Lance has a knack for transforming into a mermaid whenever he comes into contact with water, a trait inherited from his family — something he barely manages to hide through sheer luck and the help of his best friend, Hunk. Pidge is a conspiracy theorist determined to uncover the origin of the odd fish that’s been seen off of the Florida coast recently, toting a doubting Keith along with her. Allura is a scientist, with Shiro as her apprentice and research partner.

What could go wrong?
“Hunk!”

Lance had seen it. Right there, on the pavement. The clouds had been getting darker, parallel to his mood, and his stomach churns as much as the leaves underfoot, his nose picking up on the not-so-far scent of water and wind and the inevitable.

“What’s up?” Hunk casually turns to the side, taking a deep swig of his Coke, the breeze fashioning the locks of his hair like it means to turn them into an art piece. He looks at peace in his bright yellow shirt, in his worn-out sandals that he refuses to throw away, the ones threaded with age and love and a permanent smell of salty sand. Lance had asked about them once, years ago, but only got a vague “memories” as an answer — complete with a sigh and a happy look and the whole nine yards.

Hunk was always a romantic, Lance knows, but he’s always been vigilant as ever, his head out of the sky and firmly stuck onto his body. Which is why it’s surprising that he doesn’t notice.

“There!” Lance stabs his thin finger toward the concrete sidewalk, his eyes wide.

“Huh?” Hunk bends down, squinting his eyes, and Lance is a second from losing his damn mind.

“Right! There!” He squats, finger directly over the perfectly circular dot of water, and Hunk finally breaks into an “oh!” of surprise.

“Lance, that’s tiny, how did you even—“

“It’s going to rain.”

Hunk quizzically frowns. “Yeah, buddy. We have time.” The social science building is straight ahead, down a thick slab of sidewalk and up equally heavy concrete steps, its entrance elegantly punctuated with two palm trees that reflect against the enormous glass doors.

The reflection. Lance can see the clouds swirling, scheming against him directly. He’s sure of it.

He begins to walk faster.

“Lance—“ Hunk starts, but then he stops, right as Lance’s eyes dart toward the pavement.

Plop.

Lance screeches.

“Do you see that one, Hunk?” he hollers, spurring his trot to a jog.

“Lan—“

Plop.

Plop.

Plop.

Lance feels one on his hair. On his arm. On his foot.
“Run for it!” Hunk bellows, and the two are off.

Lance was never exactly a track star, but if anything motivates him, it’s panic and rain. Usually the two combined. His breath whooshes through his chest, his legs pumping as if electrified, and all he can hear is static, is Hunk’s slamming steps behind him, is the rain falling from the sky like tiny bombs, like something ready to ruin moods and lives.

No, Lance isn’t being dramatic.


Which he would be sprouting if Hunk hadn’t shoved him the last few feet before the heavens showered everything beneath them in gallons, the kind of rain that would probably tear down palm fronds and get classes cancelled for those with lazy professors who couldn’t be bothered to go out in this kind of weather. His elbows hit the concrete first, his lower lip slamming against the edge of a particularly rough step, but he doesn’t care.

What he does care about, however, is the fact that the wind is now horizontal, rushing at him in misty sheets like hoards of ghosts.

Something strong scoops him up from behind, and he yelps as he comes into contact with a solid that he quickly realizes is Hunk’s back — he’s scooped Lance up fireman-style, hauling his noodle-like body like it weighs nothing more than an actual noodle.

“Hold on!” Hunk’s grip is vice-like as he attacks the door with the force of all of the elements combined, throwing it open and slipping in as gracefully as possible — or, as gracefully as anybody can with a loose body on their back whose feet get in the way, smacking against the doorframe.

“Ouch!” Lance yelps, his body curling in on itself, but the door has closed and the building is silent and Hunk is booking it toward the bathroom with a ragged Lance in tow, ignoring the stares of the occasional students that pass by with a Starbucks cup or an armful of textbooks.

Lance’s skin is crawling like it’s been slathered with a light coat of spiders, the biggest and hairiest of the things gathering on his legs, and a sweat has broken out across his forehead, dripping into his eyebrows. He miserably moans, pressing his face into the cool fabric of Hunk’s shirt.

“You okay? We’re almost there!” Hunk huffs, hauling Lance up a flight of stairs like there’s no tomorrow.

“Doin’ just peachy,” Lance dryly answers, both of his palms curling into a thumb’s up just as he sees the familiar sign of the bathroom, blurry in his warbling sight. Hunk knocks into the door like a linebacker, just about blasting the thing off of its sockets and concussing Lance in the process.

“Oh, thank God, there’s nobody in here,” Hunk sighs. “I’m gonna put you on the floor, okay?”

“Mmmph.”

Lance slides out of his grip like a wet fish, and he’s pretty sure he’s halfway to that metaphor by now — his neck is straining, his lungs beginning to clog, to seek something more aqueous and smooth than air. He leans against the back of the bathroom wall with his hands pressed to his face, and when he removes them they’re shiny, layered with sweat.

He purses his lips. Lets out a strangled whine.

“Lance, what is it? Is something wrong? You gotta tell me more about this mermaid-y business,
what’s normal and what’s not, or I swear I’m gonna lose it one-“

“I ruined my skincare routine!” Lance wails, throwing his head back. Hunk heaves a breath. Rolls his eyes.

“Your skin is gonna be fine, Lance,” he says, a long-suffering pain laced between the syllables. “You sweat all the time. We all do. It’s Florida.”

“Yeah, and it sucks.”

“I agree with you there. Hey, can sweat Turn you?” Hunk asks, his natural curiosity peeking through.

“I…honestly don’t know. You wanna go test it this weekend?”

“Yeah, might as well. I’m still curious about the fish situation, too.”

Honestly! What the hell is up with those fish!” Lance laughs, remembering the ways that they flock around him during his ocean swims like a personal entourage, guiding him through the sea in their blanket of scales and shared kinship. Lance had rolled with it, reaching his arms out and watching them part in his wake like the waters of the red sea, but Hunk had been utterly enthralled with the phenomenon. He had been ever since the start.

And the start wasn’t anything dramatic. Lance had imagined it almost like a movie, before it had actually happened — a boy hiding his fishiness from his best friend ever since it developed at around age six, dodging rainstorms, pool parties, until alas! Caught by a squirt gun! Exposed!

Something like that. Something with flair, with personality.

Instead, he’d spilled water on himself in their shared dorm at six in the morning and collapsed to the ground with a large smack and the shattering of the cup, curses floating through his mind and spilling through mouth like a waterfall. Hunk came running, turning the corner like something wild, and he’d started. Looking at Lance, in his oversized grey hoodie and messy bedhead and luminescent blue tail. Looking at his bleary face, and the slight, unregistered horror developing there.

“Sorry I woke you up. It’s early,” he said, the words drowsy and halfway melted into another dream, and he knew what was happening, but only from afar through a thick mental wall of oh shit oh shit oh shit.

Hunk scratched at his face. Yawned.

“So you’re a mermaid?”

Lance looked down at his legs — or, lack of. “Um. Yeah. I guess?”

“You…guess?”

“It’s early, Hunk. Cut me some slack.”

Hunk walked right past him and opened the fridge, the light spilling across the still-dark dorm as he pulled out a heavy bottle of orange juice and plopped it on the counter. He casually stepped over Lance’s tail in the process, closing the fridge with a light kick of his foot and unscrewing the cap of the jug.

Lance just watched him as he poured himself a heaping glass, full of pulp and orange-y goodness,
and said, “You’re acting weirdly calm about this.”

“We just got into college, Lance. I was honestly expecting some wild shit to go down,” Hunk says, downing half the glass in a single gulp. “Wasn’t expecting you to be a mermaid, but, you know.”

“You’re not going to ask why I didn’t tell you?” He felt guilty, all of the sudden, like a rat had crawled into his chest and died there.

“Nah. I wouldn’t tell anybody either. Can you talk to dolphins?” Hunk had asked, his face lighting up eagerly.

Lance smiled, and it was sleepy and incoherent but the happiest thing he’d felt in a long time, the kind of smile that you have no control over, that possesses your face in the best way possible. “Not yet, but I’m getting there.”

And that had been it.

Simple.

Except for when it rained, of course, or when any kind of water was involved. So maybe not so simple.

“Sorry about your elbows,” Hunk says.

Lance snaps back to the present, where he’s unconsciously been cradling the raw skin where his arms had scraped against the concrete. His lip stings with a menace, and he knows he’ll have to bend the truth during the usual FaceTime calls with his family, lest they know he’d almost Turned.

Again.

“It’s okay, man,” Lance says, and it’s genuine. He’d be a fried fish, dead meat if it weren’t for Hunk bailing him out every other week. “Thanks for saving my ass.”

Hunk only laughs. “That’s me. A professional ass-saver.”

“You’d be a good fireman, you know that?”

“Lance. I’m touched.” He delicately dabs away a fake tear, and Lance laughs, and the next half hour is spent wandering around the building long after Lance’s symptoms disappear as they wait for the rain to blend from a bold deluge to a faint trickle.

They’ve missed chemistry, but neither of them care.

Chapter End Notes

(I blame too much H20 and SLM as a kid entirely, and you should, too)
So! First chapter! Cool! I've been wanting to write a mermaid story ever since I was in elementary school, and doing it within the context of fanfiction makes it even better, so I'm hella excited for this.
Comments and criticisms are appreciated!
Chapter Two

The ocean reminds Keith of the desert, oddly enough.

They’re opposites, sure, one made of wetness and the other of pure land, but they’re both expansive, stretching as far as the eye can see and further into some great beyond that seems more magical than it actually probably is. The desert was all dust, kicking up in his face and wriggling behind the tightly-tied bandana covering his mouth, but the ocean is an assault on the eyes, the crests of waves glittering like stardust intent on making him go blind at eighteen.

He looks to the side, squinting, but he can still see Pidge’s sharp smirk, as smug as he’s ever seen it. And that’s saying something.

“Tell me I’m right,” she says, the strands of her long hair whipping in front of her face, courtesy of the hasty ocean winds.

“No,” he deadpans.

She lowers her sunglasses and stares at him, the brown of her eyes melting into a gooey gold under the rays of sun, and she doesn’t flinch. Not even a little bit.

“I already know I’m right. You don’t even have to tell me.”

“So what if I didn’t bring sunglasses?”

“I toooold you-“

“I’m fine!”

He isn’t. But there’s no way in hell that he’ll admit it.

They’re shuffling across the gritty sand to the old wooden pier that probably shouldn’t be in use anymore, judging by the sinking bits of darkness that cling on to its top and sides like a disease. Craggy rocks line its sides like they’re protective of the rotting thing — they’ve seen its creation, and they’ll be damned if they see it fall. A seagull is perched on top of one of the wooden piers, staring blankly into the horizon, and Pidge lightly claps her hands together, sending it flying with a piercing squawk.

“All right,” she mutters, plopping her swollen backpack onto the sand with a distinct lack of grace. “I’m gonna blow your mind, Keith.”

“I still don’t believe it,” he mutters, brushing his hair out of his face. It seems determined to never let him see a single thing in front of him. “Have you even tested this yourself?”

“No, but-“

“So what if Matt was fucking with you? You know how he is with pranks.”

Pidge rolls her eyes, and the sarcasm is as vibrant as the waves of heat blanketing them in layers of sweat, and sea-salt, and more sweat. “Yes, Keith, I do in fact know my brother. And I know that he was more excited about this than I’ve ever seen him excited about anything. Besides Dungeons and
“Dragons, but, you know.”

“He was excited…about a blue fish.”

Pidge detaches herself from her search through her backpack and stands up, waving her hands like a madwoman. “It wasn’t just a blue fish, Keith! It’s huge! And it’s not just him that’s seen it!”

She’s not wrong. It’s been slowly developing in local news cycles, with headlines like Fish or Fishy Hoax? and short snippets of first-hand account interviews. Half of them are painfully fake, the interviewees taking their cheap shot at ten minutes of television glory, but the other half seem to have some general merit to them — accompanied by live footage that has yet to be debunked, however shoddy the camera quality of blurry the image.

Keith still isn’t convinced, but Pidge is convinced that she will convince him judging by the gleam in her eyes, the kind she only gets when she’s halfway through a coding breakthrough or arguing about the scientific grounds on which aliens probably — most definitely — exist.

Pidge finally fishes out a black square case and unzips its sides, revealing five glass vials fitted snugly into a styrofoam mold. She quickly grabs the first one, pinching it around the sides to free it of the tight fit, and holds it up with a grin of excitement that could parallel the sun.

“Go get some water from by the pier, will you? I’ll take care of the reagent.”

Keith’s eyebrows just about hit his hair, which isn’t too impressive, given his floppy bangs.

“Reagent? Pidge, just what are we doing?”

“Trust me.”

“That’s what you said when you set my room on fire in middle school.”

“That was faulty wiring! Totally not my fault!”

“Yeah, all right,” Keith grumbles, but it’s light enough to let her know that he isn’t still holding a grudge. Mostly, at least.

The sand is hot enough to practically melt the skin on his feet clean off as he shuffles toward the mangrove barrier where the sand meets the water, kneeling down underneath its clumps of green leaves to peer into the pools gathered by its roots. Tiny fish chase each other through the obstacles of shells and pebbles and bits of mangrove, rushing and darting in small packs, and he has to be careful not to scoop one of them up as he fills the vial halfway.

Pidge is unscrewing other bottles as he approaches her again, sticking a dropper into one and dispensing the clear liquid into another test tube. She quickly screws the cap back on and picks up another dropper, sampling from yet another glass bottle and adding to the same test tube.

“All right,” she begins, swirling the two contents of the vial together. “This is silver nitrate and diluted nitric acid. If the seawater turns white after depositing this liquid into it, then there’s a presence of chloride, which, of course, there should be. Chloride makes up about 60% of salt, and the ocean is, you know” — she waves her hand vaguely in the air — “salty.”

“Yeah.”

“But watch.” She takes her tube and pours its contents into Keith’s, her intense gaze almost boring a hole through the glass. Keith holds it up to eye level, squinting through the bright afterimages of the dagger-like sunspots on the water, but the water is still clear.
“Pidge—“
“Shh! Watch!”

So he does. And she’s right. The seawater clouds into a milky mixture that looks about as unfocused as it sounds, and he’s about to ask what the point of all of this is before he sees it.

The first one emerges from what seems to be the middle of the substance, floating ethereally before firmly sticking to the side of the glass, dispersing into yet more strands. He holds it closely enough for it to blur, and yes, he isn’t seeing things — there it is. A strand of electric blue, a shade so intense that it stabs into his eyes like the brightest of neon yellows.

“That’s weird,” he mutters, but it gets weirder. There’s two now. And three, and four, and five, all floating, all spreading across the mixed liquids like dye dropped into tap water and let loose to do as it pleases.

“What the hell is that?” he breathes, and Pidge is about ready to burst.

“I don’t know!” she gushes, carefully taking the vial from his fingers. “Neither of us do! It has a completely unique chemical compound! Matt’s tested it out with one of the university’s electron microscopes so far, and he’s absolutely confused. So am I. But now we have this, and I’ll be able to look at it myself, and oh my God, Keith! This is amazing!” She’s beaming, and Keith had thought ‘ear to ear’ was a radical overstatement of any kind of smile, but he has a new appreciation for the saying now.

Too bad he’s about to question everything.

“How do you know that it’s not a fluke?” Keith asks, twisting his mouth to the side.

“As far as we’ve tested, the chemical only emerges like this in the chloride test, so maybe it’s binding to the salt? Doing something to it? I don’t know. But this is one of the hotspot areas of the blue fish,” she says, her words quick and flowing. “Of course, it might not have anything to do with the fish, but it showed up around the same time that the fish did. It’s a possibility. Matt and I are going to do more tests at the other points where it’s been seen, but before even that, we have to find out what the hell this compound is.” She fixes him with a stare, and he squirms as she continues. “You have to admit. It’s weird.”

“Yeah. It’s really, really weird,” Keith says, and he means it. Truly.

He might even be a little —

“So. Are you convinced yet?” Pidge says. She slyly wriggles her eyebrows, the sun reflecting off of her shades.

Keith pouts. “No.”

“Not even a little?”

“Uh.”

“Yeah. That’s what I thought.” She pokes him in the shoulder, grinning like a little devil, and he doesn’t have it in him to lie anymore.

“For the record, I still think the existence of ancient aliens is implausible,” he says, just to rile her up.
Pidge spends the rest of the walk back to the car spouting so much scientific fact and myth that Keith swears his ears will never stop ringing, but he’s okay with it.

Chapter End Notes

This isn't a science-y fic I swear lol
Just a few more bits before the set-up is finished and we really get into the thick of it.
Thank you guys so much for the kudos and comments! I wasn't expecting it and it's literally the best thing ever
As always, comments and criticisms are always appreciated!
When Lance thinks of his uncle, he thinks of the sun.

His memories of Cuba before they moved are a tad bit hazy, slathered over with childhood wonder and the sound of crashing waves, but his uncle is a sharply-focused constant — salt-and pepper-beard, lined smile, seafoam green eyes. His laugh, however rare, was contagious, bellowing like a god’s. The folds of his clothing were always crusted over with white salt, the stuff wearing into the fabric from the ocean and staying there for good after a long while. His face was shadowed, but not in a way that speaks of doomsday — he was only blacklit by the sun behind him in the sky, dousing itself on his back instead of his face.

He was always around, but never overbearing. He had a way of fading into the background while still making himself somewhat seen, an odd balance of reality and non-reality. During the holidays when all of Lance’s family would pack into a single, madly decorated house to celebrate the occasion, everyone would crowd around him, immersing him in the thick of things. He’d entertain them well enough, a few laughs, a few kind smiles, before inevitably slipping away to the secluded corners of the room to nurse a soda. Usually a Malta.

Lance always followed him, even during his moments of distanced solitude. He didn’t seem to mind, as long as Lance didn’t say too much — which was difficult for him even at that age, but he’d managed.

His uncle was cool. He was a talented storyteller, on the rare occasion that he did decide to spin a tale. He could make some mean Ropa Vieja. He was even a surfer, according to the rest of his family, although Lance had never seen him do it. That somehow made it even better, probably by leaving everything to the imagination — and if Lance had one thing, it was a bursting imagination.

His uncle was everywhere, and then he was nowhere.

It had started with a sudden vacancy in the corner of Lance’s eye, with the warm presence missing and leaving behind a wasteland. The family was together, but he wasn’t there, and that made all the difference.

He’d approached his mother, tugging on her skirt and asking for his tío, and her face immediately crumpled.

“He’s not here today,” she’d told him. That’s what she told him the next time, too. And the next.

Nobody ever said anything. There was no funereal, no closure. Everyone talked about him like he’d simply gone away and was fit to return during the weekend, but he never did.

It was only when Lance started to develop a tail that he began to theorize why.

Lance has been underneath the stream of water for far too long, stretched out horizontally on the plastic and probably nasty floor of the shower, when somebody knocks at the door with a thick fist.

“Lance! Hurry up, I gotta take a shower!”
Lance lets out a dramatic sigh, relishing the feeling of the water drumming against his eyelids before he answers.

“Gimmie like…twenty minutes.”

Hunk groans, and it’s loud enough to make him seem like he’s right there in the bathroom instead of behind a door. “You mean an hour?”

“I gotta dry my tail!” Lance slaps the end of the thing against the shower with a wet slurp, wincing at the noise, but Hunk doesn’t seem to care.

“You have fifteen minutes, Lance. You know I love you, but we have class at ten, and I will break down that door if I have to.”

“I’m naked, Hunk!” Lance yelps. “You wouldn’t!”

“You’ve got a tail, Lance. That bit of anatomy doesn’t exactly bother me.”

“Okay, okay! Fifteen minutes! Sheesh!”

And with a sigh even more laden with weariness than the one before, Lance starts the process.

The first step, of course, is easier than it used to be back at his house. The shower handle had been far too high on the wall for him to reach it even while propping himself up by one arm, so he’d had to settle for turning it off after his tail was gone, and that required him to dodge the already flowing water like a ninja, which he couldn’t always do, so he’d end up on the floor all over again and ruin the pair of shorts (that he’d been wearing to hopefully soak up any water upon possible contact) as the tail ripped through them, and —

Yeah. It was complicated. This way is much easier. He reaches up with one hand to turn the shower off, shivering from the sudden and invasive cold.

Step two. Get out of the shower. This is usually the part he hates the most, but again, it’s much easier here than it was at the house. He’d had to slide over the tub like a wet fish, making sure that his tail didn’t smack anything too hard in the process, and then desperately claw his way across the floor to get to the cabinet underneath the sink. Now there’s just a white shower curtain that he whisks to the side, but the desperate clawing is still the same, unfortunately.

He tries to keep their bathroom floor as clean as possible, he really does, but it still pains him as he wriggles forward on his elbows, feeling his tail slide like deadweight behind him. Germs. Germs everywhere.

Well. He hadn’t fallen ill yet, had he?

He swiftly turns over and sits on what would be his butt if he currently had one, opening the cabinet to the right. It’s choked with a impressive yet slightly frightening assortment of shampoos and face products, but Lance sifts through them all to grab the hair dryer in the back and the step stool that resembles a small ladder.

Step three is a two-step process — climb and dry. Lance dutifully sticks the power cord of the hair dryer between his two rows of teeth, the plug dangling by his chin, and steps his hands up the stool, making it easier for him to rest his forearms on the bathroom sink. He plucks the cord from his teeth with his left hand, offsets his weight to his right side, and quickly jams the plug into the outlet before practically melting his way back down to the ground. It’s his workout for the day, he supposes — he has this circumstance to thank for any upper strength he possesses in his noodly arms.
He quickly grabs the towel he’d stacked on top of the toilet and does a quick one-over to get rid of
the excess water on his hair, torso, and tail, and then turns the hair dryer on with a click of a button.

He starts with the hair, as usual — he’d learned this a kid, back when even a few drops of water
could Turn him and his dripping hair turned out to be a bit of a problem — and then quickly does the
torso, which is already halfway dry by the time he’s done with his hair.

And then there’s the tail.

Lance looks down at the thing, rubbing his hand absentmindedly over the assortment of scales. They
glow with a pearly sheen, sharply reflecting the light from the bathroom to cast the wall in speckles
of brilliant blue, and he thinks that it may even be shinier than usual. His tail’s changed before over
the years, developing streamlined dorsal fins and a broader main fin at the bottom, but the glow is
something he could really do without. He doesn’t want to be seen.

But he guesses it’s too late for that already. He’s seen the news. It nearly drove him to a panic attack
last week, but he’d managed to tap it down.

They think it’s just a fish. A weird, glowing, enormous fish. Nobody’s even said anything about a
torso.

Yet.

He shakes his head to unstick the poisonous thoughts, passing the blow dryer over his scales. He can
feel them dry out with a bit of a burn, almost like plants withering under the influence of an insistent
sun, and he watches as his tail sinks a bit, a neat concave dip that cleaves down the middle. It looks
like it should hurt, really — his entire bottom half sliced into two, the scales sinking into his flesh like
fast-healing scabs, his skin stuck swirling between the unnatural blue and his usual tan — but it only
feels like a buzzing dental injection, minus the needle. Thank God. Lance hates needles.

The gill-slits on his neck close with a stinging finality — his dorsal fins have already receded, and
Lance watches as the bottom of his tail shrinks, each smooth end curling into a nub of a toe.

The weird nature finally finishes out the final stages of its course, and Lance is back to his fully
human self. He stretches his long legs out with a groan, feeling the stiff muscles clench and unclench
of their own accord. That’s also been an issue, lately. He doesn’t question it. Weirder things have
happened to him before, like the six-toe incident when his fin had gotten a bit crumpled while
shrinking. He had to wear a bigger shoe size on his left foot for a whole week, and his brother didn’t
exactly appreciate him stealing his shoe with no notice.

Lance grins at the memory, clambering to his feet. He’ll FaceTime his family tonight — it’s a Friday,
after all.

Hunk double takes when Lance walks out of the bathroom after getting dressed, checking the clock
they’d gotten from Walmart that’s hung up on the wall and always ten minutes ahead, no matter how
much they try to fix it.

“What?” Lance says, raising his eyebrows.

“You actually only took fifteen minutes,” Hunk says, his voice awash in disbelief. “I never thought
I’d see the day…”

Lance only claps him on the shoulder, winking. “Don’t say I never did anything for you, buddy.”
They arrive at their class early for once, but spots are still somewhat slim for the picking in the 400-seat, high-ceilinged auditorium. Lance wanders aimlessly down one of the central aisles, eyes skimming for a suitable place for them to sit over the hoards of yawning students, when Hunk suddenly grasps him by the hood of his sweatshirt with an excited gasp and a grip of jubilant steel.

“Whoa!” Lance yelps, but Hunk’s already marching off and hauling him in another direction — toward the front of the class. The second row, in fact.

“Hunk, dude, what are you —”

“Pidge! I didn’t know you had this class!”

“Hunk! Oh my God!” The girl, her hair up in a messy bun with an emphasis on ‘messy,’ looks up from her impossibly thick stack of books and gives Hunk a grin that could probably blow away rainclouds and bring out the sun singlehandedly.

The guy next to her, however, has an intense frown that could summon the rain right back. And a mullet. Who has a mullet these days?

“Lance, this is Pidge! We have, like, three coding classes together,” Hunk gushes, plopping himself right down in the seat beside her, so Lance, by high decree of the best friend code, has no choice but to sit as well.

“Hey, Lance. Do you guys know Keith?” she says, motioning to the guy beside her, who gives a tiny halfhearted wave.

“Nope,” Hunk says, but smiles at Keith anyways, because he’s that kind of person. “Nice to meet you!”

“Uh…you too,” Keith mumbles, burying his hands into his hoodie’s front pocket. Pidge rolls her eyes.

“Ah, don’t mind our friend Keithy here. He’s just a taaad bit shy.”

“I’m not!” Keith bristles — visibly bristles — and yeah, Lance isn’t sure he’s gonna get along with this guy.

But then the professor begins his lecture with a sharp clap of her hands, her usual opening, and Lance’s stomach plummets at the bolded words on top of the projected powerpoint.

Group project.

“Shit,” he mumbles, and he already knows, he can already feel it —

Hunk. Turning towards Pidge. Suggesting something.

He surreptitiously glances toward the right, and sees just that.

“Shit,” he whispers again. And it could be worse, it really could be. They have two ridiculously book-smart people on their side — he can already feel the genius floating off of Pidge, even two seconds after knowing her — but still. Group projects suck. Especially with strangers.

“For this project, your group will be picking a current problem in our society and devising a series of steps to fix it. The final grade will come down to your powerpoint presentation —“

And then Lance tunes out, because never mind. This is great. This is wonderful.
If there’s one thing he’s good at, it’s powerpoint presentations.

“— and the rubric is online. Any questions?”

A few hands fly up, but not Lance’s.

At the end of the class his group ultimately plans to meet up at Starbucks the next day to discuss their topic and divide the work. Keith looks weary about this. But Lance gets the feeling Keith looks weary about just about everything.

Forget Keith being weary. Three classes later, eight o’ clock at night in the dorm, and the only thing keeping Lance going is the promise of FaceTime and teasing Hunk in their usual it’s-Friday-and-I-can’t-think-straight ritual.

“So you sat with Shay in your economics class today, huh?” Lance baits, his eyes droopy with exhaustion, using precious energy to lean over the kitchen table and poke at Hunk’s stomach. The face Hunk makes is worth the effort — his eyebrows ruffled, his eyes wide as he looks up from his chocolate and caramel masterpiece of a popcorn creation.

“How did you know that?” he asks, delicately popping one of the kernels into his mouth to try it out. His face melts into a smooth, joyous picture of indulgence, and God, Lance loves popcorn night, but probably not as much as Hunk does.

“Because. You’ve got that look,” Lance says, reaching forward for a handful of the popcorn, the chocolate sauce smearing all over his palm. “You know, your crush face. Shay sat with me! She’s so nice and pretty! Marry me, Shay!”

“Dude!” He looks so scandalized that Lance can’t help but laugh.

“Your face is so red!” he crows, throwing his head back. “I cannot — wow!”

“No popcorn for you if you keep teasing me,” Hunk warns, shielding the bowl with his broad forearms, and Lance immediately snaps his mouth shut.

“Alright, alright.” He opens the kitchen cabinet and takes a bowl from it, looking pleadingly at Hunk, and the big teddy bear lasts for a grand total of two seconds.

“Fine, you can have some,” he grumbles, shoving the treat forward. “But only if you stop.”

“Aw, but you’re so cute when you’re in love!”

“Lance!”

“Okay, I’m done!” Lance laughs, pouring his bowl to the brim with the souped-up popcorn and plopping it on top of his computer like it’s a tray. “But in all seriousness. Are you going to ask her out?”

Hunk softens at that. “Maybe,” he mumbles, glancing down at his popcorn forlornly.

“Okay. Only do it if you’re ready, though. No need to rush.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Lance.” He gives him a smile, and Lance smiles right back.

“Give her some of this popcorn. It’ll win her right over,” he says, cramming his mouth with more kernels than it can possibly hold, and Hunk grins.
“Yeah, yeah. Save the ass-kissing for when I’m making a cake.”

“Will do. Hey, I’m gonna go FaceTime,” he says, picking up his laptop. “Don’t do anything bad while I’m gone.”

“I’m gonna set Lotor’s bed on fire.”

“Okay, well, maybe you can do that. Where is he, anyways?” Lance says, glancing across the common room to the asshole’s bedroom, where the door is firmly shut despite him being absent. Lance knows this particular fact by the sweet, sweet lack of obnoxious music blasting through the walls.

“Dunno. Are you complaining?”

“No,” Lance quickly says, picking up his laptop and nudging into his room. “No, no, nope, wherever he is is fine with me, as long as he isn’t here.”

“Truth,” Hunk snorts. “Tell me how your family is after you’re done.”

“Yep!” Lance flashes him a grin before shutting his bedroom door with his hip, looking around his room fondly.

It’s stunningly close to the size of a walk-in closet, the bed and his desk taking up most of the space, but that doesn’t mean Lance can’t have a little bit of fun with it. The bland white paint of the wall can hardly be seen through all of the posters he’s tacked up, most of them featuring the glittery, starry mess of space and the rest featuring an assortment of bands and movies and family photos. Even the ceiling isn’t free from his decoration, covered with glossy magazine pictures and celebrities and stick-on stars, the kind he’d had since he was six and first learning how to deal with the fact that he’s not really quite human.

Lance hops onto his bed with his computer in tow, quickly folding his legs and sitting the popcorn bowl in his lap before quickly typing in his password. He opens up FaceTime and clicks the call button without hesitation, taking a moment to sample more of the popcorn, and the other end picks up almost immediately.

“Lanth!” It’s an open mouth, covering almost the entire screen, and a finger pointing toward a gaping spot in a row of crooked teeth. “I loth a tooth!”

Lance grins at the muffled Spanish due to the said tooth, but someone else says something before he even gets a chance to respond.

“Go away, Anton!” It’s the young voice of a girl, pierced with exasperation. “I have something cooler!”

“Nu-uh!”

“Elisa! Anton!” The mouth suddenly disappears from the screen, leaving the kind face of his mother instead — a wide smile interrupted by strands of graying hair out of her ponytail, deep freckles, dazzling eyes.

But not as dazzling as usual.

“Mom?” he asks, but Elisa jumps in front of the screen like a wild thing.

“Lance! Lance, I have news!” she yelps, but another large pair of arms scoops her up from behind,
leaving her kicking and screaming with her back to a broad chest.

“Man! You’re getting bigger every day! What are you feeding her, mom?”

“Luuuuuiiiiss! Let me down!”

“Hey, where’s Dani? And Angelo? And Sonya? And—” Lance begins, but Luis flaps a hand, the other still wrapped tightly around his sister.

“They’re at Valeria’s first soccer game of the season,” he explains, finally plopping the wriggling Elisa on the ground. “But yeah, like Elisa said. We have news.”

“What is it?” Lance immediately asks, intrigued. His mother takes a deep breath, and there it is again. The troubled eyes.

Elisa bursts before she can say a word.

“A tail! I have a tail!” she screeches, and Lance’s breath whooshes out of his lungs.

“What? You have a what?” he asks, mouth breaking into a smile, but he isn’t sure if he should even be smiling, based on the look on his mother’s face.

“A tail! I’m a mermaid, just like you, Lance!”

“Wow, Elisa!” he cheers, because he doesn’t know what else to say.

“I know! You’re gonna have to teach me, because I’m so confused, like, how am I going to swim? And what if it rains? And what if—” she begins, but Lance cuts her off.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! One thing at a time! Don’t worry, Elisa, you’re gonna get Lance’s Handbook To Having A Tail for the low, low price of absolutely free, guaranteed. You know what this means.” He leans closer to the screen, hands cupped around his mouth. “Mermaid club. Just us two.”

“Mermaid club!” Elisa yells, throwing her hands into the air.

“No, no club,” his mother gently says, rolling her eyes and affectionately ruffling Elisa’s hair.

“But-!”

“But Lance will give you some tips, won’t you, Lance?”

“Not just some tips, mom. An entire handbook!”

And she looks at him in a way that’s…worried? Upset?

But then it’s gone, and they continue with the conversation for another hour, and it’s like nothing ever happened.

Chapter End Notes

Can you see it
Can you smell it
That's right folks it's the bare bones beginning of a plot
Also i tried to make the separating lines be the same distance away from the line above and line below but my god no matter how much i coded i couldn't do it so if anybody has some tips that'd be great lol

Also, thank you so much for all the kudos and comments! As always, comments and criticisms are always appreciated.
“It’s a great project idea! Keith, we’re killing two birds with one stone, here!”

“I’m just saying that it’s—“

“Besides, it’s not like they’ll know — we gotta keep this on the down low for now. The actual chemical X testing can be done on the side. It just puts us at the locations to gather the water samples faster, for two reasons. It’s so convenient.”

They’re walking down the hallway of the near-empty science building, echoes of their clopping footsteps bouncing off of the walls that are crammed with lavishly illustrated posters in German, complete with mind-bending graphs that Keith may half understand if they were in English. Pidge, however, is looking at them like they’re candy and it’s Halloween, her eyes slurping up all the information they can get.

“Really? Chemical X?” Keith snorts, but there’s a bit of a delirious edge to it, the kind he only gets when —

“You laughed!” Pidge is triumphant, taking the steps two at a time when they reach the next stairwell of the winding building, looking back at him like what she’s doing isn’t the least bit dangerous for her and her short legs. Not at all.

“No! It was more like…”

“A giggle?”


“Allura owes me five dollars,” Pidge sings, planting her hands on her hips as they finally reach the fourth floor. Keith scowls.

“I only laughed because it’s a crazy name. Chemical X? What is this, a sci-fi movie?”

“Keith. We’re literally living the plot a sci-fi movie right now. What more do you expect?” she draws, easily turning the handle of the nearest room and swinging the door open, hollering into it as she goes. “Allura! You owe me five bucks!”

“Ridiculous!” calls a British voice from inside the room, clipped and clean. He hears the faint click of heels approaching across the spotless tile floor — she’s there in full view less than a second later, and yeah, he can see why his brother has the biggest crush in the world on this girl, even if he can’t relate.

Before a few months ago he’d only seen the famous Allura in Instagram selfies and professional group photos, but pictures really don’t do her justice. Her billowy hair is currently scooped up into an elegant bun, dyed a tasteful silver that fits her much more than it doesn’t. Her eyes are an almost inhuman mixture of jade green and ocean blue that bubble over with perfectly human warmth. Her smooth, dark skin is flawless, and her plump lips are perfectly shaped, even while frowning like they are now.
“I don’t believe you, Pidge,” Allura says, stepping aside to let them in. It’s a bit of a tight space, the desks and cabinets glutted with vials, liquids, scales, hot plates, anything and everything scientific that Keith can think of. A central table in the middle of the room is littered with two regular microscopes and a hoard of glass slides, but they go almost unnoticed by Keith in favor of the crown of the room — the enormous, multi-knobbed tube standing upright at the corner, connected to a thick panel of buttons and an almost old-fashioned TV screen. Shiro sits in front of the monstrous thing, fiddling with half the controls at once, but he gracefully rolls the desk chair around at the sound of newcomers.

“Keith!” he exclaims, eyebrows raising a tad. “Didn’t know you were stopping by.”

“Well…”

Shiro still looks slightly bewildered, his face tugged and pulled in just the right places, but then he gets an eyeful of Pidge and his slight smile widens.

“She roped you into something else?”

Keith heaves the sigh of somebody who’s seen too much shit in too little time. “Yep.”

“You know you like chemical X, Keith,” Pidge teases, leaning forward to poke his shoulder. “And that isn’t the point. Not at all. The point is that you laughed, and that I’m totally believable, Allura! C’mon, Keith. Tell her. You laughed.”

His face is a pencil-straight line as he answers, closing the door behind him with a soft click.

“No, I didn’t.” His wicked grin gives him away in a second — he can normally hold a solid poker face, but today isn’t one of those days.

Pidge’s eyes widen as she shuffles to the scuffed center table, already grabbing a rectangular slide from a box chocked full with them. “You liar!”

“I’ll review the circumstances later,” Allura swiftly interrupts, her eyes flicking hopefully toward Pidge’s bag. “You have the sample, I presume?”

“Yes.” Pidge pops the p, carefully sliding the prepared specimens across the desk to create a space that she promptly dumps her backpack onto. She finds the same black case as before in half the time as yesterday and unzips it so quickly that the mechanism just about jams, digging her fingers into the styrofoam to grab the vial and hold it proudly to the light. The unusual chemicals are just as magnificent as they were yesterday when they first found them — dainty swirls of a highlighter blue clinging to the sides of the glass, gracefully swaying in perpetual, dancing motion.

Allura gently takes the vial from Pidge’s fingertips, her eyes squinting from behind the bulbous safety goggles strapped to her face. “And this developed from the chloride test, you said?”

“Yeah. Never seen anything like it,” Pidge squeaks, her voice cracking with excitement.

“Neither have I,” Allura murmurs. “Hand me a slide, please. Oh, and a dropper.”

Pidge provides the slide while Keith walks across the room to grab an unused dropper from a glass case packed full with them. Allura already has a pair of clean gloves on when he returns, the kind that go over the wrist and halfway up the forearm, and she makes quick work of preparing the slide, doing it all with the kind of precision that Keith can’t imagine possessing.

Finally — although not quite finally, Keith thinks, as it took less than a minute — she promptly fits
the slide into place on the microscope and flicks on the light beneath the platform.

“Now for the fun part.” She strips the goggles off of her face in one clean movement and gazes into the eyepieces, adjusting the slide’s positioning as she goes.

“What do you see?” Pidge immediately asks, bending down to squint at the slide under inspection as if it’s fit to do something magical.

“Nothing yet,” Allura says, her voice betraying a hint of amusement. “I’m changing the intensity.”

She pushes the current lens out of place on the circular dias and clicks the other one into position. Looks into the eyepiece. Sighs.

“No unusual sights so far.”

*Slide. Click.*

Nothing.

*Slide. Click.*

Nothing.

*Slide. Click.*

“Oh!”

“What?” someone asks. Keith’s almost surprised to realize that it’s him, his blood pounding, his lips pursed almost like his brother’s when stress arrives, and oh, God. He’s turning into Shiro after all.

“This…this is incredible,” Allura breathes, her fingers flying over the microscope with the quickness of a frenzied hummingbird. “Shiro!”

Shiro jumps in his seat, the whipping his head to look at Allura. “Yeah?”

“You have to see this!”

“Let me see!” Pidge argues, squirming in place, but Shiro is suddenly there in an instant, peering into the eyepiece, mouth dropped open.

“What?” His voice shakes, and Pidge can’t stand it anymore. She scurries to Shiro’s side, her head gently bumping his out of the way as she takes a gander herself.

“Whoa. What? Those bonds, those aren’t like bonds I’ve ever seen, and…is it changing structure?” Pidge mutters, high on her tiptoes as she moves the slide left and right. “Yes. Two different forms. Switching.”

“Like it’s in the middle of some kind of reaction,” Shiro notes, frowning. “And that shape… Allura, have you seen that structure before?”

“Not that I can recall,” she quickly answers, cheeks flushed, breathing like all the air’s been thieved from her lungs “It’s impossible to know anything for now. We must keep it under tabs for the next week or so before we really have a chance at discovering anything. Pidge, is there any way you can get us more of these samples?”

“I’m on it, Allura,” she says, beaming cheekily at Keith, and Keith sighs.
“Fine. We can do the damn water project,” he mutters, and Pidge smiles, and smiles, and smiles.

Lance already knows it’s going to be a bad day when he wakes up and it’s raining already, water pounding at his window like an angry visitor hurling rocks just to be rude. Florida isn’t even going to spring an unexpected one on him, is she? It’s just all terrible all at once, right from the get-go.

He flops an arm over his eyes. Breathe in deeply. Checks his alarm clock — 11:20.

He has a grand total of twenty minutes to get bundled up before he and Hunk are Starbucks-bound.

He flops out of bed — literally flops, barely getting his feet beneath him enough to properly stand — and sleep-walks to the closet, where he knows exactly what to put on despite the clingy brain fog that’s wrapped over him with all its strength. He’s had this outfit picked out for this exact weather for years, and habit is an old friend of his, whether it be a skincare routine or a plot to avoid exposing his biggest secret to the entire world. Yeah.

He starts with the long johns and jeans, managing to somehow get them on without tripping in what should be considered a modern miracle. Then there’s the two layers of socks — one a normal, run-of-the-mill white pair and the other a sparkly pair that his sister gave him, something he wouldn’t trade for the world. After that, the lace-up boots. The long-sleeve, worn-out T-shirt. The thick galaxy-print hoodie. The two pairs of mittens.

He doesn’t bother to look at himself in the mirror, deciding to spare himself the embarrassment, and instead walks straight into the kitchen where Hunk is busy staring at his laptop with the intensity of a predator on the prowl, the look he usually gets during advanced calculus. His head pops up at the sound of Lance’s door opening, and he almost spills the cup of orange juice held up to his lips in a call so close even Lance cringes.

His face twitches. Convulses.

“Go ahead, laugh,” Lance grumbles, shoving his mittened hands into the front pocket of his sweatshirt, and Hunk does just that.

“I spent my entire childhood thinking you were cold all the time,” Hunk wheezes, grasping at his chest. He gingerly sets his juice down on the counter, trying his hardest to minimize spillage. “Especially when it rained. Knowing the truth just makes it even better.”

“Are you gonna let me borrow your big-ass umbrella or not?”

“Yeah, yeah. Of course. My car or yours?”

“Eh, we can take mine,” Lance answers. “Lemme go get my keys.”

“Alrighty.”

The Starbucks is nearly empty, full of gentle jazz and well-placed wall decorations but void of any people besides Keith, Pidge, and the tired-looking employees, moving behind the main counter like newly dead zombies.

It’s almost uncomfortable, Keith thinks, sipping his black coffee, the cup so big that he could practically drown in it. He’s never seen Starbucks be anything but cheerful, packed full of obnoxious
college students and laptops and homework, but without it? A bonafide ghost town.

Pidge is on her phone, squinting angrily at the low glow of the screen, and Keith can practically read her mind.

“How late are they now?” he sighs, taking another swig to battle the fuzziness buzzing around his head.

“Fifteen minutes. Are they even coming?” she groans, biting her lip. “I mean, I know it’s raining pretty bad, but…”

Both of their eyes are drawn toward the enormous swaths of glass windows that mark the entrance of the shop, and Keith thinks they can agree that ‘pretty bad’ is a bit of a drastic understatement. The weather is a skip and a hop away from a roaring tropical storm, the palms outside bowing to the wind and the rain blowing in a sharply angled torrent. Lightning cracks at a distance much too close to be comfortable and the following thunder seems to rumble between Keith’s ribs, buzzing through every inch of him. The lights overhead flicker with a menace, and he expects them to fizz out right then and there, but they somehow hold out.

“We probably should’ve cancelled,” Keith says over the rim of his drink, pursing his lips, but Pidge isn’t looking at him. Her eyes are stuck over his shoulder, wide as saucers, and something stutters across her face — a grin? a wince?

“Keith,” she mutters, her voice iced with disbelief, “what…what the fuck are they doing?”

Keith turns around in his seat, and the first thing that catches his eye is the enormous, sun-yellow umbrella halfway down the street near the parking lot, and —

Has he seen an umbrella that big in his life? He seriously doubts it.

The poor thing struggles beneath the wrangling wind for a few moments, and it flashes up enough for him to recognize Hunk, but the person beside him is nothing but a bundle of clothing, his head turned down against the rain. The two are linked arm-in-arm, stumbling left and right, to and fro, but they’re sprinting all the same, like life is nothing short of a track race and the concept of slipping doesn’t exist. They avoid a fall, somehow, but the umbrella is torn from Hunk’s hand instead, flying down the street. He yells, tearing after it, and the other person is left alone in the rain. Keith can hear his screeches from even within the cafe — yeah, definitely Lance — and it’s in that moment that he notices the state of Lance’s clothing — drawstrings pulled all the way, hood wrapped around his entire head and face.

He’s essentially blind.

“HUNK!” he shrieks, his gloved hands reaching out and waving wildly. Hunk, still several yards out of reach, hollers something back, but the wind steals the words from his mouth. He throws his hands in the air in irritation for a moment, but another try, another dive, and he has the umbrella back in his grasp, hightailing it back to Lance. The two crash together, shoes skidding on the wet gravel, and Keith honestly can’t tell which one screams the loudest at the impact. Lance holds on to Hunk for dear life once they’ve found their footing, freely allowing his friend to drag him along, and they’re crossing the road with almost no concern for cars, they’re on this side of the sidewalk —

They’re in the shop, dripping and gasping and laughing.

“Oh my God!” Lance’s short huffs punctuate the air like mini explosions in comparison to Hunk’s long, enormous wheezes, but they’re laced with an odd amusement all the same as he looks at their
predicament — standing at the entrance of a perfectly normal Starbucks, looking like they’ve just taken a dip in the ocean after losing their life raft.

Keith stares.

Pidge doesn’t bat an eye.

“What were you two idiots doing?” she deadpans from across the room, eyebrows raised. Lance raises his mittened hands to pry the hood off of his face and flop it back, giving her a trademark smirk.

“Uh, having fun?” he says, his eyes alight as he plops down at their table. Pidge’s eyes narrow.

“Being blind in the rain is your idea of fun?”

Lance pauses. Then grins. “Yeah.”

Keith can smell the lie from a mile away, and Pidge could probably smell it from two, but she doesn’t say anything, opting to take a long sip of her tea instead.

“Mmm. Yeah. Listen, we’ve got a project idea. Wanna hear?”

“Shoot,” Hunk says, sitting down beside Lance, who’s grabbed a few napkins from the table dispenser and is hurriedly scrubbing at his face and hair. “We’re down for anything.”

“Okay, well, me and Keith were thinking — what’s a common problem around here? And then it hit us. Florida’s polluted waterways.”

Lance squeaks. Literally.

“Did you not know about the pollution?” Keith slowly asks, leaning forward over the table to observe him closer. Lance’s fingers only tighten over his napkin, furiously squeezing every last drop of water from his bangs.

“No, no, I knew, it’s just…I’m sure everyone’s going to be doing that project. Right?” he says, looking wildly at Hunk.

“Yyyyyeah.” Hunk drags the word out like it’s a chore, chewing on the inside of his cheek. “It is a bit of a common tale around here. You got anything else?”

“I’ve been talking to other people, and at least half the class is doing something like world hunger,” Pidge answers. “I think Florida’s waterways would be a more feasible and local place to do studies on. I mean, we live right by them.”

Lance opens his mouth, but Hunk claps his hand over the maw, studying Pidge with an elusive eye.

“You’re pretty dead set on this, aren’t you?” he asks. Pidge only smiles.

“Yeah. I am.”

And Hunk must know what Keith knows about Pidge being determined to do something, because he softly sighs and does a 180.

“Okay,” Hunk evenly says, shooting a side glance Lance’s way. “We’ll divide up the work. You and me can go get the statistics, and Lance and Keith can work on the presentation.”
Lance’s shoulders droop immediately, every visible part of him dripping with relief, but every cell of Keith sharpens into sharp edges and hesitation.

