanging over us - our survival, our lives for the goddamn rest of however long we have together.”

Lance shouldered closer, grabbed hard onto Keith’s fist, “I’m not letting you go alone.”

“No.” Keith cut in, right as Allura, echoed by Pidge and Adam, behind him chorused their own disapproval, Keith the loudest as he cut out again, “No, Lance. Stay here with Shiro –”

“No, I’m not leaving you –”

“Lance, you have to stay here with Shiro, I’m not letting you –”

“No! Keith! I am not being separated from you during this –”
"You have to listen to me -"

"No!" he yelled, pulling against the hand Shiro had placed on his shoulder, tears bursting from him as his voice cracked, "No, fuck that. Fuck you! I am never - never letting you go alone. We either go together or we don’t at all!"

Keith looked at him for a long moment, tender eyes rimmed with red and so tired. He gripped Keith’s wrist tighter, trying to stop the trembling of his bottom lip with a sharp bite to the flesh. One of Keith’s tough palms rose and cupped his cheek, a tender swift of his thumb along Lance’s cheekbone.

“Okay,” he nodded, speaking softly. “Okay, we’ll go together.”

Lance launched forward to wrap his arms around Keith’s neck, hugging tight and suffocating before pulling back, slipping away from Keith’s arms but still staying close.

“We’ll kill him together,” he bit out fiercely. “Lotor will pay.”

Keith nodded once, short and serious, eyes blazing under his dark fringe.

But then Shiro stepped forward, pushing past to the front with Adam at his side. Shiro’s voice was as firm as it could be, the lines around his mouth deeper with distress, “I’m not leaving either of you.”

Keith shot out with a hand and grabbed Lance’s tight, eyes steady at his brother, “You have to, Shiro. You have to lead everyone out - no one is safe until we’ve put this place miles behind us and Lotor is dead.”

The commander’s eyes shone wet, “Keith, I’m not leaving you again. I - can’t.”

“You need to,” Keith sounded so confident, so fierce, looking out on their ragtag group, wounded and broken, “We’ll meet beyond the town. Keep west, and keep moving. Don’t wait for us until you’ve found some shelter, the two of us are faster and we’ll catch up to you in no time.”

Shiro stepped closer and grabbed Keith’s shoulder, drawing his brother close so their foreheads touched, “Keith -”

“I’ll find you,” Keith said. “I promise, Shiro, I will.”

Lance was crying, angry hot velvety tears. The tremble in his shoulders had stretched to his arms - until he had to clench his fists tight in order for his bones to stop shivering. The tears were only absently registering as hot trails on his grubby cheeks. He had been crying for what felt like hours now, but seeing the defeated and shattered look on Shiro’s weathered face - the red eyes of Allura from under her silvery bangs - the exhausted drag of every breath in Adam’s chest -

They helped the group of compound survivors pack so to say. Artax helped carry two of the wounded; Nadia and Hira, while the rest struggled up to their feet. Only then did Lance notice Coran’s limp, and the shuffling motion of Adam’s stiff leg. They weren’t going to be able to go fast, but hopefully the distance between them would be enough of a head start that if confronting Lotor went south, the others would at least be able to escape.

It was a sobering thought, realizing that this could be the last of his existence on Earth. Lotor was batshit enough to shoot both Keith and him on sight probably, and the scalpers wouldn’t just avoid fresh meat for favor of the undead getting to it. He didn’t want to think about what would happen
to his body after he was dead, if he died, but the nauseating apprehension lingered.

Keith shared soft, angry words with Shiro before they headed out. Allura stood by Lance for a moment, their hands brushing, words soundless but so powerful. She was giving him the strength to finish Lotor for the both of them, and even though it might have been fruitless, it was enough to make him think for a single moment that he had the power and the upper hand on Lotor because he had this family and Lotor didn’t.

“Come back,” Allura said, voice fierce, eyes fiery.

He nodded.

Then, Keith turned away from Shiro and walked toward Lance, offering him his hand. Keith’s eyes were dark, serious, when he met his gaze.

Lance took Keith’s hand, and they turned back toward the compound.

The brush was just low enough for them to hide in. Going slow and steady was a good way to make sure the nearby walkers weren’t alerted to their presence and they needed the time to think. Keith was right about one thing, Lotor was after them for sure. It could be any moment before they met Lotor head-on, as he was sure to be coming after them. If he didn’t find their bodies at the compound, it would be at the town. It made the most sense why the others needed to keep moving as well.

Breathing heavily, Lance pressed closer to Keith’s side. Scalpers ahead of them were already crossing the fence lines of the compound and trickling into the forest - scouting for the survivors. They were a disorganized bunch but with Lotor’s guidance, they were tactically powerful. Going straight to the compound and meeting Lotor with all of his allies at his side was a death sentence, even more so than going after Lotor in general. They had to be methodical and sneaky about this, even if their plan so far was just to jump into the snake’s nest.