“I am not good at presentations,” he warns, and Pidge’s head bobs in a series of quick nods.

“Yeah. Yeah, he really isn’t. We did a presentation in speech class last semester and Keith almost got kicked out for—“

“Just trust me on this,” Keith quickly interrupts, his hands squeezing into fists on the table. “I’m really not the person you want doing a presentation.”

“But you are good at linking information together,” Pidge reasons, her eyes clouded with thought. “Like that whole chart you made with the red string and the —“

“Pidge!” Keith hisses, and he’s a second away from silencing her like Hunk’s silenced Lance when the aforementioned Hunk speaks again.

“Oh, you won’t have to worry about that. Lance can present like nobody’s business — none of us will have to speak a word. If you’re good at organizing information and making it easy to understand, then that’s all we need.” Lance frantically nods behind Hunk’s hand, his eyes wide and convincing.

“That sounds good to me,” Pidge says, turning toward Keith. “You good?”

Keith sits back in his seat, firmly crossing his arms. “As long as I don’t have to actually present, anything’s fine with me.”

Some vague ideas for the project are exchanged. Some plans are made. And Keith has no idea how this is going to go, but judging by Lance’s obnoxious habit of talking nonstop the second Hunk’s hand slips off of his mouth, it’s not going to go well.

Chapter End Notes

Finally. Finally! It begins.
I just finished plotting out this story recently, and all I can say is prepare yourselves.
As always, comments and criticisms are always appreciated!
The moment they walk back into their dorm, dripping buckets of water onto the thin, cheap carpeting, Lance erupts.

“Water? A water project? Hunk! What am I going to do!” he moans, pulling the hood of his hoodie over his eyes with a painful grimace.

“What?” Hunk mouths, clapping his hands over his ears, and he has a point — the 70s music blasting from Lotor’s room is smothering everything in its wake, destroying words and musical appetites in one fell swoop. Lance sighs, a noise so loud that he’s surprised that Lotor doesn’t snap at him from his lair, and tugs Hunk into his room, shutting the door firmly behind them.

“A project! With water!” he whisper-screams, his eyes as wide as the ocean itself.

“It’s okay, dude!” Hunk responds, calmly waving his hands up and down as if he can temper down the panic himself. “You’re only doing the presentation! We were literally in more danger getting into Starbucks than you are doing this project.”

“Yeah, but - “

“All you have to do is work with Keith. We won’t be going near a square inch of water. I promise.”

“Are you sure? Because Keith seems like a pretty wet blanket to me,” Lance grumbles, tightly crossing his arms together. The motion sends droplets of water splattering all over his bedsheets, and Hunk rolls his eyes, placing a comforting hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“Keith’s not a bad guy, once you get to know him. He’s just…shy. In his own way.”

“You mean standoffish?”

“Well. That too.”

Lance flops over backwards on his bed, getting an eyeful of ceiling stars and a poster of Jennifer Lawrence as he does so, and gingerly takes off his wet gloves in order to cover his face with his hands.

“We live a cursed life, Hunk,” he moans, and Hunk laughs.

“You’re the one cursing yourself by getting your bed wet, buddy,” he teases, casting Lance a knowing look as he yelps and arches off of the bed like a wild cat, landing in a pile of limbs and clothes on the floor. He doesn’t even bother to save his dignity. It’s too late to do that with a childhood friend like Hunk who’s seen you wet the bed and trip in public far too many times.

“I’m gonna go study for chem,” Hunk announces, already halfway out the door. “Try not to worry too much, okay? We’ve got this under wraps.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Lance mumbles, his cheek pressed to the floor. Telling him not to worry is like telling space to stop being mysterious. Or telling his tail to go away, and it actually listening.

Hunk closes the door, muffling the sound of Black Sabbath, and Lance is left alone with his own
thoughts.

He’s not going to survive this.

There’s no way.

And then he thinks of his sister’s snappy voice telling him to get over himself, and he sits up straight, a remembrance flitting through his head.

Getting off of the floor is no small feat, soggy clothing and all, but he manages to plop himself down into his desk chair, shivering and sopping and sloppy. He would change his clothes, but one too many raindrops on his skin while wriggling out of them calls for nothing but trouble, and he doesn’t want to fall into that trap anytime soon.

Besides. He likes these jeans. It would be a shame to see the tail rip through them like they’re made of wet paper towels.

His laptop is ready and waiting, and his shaky fingers spell out the password and open up a Word document.

He begins to type.

*Lance’s Handbook To Having A Tail*

So you’re a part of the Mermaid Club. Great! We rock! But in order to rock as hard as we do, we have to be safe. The world isn’t quite ready for us yet — because we’re too cool, obviously — so here’s a few tips on how to keep our secret.

1. Keep your eyes on the skies, everybody. After a while, you’ll be able to practically sense rain coming, even if the sky is clear — it’s almost supernatural. And also supernaturally awesome.

2. Watch out for water fountains. Some of them like to spit their water out so far that it just about punches you in the face, and you don’t want that splashing all over you.

3. NO! CUPS! WITHOUT! LIDS!

4. Always keep a hoodie on you. It’s pretty effective at keeping the Big Bad Rain away. Also, try to wear long sleeves, even though it’s Florida. Short sleeves are for the weak. Go all out.

5. If you ever need to get out of a pinch, say that you’re afraid of water. Improvise. They may not believe you, but they have no proof that you’re lying, so joke’s on them.

6. If you do Turn in public, don’t panic. Cover your tail with something if you can, or hide. As long as nobody gets any footage, you’re golden — public belief that we don’t exist helps more than anything on this list. Even if they do see your tail, it’s likely they’ll believe it’s a costume or something, especially if you act like nothing’s wrong.

7. Avoid being video recorded in general, especially while in Tail Mode. It’s better for us to keep a low profile.

8. You can still go swimming! Salt water has the ability to charge us, in a way, so take some time to visit the ocean when you can, as long as you aren’t seen. Preferably go with another in-the-know person as a watchdog.

9. Wash your hands at the sink very quickly. It’s possible to dry them off in time, as long as you dry
them with paper towels. Ignore the people staring at you in the bathroom for going so fast. It isn’t any of their business. Also, a dot of hand sanitizer helps get rid of what the quick wash might’ve missed.

10. Don’t tell anybody about the fishy business unless it’s absolutely necessary.

Lance pauses, glancing down at his clothing. It’s still a bit damp, but nowhere near the potential to turn him. Besides, the AC is getting colder by the minute — he’s not too sure Lotor has nothing to do with it, the bastard — and if he doesn’t change he’s in serious danger of hypothermia. Or something.

He grins at his work before he leaves, closing the Word window and shutting his laptop down. He’ll add more to it later.

When Lance was thinking ‘later,’ he wasn’t thinking that day, but that’s how things inevitably turned out.

He had been hunched over on the couch, leaning onto Hunk’s shoulder with his earbuds firmly in place to combat the cacophony of sounds leaking from Lotor’s bedroom door a solid two hours later. His knees jittered restlessly, and he tried to follow his lyrics, but the others were loud enough to vibrate through the walls, leaving him constantly reminded of their presence.

Lance shifted, planting his face into Hunk’s side with a groan halfway between exhaustion and spectacular anger. An idea was forming in his head with startling intensity — knocking on Lotor’s door, engaging in a conversation that would probably leave them all expelled, maybe a good old-fashioned punch in the face —

Hunk shifted, his lips pursing into a terrifyingly thin line.

Lance, practically plastered to his side, moved with him, throwing a questioning gaze his way, and yep. No doubt about it. Hunk was just as done as Lance.

“I can’t get any work done in this godforsaken dorm,” he muttered, pressing his hands to his face. The next words came out muffled, blocked by his fingertips. “C’mon. Let’s hit the library.”

“Thank God,” Lance gasped, and he never thought he’d ever say those two words in relation to the library, but then again, he never expected to have a roommate like Lotor. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

So here they are. Standing at the mouth of endless bookshelves, each labelled with countless numbers and letters and sections.

He really should’ve payed attention when they were teaching them the Dewey Decimal System in middle school.

Thankfully, Hunk seems to know where he’s going, scaling the four sets of stairs with the grace of a swan. Lance finds himself almost breathless by the time they’re at the top, slightly ashamed, his hands pressed against his knees as breaths puff out through his mouth in a constant torrent. Hunk continues on, weaving through the bookshelves like it’s second nature, like there’s a compass attached to his wrist, and Lance yelps, forcing his legs to move to keep up.

“Hunk, buddy, where are we going?” he wheezes, grabbing a fistful of the back of his shirt. Hunk slows down just enough for him to compose himself, looking back at Lance with a frown of gentle
’Dude. I’ve seen you swim like nothing else, and a set of stairs gets you?’"

“Well, it’s easier when you have a — you know!” Lance hisses through his teeth, gesturing down at his trembling legs.

“Well, that is — hey!” Hunk suddenly says, his voice drenched in surprise, and the gasp that returns from the next row of shelves over is oddly familiar. Almost unmistakeable, actually.

“Oh! Wow, we seem to be running into each other every day now, aren’t we?”


He pokes his head around the shelf to see her plopped on the ground with her legs folded beneath her, sprawled up against the shelf like it’s the most comfortable thing in the world. And beside her, inevitably, is Keith, his bottom lip between his teeth as he stares at something on his laptop with the intensity of the sun’s rays — even more enraptured in his work than Hunk. Which is saying something, Lance must admit.

“Yeah, we are,” Hunk agrees, breaching further into the aisle. “Mind if we hang?”

“Nah. Sit wherever you want,” Pidge offers, waving her hand toward the sliver of floor space between the enormous towers packed full with scientific journals and math textbooks in French. Hunk sits right down, making himself nice and comfy, but Lance pauses.

“Can’t we grab a table?” he asks, his voice still slightly thin and breathless. “I’ve totally seen cockroaches on this floor.”

“All the tables are full right now on all of the floors. I checked,” Pidge smoothly answers, patting on the ground with a shit-eating grin. “Besides. You get used to it.”

“Fine,” Lance grumbles, dropping his backpack on the ground. He means to sit across from them, but there’s no leg room with Pidge and Hunk in the way, who are already waist-deep into a conversation about contemporary chemical issues that Lance doesn’t care to join in the least bit. Hunk is taking up the space right next to the central walkway, and Lance isn’t in a mood to get stepped on, so that leaves one more spot for him to settle in.

He lets out a long breath through his nose, shouldering his backpack once more, and sits down next to Keith.

Who doesn’t even blink, continuously scrolling down whatever webpage he’s on.

It’s okay. It’s fine. Lance has his history textbook in his bag, and he can spend the time just as focused on the civil war as Keith is on —

He risks a look, surreptitiously glancing at Keith’s screen, and almost chokes. He’s not doing any work at all. He’s looking at google images of fingerless gloves made out of leather.

_Nope. Not even gonna ask._ Lance zips open his bag, digging through its contents, only to find out that he didn’t, in fact, bring his history textbook like he thought he did, so screw it.

“Fingerless gloves, huh?”

Keith snaps his head toward Lance, his eyes wide and startled like he’d been slapped out of a
meditative trance.

“What?”

“Fingerless gloves.”

Keith blinks. Looks at his screen. Turns back to Lance.

“Uh. Yeah. I like them.”

And because Lance is Lance, and will do anything to hold a conversation when feeling awkward, he begins to bicker.

“What’s the point, really? Aren’t gloves supposed to keep shit from getting on your hands?”

Keith takes the bait beautifully.

“Well, no. They give you more dexterity. With fingerless gloves you can actually scroll on your phone, get better grip on a steering wheel, pluck chords on a guitar, type faster —“

“What else can you do? Time travel back to the 80s?”

Keith scowls, his eyes narrowing. “You asked!”

“Are you a fan of Billy Idol?”

“Ha, ha,” Keith dryly responds, turning back to his laptop. He clicks on an image of fingerless gloves that lace up the middle, zooming in on the individual stitches as if inspecting them for their quality, and Lance has lost him entirely.

He tries again.

“So, what’s your major?” It’s a simple question, the one everybody asks everybody on the first day of knowing them. An easy route. Guaranteed not to piss anybody off, usually.

“You could’ve started with that question,” Keith mutters, his fingers flying over the keyboard. He still won’t look at Lance.

_Usually._

“*Rude.* I saw you looking at the gloves, and genius struck.”

“More like basic observation.”

“Hey! I’ll have you know I like to ask interesting questions, not basic ones,” Lance brags, pointing a thumb to his chest.

“You _just_ asked me what my major is.”

“Well. That’s not always basic. Some people have more than one in mind. Some people are doubting. Other people are sure of it this week, but not so sure next week. Some people know for sure, a constant sort of thing, and —“

“I’m majoring in bioinformatics,” Keith interrupts, closing the picture of the glove and opting for another one, this one knitted instead of leather.
“You’re majoring in what?”

“It’s analyzing complex data for biotechnology, healthcare, research, stuff like that.”

“Oh. Wow. That’s…interesting.”

“It’s not too bad.” Apparently, the knitted gloves are not to his liking. The next one have studs around the wrist, and it takes all Lance has not to burst into rib-breaking laughter.

“Yeah. It’s not,” he echoes, clearing his throat. He won’t laugh. Not even a little bit. Nope. He’ll talk instead.

“Well, I’m actually not sure what my major is,” he admits. “But when I do decide, it’ll be something awesome. Naturally.”

“I’m sure it will be,” Keith snorts, opening a new internet tab. Lance doesn’t sneak this time, partially out of respect but also partially out of fear. What could be worse than fingerless gloves?

“I was thinking nursing, but…bodily fluids…no… And then it was business, but I took statistics and hated it, and then it was — wait.” Lance frowns. There’s a suspicious lack of nerdy babbling going on beside them. He leans over to look beyond Keith, only to find a distinct lack of Hunk and Pidge.

“Whoa. Where’d they go?” Lance asks, eyebrows knitting together. “I swear Hunk’s a teleporter, he moves so silently sometimes —“

“Pidge usually grabs some coffee on the first floor of the library around this time of day,” Keith offhandedly says, looking back at his perplexing internet search. “Maybe Hunk went with her?”

“I’ll call him.” Lance quickly dials up his number, and Hunk answers on the first ring, as usual.

“Hey, want some hot chocolate?”

Lance claps a hand over his heart.

“Hunk. My man. You know me so well.”

“I know.” And then they hang up, and Lance finds Keith looking at him like he’s grown an extra head.

“What?” he says defensively, slipping his phone back into his bag. “Me and Hunk have a psychic connection. It’s sacred.”

“If you say so.”

“I definitely say so.” Keith cracks half a smile at that, if the twitch at the corner of his mouth could even be compared to anything like a smile. Lance almost misses the gesture entirely.

Hunk and Pidge return not long after, Hunk carrying three books large enough to stack up to his chin. Two cups of steaming drinks sit atop the topmost book, blocking off his face, and Lance stands to pluck them off while Hunk carefully lowers the books to the ground like a crane.

“I’ll pay you back when we get back to the dorm,” Lance promises, and then he deftly downs half of his cup in one go, the whipped cream sticking to his upper lip.

He would be proud of himself for that gulp, too, if he didn’t look over and see Keith chugging his extra large cup of coffee like it’s nothing but water and he’s just finished a marathon.
“You’re gonna go into cardiac arrest,” Lance mutters, sitting down next to him once more. Keith only raises his eyebrows, still swallowing mouthful after mouthful, eyes locked on Lance’s.

Cheeky little —

He finally finishes, slamming the cup on the ground with a startling finality, before swiveling his head toward Pidge. “I think that was a new record.”

“Nah, I’ve seen you do it faster,” she offhandedly says, hefting one of the books onto her lap. It covers her entire bottom half like a bulky, sharp-ended blanket, but she doesn’t seem to notice, flipping to the index in the back in half a second flat. “Alright, so, we could start with nitrates.”

“Sounds good,” Hunk responds, and then they’re lost to the world of science again.

Lance looks down at Keith’s empty cup of coffee sitting on the ground. Gloating.

He feels like he lost, and it’s not a feeling he likes. Not one bit.

Chapter End Notes

Is that the beginning of some dumb competition I see
Also this chapter is barely fiction I swear, my brother made me hate 70s music in the same exact way and coffee is a part of daily life and general happiness
As always, comments and critiques are appreciated! Thanks for reading!
Chapter Six

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Keith likes to think that he’s seen a lot of weird things in his life, but this still takes the cake.

He squints both eyes, angling his head to catch the best way to view it through the lens, a process that contains painful trial and error before it finally comes to a successful end. The image clears up on his fifth try, a cluster of octagonal shapes fitted together perfectly one moment and then bonded the other moment, then fitted, then bonded, then—

“Why does it keep moving like that?” he mutters, leaning out of the way for Pidge, who eagerly balances on her tip-toes and smashes her eyes into the ocular lens with full force.

“I dunno, but this atomic force microscope is amazing! Where’d the department get the funds for this, Shiro?”

“It’s on lend, so we better find something to pitch to the higher-ups before the contract runs out,” he calls from behind Keith’s back, projecting his voice halfway across the cramped lab. The sound of glass clashing against hard plastic rings out directly afterwards, followed by a heavy swear from Shiro and a ragged sigh. Keith can’t even blame him for tripping — the place is halfway to a wasteland, everything excitedly shoved aside and rearranged within the last few days to allow for the up-and-coming research. He doesn’t know how they’re holding it together, but they manage among the organized chaos, dancing a careful dance that Keith can’t pretend to understand.

“Oh, we’ll renew the contract if that happens,” Allura fiercely argues, dashing across the room to Keith and Pidge’s side. “I am not letting this discovery get away. Pidge, do you have the new samples from the other key areas?”

“Yeah, me and Matt got them this morning,” she says, pointing toward Shiro. “He’s got them. We’re testing for any observable differences today between the samples today, yeah?”

“Yes, and its reaction to different variables,” Allura responds, her eyes gleaming with the kind of determination that Keith thinks could stop just about anything, from a simple opinion to a meteor hurtling into earth. From the way Shiro’s mooning from across the room, he’d bet that his brother agrees. And finds it gorgeous. “We’ll start with the basics — trace metals analysis, molecular structure elucidation —“

“It’s just that we don’t know what half of it is,” Shiro stresses, finally joining the pack huddled around the microscope like it’s a newborn baby. “We’ll have to test it for simpler things too, like its reaction to fire and other basic elements.”

“If we can stop its transformation, we can study each stage more intimately,” Pidge pipes up, her face scrunched up in concentration. “And maybe figure out what triggers its unstable state?”

“Or how its unusual bonds help contribute to its state?” Keith interjects. He can’t help it. He’s interested. “That may have something to do with it.”

“I’m sure it does,” Allura says, looking over at Keith appraisingly. “How much do you know about chemistry, Keith?”

Keith laughs. “Whatever I gleaned from falling asleep halfway through every class. It was always
pretty easy for me.”

“Fair enough.” Allura suddenly claps her hands together, eyeing the microscope with a gleam of mischief. “All right. Let’s get this show on the road.”

“Ow! Ow!”

“I told you Lance, you should’ve brought better sandals…”

“Well, excuse me for not realizing the beach was going to play a game of ‘the floor is lava’ today!”

Lance’s feet fly over the scorching grains of sand, bouncing from left foot to right foot, left, right, and —

“Aha!” He squats down beneath the tangles of mangrove, sitting his butt firmly into the sweet, cool beach, wrapping the towel around his waist even tighter as he dangles his feet a few inches above the ground.

“I did it! I survived, Hunk, I — agh!” He plants his hands firmly on the ground and scoots himself forward a few precious inches, whipping his head back to see the edge of the water beneath the haven of mangrove rest peacefully near his backside. Hunk chuckles, easily traversing the terrain in his industrial-grade sandals, not a lick of heat rolling against his toes.

“Can’t get drenched yet, man,” he hums, unzipping his backpack and making quick work of dumping its contents onto the ground. The metal measuring cups clank into each other on the way down, scooping mouthfuls of dry sand and gleaming mercilessly under the glare of the sun.

“I know,” Lance sighs, wriggling himself even further to grasp one of the cups with his feet and take it between his toes, squinting at its dented label. “We’re starting with a teaspoon, yeah?”

“Yes. Go at it, dude.”

“All right!” Lance swivels around using his hands, fully enmeshed in the shade once more, and then he’s looking out past the burrowing crabs and the shimmering bait fish, past the greening leaves of the mangrove to the expanse of unfolded ocean, sliced into bites and pieces in his vision by the stalks of the plant. The ocean is a turquoise green that seeps into a navy blue on the way out, an ombre of nature that he never tires of seeing, and the salt is carried to him by the wind, dusting over his skin, and —

His body hums, electric, a current running through water and igniting every cell. He’s been hearing the ocean for a long time now, feeling its call, and now it’s here. Lapping at his toes. Waiting.

Lance scoops a teaspoon of water out of the ocean and promptly dumps it onto his arm.

It starts from his forearm, zinging through his skin like a lightning bolt that concentrates deep in his throat and on top of his legs. He watches as the water slides down his skin in its own time, leisurely carving trails that drip-drip-drip onto the sand, tingling, prickling, burning every patch of Lance that they touch.

The air is thin in his lungs now, and his fingers skim the smooth beginnings of gills that have begun to form at his neck, jutted red lines that look almost like cat scratches at this unformed stage. He looks down at his legs — they’re a bit shaky, but not melting together. Not yet.
“Trying another teaspoon, Hunk,” he calls over his shoulder, knowing that Hunk is writing it down. He’s always been interested in this side of Lance’s mermaid-ness, enough to want to carry out simple experiments like this. Lance doesn’t mind. If he’s honest, he’s relatively curious about it as well.

The second teaspoon does about as much as the first one.

“Man, I’m surprised,” Lance notes, inching the towel to his knees and tracing his hands over his kneecaps. Slight signs of scales have begun to shift above his shins, burrowing out of the skin and shuffling to the top of his flesh. “It used to take literally a single drop to Turn me. I feel bad for my sister, actually — that age sucked as a mermaid.”

“I still can’t believe your sister is one too!” Hunk gasps, plopping down on the sand like the unbearable heat is nothing. “Doesn’t it happen, like, almost never in your family?”

“Well, not almost never. It’s, like, one every generation or something. Two this time, I guess,” Lance sighs, overturning yet another teaspoon on his legs, and yep, this is the one. He squints at his knobby ankles, wriggling his feet a bit, but they’re firmly melted together. The first sign.

“My mom didn’t seem too happy about it, though,” he goes on, pursing his lips as he applies the fourth teaspoon just to speed up the process. His legs are jelly, thighs caving in on each other to fill up the gap, and the brown of his skin is mudding with the blue, the foreign color winning out by a long shot. The scales have completely taken over now, transforming his bottom half into a mountainous landscape of layered slices that reflect the sun as boldly as ever.

“Well, it makes sense,” Hunk reasons, wide eyes stuck on Lance’s toes as they squish into each other and expand outward into fins, their very being turned inside out to reveal fins streaked through with a gelatinous white and the color of the ocean mixed with its sky. “The danger of your kids turning into mythological creatures in public can’t be a nice thought.”

“Yeah,” Lance sighs, dipping his fingers into the patch of water behind him. Its energy shoots through his fingers, crawling through his veins, threading with his heartbeat. “But it just…seemed like something more than that. It’s hard to explain.”

“I dunno, man.” Hunk shrugs. “Maybe ask her?”

“Yeah…I’ll try.” Lance shakes his head, a smile crawling over his face like it belongs there, stealing the place of the current frown. He whips the beach towel off of his tail, playfully slapping a dune of sand toward Hunk, who narrows his eyes just so.

“You wanna play those games?”

Lance does it again. And quickly regrets it as Hunk stands up, quick as anything Lance has ever seen, and begins to roll him like he’s nothing but a log.

“Hunk! H- Pleg!” He spits out bits of sand, feeling the stuff wedge between his teeth and crunch uncomfortably with every bite. “You fiend!!”

“Have fun! Talk with some dolphins for me!” Hunk cheerily says, a laugh intertwined with the statement, and then Lance feels water lapping against his back, wetting his hands, making his scales stand on end.

“I will!” he shouts back, the words half-gargled as the water washes into his mouth, a wave crashing over his head and sending him into tumbling motion. He sucks a deep breath of ocean through his gills, fingers poking into the sand beneath to leverage him as he pushes against the force of the current to go deeper into the fray, and —
All water. He’s out, although still in the shallows, everything around him smokescreened with upturned sand. He blinks a few times, waiting for his vision to adjust — he’s certain that the transformation has some kind of effect on his eyes, although he can’t tell exactly what it is — and then he’s seeing everything there is to see, an even wider smile stretching across his lips.

Patches of fish glitter underneath the streams of light like kaleidoscope images, and stingrays shuffle beneath the cozy blanket of sand underneath, their barbed tails pointing up toward the surface like arrows. Lance has himself eye-to-eye with one after a powerful stroke of his tail, his fingers slowly reaching out to softly stroke its back. He remembers when he’d first tried this years ago — screaming underwater, bubbles racing each other to the surface — but it had turned out fine in the end. He’s only been barbed once, in all his years of flirting with the concept. His mother hadn’t too happy about that, and neither was Lance, for the record.

Something brushes past his tail, and he whips around, eyes wide. One of the fish has strayed from the pack, its mouth gulping in hungry mouthfuls, looking at him like it has something to say. Lance reaches out a hand, grazing it against the fish’s side — it’s beautiful, really, a stunning shade of bronze on top that melts into a white belly on the bottom. His eyes flicker closed as he tries to feel the same spark he’d once felt with the dolphins, the oddly familiar and almost recognizable brush of… something. Intelligence? Thoughts?

This fish, however, is silent.

Lance lets it go and watches as it hurries back to its pack, and they disappear into the swallowing depths. He watches until the last of their shine is gone before moving on, slicing through the water with the agile movements of an otter and the speed of a motorboat — those damned things he tries to avoid, but never can quite escape out here in the bay.

In the end, he doesn’t find a dolphin, but he does find a sense of tranquil peace in the salt and the sea, something he can never hold on to for long above the waves.

____________________

The Starbucks is packed this time around, every step in any direction sure to put you in direct, rude contact with another body. Lance angles himself sideways, attempting to slip past the throngs of people on his feeble legs, but Hunk has a way of politely plowing through the masses that leaves Lance in his wake, clutching onto his shirt for stability.

“It gets harder to Turn back every time, I swear,” he mutters through clenched teeth, almost tripping over his two feet as they abruptly stop in the back of the line.

“You were out there for a while, man. Maybe it’s like the longer you’re like that, the worse the drying-off is?” Hunk suggests, his voice low and safely swallowed within the babble of the other students.

“Maybe,” Lance mutters, biting his lip.

“Or maybe it’s the universe punishing you for not finding any dolphins for me? Who knows, dude.” Lance lightly punches him on the back, his head tipped up as he groans. “I tried, Hunk! They just weren’t out today!”

“I know,” his friend chuckles, eyes skimming over the menu. “I’m just giving you a hard time. Hey, are you getting a frappe or a cappuccino?”
“I’m getting a large coffee,” Lance crows, standing up straight with pride, wobbly legs be damned. Hunk looks down at him with awe, squinting in the slightly suspicious way that Lance was, frankly, expecting.

“Black coffee?”

“Nah, I gotta have a little cream and sugar in there, but—“

“If we’re playing opposites today, then I’ll get a frappe,” Hunk announces, and Lance snorts.

“Hunk. Dude. You’re gonna hate it.”

“I know. And you’re gonna hate regular coffee.”

“We’ll see about that.”

The bell of the front door rings loudly, and Lance sees a wash of mullet in the corner of his eye, followed by another splash of light brown hair messily braided into a fishtail, strands floating around like they’re fit to be with the clouds instead of tethered to earth.

“Hey, looks like we’re not so late this time,” he mutters to Hunk, but then he gets a proper eyeful of the two of them and promptly sucks his cheeks in, his lips puckering out a fish.

They look…

“Is it just me, or is Pidge’s hair a little singed?” Hunk whisper-shouts, ducking his head every which way to catch a better look at the odd pair. Lance drags his eyes from the dark bags smeared beneath Keith’s eyes and his wide, startled gaze to the end of Pidge’s braid, and yeah, it does seem a bit ragged. And discolored. And —

“Yep. It sure looks like it.”

The two glance at each other and unanimously decide, through intense eye contact alone, to focus on their order for now.

Lance can feel himself regretting it as the words ‘tall coffee’ exit his mouth, but it’s too late to change it now. Besides, he hears Keith’s voice order the same exact thing right as his drink is delivered to him, hot and steaming in his hands, and his chest zings with adrenaline that more than squelches any remnant of said regret.

Lance and Hunk wait, idling awkwardly in a corner, until Pidge drifts in from of them with a startlingly large espresso in hand, followed by an equally worn-out Keith pressing himself against the wall to avoid any other awkward body contact with strangers.

Hunk opens his mouth. Pidge holds up a hand in interruption.

“Unless we all don’t care for sitting today, we should go outside first. And even if you don’t care for sitting, we should go outside anyways, because there’s chairs there and I’m about to fall over as it is,” she deadpans, motioning toward the door.

Lance nods. He’s too afraid to do anything else, really — Pidge looks like she could murder someone in her current state, exhaustion be damned.

The four brawl their way to the outdoor tables, practically pushed out of the door by the sheer force of too much mass and not enough space. Keith stumbles, his coffee slopping against the lid and
dribbling onto Lance’s jeans. He yelps a bit and hurriedly wipes it off with the sleeve of his shirt, face flushing white, but Keith is thankfully too out-of-it to even notice.

“We’re in luck,” Hunk sighs, dashing to claim the last of the iron-wrought tables loitering outside of the Starbucks, flashing a cautious glance to the students who had been about to annex it themselves. They openly glare at him, stalking away with a certain shadow on their faces and the spirit of exasperation in their steps, but Pidge stares back unabashedly, a middle finger already situated on her hand.

“No, no,” Hunk mutters, slapping her palm down, and she slaps him right back, albeit lightly.

“They’re asking for it,” she complains, slumping down in a chair and knocking back a long, long gulp of espresso. Keith plops down beside her, his hand gripped around his coffee, and Lance pauses. Waiting.

He doesn’t drink it yet, though, so Lance lets his guard down. For now.

Hunk loudly clears his throat. Both Keith and Pidge whip toward him in a gesture halfway between a flinch and a jump, and he raises his hands up innocently.

“All right. I have to ask. What the hell happened to you two?” he asks, sitting back in his chair. The two look at each other carefully, calculating, tales of woe and excitement wrought in their eyes.

Pidge finally answers, a ghost of a smile flitting over her lips. “We suffer for science.”

Silence.

“Right,” Lance finally interrupts, taking a long swig of his coffee, and screw it, he’s doing it right here, right now —

It’s painful, scathing on the way down, but he does it. He chugs the whole cup in one go.

When he’s done, Keith is looking at him. Mouth open. Pidge whistles, tilting her head to the side.

“Oh, Keith, you’ve got a challenger! Whatever will you —“

And then she stops, because Keith’s downing his own coffee himself, the whole thing, adam’s apple bobbing up and down in a frenzy as he swallows Guinness Record-breaking gulps. Lance watches him go, oddly impressed at each mouthful — can he even hold that much liquid between his own cheeks? — but then it’s over, Keith slamming his cup down on the table like it’s a shot glass and he’s just finished a round.

He looks Lance in the eyes. Grins, but only a little.

“I was faster,” he says, and Lance knows he’s right, but he screws up his lips anyways.

“What? In your dreams!”

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“I was faster,” he says, and Lance knows he’s right, but he screws up his lips anyways.

“What? In your dreams!”

“So I’m guessing that’s a no?”

Lance scoffs. “Next time, mullet.” He would take the offer, but if he puts a drop of any other drink
into his stomach right now, barfing is a likely outcome.

Keith doesn’t even blink at the mullet comment — he’s too busy keeping up that sad excuse for a smile and watching Hunk as he takes a sip of his frappe and gingerly pushes it away a moment later.

“Ugh. Lance. You were right. I hate this,” he moans, and Lance only nods, tamping down the roaring fire of competition that’s still taking residence in him.

“You risked it, buddy.”

“I did.” He sounds so sad, so forlorn, that Lance has to change the subject.

“All right. So. Project ideas, anyone?”

Pidge blinks, the espresso seeming to kick her further and further out of her stupor. “Right. Hunk. Are you free tomorrow? We can do the nitrate testing together to make sure we’re doing it right, and then bring home different samples to test individually before sending the info to Keith and Lance to make the project out of.”

“Sounds good. What time are you free?”

“Is three good?”

“Yeah, it’s great.”

And then comes the thing Lance was both dreading and looking forward to. Exchanging phone numbers. Pidge adds multiple pigeon emojis next to her name, but Keith, predictably, adds nothing. It’s just his name, in those black, boring letters. Keith.

Lance stares down at it for a while, wondering what emojis to add to the contact— preferably ones that would piss Keith off — but nothing immediately comes to mind. He’ll think of something later.

Chapter End Notes

(I should honestly tag this as slow burn because dear god it's the slowest burn, it's the pace of a snail, I wasn't expecting for it to be like this but here we are)
I fought through some tricky writer's block this chapter, but I did it! I think!
Thank you guys so much for the kind kudos and comments! They honestly light up my day so much, I just kinda look at 'em in my email inbox and smile and it's all sappy and shit lol
As always, thanks for reading! Comments and critiques are appreciated!
Lance is an interesting person.

Very, very interesting.

And by interesting, Keith means infuriating.

“What’s wrong with Google Slides?”

“Keith! Keith, my man, I can’t believe you’re actually asking me this right now!”

Lance tries to stand up dramatically, he really does, but in the cramped space of the study room it’s easier said than done. His rickety chair slams back against the wall instead, leaving his long legs still trapped underneath the desk, so he half-stands, half-hunches, pointing at Keith with a mechanical pencil in hand. Keith’s eyes drift to the tip of the pencil — or, lack of — and Lance’s face pinches, his thumb quickly pumping out a few bits of lead.

“Exhibit A.” Keith watches, eyes half-lidded in irritation, as Lance pokes the pencil on the screen of his laptop, pointing at the empty Google Slides document just waiting to be filled with information and images and things that make sense. Unlike Lance’s babbling.

“Exhibit A?” Keith crosses his arms, settling back into his chair. This ought to be good.

“Yes. Exhibit A. Do you see how ugly the layout is? It’s just white, with plain black text. Disgusting.”

“Yeah. Until you take into consideration that you can change the settings,” Keith fires back. “I give your Exhibit A a solid D for poor planning and foresight.”

“No-no-no, not so fast.”

Keith throws his hands up in exasperation. “What?”

Lance slides around the table in his odd half-shamble, still trying to free his legs but failing as he sidles up beside Keith, their arms brushing together. Keith stiffens, leaning in the opposite direction, but Lance doesn’t seem to notice — no, he’s waving his hands at the screen once more, a counterargument pouring out of his mouth.

Another thing Keith’s noted about Lance. He’s kind of touchy. And Keith doesn’t mind touch, not really, but for somebody he doesn’t know as well to dive right in like this? It kind of gets to him, even if he can tell Lance doesn’t mean anything by it — he saw him lay his head on Pidge’s shoulder the other day at the library while his legs were slung over Hunk’s lap, his feet inches away from Keith’s side.

“We can change the settings and customize it, or whatever, but that takes a lot of time, and it never ends up looking as good as pre-ordained settings do, anyways,” Lance argues, snapping his gaze to Keith’s. “So, if we use Keynote —”

“But if we use Keynote, we won’t be able to have the advantage that Google Slides does!” Keith
hollers, shoving the laptop in Lance’s direction with reckless abandon. “Even if we’re not working side by side in person like we are now —“

“Side by side. That’s poetic.”

“— we can still work on the project at home, or wherever! We can both access the document and see what other changes the person is making in real time, so if we’re working on this document last minute like I think we’re probably gonna be doing —“

Lance frowns, setting his hands on his hips. “What makes you think that’s gonna happen? If anyone’s gonna be slacking it’s certainly not me!”

Keith pauses. Looks at Lance for a long, long while. And then keeps talking.

“Like I was saying. We can both access the document, just in case. Besides, the project’s not due for a while. We could take the time to design it the way we want.”

“Presentations are all about appearances. If we use Google Slides, that appearance will be absolutely ruined. Believe me. I’ve tried to work with Slides before. It’s a problem.”

“So then what do you want us to do? Make changes, email it to the other, all of that? That’s way more work than changing its current format, Lance!”

Lance claps a hand on Keith’s shoulder, his face set and serious as stone. “Keith. How much are you willing to sacrifice to make something look perfect?”

“Not as much as you, apparently!”

_**Knock knock.**_

Both their heads whip toward the small slice of window on the door of the study room. A pair of amber eyes flawlessly decked out with winged eyeliner stare at them with a tiredness that Keith himself feels in his soul.

“Uh,” he says.

“Can we help you?” Lance yells, loud enough that she can hear him instead of reading his lips, judging by her flinch and slight sigh. She nods several times before then simply putting a finger to her lips, letting them know that she needs business.

And then she walks away, her sundress flitting under the influence of the air conditioning vent directly above. Silence reigns.

Lance, predictably, shatters the peace first.

“Sheesh! What’s up with her?” he grumbles, although his voice has indeed dropped a few octaves. Keith doubts it’ll last for very long.

“I dunno, maybe if you’d stop yelling—”

“Well, I’m only *yelling* because you can’t see *common sense*—“

“No! I’m making perfect sense!” Keith wishes he had something to bash over Lance’s head — he eyes the laptop, hands twitching. It could be suitable. Maybe.

“Once you see how gorgeous Keynote is, you’ll change your miiiind,” Lance sings, his long fingers
dancing over the keyboard and bringing him to the site in two seconds flat. He scrolls down a webpage that proudly flashes previews of slick blues, forest greens, every color of the rainbow all tastefully matched up with header text and paragraph text — neat and orderly, pristine and packed up.

It’s nice. It’s better than Powerpoint ever was.

And then Keith sees the export button.

“Lance.”

“You see, I was thinking this blue one, because water, and —“

“Lance!”

“But we could change the font, it’s too bold, I was thinking something more streamlined, and —“

“Lance!”

“What?”

“Look!” He jabs his finger over the button on the screen. Lance only looks at him, no bells ringing, no light entering his eyes.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just click it.” Lance’s hand stalls on the keyboard, fingers dancing as if deciding what to do, so Keith takes it upon himself to move Lance’s hand out of the way himself, clicking on the button with vigor.

Export to: Notes, Mail, PDF...

Google Slides.

“No way,” Lance whispers. “We can export this template to Google Slides?”

“We can have our cake and eat it too, yeah.”

Lance chuckles at that, his face erupting into a full-blown smile, all bunched cheeks and white teeth. “What are you, some kind of tech genius?”

“Nah. Pidge just taught me how to export things, like, a month ago. I’m not exactly what you’d call computer-savvy,” Keith admits, coughing out a laugh that sounds painfully fake even to him.

“I mean, with a hairstyle from the 80s, I wouldn’t expect you to be.”

“It’s not my fault I came here from the middle of nowhere!” Keith defends, hooking a hand behind his head to grab at the tufts of hair at the nape of his neck. “And screw you!”

“Where’d you grow up, like, Texas?” Lance clearly means it as a joke, still grinning as he watches the computer load the export, but Keith pauses.

“Yeah, actually. Sorta.”

“Sorta?”
Deflect. Deflect. Keith’s not going into it. Not with this asshole.

“Yeah, sorta. Where’d you come from that you had access to so many computers?”

“Uh, society? Seriously, did your school not even have a computer lab?”

“You’d be surprised,” Keith mutters, and he’s gotta change the conversation, but how —

Lance does it on his own.

“I lived in Cuba until I was five and my family came here,” Lance says, absently looping the keyboard’s mouse in circles as the download goes into its last few seconds. “I don’t remember a ton — really, all I can remember is this one uncle, but…”

And then he seems to swallow his words, glancing at the computer screen instead. “Hey! It’s done!”

Lance opens the new tab, clasping his hands together excitedly as his eyes feast on the template snugly fit into Google Slides like it’s belonged there the whole time. “Oooh, would you look at that! That’s a beauty right there, Keith, wouldn’t you say?”

“Uh huh. Totally.”

“Sexy.”

“Sure.”

“And it’s gonna look even better soon,” Lance coos, switching over to the settings tab. “Now. Let’s see. A nice font…”

Keith leans a forward a bit in his seat, before realizing that it puts him in even more contact with Lance and returning to his first position. “I dunno. Baskerville?”

Lance stares at Keith, every inch of him written over with disgust.

“Baskerville? That’s so plain! It’s like, Times New Roman!”

“What’s wrong with Times New Roman?”

“Times New Roman just reminds everybody of writing papers. Nobody wants to be reminded of that.”

“But we’re in college, Lance, it’s what we do. Write papers.”

“Listen, if I’m gonna present something, Keith, I’m not gonna bring up wretched, long-buried Times New Roman memories for everyone in the room. That’s just cruel, Keith.”

Keith sighs, sinking even deeper into his chair with a hand pressed to his face. “Call me cruel, then.”

“I will!”

He’s gonna need to strum at least five songs on his guitar to calm himself down tonight. Maybe ten. And it’s all Lance’s fault.

_____________________

When Lance strolls into the room, whistling a cheery tune just to piss Lotor off on the off-chance that
he may be able to hear it, the last thing he expects to see is the girl from the library sitting right there on the couch, her graceful ponytail long enough to scrape the armrest. She looks considerably less pained now, her head tilted back in laughter — she has a sweet voice, something like bell chimes and pure kindness all piled up together, and beside her is Hunk, having just as much fun. He has on a button-up shirt, something he never, ever wears unless there’s a clean-cut reason, and Lance is pretty sure he’s shaved as well, despite having almost no stub in the first place. If Lance is doing the math right, it all adds up to two precise answers.

He finally asked her out! and oh shit.

Out of all the girls on campus he had to accidentally piss off, he had to pick —

“Oh, Shay, this is Lance, one of my roommates!”

Shay turns to the side, her smile faltering in recognition, then brightening a second later. Lance stands there, tongue tangled up in his mouth, and it’s possible that he could stay like that the whole afternoon if he didn’t see Hunk’s pleading eyes from behind Shay’s head, calling him to action.

“Oh. Hi! I-I’m sorry about the whole…library situation earlier,” he says, still standing there. Hunk’s eyebrows furrow, and Lance sends a telepathic apology his way.

“Oh, it’s not an issue!” Shay insists, her voice sure and steady. “My groupmates were just getting really annoyed, and I wanted to keep the peace, so…”

“Yeah! Absolutely! Won’t happen again! I’m just gonna…” He jabs a thumb toward his room, but not before sending them a smarmy smile as a parting gift. “Keep it PG, you two! Oh, Hunk, if you throw that pillow at me I’m gonna — agh!”

He slams his door shut before the pillow can make swift contact with his face, still cackling, and flops down on his bed, laptop perched on his stomach. He fiddles around with the tabs for a moment before opening Word and clicking on a familiar document, his head already swimming with ideas collected from a few days past.

Lance’s Handbook To Having A Tail

11. Always have a NOAA tab open on your phone to keep check on current ocean weather conditions — they can affect our mood and health, sometimes, if it gets strong enough. Choppy seas do not make good days for us, unfortunately.

12. Tail growing pains are the worst, as our tails can only grow when we’re in that form, not in our sleep like our regular bones grow or whatever. Taking a bath with some epsom salt helps the pain a bit — our bodies just love that salt — but if that isn’t an option, taking a nap in tail form can help as well.

13. The older you get, the more shiny your scales will become, so try not to swim too close to the shore in the ocean if people are around. You’ll only become more and more noticeable, and soon there will probably be a hashtag on twitter about the strange sparkly thing everyone’s been seeing in the sea recently. Trust me. I know.

14. If you ever accidentally Turn while driving a car, please, for the love of God, //don’t// try to use your two fins on the brake and gas. It just doesn’t work. Pull over and try to dry off as soon as possible, I’m begging you.

15. Sippy cups are more useful than you’d think.
16. If you can’t visit the sea for an extended period of time, eating salty snacks can help, but only for a bit. Eventually, you have to get back out there to really feel like yourself again.

17. Watch out for condensation on cups! Wipe down your glass with napkins a bunch, especially in public.

18. When you’re in the ocean, some of the wildlife will be drawn to you, but don’t worry too much about it. Even if whatever comes is typically dangerous, they won’t be looking to hurt you unless you bother them first, in my experience.

19. If you do get hurt while in tail form, it’ll transfer to your legs as soon as you Turn back, so be careful — blood can Turn us, but it Turns us slower than other liquids, giving you more time to find a safe spot.

20. Public toilets sometimes have a gross habit of splattering water everywhere upon flushing, so give them a wide, wide berth at all times. Turning into a mermaid on that nasty bathroom tile? Not a fun time.

Lance saves the document and shuts the laptop, his eyes easing shut. It’s been kind of a long day, when he thinks about it — Keith’s exhausting stubbornness has a lot to do with it, although Lance can’t really deny that he deserves it.

What can he say? It’s fun to yank the guy’s chain and watch him yank back. They may get along in their own weird way after all.

His eyes crack open, blearily gazing up at the pictures plastered onto his ceiling. He finds himself searching for the one of his uncle, the blue sky almost blinding behind him, the green of his eyes twinkling, but Lance’s limbs are lead, his head is heavy…

He blinks. No. He can’t sleep now. He has to do an online quiz, and edit that paper, and do the laundry, and —

He’s out like a light.

When Lance finally wakes he’s on the floor, adrenaline zipping through him like a wildfire.

“Agh!” He jerks, his buzzing limbs flopping lifelessly, drool trailing a path down the corner of his mouth. His forehead presses against the floor, cold and harsh, and he wriggles his fingers, his toes, waiting until he’s good and ready to move. Standing up is an arduous task, but he pulls it off, grabbing at his laptop that precariously balances halfway off his bed to check the time.

12:45 a.m. Great.

Lance flops forward on his bed, burying his face in the sheets. That online quiz is due at 8 in the morning. The paper is due at noon. He literally has nothing to wear. He just fell off of his bed and landed on the floor in what he assumes was a fitful sleep.

He’s a certified mess.

“Alright,” he mutters to himself, hoisting his legs up onto the bed and curling up into a comfortable ball. The quiz should be easy enough, but it’ll take some time…and he needs to be fully awake to do his paper…

So, knowing he’s procrastinating and fully ignoring the fact, Lance grabs his overfull laundry hamper and his wallet, venturing through the dorm halls in the dead of night.
He doesn’t really know where he’s going, but his muscle memory pulls through, guiding him to a left turn, a right turn, walking forward, step-by-step, and —

Lance pauses, suddenly shaking himself awake. His hand is on the cool doorknob of the communal laundry room of their floor, ready to open it, but he pauses. He could’ve sworn he just heard something inside, and he really, really, wants to be alone for once in his life to carry out his task in peace, but the universe is against him tonight, apparently.

He thinks. The only alternatives are returning back to his room and starting on his paper and quiz, and he’s not keen on either of those, so…

Lance swings the door open and winces at the hinge’s horrible screech, his teeth grinding together in a knee-jerk reaction. The room is dim, only a few of the overhead lights turned on, but he can still make out the figure of somebody on the last row of washers, hefting his load into his arms and dumping it into the dryer. His back is turned to Lance — he’s surprised that the guy didn’t jump out of his skin at the horrific sound the door had just made, but a quick look tells him the answer. The guy’s earbuds are turned up all the way, giving Lance hints of a strumming guitar and a gentle melody, but what really stands out is something else entirely.

The guy isn’t singing — not exactly — but his humming, rich and smooth, switches between what could be syllables and mindless murmurs, effortless and unconscious. His head is swaying to the beat, followed with the almost imperceptible tilt of his shoulders, and even his feet tap out a soft beat on the floor, a steady thrum resembling a heartbeat.

But then Lance’s eyes catch on his mullet, almost blending in with the darkness around them, and the spell is broken.

“Keith?” he says, chancing a few steps forward. Keith doesn’t hear him, still lost in the music — as Lance inches even closer he sees that his eyes are closed, his hands positioned as if they were cradling an imaginary guitar, the left hand dictating chords and the right hand strumming.

Lance sets his laundry hamper on the ground, hard enough for the plastic to bang against the tile floor and emit a sound as startling as a gunshot, but Keith doesn’t even blink. Or open his eyes. Or do anything.

So Lance pokes him in the shoulder, sending him reeling. He jumps like a startled cat, ripping his earbuds out of his ears with the same ferocity — his eyes are alight with aggression mixed with a healthy dose of panic, but it all leaks out of him as he takes Lance in, soft pajamas and all.

“O-Oh,” he says.

“Hi,” Lance says.

They stand there awkwardly, and even Lance doesn’t know what to say — he’s too tired to think of anything beyond a mullet joke — so he grabs his wallet out of his robe’s pocket and shoves a few coins into the nearest washing machine, bending over to start the task of filling it up.

He hears Keith halfway through the process. “What are you doing here?”

“My laundry.”

“Yeah, but at one in the morning?”

“Then why are you here, Mr. Mullet-Head?” Lance quips back, shutting the washing machine door and punching in the settings. “Can’t sleep?”
Keith doesn’t answer that. “Why aren’t you asleep? You spend half your breath talking about bedtime routines, so you seem to take it pretty seriously.”

“I do. But laundry calls, Keith.”

Keith pauses, and when Lance looks over he sees the knowing in his eyes. It’s twinkling, almost unusual from what Lance has seen from him thus far.

“You’re procrastinating, aren’t you?” Keith says, squinting, and Lance squawks, jerking away.

“What? No! What, is that what you’re doing?” he fires back, face flushed.

“No. I just prefer to do my laundry at night. Nobody’s here. Usually.”

“Well, then I won’t disturb you again. Sheesh.” Lance tightly crosses his arms, leaning back against the washing machine. “You want to sing in peace, I see.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“You play guitar?”

Keith blinks, as if he hadn’t been expecting the question after the stunt he was pulling off. “What? Yeah. I’ve played for years.”

“That’s…cool.”

“Mmm.” And then they’re back to where they started, silent and indifferent, and Lance just wants to fill it with banter, jokes — hell, even regular conversation at this point. Anything to avoid this.

“My older brother tried to teach me how to play piano once,” he offers, a faint grin appearing on his face. “He wasn’t very good himself — only knew, like, two songs — but he tried his hardest. We had this keyboard that we got at Wal-Mart, and we’d balance it on our laps and try to play without the damn thing tipping over when we tried to play too far of a G,” Lance blurs out.

Keith chuckles at that, his eyes softening. They look different in this light, darker than usual but still undoubtedly that odd mixture of grey and purple, the one Lance has been dying to ask about but can never quite find the opportunity to.

“I remember when I started guitar, my fingers were sore for days,” he recalls, looking over the callused tips of his fingers. “They even used to bleed, but I just kept going.”

“Wow. Metal.” Keith’s small smile grows at that, and this is probably the biggest Lance has ever seen it — it’s still not reached full bloom, but he’ll take what he can get from a tough audience.

“Did your throat bleed when you learned to sing, too? Did you cry blood? Was it tragic?” he continues, his grin growing by the second

“The only tragic thing is your jokes.”

“Tragically awesome.”

“Nah. Just tragic.”

Keith’s dryer dings pleasantly, interrupting the conversation. Keith looks toward it like he’d forgotten it was there, then down at his own hamper, a mesh-like bag deflated on the floor.
“I’d better…” he starts, but he doesn’t finish the thought, opening the dryer and shoving his clothes into his hamper instead. He does a quick job of it, shutting the door with his hip, slinging the enormous bag over his shoulder like it’s nothing.

Lance sniggers.

Keith tilts his head to the side. “What?”

“You’re like...a laundry Santa Claus.”

“Shut up.” Keith turns, heading toward the front door, but Lance just can’t stop.

“Ho-ho-ho, Merry Christmas! Have some underwear!”

Keith doesn’t pause — he only throws his head over his shoulder, giving Lance a look of long-suffering as he fits his earbuds into his ears, to which Lance responds with another tidbit.

“Underwear with little candy canes on it!”

“Goodnight, Lance.” And he’s out the door, the hinges screeching just the same.

Chapter End Notes

Am I doing slow-burn right? I've never written this kind of stuff before which is why I'm doing it now as an experiment lol
This chapter was really fun to write? Their banter is a blessing, honestly.
As always, comments and critiques are appreciated! There may be a longer break between this chapter and the next due to finals and all that, but once Christmas break hits, I'm all over it again. Good luck to my fellow comrades battling finals, and anyone in school/life in general. God knows we need that luck.
The ocean is an enigma to Hunk.

It’s one of the things he would normally hate with a passion, with all of its uncovered nooks and crannies and strange, unidentified life forms. Especially deep-sea creatures. Those things look like they belong in hell, not anywhere on earth, and knowing that there’s even more of them than humanity will likely never know about? Hunk isn’t a fan of the idea.

Yet, he doesn’t hate the ocean. Not entirely. No matter where he was as a kid, whether it be Samoa or Florida or anywhere in-between, the waves were never out of his sight — he could always confide with them, see them claw at the shore and take hefty gulps of sand, bubbling and foaming like a the maw of a great monster.

It’s a monster Hunk respects, despite its terrifying status — he doesn’t know how Lance does it, diving down into those blues like there’s nothing to it. It’s probably easier for him. Something in his blood, or in that tail of his. But just because Hunk’s a tad bit queasy around the sea doesn’t mean he can’t appreciate an eyeful of it — he gets the feeling he’d feel miserably closed-off if he lived inland without the water swirling around his ankles like it is now, slurping at his feet.

Hunk takes one of the vials strapped against his hip and carefully dips it into the water. The waves lap into the glass immediately, fully willing — probably pushed forward by the long-traveling of a nearby boat, he guesses. They are in the intercostal, after all, one of the sample places picked out by Pidge for their project. She had been oddly finicky about the whole topic, but Hunk doesn’t mind. With Pidge, specifics are not out of the ordinary.

With Pidge, teasing is also not out of the ordinary.

“So I hear you have a giiiirlfriend!” Pidge crows from a few feet ahead of Hunk, already waist-deep in the water and scooping up samples to her little heart’s content. Hunk slaps a soggy hand against his face, noticing its subtle upturn in temperature.

“No, I just invited her over to my dorm! No biggie! We’re not —“

Pidge twists around in the water, the student movement sending ripples around her like the aftereffects of a seismic earthquake. “Your face tells me everything I need to know, Hunk.”

Okay, maybe it wasn’t a ‘subtle upturn’ in temperature. He can admit that. No shame.

“She’s just…super nice,” he begins, nervously fiddling with the slick vials in his hands. “A-And super pretty.”

“Aww, Hunk. You’re adorable,” Pidge coos, wading toward him in the water with a wicked grin slashed across her face. “You’re blushing so much, dude, lemme just —“

“Pidge, if you — agh!” He can only duck his head down as Pidge upends one of her vials on top of his head, the rivulets of cool water carving soothing paths over his scalp and streaming to his shoulders, and he would be complaining if it didn’t feel so damn nice. His face must give it away, because Pidge immediately douses herself as well, squinting as the water tangles itself between her eyelashes and splashes over her pale cheeks. She messily wipes at her face, laughing a bit, before
finally filling the vial for the third (and hopefully last) time.

“All right, now that the mandatory embarrassment ritual is done with, real talk. How’s it going?” she asks, a droplet of water caught at the edge of her nose, trembling precariously.

“It’s…going,” Hunk admits, biting the inside of his cheek. “I mean, I wore this nice shirt and all, and we had this conversation about civil rights, and —“

“Whoa, civil rights?” Pidge laughs, tilting her head back. The bit of water slides down her throat and mingles with the sweat already present there, a sheen that covers her entire body and curls the ends of her ponytail. “Starting hot and heavy, huh?”

“She was passionate about it!” Hunk defends. “And so am I! It was cool!”

“Alright, calm down, political science major. So. You invited her over.”

“Yeah. It wasn’t like, a date date, but I think it went well.” Hunk sees her grin as she begins to slog out of the water and onto the beach, looking at him like she’s trying to solve an equation written in his eyes. He’s sure he looks like a smiling fool, but really, he doesn’t care. Not even a little bit.

“You should totally take her out. Like, for real,” Pidge suggests as she passes by him, balling her shirt into her fist and squeezing the water out of it like a sponge. “You seem pretty smitten, dude.”

“I…I guess. But it’s not that easy! It’s scary!”

“Life is short! Take a chance! I do it every day!”

“Your definition of taking a chance is tampering with codes and probably hacking the government or something, Pidge. You’re gonna get assassinated one day,” Hunk snorts, wading through the water to the sand, feeling the stuff cling to his toes like it can’t go without them.

“Well, if I’m going out, I’m going out proving that the Kennedy assassination was a setup.”

“An assassination that uncovers another assassination?”

“Exactly, Hunk. Tell me it isn’t genius.”

“It’ll attract media attention, I can tell you that.” Hunk picks his backpack off of the ground and lightly dusts it off, digging around in the front pocket for the nitrate strip tests. Pidge plops to the ground beside him in a soggy heap, the bits of beach pasting themselves on her like a gritty coating of sugar, and Hunk recognizes that particular degree of a slump, those heavily-layered bags smudged beneath her eyes.

“Hey, Pidge. Been getting any sleep?” he casually asks. Her head snaps up, eyes sharp as ever, but it’s a different kind of sharpness, the kind that’s hyperaware and a second away from crashing into oblivion.

“Well, no,” she says bluntly, grabbing a clump of sand and watching it trickle through her fingers like an hourglass. “I’m doing this new research on this…chemical thing.”

“Really? I thought computers were your niche.”

“Well, they are, technically, but this thing is really fascinating,” Pidge begins, her face splitting into her smile, her toes curling up in glee. And then she stays like that, ready to burst into nerdy fireworks without a lick of context.
“So…gonna tell me about any of it?” Hunk says, sitting down beside her. The sand is lavishly warm, like sheets fresh of the dryer, and he wants to bury himself in it completely, scoop it on his legs and stomach until it’s all that he can feel.

“I…can’t,” Pidge admits, her head lolling. “Not right now, at least. It’s…I’ll explain why when I can, Hunk. But it can’t be now. We have to figure out more about it first, and keeping the specifics within a small circle is for the best right now.”

“Oh. That’s fine. I understand.” And he does.

But it doesn’t make him any less curious.

“But, anyways! Hand those nitrate strips over, will you? I’ve got a pretty good guess that the results are gonna be shit compared to what they should be,” Pidge sighs, shaking her head as she lays her hand out, palm up. “Damn fertilizer runoff.”


“Hey. At least we’ve got Disney.”

The chords just aren’t sounding right today.

Keith grits his teeth, settling the guitar more firmly onto his lap, fiddling with the supportive strap. He’s pretty sure he has it in a good position, but…

He slowly strums a G-minor chord, but it’s too quiet, so he does it again with one strong stroke of the strings. It sounds a little better the second time, firm and ringing, but he still isn’t sure. Is he just not in the mood today? Is it another block? His fingers can usually turn out patterns quicker than a flick of the lights, his brain concocting all sorts of chords that slot together like they were meant to be in record time, but some days are like fire and others are like ice, as inspiration goes.

Today is a chilly, chilly day.

Maybe it’s because of Lance. Annoying him, asking him questions, showing up to do his laundry at the one time Keith picked specifically so that nobody else would be there.

If he’s being honest with himself, Keith knows this excuse is bullshit. Lance is acting like any other person who tries to get to know Keith, only with a flare of extravagance and banter that Keith usually can’t handle, but that he somewhat appreciates this time. It’s a way out of personal conversations. It’s a way to keep things light.

And in the end, it doesn’t matter, anyhow. Lance will eventually stop talking to him, just like all the others do. No extra personality or dramatic inclination can stop the natural process, the one Keith has begun to know as ultimate truth.

He tries out another chord, this one a D, followed by a regular G, and then he switches between the two as fast as he can. He’s gotten pretty good at nimbling his fingers up — they dance like spiders, like he has more digits than he knows what to do with, but none of is it any use if he can’t think of anything.

He sighs, setting his head against the wall he’s sitting against. He has the door firmly shut, but he knows his dormmates can hear him anyways. It took him months to gather enough courage up to
actually sing — he sang in the softest register of his voice for the longest time, a method that he
doesn’t exactly hate, especially when in the mood, but nothing does it for him like belting out a loud,
unrestricted note.

He opens his mouth, ready to let loose, when his phone buzzes.

“Shit,” he mutters, shifting a bit to the right to reach on top of his bed and inspect his cell. It’s a text
message from Hunk, and Keith unlocks his phone to see the the entirety of the message in the group
chat.

me and pidge have just put some of our data on google docs so if you guys wanna insert it into the
project as the first few slides that’d be great! :)

Keith pushes his bangs out of his eyes, sighing. It doesn’t sound like the most interesting task, but
what else is he to do? Keep sitting here in silence and suffering?

His thumbs are moving before he can really register it, typing out a quick ok, and then he’s shifting
his guitar out of his lap and gently laying it on the ground, standing up to make his way to the bulky,
ages-old laptop that sits on his small desk like a lump. It’s a dull black, peppered over with scratches
and chips and imperfections, but it still works, so Keith isn’t really complaining.

He collapses into his rickety rolling chair and jams the power button of the laptop, drumming his
fingers on the wooden table as the ancient tech takes its sweet time powering up. Finally, finally, the
logo flashes in front of the screen, a company long since swallowed by the monolith that is Apple,
and Keith expertly dodges his way through sticky keys and flashy clickbait viruses to arrive at
Google Slides.

He hates to admit it, but Lance was right. The layout does look quite nice with its gently rolling,
double-hued blue outline, and its smooth navy headers, and its —

Randomly appearing text.

“Oh, God,” Keith mutters, smushing his cheeks into chipmunk-looking facades with his hands.

Lance is online. He can see his name right by his cursor, moving along with the words he types, and
Keith doesn’t even want to look at what he’s saying for his own safety, so he clicks to Pidge and
Hunk’s document for the info instead.

It’ll be simple. He’ll copy and paste the info and then put it into a table, leaving room for the other
factors that have not yet been tested. That way, it’ll already be there when the new info comes in.
Easy.

When he clicks back, he groans, because no, this isn’t going to be so easy, is it?

Lance has created a new slide called Nitrate, and while there’s a short blurb explaining what nitrate is
that Keith appreciates, the info is not in a table. It’s just…there.

And then he sees Lance create another slide named pH, presumably with the same plan, and Keith
decides that this cannot stand.

He clicks into the pH slide and makes a bullet point directly below the title that Lance is still working
on perfecting, typing furiously. Why are you making a separate slide for them all?

Lance’s work on the title pauses. And then resumes again, beginning in a manner that has nothing to
do with pH whatsoever. it’s called organization, keithy. you ever heard of it?
Keith deletes his former text in one smooth motion and replaces it with something else. *But if we do it like this instead of in a single table, how will people be able to see how everything relates and compares?*

*we can do it in another slide. duh.* Lance promptly wipes his commentary and continues on with the pH information, so Keith huffs a single breath through his teeth and adds a slide to the presentation with a vindictive click of the mouse. Fine. He’ll just work on that final slide, and ignore that they’re doing all this extra work for nothing. He can deal. It’s easier than separating Lance from his dearly-loved bullshit, after all.

Halfway through the arduous process of figuring out the settings and creating a table, however, Lance decides to intervene. The text appears in the third heading of the table on a font setting of at least sixty, the words themselves screaming out in a scathing highlighter-blue.

*WHAT ARE YOU DOING??*

Keith slams his hand against the keyboard, unintentionally creating a key smash that he doesn’t bother to fix. Lance keeps going.

*alright, so. keith’s had a stroke. got it. guess i’m on my own with this project.*

*You will be if you don’t leave me to make this damn chart!*

Lance switches his font to a regular size again, though it’s still the same obnoxious blue. *oh, he’s alive! thank god!*

Keith snorts, ignoring the hint of laughter that was undeniably mixed with the noise. It’s a good think Lance isn’t here in person to point it out. *You said we’re going to put it all in an end slide that says how they compare!*

*yeah, in words. you think anyone likes looking at all of that chart math? it’s almost as depressing as your mullet.*

Keith changes his font to red, a sharply smug smile taking over his lips. *Not as depressing as a full paragraph of text.*

*hey! it won’t be depressing with me explaining it!*

*Which you could do just as effectively with a chart. Case closed.* And then Keith’s jaw drops, because the slide suddenly looks very, very different, like he blinked and something had changed in the instant his eyes were closed.

His chart is gone.

*LNACE! he speed-types, fury bubbling in his gut. Youre such a ddick!*

The only response is an uploaded image in the middle of the presentation, one that Keith hates to recognize. The troll face.

Keith almost falls out of his chair in his haste to bolt to his phone, typing the password incorrectly twice before finally succeeding and opening contacts, slamming his finger into Lance’s name and pressing call.

Lance responds on the first ring.
“Helloooo?” He draws the word out like it’s a delicacy that he’s taking his sweet time with, a cackle cracking his voice at the end.

Keith wastes no time with pleasantries. “The troll face? Really?”

“I’m surprised you know what that is, Keith. It was a test. You get an A, congrats!”

“I deserve an A+ for putting up with you instead of joining another group.”

“Well, good luck with that. They’d probably run at the sight of your…ah…unfortunate hair.”

“What’s your beef with my hair? Are you jealous?”

“Of what? The rat’s nest?”

“I mean, yeah, why else would you bring it up all the time?”

“It’s a crime to humanity!”

“You’re a crime to humanity!”

“Ohoho, fighting words. Meet me out back, two o’clock. We can settle this with our fists.”

It suddenly dawns on Keith that they’re bickering like they’re in the fifth grade, and that he loves it and hates it at the same time — but the first bit of that equation sinks in a little too deep, kickstarting his desire to put an end to this.

“Alright, Lance. Listen.”

“I’m all ears!” he chirps, and Keith’s grip tightens on the phone for reasons he can’t decipher.

“If you let me keep my chart, I’ll let you keep the previous slides. Deal?”

Lance considers this for a moment, the other end of the line deathly silent, before he answers. “Deal.”

He hangs up before Keith can say anything else, and Keith doesn’t know whether to be disappointed or relieved, although he leans toward relieved when the troll face disappears on the slide and is replaced by a line of familiar blue text.

<i>i still think the math is going to make people sad. you’re responsible for that.</i>

Keith grins, a half-moon of a full smile, and responds in the same red as before. <i>That’s something I can deal with.</i>

____________________________

“I can’t even drive a car, Lance, why would you put this on the list?” Elisa’s face glitches on the screen of Lance’s laptop for a moment, catching a perfect image of her puff-lipped pout. She’s wedged between all of Dani and half of Angelo on the cushy couch, half their size but brimming with an equal amount of sass. Like usual.

“Because! You will one day! I’m preparing you for your entire life, Elisa!”

“I’m not sure you need to tell her not to drive a car while in tail mode,” Angelo snorts from off-camera, suddenly leaning his eye directly into the lens until it’s all Lance can see on the FaceTime
monitor. “That seems kinda self-obvious, y’know?”

“Well, maybe it isn’t!” Lance defends, sitting straight on his own couch instead of sloughing off all of his weight against Hunk, almost upturning the bowl of fresh popcorn wedged between his thighs.

“I saw Lance do it once. We almost swerved into a semi and died,” Hunk pitches in, a harrowed expression creeping in to shape the lines of his face, and Lance gives him a dazzling grin. He’s picked up enough Spanish from Lance over the years to understand almost everything he and his family says, although he can only answer in English or some unfortunately-structured Spanish that borders on spanglish.

“Lance, are you serious? Flippers aren’t feet, dummy!” Dani crows, pressing a hand on her stomach as she lets her signature booming laugh lose, fit to shake the ground and shatter the earth. It’s crackly over the audio, only containing a fraction of its real-life power, but a stab of homesickness spears into Lance’s gut anyways — enough to make him ache for home, enough to make him want to punch through the bothersome screen and braid her hair into a crown like he used to on the weekends.

He shoves it back down into its labeled container in his brain, packing the memories back where they won’t bother him right now. “They’re not flippers, they’re fins!” he argues, scoffing as he absentmindedly flicks a piece of popcorn over his shoulder, hearing Hunk catch it in his mouth and crunch down on the kernel. “I thought it could work! The point is, Elisa, don’t do it. Like, ever.”

“I won’t,” Elisa grumbles, tightly crossing her arms. “This sucks. I thought it was cool, but I realized that I can’t go to pool parties anymore!”

“Why’d you want a pool party when the entire ocean is your pool party?” Lance counters, trying to cheer her up. In truth, he understands the feeling. The tail is isolating in a way he could never fully explain to anyone, a solid brick wall between him and the rest of humanity.

“Mom won’t let me go to the ocean,” Elisa whines, tucking her knees to her chest. “She says it’s bad for me.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. I don’t see why it’s so bad. It’s warm, and the water is all shiny, and —“

“Hang on. Elisa, can you give the phone to mom?” Lance quickly asks, his eyebrows crumpling. Hunk spares him a side-glance, undoubtedly questioning, but Lance doesn’t look back — he’s too focused on the kickstart of his heartbeat, the bothersome thing patting against his chest in a fast frenzy.

“But I have so much more to tell you!” Elisa argues, but Angelo rolls his eyes and snatches the phone from her grip. The screen is a whirlwind for a few seconds as he trots across the house, the image smudging into the cream color of their tile and the brown of Angelo’s feet, but it finally settles on his mother’s face, as smiling and open as usual. Her hair is pulled back into a ponytail, the freshly-cut bangs drawing a straight line across her forehead.

“Lance! How are you?” she asks, but then her eyes really settle on him, roaming over his face, and the welcoming beam dims into something almost unrecognizable. “What’s wrong?”

“I…uh, mom, I was just wondering why you won’t let Elisa visit the ocean?” he hesitantly asks, fiddling with a piece of popcorn below the camera’s sight. “I mean, it’s good for her to become familiar with it, especially because—“

“No, Lance. She needs to stay away from the ocean as much as possible.” Her face is set in stone,
the kind of expression that lets Lance know she sets her laws for a reason and will defend them to the death. “So do you.”

“But…why?” Lance bursts, sucking his bottom lip between his teeth and biting down, hard. “It helps us! It’s a part of who we are, mom.”

“Have you been going to the ocean more lately?” his mother suddenly asks out of nowhere, and Lance almost wants to say no, given the redness ringing her eyes and the added bits of grey eating away the natural brown of her hair.

But he can’t lie. Not to her. And he can’t deny that he’s woken up with a craving for salt and sea more often than not.

“Well, yeah. I have.”

“Don’t.” It’s as simple as that. “Lance, don’t. It’s dangerous.”

“Mom, I told you, the sharks never touch me.”

“That’s not what I mean.” She shakes her head, over and over and over. “Trust me, Lance. Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” he murmurs, drawing back. Her eyes are glistening. He doesn’t want to see her cry, doesn’t want to be the one to make her do it. “I’ll... I’ll talk to you later, okay? Can you hand the phone back to Angelo?”

“Oh course.” She gives him a smile, and it’s full of hope and joy and sadness and a million other things all mixed into one, but then it’s gone, the monitor filled with the blurred colors of Lance’s house and the sound of scuffles and giggles from the rest of his siblings.

Lance looks over at Hunk, completely mystified, and Hunk looks just as concerned, but they can’t talk about it now, not with Elisa back on the screen, sporting a gap-toothed grin.

“Lance, I forgot to tell you, I lost a tooth!”

“So did I, actually,” Dani admits, sheepishly hiding her mouth behind her hand, and Elisa immediately jumps on her, instigating a tussle.

“You did? You did? I thought you were too old to lose teeth!”

“I’m only 12, Elisa, get off of me!”

Lance laughs, even though it’s hard, and keeps the conversation rolling, snuggling even further against Hunk for comfort amongst the confusion.

Chapter End Notes

I wasn't too keen on this chapter but the next one will make up for it I swear, I've been waiting to write the next chapter ever since the fic started Thank you guys for all of the kind kudos and comments!! It means the world to me, it really does <3 And as always, comments and critiques are always appreciated! Thanks for reading!
It’s almost midnight, but Lance can’t stop pacing — back and forth, back and forth, toes kneading into the thin carpeting on the floor and pounding it flat.

“I don’t get it, Hunk,” he confesses, running a quick hand through his hair to vent out some of the nervous energy that’s possessed him like some kind of wrathful spirit, determined to scatter any thought that isn’t about the pressing matter.

“I don’t either,” Hunk responds, his legs folded beneath him on the couch, his elbows perched on his knees and his chin perched in his hands. “In all the years I’ve known your family, I’ve never seen her like that.”

“Neither have I! She’s usually open and honest! This whole…keeping secrets thing…” He shakes his head, teeth sinking into the side of his cheek. “There’s something going on, Hunk. This is weird.”

“Maybe if you approach her slowly about it?” Hunk offers, absentmindedly flicking a piece of popcorn into his mouth. He’s set the bowl aside for now, its contents nearly forgotten — the memory of it is only resurrected when Hunk happens to look its way, his head swiveling back and forth to watch the stages of Lance’s solemn march. “Or ask her why she’s so worried? And if you should know?”

“If she thought I should know, she’d tell me about it,” Lance muses. “But she obviously doesn’t want me to know. If it’s dangerous, though, wouldn’t she tell me so I can avoid it? Why be vague?”

“I wish I knew, man,” Hunk sighs, sinking further into the couch. The springs beneath him scream out a chorus of miserable moans, worn out from their decades of heavy work. The dorms aren’t exactly high-caliber. “Maybe you should just take her advice.”

“What, just like that?” Lance throws his hands in the air, plopping down on the carpet with a defeated thump. “No. I do trust her, but I need to find out what’s going on.”

“Lance —“

“Hunk, we should go to the beach tomorrow.”

“Lance—“

“If she won’t tell me, I’ll figure it out for myself.”

“Lance, are you even hearing yourself?” Hunk groans, burying his hand into the popcorn bowl and tossing a barrage of kerneled bullets that Lance firmly ignores. “Did you not register the word danger?”

“Yeah, I did. And I’m still going.”

“You’re insane.”

“Probably. But, I just…” he trails off, glancing down to irritably pick at his nails. “Something about this is just getting underneath my skin. If I don’t at least try to face it head-on, I’m gonna go crazy,
Hunk.

Hunk suddenly forgets any notion of having a spine, collapsing entirely into the confines of the couch like a conch without its shell. Lance finds his friend’s eyes in the dim light, sending him the strongest begging vibes he possibly can — physically, psychically, any way and every way.

It takes a hot second, but Hunk finally cracks.

“Fine. Fine!” He presses his face into the couch, his voice muffled and his nose squishing uncomfortably against the fabric. “We’ll go to the beach and do your stupid plan, and then me, your best friend, will watch you *die*, probably, and it’ll all be hunky-dory!”

“Aw, Hunk, a little death never killed anybody!”

“What, so mermaids are immortal now?”

Lance snorts. “Guess I’ll find out.”

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Despite it all, Lance can see why his mother is so worried. In truth, he’s a little worried himself.

He could feel the ocean approaching on their drive there the next day like a magnet feels its attraction to metal — a force that began as a simple pull at his navel but soon ballooned to a full-on tug-of-war, the sea pulling forward with all its 352 quintillion gallons of force and Lance pulling backwards with his measly 135 pounds. It was enough to make him feel as if he could fly out of his seat from the sheer force of it all and sprout wings like he was half-bird instead of half-fish, but he anchored himself with an iron grip on the car door, his knuckles and face flushing a stark, cold white.

Hunk saw. There’s no way he couldn’t have. But Lance didn’t hear him say anything — he just kept on driving, halting at red lights, slowing down at speed bumps, his every move responsible and controlled.

Lance knew exactly where they were going. It was intuitive, even stronger than the familiarity of the ocean. He had it memorized in every twist and turn they took, in every stop and start — the abandoned, rotten pier that nobody ever bothered to visit unless they have a clear-cut reason to. Like to avoid being seen transforming into a mythological creature, or perhaps meditate. The usual.

Hunk parks the car on the side of the road, halfway into the mishmash of billowing, straw-like grasses and beach, and Lance wastes no time throwing himself out of the car with bodily force, his bare feet biting into the gritty plants and shifting sand. It’s not nearly as hot today as usual, a soothing breeze combing through Lance’s hair and soul, and he can practically *taste* the salt on his tongue, feel the waves roll over him with all the comfort of home.

The grasses tickle his shins as he runs, dodging thickets of the wildlife left and right, and he knows prickly burrs are sticking in his feet, but he doesn’t care — they’ll be easier to remove when he’s in the gelatinous form of a tail. One of its many upsides. In fact, he can’t even think of a downside right now.

But then he stops short, stumbling like the ground has suddenly turned to slick ice. Because there is a downside, dammit. Of course there is.

They’re not alone.
Keith can’t believe Pidge dragged him out into the wild like this.

“C’mon, Keith, when do you ever relax?” she had said a few hours earlier, attaching herself to his arm like a cuddly koala as they sat in the silent library — the usual slew of unfortunate students with class at eight in the morning were nowhere to be seen in the secluded corner that Keith had found a year back, preferably to avoid contact with as many people as possible.

“That’s rich, coming from you.” He stared pointedly at the lines of exhaustion stretched across her face, and she stared right back at him, every inch of her declaring her disapproval of his sass.

“Well. True. But you’ve been all about that Grumpy Face recently. I haven’t seen that smile of yours in forever, and if there’s one thing that I know makes you smile, it’s music.”

“I can play music in my dorm just fine!”

“So you say. But you always get more into it when you’re not around as many people. I can tell.”

“Well…” Keith had balked at that, scratching at the back of his neck where the edge of a book was poking into his skin. “I mean…”

“I know I’m right, Keith. Besides, it’ll be fun! We never go to the beach just to hang.”

“I’m not fooled, Pidge. I know you only want to go to get more samples.”

Pidge rolled her eyes. “Well, yeah. It’s a win-win. Ultimate gains are key. Also, Allura bet 10 bucks that I can’t get a picture of you genuinely smiling. If I win, we can split the money.”

Keith thought about it. It didn’t take long — the prospect of five dollars was too tempting for his Wendy’s 4-for-4 craving, and he would have a whole dollar left over. He could totally get a frosty with that order.

So here he is, his guitar slung across his lap, wondering if this really is an ultimate gain for him as he watches Pidge slog through the water, hefting her bag over her head avoid a spillage of mass proportions.

“Why don’t you just leave your bag at the shore?” Keith hollers, lobbing a frown at her while he’s at it. Pidge hisses a breath through her teeth, teetering dangerously as a wave half her size slams into her torso like a bully and shoves her backward a few feet.

“Why don’t you mind your own business?” she snaps back, and she’s probably squinting at him in irritation, but he can’t see her eyes through the glare that sets her glasses alight, bouncing off of the lenses. “I forgot my vial belt, so this is the next best thing!”

“Poseidon’s laughing.”

“At me, or at your pitiful lack of music?”

“Hey!”

“Get going, then!”

“Yeah, wouldn’t want to anger the gods, would you, Keith?” The voice comes from behind him, and Keith whips around, his eyes blowing wide.

*You’ve got to be kidding me.*
It’s Lance, standing tall and lanky in a pair of blue swim shorts, his hands planted on his bony hips and his eyes piercing Keith like he’s just stolen Lance’s firstborn.

“What are you doing here?” Keith sputters, shifting unconsciously, but his guitar dips dangerously to the left and he grabs onto its neck in desperation, determined to save it from the ever-intruding sand.

“The same thing you’re doing, I guess.” He shrugs, his eyes darting anxiously toward the endless expanse of water stretching before them, and then back to Keith. There’s a longing there, a kinship that Keith can’t be blind to. It’s as obvious as Lance’s oddly pale skin, as his shrunken pupils and blistering eyes — they’re a brighter blue than usual, like spotlights dousing everything they rest upon in a thousand different oceans. Looking at them is like drowning in paradise, and Keith forces his gaze to the sand to anchor himself to dry land, frowning at the tickle behind his sternum.

“Are you sick?” he blurs out, resting his hands on his guitar, feeling the warmth of its sides as the wood sunbathes. Lance tilts his head, glancing frantically at Hunk, who’s appeared by his side with a beach bag at his hip and sunglasses perched on his nose.

“Uh, no. I’m fine. Are you sick?” he scoffs. Keith opens his mouth to point out how ridiculous that comeback is, but he’s interrupted by Pidge, who’s waving her arms frantically at Hunk from her spot amongst the chaos and the waves.

“Hu-“ she starts, but the ocean shoves itself into her mouth and she sputters, her arms shaking underneath the bulk of her bag. Hunk chuckles, shaking his head as he sets his beach bag down and trots toward the pounding surf.

“Got somebody to save, guys. Play nice,” he calls over his shoulder.

“No promises,” Lance mutters, dropping to the ground in a sprawl, a bit too close for Keith’s comfort — but Keith doesn’t move away. Instead, he picks at the first string of his guitar nervously, trying it out with his thumb and then his nail, relishing the difference in sound.

“Why are you really here?” Keith asks, absentmindedly switching to the second string. Lance’s face pinches, and he pries himself from the warmth of the sand and sits normally for once, his legs sticking toward the ocean like arrows.

“It’s not a crime to visit the beach every once in a while.”

“No, I mean, like… Why this place? The only things here are mangroves and a rotting deck. Not exactly glamorous.”

Lance picks at the hard edge of a nearby shell that the ocean had spat out onto the sand, his thumb rubbing over its tiny mountains and valleys. “I’m here for the same reason you are, I think. It’s quiet.”

Keith can’t really deny that, so he opts to say nothing instead.

“Hey, guys, look what I caught!” Hunk has a fidgeting Pidge slung across his shoulder, both of them dripping wet, her bag hovering just above the sand as she tries to tangle its straps between Hunk’s legs to trip him up.

“That’s a weird looking fish,” Keith mutters.

“Hunk, put me down, dammit!”

“A talking fish!” Lance gasps, placing his hands on both cheeks in a pantomime of shock.
“I hate both of you!” Hunk finally loosens his grip and Pidge just about kills them both in the process of getting back on the ground, still not giving up with the bag assault. Hunk kicks the bag away, upturning a cloud of sand that Keith shields from his guitar with his own body, but then Pidge switches to another tactic with no hesitation or mercy — tickling. And anybody who knows Hunk knows that his weak spots are his sides and neck.

“P-Pidge, oh my — stop!” Hunk squeals between fits of gasping laughter, grabbing her by the shoulders and attempting to pry her off of him, but she wraps her legs around him and hooks her feet around each other in the back, cackling mercilessly.

“This is what you get for picking me up like I’m a kid!”

“Pidge, you’re like, three years younger than us — ahhh! Okay! I surrender!”

“Say uncle.”

“Uncle! Uncle Loto! Uncle Sione!”

“I know you have more uncles than that, Hunk. But I’ll oblige.” She separates her feet and drops to the ground, landing in a crouch that sends water droplets flying all over the place. Keith grins, not minding the welcome coolness that the drops bring (although he isn’t too happy about the mini-puddles that he has to wipe off of his guitar), but Lance leaps backwards as if set on fire, quickly flinging sand on his arms to stanch the flames.

“Lance?” Keith slowly asks, reclining on his elbows as he looks back at Lance in concern. He really does look sick — all flushed now instead of pale as he looks back at Keith, his eyes still luminous as he just keeps scooping handful upon handful on himself. Is he cold? Keith always gets cold when he has a fever, so maybe —

“Yeah, I-I’m fine,” Lance stutters, seeming to compose himself. He keeps snatching glances at his legs and touching the sides of his neck, as if checking for something about to sprout through his skin. Nothing does. “I, just…wasn’t expecting that water.”

“He’s afraid of water,” Hunk quickly says, wringing his hands together, and Lance shoots him a dirty look.

“What? Afraid of water?” Keith asks, sitting up straight again.

“Yeah… Like, swimming, large bodies of water, all of that,” Lance slowly begins, brushing the majority of the sand clots off of his arms, although he can’t rid himself of the stuff completely. “I almost drowned when I was a kid, and any unexpected contact with it just kinda freaks me out.”

“Oh,” Pidge softly says, leaning down to grab a towel out of her bag and drape it over her shoulders. “I never knew that. I’m sorry.”

“Nah, don’t be.” He waves the comment off, shedding the fear for fun instead. “We’ve all got embarrassing shit like that.” He pokes at Keith’s shoulder, waggling his eyebrows in an act fitting for an overdramatic play. “What’s yours, mullet?”

“Oh, I’ll tell you what his is,” Pidge sagely says, now drying her long hair with her towel, stealing the water from the strands. Keith grips his guitar in panic, every cell freezing up.

“Pidge. Don’t you —“

“He believes Mothman is real.”
Keith’s hands automatically find an F chord, channeling the power of his irritation into the strum. “Not anymore! I told you, I couldn’t find definitive proof!”

“But you thought you did! I saw the whole chart!”

“Whoa, whoa, you made a chart?” Lance interrupts, bumping his shoulder into Keith’s, and Keith is on fire. Burning. Dead.

“Yeah. It was actually pretty neat. But then he got all salty and gave up on cryptids altogether,” Pidge laments, neatly laying her towel out on the sand and perching on it to keep the wind from sweeping it up like a magic carpet. “It’s my sole duty to make him a believer again.”

“Hey. Props. We all gotta believe in something,” Hunk graciously says, digging into his bag for the largest can of Pringles Keith has ever seen in his life. “For me, it’s aliens.”

“See! I’m not alone, Keith!” Pidge slaps his shoulder, the one Lance had missed. Keith is tired of the abuse. “Aliens are totally real!”

“People believe in aliens in different contexts,” Keith sighs, rubbing his face with a single hand. “Life could exist on other planets in the form of simple bacteria, or in the form of basic animals. Sure. But—“

“The pyramids, Keith!”

“Humanity could’ve totally built the pyramids through their own brainpower, Pidge! We aren’t that stupid!”

“I beg to differ,” Lance mutters, digging his hand into the Pringles can and bringing one of the chips to his mouth with a satisfying crunch.

Pidge jumps on that comment like it’s clean water and she’s in the driest part of the desert. “So you believe in aliens?”

“Well. I guess?”

“That’s two for me! Hunk, your thoughts?”

“Eh. I’m kinda ambivalent on the whole ancient aliens thing.”

“Alright. Ambivalent is a 50/50 chance, so I’m taking that one too. How does it feel to be the odd one out, Keith?” Pidge’s smile is as smug as Keith’s ever seen it, and he wants to take her down right here and now, but there’s more effective ways of getting to her that require patience, as he’s learned. Like moving all of her experiments on the topmost shelf in her dorm where she can’t reach them.

“It means I’m the smartest one here,” he smoothly responds, strumming a victorious major chord. Lance throws his head back and laughs, his jawline sharp in Keith’s peripheral. Keith doesn’t know what to make of that fun fact.

“Where’s your proof?” Lance teases, shifting even closer to Keith in the sand. Keith swallows.

“It’s all anecdotal.”

“Or we could agree that we’re all smart, and go home happy?” Hunk nervously suggests, popping three Pringles into his mouth at the same time. The sound of his teeth munching down into the chips scares a few skittish seagulls into flight, but their eyes never depart from the treat, even from their...
landing spot of a few feet away.

“Sure, sure. But the truth is out there,” Pidge warns, her voice low. “You’ll all see, someday.”

“Mmhmm. Right,” Keith mutters, his fingers playing over his guitar strings experimentally. He can feel Lance’s gaze set on him, every bit as blazing as the sun — or maybe that’s just Keith’s cheeks. Keith has no idea what’s up with himself today, but whatever it is, he can’t wait for it to be over.

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Lance can hardly stand it. The ocean is there, right there, and he can’t do anything about it.

The others are talking, bantering, and something about aliens vaguely reaches his ears, but he’s too focused on trying not to dive into the waves headfirst and give Keith definitive proof of the otherworldly, a cryptid to truly believe in without any research.

He digs his hand into the sand and scrunches it into a fist, trying to feel every individual grain dig into his skin and stick against the lines of his palm to read his fortune, but sand has never been a good anchor in any sense of the word. It’s flimsy and weak, just like Lance’s current will to stay put.

But then Keith strums out a chord like his life depends on it, and Lance’s soul is sucked back into his body with a resonating slam.

Lance almost jumps, chancing a look at Keith and his vicious, victorious smile. He’s won the argument with a snappy comment (or at least Lance thinks so — he had said something vague during the conversation in the hopes that it would help convince them he was paying attention), and Lance can’t help but laugh, tilting his head back to bask in the sun. It’s just like Keith to articulate himself in some vague way instead of using his words.

“Where’s your proof?” He scoots closer to Keith, guessing that he’s a much better anchor than Lance had originally pegged him for, and he’s right. He can see every individual fleck of purple in Keith’s odd eyes, his vision finally evening out instead of screaming blue, blue, blue.

“It’s all anecdotal,” Keith quips, fiddling with the strings of his guitar, and then Hunk says something, followed by Pidge, but Lance has no idea what they’re talking about, his eyes glued to Keith’s fine hands instead. He has graceful fingers. Pianist fingers. Why doesn’t he play piano? Lance should ask him, should do something, because he’s starting to slip, caught in the midst of a riptide that’s dragging him further out to sea.

And then Pidge saves the day without even knowing it.

“Hey, Keith, why don’t you play something?”

Lance feels Keith stiffen beside him, cradling his guitar closer to his body like it’s his child. “I…”

“You play guitar, Keith?” Hunk says, his face breaking into a broad smile that could soften even the hearts made of diamond rock. “I didn’t know that! That’s so cool!”

Keith ducks his head down, but Lance can see his reluctant smile. “I dabble.”

“Don’t bullshit them, Keith. He does more than dabble. He kills it,” Pidge brags, bending forward across Lance’s legs to grab the Pringles can for herself. “Don’t be shy!”

Keith looks at her from behind his long bangs, his lips pursed together so tightly that they’ve turned white, and then he looks at Lance — nervous, taken aback. Afraid.
And sure, Lance wants him to hear him sing for selfish reasons, but he wants Keith to sing for himself, too, so he gives him what must be the most gentle smile he’s ever given anybody in his entire life, save for his siblings.

“We’d love to hear it,” he quietly says, mainly because his voice would squeak if he speaks any louder due to his internal struggle to not look at the tantalizing ocean.

Keith blinks. Glances down at his guitar. And then peers toward the ocean, the violet in his eyes mixing with its calming blue. Lance wants to look with him, to feast his eyes on the shore, but he keeps himself focused on the reflection in Keith’s eyes instead, like the ocean is some kind of medusa that he’d rather not tangle with the direct image of.

“Well, there is this song I’ve been working on,” Keith muses, his finger silently dragging across one of the strings. “It’s by Train, and it’s about the ocean. Sort of. So it fits the occasion.”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Let’s hear it!” Pidge cheers, the words slightly muffled from the Pringle now wedged between her teeth.

“Well, alright.” He hefts out a sigh, and Lance watches his chest rise and fall before he holds the guitar right against it, his left hand quickly rotating a few of the tuning pegs and his right hand plucking at the strings to make sure he has the notes he’s looking for. Keith takes a long pause when he’s finished, fingers tap-tap-tapping on the strings and flitting between imaginary positions, and Lance is fully prepared to wait a few more minutes before the show but Keith begins the song like a firecracker, sudden and unexpected.

The tune is jumpy and carefree, made of two lower notes and two higher notes, nothing that Lance would’ve expected from him — but here he is, drawing out the word ‘whoa’ with mores than a hint of musical inclination. His voice is quiet at first, registering at his regular volume, but it swells as he begins the first few words, full and rich and wonderful.

“Can’t swim so I took a boat,
To an island so remote,
Only Johnny Depp has ever been to it before.”

Lance’s breath catches in his chest. Because damn. Keith can sing. Keith can really, really sing, and Lance can’t stop staring at him, at how different he looks. His face has broken down in the best way possible, all of its sharp and harsh bits smoothed down to a picture of relaxation — his eyebrows less tense, his mouth dynamic instead of frozen in its typical frown.

“Stayed there ’til the air was clear,
I was bored and out of tears,
Then I saw you washed up on the shore.”

Lance sees a flicker of movement in the corner of his eye, and looks over at Hunk only to see him in his trademarked mode of suspicion, the accusation mixed with a bit of humor. Lance tilts his head to the side, followed with a silent ‘what?’ for Hunk to read on his lips, but Hunk doesn’t answer.

“I offered you my coat,
Thank goodness love can float,
Crazy how that shipwreck meant my ship was comin’ in.
We talked ’til the sun went down,
Love on the Puget Sound,
My treasure map was on your skin!”
Keith’s voice had been steadily growing throughout the verses, but the last word hits a crescendo that leaves goosebumps scattered across Lance’s skin. He thinks he’s heard this song before, even if he can’t remember it clearly, but he’s certainly never heard it (or any song, really) sung with this amount of passion and unrestrained life. Keith is a beacon, glowing instead of moody, and Lance finally sees his honest-to-goodness smile — eyes scrunched closed, white teeth glinting under the sunlight. He has dimples. Lance has never noticed that. He’s never had many chances to notice much of anything, as far as Keith’s smile goes.

He watches as Pidge surreptitiously takes a picture of his expression, her thumbs darting over the screen as if sending it to somebody.

“*Beauty in the water!*
*Angel on the beach,*
*Ocean’s daughter!*
*I thought love was out of reach.*”

Hunk is looking at him desperately now, eyes bugged, and Lance still has no idea why.

It only takes a few more seconds for him to figure it out.

“*‘Til I got her!*
*Had I known it could come true?*
*I would have wished in ’92.*
*For a mermaid just like you!*”

Lance’s jaw drops.

“No way,” he whispers, his blood suddenly running cold, the word tipping on its side. Does Keith know? How could Keith know? Hell, does *Pidge* know? Is this their cruel way of telling him?

He doesn’t want to look at Keith. Doesn’t want to see him with those dark eyes, staring right at him, promising the end of Lance’s life as he knows it — because once the secret gets out to even a few more people, Lance’s levels of risk skyrocket to the moon and beyond.

He doesn’t want to look, but he does anyways, only to find that Keith isn’t looking at him. In fact, he’s already on the next verse, lost in his own world made of sound and emotion, eyes still squeezed closed and fingers moving flawlessly. Lance deflates on the spot, leaning into Hunk, who slings a comforting arm across his shoulder.

Keith doesn’t know. Thank God. This is just the universe’s way of fucking with Lance, because why not? It’s been messing with him for his whole life, and this isn’t any different — besides the fact that it’s actually halfway enjoyable this time. Besides the fact that Lance could look at Keith for hours, soaking up his happiness like they’re all currently soaking up the sun.

When it’s finished, they all clap, Lance loudest of all. Keith keeps his eyes on the sand, his breaths heavy and taxing, but that beam is still in place, the one that makes his face squish up in the best way possible and his eyes shine like midnight stars in the middle of nowhere.

Keith begins another song, high on it all, and Lance doesn’t think about the ocean until Keith’s finally finished with his concert and they leave the beach altogether.

Chapter End Notes
And so it begins! Sorta-kind!
If any of you guys haven't seen Steven Yeun (Keith's voice actor) sing before please feast your ears his voice is so pretty and if Keith doesn't sing at some point in the show that is one lost opportunity my dudes
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6wDOI2HrsI
Thank you so much for reading! As always, comments and criticisms are always appreciated! Love you guys <3
There’s a knock on the door.

“Lance?”

No response.

Knock knock knock.

“Lance, you have to get up! Keith’s gonna be here in an hour!”

Even more silence.

“All right, I’m coming in there.”

Zero complaints.

“One…two…three!”

Hunk doesn’t quite shatter the door, but he comes close to it — the hinges let loose a miserable squeak that would usually send the form under the ball of blankets into a fit, but right now? It doesn’t even so much as twitch.

Footsteps sound across the room, and two hands grasp around the bundle, probably trying to find where the shoulders are so they can shake them. “C’mon! Get up!”

Lance grunts. It’s not even a word. He just makes a noise.

“Allright. I hate to do this to you. But it seems I have no choice.” Hunk’s hands bunch into the blanket and rip it away, throwing the thing to the ground. And then he gasps.

“Lance! Oh my God!”

“Can you see why I didn’t answer now?” Lance croaks, curling into himself like a cat as the chill of the air meets his skin. His throat hurts. It burns like the fires of hell. He probably looks like he’s just been through those same flames, judging by the horrified look on Hunk’s face, still obvious despite how blurry it is through Lance’s watering eyes — his gaping mouth resembles a black hole, his hands nothing but giant blobs that come to rest on Lance’s forehead.