But of course, the odds were stacked against them in every way.

They were blindsided. It made sense - Lotor had had the jump on them from the start.

Their backs were turned, and he hadn’t even turned to see him, but Lance knew it was Lotor when the lip of the gun pressed to his temple and Ezor and Zethrid stepped out of the leaves ahead of them. Although Keith was facing them, they hesitated in stepping forward and didn’t grab him. Lance was frozen, and Lotor laughed cruelly in his ear when Keith turned, breath caught and eyes frantic, to see the gun at Lance’s hand.

Lance could smell the stench of blood, sharp and metallic, as Lotor brushed against him and yanked him backward by the holster around his hips. The bow he had grabbed dropped to his feet, along with the canister of arrows. Panic and fear rose like burning bile in his throat, feeling the body of Lotor press against him, his voice chilling and taunting against the shell of his ear, “Hello again, Keith.”

“Lotor,” Keith bit out and edged, the slightest bit forward, but Lotor snapped out -

“Not a step further,” he unclicked the safety against Lance’s temple. “I’m not here to play with
you, Kogane. Now, kneel.”

The barrel dug in harder, until it was hurting against his skin, until he felt the cold metal against his skull practically, and Keith, with eyes wide and eyebrows pinched tight, lifted his hands above his head and sunk to his knees in the wet dirt.

He was beginning to hyperventilate, the panic making his vision swim, or was that the tears? Keith’s eyes snapped between the gun and Lance’s own, and he was trembling while he was kneeling. The fear was almost palpable, hanging in the air, and Lance couldn’t breathe. Ezor and Zethrid looked grimly at him behind Keith’s back.

A nudge at his hips, Lotor’s slimy voice a wet croon in his ear, “Pick up your gun, whore.”

He froze, chest rising and falling fast and breath pushing out of his nose. Slowly, Lance shook his head, just the tiniest bit, eyes wide, staring directly at Keith. His hands felt like they weren’t even connected to him. He wouldn’t do it, he wouldn’t do it, he can’t -

“Do what I say, or I’ll pull the trigger,” Lotor’s warning was low, tight, deadly.

Keith in turn, took a sharp intake of breath, eyes swimming, already begging quietly, “Lance, do what he says please. Please.”

His chest burned from the hyperventilation, eyes stinging with tears that he didn’t have the moisture for, and he had to force his brain to think - force his fingers into the clip of his holster - force them around his pistol.

Lotor’s voice felt like sandpaper on his skin, the humming resonating from his chest to Lance’s back, “Excellent. Now, put it on him.”

He can’t - he can’t - Lotor’s finger eased down on the trigger, an audible near-click that had his skin prickle in goosebumps.

Keith’s voice burst out, cracking hard with panic, “Lance, goddamn it, just - put the fucking gun on me. Do it, c’mon.”

Lance sucked in a breath so hard his nostrils hurt. His eyes prickled and he shook his head, adamant, frantic. I can’t - I can’t - I can’t -

“Five seconds,” Lotor counted down, smooth as butter, moving behind him. A hand came up to his hip and grabbed him there, and the recoil alone was forced down by Lotor’s strength.

“Lance, baby,” Keith had tears streaming down his cheeks, like Lance had never seen before. “C’mon, I can’t… I can’t watch you…”

Lance was in a breath so hard his nostrils hurt. His eyes prickled and he shook his head, adamant, frantic. I can’t - I can’t - I can’t -

His voice was a whimper, “I can’t,” as he shook his head again, tears dripping off his nose and chin - unattractive, babyish gasping in between breaths like he couldn’t get air fast enough for his heartbeat. Lotor’s hand crept up his side, brushing against the soft skin on the inside of his arm.

“Yes you can.” Keith begged, fingers peeling into the dirt underneath him. “You can do it. Put the gun on me.”

How was he going to survive this? How was he going to put the gun on Keith, kill him with Lotor at his back, and survive? They were both dead, but he would rather take the bullet for Keith in the end. Their people needed him, Keith could lead them to safety and his heart couldn’t take the shot - he would rather die than shoot Keith Kogane.
“Two seconds,” Lotor breathed a laugh into the shell of his ear, and he shuddered hard against him. Even leaning away wasn’t giving him the space he needed to move in that moment.

“Lance,” Keith shouted at him, “Lance, PLEASE.” He was a mess, heaving with every breath and eyes demanding something from Lance that he could never - ever -

He squeezed his eyes shut, so tight his lashes stuck in, and raised his arm. His elbow wouldn’t lock, his arm was trembling so much. Lotor gripped his other arm and joined the two, with an airy laugh like he was teaching Lance something so small.

Lance couldn’t look. Couldn’t look down his arms at the pistol pointed at Keith.