“You’re burning hot! Jeez! I’m gonna go get the thermometer.” Hunk rushes out of the room with all of the grace of a rock, almost stubbing his toe over Lance’s laptop on the way out — he should’ve put it up last night, but he’d passed out before he could get anything done. Like usual.

And then he’d woken up like this.

Lance turns his face into the cool pillow and groans, savoring the two-second window of chill before it heats up with the rest of him. He suspects that if anyone were to make a spark within a two foot radius of him, his entire body would ignite like his veins are pumping lighter fluid instead of plain old blood. It’s the exact opposite of his nature. It’s everything he despises.
His tingling fingers fish for his phone and find it next to his side, and for a bleary moment he can’t remember his password, but his thumb types it out for him out of muscle memory and guides him to Safari where the NOAA page is waiting. Lance rubs at his eyes, the black text swirling in front of him like it’s fading between universes, and a sudden patch of ice plops onto his forehead, droplets of condensation hitting the sheets with a nice series of plunks.

“Here, this should cool you down a little. Open your mouth.”

Lance does, only to almost choke on the thermometer that Hunk practically shoves down his shredded throat.

“Hey! Careful!” he says, but his voice cracks on the last syllable, and that’s it. His voice is gone. Kaput.

“Sorry! I’m just nervous!” Hunk’s hands are rubbing together, over and over and over. Lance can almost feel the friction. “You can’t see what you look like, dude. It’s bad.”

“Thanks,” Lance whispers. His shaky arm holds the phone up to Hunk’s face, squeezing his eyes shut as the world spins like he’d suddenly sat up, all of his blood cells racing to see who can make it to his brain first. “Can you read this for me?”

“You can’t see?”

“Um. Everything is kinda…dim.”

“That’s scary as hell.” Hunk takes one look at the phone and his eyes blow wide, noticeable even through Lance’s eclipsing vision. “It says there’s an advisory warning for a red tide.”

“Oh.” The thermometer beeps, and Lance takes it out of his mouth, just barely able to make out the numbers. 102.

“Oh? That’s it?” Hunk drops the phone onto the blanket sprawled on the floor. “You’re connected to the ocean! That’s why this is happening, is it?”

“I guess.” Lance flops over onto his stomach, pulling his arms close to his body in comfort, ducking his head down until his chin meets his chest. “Can you get me some Tylenol? I’m sure it’ll fade.”

“Yeah, but Lance…”

“You worry too much. I’ll be fine, Hunk — I’ve been through this before. Or something similar, at least.”

Hunk’s still playing with his fingers, twisting them into all kind of pretzels that will probably give him arthritis in an hour’s time, but he eventually heaves out a sigh. “Yeah. All right. I’ll call Keith, tell him today isn’t a good day to work on the project.”

Lance’s stomach does a triple flip. He thinks he’s going to throw up sooner rather than later, and he really doesn’t want to vomit all over Keith. Or anybody, really. “Yeah. That’d probably be a good idea. Thanks, Hunk.”

And then they hear a faint knocking at their front door.

“Oh my God,” Lance mutters, rubbing his face with his hands. His fingers are ice-cold despite feeling like they’ve turned into individual columns of flame, tracing their biting chill down his skin. “Don’t tell me.”
“Maybe it isn’t him. It is an hour early, after all,” Hunk offers, but his voice is as doubtful as ever.

“Hunk. This is Keith we’re talking about.” Lance gives him the best deadpan look he possibly can while squelching down a wince, his body feeling like boiling water ready to evaporate, and Hunk’s shoulders sag in defeat.

“Yeah. You’re right. I’ll go turn him away.”

“You’re my savior, Hunk.”

“I know.”

Hunk leaves again, gingerly stepping over the laptop this time, and Lance’s burning eyes slip shut. Finally. Peace.

Until he faintly hears Lotor’s godforsaken voice from beyond his cracked door.

“Oh, Keith! Hey! Come on in!”

Hunk’s voice is frenzied, tripping over itself as he responds. “U-Uh, Lotor, I don’t think that’s the best —“

“Nonsense! What kind of host are you, Hunk? We can’t just turn Keith away.” He’s parading that pompous attitude, like he’s the only one on the universe who could possibly know best, and it drives Lance absolutely insane, even in his current state.

Thankfully, Keith seems to be on the same wavelength. “Oh, that’s…nice of you guys, but, I just remembered! I gotta study for—“

“You can study in here! It’s no problem!” Keith’s lets out a surprised grunt (as Lotor physically drags him into the dorm, no doubt), and the door shuts behind him with an ominous click. It’s a done deal.

There’s a pause, as awkward as they come, and Lance is about to get up himself and see what the hell’s going on, sickness be damned, but Hunk acts before he even has the chance.

“Well, I’ll bring Keith into Lance’s room. We’ve all got a project to do, so —“

“Hunk, what’s…ah!” The squeak is uncharacteristic of Keith, as is the stunned look on his face as Hunk wrenches the door open and shoves them both into the small room at lightning speed, slamming the door shut with a swift kick of his foot. Lance still can’t see very clearly, but he sees enough for his eyes to automatically skim over Keith’s fluffy bangs, the ones he’d hid behind only a few days ago as his face split into a grin, sporting that smile that Lance couldn’t have ever estimated the positive energy of.

It was nice, really. He’d like to see it again.

Wow, Lance thinks to himself, snapping his eyes closed. I must be fucking delirious.

Keith is looking right at him when he opens them, his already pale face turning the shade of a blank piece of paper.

“God, do I really look that bad?” Lance mutters, rubbing at his eyes. “C’mon, throw me a bone. At least pretend I don’t look like a crusty piece of shit.”

“You look like a crusty piece of shit,” Keith confirms, pursing his lips as he looks over Lance in his
“Psh. Rude.”

“Don’t worry, I have Tylenol,” Hunk sighs, placing two pills into Lance’s open palm. Lance downs them without water, an uncanny talent of his, ignoring the way that they scrape on the way down and draw new slices of pain down his already wrecked throat.

“So…you two share a dorm with Lotor?” Keith asks, sitting down at the edge of Lance’s bed, seemingly unafraid of catching whatever he has.

“Unfortunately, Jesus Christ,” Lance mutters, slumping back as a fresh wave of dizziness crests over him like a cartoon depiction of a tsunami. “How do you know him?”

“We used to have a bunch of the same classes together before he changed his major.”

“Oh, thank fuck. You lucked out, buddy.”

“I know,” Keith mutters, shouldering his backpack off and dumping it onto the ground. “I never thought I’d see him again.”

“Not so lucky, then,” Hunk pitches in. “I’m honestly surprised he hasn’t broken through the door to annoy all of us at once.”

“It’s probably his greatest dream,” Lance says, croaking out a weak laugh. “Keith. You can’t leave until we know he’s gone. He’ll take you into that lair of his and we’ll never see you again.”

“He’ll sacrifice you to the demon gods,” Hunk adds. “We think he’s one of them in disguise.”

“And Pidge calls me a conspiracy theorist,” Keith sighs, rolling his eyes to the ceiling.

“You don’t hear at the screamo he plays in his room. It’s not from our good green earth,” Lance says, but even whispering is beginning to make his throat feel like it’s being stripped all over again, so he falls silent. Hunk, bless him, seems to read his thoughts like he’s announcing them aloud. He’s the most empathetic person Lance has ever known, his intuitive nature bordering on ancient psychic sorcery.

“Don’t talk too much, Lance. Try to get some rest. Me and Keith can work on the project or something. Oh, speaking of! Me and Pidge have more data! We can put that into the power point.”

“Alright, sounds good,” Keith responds, casting another look at Lance before he slides down on the floor to join Hunk, and maybe Lance is just crazy, but he could’ve sworn that Keith seemed worried.

No. That’s dumb.

He tries to follow Keith and Hunk at first, words of pH and nitrate and pollution filling his ears like a nerdy song that he’d never normally put on his Spotify playlist. He’s used to the warm upturns and not-so-subtle emotion of Hunk’s voice, but Keith’s is something entirely new, now that he’s listening and dedicated to mapping it in his brain. Something about it is inherently cozy — Lance hasn’t heard his natural voice much, too accustomed to his trademarked irritation, but now that it’s right next to him he can’t help but notice its scratchiness, like he sang until his throat was raw last night, or its force, like he’d decided on something on the spot and would enforce it till his last breath. Lance cracks his eyes open, catching a glimpse of Keith staring at Hunk’s laptop with focused eyes, the light of the screen flushing the deeper part of his iris a lighter shade of lavender.
Lance feels like he’s floating, like his limbs have been pumped with helium, like he’s grazing the ceiling instead of stuck on his bed. His head is pounding with each heartbeat, *thump thump, thump thump, thump thump,* and its eternal cadence almost masks the new flush of nausea that slides over his stomach, pooling into his gut like poisoned concrete ready to harden. Lance slumps onto his side, stifling a groan, and his stomach sloshes with the movement but eventually settles, still afire but not quite as churning as before. Chills are starting to trace up his spine, his body wracking out involuntary shivers — he snuggles further into the covers, but the cold only stretches through his arms and chest, carving out its own space to exist.

*Didn’t I just take some Tylenol? Does it really take this long to kick in?* The world is rippling around him, the fluorescent lights too bright, piercing into his eyes just like the sun bouncing off of the undulating waves, and —

*The surf is pounding at his feet, slipping between his toes, and Lance knows, he knows he shouldn’t be here, that something bad is going to happen, but…what was it again? He doesn’t know.*

He’s on the beach by the broken pier, the sun slipping down the horizon, and Lance stares at it, all thoughts spiraling into nothingness. It’s painting the sky purple and pink and orange, a *kaleidoscope of impressionist-like splatters,* and the water is responding in turn, bleeding red like it’s been set afire. Like flames and water can actually mix for once.

*He’s seen this scene a thousand times over — as a wide-eyed child, as gangly teen, as the young adult he is now — but it’s never resonated with him like it does now. It’s never looked this beautiful.*

No! something in Lance screams, and just like that, he’s scuttling backwards, dumping sand over his feet. He watches his hands work, completely detached from the action. Why’s he doing this again? *What’s the point? Where —*

And then he can’t breathe. He arches backwards, but there’s nowhere to fall. He flails, but there’s nowhere to flail — because the water, it’s everywhere, it’s forcing itself down his throat and clogging his lungs and screaming *danger! danger! danger!*

Suddenly, Lance can take a breath, and he sucks the water down in greedy gulps, his hands grazing over his neck where gills have appeared. He looks down, and his feet aren’t kicking anymore. In fact, he no longer has feet — his legs have melded into one glittering tail, layered with scales and peppered with swirling trails of oceanic blues. He lets out a sigh, bubbles pouring from his mouth, but then his tail is writhing, bending out of his control, and the water in his lungs is heavy, heavy, heavy, and he’s drowning, drowning, drowning.

*Tail. Legs. Tail. Legs. Tail, legs, tail…*

“Lance!”

Light streams through the darkness like rays of hope, and Lance gasps, his legs giving one final kick.

Someone’s grasping his forearms, their grip tight and comforting. The world is spinning, falling, but Lance anchors himself to the feeling instead of trembling, his hands squeezing into slippery, sweaty fists.

“Lance.” It’s the voice again, one that his spiraling mind remembers. Keith. He opens his eyes and sees those violets staring right back at him, wide and fearful and, yes, worried.

“Wh-what happened?” Lance stutters, blinking the tears out of his eyes, shuffling into a sitting position. Keith doesn’t let go, something Lance is eternally grateful for.
“You were asleep for about an hour, but then you just started thrashing and yelling, and…” He bites his lip. “Hunk’s getting you some water. You don’t feel as hot, though. I think your fever may be going down.”

Weirdly enough, he’s right. Lance’s forehead isn’t burning with a vengeance anymore, and the open flames that were raging in his entire body before have been mostly extinguished. His stomach is still burbling, stirring uncomfortably, but it’s nothing near where it was before he’d fallen asleep.

Normally, this is how it goes with his sea-linked experiences — half a day of discomfort, and then quick relief as Poseidon or whoever the hell unleashes him from the misery. But that dream, or vision, or whatever that thing was…that was different. Frighteningly different.

Keith is frozen in front of him, awkwardly looking up, down, at every direction that isn’t near Lance’s face, and Lance gets it. Keith doesn’t seem to be the type that’s naturally blessed with the ability to comfort others. He slowly pulls his arms away, not missing how Keith’s grip tightens before he lets him go, and throws Keith a winning grin, like he isn’t incredibly touched by the gesture.

“Fever dreams. Wild, right? Not as wild as your hair, though. That mullet really dominates the competition.”

“Shut up.” Keith slaps at his arm, a glimmer of a fond smile passing over his face for half a second. Lance recoils, throwing his hands in front of his face like he’s just been majorly assaulted.

“Police! Police! Some crazy man is trying to kill me while I’m weak! It’s gotta be first degree murder! He’s been planning it for a while, I just know it!”

“You bet.”

“Hey!”

The door whips open and slams shut just as fast, a pale-faced Hunk standing with a cup full of water and a crazed look gleaming in his eyes.

“Good to know you two are getting along while I just risked my life.”

“Oh, Jesus, what did Lotor do?” Lance asks, folding his feet beneath him, still trying to regulate his breathing. Fake it till you make it, right?

“He offered to take the cup to our room himself. He almost got in here, Lance. God knows what he would’ve done.”

“He would’ve played Chop Suey by System of a Down until we begged for mercy and swore to do whatever he asked of us.”

“Or worse!”

“Probably worse.”

“Guys… Lotor is annoying. I get it. But aren’t you two overreacting?” Keith suggests, his eyes squinting the tiniest bit. Lance and Keith only stare at him, blank eyes recalling millions and millions of untellable memories, and Keith quickly backs off without them even having to say a word.

“I know he always leaves on Saturdays at around 3 to go somewhere, so you should be free to go pretty soon, Keith,” Hunk says, breaking the pointed silence. “Sorry you’ve been cooped up in
“No, it’s fine. Better than being out there.” His eyes dart toward the door, where they can hear Lotor opening the fridge and pouring himself a glass of juice—or blood, quite possibly. “Let’s just wrap up this slide up.”

“Sounds good.” And then it’s the same as it was before, mumbling and murmuring, the two arranging the information before delving into their own separate worlds of thought. Hunk grunts when he’s concentrating, his chin perched on his hand, and Lance would expect for Keith to be a silent thinker, but it turns out that he’s not. He hums. The tune changes every few minutes or so, and it seems to be a song instead of something aimless, floating from repeated verse to repeated chorus in a comforting, predictable fashion. Lance flops onto his stomach, inching to the left side of his bed to hear him just a little bit better, and then he’s floating again, but it’s not painful like before. It’s lulling, sluggish, dark—and eventually dreamless.

Lance wakes up with a leisurely stretch to an empty room and his LED clock reading 2 a.m. in bright blue letters on the opposite wall.

“Fuck,” he mutters, kicking the blankets off of his legs with a burst of sudden energy—or panic, more like. He slept the whole day away, didn’t he? Not that he can blame himself, exactly, but he has that trig chapter to read and that paper to start drafting and that extra credit for biology to complete and—

The mangled heap of fabric sitting at the end of his bed catches his eye, looking like a bulky monster that makes its home in the shadows. Above all, he really, really needs to do some fucking laundry.

He hasn’t done any since running into Keith last week, and Lance is one of those people who changes several times a day and prefers everything of his to smell like fresh, fragrant roses, so a week without laundry is a quick way to force him to show up to class naked.

It’s 2 a.m. Remarkably early. He’d caught Keith at around midnight last time, and he bets Keith isn’t nearly as picky as he is when it comes to clothing. He probably has another good week and a half before he has to wash anything—and even then, what are the chances that they’d run into each other again?

Very, very high, apparently.

He hears the music dancing from across the hall before even setting foot in the laundry room, and he almost turns right back around before deciding that his mother didn’t raise him to be a coward. Besides. It’s just Keith. What’s there to be afraid of?

He marches on in, banging the door open with his foot, and Keith just about jumps out of his skin.

“Oh. Keith. That’s adorable.” Keith openly stares at him, confused as all hell, but Lance only darts across the room to poke and coo at the bits of hair, his laundry completely forgotten.
on the spot.

“Look at it! It’s so little! I’m surprised you can even put it back, Keith, wow! This almost makes your mullet worth it!”

Keith arches an eyebrow. “Almost?”

“Yes. Almost. I’m not giving you full credit just yet.”

“What’ll it take, Lance?”

“The end of the world.”

“Well, I’m sure Pidge can arrange that.”

“All for me to finally admit to liking your hair? Cruel, Keith.” Lance can’t rid himself of the dumb smile on his face, and even if he could, he’s not so sure he’d want to. It’s just so easy to talk with Keith like this, spitting statements back and forth like a game of ping-pong. It’s a battle of wits as much as it’s a battle of thoughts.

“Yep. I take no prisoners,” Keith dryly answers, and Lance grins wickedly at that, cocking out a hip and crossing his arms.

“Really? You don’t? Show me your moves, samurai.” And then Lance chokes on his own words, because that didn’t sound remotely as insinuating in his head as it did out loud, but Keith isn’t paying any attention. He’s too busy taking Lance’s arms in his grip, stealthily side-stepping and flipping Lance’s body around to lightly shove him stomach-down on the nearest washing machine, his arms firmly locked behind his back. Lance squeaks, struggling to understand how he got here in the first place — Keith moved unnaturally fast — but Keith swiftly lets him go before he can comprehend any of it, a satisfied laugh bubbling from his lips.

“Are those the moves you were looking for?” he teases, planting his hands on his hips.

“My god, Keith, are you an assassin?” Lance wails, slouching on the washing machine’s metal top and resting his forehead on the chilly surface. “That was some crazy-ass wrestling move.”

“No, my brother just trained me in self defense. Can’t help but show off every once in a while.”

“Show off on somebody else! You almost gave me a heart attack!”

“You asked me to do it!”


“No buts!”

Lance giggles. “No butts. Ha.”

“Oh, real mature.”

“I know. I’m the picture of adulthood.”

“Doing laundry at 2 in the morning?”

“Look who’s talking!”
Keith balks, blinking rapidly. “Well —“

“No! Shh! You’ve been beat!”

“But —“

“You’re defeated, Keith. Take the L.”

“I’ll take nothing, thank you very much.”

“Wow. So ungrateful.”

“Oh my god, Lance.”

“Oh my god, Keith.” They both pause then, and Lance looks into Keith’s eyes, seeing their puzzled yet amused gleam, two things that wouldn’t seem normal on him in any moment that wasn’t now.

“Why are your eyes like that?” Lance blurts out, wincing a moment later. Wow. Nicely said.

Keith’s eyebrows furrow. “Like what?”

Lance was talking about his expression, but he changes gears faster than a train can change its tracks, going for something else that he’s always wanted to know. “I-I meant, like…purple.”

“Oh.” Keith pauses, looking off distantly, but then he returns to earth with an answer as unimpressive as the initial question. “I don’t know.”

“What?”

“They’ve always been like that.”

“Oh. Cool.”

Keith hums, falling back against the sturdy row of washing machines, and the silence isn’t quite comfortable but it isn’t quite awkward, either. They’ve both lost their balance in the conversation, teetering on the tightrope, and whenever Lance is struggling he masks it up with a hearty serving of alphabet soup, so he says the first thing that comes to his mind — although what he ends up spitting out surprises him.

“Uh. Keith. I just wanted to say…thanks, for today,” he begins, shuffling his sandaled foot across the ground with a gentle scrape.

“What do you mean?” It would seem like a coy statement at face value, except there’s no actual coyness in Keith’s voice to back up the claim. Lance looks up at him, convinced that he’s joking, but no. Keith’s blank face screams that he genuinely has no idea.

“For waking me up.” He doesn’t want to say ‘for comforting me,’ but he thinks that Keith gets the gist of it, based on the almost imperceptible softening of his eyes.

“Oh. Yeah. Of course.” Keith opens his mouth again and then snaps it closed, pursing his lips. He’s not looking at Lance again, just like before.

Lance turns to the washing machine, thinking this is as good of a time as any to start what he came here to do, but then Keith’s talking again, his words fast and nearly incomprehensible, like he wants to spit them out before they poison him. “I used to have a lot of nightmares, so I know what it’s like.”
“Oh.” Lance aimlessly dumps the rest of his clothes into the washing machine, sneaking a look at Keith, whose gaze is still fixed on the ground. “I'm sorry about that.” And he is.

“No, it’s fine. I don’t really have them anymore.” Keith’s head snaps up as his dryer gives lets loose a metallic noise that drills into both of their heads, more of a jump-scare than any horror movie can ever manage.

“Ow,” Lance mutters, sticking his fingers in his ears. “Can you hear that ringing? I can.”

“I’ll be hearing it for the rest of my life,” Keith snorts, opening the dryer and dumping fistfuls of clothes into his hard plastic hamper. Lance watches him work, still slotting coins into his washing machine, and he almost drops one of his quarters as Keith turns his way when he’s finished.

“Well. I gotta go.” His hands grip the plastic handles, and he finally meets Lance’s eyes, a small smile stretching across his face. Lance nods, responding with a grin of his own.

“Alright. Smell you later, ponytail mullet.”

“Are you gonna get over that?”

“Nope. Never. Get ready to be called ponytail mullet for the rest of your life.”

“Something tells me I can survive that.” Keith turns and starts for the exit, the glass of the door reflecting his wry smile. Lance feels oddly disappointed as he sees him go, taking his blaring music and his ponytail with him, and he doesn’t really know why.

He hums by himself and waits for the washer to stop churning long after Keith is gone, tapping out a steady beat on his thigh with a single finger.

Chapter End Notes

Bonding? Bonding.
Y’all finals are oVER guess who's gonna vegetate on the couch for a whole week while they get their wits about them again?!
Anyways I dare say the next chapter is when shit starts picking up - or you start seeing the signs of it picking up, at least. Prepare yourselves. Lock the doors. Hide your valuables. Hug the nearest stuffed animal.
As always, comments and critiques are always appreciated! Thank you so much for reading (and for all the kind comments holy wOW you guys are amazing <3)!
“You…used a move on Lance?”

“Don’t say it like that!” Keith hisses, his face flushing a bright red as he snaps a pair of gloves on — it seems like they appear out of nowhere in this lab, like the boxes and boxes of them could never possibly run out. “I was just…! Showing him karate!”

“Hitting on him, you mean?” Pidge gives him a sly smile, resting her chin on her gloved hand, and Keith shoots a panicked look at Shiro from across the room, blood turning to slushy ice.

“Shh! Don’t be so loud! What if —“

“Then you should’ve picked another place to tell me about this…development.” Pidge waggles her eyebrows, reaching for one of the test tubes in front of her. “Now, should we start with methyl or ethyl?”

“Do all of the alkyl groups rhyme?”

“Nah, there’s propyl and isopropyl, and —“

“Okay. Methyl it is.”

“I thought you’d say that.” Pidge grabs the third tube to the right, the smudged name of the substance scribbled on the glass with a whiteboard marker. “It’ll probably be better to start with a one carbon group anyways and work our way up, seeing if it makes any difference on Chemical X.”

Keith sighs, relieved that they’ve changed the subject, although his cheeks are still covered with twin patches of blooming red. He would never hear the end of it if Shiro got involved, suggesting for Keith to ‘think about it!’ and ‘come to terms with your feelings!’ — two things that Keith would rather die than do. He doesn’t know what the hell he feels and how he even got to this point, and none of the boys he’s ever blushed over feel the same way about him, so what’s the point? It’ll fade eventually, and he’ll be safe again.

Probably.

Ugh. He shakes his head, tuning in as Allura strides up to them in her full lab coat, looking positively frazzled yet still somehow in control.

“Alright. I know it blew up last time we tried something like this —“ Keith glances toward the coal-black scorch marks slashed into the wall and winces, his hand drifting to the then-singed back of his hair — “but I think it’s going to work this time!” She flashes them a winning smile, pearly teeth and all, and Keith catches a glance of Shiro’s starstruck face, the expression wiping clean a second before Allura looks back at him. Close call.

“Keith and I chose methyl for the first alkyl group. It’s a one-carbon, so if it doesn’t work, we’ll move up to ethyl, and so on and so forth,” Pidge confirms, handing the test tube to Allura. “Let’s try to not explode the earth, shall we?”

“As nice as that sounds, I think trying to stabilize a volatile substance would have the opposite

From what he heard Allura and Shiro talk about an hour earlier, their best shot at getting a good look at the substance is to slow its rapid changing, giving them a window to better observe its every individual stage and the process of transformation. Pidge had proposed that they diffuse it over a large surface at first — a nice, hands-free approach — but that had done absolutely nothing, so Allura came up with the more unpredictable prospect of introducing the substance to a neighbor that could donate its electrons, filling the erratic gaps. To be honest, he thinks they have a fair shot of at least slowing the jumping bean down, if not pausing it altogether, and so does Pidge this time, based on her maniac smile.

“Okay, Keith, could you record the monitor for us?” Allura asks, ignoring Pidge’s comment, and he nods.

“Sure thing.” Keith digs his phone out of his pocket and points the camera toward the mini-screen on the electron microscope that’s currently set on Chemical X, watching the atomic clusters wriggle and writhe and jump from one form to another, forming nonsense static between each change like it’s flipping through television channels.

“What’s it even doing in the space between one form and the next?” Pidge muses, pushing her glasses further up the bridge of her nose as she leans toward the monitor, squinting. “It doesn’t even look like the atoms are bonded at all in that time, although it’s going to fast for me to properly see…”

“According to the footage I reviewed, it seems to me that it’s switching between two or three forms at once,” Shiro answers, taking the vial that Allura hands to him. “Each form is just as unstable, I’m guessing, so it devolves into that…mess. And that can’t hold, so it jumps to another form, but that one is even worse, and it all just repeats.”

“Solid theory, Shiro. I guess we’ll see in a second,” Allura says, completely missing his pleased flush. Keith almost snorts. Does Shiro even like science, or is he only in it for Allura? “Add the methyl to the slide, will you?”

“Alright.” Shiro fiddles with the enormous machinery for a moment, his broad back blocking half of his actions, but Keith can vaguely see him retract the slide and re-apply the Chemical X, dabbing some methyl on its side. He then inserts it back into the gigantic machine, and Keith hits record, his heart quickening in his chest.

The change is immediate — nothing can obscure the entirely new cluster of methyl that’s attached itself to X’s side like a plug-in, or the changes in the transformations that now struggle to take place while locked to another group. It hasn’t stopped completely, but it does seem to have to work twice as hard to twist itself into another shape, enslaved to the natural order of things.

“It looks like there’s only two forms,” Allura murmurs, pressing a gloved hand to the screen.

“Maybe it can only switch between two forms in this current state of being bonded? It could block all of the other combinations off,” Shiro suggests. “We’ll have to review the previous footage frame-by-frame, although it’s possible that I could have accidentally interpreted one of the in-betweens as a separate form. It didn’t record clearly enough in the first place.”

“If we’re changing the number of electrons it has, aren’t we changing the chemical altogether?” Pidge nervously pipes up. “It’s still sorta too fast for me to see how it’s bonded.”
“It looks like a plain covalent bond to me, but we’ll make sure,” Allura confirms. “Keith, you can stop recording now. Can you hook up your phone to the computer and import the footage into Windows Media Player?”

“Yeah. Pidge, you got a cord?”

“I think so. Check the first zipper of my backpack.”

“Okay.”

Allura clasps her hands together, very obviously pleased. “I’ll start a new recording of Chemical X, and we’ll re-do the first frame-by-frame analysis to see how many forms it really has. And then we can do a before methyl and after methyl side-by-side comparison!”

“How do you think you’ll start this research paper?” Shiro teases, grabbing a notebook off of the tabletop and scribbling something into its margins, and Allura beams back.

“I think I’ll call it ‘The Case of Methyl, Ethyl, and Chemical X.’”

“Sounds like a sci-fi Sherlock Holmes spinoff,” Keith says, and the room erupts into laughter, like he was kidding. He doesn’t have the heart to tell anyone that he was being completely serious.

Lance stares at his tail, scowling at its reflective sparkle. Normally he loves the flashiness of things — the bits of glitter in the eyeshadow that he wears every so often, the holo strips bedazzling the sides of his favorite pair of tennis shoes — but this is just ridiculous.

His hand grips the sides of the bathtub, his thumb dipping into the water that laps directly below it. He’s filled it up to the literal brim, probably wasting all of their hot water, but who else would be taking a bath at noon?

(Probably a lot of tired college students, now that he thinks about it, but he doesn’t feel particularly guilty — he certainly needs it more than they do right now.)

Lance carefully sits up in the bath, wincing as a bit of the water sloshes out of the tub and splats onto the tile, like the waves pounding against a rocky shore—

“Stop it,” he mutters, bringing up a hand to lightly slap at his cheek. Nope. He isn’t thinking about the ocean. Who’s thinking about the ocean? Not him. Instead, he leans forward as far as humanly possible to take a look at the fine print of the epsom salt package that he’d precariously balanced on the edge of the tub. It still reads the same thing, predictably — two cups of salt per bath.

Lance huffs and upturns the rest of the bag into the water without a second thought, transforming the entire bath into a sickly-smelling, half-sludge mess, like an oil spill in the middle of the Gu—

“Oh my God!” Lance hollers, throwing his arms up and his head back, his skull cracking against the spout that he forgot existed. He swears like a sea-born sailor, half the words bubbled between air and water as he dips further into the bath in pain, letting the epsom salt soothe his muscles and mind — although the mind part is a lie. No, his mind is whirling, twirling, doing everything that he doesn’t want it to.

Why isn’t the epsom salt helping? It always does! He wrote it down in the Mermaid Handbook and everything!
“Nonono,” Lance mutters, crossing his arms tightly against his chest. Mermaid Handbook. Mermaid Handbook. *Stay focused, McClain.* Where was he when he last stopped writing? 20?

He shoves the ocean away with all the force he can manage and begins to think thoughts of his own, his fingers moving as if he were typing the words.

21. *Never keep pet fish. It’s not worth the water-based hassle and the fear that you may be able to wake up one day and suddenly read their minds — which I don’t think can happen, given their intelligence? But still.*

22. *Be very, very careful brushing your teeth, although I doubt I have to tell you this one. You’ve probably accidentally Turned via this method already.*

23. *Avoid dogs like the plague at first. I know it’s hard, but the slobby ones can lick you all over and you’ll be on the floor flopping like a fish before you know it, especially in the early stages when almost anything can and will Turn you.*

*Turn. Change. Rebirth.*

Lance snaps his eyes open, unaware that they had even closed in the first place.

“Dammit,” he hisses through clenched teeth, banging a closed fist into the water. It splashes all around, landing on his hair, his face, and he wishes he could feel anything that isn’t this tingling that’s decided to take a hold of his skin, vibrating straight into his bones.

Mermaid Handbook!

24. *The ocean can be tricky, apparently. We need it every once in a while, but if it calls you too often, tell me.*

*Calling. Like a siren, like a buoy gently bobbing out to sea, like something beautiful.*

Lance grits his teeth.

25. *Actually, maybe don’t visit the ocean at all. Maybe that’s why this is happening. Maybe I gave in too much.*

*Give in.*

26. *Yeah, screw it. The ocean’s overrated. Seriously. She’s all clingy, all noisy, always wanting you to be around her. It’s getting kind of —*

*Noise. The lull of the waves. The howl of the wind.*

“Stoooooop!” Lance groans, digging the heels of his hands into his eyes. “Oh my God, let me live!”

*Life. Energy. Flowing, dispersing, calling, spreading…*

And Lance can’t take it anymore.

“Fine! I’ll go see for myself!”

______________________

Keith willingly going out by himself on a day off? It’s more likely than he’d previously thought,
apparently.

It wasn’t easy, doing this. His finger had hovered over Pidge’s contact more than once after they left the lab earlier, his teeth sinking into his bottom lip, but in the end, he’d decided that this was something he had to do himself — without any ears or eyes besides his own, no matter how familiar the others may be.

He’d tried to forget it. Tried to convince himself that it was average. But playing last time at the beach, feeling the sun beat on his back, feeling his sand-tipped fingers strum over the chords where the world couldn’t hear him… It was too good of an experience for him to forget. He was floating higher than he’d been in a long, long while. He was on cloud nine. And Keith intends to be on that cloud again, especially if it can take his mind off of a certain chemical and a certain project and a certain person.

His car is slowly dying, just like Keith’s patience for it, but he’s somehow made it as far as he has, waiting at a stoplight not a block away from the rotted dock. His fingers tap over his faded steering wheel, feeling the spots where he’s worn valleys into the leather doing this same exact thing for years, but then the light turns green and he eases on the gas.

Something flashes before his eyes — either a car, or his life. Or both.

Keith yells, his voice hoarse as he slams on the breaks, his half-flat tires screeching against the gravel like they’re in physical pain. His eyes dart up to check the rearview mirror, but nobody’s behind him, thank God. He doesn’t have the money to deal with the medical or mechanical bills from a hell of a rear-ending — but it could’ve been even worse. He scowls, snatching his thoughts from their scattered places and stitching them back into a single quilt, arching his neck to snatch a look at the fucking idiot that almost T-boned him, but the car is long gone.

“Oh my God,” he mutters, running a shaky hand with shaky fingers through his hair. He’s had a few close calls before, like most people, but nothing like this.

**Brush it off.** Keith rigorously shakes his head, slapping his palms against his cheeks. He has better things to do than sit here and worry about the almosts of life.

So he takes a right, his car put-put-putting down the short strip of road lined with ragged palm trees and not much else, and parks at the curb. He shuts the engine off. Hears it die with a squealing, revving noise, foretelling of yet another story with him stranded on the highway and dialing the now-memorized number of a towing company. He presses a hand to his chest, surprised to feel his heart pounding, surprised to find that he’s light-headed, just enough to make him feel like the earth’s tilted off of its axis by a few degrees.

“Get a grip,” Keith mutters to himself, looking over at the passenger seat with a sudden stab of concern. His guitar looks alright, if a bit scuffed on the top from its smash against the dashboard during his surprise rendezvous with the breaks. He’s fairly surprised that none of the strings snapped off from the force of it all, but then again, he really isn’t. Red is a hardy guitar, made of sturdy maple and threaded with strings made of nylon filament and bronze — he isn’t cracking anytime soon.

Keith grabs his guitar by its neck and gets out of the car, a secret smile blooming on his face.

It’s hotter than it was the other day, the sun only faintly blocked by weak strands of clouds instead of the ones that look like they’re made of heavy cotton, but Keith figures he can handle it. He’s pretty much immune to heat after living in the middle of nowhere for a good chunk of his life — he could be wearing jeans and a hoodie in relative comfort right now, a trait that sometimes freaks Pidge out and makes her call him an alien.
Hell, maybe I am an alien. Keith’s smile falters as he treads across the beachy terrain, the scorching sand beneath going completely unnoticed. He never really fits in, does he? Everything is so far away, it seems, and sometimes he just wants to go somewhere. Anywhere. It doesn’t matter, as long as wherever he ends up finally feels like home.

Keith plops down in the sand, cradling his guitar to his chest, feeling the familiar warmth in his chest that comes from holding it. His fingers brush over the faint lines of Sharpie that used to be there when he was thirteen, the decorations that Shiro had caught him drawing and freaked out over.

"You can’t use red Sharpie on our guitar!" he’d scolded, his eyes wide and horrified. "My parents will kill me!"

And then he’d stopped, blinking profusely, fixing the slip-up with a few hasty words. "Our. I mean our parents."

Keith got it. He wasn’t used to finally being adopted by a former foster family, either. Suddenly having a big brother? Parents? A singular place to live? It was a lot. It was overwhelming, in every sense of the word.

And yes, Keith loves his family with all of his heart, but a part of him never stopped feeling lost.

His fingers whisper over the strings, experimentally plucking each one. He needs to tune it, but it’s not too bad. These pegs tend to sit still, unlike the ones on his old guitar, the willy-nilly ones that he’d have to fix after almost every single song. It was annoying, but he still loved them. He loved them even after his 19-year-old foster brother had destroyed it in a drunken rage when Keith was twelve, his eyes as red as the sharpie on the guitar that was smashed to pieces right before his eyes.

Keith really misses that guitar.

He closes his eyes and just lets himself be for once. Lets himself think of that old instrument. Of those old songs he played over and over again, his fingers raw, his heart happy. Of the old tethers he created, the solitude inside of the lyrics and the sound, the closest to home he thinks he’ll ever get.

Keith twiddles with the pegs, his eyes still shut, and begins to play.

"Movin’ like the speed of...no," Keith scoffs, clearing his throat. He started on the wrong note again, just like he always does on this song. He thinks his fingers and throat are trained to always kick it off this way, the effects of sloppy practice that he needs to streamline. He really wasn’t in the best place when he learned this song, so he can’t blame himself too hard, but it still bothers him.

He starts again.

"Movin’ like the speed of sound... Feet can’t keep on the ground..."

He grins around the lyrics, feeling the notes wrap over him like a blanket, like something tangible. This is it. He started on the right foot this time.

"Can’t stay in one place... Keep moving’ like a bullet train."

Keith taps his feet against the sand to the heartbeat of the song, wishing he had a drum, wishing he had something more powerful than this, but it doesn’t matter. He can feel it in him, around him, everywhere. It’s enough.
He’s halfway through the complicated finger-picking section when a loud splash sounds in front of him, rudely cutting through the water. Keith jumps, his fingers fumbling on the strings and letting out a distasteful note that rings across the choppy waves.

“What the hell?” he mutters, gently setting Red on the sand and clambering to his feet. He thought he saw a shadow. Just there. A dolphin?

Keith steps forward with no regard for danger, peering into the waves, and — there it is! He crouches down to avoid the glare of the sun bouncing off of the water, squinting as something sparkles… Something that doesn’t seem like the shimmer of the waves.

It’s blue. It’s tan. It’s edges are uncertain, covered with upturned sand and the natural tendency of water to warp images, but the main shape of it is undeniable.

Is this the blue fish they were talking about on TV…? Because Keith’s pretty sure that’s not a fish. He’d bet actual money on it, and he’s close to broke. He takes another few steps, but he must be too loud, because there’s a wave of a tail, a sputter of bubbles that rise to the surface, and then nothing.

The creature is gone.

Keith just stands there. Staring. And when he finally gets his jaw off of the ground, he dials Pidge at the speed of light. She picks up immediately with a distracted “what’s up?” but he gets her attention with two simple statements.

“I’m converted to cryptids again, Pidge. Get over here right now.”

Lance is surprisingly level-headed for someone who ditched the whole day to jump into the ocean, almost getting into a car crash in the process.

He doesn’t know what happened. He’d been jittery, of course, but he saw the red light, and he’d tried to stop, but his breaks weren’t working, and he flew and flew and flew —

In short, he’s lucky he isn’t dead. He’s lucky that he’s in the ocean right now, the craving disappearing with each lick of water against his skin, instead of hooked up to fifteen machines in a hospital. He’s lucky that he knows where to go to get his breaks fixed.

Lance sighs, his hands skimming over the shells that carpet the bottom of this part of the coast. Some are sea glass, pearlescent and sharply edged, a whole pile of the stuff sitting next to a few conch shells that wait to be taken up by another resident. Lance leaves them be. He has piles and piles of shells of all kinds back at home, and an entire jar of shark teeth to boot that he proudly shows off to anyone that’s willing to hear him babble about it for an hour straight.

He sinks down to the bottom with a flick of his tail, tracing a finger over a soft pink shell with rounded rivulets on top of its curved back, scouring his mind for any of the intrusive thoughts. They were unrelenting before, pelting themselves at his brain from each and every way, even worming itself into his dreams, but now? They’re gone, only a slight tug still remaining. It’s almost suspicious. Lance is almost scared.

Or, rather, he would be if he hadn’t thought of a genius solution. Every few days he’d drive to the beach, dip his toes in the water, and voila! Thirty minutes of a tail and he should have zero oceanic influence picking at his brain. His mother doesn’t even have to know — although he knows he can’t
lie to her if she asks him upright…

He’s thinking about this, fearing the memory of his mother’s troubled face, when the sound arrives. The hushed, sharp, coercive sound, clear as day even down here, where everything is muffled by millions of gallons of water.

Lance whips around, staring into the never-ending blue, and there’s nothing. Absolutely nothing.

He hears it again. It’s as vague as white noise, but also oddly familiar, like he’s heard a recognizable pattern in a string of useless jabber. He can’t tell if it’s in his mind or if it’s actually in his ears, but the tug in his gut is strengthening, a giant hand wrapping around its end and pulling without hesitation.

_out. out. out to the sea._

And yeah, Lance is officially scared.

“Oh, hell no,” he mutters, the garbled sound spilling out of his mouth in a flurry of bubbles, and he turns around and books it back to the shore with a single swipe of his tail, ignoring the tightening in his chest, ignoring the sound as it grows almost imperceptibly louder, thrumming and thrumming and —

There’s something else. Something even more familiar than the slurring nothing-noise, growing in strength as the water shallows, dipping at his back, skimming over his tail. Lance pokes his head above the water, the stuff spilling out of his ears, and a chill trickles down his spine for more reasons than one.

It’s Keith. On the beach. Singing. Looking oh-so-happy, incredibly free, relishing the release of the tune, riding its tide. He’s smiling again, that same damn smile that makes Lance smile too, even though the fear that has him in its grip, but then Keith opens his eyes and oh shit, he has to move. Quickly. Right now.

He dips his head under the water, plunging himself back into a world of sound and temptation, and darts away as fast as he can, fear prickling at his chest and a cramp stretching through his tail. Did Keith see him? If he did, would he even believe it? Oh, _God_, now Lance is panicking, heavy breaths in through his gills, out through his mouth.

Epsom salt isn’t helping. Keith was on the shore. The ocean is fucking talking to him.

Lance needs to get out of here and talk to Hunk, stat.

Chapter End Notes

Hello welcome to Fishy Business where we bullshit microscopes/science and make Michael Faraday and James Dalton roll in their graves!

And tbh I wasn't even going to go into Keith's backstory in this chapter but for some reason it just came out when i was writing it so hERE WE ARE I guess lol I swear! Everything will make sense in time! We're a little over halfway through the story I believe (this was originally supposed to be over 20,000 words, silly me, thinking I could ever write something that short), and the interesting stuff is coming up. I cannot WAIT to write a bunch of it!

Thank you for all of your kind comments and kudos!! I love you guys so much! And as
always, comments and criticisms are always appreciated!
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pidge arrived at the scene a grand total of ten minutes after their phone call, making Keith think that she either teleported half the way or tore through at least five red lights, both of which are equally possible in his mind — if anybody could find a way to bend time and space or avoid the hawk-eyed police officers, it’s her.

It’s also Pidge that can squeeze the life out of somebody like an anaconda, apparently, which Keith learned the hard way. His eyes had been tracing over the ever-changing line where the sea laps over the sand, its arms reaching out further and further at each onslaught of waves as if determined to reach out and grab Keith in its grip, so he was already on edge when he heard the shriek erupt from behind his back.

“Keith!”

Keith jumped, his heart pounding at the hollow of his throat like a bass drum, and he struggled for a few moments before recognizing that, no, he’s not suffering from a heart attack — it’s just Pidge, her arms wrapped around his chest like taut rubber bands, her face pressed into his back.

“I knew you’d come back to the light!” she’d yelled, her voice muffled by his t-shirt.

“Pidge…please…”

“You’ll believe me about aliens now, right? Not gonna lie, that was really bothering me, given how we met and everything.”

“Can’t…breathe…!”

“Oh!” She took a quick step back and swung around to face his front, grinning from ear-to-ear, even her glasses shining merrily under the sun. She quite obviously wasn’t dressed for the beach, her legs clad in jeans and her favorite Converse on her feet instead of a pair of dollar-store sandals, but who has time to change when evidence of the impossible has just popped up? Her comfort can wait.

“Well. I’ll give you, like, five seconds to recover, but then you gotta tell me everything.”

So Keith did. And now Pidge’s mouth is hanging wide open, her eyes bugging out almost grotesquely, like a pantomime of some cheesy horror film from the 40’s.

“You’re gonna catch flies,” Keith drily comments, and Pidge snaps her mouth shut, pinning him in place with a deadly stink-eye worthy of an Oscar.

“Since when have there ever been flies at the beach, Keith? Don’t distract me! You’re telling me that you saw the blue fish?”

“Well. Sorta?”

Pidge shakes her head profusely, bringing her hands to her temples, squeezing her eyes shut for a good few seconds before popping them open again. “You think the blue fish is a mermaid?”

“Yeah. At least, I think so.”
“And you’re sure you weren’t just looking at it funny?”

“Pidge! I have 20/20 vision!” Keith scoffs, wildly throwing his hands in the air. “I saw it! It was here! I wouldn’t be converted over anything less!”

“That’s a good point,” Pidge mutters under her breath, covering her mouth with her hand contemplatively. She’s got that look on her face, the one where there’s a problem staring her in the eyes and she’s staring right back, planning to take it down before either of them can blink. “You think we should report it? There haven’t been any sightings in a while.”

And in a rare moment separated from music, Keith smiles, crossing his arms across his chest. “No. We don’t report it through the mainstream media. We report it ourselves.”

Pidge’s eyes are alight now, her hands clenching in excitement, up on tiptoe without even realizing it. “What do you have in mind?”

“I think we should set up a hidden camera and leave it there for a few days in this area — maybe even more than one, if we can find the resources. We’ll see what we can find, and if we do find something we can post the evidence.”

“Now you’re thinking like a real cryptid hunter,” Pidge says, her lips lifting into a shit-eating smirk. “A nice move, for a rookie.”

“I’m anything but a rookie!” Keith hotly responds, scrunching his eyebrows together.

“For a deserter, then.”

“Call me what you want. It’s still a good idea.”

“Well, sure it is. I say we do it. But we can’t tell Allura or Shiro about it until we find anything solid. Watch them try to explain this away,” Pidge cackles, throwing her head back in sheer glee. “They can dismiss my alien theories all they want, but I’m gonna hit them with the good stuff.”

“To confusing the hell out of them?” Keith says, offering his hand. It’s soaked with sweat, glistening underneath the death-beam of the sun, but he’s too distracted to care, and so is Pidge.

“To confusing the hell out of them,” she confirms, smacking her palm against his. Her high-fives are killer, bringing the kind of sharp pain that comes along with a bee sting, but Keith doesn’t wince. He’s too busy caught up in the wonder of things, in that feeling that he’d half-forgotten — the sweeping sensation digging inside of his stomach, the shot of glee shooting through his chest, the adrenaline, the excitement. Keith is a junkie for it all, craving the unknown, enraptured with every new glimpse that he can catch. There’s simply nothing better than the chase, than the win, and Keith has missed it. He’s missed it a lot.

“Hey, Pidge, wanna go to the library and read up on sirens?” he says, a smile inching over his face, and Pidge grins like the devil perched on someone’s left shoulder.

“Sure thing, Keith.”

If there’s one thing Lance knows about Hunk, it’s that he binge-eats like nobody’s business when he’s nervous. Anxious about an upcoming date with Shay? Pretzels. A huge-ass exam tomorrow? Popcorn.
The snack of the moment is Cheetos, and even Lance is pitching in despite the fact that he absolutely hates the powdery residue that they leave behind on his fingers, a monstrous reminder of their deceptively good taste. Is it worth the hassle? Not usually. But it is right now, with his heart still jogging a mile a minute and his skin washed three shades paler than usual.

They’re sprawled out on Hunk’s bed, which fits the occasion, as he has the comfier mattress that Lance sinks two inches into without even trying. He’s on his back staring up at the empty ceiling, his arms tightly crossed over his chest, almost wrapped around himself like a hug. His voice had started out low, the tale taking on a haunted quality, but now it’s devolved into a pre-pubescent squeak, sharpened at the edges with fear and confusion and all kinds of things that he can’t sort out and puzzle together, no matter how hard he tries — and that’s probably the worst part of all.

“It was like…this voice. But not a voice. I dunno, dude, how do I even explain this?” Lance sighs, throwing an arm on top of his forehead, his palm upturned. He feels something lightly plop onto his hand, put there by Hunk, undoubtedly, and when he curls his palm around it and brings it to his face, he sees it. A single Cheeto.

“Just eat it,” Hunk says from beside him, his face pressed into the pillow and swallowing the majority of his words, making his aim for Lance’s hand more impressive than anticipated. “You’ll feel better.”

“Will I?”

Hunk peels his head off of the pillow and flips onto his back with the agility of a cat, something that Lance has always admired about him, and reaches up to grab the jumbo-sized bag and plop it down on his stomach. They’ve already gone through half of it, enough to make Lance feel vaguely sick — but obviously not sick enough, as he shoves the Cheeto into his mouth and talks around it anyways.

“But, yeah. It was this thing that I couldn’t understand, but I could, kinda. It was calling me, kind of like before, but different? It gave me a little bit more of a choice this time.”

“That’s kind of it,” Hunk mutters, turning the bag toward Lance, who grabs a handful of the puffy snacks and shoves them all into his maw at once. Hunk does the same a moment later, and they send the next minute in an extremely chewy silence before Lance goes on with his narrative.

“So, yeah. I swam away.” A short, to-the-point finish, just the way he likes it after a long-winded and glorious journey of words, although the current story feels anything but glorious.

“But I thought that’s what you wanted,” Hunk says, quizzically staring at Lance. “You don’t want to know what it is? Why the ocean’s calling you?”

“I do,” Lance sullenly answers, clenching his teeth together. “But…it’s just… If my mom acted that way, if she wouldn’t even tell me, then do I really want to know?”

“You did before.”

“I don’t think I want to now.”

Hunk doesn’t have an answer to that, and Lance wasn’t really expecting one, so they lay there for a bit, Lance licking the powder off of his fingers and Hunk polishing off nearly the rest of the bag.

“And Keith was there,” Lance suddenly says, as if the thought had just occurred to him instead of bouncing off the sides of his brain for the last thirty minutes. Hunk chokes on the spot.

“Dude! You can’t just! Drop that on me!” he hacks, sitting up straight, and Lance pounds on his
back while his friend resets the pipes in his throat, undoubtedly going hoarse from the force of it all.

“Well…” Lance trails off, shifting uncomfortably, and Hunk quickly snatches another Cheeto from the bag to wash the rest down before he turns toward him, face contorted in fear.

“Did he see you? Did you talk to him? Why was he even there, oh God —” Hunk croaks, smashing his face into his hands, but Lance lays a hand on his shoulder, comfortingly this time.

“I don’t think he saw me?” he starts tentatively, and he feels the muscles in Hunk’s back ease immediately. “But. He might’ve seen…something.”

Just like that, Hunk’s tendons tie themselves right back into knots, the kind that need several rounds of massages to even out.

“What?” he shrieks, his hands flying up, and the Cheeto bag falls to the floor, spilling bright orange tidbits all over the dingy carpet. “What do you mean, he might’ve seen something?”

“I-I dunno!” Lance defends, huffing. “He just… He probably didn’t see me directly, and that’s what counts.”

“You don’t know for sure? You didn’t run away immediately? Er, swim, but…yeah.”

“Shit”

“I…uh…” Lance stutters, clutching at Hunk’s yellow-orange quilt. “No?”

“Why not?”

“Shit shit shit. There’s no point in lying, is there?

“He was playing the guitar. Like last time we were at the beach.” It comes out softer than he thought it would, rounded and bittersweet, and Hunk turns toward him, his entire face melting into… something. Something that makes Lance’s insides twist into uncomfortable pretzels — or maybe he’s just doing it by himself, no help from Hunk whatsoever.

“Yeah, he does play well, doesn’t he?” Hunk says, but it’s with a different cadence than usual, one that makes Lance think he’s testing the waters. He’s staring into Lance’s eyes intently now, like he’s looking to reach inside his brain and scour through his soul, and it only makes Lance blink, blink, blink.

“Yeah. H-He’s pretty good,” Lance nervously answers, picking at the sheets with more fervor than before. What’s wrong with him? Keith is good at guitar. There’s nothing wrong with saying that. So why does he feel so weird about it?

Hunk’s eyes widen, and Lance can practically see the lightbulb flashing above his head.

“You like him,” he says, his eyes narrowing, sly and teasing like they were back in high school during these kinds of giggled, hasty conversations. “You liiiike him, don’t you?”

And suddenly, Lance has never been more confused in his entire life.

“What?” he says, the words coming out a little breathless. “What do you mean, I like him?”

“You’ve got that look in your eyes. I know that look, Lance.”

“But…”
“Dude, why haven’t you told me? We could’ve gotten something planned forever ago! You know I’m the perfect wingman!”

“But I don’t like guys!” It gushes out of him without his permission, and if he thought his heart was pounding earlier, boy, was he wrong. He doesn’t like guys. He doesn’t. Right?

“What?” Hunk gasps, looking just as confused as Lance feels. “You don’t? I thought…”

“How long have you thought I like guys too?” Lance is suddenly rooted to the spot. How has he never caught on to this?

“Since we were kids,” Hunk answers, gnawing on the inside of his cheek. “So you’re saying you don’t like guys?”

“Well, everyone has ‘lil guy crushes, right?” Lance says, puffing a small, incredulous laugh out of his chest. He’s fine. This is fine. Hunk’s gonna say yes, and they’re gonna laugh about it all, and realize that this was just a silly misunderstanding.

“What do you mean, guy crushes?” Hunk answers, crossing his legs beneath him, turning entirely toward Lance, and damn it, he looks confused. Genuinely confused.

“Like… When you see a guy, and he’s cute, and you kinda…” Lance slowly says, his heart pound-pound-pounding. There’s more to it, more that he can’t even explain himself, but he won’t even try to say it. He’s testing the waters, just like Hunk is. “Y’know. I thought everyone had that.”

Hunk stares at him, as if unsure of what to say, but he comes up with something eventually.

“I don’t really know what you mean,” he carefully says, eyes softening.

“You don’t?” It’s a weird thought to Lance.

“Nope.” Hunk pops the p, trying to lighten the mood, and it works. Just a little. “You don’t have to label yourself or anything, dude, and I’m sorry I didn’t say anything earlier. You just seemed like you knew? It was all through context, really. I thought it was something that went unsaid, like how it’s unsaid that I like girls, or Cheetos, or whatever.”

“It’s not your fault,” Lance mumbles, and he wants to say more, but he can’t pull a cohesive thought out of any of the million resurrected memories scrambling in his brain, so he just sits there, trying to battle the indescribable feeling that’s suddenly washed over him like a wave of epic proportions. He needs to breathe. Just…breathe.

Hunk cuts in after a few minutes, voice edged with concern. “Hey, dude, are you okay? You can talk to me. Spill it all out if you wanna.”

“I just need to think.”

“Okay. That’s fine.”

So they keep on laying there, and Lance does what he said he would. He thinks.

____________________

When Lance was in second grade, the room was small but his heart was big.

There wasn’t much space to work with, so the seats were arranged into little clusters of twos, automatically assigning everyone a buddy — and Lance couldn’t be more hyped to make what he
assumed would be a lifelong friend, someone to stroll through the middle and high school buildings with, when they would have lockers and have to carry around textbooks and there would be no more lines. Nobody would have to be the caboose. Lance hated being the caboose.

Of course, none of that had happened, but Lance had a reason to remember who he sat by despite their lack of a future beyond the age of seven.

His buddy’s name was Joseph, and he had the kind of flyaway hair that looked about ready to fling itself into space in little curls and ringlets, to touch and scatter the stars themselves. His eyes were dark and deep, and always crinkled from laughing — the teacher would send a cross look their way every time they burst into fits of giggles, which proved to be almost every day. He was smaller than Lance, his legs always swinging and his scuffed tennis shoes barely skimming the floor, and Lance had poked his arm and called him ‘shorts,’ laughing at his scrunched-up scowl and his stuck-out tongue.

He was always the most fun at recess — when all of the other kids were kicking around a plain ball and pushing each other to the ground in sport, the other two would be neck-deep into the throngs of trees that stood about the playground like silent guardians, casting spells to summon elves and bring about wind. A twig was a wand. Gibberish was their elven language. If they were lucky, a gust of bustling wind might come by as one of them spat out nonsense and held their wand out like a sword, and they would look at each other, pure wonder shining in their eyes, yelling and cheering and screaming. Lance half believed they had magic sometimes. It sure felt like it.

They started to call their connected desks their ‘little island,’ banishing anyone who wasn’t a part of the adventure. They swapped stories and smiles, pencils and erasers. Lance, always being the touchy-feely kind, would frequently reach out to hold his hand, and Joseph had no problem with it. Neither did Lance. In fact, it created this nice feeling in his stomach, this bubbly buzzing, and he had no idea what it meant but he didn’t question it.

Second grade eventually ended, as all good things do. Joseph was placed into another class the next year, and they hardly ever talked again.

In fifth grade, it was a boy named Clark. Much like the first time, they were placed to sit next to each other, and Lance got to know him through light conversations about Star Wars, especially about how they themselves would act if they were Jedi. Clark would be on the dark side just for the fun of it, he always said. He was daring, his mouth sharp and his wit dry, and Lance didn’t know why he was so drawn to him, but he was.

They may have been fast friends during class, but in P.E., there was no mercy. After all, sharks and minnows is sharks and minnows, and must be played to the death. He couldn’t count on Clark to be on his side — not even for a second. So the only choice he had was to outrun him, and if there was one thing Clark was, it was fast.

Clark would look him in the eyes as Lance’ feet nervously dug into the wood chips below, his gaze trained over his friend’s shoulder to the other side of the fence. It wasn’t a short run. It would take some effort. And Clark would puppy-guard every time, matching him step for step, dodge for dodge — so really, Lance’s only weapon was sheer unpredictability. He started out making false claims (look! a dog!) or hiring somebody else to get Clark off of his tail by trading his pack of gummies with them at lunch, but Clark eventually figured out that, no, there wasn’t a cute girl behind him, and that the people blocking his way on his own team were motivated by something else (i.e. Lance’s assortment of goodies in his backpack), so Lance had to think of a different tactic.

It was a crucial day. Sweat was beading down Lance’s neck in droves, wetting the collar of his shirt, and he could feel his hair sticking to his forehead like he’d just climbed out of the pool. It was the
hottest week of the year that he could remember, the kind where some teachers skipped P.E. altogether lest their students pass out from heat stroke, but Lance’s teacher was a cranky old woman who didn’t care one way or the other, so there they were.

The game was almost over. Almost the entire team had been turned into hungry, prowling sharks, out for blood, and it was only Lance and a girl named Samantha left, both of them as far away from each other as possible for strategic value. The sharks would have to split up to go for both of them, but Lance knew who wouldn’t go to chase Samantha down.

Clark was a foot away from him, his legs spread apart like a karate master, ready to dodge one way or the other. Lance would stick a limb out only to quickly bring it back in, impishly grinning as Clark made a swipe to tag him. He was practically vibrating with the energy of the play, bobbing on the balls of his feet, and Lance knew he had to act before the sharks grew impatient and began to count down.

To his left, a streak of movement. Samantha was making her move. He knew they would tag her — too many sharks, not enough minnows — and then all of them would converge on him, so he did the first thing that came to mind.

Lance took Clark’s face in his hands and planted a big kiss smack in the middle of his cheek.

He only had a moment to feel his friend freeze beneath his fingertips, to see his eyes widen like he’d never seen them widen before, before he took off, skirting around his silent form as easily as if Clark were a granite statue.

Lance made it to the other side of the fence by some miracle of God, his hands shaking and that semi-familiar feeling blooming in his stomach — the butterflies, the creepy-crawlies — and it was worth his win in the moment, but not worth it overall. Clark never spoke to him again.

It was a little different in middle school — no particular people to latch on to, but a whole slew of just-beneath-the-surface experiences packed into his everyday life. Changing in locker rooms at school, seeing everybody’s bodies change and liking it maybe a little more than he should. Watching the Jason Bourne trilogy, craving every second of Bourne himself on the screen with those eyes and that stubble and that — ugh. Gorgeous. Every bit of him. Lance said it, too, and all his friends would laugh, so they agreed, right?

High school passed in a flurry of cute girls and month-long relationships, usually finishing with Lance getting ditched for another guy or something similar, but he still kept pursuing it, bless his heart. Flirtations poured out of him like his first language was one of love, all finger-guns and one-liners — he’d always been a ladies’ man, of course, a habit that had started with Jessica in the sixth grade. She never paid him any mind, and sure, he was disappointed, but he kept going. And going. And going.

And if that guy he was sitting behind in school happened to have a nice head of hair and a delicious physique? He’ll kind of acknowledge it, but also ignore it. And ignore it. And ignore it.

It was still there, of course, just beneath the surface. He was never scared of it. In fact, he never even gave it the time of day, never even thought about it.

But now?

Lance is just straight up bewildered.
MERRY CHRISTMAS EVE BABES

hEY this is probably a good moment to mention that I’m modeling Lance’s bi crisis/realization/experience off of my past experiences of discovering that I’m biromantic (as kind of an outlet lol, it's something I've always wanted to write about) and that it’s different for everybody! Same thing with Keith’s asexuality, which will be discussed in an upcoming scene. Everyone experiences their identities in their own way and it’s a beautiful, diverse thing! <3

Also I binged Daisy by Zedd while writing this so check that out if you want lol, I love Zedd to bits

As always, comments and criticisms are always appreciated! Have a good Christmas/Happy Holidays!!
Chapter Thirteen

Hunk, naturally, didn’t want Lance to go.

“Seriously, dude, I can just pick up one of those big ass bags of salt at Publix or some—“

“It’s not just the salt, Hunk. It has to be the ocean itself. Don’t sweat it! I’ll be back in an hour, tops!”

“You better be, or I’m coming after you myself.”

“So be it.”

He made it to the beach without a dramatic near-death experience this time, carefully yielding to every yellow light and stopping firmly at the reds, feeling that thing that’s made its home in his stomach uncurl and rumble and leisurely stretch its tendons out toward the sea. It’s been a few days since the scare — he’d finally caught up on the classes that he’d been skipping handfuls at a time by holing himself up in his room for hours while hunched over his computer and stacks of ratty rented textbooks, and yeah, he’s exhausted, but the lapping waves should be a good pick-me-up, right?

Besides. It’s not like he’s going in entirely. It’s just a dip, just enough to satiate the Thing, and then he’s hightailing it out of there.

It’s too bad he doesn’t get the chance.

Lance parks his car in the lot of a nearby family-owned bait and tackle shop and waltzes down the rest of the street, the gravel road crunching beneath his feet, sand dusting it like a light garnish. He could’ve parked it on the side of the road, sure, but he doesn’t want to be tied directly to this place via his car placement.

Speaking of cars…

Lance almost stops in his tracks, staring at the rust bucket that’s parked itself in his former spot by the weed-ridden curb, its red paint chipped and stripped and fading practically right before his eyes. He doesn’t recognize the car, but he doesn’t need to know it to feel the sinking disappointment that’s pitted into his gut, scooping away any of the little stamina he has stored and dumping it into the trash. Someone else is here.

_Maybe I could walk further down the beach?_ It’s a lonely little strip, dotted with swarming groups of fire ants and knife-like shells and several other half-dead piers almost identical to the one at the start, but he’s willing to brave it if it means a slice of time to himself, alone and undiscovered.

He hops over the curb and crunches through the tuft-tipped weeds, past the scatterings of tall grasses and ragged undergrowth, until his feet hit warm, chunky sand — not quite as silky as the stuff spread over the famed Miami beaches, but good enough. He shuffles through it gratuitously, stuffing his sandals with the grains, feeling them squish between his toes. It’s _warm_, carrying all the comfort of a heated blanket, and he wants nothing but to face-plant into it entirely and _sleep_, easing the nasty bags out of their resident space beneath his eyes, returning the energy to his limbs. The sun is heady, seeping into him like syrup, and Lance blinks, smooth and careful. Maybe, just maybe, he could lie here for a while instead of diving head-first into the water like the ocean wants him to…
And then the next thing Lance knows he’s on his back, eyes closed, the sun flushing the would-be darkness into a vivid red. He flops his hand over his eyes, watching as the red melts to a cool blue, and it feels like he’s rocking, back and forth, back and forth, out on a voyage to nowhere…

Something taps his leg, and for a sleep-slowed moment, Lance things it might be a wave, hovering above him expectantly like in Moana. Why wouldn’t that be the case? His life is weird enough as it is.

“Lance?”

But the ocean doesn’t talk. At least, not like that. Not in that musically inclined voice. Lance snaps his eyes open, a gasp shredding through his chest — and it’s not from the glare of the sun stabbing into his eyes, although he desperately wishes it was.

Out of all the people on this earth, all seven billion of them, it has to be Keith, doesn’t it?

“U-Uh,” Lance mutters, sucking his bottom lip into his mouth. He’s not tired anymore. Not at all. Who could ever fall asleep with a traitorous heart that wants to smash its way out of their chest and leave them dead in its destructive wake? “H-Hey, Keith?”

Keith frowns, staring down at him. He’s got his hair tied up in a tiny ponytail again, dammit, and his bangs are falling across his face just so, shielding his left eye and leaving the right for all to see. The sun cuts across it diagonally, setting his iris on fire, and it’s like a lilac sunset, flecked with the black of the oncoming twilight and sprinkled with the light of the silver-lined clouds.

“Are you…okay?” He sounds dubious, his mouth pulled into a tiny frown, and Lance sits up with a start, scrabbling a few inches backward in the sand.

“Yeah! ’M fine! All good! Just peachy!” His face is on fire, burning, burning, burning — why isn’t there smoke in the air? Is this embarrassment? What is this? Why does it feel so easy, yet so hard to understand? “What about you, Keith-a-roo?”

Keith tilts his head to the side, and Lance wants to die. Keith-a-roo? Really? What the everloving fuck was —

“I’m ready to dance, Lancey-Lance,” Keith suddenly responds, half a smile cracking over his face, and… Was that a joke? Keith Kogane, making a joke?

“I’m glad I’m rubbing off on you,” Lance shoots back, the words intertwining with a surprised laugh, but Keith only rolls his eyes.

“That means we’ve done our jobs.”

“No, getting you to lighten up! Now help a guy out, would you?” He reaches his hand up, realizing a nanosecond too late what a bad idea this is — Keith’s palm is comfortable, dry and warm, while Lance’s is a sweaty and clammy mess. It’s all he can do to heft himself up, leaning maybe a bit too much on Keith before snatching his hand away and desperately wiping it on his shorts. Keith, thankfully, doesn’t seem to notice — he’s looking out to the sea instead, his hair curling around his ear and his bangs blowing back with the tug of the wind, exposing both eyes for once.

“What’re you doing here?” Keith asks, throwing him a side-glance, and Lance almost laughs. Oh,
I'm here to turn into a mermaid/merman/whatever to avoid the practical joke the ocean keeps pulling on me. Y'know, the one it does where it wants you to just disappear in it and probably expose yourself in the process? Good times! What're you doing here, Keith, hmm?

“Just…enjoying the beach,” Lance lies through his teeth, faking a boisterous smile that’s just a smidge too tight. “What about you?”

He expects a similar answer, but instead, Keith pauses. Purses his lips.

Lance smells drama.

“Oh? Why so secretive, Keith?” he chirps, and he would step forward without thinking, but the fact that he would even do that is now registering in his brain in flashing lights and screaming bells. He would do that. Why would he do that? He would do that when flirting with a girl, but…

Flirting? Who said anything about flirting, Lance? He isn’t flirting with Keith. He’s never flirted with…well. Thinking back, is that really true? If he did, it would’ve been subconscious, then! But who can tell if said past flirtations were really in the flirting spirit? If he does the same action once it doesn’t mean it has the same meaning behind it the second time with another person, right? Maybe it’s situational? If he thinks back to the situation —

“Lance?”

Lance blinks, swallowing heavily. Keith is waving a hand in front of his face, his shadow casting a cool slice of shade over Lance’s nose.

“Sorry. I was just thinking. What did you say?” he weakly says, and Keith blankly stares at him for a moment longer before going on. Sort of.

“I said…well, nothing.”

“Keith! You tease! Starting a thought and not finishing it?”

“You’d think I’m weird!”

“Keith. I already think you’re weird.”

Keith glowers at him, his face bunching up into creases and crevices. “I think you’re weird too!”

“I’ll take it as a compliment.”

“Then so will I.” Keith crosses his arms against his chest, frowning like a little kid, and Lance can’t help it. He starts laughing — cackling, tight heaves, the kind that set his abs on fire and bring spikes of pain to the edges of his splitting smile.

“What!” Keith incredulously yelps, tightening his scowl even further, if such an act is even possible. “Why are you laughing?”

“I just —” Lance wheezes, pressing a hand to his stomach. “We’re just…we argue like we’re six! I’m sorry! It’s funny!”

He has no choice but to snap over in half from the force of his giggles, hands on his knees, tears squeezing out of his eyes in droves, and it feels good. It’s a half-hysterical release, one of built-up stress stemming from at least ten different sources, one of frazzled joy and wild humor. It finally ebbs, fizzling into nothing like the last act of bright embers, and Lance brings his torso back up in a
wobbly, uncertain roll, his feet crossing over each other deliriously.

When he looks over at Keith, to say he doesn’t expect what he sees is an understatement.

For once, Keith’s face is unguarded. For once, his arms are at his sides, loose and uncrossed. For once, his eyes are radiant, soft as velvet and undeniably fond.

And for once, even Lance, King of Kook, Ruler of Ramblings, is rendered speechless.

“I guess it is kind of funny,” Keith says, one side of his mouth quirking up. He’s still looking at Lance like…like *that*, and Lance is two seconds away from spiraling into another session of deep, contemplative thought, but he knows he can’t afford to do that. Not now, anyways.

“Yeah,” he lightly answers, copying and pasting a cocky smile onto his face. “Now that I’m done losing my mind, though — please, Keith, you’ve gotta tell me what you’re doing here. I’ll just wonder until I go mad.” Which is true. Lance can’t stand not knowing things.

Keith sighs, the sound painful and long-suffering, and he runs a hand through his hair, rolling his eyes to the clear blue sky. “Fine. But if I do, you have to promise not to laugh. Go it?”

“You have my word,” Lance gravely monotones, bowing like an 13th century knight in clanky armor, unable to keep the humor off of his face. Keith stares at his impish smile, eyes narrowing, but he decides to speak despite the obvious trouble Lance promises, seeming to forcibly push the words from his throat to the air.

“I’m hunting a cryptid.”

Lance automatically scoffs, and Keith points an accusatory finger in his face.

“No laughing!”

“I-I’m not! I’m just…well. Don’t worry about it. Which cryptid?”

“Have you ever heard of the blue fish?”

Lance’s blood runs cold, stinging and electric.

“I have, actually.” *Oh, God*

“Oh, cool!” Keith’s face lights up like a not-so-sinister jack-o-lantern, excitedly flickering through the dark. “Well, I saw it the other day.”

*Oooh, I done fucked up.*

“I saw it pretty clearly, actually. It was insane.”

*Oh no. Oooh no.*

“Me and Pidge have a plan to get footage of it and post it online to see what happens. Wanna help us?”

*No, I don’t want to help you! I want to get away as far as possible, but only after stealing and crushing your hidden camera! Nothing personal!*

Lance opens his mouth, about to say as much, but then something hits him. Something solid. Something plausible.
So he shakily turns to face Keith head-on, sporting a flickering, uncertain smile that he desperately hopes will fly over the other’s head. “Uh, yeah! Sure! Count me in, dude!”

*If I can’t stop him, then I can at least lead him astray.*

A lot of things tend to go over Keith head. He knows this. He’s too hot-headed, too laser-focused to see anything in his peripheral while his sight is burning a hole through the target, determined to hit it in any way possible. But he sure as hell notices Lance’s trembling fingers and unusually stuttered words, his face as red as a firetruck from…embarrassment? But he has nothing to be embarrassed about. Nervousness? Maybe the idea of cryptids is freaking him out more than he’s letting on…

*That’s okay, Keith figures. He was also pretty shaken at the idea of cryptids at first, until he met Pidge in that Texas field in the middle of the night where the dizzying patterns had been flattened into a local farmer’s rows of corn. She’d opened his eyes to see the wonderful nature of possibility coexisting with the mystery, and he’d do the same for Lance.*

“So I got a Go-Pro from Shiro and another from Coran, Allura’s weird uncle — he uses them for stunting or something,” Keith begins, trudging across the sand to a thicket of mangrove perched by the shore. Lance trails behind him lazily, and Keith sees his eyes flicker toward the water and snap back toward his feet, as if afraid that the waves will gobble up his toes like snacks.

“I heard about that,” Lance distantly answers — emphasis on distantly. Keith has never seen him this aloof, his eyes hinting at exhaustion yet double-layered with an almost maniac adrenaline, the kind that comes from too much work and not enough rest.

“Hey,” he begins, and Lance’s head whips toward him at neck-breaking speed, his eyes widening like he’d been spooked. “You look…tired. You’re sure you don’t want to go home?”

“Who? Tired? Me? Nah, Keith, I’m fine!” Lance babbles, clasping a hand on his shoulder. Keith tenses despite himself and Lance snatches his hand away, ducking his head down as if regretful, and something in the expression makes Keith ache — he desperately wants to tell him that no, he’s not uncomfortable with it — he likes it too much, to be honest — but how do you tell somebody that? How can that possibly pop out and register as normal?

He chews and shifts the words in his mouth like a game of scrabble, twisting them into something appropriate instead. “Okay,” is all he can manage, apparently, but it doesn’t matter, because they’re close to the mangrove patch and he can see the monochrome grey of the camera glinting under the light of the sun with a hearty wink.

“Is that it?” Lance asks, squinting. “It’s tiny!”

“Yeah. But waterproof, which is why we used it,” Keith explains, his tongue loosening, now. He snatches the little camera up and pushes a button on top, digging his phone out of his pocket. “I’ll download the footage to my phone through the app, and we’ll take a look. Should only take a second.”

“Alright,” Lance says, gaze still cast down to the soft sand. A sudden surge of water erupts over the mangrove, rushing between the intertwined roots with a gentle hiss, and a certain uneasiness spills over Lance’s face before hardening, liquid lava to molten rock in seconds.

*He’s trying not to look tired. Trying not to look haggard. But why?*

Keith clenches his jaw, fiddling with the settings of the pocket-sized camera with even more
impatience. Why does he want to figure Lance out so much? Why is it suddenly so important? Well, he knows why, technically, and he also knows that he should stop before he slips up and the situation turns sour, but —

The camera finally connects to the bluetooth, and Keith scatters the thoughts from his mind, letting them drift like dandelion fluff in the wind. Don’t feed the beast.

He looks over at Lance again, only to see his strong jaw tilted upwards, a soft smile painted on his face. Keith follows his gaze up, up, until he sees the flock of salt-and-pepper seagulls with their lemon yellow beaks, circling the skies like hawks of prey, singing their trademarked song. It’s high-pitched, almost annoying but not quite there, at least for Keith. Maybe he’s just used to their gossip.

He’s humming, suddenly, the song’s lyrics bleeding into his head long after the tune does. Keith’s brain tends to latch on to his surroundings and shuffle through a never-ending playlist of songs that have to do with it — almost every single moment in his life could be categorized through a song, the lyrics and melody walking beside him in solidarity, threading into his experience. It’s an outlet, a way of processing that feels like second nature at this point, a system of remembrance that he doesn’t want to shake.

“A flock of birds… Hovering above.”

Keith blinks. He’s still humming, so…

He looks over at Lance, whose relaxed nostalgia is practically spilling from him and soaking the sand beneath his feet to the core. His eyes are a deep, memory-filled blue, his hands shoved into his pockets as he mumbles the lyrics, not quite speaking but not quite singing, either.

“Just a flock of birds… That's how you think of love…”

“You know it?” Keith asks after Lance trails off, his eyes loitering on an unfixed point in the distance. Lance shrugs shyly, an evasive quality that Keith almost doesn’t recognize in him.

“Yeah. O by Coldplay. My brother used to play it on the piano. He tried to teach me, but, you know. Clumsy fingers,” he chuckles, holding up his hands and wiggling his long digits. “I never forgot it, though. Always thought it was beautiful.”

“Yeah. Me too,” Keith agrees, smiling at him, and — there it is. Lance won’t make eye contact again. He’s digging the toe of his sandal into the sand as if trying to see if he can make it all the way to China, but he’s got Keith hooked now, the melody thrumming through his veins — he has no choice but to continue the song, the spotty lyrics re-materializing in his memory as he goes.

“And I al...ways... Look up to the sky... Pray before the dawn... 'Cause they fly always... Sometimes they arrive... Sometimes they are gone...” They fly on.”

The last line wasn’t just him, though — he saw Lance’s mouth open with his own two eyes, recognized his perfect harmonization, heard him really sing instead of murmur, and yeah, he needs practice, but the raw power in it…
Keith is stunned.

So is Lance, apparently — his mouth is hanging wide open, his eyes fluttering open and shut in a series of confused blinks.

“You sing?” Keith breathes, bewildered. He can’t get over that ring. He doesn’t think he’s heard anything like it, not in all of his life — it sent chills stuttering down his spine, the hair on the back of his neck standing at attention.

“I — no? I mean, I did harmonizations with my brother sometimes, but...I never sounded like that,” Lance slowly responds, the tone of the last sentence bordering on hotly suspicious.

“I guess your voice changed,” Keith not-so-offhandedly comments, trying not to sound strained, trying to hide the flush that’s painted itself his cheeks, despite the fact that it’s probably impossible to conceal when you’re as pale as he is. He can pass it off as a sunburn, right?

“Changed indeed. Gimmie a sec. I’m gonna test this out.” Lance almost looks mad. Why would he be mad, with a voice like that?

He opens his mouth, his chest puffing out almost comically, and belts the last section of the lyrics out like his life depends on it.

“Fly on, ride through…
Maybe one day I’ll fly next to you…
Fly on, ride through…
Maybe one day I can fly with you!”

Lance finishes, the last note suspended in the air like magic, echoing and echoing and echoing despite the lack of mountains, and Keith...

Fine, he’ll admit it. Keith is a weak man for music, and Lance is hitting him right in the sweet spot. He’s a little dizzy, actually, the earth swirling and shifting gently beneath his feat, like the note has influenced every bit of matter and gravity and air, rendering them just as speechless as he.

Lance, meanwhile, is still pissed.

“Dammit. Sorry, Keith, I should’ve tried that later. Are you okay?” Lance worries, steadying Keith by his shoulders, and just like that, the spell is broken. No more ringing. No more singing.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Lance, you have an incredible—” Keith starts out, as earnest as ever, but Lance only shakes his head in a single sharp movement.

“No. I’m not. That’s not…” he trails off helplessly. There’s a million things he wants to say, all wrestling with each other across his face, but he’s holding back with all of his might, pursing his lips lest the secrets slip through without his consent.

And it’s then that Keith’s fuzzy brain starts to reboot like an old Windows laptop, the error sound blinking through the blue screen. What the hell was all that? God, Keith is either extremely whipped or extremely tired, and it’s a 50/50 chance right now. Maybe even 60/40.

“Well! Anyways! Have the videos downloaded yet?” Lance interrupts, blasting through Keith’s thoughts with a loud, painfully awkward laugh, his hand jumping to rub at the back of his neck. He’s nervous. Again.

Keith glances at his phone, a rush of satisfaction seeping through his chest. “Yeah, they did.”
“Are you gonna look through them now?” Lance is shuffling back and forth in the sand, his body wavering with the motion like a flag flapping in the wind.

“Why not?” Keith answers, just to see his reaction, and Lance visibly squirms.

No going back. Keith has to play the video now.

“So me and Pidge put it on time lapse with a picture every second, just to make sure we don’t miss anything,” Keith quickly explains, flipping his phone to horizontal. “This footage should be from around 10 last night to now.”

Lance immediately relaxes at the news, the lines by his eyes smoothing out into undisturbed patches of clear skin. “Okay.”

Keith presses play.

It’s dark at first, even with the light that they rigged by the camera bathing the scene — a family of crabs scuttle through the sand from one hole to the next, burrowing into the soft ground with their tiny, snapping claws, but that’s about all there is to see. The stars perform their twinkling dance above them, soaring across the sky like winged creatures as the globe turns and the sun rises in tandem with the rest of the astral procession, licking at the sky in soft yellows and caring pinks and weak blues. The artificial light is unneeded by then but still continues, brightening the view even further, and Keith’s eyes desperately flicker to and fro, wishing on the former stars above for a flicker of an unnatural blue or a hint of a torso, but there’s nothing. Absolutely nothing.

The footage ends, and Lance deflates beside him, all the air in his lungs whooshing out in one big gust.

“Whelp. I didn’t see anything. Did you?” he asks, awfully chipper.

“No,” Keith murmurs, feeling his face droop in disappointment without his permission. “I should talk to Pidge about using night vision next time. And we still have to check the other camera, so maybe there’s hope yet.”

“Maybe,” Lance says, his voice even, and Keith looks straight at him, taking it all in — his balanced, clean slate of a face, his guarded eyes — and for a surreal moment, it feels like they’ve traded places. A closed-off Lance. A somewhat open Keith.

And Keith just can’t figure any of this out. At least, not yet.

“C’mon. Let’s go check the other camera,” he says, turning around and marching down the beach, savoring Lance’s indignant squawk behind him.

“Dude! Have you been over there? We’re going to get eaten alive by ants, I swear!”

“It’ll be worth it.” He keeps going, smiling as Lance follows after him despite his best interests.

“Okay, okay! I’ll be laughing when they consume you down to your bones!”

“You won’t be laughing. You’ll be dead too.”

“Hey! Keith, you’re a — agh!”

Strong hands scrabble on Keith’s shoulders as Lance yelps, toppling forward, and Keith braces himself against the sudden onslaught of weight, whipping around.
“Lance, what’s...?”

Oh.

The sand beneath their feet is damp and dark. There’s a rumbling in the not-so-far distance, revving up almost like a race car engine. They’ve strayed much too close to the shore while wrapped up in conversation, and an oncoming wave is heaving into existence, arching at the top, frothing over —

“Keith!” Lance can’t seem to get his balance, frantically scrambling his feet back, but his toes catch on the same log of driftwood that he probably tripped over in the first place, sending him backward. His arms cartwheel in the air, blurs of motion, and his eyes are wide with an instinctual, guttural panic, one that makes Keith’s stomach clench, one that makes him step forward and grab Lance with all of his strength, dragging him to the side, racing the tide.

The wave has kissed the sand, now, rushing, rushing toward them, and Keith feels Lance’s fingers brand into his forearms, squeezing him like a stress ball. He’s managed to get a foothold, finally, but his balance is still tilted forward, shifting the gravity as he hurtles forward in one last desperate leap to avoid the water.

But he’s still holding on to Keith. And Keith hasn’t let go.

The final result is not pretty.

Keith hisses as his back slams into the sand — it’s not as hard as concrete, per-say, but it’s not like a pile of fluffy pillows, either. Lance ends up meeting the ground in a traditional belly-flop, but he can still breathe fine, judging by the way he huffs air in and out of his lungs like he can’t get enough of the stuff. He lays there for a second like nothing short of God himself can move him, but then his legs bend in a knee-jerk reaction to avoid the last of the water that skims over the edge of his flip-flops.

“Lance? Are you okay?” Keith gasps, scrambling to his knees. Lance’s forehead is planted into the ground like it’s a seed meant to grow there, so Keith grasps the back of his shirt and hoists him up, watching as the bits of sand teetering on the fine lines of his eyelashes fall to the ground when he blinks.

“M’fine,” Lance mutters, supporting himself with his arms so that Keith can let go. “I…thanks.”

“No problem.” Keith stands up a moment before Lance does, dusting the grains off of his shorts, and he sees Lance’s sandaled feet step toward him. Just one tiny step.

He looks up, but Lance has already stepped back, a flicker of fear exploding in his eyes like a firecracker — there and gone in a flash, leaving his usual, whimsical self behind in the aftermath.

“This footage better be worth it.” he grumbles, turning around on his heel and pointing toward the first ant in sight, a minuscule dot that he somehow identified in .2 seconds. “See! There!”

“It’s just one ant, Lance.”

“One followed by a million!”

Keith sighs, shaking his head. “C’mon. Let’s get going.”

Chapter End Notes
The singing. Hmm...
Also I can't believe I'm over 40k words in and I still haven't gotten to the exciting part
what's wrong with me lol
O by Coldplay is gorgeous please listen to it - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ap-HeMIKi-c
And as always, comments and criticisms are always appreciated! Thanks for reading!
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Hunk is on the couch vaguely watching The Real Housewives of New Jersey, his feet propped up on a mountain of pillows and his face pressed into a mountain of textbooks when Lance bursts into the dorm like a jack-in-the-box from hell.

“Jesus!” Hunk yelps, jumping what must be an inch off of the cushions in shock, watching in vain as half of his impressive book pile topples to the floor and lies there lifelessly. He stares openly as Lance gingerly shuts the door behind him to make up for the jump-scare, all kinds of regret scrawled over his face, but none of them are concentrated enough to overshadow the clear confusion and panic on display. “God, Lance, what’s —“

“Hunk Hunk Hunk. Tell me — what does this do to you?” He plops his lanky self on the arm of the couch, pounding at his lungs with a fist and obnoxiously clearing his throat, and Hunk looks two seconds away from lobbing his advanced calculus textbook at his head before he opens his mouth and releases a note — clear as polished crystal, pure as the ring of a silver bell, drenched in fifteen flavors of emotion and stimulating at least twenty senses.

He finally cuts it off, looking at Hunk expectedly, who has tears in his eyes — which has never been too hard to draw out of Hunk, but still.

“Dude. I mean. I always thought this day would come. I always knew, that, like, there was a possibility that I wasn’t straight, but —“

“Hunk, no! You know how my tail keeps getting shinier, right? I think this is another development,” Lance says, the words falling out of his mouth and tripping over each other in the process. “I think this is some kind of…siren…thing?”

Hunk wheezes out a breath, sitting up straighter on the couch, not even looking at the remaining textbooks that slide off of his lap to join their brethren on the carpet. “Dude. You scared me there for a second.”

“It’s scaring me, too!” Lance squawks, dramatically throwing his arms into the air. “Like, what am I supposed to do with this? Lure people out to sea?”

“Well. Maybe. I guess you have a plan to defeat your enemies now.”

“I can’t believe I can fucking charmspeak.”

Hunk frowns. “Well, I wouldn’t call it charmspeaking, exactly.”

“Okay. True. But maybe it could be. Lemme try again.” Lance swallows, looking at Hunk expectedly. “What do you want me to suggest?”

“Oh. For me to make some food?”

“We can’t tell if it’s genuine if I charmspeak you into doing something you usually do. How about… for you to go make your bed?”

“Wow. Callout.”
“Shh.” Lance settles himself into the couch a bit more, sliding down from the skeletal arm to meet the meat of the cushions. “Okay. How do I…hmm. I got this. I think.”

He doesn’t ‘got this,’ but he makes the words up on the spot anyways, singing to the tune of Happy Birthday — the most earnest and emotional Happy Birthday he thinks he’s ever sung, save for his sibling’s 1st or 18th birthdays. Milestones, you know. They get him every time.

”Please go make your bed,
Please go make your bed,
My dude I am begging,
Please go make your bed!”

Hunk sits there for a moment, his eyes glazed over like donuts, his mouth cracked open in a tiny ‘o,’ but then he blinks. Once. Twice.

“I…kind of felt it? But? It wasn’t much,” he says, his words a bit slanted and stilted, like the spoken version of italics. “Either I’m really stubborn, or you need to work on it more.”

“I don’t even want to work on it,” Lance grumbles, slouching down on the couch like he can sink right through its cushions if he tries. “Does this have to do with the ocean’s call? Why is this happening?”

“Maybe it’s just a natural development?” Hunk suggests, rubbing his clouded eyes. The slur is gradually bleeding out of his words, replaced by his usual, coherent sharpness. “I dunno. Mermaid puberty.”

“I already went through puberty once, I don’t wanna go through it again!”

“Hopefully your voice won’t crack this time,” Hunk jokes, his lips slipping into a sympathetic half-smile. “How’d you find out about this, anyway?”

Lance freezes. His heart gives an involuntary leap in his chest, galloping like a horse on the run — it makes him lightheaded, makes his vision sparkle and shake like a video from the 30s.

“I. Uh. Was at the beach.”

Hunk blinks. “I know.”

“Aaaaand. Somebody else was there.”

“Pray tell.”

Lance winces. “It…it might’ve been Keith.”

Hunk’s eyes blow wide in sympathy, his hand instinctively flying to cover his mouth. “Oh no.”

“Buddy, it gets worse. Guess why he was there. Just guess.”

“He…really likes the beach?”

“He’s hunting the blue fish cryptid.”

“Oh, no way,” Hunk groans, his hand moving from his mouth to rub at his temple, his face crumpling into a picture of pure, unadulterated irritation. “You’ve gotta be shitting me!”

“Nope. No shits. I told him I would help him, so I can mess up his plans or something, but I’m not
gonna lie, this is the last thing I need right now,” Lance confesses, biting into the soft skin of his cheek. “Everything is just…mounting up. The universe is against me, Hunk, I swear.”

“It’s just like that sometimes, dude,” Hunk sighs, hooking his arm around Lance’s skinny shoulders and pulling him into a bear-hug that Lance gratefully reciprocates, smushing his face into the front of Hunk’s t-shirt. “Hey. How about I make some popcorn, and we sit on the couch, and I finish up this reading while you flick aimlessly through the channels and find something that’ll eat away at our brain cells?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Lance mumbles.

So Hunk throws a bag of extra-buttered popcorn in the microwave and Lance tidies up his books, both of them regrouping with piles and piles of blankets, the popcorn bowl fitted between them in the cozy nest. Hunk is wearing his orange headband to keep his bangs from slopping over his eyes, hunched over his world history text like an old man with his nose almost rubbing against the pages, and Lance can’t help but snap a surreptitious picture before turning toward the television, fully planning on emptying his woes into a swirling void of trash TV.

He likes The Housewives of New Jersey plenty, but he’s not feeling it right now, so he switches the channel. Dance Moms? Eh. He’ll see what else is on. An advertisement. Another advertisement. A news channel, a sports channel, and then —

The weather channel. And a symbol that he recognizes as easily as he recognizes the alphabet.

“Hunk.”

Hunk grunts, flipping a page over, and Lance grabs a handful of popcorn and tosses it at him, watching in awe as he unconsciously catches a few of the pieces in his mouth before paying full attention.

“Wha’?”

Lance points the remote toward the TV, his elbow cracking from the force behind the motion. “Look!”

Hunk looks. And seems just as pissed off as Lance.

Even the blonde lady on the television is leaning more toward miffed, gesturing at the green screen with all the enthusiasm of a senior during the last week of high school.

“Despite having a relatively clear hurricane season this year, Hurricane Helene has appeared in the Atlantic, stemming from a fast-appearing tropical storm. Earlier models anticipated it to swerve north, skimming the Carolinas, but its course has adjusted considerably over the last 24 hours, as you can see.”

The spinning red symbol is still relatively far-out into the ocean, but the possible storm paths sprawl out over the screen in various spaghetti models, all pointing decidedly in one direction.

“So almost all models have the storm passing through the middle of Florida. Hurricane Helene is currently a Category Two, but is expected to develop into a Category Four within the next two days. Updates are released from the National Hurricane Center every two hours on average, so tune in at —”

Lance promptly tunes out instead, staring at Hunk, who stares right back. And sighs.
“Dude, if you thought the universe was against you before, what do you think now?” he wryly asks, the space between his eyebrows puckering in worry, and Lance can only drop his head into his hands in response.

“I think it wants to straight up murder me, Hunk.”

“I’ll make sure you have a nice funeral.”

“Thank you.”

Keith only hears the news on his way to class when Pidge sidles up next to him right outside the lecture hall, grabbing his phone out of his hand and pressing the home button to show him the lock screen.

“Look,” she says, but he can barely hear it through her mouthful of gum — she’s one of the people who chews a whole pack in one go, leaving maybe only a stick or two behind that Keith can usually find a way to steal.

“You know I don’t get any — oh.” His eyes flit over the CNN news notification, and his entire being pauses, reminiscent of a flatline — a very displeased one, like the judging silence after a badly delivered joke. “A hurricane? C’mon.”

“Same,” Pidge mutters, blowing a bubble that almost reaches the size of her face before it pops, just barely avoiding snatching some of her bangs with it. She has it down to a science. Just like Keith has his scowl down to a science, the scowl that Lace immediately notices as he plops down beside him in a middle row.

“What crawled up your ass?” he mutters, but it’s not unkind, and Keith knows it. He looks over to see that sliver of a smile that he knows like the back of his hand, that he spends just a few more seconds than usual staring at, before forcing his gaze away. It’s like eating chocolate with Lance — the more he indulges himself, the harder it is to stop.

He’s got to stop, dammit.

“A hurricane. And it’s not just crawling up just my ass, it’s crawling up all our asses,” Keith darkly mutters, like it’s an omen, and Lance breathes out a loose *psh*.

“Keith. It’s still a week out. Hurricanes go all over the place. There’s still a huge chance that it won’t hit us at all,” Lance says, his face deceptively clear, his voice deceptively smooth, save for that *tiny* edge of desperation — and Keith knows he isn’t naturally intuitive. No, he recognizes this because he’s studied Lance enough to see it. That itty bitty edge. That well-concealed bundle of sparking nerves.

Lance is the most expressive person that Keith has ever known, but it’s the little parts of him that tell the real story, one that deviates from the broad plot written by his vivid expressions and grandiose words.

“Literally all of the models are headed straight for us,” Keith responds, shaking his head. “How can you say that?”

“I’ve lived in Florida all my life. I’d run out of fingers if I counted all the times that meteorologists were 1000% sure that a hurricane was about to wreck up our shit and the storm decided to swerve on the last day,” Lance easily answers. “I’m just saying. Don’t worry too soon.”
I won’t. But you will, won’t you?

“Actually. We should worry too soon,” Hunk cuts in, index finger pointed up. “Dude, we gotta prepare for this thing. Just in case, you know? Get all the water and — oh, we gotta find a shelter! Hey, help me research that tonight, will you?”

“I’m not saying don’t prepare—“ Lance amends, but the professor begins her lecture with a customary sharp clap of her hands, cutting him short.

“Alright, folks. The project is due next week, but we all know about the storm, yes?”

Nods bob all around the room, almost 300 of them.

“Good. So. There may not be class next week, as should be obvious, but for now, we’ll be conducting today’s class as usual. I’ll keep you updated via e-mail, so actually bother to check your inboxes this week.”

Lance grins beside Keith, the edge of his lips sharp, matter-of-fact.

“See? It could totally change,” he brags, pointing toward himself like he’s just accomplished a grand feat, and Keith snorts, smothering a grin at Lance’s offended scoff.

In the end, it may have been better if things had changed after all, if only for the sake of not having to sit through a dry-as-bones lecture, Lance tilting lazily to the side the whole time as he vigilantly fights off sleep. The first few instances are decidedly in Keith’s direction — Lance’s head raps sharply against his, nearly giving him a concussion, and Keith hears him hiss in a breath of pain, his mouth right by Keith’s ear, and —

He clenches his jaw, holding his breath as Lance hurriedly rights himself, shooting an apologetic glance Keith’s way. It’s filled with that odd brand of embarrassment again, the kind he’d seen in full display at the beach. It makes sense this time, he supposes, as does the sudden spurt of adrenaline that’s zooming through his body like it’s decided to partake in the Indy 500. God, Lance almost knocked his brains out through his ears, and he’s still swooning.

Stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

You know what else is stupid? The way Lance’s fingers are performing a series of rapid tap dances on his lap near the end of the hour, pushing the home button on his phone every other moment to check the digital clock, like time itself will decide to half its seconds if he asks nicely enough. The way Keith wants to smother his anxious movements, cover Lance’s hands with his own. That’s stupid.

And then class is over, and Pidge is saying something, her mouth still stuffed with that glob of gum the size of the moon, but Keith isn’t listening, because it’s all so stupid.

Fingers snap in front of his face.

“Keith?”

Pop.

It’s Pidge, staring at him with a set of unimpressed eyes behind her owlish glasses, a bright pink bubble deflating inches away from his nose.

“Yeah?” he asks, clearing his throat. His arms are on autopilot, apparently, shoving his binder and
textbook into his backpack and zipping the whole thing up, and Pidge’s eyes dart toward Lance. Back to Keith.