“Good boy,” Lotor gasped happily, thrilled to the bone no doubt. His voice dropped to a chilly whisper as he told Lance, “That’s what I like to see. When Kogane’s dead, everything will be perfect.”

Ezor and Zethrid seemed on edge, eyes wide. He jumped between looking at them, Keith, and glancing out of the corner of his eyes at Lotor.

Continuing, Lotor said, “I destroyed your compound. Kogane will be dead, we’ll chase down the rest of your little survivors, you and I, and then… Oh this is the best part, listen to me, dearest.”

His fingers closed loosely around Lance’s neck, thumb pressing hard against the scar there,

“Oh do the scalpers have a plan for you, little whore. After I’m done with you, our alliance will be perfectly complete with you as collateral.”

Keith looked murderous, his throat bobbing. Lance felt numb.

“You know what you need to do now, don’t you?” Lotor murmured, pressing his nose into the side of Lance’s head, into his hair.

He did.

“Shoot him.”

He couldn’t.

“Lance…” Keith breathed.

How was he supposed to do this? He couldn’t. He wouldn’t.

It was like Keith knew it too because he looked up at him calmly, even though there were heavy tear tracks cutting down his cheeks, and his voice was wrecked when he said, “It’s okay. C’mon. It’s okay. You can do it.”

“I can’t,” Lance whispered. Lotor huffed a laugh into Lance’s neck, breath hot on his skin.

“You can,” Keith was fucking encouraging him to shoot him. “It’s okay. He’s not going to wait all day.”

“There - ” Lance hiccups roughly. “Has to be another way…”

Keith’s smile was sad, and his lips were trembling as he shook his head, “I wish there was, baby.”

“He’s right,” Lotor murmured dangerously. “I won’t wait much longer.”
“Please don’t make me,” Lance started, begging Lotor. His hand was shaking. “I’ll do anything you want. I’ll go with you. Don’t m - make me -”

“Sorry,” Lotor hummed, “I’ve already given you extra time.”

“Anything,” Lance sobbed, turning away, trying to meet Lotor’s eyes. “I’ll do whatever you want, just let Keith go -”

The gun at his temple pressed in harder, making Lance catch his breath again. Keith was silent where he kneeled in front of them.

“You need to calm down,” Lotor said, “and pull the trigger before I kill you first.”

“Kill me,” Lance begged then, turning back to meet Keith’s horrified, broken gaze. “Please kill me. I can’t do this, just pull the trigger, I don’t want to -”

“Lance - ” Keith panicked, shifting on his knees.

He sobbed in relief when Lotor shifted away from him, pulling back completely.

Keith shook his head, “No, Lotor, no, don’t do this. Fuck, don’t do it, please.”

“The great Keith Kogane,” Lotor mused, “finally begging me . For a worthy subject too, I suppose. Too bad he won’t cooperate. Axca tried to tell me it was pointless with the two of you.”

“Anything,” Keith promised viciously, “I’ll give you anything. Don’t do this.”

Lotor sighed disappointedly, “The only thing I want is your death, and your expression when I shoot your whore and trade him off. Unless he manages to shoot your first.”

Lance shook his head, but even still, Lotor hadn’t told him to move the gun away from Keith yet.

“Someone has to shoot first,” Lotor purred. “Who will it be?”

Then, from a few yards away, a clear voice broke the tense air when a single word, “Me.”

Lance didn’t have time to turn and look before a shot blasted through the air.

He dived forward, straight for Keith, spinning and crouching in front of him, even as one of Keith’s arms wrapped around his stomach and held him close. They were both trembling.

When Lance looked, Lotor was crouched, one knee in the dirt, gripping his midsection roughly. Blood seeped out between his fingers.

He looked farther, and Axca stepped more firmly into the clearing, a shining handgun clasped in her hand.

She shot at Lotor again, face grim. Lotor hissed and ducked forward, cocking his own pistol right back at her.

“I thought you were dead, bitch,” he howled. “I’ll shoot you again, traitor! Ezor, Zethrid !”

But Ezor and Zethrid didn’t move, and Axca grinned wide. She had been shot, in the midsection, Lance noticed as he turned in the dirt and crouched, scrambling for his pistol. A wrap was around her waist, bloodied, but she was strong, and she cocked her handgun again.
“Die,” she hissed, and pulled the trigger.

But Lotor pounced forward and the shot was yards off. Axca shuffled as fast as she could backward, just as Lance gripped his gun, raised it -

A single shot pierced through Lotor’s neck. The recoil was nothing. The blood burst all across his dirty white hair and Lotor tipped sideways onto the ground, body twitching.

Keith was on Lance the next second, bundling him up in his arms and holding him tight. Lance gasped into his arms and turned closely into Keith’s neck, wetting the dirty skin there with new, fresh tears. He had killed Lotor, a single shot, and it was over. Everything with him was over. It was done.