She smiles, cunning and deadly, and Keith mentally begs her with all of his might to just shut up about it.

“Are you ready to set up the cameras again?” she asks instead, but it’s still through that splitting grin, the one that screams danger, and she looks like she’s about to say even more when Lance cuts in, effectively shutting her up.

“Yeah, I actually have a suggestion,” he casually says, shouldering his backpack, and Pidge’s face slides from decidedly devious to crazily confused.

“Wait, you told him about the mermaid?” she asks, frowning, and Lance… Keith can’t easily describe what Lance does. The noise is a bizarre crossover between a squeak and a wheeze, a combination that seems to hurt, judging by the soaring of his eyebrows and the pained set of his mouth.

“I — mermaid?” he coughs out, his face cherry red, and Hunk slaps his back from behind, probably meaning to be helpful but really only succeeding in pushing Lance forward until he stumbles against the narrow row of seats, barely keeping himself afloat. “Is—is there something I’m missing here?”

“Keith here thinks our blue fish is a mermaid,” Pidge snorts, leading them out of the cramped row, keeping her voice at a low pitch as they mingle with the pack of students flowing toward the double doors at the opposite side of the room. “Personally, I’d love to believe it’s true, but we’ve yet to find any evidence aside from Keith’s shoddy eyesight.”

“We’ve talked about this! My eyes are fine!” Keith shoots back, shoving his hands into the front pocket of his hoodie and scowling like it’s the only face he knows how to make, even though he knows that certainly isn’t true — despite how he may appear most of the time. “I know we’ll find evidence! I saw it!”

Somebody suddenly snatches his hood, yanking him back a few inches, and it doesn’t take long to figure out who.

“A-And why didn’t you tell me you were looking for a mermaid?” Lance asks, everything in his voice pointing toward him being clearly rattled, and Keith sighs, looking over his shoulder while grasping on to the back of Pidge’s shirt to keep himself going in the right direction.

In hindsight, maybe he should’ve expected this. Maybe he should’ve realized that Lance was right on his tail, judging by the brush of his breath against Keith’s skin, the bump of Lance’s fingers against the back of his neck. Maybe he knew. Maybe it was all subconscious.

Whether he knew or not doesn’t change the fact that he ends up nose-to-nose with Lance, close enough that he’s all Keith can see, those freckles that he could draw constellations out of scattered across his face but blurred compared to his eyes — the ones that stare into Keith’s with a reaching desperation, asking a question that Keith can’t decipher and doesn’t know the answer to.

And it’s now that Keith knows for sure, the concept hooking and finally staying stuck.

Lance is hiding something.

Lance blinks, his eyelashes almost scraping against Keith’s cheek, and he slowly retreats, his grip still firm on the back of Keith’s hoodie. Keith can’t miss the redness on his cheeks, the drop of his eyes as he watches the shoes of the other students that flood past them like water around a rock at the
bottom of a stream, and he wants to know what's going on, but it’s never that easy, is it? It’s always one step at a time, little by little — foreign concepts for Keith, but he’s forcing himself to at least try to stick by them this time, via Shiro’s constant advice.

So he answers Lance’s question.

“I know that the idea of cryptids is kind of shocking for some people, so I was trying to ease you into the waters a little,” he slowly answers, watching as Lance’s fingers uncurl from his hoodie and limp fall to his side. “I wanted to see if you were really interested before telling you more.”

“Not typically your style,” Pidge mutters, and Keith smacks her on the shoulder in retribution.

“You were baiting me into it?” Lance incredulously asks, the edge of his mouth twitching in what could either be irritation or the smothering of a smile. Keith has no idea which one.

“What? No. I was —“

“He was trying to save your poor heart, bless his soul, but you gotta hit ‘em hard with this kinda stuff,” Pidge airily answers as they finally make it out the door and into the brisk afternoon, following the path of the sidewalk to the right. “It’s like — bam. Here. Have some aliens. Gets them interested. Works every time.”

“Freaked me out when you did it to me.”

“Yeah, but you came back, right?”

Keith has no answer to that. Pidge winks at Lance, smirking at him with like a certified Mrs. Know-It-All. Which she is.

“Anyways. Still wanna help us? You too, Hunk,” she offers. Lance whips around to look at Hunk, and they share a look, something that Keith can’t decode, as hard as he may try.

“Yeah,” Lance says, clearing his throat. “Yeah. I’m still in. Consider me interested.”

“Me too,” Hunk quickly adds. “Although, I do pitch in the possible idea that we wait until the hurricane blows over to mess with any of this.”

“No way,” Pidge argues, frowning. “What if it shows up? What if this storm brings up a whole bunch of them? We still have a few days before the water starts getting dangerous, anyhow. I say we set up more cameras, some in different settings, possibly, and see what we can find.”

“I was gonna suggest earlier that we set up night vision cameras instead of tracking a heat signature, just in case the anomaly doesn’t give off any heat. We’d be able to see it better in the night vision setting that way, if it doesn’t heat up,” Lance says, but his voice is oddly flat, something that Pidge jumps right over.

“I like your dependent variable train of thought, but we could totally record both settings at the same time. I’d have to pick up some more cameras, but don’t worry about it. It won’t take me too long,” she says, giving absolutely no insight into how she’d do that, exactly. Keith isn’t sure he wants to know.

“Yeah, okay,” Lance says, adjusting the straps on his backpack with white-knuckled fingers. “Well, me and Hunk have to go make sure that Lotor hasn’t destroyed everything we know and love, so, uh, we’ll see you two later! I’ll make a group chat!”
He sounds enthused, his voice as light as a feather, but Keith knows he isn’t. There’s no way he could be, not paired with his former reaction, something that registered as beyond the fear of the unknown.

No, Lance is afraid of the known. And Keith can’t help but think that all of this has something to do with the mermaid.

At this point, Lance is just tired.

“I can’t believe this. Well, no, I can. I totally can,” Lance huffs, his long legs striding so far that Hunk has to trot to keep up with him.

“So much for screwing their plans up,” Hunk mumbles, nervously tossing a look behind his shoulder even though Keith and Pidge are long gone and have a 0% chance of hearing them. “Why didn’t you want them to use heat sensors?”

“I didn’t want them to see the exact shape if they ever do happen to get me or some other mermaid on camera. I thought Keith thought it was just a weird fish, but nooo. He’s already a step ahead!”

“Some other mermaid? What do you mean?” Hunk asks, still jogging hurriedly to keep up.

“Well, if me and my sister and possibly other relatives are mermaids, then I assume there may be some others out there,” Lance reasons, pursing his lips as he counts his steps, one by one. Slow down. “I’m gonna have to find another abandoned beach to crash. Someplace reasonably close by.”

“Or…”

Lance whips around to look at Hunk. He knows that voice — hesitant, but firm. He knows that face — guilty, but determined.

“No. I am not telling them.”

“But—!”

“Hunk! Pidge is a scientist! She has connections! I’m not saying I don’t trust her, but I don’t trust her!” Lance emphasizes, his eyes wider than ever, his hands dragging down either side of his face. “And Keith? Who knows how Keith would react?”

“He’d probably be excited.”

“Yeah, excited to post about me on that secret cryptid blog of his!”

“What secret cryptid blog?”

“I dunno, Hunk. Tell me with a straight face that he doesn’t have a Mothman-themed Tumblr. You can’t, can you?”

Hunk throws his head back and sighs, clapping a hand on Lance’s shoulder, piercing him with a look that could melt ice and bring any criminal to tell the truth. “You really don’t trust either of them? Even Keith?”

Lance deflates.

“I… just. I’m scared, Hunk.” He worries his bottom lip, feeling the bitten, rough spots that have
developed there, the kind of damage that not even liberal amounts of petroleum jelly can easily get rid of. “There’s just a lot going on. I’m not sure I could handle telling anyone. Not until I get this ocean thing under control, at least.”

Hunk’s hand squeezes on his shoulder, tight and comforting. “How’s that been lately?”

“It’s…been going.” To tell the truth, he’s hit a standstill, a place between the ferocious yearning in his chest and the equally ferocious desperation in his head that yells at him to just stay put. It’s a tug of war, one that could go either way — and maybe that’s what scares Lance the most. The luck of the draw. The underlying uncertainty.

Lance sighs, biting out a bitter laugh. “Honestly, I just need some fucking sleep, that’s what I need. Maybe some peace of mind would help, too.”

Hunk hums in agreement, peering further down the wide sidewalk where the dorms reside, clearly in view. “Well, we’re almost there. You gonna FaceTime your family tonight?”

Lance sighs. He’s been dreading speaking to them, honestly, an experience that he’s been through only about three times, most of them when he was a kid and broke a lamp or something — but he can’t avoid it anymore, can he? It’s not good for him, and it’s not fair to them.

“Yeah. I think I will.”

As it turns out, they call him first — or, more specifically, Elisa does.

“Lance!” The camera is jerky, wild, the familiar colors of his living room smearing all around like an impressionist painting on his screen. “Anton is trying to pour water on me!”

“You deserve it!” a faint voice calls from not-so-far-behind, punctuated with a whine.

“Anton, seriously?” Lance hollers, leaning forward on his bed to better stick his face near the camera, giving it the best expression of patented disappointment that he can possibly manage. “Elisa, show him the screen, would you?”

The screen stops swaying for a second, and Anton pauses at the look on his face — a mirror image of their mother’s, he knows — before shaking himself out of it.

“She stole my Lego set! She deserves it!” he counters, a cumbersome coffee mug in his hand and water dripping all the way down the front of his shirt, some of the stuff slopping over the rim and onto the floor right as they speak. “This is, like, the third time!”

“So? You steal my iPod all the time!”

“You still have Flappy Bird downloaded on it! S’not fair!”

“Do you guys want to draw from the Job Jar?” Lance warns, and Elisa immediately snaps her mouth shut with a click of the teeth, paling. Anton follows suit, warily slowing his steps and glancing down at the mug like it’s about to actively explode in his face.

“But I’ve already washed the windows this week!” he mutters, hanging his head, and Elisa nods wildly in agreement — she can’t do the water-based chores, which means the Job Jar is a harbinger of vacuuming, her much-hated assignment.
“So settle this, and mom won’t make you guys pull from the Jar,” Lance advises, throwing them a quick wink and a mischievous grin. “Don’t worry. I’ll let this little incident slide. But only if you two work it out.”

Elisa scrunches her face up in displeasure to the point where she’s hardly recognizable, her frustration almost palatable, but the alternative is ten times worse and she knows it. “Okay,” she finally mutters, and Lance nods in satisfaction. His job here is done.

“Cool. Can you hand the phone to mom?”

“Yeah.” There’s still a bit of grumble left over, roughing up her voice, but Lance knows it won’t take long to fade — Elisa prefers smiling to frowning any day of the week. She moodily grabs the mug out of Anton’s hand as she passes by him, careful to avoid the water droplets slipping down its sides, and tosses him a look of utter disapproval over her shoulder as she turns the corner.

“He knows I don’t wanna be a mermaid right now,” she mutters, glancing off to the side, and Lance frowns.

“Why not?”

“It makes mom upset,” she whispers, if that quiet of a tone can even be called a whisper, and Lance is scrambling to find something to say about this when his mother’s face suddenly appears on the screen — her eyes a shade sadder than he remembers, the roots of her hair even grayer than they were the last time they spoke. It strikes Lance like a gong, this new and not-so-improved appearance, and he already thought that he wasn’t going to talk about his oceanic issues, but this? This knocks him off the edge of the fence entirely, his head smacking into the wood on the way down. Damn stress headache.

“Hey Lance,” she says, and her smile is weathered and frayed, like the hurricane’s already knocking at their doorstep instead of a few days out. “You need to go out and get some water. Gallons of it. Lots and lots of water.”

“Don’t worry, mom, me and Hunk are already on it,” Lance soothes, perching his chin on his hand. “Besides. We don’t even know if it’s gonna hit.”

“Oh, it’s gonna hit,” his mother firmly responds, her face set, and every bit of spare hope that Lance has built up evaporates in an instant — because his mother knows things. She knows when they’re about to run into an old friend in the mall, even if they haven’t seen them in years. She knows when a dangerous car on the road is about to zoom past them, long before they hear the roaring engine. She knows if a random fire drill is about to go off, or if a lottery ticket will win anything, or even if the milk at Wax-Mart is on sale. Nobody in their family knows quite what to call it — premonitions? a sixth sense? — but they all trust it as much as they trust sight or touch, so if Lance’s mother says the hurricane is coming, then it’s definitely coming.

“Tell everybody you know to fill up their gas tanks now, Lance. The gas stations are going to gouge the prices like they always do, and there may be lines already — oh! Get some taper candles! Do you have an emergency radio?” she goes on, face pinched in concentration and worry, and Lance holds his hands up comfortingly.

“I got it, mom! Don’t worry about me. Me and Hunk are gonna figure it out,” he promises. “Do you have any water?”

“I bought a bunch of cases last week,” she says, and Lance smiles. Of course she did.
She reminds him of more odds and ends — canned food, filled bathtubs, first aid kits — but Lance remembers the multiple hurricanes he’d braved as a kid, the howling wind and the flooded bedrooms and the fallen trees. He knows the drill. He’s got this down.

Doesn’t mean he’s not nervous, though.

He asks about the family. Sonya’s good, apparently. So is Dani, Angelo, Valeria, all his aunts and uncles, his cousins, his grandparents, the whole nine yards. All seems…well. In general.

“All right, well, I have to go pick up Valeria from soccer practice,” his mom finally says, setting the phone down on the counter and tying her hair up into a quick ponytail, the way she always does when she’s about to drive. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay.” A pause. Then: “Take care of yourself, mom.”

She blinks. Gives him a watery smile.

“I will, Lance.”

Chapter End Notes

hONEY, you've gOt a Big stORM COMin
(Sometimes ya just need a Job Jar to keep your kids from throwing water on each other and turning someone into a mermaid y'know)
((It's totally canon in this story that Lance's older brother did that to him))
(((In fact,, it may be the reason they have a Job Jar in the first place)))
(((Enjoy this meaningless backstory)))))
I took a New Year's break, about week off from writing, and it really helped tbh, I'm glad I did it - came back feeling refreshed! It was nice!
Unfortunately, coming up soon, updates will not be as quick as they have been previously because of the new school semester and my new job, but not to worry! I will definitely be finishing this fic! I've come too damn far to stop now lol
Thank you guys so much for all the love! Your comments/kudos make me smile so hard omg, whenever I get those email notifications my heart goes EEEE
And as always, kudos/comments/critiques are always appreciated! Thank you for reading!
That night, Lance dreams.

It’s diluted at first, like water mixed with milk, and he gets the distinct feeling that he’s…falling? Falling up. Falling down. Falling somewhere, his chest swooping, fluttering, doing things that would normally be a reaction to something enjoyable.

There’s just one little problem, though. He isn’t having fun.

It’s like panic. No, not like panic. It is panic. Lance never thought he would skydive, but here he is in this free fall, about to hit the concrete and flatten into a Lance-shaped pancake as the clouds part and the ground rushes toward him like it’s in a hurry to clobber him and —

Lean hands. The neck of a guitar. A chord.

Lance thinks he’s still falling. Right? He can’t tell. He has no idea where he is. He has no idea what’s going on, but he does know that he likes the voice that’s begun to sing, smooth yet raw, sanding down the rough bits living inside of Lance and leaving comfort in its wake.

It’s all vague, like walking through fog and not knowing what each step will bring, but he’s okay. He’s…fine.

But then the terror flickers like fire, beginning small, inconsequential, but then rearing its ugly head and burning him from head to toe, like it’s claiming something it owns. Something it’s always had.

He can’t be comforted by the voice. He can’t. He can’t, but he doesn’t know why he can’t. It feels so nice. Why should he avoid it? Why?

Fear. He’d gasp if he could gasp, move if he could move, but he can’t. He just exists, now. He’s everywhere, and nowhere, and he just wants this to be over with. He wants to feel like himself again.

There’s more singing, but it isn’t the same voice — it’s not a voice at all, actually. There’s no easily recognizable words, but there’s feelings, a slew of universal language that speaks to the thing in his chest, hooking itself into his bones and his lungs and his heart, and he’s being tugged forward, forward, forward —

The whisper of the sea.

And then he wakes.

Shit. Shit shit shit. He’s gasping, rubbing furiously at his burning eyes, cursing himself to high heaven, because he can’t keep going on like this. He can’t keep ignoring all of these things that are festering inside him like a disease, ferreting into every part of his life, even his dreams, for God’s sake, and he’s just so tired. He wants to sleep for a thousand years, go into the world’s most stunning
coma, and —

Wait.

Lance curls in on himself, dread sweeping over him like a shadow. He takes a deep breath in. A deep breath out.

He’s not breathing like usual.

He opens his eyes.

It’s dark, much like the dorm room where he fell asleep would be, but there’s a faint light radiating from above, dappling on the surface of the water and gently lighting his surroundings below the choppy waves.

The…water. Waves.

Lance slides his hands over the top of his tail, feeling the slight creases between the individual scales, watching the light of the moon glare off of the shimmering blue.

“Oh, God,” he mutters, but the words leave his mouth as a flurry of bubbles, tickling his cheeks as they brush past him to find their way to the surface. What would this qualify as? Sleep-swimming? How did he even get here? Did he sleep-walk? Sleep-teleport? What the hell?

*Lance.*

He jumps and whips around like a startled mouse, his tail working to put some distance between him and the noise. It wasn’t his name — not directly. But it was most definitely a call, piercing through the sluggish water, threading past the fish and the seaweed and the darkness to reach him.

*Lance.*

“No,” Lance gasps, dragging in a breath through his gills. “No, don’t you dare.” He’s in the water. He should be sated right now, but the pull is inexplicably there, tugging at his collarbone, tickling at his chest, and — shit. He needs to go. Right now.

Lance turns around and flees like whatever is calling is right on his tail — which is might as well be, because it’s getting louder. And louder. And louder, and louder, and —

His head pops above the water, gasping for fresh air, and it’s as if the connection is suddenly interrupted, like somebody’s scissored through the wires — garbled static, weakened message. Some of the water pushes past his mouth and slides down his throat, the salt biting at his torn-up lips, but Lance doesn’t particularly care at the moment. He’s too focused on whipping his tail to propel himself forward, digging his hands into the now-near ocean floor to give him some leverage, and he’s almost to the shore when the ocean decides to give him a lift, a sudden surge of water swelling behind him and spitting him onto the shore.

He’s officially been washed up.

Lance lays there for a minute, his cheek pressed against the wet sand, looking out past the clutter of mangrove to the slowly disintegrating dock. He personally relates to that dock right now. He feels a connection with that dock. Him and the dock are brethren, for better or for worse.

The water is still lapping against his fin as if begging him to return, sloshing and sliding in its rage, but Lance only braces himself up on his hands and awkwardly waddles himself into a dryer section
of sand.

“Nice try, fucker,” he mutters, turning onto his back and sitting up. He’s a good two feet away from where the water recedes back to where it came from, and he slaps his tail against the ground in retribution, squeezing his fists at his sides.

He’s mad. He’s mad as hell. He doesn’t think he’s ever been this mad before in his entire life, and he would scream his lungs out if there weren’t possibly people around that could hear him, so he squelches it down and slams his tail against the sand one last time, heaving out a weighted breath.

Lance always thought he knew himself. He always thought that he was aware of his insecurities, aware of his faults, aware of everything that crawled inside of him, good or bad, and he took it for granted — because now that the world’s taken him for a spin? He has no idea what to do.

Okay, Lance. Breathe. He tilts his head back, focusing on the sensation of air entering through his nose and emptying through his mouth, on his knife-like headache, waiting as the world gradually switches from a rollercoaster to a bumpy drive. An improvement. Kind of. He opens his eyes, rubbing his fingers against the sides of his temples and just trying to exist, when a beep rings through the silence of the night.

Lance pauses. Slowly lets his arm down, peering through the tangled roots of the mangrove, and — there. Perched on a lower branch. A GoPro.

“Shit,” he mumbles, sucking in his cheeks. He has to get rid of those cameras before Keith or Pidge come back and look at the footage. Or — no, he can’t just steal the cameras. They’d be suspicious. He’ll just delete the footage and they’ll be forced to blame it on a glitch, or something.

He leans forward to grab it but finds that he isn’t nearly close enough, and to put him in a better position would also put him in a position of dangerous proximity to the water, so he’s definitely not doing that. Lance flops back down onto the sand, covering his hands with his eyes, and thinks, the simple list cutting through the internal maelstrom of his scattered thoughts.

1. Get dry.
2. Delete the footage.
3. Walk back to the dorms.

Simple. He can do that. He can cling to three steps. Maybe.

Lance rolls onto his back and closes his eyes, waiting for the air to do its duty.

____________________

Keith doesn’t know why he procrastinates on doing his laundry.

It’s funny, almost. Keith doesn’t think of himself as a procrastinator. When he wants something done, he does it. No ifs. No buts. He plows through it, sometimes in a way so uncannily ferocious that Pidge has to yank him away and tell him to play her a relaxing song so they can both chill the fuck out, but for some reason, laundry doesn’t qualify as something he wants done.

Maybe it’s because he can wear the same grey shirt for four days in a row without an ounce of guilt — same thing with his black jeans, or red jacket, or any other item of clothing. Keith doesn’t actually have a closet with hanging clothes, when he comes to think of it. He has a laundry hamper that he randomly digs through instead, finding something that doesn’t smell too bad, something that he can
smother with an appropriate amount of cologne if need be.

Either way, he’s grumpily stumbling down the dorm’s hallway in his droopy sweatpants and grey shirt at 3 a.m., momentarily regretting most of his life choices. He thought he’d go at midnight like usual, but then he procrastinated on *that* goal, so honestly, he’s surprised he’s here at all.

He’s also surprised at the way the stairwell door suddenly swings open at the end of the hallway, a figure slipping out and closing it softly behind them.

Keith freezes, laundry hamper in hand, and a wave of awkwardness slams into him with an almost physical force. Oh, God. He hopes they aren’t the talkative kind. He hopes they don’t try to bother him. He hopes they aren’t drunk and about to collapse in the hallway in a pool of their own vomit. Keith’s seen some shit.

The figure turns around, pauses, and studies Keith in the darkness, illuminated only by the faint yellow light that spills from out from some the cracks of the closed doors.

“Uh…hello?” Keith calls out despite himself, unnerved by the other person’s stillness. For a long moment, they don’t respond. Then —

“Keith?” The voice is spent, cracked with stress and laden with exhaustion, and Keith frowns.

“Lance?”

No response.

Keith tightens his grip around his hamper. Something’s wrong. Lance is never this quiet. Lance is never this still. He’s just standing there, wreathed with the shade of the hallway, and Keith carefully begins to walk toward him, setting his hamper aside.

“Are you…okay?” Lance’s face is becoming clearer, now — it’s tight, its lines telling stories that his mouth won’t let loose, and pale, almost like he’s sick, even though that doesn’t seem to be the case.

“Lance?” he says again, as soft as he can make it, and that’s it. Lance cracks. Keith can’t say he’s very experienced with hugs, but when Lance wraps his arms around him, sagging like his breath’s been robbed from his lungs, Keith can say that he tries his very best to reciprocate.

“Lance, what’s wrong?” he whispers, hesitantly rubbing his back — that’s what you do, right? — but Lance isn’t in the state to answer, not with the sobs that are now escaping him, not with the way he’s burying his face into Keith’s shoulder like he’s trying to anchor himself to something solid, something safe.

“Hey, I’m gonna take us to the laundry room, ok?” Keith quietly says, and he thinks Lance nods, just the tiniest bit, so he adjusts his grip from Lance’s front to his side, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. He feels them shake and shudder as he gently guides a stumbling Lance down the dim hall, opening the door to the laundry room and shutting it firmly behind them. He left his laundry hamper behind, but honestly, that’s low on the list of things on his mind right now, because Lance is gasping like all the oxygen has been sucked out of the room, squeezing Keith like he’s a stuffed animal, and all Keith can do is hold him and wait for it to pass.

And eventually, it does. Desperate breaths turn to choppy ones. Hard sobs turn to quiet chokes. Lance shudders for a moment, messily wiping at his face with the palm of his hand — the tears are still coming, fast and heavy, but he’s close to silent. If Keith wasn’t looking, he might not even know they were there.
It’s one of the most heartbreaking things he’s ever seen.

“Lance,” he says, and he means to say something else, but Lance simply looks at him through a sheen of tears, his expression lost in translation.

“I-I’m sorry,” he hiccups, still wiping at his face — the motion is rushed and angry, almost peeling his cheek away with the force of it. “I didn’t mean to—“

“Lance, it’s fine.” Keith wraps him up in a new hug, desperately hoping that he’s doing the right thing — how much hugging is too much hugging? is there a limit? — and then steps aside, abruptly letting go of Lance. *What now?* Oh — yeah. “Do…do you wanna talk about it?”

Lance pauses. Shifts on his feet, swaying from side to side. And then he huffs out a breath and plunks down on one of the plastic chairs that’s set up against the wall, Keith nervously following suit. He doesn’t speak for a moment, his face crumpling like he doesn’t trust his mouth to form the words, but then his eyes blaze like blue fire, a sure sign of him powering through it.

“I just…I always thought I knew who I was,” he begins, clearing his clogged throat before continuing. “I mean, in general, I do still know. I’m not the kind of guy who…who always likes himself, you know? I went through a lot of self hate and had to learn to love myself, especially in high school, and it got me really in touch with everything? I was always so…proud of myself. For doing that. And I thought that that was it. It was over. I was fine. But now there’s this other thing, and it’s making me re-think everything, my entire past, just, *everything*. And really, I think I always knew it was there, I just didn’t think of it the way I’m thinking of it now. But that shift is just…just terrifying. It’s like I’m back there again. Back in high school.”

Keith nods. He doesn’t really know what else to do. But Lance nods back, seeming satisfied, and maybe that’s all he wants right now. For someone to listen to him.

“And I’m just so *irritated*. I don’t want to move backward, I want to go forward, but my God, I just… Maybe the alternative is terrifying? Maybe I’m afraid of accepting it? Maybe I’m afraid of change? But that’s not who I am, typically. But…I don’t know. I don’t fucking know,” he mutters, cradling his head in his hands. “And the ocean is screwing with me, too, which doesn’t help.”

Keith frowns. “The ocean is…what?”

Lance flaps a hand in the air. “Long story.”

Silence. Then —

“I think if I acknowledged it, I would feel like it separates me from people. And I already feel separated from people enough. Like I don’t belong. I mean, I wouldn’t be *alone*, because there’s other people like this, obviously, but — God. What would…” He swallows. Goes on. “What would my parents think?”

And then he looks up at Keith, eyes wild. “What do you think?”

“I…Lance, I hear you, but if you want me to attempt to give you actual advice, you’re gonna have to be more specific,” Keith says, inwardly wincing. Can he do that? Ask for more details? Is Lance comfortable with that? “You don’t have to be embarrassed, or whatever. It’s…chill.”

Lance snorts, a ghost of a smile passing over his lips. “Chill?”

“Yeah, isn’t that the lingo?”
“Lingo?”

“What the kids are saying these days?”

“Keith. No.”

“Whatever. My statement still stands.”

Lance twists his fingers together like a pretzel of impossible proportions, and Keith is half-convinced that he’s gonna break a hand when he finally says something that Keith can’t quite hear.

“What?” He leans forward and mindlessly tucks some of his bangs behind his ear, not missing how Lance’s eyes track the movement. He says it again, definitely not any louder, but Keith catches it this time.

“I think I like guys too.”

Oh. Oh.

Keith’s heart kicks against his rib cage, but no, he can’t think about his stupid crush. Not right now. He’s got some advice to dish out, dammit, even if he’s never given proper advice in his entire life.

How do I even start?

Keith blinks. He has to say something. Lance is looking at him, fear dawning on his face, and he has to say something now, in case Lance thinks he’s rejecting him —

“That’s okay.”

Wow, Keith.

Lance hikes his feet up on the chair and presses his thighs to his chest, clasping his hands around his legs. “It doesn’t feel okay,” he admits, twisting his mouth to the side. “I mean, I feel like my brain says it’s foreign, but my heart says it’s not. God. My heart. How cheesy is that?”

“It’s not. It’s just the truth,” Keith says, shrugging. “Is your family homophobic?”

“I mean… I don’t know. It’s not something we ever talked about. I’m not even against gay people, which is why it’s weird that I’m being so weird about it. Maybe it was just growing up, hearing gay and queer as a slur and stuff. I realized that it shouldn’t be a bad thing eventually, but I always thought those words were for other people. Not…for myself.” He picks his head up from where he’d perched it on his knees. “Am I making sense? Please tell me I’m making sense.”

“It’s not. It’s just the truth,” Keith says, shrugging. “Is your family homophobic?”

“Yeah. It makes sense.” Should he tell him? He doesn’t want to make this about himself, but maybe Lance would —

“I just wish I could find someone that’s the same way. I dunno. Maybe it would…” He sighs. “I don’t know.”

Okay. Yeah. He’s telling him.

Keith draws in a heavy breath, steadying himself. This shouldn’t be hard. He’s come out a million times now. Why is this so hard all of the sudden?
“Keith?” Lance is looking at him, his eyebrows drawn in concern, and Keith blurts it out.

“I like guys too.”

Lance’s eyes balloon. “You do?”

“Yeah.”

Lance opens his mouth. Shuts it. And then he sits there, his shoulders sagging, his head leaning back against the wall with a dull thunk.

“I…wow,” he finally says, still staring at the ceiling. He doesn’t seem like he’s going to continue with that thought, so Keith keeps talking, unsure of where he’s going but figuring that he’ll make a point eventually, even if it’s by mistake.

“Yeah. I mean, I’m homoromantic. Homoromantic asexual. So I’m gay, but I’m not, like, sexually attracted to guys. Or to anyone. It took me a while to figure that out. I thought the romantic attraction I was feeling was sexual attraction for the longest time, but then it eventually became obvious that when people said they were ‘attracted’ to someone, that meant they wanted to put their hands down their pants. Which I didn’t get — and still don’t get. And that’s when I figured out that I’m ace.”

Lance pauses, absorbing this information, and his eyes flick to meet Keith’s, a deep navy blue in the low light. “Was accepting it hard for you?”

Keith laughs a little, bitterness crawling up his throat and resting on his tongue. “Yeah. Very. When I was in the foster system is when I was starting to figure out that I like boys, but there was nobody I could tell. Nobody I could talk to. It was only when Shiro’s family adopted me that I was finally able to open up about it, and even then, it took several years for me to actually unravel. I think it’s a part of why I love music, actually. It was an escape when everything else was too much to bear — sexuality, life…” He trails off, awkwardly clearing his throat. He doesn’t think he’s ever told anybody this before, besides Shiro. It makes him feel naked, bare in an almost mortifying way, but when he looks over at Lance, the feeling ebbs.

He sees no judgement. No disgust. In fact, he sees the opposite — acceptance.

“I didn’t know you were in the foster system,” he softly says, and Keith nods.

“Yeah. Till I was fourteen.” He doesn’t want to say anything else on the matter. He’s gone way over on his daily sharing limits already, and he isn’t fond of the idea of unpacking that particular bundle of emotions right now, so he simply lets a sigh ease out through his lips. A weight drops on his shoulder, and he feels a shock of surprise mixed with adrenaline spear through his chest, turning his head to investigate but ending up with a face-full of fluffy brown hair.

Lance doesn’t say anything. Keith appreciates it.

“Being asexual was also hard to accept at first,” Keith goes on, pursing his lips. “I mean, I didn’t even know asexuality was a thing until I was talking to Shiro about all this when I was seventeen and he suggested that I might be ace. We spent that whole day researching it, even taking those dumb quizzes, and every single sign pointed toward it. And it was okay at first, but then I realized that…well, I was scared that nobody would want me,” he mumbles.

“Why did you think that?” Lance asks, cuddling further into his side. He’s as warm as a resting fireplace, coals gleaming with flecks of orange and red, and it’s pleasant. Incredibly pleasant.

“Everywhere you look, it’s just sex, sex, sex. Everybody likes it. Everybody wants it. It’s an
important part of relationships — hell, an important part of life, and that’s fine, but it just doesn’t personally align with me. So if I don’t want to have sex, who’s gonna want me?” Keith sighs, crossing his arms. “It’s something I still worry about, kinda. But it’s okay. We’re allowed to feel shit. I’m a fucking hypocrite for saying this, but pushing it all down doesn’t really help.”

Lance sighs, slinging his arm around Keith’s shoulders. “But what if acceptance is impossible? What if I’m — we’re — stuck like this forever?”

“It’s not. I know it seems like it, but it’s like…a wave. Some waves are bigger and choppier than others, but they all rise and eventually fall, and then you’re better off at the end of it,” Keith softly answers. He means it. If somebody as lost as he used to be can somehow stumble their way into finding themselves, then literally anything is possible.

“That’s poetic,” Lance mutters, and Keith grins despite the weight hanging over his heart.

“It’s true.”

“Most poetic things tend to be true.”

“Well. Depends.”

“Keith. I would argue with you about this, but to be honest, I’m too exhausted.”

“Same.”

It’s quiet, then, the world slowly easing itself back through their bubble in the wake of the comfortable silence, marinating them in the ticking of the laundry room’s clock and the hum of the overhead lights and the random noises that creak and thump from the floor above. Lance has securely fitted his head into the crook of Keith’s neck, his thumb rubbing smooth circles on Keith’s shoulder, and Keith lets himself get lost in it — in the comfort, in the warmth, in the belonging. For once, just this once, he lets himself be present.

He doesn’t know how long they sit there, tucked into each other like two matching puzzle pieces, but he knows that he’s feeling more than slightly drowsy when Lance finally says something, his breath tickling Keith’s neck.

“Y’know what? I feel a little better.”

Keith smiles.

“You’re gonna be just fine, Lance.”

“So’re you,” Lance sleepily shoots back, as if offended that Keith would leave himself out of the equation, and Keith manages a tiny nod, his eyes slipping shut.

“Yeah. So am I.”

Chapter End Notes

Keith is better at this whole comforting thing than he thought - although maybe it's just because he can relate lol
I've been waiting to write this scene forever oh my God I'm so glad I finally got there.
Don't get too comfortable with this comfort though...just warning you... >:)
As always, thank you guys so much for all the comments and kudos!! Have a good
day/week my guys
Chapter Sixteen

Lance wakes up to warmth, the kind that he craves but never seems to get.

Oh — and a splitting headache.

“Christ,” he whispers, wetting his chapped lips. He can’t open his eyes, because if he does the world will be spiraling in a million different directions and he’s not sure if he can deal with that right now. Or ever. In fact, the only thing keeping him intact is a steady thump thump, thump thump, thump —

His hand instinctively squeezes, sinking into soft skin, and a loose snore escapes somebody’s lips, right by his ear.

And suddenly, it all comes rushing back.

Lance’s eyes pop open with such an intensity that it feels like they’re about to detach from his skull, jolting in his seat, but another abrupt snore from Keith instinctively brings out gentle movements, quiet murmurings.

Quiet, yes, but not calm.

“Oh my God,” Lance mutters, pushing a swallow down his dry throat, a dryness that the touch of the sea can surely fix. He slams his left palm against his forehead, squeezing his eyes shut as the world gives a toppling lurch around him, scooping the ground from beneath his feet — thank God he’s sitting down because he doesn’t want to be acquainted with the floor today, thank you very much. He’s said hello to it far too many times when he’s of a perfectly sound mind, much less drowning in clear air.

And because he has nothing else to say, he says it again: “Oh my God.”

He came out. To Keith. The very object of his…bi-awakening? Bi-crisis? He has no idea what the hell he wants to call it, but whatever it is, he said it. And Keith…

Keith likes guys too.

Lance’s heart slams in his chest, knocking at his ribcage like it wants permission to burst out and spill all over the floor. He almost wants to cry, but he can’t pinpoint the exact reason why. Is it relief? More fear? A mixture of the two?

A mixture of salt and sea, of nature and nurture.

Lance has to rub his eyes a million times to rid the flashes of blue from the corners of his sight, overlying everything in a watery tint. God, this is bad. This is really, really bad, and yeah, he’s with Keith, who looks adorable when he’s sleeping with his pouty mouth cracked open and his pretty face relaxed and his stupid mullet soft to the touch, but that doesn’t erase the fact that this is undoubtedly bad.

And to make it even worse, Lance spots a flash of yellow in the laundry room window, a figure with a laundry hamper half his size approaching in an exhausted stagger.
The door handle jiggles.

“Shit,” Lance breathes, snaking his arm back from around Keith’s shoulders, but he can’t just let him go — he’ll fall face first into the other chair, and Lance isn’t prepared for a petty fight this early in the morning, especially after what just happened. And why is he so scared anyways? Scared that he’ll look gay? Well, he is kinda gay, so…so what? Why should he be afraid?

He said he felt a little better last night, and that was true — but the core of it all still remains, stuck in his brain like a tight sailor’s knot in need of uncoiling.

The door opens. Lance thinks he’s going to explode, or phase out of this existence from sheer force of will. Maybe he’ll do both. At the same time. *Beam me up, Scotty!*

The door closes behind the man, and Lance immediately wilts in relief, because —

“Hunk. Oh my God, Hunk, I had the wildest — *agh*!” Lance bends his head forward as far as his neck will physically let him go, jiggling his leg against the ground in a frenzied attempt to keep him here, solid, instead of buoying out to the waves.

“A wild night, Hunk. A wild night,” Lance blearily responds, biting hard into his lip, and Hunk pauses. Stares at him. Stares at Keith. Raises his eyebrows in a way that Lance immediately recognizes as *scandalous.*

“No, not that kind of wild!” he desperately says, letting out a long groan. Miraculously, Keith still doesn’t wake. Maybe they should check for a pulse. “I just…well…I kind of woke up in the ocean? And had to walk back to the dorms? And then came out to Keith?”

“You — what now?” Hunk hollers, but it’s more of a whisper-holler, his eyebrows strung together in a single, concerned line. “That’s…a big list. Start from the beginning.”

“I would if I didn’t feel like I’m about to die,” Lance moans, pressing his hand against his burning, lead-weighted eyelids. “The fucking pull is driving me insane, Hunk. It’s…it’s like it’s…looming. Like there’s this tsunami or something, just about to rush in and — I dunno. Fuck me up?”

Hunk purses his lips, crossing his arms over his bright yellow shirt. It suits him. Most bright colors do. “What do you need?”

“I need some Tylenol, first of all. And maybe a big fat distraction.”

Hunk smiles.

“Well, me and Pidge are going to Wal-Mart to stock up in 30 minutes. Pidge is driving.”

Lance sighs in relief, nuzzling up against Keith, seeking his anchoring light through the swaths of deep-ocean dark. *Perfect.*

____________________

“Motherfucker!”
“Language, Pidge!”

“Language my ass, the gas prices have gone up at least ten cents between today and yesterday!”

“Hey, Hunk, you think we should be letting the gremlin drive?”

“If I’m a gremlin then you’re a walking noodle, Lance.”

Lance sags like a deflated balloon in the backseat of the car, quelling the urge to reach up and mess with her ponytail in that way that she hates, but she would whip around and murder him in a second flat and they would smash into another car during her quest for revenge, so really, he’s saving all of their lives by not giving in to the temptation. Isn’t he a good friend?

He also can’t actually raise a hand without his pain slamming into his brain with the force of a million Hulks, but ignore that. It’s totally because he’s a good friend.

“You’re not gonna challenge that, Lance?” Hunk pipes up from the shotgun seat, the spot that Lance usually resides in — they did rock-paper-scissors for it, like usual, but Hunk must’ve looked up some fancy methods, because he actually won this time.

“I mean, I can’t argue against the truth. Pidge is a gremlin, and I’m a noodle. It’s just the way things are,” Lance snorts, crossing his arms and triple-checking that his seat belt is clicked. He knows what doom he’s brought upon himself with that statement.

“If I wasn’t trying to get our asses to Wal-Mart I’d be throttling you right now,” Pidge hisses, jabbing her foot into the break with a ferocity that causes everybody in the car to bow to the forces of velocity, and Lance can now say he’s had a very intimate relationship with the back of the driver’s seat — which isn’t something he ever wanted to say, honestly, but here he is. Seeing stars. Feeling like his head’s about to burst like an overfilled balloon.

“Not cool,” he blearily mutters, Hunk’s statement swallowing his up by methods of sheer volume.

“Pidge, we’re gonna get rear-ended!” he hollers, clutching onto the side-door handle with all of his muscular might, but Pidge only shrugs, a coy smirk spreading across her face.

“It’s a red light. There’s nobody behind us. What’s the problem again?”

“The problem is that you’re about to give me and Hunk a heart attack,” Lance gasps, rubbing at his cheek where it had smacked against the torn-up leather, little bits of white fluff puffing out of the cracks and falling to the car floor like snow. A heart attack is second on his list for things he doesn’t need right now, with the ocean taking spot number one — two Tylenol later, and he’s still feeling like he’s a hop and a skip away from passing out.

“Eh. You’ll be fine,” Pidge scoffs, at which Lance scoffs right back, drop-kicking the thoughts of salt and sea and sun out his mind with all of his might, decidedly ignoring the way they tickle at the edges of his skull.

“How do you know?” he argues, just to be difficult. Banter is easier to focus on.

“Because I’m omnipresent.”

“Sure, only because you’ve hacked into every security camera between here and California.”

“Is that such a bad thing?”
“Left! Turn left!” Hunk interrupts, his voice pitched higher than Lance and Pidge combined could ever manage, and Pidge immediately swerves the car, the tires screeching like an alarm against the sun-burnt asphalt. Suddenly, intimacy with the driver’s seat doesn’t look too awful, because compared to smacking against the glass of the window? The driver’s seat was nothing. It was peachy. Pure fun and fluff and happiness.

“Is this what mosquitos feel like?” Hunk mutters, peeling most of his limbs off of the space between his seat and the driver’s, queasily placing a hand on his stomach.

“If anybody’s a mosquito it’s those gas stations sucking us all dry,” Pidge wryly responds, casting a wary glance Hunk’s way. “You gonna vomit?”

“I’d say it’s a distinct possibility, yeah.”

“Who wouldn’t vomit in this situation?” Lance miserably moans, cradling his head in his sweaty hands. This was a bad idea. Why did he think this was a good idea? He should’ve just stayed with Keith in his room, for God’s sake, away from Pidge and her chaotic ways — you’d think a scientist would understand simple laws of physics, but no. He hikes his feet on the center console to center himself in the currently warbling, warped reality, but Pidge smacks at his Converse the way she would at a bug and he wastes no time in retreating — a Pidge at the wheel with two hands is terrifying enough, never mind one hand. He wants a distraction from his problems, not death.

“Matt wouldn’t,” she simply answers, turning the car to the right, and — finally! Hallelujah! The blue text of glory! The yellow sun beams of dreams!

He’s never been so relieved to see a Wal-Mart in his entire goddamn life, no matter how double-layered the image may look to his addled eyes.

“Matt drives even worse than you do,” Hunk counters, squinting across the parking lot that’s as packed as the Magic Kingdom during a sweltering summer day, scouting for a spare spot.

“Listen, he’s the one who taught me how to drive. Blame him,” Pidge easily answers, re-setting her glasses on her nose. They’d almost flown off of her face in the chaos of her road rage, just as desperate to escape the car as everyone else stuffed in it. “Hunk, you see anything?”

“Nope. Keep going.”

“We’re not gonna find a parking spot, are we? After all this time and all that —“ Lance begins, but Pidge holds up a hand in interruption, which makes him freak all over again because she needs to have both hands on the wheel at all times!

“Shove your sob story somewhere else. Your tears are getting all over the car, and I’ll have to clean the mess.”

“I’m doing you a service, then. This car is a disaster.”

“We’re all disasters, Lance.”

“Hey, three aisles over to your right! Right by that funky tree!” Hunk points, and it takes Lance a moment to find, but he’s right. It’s a free parking space.

“See, Lance?” Pidge brags, her eyelids dropping into smug hoods. “It’s not so bad after all, huh, Broody Mc Broody Pants?”

“You totally stole my Keith line.”
“Anything you say can and will be repeated.” She turns the steering wheel to the left, squeezing the car into the spot and doing a surprisingly clean job of it, too. Lance has to hand it to her — she can drive pretty well when she pleases. It’s just that she doesn’t please all too much.

Pidge then twists around in her seat like they all hadn’t come half an inch away from meeting their maker a minute before, facing Hunk and Lance and roughly pulling the key out of the ignition.

“All right, we’re here, kiddos. I’ve got canned soup duty and you two have water?” she drawls, casually resting her elbow on the side of the seat. Hunk flashes her a shaky thumbs up, and he all-too-willingly claws his way out of the car, followed by a jelly-legged Lance, the two somewhat ready to execute the plan.

The plan that they soon discover is flawed.

It’s not their fault, really. It’s poor timing. Poor luck. Poor lack of the almost supernatural predictive skills that Lance’s mother possesses. Wherever the fault lies, it doesn’t change the fact that Hunk and Lance turn the corner good and ready to haul case upon case and gallon upon gallon of water into their cart, only to find the shelves completely bare. Empty. Vacant.

They pause, the wheels of the damaged shopping cart screeching obnoxiously against the white tile floor, just about murdering Lance and his sensitive-ass migraine.

“This is weird,” Hunk whispers, like this is suddenly the kind of place where whispering is warranted, walking forward with a cautious aura about him — more of a cautious aura than usual, that is. Lance, despite himself, agrees. There’s something intrinsically off about an entire section of an aisle transforming into a ghost town, unnerving enough to be in the running for an episode of the Twilight Zone.

“Cursed image,” Lance murmurs, a frumpy frown stuck on his face as he leans against Hunk’s side, his burning eyes slipping shut against a new wave of stabbing pain. “Well, what now?”

“We could try to look for some Gatorade,” Hunk offers, shrugging. “It’ll keep us hydrated.”

“Yeah, but what about water to wash our hands and flush the toilet when the power’s off?”

“That’s what we fill the bathtub up for.”

“But will that be enough?”

Hunk snorts. “It’ll have to be, dude. And this is all assuming that the college doesn’t move us from the dorms.”

“Shit, they better not.”

“Shit, they better not? Shit, I hope they do! I don’t trust these dorms with my life!”

“Okay. Point taken. Let’s go get that Gatorade.”

Lance regretfully sloughs off of his friend and Hunk swerves the cart around the bend, both of them dead set on ignoring the horrific noise that it releases and the terrified stares of strangers — although Lance can’t tell if they’re terrified of sudden noises or of Pidge, who is marching toward them with the exasperation of a thousand lifetimes gleaming in her eyes.

“They’re totally out of soup,” she complains, her loud tone well in earshot of the rest of the shoppers who are minding their own damn business, their carts packed with crank-able flashlights and taper
candles and at least fifteen different types of cereal. “We’re gonna have to get, like, vegetable or something.”

“Vegetable soup isn’t that bad,” Hunk offers, sporting a weak smile, but Pidge crosses her arms and looks him dead in the eye, cocking out a hip.

“Hunk, I appreciate your optimism, but these are dire times.”

“Some carrots aren’t gonna kill you, Pidge. C’mon,” Lance snaps, a wave of something hot and molten pouring over his chest, dripping out his mouth like volcanic ash. He’s just so fucking tired. He feels like a little kid again, fit to smash his feet against the tile floor like his little sister and just scream, but he thinks he’d crumple to the ground if he tried anything more than a stern voice, so he simply grabs the front of the cart with frantic fingers and drags it through the throngs of desperate shoppers, carving a path for the others to follow behind him. She’s just being dramatic, like usual. There’s nothing wrong with —

And then he reaches the desired aisle, which is entirely destitute save for some chicken broth and store-brand vegetable soup.

“Oh,” he mutters, stopping beside a mother with at least five kids swarming around her, the same expression of displeasure settling on her face as she scans the pickings.

“This is depressing,” Hunk mutters, and Pidge nods enthusiastically beside him, her long ponytail bouncing all over the place.

“I get the feeling we’re gonna be surviving on Doritos or something — not that I’m complaining. As long as they’re Cool Ranch. But some nutrition might be nice too,” she says, craning her neck at what must be uncomfortable proportions to check out the labeled signs hanging above each aisle. “Maybe we could get that fruit that comes in those little cups?”

“Those are disgusting,” Lance mutters, his face screwing up in the kind of displeasure usually saved for dog shit or finals. Pidge rolls her eyes.

“Sorry, I’m only trying to save us all from Lance.”

“I mean. I know what scurvy is in the abstract, but…”

Pidge releases out a long-suffering sigh, the silent scream of a soul too tired to explain anything further. “Google it.”

So…did Pidge ever get gas for her car?”

“Nope. She’s on her last drop.”

“So what’s she gonna do?”

“I dunno, Keith. Summon gasoline through the dark arts of science, or something.”

“You mean siphon from somebody else’s car?”

“Yeah. That’s exactly what I mean.”

Keith laughs at that, fiddling with the red Sharpie that’s perched in his hand, resting upon his guitar. He’s been laughing a lot more recently, Lance has noticed. It’s nice. Really, really nice — for lack of
a better word. It’s all he can come up with right now.

Keith finally settles down, shifting his focus back to his artwork. It’s amazing how fast he does it — giggling one moment, his cheeks bunched up and his dimples on display and his eyes glittering with mirth, and completely reigning himself in the next, the felt-tip point of his red Sharpie poised just above the wood of the guitar. The curved bottom of the instrument is already decked out in roiling flames, stylized with sharp flickers and graceful swoops, but he’s been working it into a pattern that’s almost mesmerizing, growing skinnier and skinnier near the top. It’s a bonfire, a sign of songs so fiery that they hurt just to be around, and Lance appreciates the rawness of that. Honestly, he appreciates just being around Keith, both of them lounging on Keith’s boring bed in his boring room (“No posters? Seriously, dude?” “Not everybody is as extra as you, Lance.”), making idle conversation and checking the Weather Channel every five minutes. It’s shaping up to be alright — but it turns out that alright isn’t cutting it anymore, still leaving room for the rush of salt in his hair, water at his feet, blue for as far as the eye can —

“Shit,” Lance mumbles. If Keith-therapy isn’t working, what will?

Keith looks up momentarily, those jewel-purple eyes peeking out from between his bangs, and Lance just wants to scootch in closer, wrap his arms around him and bury his face into the soft parts of Keith’s neck. He wants to find that comfort that he used to find in the ocean, splashing through the playful waves of the Atlantic, his toes worming into the damp sand and his eyes squinting into the piercing sun, mirroring it with his joy.

He used to want the ocean, but now the ocean wants him. And he doesn’t think it will ever be the same kind of place for him again.

_Frothy waves. Underlying currents._

_Peace._

God, he wants that. He wants peace. He’s found a few spare bits of it in the conversation he had with Keith a few days ago, but he’s still turbulent, a little boat rocking back in forth in the clutches of an unrelenting sea. Turbulent and _tired_, the sides of his vessel dinged up, its paint stripping and its hull slamming into the water like it’s concrete.

“Lance?”

Lance jumps, whipping around to face Keith. He needs that loud music again, the kind he’s been using to douse his head, like the problem is something that can be washed out. He needs fire in his veins. He needs _something_, because here it is again. Tugging at him. Pulling at him. Grabbing and grabbing and not letting go.

“Yeah?” he blearily answers, rubbing at his eyes, because everything has an unnatural luster to it, _like the sun bouncing off of the waves._

Keith frowns, lifting the Sharpie off of his guitar. “Are you okay?” His eyes are slightly glazed, iced over with an odd type of sheen that Lance can’t peel off and peer into, a pearlescent thing that’s —

Just like he was back at the beach.

“I’m fine,” Lance carefully answers, his ears tuned to the vibrations of his voice, and yeah, there it is. Echoing. Living on a whole different plane of reality, playfully peeking through into this one to wriggle inside Keith’s brain and turn his eyes to mush.

“Are you sure?” Keith presses, his face crumpling for a split second, his hands rising to vigorously
rub at his eyes, and Lance swallows.

No. He’s not. He’s not he’s not he’s not, because the last time he heard this foreign quality slip into his voice he was caught unawares, the very thing he doesn’t want to be right now. The last time he felt this kind of call he was dumped into the ocean with no warning, waking up in a world of bubbles and fishtails.

“I’ve gotta go,” he finds himself saying. He wasn’t planning on saying that, but there it is, slipping out of him.

“Lance?” Keith says again. It’s a simple statement. It’s a simple question.

Lance can’t look at him, because if he looks at him, he thinks it’ll all spill out.

So he leaves.

____________________

When he wakes up in the morning, it’ll be better, right?

____________________

It isn’t. It’s worse.

____________________

Hunk’s not gonna lie — when he wakes up this morning, it’s with a weight pressing down on his ribcage, holding his heart in his steel grip. He doesn’t like storms. He really doesn’t. So the fact that Hurricane Helene is hardly two days away isn’t really settling well with him.

There’s no reason to leave the safe, warm cocoon of his bed — classes have been cancelled so that the students can travel to wherever they need to go for the storm, braving the car-choked highways and skyrocketing gas prices — but he hears the noisily clacking keys of a keyboard, undoubtedly Lance’s, from outside. Hunk vaguely frowns, stretching his arms above his head, and checks the clock mounted on his wall. 8:30. What’s Lance doing up before 12?

Maybe he’s nervous too. Hunk flips the thought around in his mind like an omelette, pursing his lips. Lance has been a bit off lately, sure, and Hunk knows that he tends to shove his feelings into a vat until the stew spills over. So this makes sense. Kind of.

Something tells him to get up.

He rolls out of the sheets and messily makes his bed — he’ll go mad if he doesn’t — entering the ‘lounge’ part of their dorm in his blinding yellow pajamas afterwards, padding to the refrigerator and pouring himself a nice, frothing glass of orange juice.

“Hey, you okay?” he casually calls over his shoulder.

No answer.

“Lance?” Hunk turns around while taking a swig of his drink, the pulp sticking to his upper lip, and blinks, because Lance is just…sitting there. On the couch. Fully dressed. Eyes glued to his computer screen.

“Lance?” Hunk tries again, gently setting the glass down on the table with a delicate clink. “Lance, buddy?”
Hunk’s getting scared, now, and he was already scared *before*, so this really isn’t helping, no siree. “C’mon, dude, stop messing around,” he jokes, walking to Lance and clasping a hand on his shoulder — his palm is so big that it swallows a good fourth of his arm, detecting the mess of tensed muscle beneath Lance’s skin.

And Lance jumps out of said skin, his fingers flying across the tracking pad to close the tab, but not before Hunk can catch the tail end of the coast, white-sand beaches and smiling sea-fairing tourists, wrapped up in towels with their hair wet and their family near.

“H-Hunk,” he says, and it’s a whisper — a ripped-throat, painfully distracted whisper. His eyes are huge and luminous like moons from another world, shaded by the bags beneath his eyes. He’s wearing the same clothes from yesterday.

“Lance, did you sleep?” Hunk softly questions, plopping down beside Lance, who’s sitting as straight as a plank of wood. He doesn’t answer, but that’s probably because he didn’t even hear him, judging by the look on his face. “Lance?” Hunk says even louder, snapping him to attention, but he only stares.

“M’fine.” And that’s all he has to say.

He’s like this for the whole day.

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*Hey, Lance. How’re you holding up?*

Keith closes his phone, glancing toward the small suitcase he’s packing. Shiro wanted to go back to their grandparent’s house about an hour away in a retirement community to make sure that they hold up well, so they’re going, and honestly, Keith couldn’t be happier. Does he trust these dorms in a storm? No.

His eyes keep flicking toward the screen as he messily folds his grey shirt, wondering how many days of wearing it in a row that he can get away with. Lance is a fast texter. He’s been known to answer two seconds after Keith has texted him. Literally. Keith counted it.

He checks an hour later, and he checks four hours later, and he checks eight hours later before he goes to bed, but Lance never texts him back.

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“Hey, Lance. Your parents called you, right?”

Lance is plopped down on the floor, his legs sprawled beneath him and his eyes closed, almost like he’s in the middle of a meditation session. Hunk’s been tossing questions at him all day, just to see how he responds, and it’s usually nothing special.

“Mhm.”

“Yep.”

“Yeah.”

Lather, rinse, repeat.
Hunk’s getting kind of pissed. He knows that this isn’t Lance’s fault, not exactly — the kid didn’t just wake up in the ocean for no reason — but they’re in the middle of a stressful event, ok? Not that Hunk can’t handle it. Of course he can. It’s just…

He looks at Lance again, sipping idly from his third cup of orange juice that day. He craves sugar when he’s nervous.

“So…you know we’re getting up hella early tomorrow? To go to their house?”

Lance hums, but Hunk can’t tell if it’s a hum of acknowledgement or just a hum in general.

“Lance?”

Another hum.

Hunk sighs, walking over to his friend and idly checking his forehead, just to make himself feel better. No fever, as far as he can tell. No nothing. But Lance is still there, not moving, not slapping Hunk’s hand away and yelping that he’s fine, he already has, like, ten thousand siblings and a mother to do this for him!

*But I’m like your brother,* Hunk would answer, mocking offense, and Lance would crack a smile in obvious agreement.

He eventually ends up carrying Lance to his bed, a sick, roiling feeling bubbling in his gut. He eventually ends up camping out on the floor in a mountain of pillows in blankets, feeling the eyes of Lance’s posters boring into his back.

Needless to say, it takes him a long time to fall asleep that night.

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When he wakes up at five in the morning to the sound of his alarm clock, Lance is gone.

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Keith’s already kind of awake, imagining what the slam of rain against the shutters and the third-category howling wind is going to sound like, when his phone goes off. He rolls over in the pitch-black of the morning, lazily slapping the counter by his bed a few times before finally palming the thing, swiping left and raising it to his ear.

The other person is yelling before he can even even slur out a greeting.

“Keith. Keith, is Lance with you?” It’s Hunk, his voice tight as a rubber band about to snap, and Keith hears the whipping gale in the background, crackling his words in rude interruption, goaded on by a rumble and a rush and a sudden *shhhhh.*

“No, he’s not, what’s — “ Keith starts, sitting up, but he can’t fit a word in between Hunk’s rambling, punctuated by the same sounds of the — what is that?

“Oh, God, oh my God, *I knew* he was acting weird, I should’ve done something, it’s — “

“Hunk. No — Hunk! Slow down! Is Lance in danger?”

“Keith, he’s — how do I even…? He’s in this — he’s gone, and I dunno where he is, and I’m here and I can see this fucking hurricane, right on the coast, and —”
Another gust of wind, veiling Hunk’s words in nonsense static.

“—ocean! God, is he — Keith, I can’t do this, I should’ve, I dunno, I should’ve told somebody, I should’ve done more, I should’ve —“

And the sounds suddenly come together in Keith’s mind, separate threads weaving into a clear tapestry of storm-swollen clouds and a wild surf, a destroyed dock falling apart with each raindrop and growl of thunder.

“I’ll be right there,” Keith promises, and he hangs up.

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Keith has never driven so fast in his entire life, but the situation is somewhat in his favor — the streets are halfway deserted, not a police officer to be seen, so he gets away with it.

He doesn’t even wait for the car to fully stop before he’s yanking the keys out and slamming the door open, hurtling out of his seat like a man on the run from the law and almost face-planting into the weed-ridden sand in his hurry, but he somehow stands his ground, kicking the door shut behind him with a solid thunk.

“Hunk!” he yells, grains of wind-blown sand catching on his tongue and stinging on his face.

“Hunk!”

“Keith!” The voice is hoarse, slashed with panic and hysteria, and Keith finally climbs over the final sand dune, staring out into the ocean. It’s dark, its depths swallowing and frothy in the morning dimness, licking at the shore like a hungry creature in need of blood, and Keith has never had a problem with the ocean, not in his entire life, but he does now.

Hunk is still in his pajamas, his hair sticking out in all directions like a sheer embodiment of chaos, his eyes red and his hands strong as they grip Keith’s shoulders, shaking the life out of him. “Keith! Oh, thank God, Keith, I don’t know if he’s here but it’s the only place I could look, given everything that’s happened, and Christ, he’s probably out there, and —“

“Why would he be here?” Keith yells, the volume scraping the back of his throat raw, but he has no choice if he’s to beat the sound of the wind. There will be no sunrise today — not with that mass of black hulking at the horizon, spitting rain on them all as if in disgust, bringing all the power of Mother Nature along with it. “He’s — he’s afraid of water, isn’t he?”

“No, Keith, he’s not, that was all a ruse, a story, and I’m sorry but he had no choice, because —“ He turns around with his shoulders hiked up, almost brushing his ears, and screams.

“Lance!”

“What are you talking about? What’s going on?” Keith hollers back, but Hunk is running, sprinting toward the ocean, the water slipping across his feet, over his ankles, and —

“Hunk!” Keith darts forward, grabbing Hunk’s arm and yanking him back. “Hunk? What are you —“

And then he sees it.

“Lance!” Hunk is still screaming, the soft material of his pajamas soaked in the ocean’s soup, kelp twisting around his calf and broad waves shoving him back, and all Keith can do is stare and try to breathe.
“Lance, come back! Come on, Lance, don’t listen to it!”

But if seeing is believing...

“Lance! Son of a bitch! Get over here!”

Keith blinks against the ocean-salt sting, and there it is again. A sleek, scaled tail, slicing above the choppy waves, glittering almost ridiculously against the darkness before disappearing beneath the boil.

“Oh my God,” Keith breathes, all the air whooshing out of his lungs as if he’d been sucker-punched. “Hunk. Hunk, what’s...?”

But Hunk is still knee-deep in the water, his words bellowing out, besting the wind and the waves and the power of the hurricane itself.

“Lance, you stupid mermaid, come back!”

Chapter End Notes

*looks up from beneath mountains of papers*
Don't take three literature classes all at once kids
AnD take a job that's all about writing at the sAMe TiMe

oh and

>:}
Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Lance.”

The word drifts to Lance as if braving through the smog of a faraway city, reaching into the depths to find him, and his eyes instinctively squeeze even tighter than they were before. Whoever’s calling, he doesn’t want to hear it. Wherever he is, he doesn’t want to face it.

“Lance, wake up.”

Shut up.

“Lance!” It’s a bit clearer, now, breaching the foggy haze of his head and slashing through the vines of his pissed-off resolve. Wherever he is — even as much as he doesn’t want to know that particular fact — is cool. Invigorating. Always fluid, always in motion, but it’s not something that necessarily causes concern. In fact, it’s rooting him to the spot, his entire being singing with the sensation of it, because it’s…natural? Inherent?

“Come on, now.”

And that’s when it registers that these are actual words — not feelings, not images. This is nothing like the way the ocean ever contacts him.

And the ocean certainly never speaks to him in Spanish.

“Lance, I know you must be out of it by now.”

Lance promptly chokes a mouthful of water down his throat instead of through his gills, and his eyes can’t help but bug open at that, flurries of minuscule bubbles escaping from his throat as he retches the fluid right back up. His tail twitches helplessly beneath him, the stubborn rays of sun that reach down this far below the waves catching on the shards of reflective scales, glittering like a disco ball.

It’s not only his tail, though.

The other fin is a slightly darker blue than his, more along the lines of the color of the Atlantic when there’s no shore to be seen, but it’s just as sparkling, just as dazzling, and Lance pulls his eyes away from it, but only because his determination to know the truth is stronger than his wonder.

And, in all honesty, he knows what he’s going to find before he even looks.

The man has tan skin. Seafoam green eyes. A salt-and-pepper beard, more emphasis on the salt and less on the pepper.

“Uncle Riel,” Lance whispers, but the words are lost to the ocean, swept away by the school of fish that flurry by. His uncle smiles. It’s the saddest smile that Lance has ever seen.

“You remember me?” It’s a voice, undoubtedly, and his uncle is speaking, his mouth opening and closing, but it comes in through Lance’s head more than through his ears.

“You remember me?” It’s a voice, undoubtedly, and his uncle is speaking, his mouth opening and closing, but it comes in through Lance’s head more than through his ears.

“Of course I do. You…” Lance shakes his head, rubbing at the corners of his eyes. For once, his head isn’t beating along with the rhythm set by his heart — unless all of this culminates into a stress
headache, the chances of which seem extraordinarily high right now. “You’re what I remember most about Cuba.”

“That’s comforting, I suppose,” his uncle murmurs, rubbing a hand across his beard, the wiry tangles of it subject to the current’s whim. Give him a crown of seaweed, and he could be a picture-perfect Poseidon.

“Uncle Riel, why are we here?” Lance urges, his voice cracking on the last syllable. “What’s going on? How did… I don’t remember getting here.”

“That’s normal,” his uncle sighs, his hand rising to rub at his temple. “Lance, there’s so much I have to explain, and if I’m being completely honest with you, I have no idea where to begin.”

“Start from the beginning,” Lance says, hurriedly swiping the bubbles away from his face. “How do I do what you’re doing? Talking without… you know.”

His uncle squints, and Lance says it again, over-emphasizing the words so that he can read them on his lips.

“Oh, you — yeah.” A chuckle rings out, brimming with age and melancholy undertones. “I’ll get to that.” He pauses, then, staring at Lance with this look on his face, like remorse, or regret, or just plain sadness.

“Yeah?” Lance says, just because he feels like he has to say something, his eyes raising to catch a glimpse of the far-off surface. He can tell that it’s rocking and roaring, even from all the way down here, a plaything to the storm hanging above all their heads like a dark omen.

His uncle doesn’t answer. Not exactly. Instead, he starts talking.

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“Hunk.”

“Keith, I — I can’t tell her.”

“You’d rather go to her house and have her lose it in front of the rest of her family?”

“What if she’s on the phone in front of her family and she ends up doing that anyways?”

Keith sighs, resting his head against the back of the driver’s seat. His eyes lazily track a droplet of water dangling from the edge of one of his bangs — it had begun to pour outside, turning the sand to slush and their vision to nothing through the thick sheets of rain, so they couldn’t see Lance even if he was there. Even if he wasn’t gone.

And Keith wants to feel something, but his body is doing its best to force it all down, like a volcano sucking in its magma, ready to explode another day. He can’t freak out. Not now. Hunk needs him.

Lance’s family…

Keith bits down into his cheek, hard, grimacing against the tang of blood. The windshield is blurry, dotted with countless individual raindrops all bleeding together like abstract pointillism, and the palm trees outside are beginning to bend to the will of the approaching storm, their fronds shaking with fright.

“He’s… Hunk, he’s not necessarily gone forever.” The bland colors of the grey-tinged day are beginning to swim together to form an awful gradient, and Keith angrily wipes at his eyes, inhaling
shakily. *Not now.* He wishes he had the room in himself to be amazed — mermaids are *real.* He was *right.* And if they’re real, this opens a whole new door of wild possibilities, an entirely new chapter of cryptid studies, but even as he saw the tail, Keith was sensing something deeper. Lance leaving. Diving out into a whole world of trouble, disappearing into the angry seas, welcoming the hurricane that’s decided to barge into land like a rude guest.

His existence is a miracle, but the current reality of his situation is anything but but.

“Lance’s mom…she tried to warn him,” Hunk mutters, the words coming out scratchy, dismantled. He’s flopped over in the passenger seat of Keith’s dingy ride, the 30-year-old seat creaking with his every movement, and his fingers are plucking at a ripped hole in the leather, just to give him something to do except stew in his panic. “She knew something about all this. I just…don’t know what.”

“You said the ocean was calling him?” Keith asks, tightly crossing his arms across his chest to keep them from shaking, both from the nipping cold and from the deadweight dread that’s sunken into his chest.

“Yeah. It’s been going on for a while, but when he tried to tell his mom, she freaked and shut him down immediately. Told him not to go near the ocean, although that certainly wasn’t an option.”

“Hunk. We need to call her.”

“Who knows if we’ll even get reception in this weather?”

“We have to try. I’d tell her, but you and Lance were childhood friends, right?” Hunk nods. Keith nods back. “So, I think it would be better coming from you. I’m sorry, but…it has to be you.”

Hunk closes his eyes, and for a moment, the car is quiet — or as quiet as a car can be on the cusp of a hurricane.

“Okay,” he mutters, clenching his teeth. “Do you have your cell? Mine’s in my car.”

“Yeah. You know her number?”

“Yeah.”

Keith fishes the cell phone out of his damp pocket, wiping a few of the droplets off of the screen with a dry patch of his shirt, and quickly types in the password, setting up the keypad for Hunk. He slowly offers the device, fully expecting him to take a few more minutes of contemplation, but Hunk swipes it from his hand and immediately dials the number without even looking at the buttons, hitting the speaker button.

Keith holds his breath.

*Buzz.*

*Buzz.*

Bu—

A crackle. Static. Then —

“Hello?”

“I — Mrs. McClain, it’s me, Hunk,” he starts, his voice tripping into a waver, and there’s nothing
from the other end for a long, long time.

When she speaks again, it’s unlike anything Keith’s ever heard, unlike anything he can even describe.

“Lance. Where is he? What’s wrong?”

“He’s…well…he’s in the ocean. We—we couldn’t stop him. He didn’t tell you, I don’t think, but there was this call, this pull from the sea, that’s been after him, and it just…” Hunk sighs, holding the phone up to his forehead, his face crumpling.

A string of Spanish curses, piercing as the howling wind and strong as the swelling waves that slap against the shore, spill out of the phone, and Hunk winces, turning down the volume a few notches.

“Mrs. McClain, I —“

She suddenly switches into English, her words choppy, frenzied. “Hunk. Hunk, I should’ve told him.”

“It isn’t the end, Mrs. McClain,” Hunk tries to soothe, and Keith can tell that he’s swallowing his avalanche of tears down, shoving the trip-ups borne of uncertainty out of his voice. “He always comes back from these…benders. No! Not benders! It’s not —“ He sighs, burying his face into his hands, before continuing. “When the ocean gets to him, he just needs to take a dip, and then he’s fine. It goes away. He’ll be back.”

Keith stares at Hunk quizzically, who shrugs and mouths ‘word vomit.’

“No. If his uncle didn’t come back, then why would he?” Mrs. McClain counters, her breath shaking in, shaking out.

Hunk frowns, cupping the phone with both hands instead of just one. “His uncle? His uncle felt the same call?”

“Hunk. What’s that noise?” she suddenly cuts in, the frown on her face palatable through voice alone. “Are you — is that the ocean? What are you doing there? Come here immediately! It’s dangerous out there!”

“I can’t go out! Not until we see Lance again!” Hunk desperately answers, voice dripping with incredulously. “Maybe we can — I dunno, get a hold of him?”

“No. Believe me, it’s not going to happen,” she gravely says. “We’re looking for him after the hurricane passes. For now, come to the house. I’ll…well. I’ll explain.” Her voice is as sharp as a razor’s edge, whittling itself into shape with each passing second, and Keith bites his tongue, because he recognizes this.

She’s exactly like him, with her fleeting despair swallowed by a tide of boiling anger and determination, melting everything in its path until she either achieves her goal or burns to death herself.

“Okay,” Hunk says, lowering the phone to his lap. “I’m on my way.”

“Lance, you were around six when you started to Turn, correct?”
Lance frowns, twisting a hunk of porous coral around and around in his slim hands. He’s resting on the bottom of the ocean floor, his stomach pressed against the cool sand — there isn’t much vegetation in this part of the ocean, just shells and seaweed and tiny bait fish whose tails give off a silvery shine, same as dollar coins glinting in the sun. His uncle has perched down beside him, his tail coiled beneath his torso almost like a garden hose, the schools of fish parting to avoid his solid form before re-grouping to skirt near Lance.

“Yeah, I was,” Lance admits. “How did you know?”

“I felt it. Your quintessence.”

“Quin-what?”

“Quintessence. It’s the universe’s lifeblood, the rawest form of energy that operates everything around us, but beings like us can manipulate it in ways that humans and other creatures cannot. That’s how I’m talking to you right now, in your head, if you will — I’ve spent quite a while forging our connection, and it gets stronger at this close of a proximity. You can try to reach out to me. You just recently discovered your singing, right?”

“Yeah...how...?”

“Again, I could feel it,” his uncle says, twisting a long strip of seaweed around his wrist like a bracelet. “Our quintessence is inherently more connected than it would’ve been if we weren’t blood related. Try to think like you did with your singing. You should be able to communicate with me in the same way that I’m communicating with you.”

Lance gently waves his tail behind him, relishing the way the water parts around it and pushes against him with a gentle, comforting pressure. “Uh, okay. Is this like...using the Force?”

His uncle snorts out a short laugh at that. “Yeah. Think of it like that.”

“All right. I always wanted to be a Jedi anyways,” Lance mutters, settling himself in the sand. “Should I...like...close my eyes?”

“It doesn’t really matter,” his uncle frankly says, and Lance sighs.

“Okay. Eyes open, then.” He clears his throat, digging his fingers into the rough sand. He’d sung before, sure, but the most he’d gotten was some glazed-eyed looks and maybe a gentle tug of motivation for them to do whatever he asked. Maybe he’s just not good at it? That wouldn’t surprise him. Or does he just not have enough experience?

Lance clears his throat yet again. Begins to bury his hands into the ocean floor, up to the wrist.

“Last time I tried this I ended up kind of...controlling people, almost,” Lance says, fishing yet another shell from the ocean’s floor, staring at its pearlescent glow. “But you understand it as communication. Brainwashing doesn’t seem like communication to me.”

“Your quintessence is still not fully fledged, and given our family history, there’s a chance that it will never operate like most quintessence does,” his uncle slowly admits, almost wincing.

Lance offhandedly hums, dropping the shell, watching it float dully to the ground. “What does that —“

A sharp intake. A deep breath drawn through his gills.
His uncle grins.

“You feel it?” The voice swishes in Lance’s brain like somebody testing out a mouthful of a drink, bouncing from one side of his skull to the other, fit to bubble over and spill out of his ears.

“Why does it feel so weird?” he mutters, but when he talks, it doesn’t take its regular path through the muffling waves — it rides on a different current now, one that’s as easy to grab as mist, sneaking out of view just as soon as he’s beginning to have a handle on it.

“The combination of both of our quintessences isn’t like most. Most quintessence is relatively stable and strong, but ours is disjointed. Lance, creatures like us aren’t meant to exist. It’s either human, or mer. No in-between.” He runs a weary hand through his hair, and Lance watches as it swirls around in the water like it would in space, thick yet weightless. “What our family has is a curse. The specifics of it have been lost to time, but as far as the mer-people have been able to tell me, some ancient god or power or overlord punished one of our ancestors — some say it was Neptune himself. Whoever or whatever it was, it cursed them and their line — our line — to a life of living between two worlds that were never meant to mix, two forms unnaturally stuck in one body, and…well…those of us who inherited it don’t have the most reliable quintessence in the world.”

“There’s other mer-people? And what does that mean, though?” Lance presses, blearily blinking as his voice whiplashes back at him through the botched connection. “For us, I mean?”

“Yes. We aren’t the only mermaids around. And energy, reality, time — they’re all connected, Lance. When one isn’t stable, the others aren’t as well. When I was around your age, I started to gain a knack for running into dangerous experiences. I’m guessing this has started to affect you as well.”

“No, it —“

Lance pauses.

The almost-car crash.

The almost-reveal at the beach.

He doesn’t even have to say them out loud. His uncle’s knowing face says it all.

“The older I got, the worse it became. And then it began to affect our family. Do you remember the boat ride? You were pretty young. I’m not sure if you will.”

“No, but I know the story.” His mother never stops recalling it. His family and his uncle’s family had rented a boat for the day, and they were way out in the glistening blue water when something — they still don’t know what — smashed into their hull, the boat slurping up greedy gulps of water and tipping nose-down into the sea. There was hardly enough time for everyone to scurry to the compartment at the front of the boat, where the life vests were packed into a small cabinet.

“I had to keep your tiny head above the water,” his mom would always say, lines of stress re-structuring themselves across her face. “You kept coughing, and I thought the water was hitting your mouth, but every time I struggled to life you up more I thought I was going to go under, too. The life jacket wasn’t the right size. If that other boat hadn’t come along, I don’t know what would’ve happened.”

“I gotta go back,” Lance is suddenly saying, the words popping out of him unexpectedly. “Oh my God, the hurricane is here, and I’m supposed to be over there, and my mom’s gonna freak out, and —“
“Lance. You can’t go back. There’s a reason I called you here.”

Lance blinks.

“What do you mean, called me here?”

“Did you think it was the ocean? I thought that too, at first,” his uncle softly answers. “But it was never the ocean — it was the mermaids that first called me out. And for you, it was me.”

Keith follows Hunk in his car, through the rows of surgically implanted palm trees and past the shutter-clad houses, each window adorned with gleaming, corrugated metal or or sheets of plywood, some bearing the markings of spray paint. ‘Hurricane Hell(ene)’ flashes by in Keith’s peripheral vision, the lashings of punishing rain soaking and blending the red paint into the meat of the wood, and another follows straight after it, a neatly-stated ‘fuck off.’

The rain has gotten impossibly thicker as Hunk rolls up to the gate of a community, whose usually burbling front-fountains are overflowing, slopes of water rolling down toward the street drains and sinking into the curbside grass. Hunk opens his window a crack and wedges his arm out of the space, quickly pounding in a four-digit code, and the front gate shudders in approval, its grand, iron-wrought arms opening as if welcoming them in — if you can ignore the way they look like they’re about to fly off of their hinges and dump into the nearby fountains, that is.

Keith nervously speeds after Hunk, his windshield wipers on their highest setting, but it’s still like trying to drive through the ocean, waterlogged and slippery. There’s a right turn — a screech and squeal of the tires, the car water-planing for a heart-stopping moment before finding solid ground — and then a left turn. Hunk enters a driveway, his break lights glaring like two red beacons, and the streaking tears of rain on Keith’s windshield spill the color all over his vision, like it’s a painting done in bleeding watercolor.

The house isn’t looking all too clear through the haze either, but Keith can pick out its friendly yellow color, its wavy, clay-tile roof, its blocked-off windows that are suddenly blocked by Hunk’s form, darting around his car and booking it to the front door. Keith shoves a deep breath of air through his lungs, squeezes his eyes shut hard enough to see flashes of purple and blue, and then whips his car door open, sliding out into the fray.

It’s a roar of wind slamming into his eardrums, tossing everything around like it means to reorganize the current design of the neighborhood. It’s gallons of water free-falling from the bloated clouds above, punching into his skin like it’s made of pebbles instead of plain old liquid. Keith throws his arm in front of his eyes, grappling near his car like he isn’t quite sure if it exists and is sketching out its shape in his mind to make sure, his hand finding the car door, shutting it, and then moving on to the rear-view mirror, fingers sliding over its slippery mirror — if he’s here then Hunk’s car is right in front, and then he just needs to go to the —

Somebody grabs his arm and yanks him forward, his squeaky sneakers slipping over the streams of water but his body managing to keep itself upright, allowing himself to be hauled from wind-chill into hearth-warmth.

“You okay, man?” It’s Hunk, just like Keith knew it was, and he slowly lowers his arm, slowly brings his hands to his eyes to rub the hurricane out of his vision.

“Yeah,” he mutters, shuddering involuntarily. “That was...”
“Hunk!” A tan-skinned woman whips around the corner of the house, a babble of conversation following in her wake, and Keith knows her by her eyes of fire, her aura of sea-directed wrath.

“Mrs. McClain, this is Ke—“ Hunk begins, but the woman has grabbed them both by the arm and is yanking them into a side room, one that Keith didn’t really notice, but he’s really too out of it to even notice anything in the first place, save for the vague impression of a few couches and a television in the last room that they had just left. This room appears to be a bedroom converted into an office, choked with bookshelves surrounding a solid oak desk, piled up with hills of papers and valleys of sticky notes and paper clips. Hunk blinks, staring at Keith, and Keith only shrugs as Mrs. McClain swoops behind them and shuts the door, quiet enough for nobody else in the house to miss.

She turns around — her grey-rooted hair tied into a messy bun, her legs in sweats and her torso in a sweater, her feet slippered and her arms crossed, and Keith knows that she isn’t mad at them — not really — but he feels a spike of fear and respect all the same.

“I-I’m Keith. Lance’s friend,” Keith mumbles, because he doesn’t know what else to say. Mrs. McClain only nods.

“And you know about him?” she asks.

Keith nods. She nods. And turns to Hunk

“What really happened? Tell me all of it,” she demands, her eyes glassy, dull.

So Hunk tells her everything, all the things that Keith didn’t know, and Keith — Keith can’t believe he didn’t realize anything sooner. He knew Lance was stressed, but after coming out, he’d assumed that was the source. And it probably was part of the source, he thinks, but the ocean’s call? His singing? Disappearing, and awakening in the middle of the drink?

Keith can hardly imagine all of it, all at once.

When he’s finished, Lance’s mom looks even madder than before, her sag straightening, her sharp eyes glistening.

“Why didn’t he tell me this?” she whispers, rubbing at the corners of her eyes. “Why?”

“He didn’t want to upset you any more,” Hunk admits. “He was worried about you. He thought he could handle it on his own.”

“And I thought the same thing,” Mrs. McClain bitterly answers, shaking her head, again and again and again. “I suppose you want to know.”

“Well. Yeah,” Hunk bluntly says — although not rudely. She tilts her head to the side, stretching out her neck, and Keith can almost see the crouching creature of regret attached to her shoulders, pushing down on her, day after day after day.

“It started with his uncle, my brother, years ago,” she begins, leaning against the door. “He was like Lance. We knew it ran in the family, but we knew little else about it, which is why we were surprised when he started to feel the call.”

“He felt the same call that Lance does?” Keith questions, frowning. She nods, pursing her lips.

“Yes. He started growing distant from us, and wouldn’t tell us why, and — I wish he didn’t give in to our questions. My questions especially. Because I never stopped asking him about it once he told me, making sure he was okay, and I thought I was helping, but — “ She forces a breath in through
her lungs, releasing it in a ragged manner. “But the more I hounded him, the more he seemed to be shovel deeper and deeper into the hole. I didn’t see it at the time, but looking back… and then he was gone, and…”

“It’s not your fault,” Hunk pleads, but she isn’t done.

“There started to be these…accidents. He was so out of it all the time, I guess, that one disaster piled on top of another, which only made him stray further from us, and when I tried to pursue help it just got worse, and — if I had done more, if I had just left it alone, or tried to distract him…”

“Maybe if you did that, it would only be buying him a little bit of time that was always meant to end in an inevitable fate,” Hunk quietly answers, his eyes fastened to the floor.

“Maybe so. But how can I be sure? I vowed, when Lance first Turned, to never tell him, to never even introduce the idea of it to him. We have very little record of the mermaids before us in our family line. It could’ve been an isolated incident, what happened to his uncle. I didn’t know. I didn’t want to make Lance scared. I…” She sighs, forced and angry. “I was a coward. I was hiding it from him, but hiding it from myself, too. Burying all the memories, so nobody would have to think about it. I’d already lost my brother, and I didn’t…” Mrs. McClain suddenly lets out a dry, muffled sob, her mask cracking, her voice aching with all the pain contained in the entire world. “I can’t lose my son, too.”

“**You what?**”

His uncle’s eyes flick down, tracing the path of a stingray. “You heard me, Lance.”

Lance backs away, his tail shifted in front of him, fully prepared to propel himself away, but his uncle reaches out a hand, eyes flashing with panic.

“No! Wait! Lance, I didn’t mean to hurt you, but I had to,” he says, swimming forward an inch. “Just like the mers had to call me. You need to know the consequences of this. You need to know the truth.”

“All I need to know is that I need to get back to shore,” Lance whispers, a firecracker-flash of anger bursting through him with uncontrollable strength. “I can’t believe you’d do this to me. I can’t —“

“I can’t believe you won’t listen to me when I’m trying to tell you that if you go back, you and everyone you know could get hurt,” his uncle snaps, eyes narrowing.

Lance pauses at that.

“You think I wanted to disappear? Leave my entire family and life behind? No! Of course not! But my unbalanced quintessence was warping everything, wrecking my life, hurting the people I loved! The mers knew. They’ve dealt with our kind for centuries. They could feel the disturbance, but they can’t get too close to the shore, so they called me. Told me everything. Even told me that I had to stay in one form for the rest of my life, because the more I change — the more we change — the more the quintessence splits. The worse everything gets.”

“Why didn’t you pick being human?” Lance yells, throwing his hands in the air. “Why didn’t you even visit us?”

“Our genes are closer to mer than to human,” he bitterly spits out, mouth twisting into a scowl. “They didn’t call me until I was in my 40s, Lance. It was so bad by that time that they couldn’t hold
off any longer. When I was 25, the gills stayed. I had to wear turtlenecks every day. When I was 30, some scales stuck to my human skin, and I had to wear jeans. If I stayed human, the balance would still be uneven. I would still have a chance of hurting my family — and that's something I would not do. And how could I even visit, knowing my very presence is dangerous? How could I tell them why I'm leaving, knowing that they would never give up looking for me?”

He stares at Lance, long and hard and desperate, and Lance can’t think of anything to say. Not a single word.

“My quintessence has stabilized a bit in the 15 or so years I’ve been in this form, and I felt it was relatively safe for me to call you, so I did. I felt the responsibility to. You’re my nephew. And there’s another of us now, correct? I felt it.”


“When her quintessence begins to destabilize to the point of danger, I’ll call her, too. Or perhaps you will.”

Lance recoils, mouth twisting in disgust. “No. I’m not…”

“You’re not what?”

“I can’t…”

He can’t breathe. He can’t think.

His uncle stares at him, his face shadowed, his mouth in a straight line.

“I’m not going to force you to stay down here, Lance. I’m only telling you the consequences of what lies above. The decision is yours.”

“I…” he chokes, hand raising to cover his mouth. “I didn’t even…”

I didn’t even get to hug my family.

I didn’t even get to see Keith smile, one last time.

I didn’t even get to finish college.

I didn’t even get to say goodbye.

Lance looks at his uncle, his tears lost to the sea, and his uncle looks back, his eyes softening, squeezing shut.

“Lance. I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

Chapter End Notes

Lance includes Hunk in his definition of ‘family’ btw

Well

Here it be
~The reveal~

(I had so much fun writing this you have no idea I've been waiting for this part of the story for so long AAAA)

Please tell me if I wrote this in a way that makes sense lol I don't wanna confuse anybody

As always, comments and kudos are always appreciated! Thanks for reading!
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It takes Keith three times, but he finally manages to get Shiro on the phone.

It wasn’t a perfect connection, of course, slashed into static by the clotted clouds and lightning reigning from above, but it was enough for him to hear Shiro’s clipped tone.

“Keith! Where are you? I had to leave! You better be safe, or I -“

“Shiro! Shiro, I’m fine,” Keith promises, cupping his phone close. “I’m…well, I’m at Lance’s house.”

Shiro pauses. The crackling noise reigns, sputtering into Keith’s ear, and awkwardness burns into his chest like dripping lava, so he keeps going.

“I wanted to leave and join you, but it’s bad outside and Lance’s mom literally pulled me back by my shirt to keep me from going out, and —“

“Did something happen between you two?” Shiro suddenly cuts in, voice dripping with a certain kind of something that has a blush blooming on Keith’s cheeks.

“I wish,” he mutters, and a choke suddenly sticks itself in his throat, because he hasn’t entirely relayed that information to Shiro yet, but he has bigger things on his mind right now. “He…went missing.”

“What do you mean, went missing?”

Keith blinks, pursing his lips. He’d promised Lance’s mom that he wouldn’t tell anyone that didn’t already know, and he would keep his word. “He didn’t show up at his house before the hurricane, so we were looking for him. Didn’t find him.”

“What?” The voice is sliced in half by a beeping interruption, and Keith clears his throat.

“Yeah. We’re gonna look for him after the hurricane passes, but I’m sure he’s fine. And I’m fine, so don’t worry.”

“Keith. Your friend is missing and you expect me to not worry?”

“Try your best, Shiro,” Keith sighs, shifting uncomfortably, and Hunk, who’s sitting beside him on the carpet of the office, places a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Shiro takes a deep breath, preparing himself for a statement that Keith doesn’t get to hear, because the desk lamp on the paper-laden table blinks out, plunging the room into darkness.

Keith, of course, grabs the opportunity like it’s the last one he’ll ever have. “Gotta go help light the candles, Shiro. Power just went off.”

“Kei—“

“Bye!” Keith rips the phone away from his ear and slams the end call button, unleashing a breath from his tight chest, and he turns toward Lance’s mother, who is nothing but a shadow in the dimness.
“So, do you want me to help light the candles?” he says, and he can vaguely make out her small smile.

“I’d love for you to. But before we go out, we’re setting some ground communication rules,” she firmly responds, locking eyes with him and then Hunk. The pain is still wrapped around each and every word, tightening their syllables and clipping their edges, but she’s managed to free her face of the tears, a determined expression slapped over the brokenness. “I made a mistake keeping the truth from everyone last time, and I won’t make the same mistake again. We’ll tell everyone what happened, and that we’ll go out to find him as soon as possible.”

“I just hope he’s okay,” Hunk murmurs, his eyes cast down to the floor, and Keith nods, his stomach twisting miserably.

“He’s okay,” Mrs. McClain immediately answers, her eyes burning with a feverish certainty. “I know he is.”

Keith wishes he could believe her. Wishes he knew for certain.

“I have to get back to the others,” Lance’s mother suddenly sighs, leaning against the door and resting her hand on the knob, ready to twist it. “Elisa will set the house on fire with those taper candles if we don’t keep an eye on her.”

“Okay, we’ll be right out,” Hunk says, eyes trained on her as she slips out of the room toward the hustle and bustle that’s knocking about in the kitchen, and a strange smile is stretched across his mouth, one that Keith can’t help but frown at.

“What is it?” he asks, clambering up from his perch on the ground and stretching his arms above his head, but Hunk only shakes his head, grin growing wider.

“Dude. If she says Lance is fine, then he is.”

Keith blinks. “What do you mean?”

“She’s got this way of knowing things. Always has. If she says he’s fine, then he’s fine.”

“What?”

“Trust me on this one, man.”

And Keith has never been big on trust, but he’s willing to risk it this time.

“So. You’re telling me that there’s an…Atlantis?”

“Yes. But that’s further out. We’re only going to Vellamo.”

Lance is trying to move his tail, but really, there’s no need — the current they’ve leapt into operates like a bullet train, sweeping them along its swift path. His uncle calls it Achelous, one of the well-known ‘roads’ of its kind. “It spits out right near the city,” he had said, tugging on Lance’s arm and pulling him into the nearly invisible fray, and for a moment Lance had tried to kick, but he had no legs; had tried to squirm, but the undertow kept him locked in like a straightjacket.

“You’ll get used to it,” his uncle reassured at the time, but Lance can now see the tension on his face, high-strung and boxed-in.
“It’s going fast today,” he mutters, the sound of his voice banging against the walls of Lance’s brain. “Must be because of the hurricane.”

“Of all the times you could’ve dragged me down to my doom, you chose this one,” Lance mutters, only half-kidding. His chest is still stinging from the shock, his limbs loose, numb — or maybe that’s just the effects of the current. He doubts it.

His uncle shoots him an apologetic look, his eyes flickering down to the patches of multicolored coral below, blooming with algae and filled with shimmering fish sporting their glamorous scales. “That wasn’t my intention. I called you down when I felt your quintessence take a new turn, but once the connection is secured, it’s difficult to sever. The timing was unfortunate, but you made it here nonetheless.”

“Don’t tell me I pulled a hurricane to the shore with my bad luck,” Lance chuckles, his weary face cracking into a delirious grin. He may feel like shit, sure, but the thought of that is just too hilarious.

His uncle, however, stays silent for the rest of the ride, which doesn’t turn out to be that long of a time.

Lance can feel it before he properly sees it — a hum like a swarming colony of bees tickling at the edges of his scalp, shuddering through his teeth, vibrating against his skin with a thump, thump, thump.

“What is that?” he whispers, but the words are grabbed from his tongue and pushed through the second wavelength that’s all around them, the one he’s tuned in to like a faulty radio.

“We’re almost there,” his uncle answers, the words reaching him through the same medium, but they’re mixed with a cacophony of voices, words murmured and laughed and shouted, a soup of life and salt and sea. It’s like listening to an entire continent blabber all at once, feeling the brush of their skin against the ocean current, feeling their soft beds of seaweed and their shell amulets bouncing at their collarbones, just feeling and feeling and recognizing everything in its connected entirety.

Lance’s uncle grabs his elbow and forcibly yanks both of them out of the current, his tail pushing against the muscular flow with the strength of a kraken.

And beneath them sprawls a sight that leaves Lance breathless.

It’s apparent that they were once plain, jutting rocks that spat out from the sand some million years ago and reached toward the surface like cursed beings yearning for light, but now they’re something else entirely. Each gray, once bumpy surface has been filed down and etched into magnificent spirals, the lavish decorations enough to make Lance’s head dizzy — even the tips of the monuments have been fashioned into curves that reach out like ram’s horns, some blunted at the edge but others sharp as fresh knives. Wedged between the monoliths are a series of hill-like caves that ebb and flow, some wide as cathedrals but others only as big as a single room, and the ones Lance can see into are stunningly visible from the effect of the orb-shaped plants that float about, casting a warm, pulsating yellow light. There seems to be an order to the chaos — a plaza of sorts that the caves center around is overflowing with loose greenery that’s been carefully planted into the ground, the fauna bright as highlighted markers and splashing the would-be dull rock that surrounds it in vivid color.

Even if the fauna weren’t there, though, the place would still be quite the painted sight.

Purple. Yellow. Pink. Red. Every color Lance has ever fathomed is present on the mer-people’s tails, soaked into their scales and sloping down their sides, and their skin comes in varying colors of blue and green, some spotted with both. Their silver hair billows in the water, tracing graceful arcs as they
swim to and fro in groups of all sizes, each happily chattering to each other while grasping on to the satchels slung across their chests, and Lance can hear everything and see everything and his entire body is no longer flesh and bone but sounds and sensations and —

“Reign it in.” A voice pierces above the others, scratchy and real. “They’re used to shuffling the sensory wavelengths of quintessence around to their advantage, but you aren’t. Focus on your breathing. Focus on what I’m saying and throw walls up against everything else.”

Lance draws in a hefty breath through his gills, his eyes squeezing shut, and he loosely moves his tail in the water, relishing the way the liquid feels against his fins, not against the fins of the others. He pushes the breath out, feeling the bubbles escape and tickle against his skin. In. Out.

And eventually he feels centered enough to open his eyes again, beholding the sight of two mermaids swimming up toward them, needle-like fangs jutting from their smiling lips.

“Riel!” one of them calls, his chest as solid as the rock surrounding them, his skin a smooth green and flecked with aqua blue freckles, and the other one just shoots him a reserved smile, her navy skin patched with baby blue markings, her silver-white hair brushing against her shoulders.

Lance’s uncle politely greets them with a few lilting words that Lance doesn’t recognize whatsoever, reaching forward to press his hands against each one of their foreheads, and they return the gesture. The man turns toward Lance as he pulls his palm away, taking him all in, before tilting his head to the side and projecting his words straight into Lance’s ears, the connection spiraling throughout the four of them like a ricocheting pinball.

“What?” Lance bluntly responds, watching the man wince as his voice grates against the connection like sandpaper, a drastic opposite to their smooth, silky tones.

“I’ll have to be the translator for now,” Lance’s uncle sighs, rubbing his hand against his chin. “You’ll have to learn the language of the Mers, Lance. They call it Mareloquitur.”

The woman responds in a statement with the same lovely tones, intermitted with clicks and guttural noises that Lance thinks would destroy his vocal cords, and extends her hand toward Lance.

“No, I, uh —” he starts, but the lady’s hand is on him before he can back away, and her palm is absolutely bursting with warmth, strong and unquestioning, in a feeling that can only be described as ‘welcome.’

“That’s direct quintessence,” his uncle says, smiling a bit. “It’s a way to project meaning without using words. You can use it as a crutch for now.”

“Oh,” Lance quietly responds, staring at the woman as she retracts her greeting and dives into ecstatic conversation with the others. His uncle speaks with them for a few moments before waving his hand in Lance’s direction, holding his other hand out, and the others blink in what Lance feels is understanding. His uncle wilts with relief, his face dropping into something almost vaguely numb, but he clasps his hands together and shakes the mess of fingers towards them in thanks. They simply smile and swim off with astonishing speed, melting into the rest of the crowd, and Lance’s uncle turns toward him with a neutral expression.