“It’s over,” he croaked.

Keith nodded furiously, pressing a kiss against his forehead, “You did it, Lance, you fucking did it.”

He nodded, again and again, gasping and heavily breathing against Keith’s chest. “We… We have to find the others.”

But Keith didn’t reply. He was staring over Lance’s shoulder, and Lance turned to follow his gaze. Axca was on her knees in the dirt next to Lotor’s body, staring down at it with the blood of that fatal gunshot sprayed across her face.

Zethrid and Ezor hovered close, but they didn’t approach her.

“Goodbye,” Axca finally murmured, “you fucking bastard.”

She stood up with a grim look, casting it over to Zethrid and Ezor, before landing on Lance and Keith. He stared back at her, at the matted hair over one side of her face and the blood on her cheek and chin.

“I’m not returning, I’m leaving,” Axca stated. “I have to.”

There was a pause from the others, before Ezor’s usually manic voice whispered back, “Okay. Okay…” as if it pained her to see Axca go. Lance didn’t think there were actual feelings of care between the trio, as if Lotor’s generals were anything but mindless soldiers.

“Be safe,” Ezor added. “Please.”

“…You too,” Axca muttered, shouldering the pack strewn across her back, but still holding her gun back aloft. “Both of you.”

It was not a moment later before Zethrid and Ezor shared a look between them, cast it over their shoulders, and withdrew through the brush. Keith started after them, but Lance stopped him with a solid hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t,” Lance murmured. “They didn’t even mourn him.”

Keith breathed heavily, “…I know. I know.”

“We have to go,” Lance pulled on his shoulder. “We need to find the others.”

But Keith paused, turning back to Axca.
She was lingering over Lotor’s body, but she cast a look at them when Keith took a step toward her.

“Are you alright?” he asked, low and eyeing her midsection.

The question was odd, and she knew that as well from the look in her eye. Axca’s dark gaze bounced from Keith to Lance behind him, but she shrugged a shoulder, “I’ll be fine.”

“Where will you go?” Keith continued. “I…”

The implication hung in the air. Axca knew it, Keith knew it, and Lance knew it. There was a longer pause now, where she turned from them and looked down on Lotor’s body before raising her eyes to the sky.

“I won’t go with you,” Axca finally said. “I need to find who I am without him.”

Keith shifted, nodding slow. Lance knew what she needed, but it would be harder than any self-exploration journey. The world was reckless and dangerous out there, and she only had a half full pack and suffering on her back. But she was strong, and reminded him of Keith in so many ways.

“You should go,” Axca continued. “He’ll turn soon.”

With a flick of her thumb, she uncapped the safety on her gun once again. She meant to end his existence entirely.

Keith turned to Lance with a grim look, already tucking his arm around Lance, but Lance didn’t move. Axca’s figure along the trees was skinny but strong, and she was looking back down at Lotor’s corpse. A few of the corpse’s fingers twitched.

“Head west,” Lance called to her. “Get into Canada if you can. The more remote northern provinces will be the safest.”

She didn’t respond beyond a nod, but he knew the information was appreciated. The corpse at her feet jerked with renewed life and with that, Keith pulled him around and back through the trees.

They walked on and moved fast, dipping through the thickest of the trees in an attempt to avoid the scalpers and walkers wandering in the forest when the second shot rang out - loud and clear. From the clearing where the shot had resonated, crows flew up through the air, cawing and flying spectacularly upward, mimicking the billowing smoke from the compound that still clouded the air.

They were both quiet, the shock of Lotor’s death, the entire destruction of the compound, finally settling in. Keith’s breathing was shallow, exhausted, and they were both sticky with blood and sweat and dirt - relying on one another for support as they crossed through the forest. Eventually, the treeline thinned out, and the darkness of the branches and brush parted for the pavement of the highway’s side pocket.

The gravel’s uneven ground was a difficult transition for his dead tired feet, but they both walked down the highway, sides against the barrier and heading west. The sun, at this point, was setting slowly over the trees and setting the sky on fire. The smoke from the compound was still prevalent, creating a purple vortex that led behind them. But they walked on and left the compound behind.

It would be a while before they found the camp of the survivors. It was small and neatly tucked off the side of the highway and a good hour or so away. The sky was dark, gloomy, and the last dregs
of sunlight were only a sliver on the horizon. When they stumbled closer, Shiro was on guard. The rifle in his hand dropped to the dirt as he stood up and went to them immediately.

His arms were tight around them, hugging them close as his body wracked with happy gasping sobs. Keith buried his head, like a child, into his brother’s chest, and Lance smiled at the sight. The others around the small campfire turned as they stepped into the camp.

Keith didn’t have to say it, they all knew. Lotor was dead, and it was over.

End Notes

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