“They’re going to help us request your citizenship,” he sighs. “There’s not many like them around here. I’m lucky to have met them when I first got here.”

“What do you mean?” Lance asks, his eyes narrowing.

“They…well, the mers don’t take kindly to our kind. Our quintessence is cursed — we’re nothing
but a problem to them. They call us to the ocean to quell the disturbance that it causes, as all lines of quintessence are ultimately connected, but they don’t exactly accept us with open arms. When I became a citizen it caused an uproar all among this quadrant of the ocean, but hopefully it’ll be easier for you, with a precedent.”

“Oh my God,” Lance groans, grating his teeth together, a sudden spark of anger sweeping his grief under the rug. “I can’t fucking believe this. I just…I can’t believe any of it.”

His uncle chuckles at that, but the noise is bitter, laced with heartbreak. “If I could’ve saved you from this fate, I would have.”

“I know,” Lance mutters, fiercely rubbing his eyes. It’s true. He understands.

But that certainly doesn’t mean he’s delighted with it.

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As family meetings go, this one wasn’t exactly the best Keith had ever seen.

They’d all crowded into the middle of the family room, Elisa and Anton scrabbling for their own space on the edge of the couch before Dani sat determinedly between them, Valeria and Luis taking their seats on the carpet below, Angelo hogging a recliner for himself and Lance’s mother taking the other one opposite to it. Crankable flashlights with necklace-like cords dangled from everybody’s necks, filling the air with sounds of clicking and whirring — mainly clicking, as far as Elisa was concerned, her fingers mashing into the buttons in a constant stream of repetitive noise. Hunk and Keith awkwardly stood by the side, although it wasn’t exactly awkward for Hunk with the way the two youngest members of the family latched on to him the moment they saw him, shrieking frenzied “Uncle Hunk!”s before Dani wrangled them away, under the (probably accurate) impression that they’d wrap themselves around his legs like deadweights and not let go until the hurricane had passed entirely.

Keith thought it was annoying, at first — he’s never been around kids much and doesn’t quite know how to handle their unrelenting enthusiasm, but he found himself missing it as the joy is sucked out of the room with each passing word that leaves Mrs. McClain’s mouth, their faces sloping downwards, their lips trembling and their eyes filing with salty tears, like tiny bits of the ocean were hurting along with them.

She told them about their uncle. About Lance. About the call, about everything that they knew, and about how they would stop at nothing to find him.

At least, that’s what Keith assumes. He doesn’t know a lick of Spanish.

When she finishes, heaving a weary breath through her laden lungs, Elisa bursts out into tears.

“We have to go!” she cries in English to Hunk, the words released between breathless sobs. “We-We have to go find him! Right now!”

“Elisa, it’s bad out there,” Hunk softly replies, his face falling. “We barely got here, and that was before the worst of it started up.”

“I don’t care!” The last word pitches into a heartbroken shriek, her fists bashing weakly against the couch, and Luis peels himself up from his spot on the ground and sweeps her into his arms, his chin nestled on top of her head as she presses her face into his chest, wetting the fabric of his shirt.

A sudden, splitting eruption of thunder crashes down with the kind of proximity that shocks
everybody’s hair with static electricity and leaves the taste of bubbling copper buzzing on their tongues. Keith feels it dig into his chest, deep and reverberating, and he winces, watching as Hunk jumps two feet in the air and grasps at his heart.

Dani screams. Valeria lets out a series of rapid blinks. Angelo simply continues to lounge in his chair, seemingly unaffected.

Then, it’s quiet, save for the occasional sniffle. And Keith doesn’t know why he says it, how he even breaks through the anxiety of addressing a grieving family with what he knows could be an empty promise — but the thing is, it doesn’t seem so empty. Not anymore.

“We’re gonna find him,” he says, sinking his teeth deeply into his cheek to keep the aching in his chest at a minimum. “We will.”

Everybody stares. Not a good stare, not a bad stare. Just a stare.

“Who are you again?” Angelo lazily calls out, and Keith almost laughs.

“I’m just…a friend.”

“This is Keith,” Hunk says, bumping him with a shoulder. “He’s a part of the squad.”

“Squad?”

“Yeah. Squad. Own it, buddy.”

Keith sees what he’s trying to do. It’s working — kind of. The air has loosened enough for the atmosphere to be breathable again, smiles of relief breaking out on shattered faces, and Lance’s mother takes the opportunity to clap her hands together, her eyes sparkling with that eruption of determination, with that burning hope.

“Keith is right. We’re going to find Lance, but first we have to brave the weather. We can do this. We will do this.”

Everybody nods, their heads bobbing up and down — even little Eliza’s, her face still shining with dried tears that she’s hastily wiped off with her sleeve, lest her legs mesh into a tail at the most inopportune time.

Mrs. McClain looks over at Keith, offering a semblance of a smile.

“How about lighting those candles, huh?”

____________________

His uncle’s room is crowded, sure, but Lance can’t help but admit that it’s charming at the same time.

He’s taken residence in a cave further from the main veins of the town, in a small ‘neighborhood’ of sorts, and its door is nothing but strips of seaweed that ripple in the peaceful currents of the water, almost like the bead curtains Lance used to be obsessed with when he was younger. It’s pitch-black when they arrive, but his uncle presses his hand against a cluster of gel-like orbs in the corner and they light immediately, revealing themselves to be the same ones that Lance had seen in the central square. Inside the small alcove is a stone desk that’s been carved in a way that resembles the furniture on dry land, fashioned with shelves that are cluttered with knickknacks of colorful coral and potted flora, with abandoned rings and house keys, with sea glass and intricate shells and even empty Coke cans, crushed yet still nostalgic. His bed is made of the soft seaweed that makes up the doorway, a
giant pile that floats almost ethereally at the edges, expertly woven together like a straw mat would be.

“I took up this place when I first got here. They tried to get me out, but I kept coming back, and eventually they stopped bothering,” his uncle explains, swimming up to press his hand against the ceiling. “It’s served me well through the years. You can stay here until you find a place of your own, hopefully nearby.”

Lance hates that. Hates the blunt talk of his future, like it’s here, under the sea instead of above on the land, where he belongs. Hates the truth.

He’s never felt so poisoned by the cruelty of fate, so cheated by the workings of the universe. He’s never felt so angry. Lance’s eyes burn, his fists clenching by his side, and his uncle slowly drifts down to meet him, his green eyes inquisitive.

“What is it?”

“What is it? Are you kidding?” Lance spits out, squeezing his eyes closed. God, he could punch a wall. He could punch his uncle, but he won’t.

“You’ll feel better once you get some sleep.”

“No, I won’t.”

His uncle sighs.

“Yeah. You won’t.”

“We don’t belong anywhere, do we?” Lance suddenly whispers, forcing his fingers to uncurl, to return to a state of calm. “Not on land. Not here. We’re just an outlier.”

“In a way, yes.”

Lance makes up his mind, then and there.

“We should see them.”

“See who?”

“Our family.”

His uncle’s face darkens, his lips pursing tight, tight, tight. “Lance, I’ve already ex—“

“No. Hear me out. My unbalanced quintessence is just starting, yeah? And yours has stabilized throughout the years?”

“Yes, but —“

“That means that a small visit wouldn’t be dangerous. Just 30 minutes. Just one last time, to say goodbye.”

“Lance. We are not walking again. We can’t.”

“We won’t be walking. We’ll be in the ocean, and they’ll be on the beach.” His mind is whirring, now, lighting with lightning thought. “They’ll look for me after the hurricane passes. I know they will. We go together, explain everything, and get some goddamn closure.”
“Lance. We can’t.”

“Says who?” He’s shouting without even realizing it, his arms thrown up irritation, his tail whipping furiously beneath him. “Says who, uncle? Look me in the eyes and tell me that it won’t be worth it. Just for 30 minutes. Tell me.”

And he stares at his mother’s brother, his ocean-blue eyes meeting seafoam-green, boring a hole into him with everything he has.

His uncle can’t answer. Can’t speak. Until he does.

“I’ll think about it.”

Lance sighs, shakily rubbing his hands over his arms. A spurt of cold water has suddenly swept through the room, entering through the seaweed curtain and circling around before warming up with their body heat.

“Thank you.”

__________

One detail that Keith quickly picks up on about Lance’s family is that they ask a lot of questions.

“How did you meet Lance?”

“How long have you known him?”

“What’s your major?”

“Do you have a job?”

“Why do you have a mullet?”

Elisa asks that one. She might as well be a carbon copy of her older brother.

“I have a mullet because I like having a mullet,” he answers, not unkindly, but not exactly kindly, either. Her earnest face is lit up in the flickering light of the scattered candles that they have set up all around the kitchen, Dani taking it upon herself to carry some to the other rooms to give them a bit of illumination.

Keith strikes a match, watching as Elisa’s wide eyes reflect the flame, her mouth shaped into a tiny ‘o.’ She’s brightened up considerably in the last hour, her eyes going from blood-red and bloated to only slightly puffed, no longer glistening with unshed tears. She’s attached herself to Keith like they’ve been handcuffed together — he’s pretty sure Hunk sicced her on him to get her off of his leg, which he can’t blame him entirely for — and is handing him candle after candle to light. She’d wanted to light some by herself at first, had even gotten ahold of a few matches despite the whole family’s attempts to keep her away from them, but had quickly abandoned the idea after the match burned down to the quick, scorching her fingers.

“Why do you like having a mullet?” she squeaks, blinking owlishly.

“Uh. I dunno. I like how it looks, I guess.”

“Why?”

“There’s no answer, Elisa.”
“Why?”

Keith sighs, thinking it best to change the subject before the ‘why’s escalate to the matter of the existence of the universe itself. He looks down at his coffee-scented candle, which is a jumbo-sized, three-wicked monstrosity of a thing, and something suddenly occurs to him.

“Hey, why do you guys have so many scented candles?” It’s true — all around him are an assortment of smells bleeding into one indescribable blend of cherry and chocolate and mint and ‘evergreen forest,’ or whatever the hell that last one was.

“Oh, Lance loves those!” Elisa squeals, her face breaking into a sunny smile, the string of ‘why’ blessedly forgotten. “He takes me to Yankee Candle all the time and we smell all of the candles. Sometimes it takes hours.”

“Oh,” Keith dumbly says. He has to admit that that’s pretty damn adorable. He can imagine it — the two going shelf-by-shelf, prying the glass stoppers off and taking a whiff before either making a face of delight or a face of disgust, exchanging their finds, maybe buying one or two if they have the cash on them.

Or three, or four, or five, if he’s judging by the sheer quantity of candles that have been piled onto the kitchen counter.

Angelo is nearby, fiddling with an emergency radio, bits and crackles of voices blipping in and out of reach before he finally gets ahold of some half-sentences, each snippet blending into a single narrative.

“—117 mile per hour winds out there, meaning that Hurricane Helene has weakened to a category three upon landfall, and —“

_Shhhhh_ goes the blocked radio.

“—storm surge rising 10 feet, threatening to swallow up parts of Key —“

_Shhhhh._

“—expecting seven inches of rain this evening, and —“

_Shhhhh._

Angelo turns the radio off.

“Well, that’s depressing,” he snorts, rolling his eyes.

“At least we’re not getting the eye of the storm,” Hunk offhandedly mentions, scruffling Anton’s thick head of hair that bobs beside him with one hand as he expertly lights a series of long taper candles with the other. “I hear the winds there are expected to get up to 125 miles per hour.”

“Jesus,” Keith mumbles, setting yet another lit candle carefully on the counter. The wind outside is positively screaming, pelts of God knows what slamming against the strong shutters, and he watches as Angelo untangles his earbuds from his pocket, connects them to his iPod, and jams them into his ears.

“It sounds like a monster,” Elisa whispers, clinging on to Keith’s arm, and Keith breathes out a short huff of air, letting her do what she wishes.
“Yeah, it does.”

He can’t wait until all of this is over and he can just dive into the sea, searching for glimpses of a glittering blue tail that he never would’ve thought could ever lead to anything more than a slightly popular cryptid blog post. Not in a million years.

But here they are, he guesses. Weird how that works.

Chapter End Notes

I JUST SAW THIS FIC ON A FIC REC LIST AND IM YELLING AAAAA THIS HAS NEVER HAPPENED TO ME BEFORE

Also sorry it's been like two weeks, work and school have been kicking my ass, but I finally got on top of everything enough to write a chapter this weekend! Good to be back.

Also should I make a writing tumblr? I have a tumblr that I use but I can't link it to this fic since a lot of people I know in real life follow that blog and I'm not out to all of them yet. I've been wanting to make a writing blog for a long time, so I may just do it the next time I actually have some spare time, haha.

(Also I don't think I ever mentioned that the document I keep this fic in is named "Un-Follow Me Now, This Is Gonna Be the Only Thing I Write About For The Next Week. Ive Wanted This For Years Fuck. What The Fuck." Fun fact I guess)

As always, thank you so much for reading! Comments/kudos/constructive criticism are appreciated!
Chapter Nineteen

Keith is trying to sleep soundly on the couch, his face pressed into the squishy cushions and his tense, curled-up form wrapped up in a blanket that smells vaguely like Lance, when he hears it — the groaning of breaking wood, the rush of scathing winds rushing into a formerly calm room and stealing the breath from its lungs.

It’s the sound of something crashing into the house.

Keith’s torso jerks up, a stab of panic piercing his chest and crawling up his throat, and he tries to free himself, but the blanket-burrito has grabbed him in a secure (if comfy) grip, tight enough for him to have to awkwardly roll over a few times to loosen it.

“Hunk!” he gasps, reaching blindly for his trusty flashlight. He clicks it on, and it emits a weak beam of light that grows ever stronger as he frantically cranks the little handle, but it only illuminates a peacefully slumbering Hunk in his self-made burrow of pillows and blankets on the floor beside the couch, his mouth askew and twitching with sudden snores.

“What’s happening?” a small voice pipes up from Keith’s left. It’s Anton, his small legs clad in oversized sweatpants, his hand rubbing wearily at his sleep-filled eyes as his gaze flits to and fro, searching for the source of the disruption.

“Go back to bed,” Keith urges, trying to level his tone out as much as possible. “Everything’s fine. It’s just —”

“What in the hell was that?” another voice shrilly shrieks, a shadow practically projecting itself into the living room with long, dark hair cascading down the front of the face in a tangled veil. Valeria. “It was like —”

“Calm down!” Mrs. McClain bustles in from behind Keith, her head cocked to the side, her tired eyes drooping as if fit to slide right off of her face and plop on the floor. “One of the trees fell and came through the roof in the office. I’ve closed the door, but we need to —”

“What?” Valeria shrieks, her voice a high-pitched squeak, reaching registers that Keith had only heard from Lance. “Are you serious? Wow, just our luck —”

“Well, are we going to complain about it or are we going to do something?” Lance’s mother demands. “Come on, get some towels from the bathroom. We have to block the crack underneath the door to keep the rain from flooding into the rest of the house.”

“Okay,” Valeria mumbles, turning on her heel and disappearing back into the kitchen, and Anton follows her, his full-moon eyes glossy and his trembling hands clasped together. Mrs. McClain clasps her hands to her eyes as they leave, collapsing heavily into a nearby armchair, and Keith bites his tongue.

“I’m sorry,” he says, knowing that it means nothing, that it can do jack shit in the face of all of this — but what else can he say?

“No. Don’t be. It’s just…a lot,” she sighs, rubbing at her eyes with an exhausted ferocity. “I just want to get out here and find him.”
“Me too,” Keith softly says, something in him bleeding out at the words, and Lance’s mother suddenly ceases her worrying, opting to gaze up at Keith curiously instead — those brown eyes searching, gently probing around Keith’s insides, and for second he swears she can see right inside him, down to the blood and bone.

“You care about him a lot, don’t you?” she whispers, blinking like a cat. Keith swallows.

“Uh. Yeah. I do.” What am I supposed to say? ‘Oh yeah, I’ve fallen head over heels for your son only to find out that he’s actually half-fish, and —’

“Found some stuff!” Valeria proudly announces, bursting in — she’s one for dramatic entrances, Keith has noticed — with Anton two steps behind her, up to his ears in multicolored beach towels and plain white bath towels and everything in-between. Valeria is hefting just as much, and she plops them on the ground in a giant heap, wiping her hands on her shorts.

“This is…a little overkill, but it’ll do,” Mrs. McClain sighs, standing up from the chair, expertly tucking the frayed edges of herself back in as she rises. “All right. Let’s get started.”

The sensation wakes Lance right up, igniting the stuff of his soul like a roman candle.

“Ah!” His hands fly up to his chest, groping for the thing that’s beat-beat-beating like another heart stuck in beside his, tendrils of not-so-distant panic writhing up and down his torso, clenching his muscles and tightening his jaw. His tail whips wildly against the side of the cave — he’s a few feet above his recently-made seaweed bed, the one he’d been trying to ignore the sliminess of just a few hours before, and he wants to calm down, wants to breathe, but it was so sudden and frightening and —

“Lance!” A callused hand is placed on his shoulder — his uncle’s, no doubt. “Lance, calm down.”

“What is this?” Lance cries, twisting around to face his uncle’s pinched face, the crow’s feet stamped on the corners of his eyes stronger than usual, the lines of his forehead sticking out as obviously as scars. “What’s…”

“It’s your quintessence,” his uncle sighs, gnawing on his cheek, his soft green eyes glowing with a melancholy light. “It’s been developing all these years, connecting to everything around you — especially those you care about. What you’re feeling is them.”

“What?” Lance shrieks, eyes stretching wide. “They’re in danger! I — we have to —“

“They’re not in danger, they’re just in shock,” his uncle patiently explains, a dash of weariness dipping into his words. “I can feel it too. It’s fading already.”

Lance wants to scream in his face, bubbles exploding from the air projecting out of his lungs. Wants to tell him that he’s wrong, that they need to get their asses up to the shore, hurricane be damned — that he was wrong about bringing him down here, that’s he’s wrong about the whole fucking situation, but he can’t.

Because his uncle is right. The maelstrom is disappearing, dissipating into his blood, jogging instead of sprinting beside the smooth circulation that’s orchestrated by the beat of his now slowing heart.

And he hates that he’s right.
“If you concentrate enough, you can separate the separate threads that make up the whole emotion,” his uncle explains, closing his eyes. “It took me a little bit of practice, but it’s doable, even for us. Each person you’re connected with has a certain kind of energy to them that you learn to recognize.”

All right. Maybe Lance hates everything a little less now.

“If it goes one way, to us….does that mean it can also go two ways? Can we connect with them?”

“Technically, yes. But I choose not to,” his uncle sighs, rubbing at his face. “It wouldn’t be fair. I don’t deserve it.”

Lance frowns. “What do you mean?”

“I left them. Didn’t even tell them where I was going. And I know that I had to, but it doesn’t mean I’m okay with it. With myself,” he softly says. “And what if connecting with them would increase my disruptive quintessence in their life? I can’t risk it.”

And for once, Lance shuts up, forcing down the hateful anger that’s threatening to spill over his lips and boil the water around them.

Because despite everything, his uncle is just…human.

And Lance can’t blame him for that.

God, I’ve been an asshole.

“It’s okay,” Lance murmurs, looking up into his uncle’s troubled eyes. “You can tell them everything when we see them.”

His uncle throws him a weak smile. “I never said yes to that.”

“You never said no, either.”

He opens his mouth to speak, and then shuts it. Shakes his head.

“Get some sleep, Lance.”

The hubbub began the second the rain leaned toward subsiding, pouring instead of splashing out of the gutters in grand pools and rolling off of the leaves of the trees like sweat.

Elisa was the first to speak, of course, her hands pressed to the front door, her body crouched to peer out of the small hole cut out of the metal shutter.

“Mom! C’mon, let’s go!” she shrieked, clad in jeans with a puffy overcoat, the hood slung over her tangled locks that she’d washed in a basin of water that morning, taking even more of their rapidly disappearing supply.

“Not yet, Elisa,” Mrs. McClain had sighed, planting her hands on her hips. She bent over and frowned at the sight, pointing at the river that used to be the sidewalk, burbling and rushing and hefting splintered tree branches with it. “The roads are still too flooded. We wouldn’t make a mile.”

And so Elisa pouted, plopping down in her spot like a sack of rocks, and stayed there.

An hour passed.
“Mom!”

“Not yet, Elisa.”

Two hours, with Anton standing vigil beside her, fidgeting in place.

“Mom, what about now?”

“Elisa. No.”

Three hours, with the ever-chill Angelo spread out on the floor like a cat, his eyes carefully trained on the peephole.

“Mooooooooom!”

“Elisa! What did I say?”

Four hours later, the rest of the family had migrated to the door, pulled by a magnetic force of both Elisa’s whining and their own determination — and by then, what choice did poor Mrs. McClain have?

“All right. Let’s go,” she sighed, pulling on a jacket to ward against the post-rain chill, and the war cry that resounded almost knocked her off her feet. It’s hard to say if Hunk or Dani opened the door first — they both flung themselves at it at the speed of light, fumbling with the handle in an attempt that probably would’ve been quicker if they had approached it like normal people — but either way, the group was off, shoes splashing and skidding in the muddy water, legs leaping over debris made of soggy greenery and an uprooted stop sign that had been bent into a right angle.

How they all managed to fit into one car is a miracle, but it happened nonetheless.

____________________

“Oh, come on!”

Mrs McClain’s fingers are tight against the wheel of the car, pressing imprints of her irritation into its soft leather, and Keith agrees wholeheartedly.

They made it fifteen minutes out into the fray without much trouble, faces pasted to the rain-splattered windows to wince at the wrecked roofs and dented shutters, but right in front of them — right there! — is a thick-trunked tree, its roots exposed to the air and its branches hanging off of it at pitiful angles. And this wouldn’t be a big deal — they’ve seen plenty of wrecked trees within the last few minutes — if it wasn’t perched right in the middle of the road.

And if it wasn’t almost as large as the minivan.

Keith swears under his breath, and Hunk claps his hand over his mouth, glancing worriedly over at the younger kids that are smushed up against his side like sardines packed into a can.

“All right. It’s fine,” Luis assuages, gathering Anton more securely into his lap. “We’re almost there. We can get out and walk, right?”

Angelo pops up from his perch on the car floor and reaches a long, gangly arm to pop the door open, wriggling out like a misplaced snake and almost falling on his stomach on the muddy earth. He quickly scoops his feet underneath him, though, face plastered with a facade of dignity, and stares at them all with an incredulity that even Keith can’t quite match on his best days.
“Well, what are you guys waiting for?” he says, turning on his heel and tromping through the mud with the fearlessness of a skydiver, and the call to action is quickly received.

Keith isn’t prepared for how much his legs ache when his sneakers meet the ground, the packed-in muscles screaming for release, but he braves it all the same, unpacking his weary bones and keeping his eyes trained on his feet as they traverse over soupy mud, rocky gravel, prickly weeds, wet sand —

The song of the ocean hits his ears in a chaotic, cymbal-like crash of water against earth, violent enough to make anybody fear its power, but in this moment, nothing else could have soothed his nerves.

Well, maybe one thing could, but that’s what they’re here to find.

“Laaaaaance!” Elisa howls, trudging within inches of the hiked-up waterline that’s swallowing most of the former beach, her rain boots squeaking together obnoxiously. “Lance, where are you?”

“Don’t go too far into the water!” Mrs. McClain warns, keeping hawk-eyed tabs on each family member. “The riptides must still be strong.”

Hunk is actively plowing through the water as she says this, waist-deep in the frothing surf, his hands cupped around his mouth as he yells with all his might.

“Lance! Can you hear us?” he hollers, the water catching on his yellow shirt, staining it a deeper, sadder color. “Lance!”

“Lance!” Keith begins, clearing his throat of its misuse. After a day amongst the violent winds and pounding rain, there wasn’t too much to say around the house. Even Elisa had fallen quiet, her face collapsed in a resolve too old for a face that young, but now that they’re here the words that they saved are being used as a beacon. A call home.

The water is icy, lapping through Keith’s sneakers with tongues of bubbles and sand, so he hurriedly rips his shoes and socks off, wading further into the fray with clenched teeth. Each step is like battling gravity itself, the rain-swollen sea pushing against his body before sucking him in again, the surf going in and out in a constant series of breaths. He somehow makes it beside Hunk, the water crawling up his chest, and he grabs on to his large bicep for stability.

“What do you see anything?” Hunk asks, squinting his eyes against the still-bright sun behind the veil of clouds, but Keith can only shrug.

“No. Nothing.”

And that’s when the reality of their situation hits him.

The ocean is huge. Keith knows this, of course, but nothing really illustrates it like being there at the crust of the continent, knowing something else is out there but not being able to see it, operating on faith alone. It’s not blue but rather reflecting the drab grey of the clouds, like millions and millions of gallons of wet concrete sloshing together, never to solidify. It feels that heavy, too, reducing his movements to molasses, reminding him just how powerless he is in its grip, just how small he is in its never-ending spread.

Because the truth is that it just keeps going. And going, and going, and going — and yes, eventually there will be land, but there’s also the expanse of everything in-between, the coral reefs and the underground volcanoes and the pits and the unknown creatures. Hell, if mermaids exist, who knows what else does?
Lance is out there, somewhere. But he could be anywhere.

“Hunk,” Keith mutters, his fingers tight around the muscle of Hunk’s arm. The water is becoming even more restless, jostling against his sides and causing his body to bob in the water like a buoy. “This is…”

Hunk sighs, his eyebrows sloping downward.

“Impossible,” he quietly finishes for him, swallowing. “This is fucking impossible, isn’t it?”

“He might still be in the clutches of that thing. It was like some kind of trance. What if he doesn’t even know who he is? What if he doesn’t even remember his past?” Keith bites out, eyes stinging from the choppy saltwater, swallowing the pain of his tears. “Shit, Hunk, he could be dead.”

“Don’t say that,” Hunk fiercely says, and Keith can feel his arm tighten beneath his hand. “We don’t know that.”

“Exactly. We don’t know. It —” Keith starts, but the rest of his words are choked out by a mouthful of seawater, burning down his throat like alcohol. He coughs, arching his neck to allow his nose and mouth to escape the water, pulling down on Hunk’s solid arm to give him leverage, but another wave bears down on him, filtering through his nose and slipping into his lungs and —

The third wave, the strongest of all, forcibly tears his fingers from Hunk’s grip.

The undertow is immediate, sucking his body under as if it had yanked him by the leg, and Keith is screaming, his cry for help nothing but bubbles, his arms and legs writhing wildly, his fingers catching touches of sand and shells, but which way is up? Which way is down? There’s nothing, no sunlight streaming through the waves, nothing to give him the barest of hints, and his lungs are heavy, heavy, burning, burning, and he doesn’t know if its from lack of air or from an abundance of water. He doesn’t know anything.

He thinks he screams again, but maybe he doesn’t.

Of course, it hadn’t taken much pestering to flip Lance’s uncle over to the side of visiting the family.

And of course, of course, they’re halfway to the beach when an onslaught of panic grips Lance’s chest out of the blue.

“Oh, jeez,” he mutters, hand pressing to his skin, feeling the racing pulse. “Somebody’s freaking out again.”

“Who is it?” his uncle asks, curiously looking over. The tide is swifter than usual today, something they ride the way surfers ride waves, and Lance can’t help but be grateful for it. The less time it takes to see his family, the better.

“I dunno. I can’t tell yet,” he sighs, gnawing on his lip. “This…”

He pauses.

This isn’t like the last time.

It’s deeper, digging into the carnal side of humanity, the fight or flight stuck inside everyone’s bones — a stab of pain slicing into his lungs, the bitter ghost of salt on his tongue. And it’s only rising.
Lance’s uncle gasps, and Lance knows exactly why. He can feel it too — the other ties lighting up with emotion one at a time illuminating the dire straits, and he can practically feel the screams warming their throats, ripping their vocal cords.

“How far away are we?” Lance gasps at the same exact time that his uncle cries “Swim faster!” And by God, they do. They swim so fast that Lance can hardly catch a breath, his tail cramping up with the effort — his uncle is much faster, his mastery over his tail honed in by years of practice, but Lance is right there behind him, fueled with the kind of fear that helps people lift cars to free the trapped love one underneath, the kind of fear that inspires the impossible.

And that fear is multiplied by ten when he sees the body floating, its head tilted back, its limbs askew in a way that would be graceful if the whole situation wasn’t so horrifying.

He’s in ratty basketball shorts and a plain t-shirt, his hair fanning outward like spilled ink, and his clothes float ethereally, billowing over his skin in folds. It’s the kind of peaceful scene that should paint him as an angel, ascending above the waves, but in reality he’s sinking, sinking, a thin stream of bubbles escaping from his nostrils, his head tilting back enough for the mermaids get a good look at him.

Lance’s heart stops

“How!” he shrieks, and he shoots forward like an arrow released from a bow, barely taking any of it in — all he can see is that slack face, that soft hair brushing against his arms, the pressure of the water swirling around and around and around. It’s almost nothing for Lance to break through the current, aided with his tail, but for a human? Lance can’t imagine facing this with two kicking legs and two balled fists, no gills sliced into the sides of his neck.

Keith is limp. Far, far too limp. Lance doesn’t remember them going above the waves, but there they are, Keith’s face tilted to the sun, highlighting the bits of water that slide down his face and rejoin the sea.

“Breathe!” Lance screams, shaking him, watching that waterlogged head bobble back and forth. “Fuck you, Keith! Breathe!”

“We have to get him to shore!” Lance’s uncle yells — he’s right beside him, green eyes burning with fear. Lance hadn’t noticed. “Quickly!”

“Lance!” another voice howls, but it isn’t Keith — it’s Hunk, his yellow shirt blazing like a second sun in the water a few yards away, up to his neck in the ocean. “Lance, you found Keith!”

“Hunk, get on the shore! I don’t wanna be saving your sorry ass too!” Lance yells back, cradling Keith to his chest as his tail works in broad strokes, chin resting his mess of black hair. He should check for a pulse. He should check for a pulse.

He doesn’t want to check for a pulse.

“Lance!” More screams, now, none other than the voices he has imprinted in his brain, the ones he could never forget. He looks up, vision blurry, but there’s no mistaking it — his family’s bunched at the shore, their faces flushed with a myriad of emotion.

“Guys!” Lance yells, equally as choked. The sand is skimming his belly, getting stuck in the spaces between his scales, and it’s shallow enough for him to plunk Keith down on the sand face-up, the tide rushing over his legs in an enormous oceanic exhale.
Elisa is the first to arrive, those godforsaken boots squeaking up a storm, her tiny chest heaving with wracking sobs. “K-Keith!” she screeches, bending down to touch her gloved hands to his painfully still chest.

Lance’s mother is next, collapsing to her knees beside the two, the sand sticking to her kakis. “Lance, I —” she begins, but then she looks behind him. Does a double take.

“Riel?” she breathes, mouth dropping open.

“Hey, sis,” he answers, smiling a crooked smile that’s eerily similar to Lance’s.

“Uh, we’ve got bigger problems, guys!” Lance has his fingers at Keith’s neck, searching for the pumping artery, but he’s finding nothing, nothing —

Until he does.

It’s barely noticeable, as weak as a swipe of butterfly wings, but it’s there.

“Oh, thank God,” he wheezes, dropping his head to Keith’s shoulder. His skin is waxy and cold, and Lance just wants to rub some life into it, to curl him in a blanket and carry him back home.

The coughs are sudden, explosive, and Keith’s torso pops up with enough force to knock Lance over. He moans, weakly flipping his body over, and then he’s on his hands and knees, coughing up lungful after lungful of seawater. Mrs. McClain rubs his back as it continues, drawing comforting patterns of circles and boxes, and they wait until the last heave, the last shuddering breath.

Finally, he looks up. Eyes glassy. Mouth open. He slowly lowers himself back down on the ground, shaking, and Lance can’t help but catch his hand, squeezing it. Keith looks down at the touch like he doesn’t know what it is, tracing Lance’s arm up to his chest, his neck, his eyes —

And he stares. Not even blinking.

He stays like this for quite some time.

“Hey, uh, Keith, I know this is —” Lance nervously starts, but Keith cuts him off.

“You’re…a fish.”

An unexpected laugh bubbles out of Lance’s throat. “Excuse you. I’m a mermaid, you uncultured swine.”

Keith doesn’t seem to have heard him. “I mean, I knew you were a fish, but —“

“What?” Lance yelps, blinking profusely. “You knew?”

“Well, not for long. Hunk and I saw you disappear into the ocean before the hurricane. But seeing it up close is…different,” he hazily says, bleary eyes tracing over his gleaming tail.

“Promise you won’t tell anyone? Pinky swear?”

Keith coughs out a dim chuckle, shaking his head with incredulity. “Goddamn it, Lance.”

“Riel,” Mrs. McClain cuts in, tilting her head to the side, a sharp frown cut into her face. “I’m sorry, but — where have you been for all these years? What happened?”

Lance and his uncle share a look.
“It’s best if we start from the beginning,” Riel sighs.

So they do.

By the time they’re finished with the tale the afternoon is approaching, the sun beginning its descent down the ashen sky instead of directly above, and the surface of the water isn’t shining with its usual reflections — the glittering gems usually strewn across the surface have sunken to the depths.

Nobody’s faces are shining, either.

“So you’re telling me,” Mrs. McClain begins, her voice shaking with unkempt rage, “that you can’t ever return?”

“That’s bullshit!” Angelo gruffly says, and Dani smacks him on the arm, shooting him a poisonous glare.

“You have to understand,” Riel pleads, hands folded together, seashell bracelets jangling with the movement. “We’re doing this for your safety! It’s not much of a choice!”

“No. No, I am not losing my brother and my son,” she spits, crossing her arms, casting a worried glance Elisa’s way. The last part of that sentence goes unsaid, but still echoes in everybody’s thoughts. And my daughter.

Keith can feel Lance looking at him out of the corner of his eye. Can feel him interlock their fingers into a new type of hand-holding, one that leaves his entire body buzzing. They hadn’t let go this entire time, Keith’s water-wrinkled palm pressed against Lance’s smooth one, and Lance was gripping him as though he’d never see him again, as though this were the last time they’d ever find themselves face-to-face.

And he thinks that’s true. He really does.

Keith isn’t so sure.

“You said quintessence is unstable, right?” he says, finally looking Lance in the eyes, taking in their melancholy glimmer. Lance nods, sucking in his cheeks.

“Yeah. Everything has quintessence, but ours is…defective, basically.”

And Keith thinks back.

Back to Pidge and her water samples at the beach.

Back to her and Matt’s odd discovery.

Back to the countless hours in the lab, careful hands preparing slides of Chemical X, watching under a microscope’s piercing eye as it switched back and forth, back and forth, unstable as anything he’d ever seen.

An unstable thing that they’d found ways to tame.

“Guys, I think there’s something we can do,” he breathes out.

Pidge is going to kill him for spilling the secret, but Keith knows it’s worth it.
Y'all we're almost at 10k hits woop!

This chapter was a doozy, and there were some lil time skips that I was like 'ehh' about, but I had to skip them because nothing important to the plot happened. I'm not used to skipping stuff like that, so I hope it worked and didn't sound fractured. Idk man

Either way, though, thanks for reading! Comments/kudos/constructive criticism are always appreciated!
“Dude. Play some Elvis Presley.”

“Lance, I don’t know any Elvis Presley.”

“Really? You don’t know any songs from your mullet successor?”

“What’s your deal with mullets? I still don’t get it.”

“We’ve been over this, Keith. They’re tragic.”

Lance watches as Keith sighs, blowing a spare bang out of his face. The ocean breeze helps, pushing his hair away from his forehead until it flops the wrong way entirely, and he frowns, fiddling with the strands to tuck them behind his ears. Lance tries to ignore how endearing it looks, his eyes slipping down to find Keith’s fingers fiddling over the strings of the guitar that he has cradled to his chest, the one he borrowed from Luis. Lance didn’t expect him to show up when he did, face gleaming with sweat and eyes gleaming with something else, telling about how it’s hotter inside without any air conditioning than it was outside, so he might as well come out here while the people who fully know what they’re doing when it comes to chemicals start the generator up at the lab.

Lance won’t say it, but he’s ridiculously happy. Happy that he’d scooped Keith from the depths, the water emptying from his lungs instead of drowning them forever. Ecstatic that he has a second change. Pleased to not be alone, wandering aimlessly by the shore as his uncle travels back to the city to scoop up his few possessions and say what would hopefully be his last goodbyes.

“I know some Johnny Cash, if that makes your mullet-obsessed self happy,” Keith cheekily snorts, dipping his feet into the water as the high tide washes even closer to his skin with a pleased little sigh. His pale skin is tanner than usual, baking under the incessant sun, and he inches closer into the shade of the mangrove, watching as tiny bait fish dart around his toes, playing tag.

Lance rolls his eyes. “Of course you do. You’re from Texas. Is it Ring of Fire?”

Keith pauses, meeting Lance’s narrowed eyes, and swallows.

“Maybe.”

“Damn it, Keith — what’s next, The Devil Went Down to Georgia?”

“Actually. I know that one too.”

“God!” Lance whips his tail up, watching as the water arcs over his head and splatters onto Keith’s face, waiting for a swift and deadly rebuttal, but he gets none of that. Instead, Keith tilts his head up, his eyes slipping blissfully closed.

“That feels pretty good, actually,” he says, a ghost of a grin passing over his face, one eye cracking open to watch Lance. He doesn’t exactly know what Keith sees, which of his emotions is splayed out on his face — because of course one of them is. He can never quite wipe his heart off his sleeve.

He’d missed being with Keith like this — words spouting off of their tongues, an effortless battle of
wit and words. A lot. Too much, probably, to the point where he wants to squelch it down and run, but he’s kind of tired of running. Really tired of it, actually. He’d much rather sit here and talk.

And he hadn’t realized how much he craved this with Keith until it was gone, until the possibility of it literally never happening again popped up, so he watches the curve of Keith’s barely smiling lips, the golden sun bouncing off of his now burning skin, and just exists for a second, floating out with the tide.

“Hey, did Pidge really believe I was a mermaid?” Lance suddenly asks, breaking the spell to reel his brain back in, and Keith rolls his eyes.

“She has an eye for the smallest of photoshop changes, so when I showed her the picture she immediately looked me in the eyes and said ‘Well, fuck me,’” Keith says, snorting. “If anybody can figure out how to further stabilize the quintessence in less than 24 hours, it’s her. I wouldn’t worry too much.”

“Okay,” Lance softly responds, laying down on his back, feeling the water lap over his scales as he looks at Keith upside-down, a habit he’d gotten used to after laying the same way on the couch and watching TV as a kid. Keith stares at him strangely but says nothing, his fingers pressing down on the strings, playing a series of random yet pleasant-sounding chords in time with the rhythm of the shoreline. His throat strains with soft hums, the tenor almost otherworldly, and the lull fills the comfortable silence until the music fades away, replaced with an interested Keith — furrowed eyebrows, pursed lips.

“You never told me about the mermaid world down there,” he says, absentmindedly fiddling with the tuning pegs.

“Because you’ll write about it in that cryptid blog of yours!” Lance argues, slapping his tail against the ocean with a small splash.

“I won’t.”

“You will.”

“Well, you follow me, so if I post it you’ll know and can come kick my ass or whatever.”

Lance blanches, wishing very desperately that he could bury his head in the sand at this very moment. “How did you know I follow you?”

“Who else could ‘MermaidBlue82’ be?”

“You got me there,” Lance hums, crossing his arms behind his head, shaking off the startlement. “But yeah, mermaid territory was cool. They had taken advantage of the local cave systems and carved them into homes, and there were these bioluminescent plants that I’ve never seen before. They were beautiful. The whole thing was, really — just drop-dead gorgeous. But it just…” He cuts off, gnawing on his chapped bottom lip. “I didn’t belong. Hell, even my uncle had been there for years and years, and he still didn’t belong. Our quintessence set us apart. Nobody wanted to bother with something so troublesome and inconvenient. It was so damn isolating.”

Keith nods, his fingers stilling on the instrument, his eyes stuck down on the sand as if he’s trying to separate every individual grain and commit each of them to memory.

“It was like that when I was in foster homes,” he admits. “Never felt like I really was meant to be anywhere. The only constant, the only home I really had was music, until Shiro and his family came along. Even then, it took some time to adjust and feel present and…and wanted, I guess.”
Lance nods, feeling this, but a moment later he really feels it, a slough of molasses-like sadness mixed with a dashing of bitterness, relief at the outcome edging the sides of the whole thing. It pulses down their interconnected lines of quintessence like a heartbeat, pumping into Lance’s limbs and brain, and the line is fuzzy, jumpy, but there all the same. Lance squirms in place, inspecting Keith, but he shows no sign of awareness, no shared connection of energy.

Lance wants to tell him. He should probably tell him. But how creepy would that be? Hey, Keith, so there’s more to quintessence, and I can pretty much feel your strong emotions every once in a while. So, uh — hope that doesn’t freak you out? Sorry, I guess?

Lance’s uncle told him it could be a two-way street. But how?

Just before he reaches out to test his luck, Keith’s phone rings with the x-files theme song, the screen flashing with Pidge’s contact photo.

“Oh my God,” Lance mutters, barely containing his glee, and Keith throws him a death glare, swiping the screen to open the call and put it on speaker.

“Pidge?”

“Keith! Ok, so, first of all, thank God for the invention of fire extinguishers —“

“What did you —“

“And second of all, I may have burned off the lower layers of my hair, but this means I can get a cool under-shave, so it’s a win, right? Anyways —“

“Pidge, how many times are you going to set your hair on fire?”

She snorts, the sound crackling through the phone’s connection. “Listen, I dropped my open water bottle on a container of potassium permanganate, which knocked over the glycerin, and, well, y’know. And because I’m feeling attacked, I’ll have you know that I haven’t burned my hair in the lab any more than you have while shuffling through out data sets at an unfortunate time, hypocrite. But that’s not the point. The point is that we found something that stabilizes Chemical X the most.”

“You mean quintessence?”

“It’s too late, Keith. It’ll always be Chemical X in my heart. But remember how we thought it was specifically bonded to salt in the chemical test, when it showed up as blue when it should’ve showed up as white? There was a reason it was doing that. The salt calmed it down from multiple forms to just a few, so it naturally bonded to the salt while in the ocean to stabilize itself — it was probably residual from Lance, or perhaps his uncle.”

“No wonder my body craves salt,” Lance mutters, looking back at the water lapping at his tail-end. “The more I grew the more my body needed it, which is when my quintessence began to freak out even more.”

“It is the most natural solution, yes,” Pidge says, matter-of-fact, and he can practically see her push her glasses further up her nose. “But since salt didn’t stabilize it all the way, we had to artificially add some two-carbon ethyl instead of one-carbon methyl to create ethyl formyl acetate sodium salt! And you wanna know what happened?”

“Keeping me on the edge of my seat, I see,” Lance laughs, grinning at the unbridled excitement splitting the seams of her voice.
“It finally quieted down to one form! Hallelujah!” she shrieks, and Lance can practically see her punching the air, the space around her still smoking with the after-effects of chemical fire. “So if you take an appropriate dose of that stuff — we’ll have to be precise, mind you, because too much could cause some side effects of eye irritation and shit — you and your uncle should be golden, Lance.”

Lance lets out a breath, one that he hadn’t even been holding, but it’s like he’s been holding it for days judging by the intensity with which it comes out, squeezing out of his lungs like it couldn’t possibly fit there anymore. Keith slumps beside him, his shoulders melting, his face shedding all of its pinched edges and melting into nothing, before shifting into a certain something.

A smile. A genuine smile. Something Lance has seen from him before, but not often, and then Keith looks at him, all that joy and emotion pouring into Lance like coffee into a cup, warm and fond and invigorating.

And as boring as it might seem, all he can do is stare. Because liking Keith is still kind of weird, the idea of it shifting erratically under his skin and goading on his rapid heartbeat, but it’s also kind of wonderful.

“Thanks, Pidge,” he chokes out, forcibly tearing his eyes away from Keith’s, because if he doesn’t he’s pretty sure the magnetic pull he was feeling would do more damage than it would good, with the things it begged him to do — reach out for Keith’s hand again, for example. Kiss the callused skin of his knuckles. Mushy shit.

“No prob, Lance. Actually, I should be thanking you for introducing me to what will probably be the topic of my senior thesis,” she responds, and Lance pales.

“Uh, you —“

“No, not about mermaids, about the chemical. Quintessence. Whatever. Your version of it has some interesting properties, and if I study it in its stabilized form normally and in its unstable form in small doses, I should be able to avoid the universe-shattering bad luck you guys were talking about.”

“As long as you don’t explode anything,” Keith sighs, rolling his eyes. Pidge chuckles.

“Can’t promise that, Keith. But I’ll try. But we already have some of the antidote, if you wanna call it that. We’ll be around in the next few hours to give it to you and your uncle, Lance.”

“Sounds great. Can’t wait to be on dry land again,” he sighs, and he means it. He really does.

And looking at Keith, still smiling, he means it even more.

“Cool! I’m gonna go find some scissors and cut this hair off,” Pidge grumbles, her voice fainter, as if she’d put the phone down in search of the shears already. “I’ll see you guys in a few hours!”

“Gotcha,” Keith says, rolling his eyes, at the same time that Lance says “Don’t run with scissors, kids!”

“I’ll stop running with scissors the day Keith cuts his mullet off.”

“I second that, Pidge!” Lance hollers, cupping his hands around his mouth for extra amplification, and Keith hangs up with a huff, Pidge’s laughter cut off mid-giggle.

“I can’t believe you two,” he groans, running his fingers through said mullet, and Lance watches the motion, slightly more captivated than he probably should be.
“I can. Hey, do you know Wonderwall?”

As it turns out, Keith does.

When they return, they return with absolutely everybody — Elisa, Anton, Luis, Valeria, Dani, Angelo, Mrs. McClain, Hunk, Pidge, every single individual decked out with eager eyes and fidgeting feet, kicking sand out of their way as they clamber down the dunes and pick their way through the treacherous weeds. Keith sees Pidge first, her now shoulder-length hair chaotically whipping around in the wind, and when her mouth drops open a whole lock of her hair is suddenly shoved behind her teeth, causing her face to collapse in on itself as she spits the strands out.

“Is that a cryptid I spy?” she cries, immediately kicking off her sandals and dashing forward, her knees planting into the shallow water as she rakes her eyes over Lance’s tail with the intensity of a bird of prey. Her hand hovers in the air, curious, but Lance playfully smacks it away.

“It is indeed,” Lance proudly answers, placing a coy hand on his hip and fluttering his eyelashes. “Don’t touch the merchandise.”

Keith snorts, gently placing his guitar to the side. “C’mon, Lance. You let me touch it.”

“Oh?” Pidge says, her eyebrow cocking up and her expression spelling out pure sin, and Lance immediately flushes.

“O-Okay, fine! Do it! I’m just warning you, it’s kind of slimy,” he stutters out, and Pidge lets a vicious grin loose, tracing a few fingers over where his knees would be if he had them.

“Interesting,” she mutters, pulling away to study the blue shimmer that sticks to her skin. “I wonder if this has to do with the quintessence.”

A head suddenly pokes out of the water, ears pierced with sea glass and neck draped with murky green seaweed, and Pidge yelps, skittering away on all fours like a crab.

“It may have to do with quintessence,” Lance’s uncle conversationally begins as if nothing’s wrong, gingerly peeling the seaweed away from his skin and letting it bob away. “Our tails do shine more than the others do, after all.”

“Pidge! This is my uncle Riel,” Lance proudly announces, throwing his arms out like a showman, jazz hands aflutter. “Ask all your cryptid questions to him, he knows more than I do.”

“Cryptid?” his uncle asks, frowning, and Pidge openly laughs, returning from her formerly panicked retreat.

“Don’t worry, I’ll explain it all. But for now, we’re getting you two out of there,” she says, looking up at Hunk, who slides his backpack off of his back and pulls out two vials and two mini water bottles.

“Can I do it?” Mrs. McClain quietly asks, holding her palm out, and Hunk smiles, something soft and genuine and utterly Hunk-like.

“Go ahead.” He hands her the equipment, and she perches down on the sand, followed by Elisa standing at her shoulder. She opens her mouth to say something, but surprisingly says nothing, simply watching her mother open the water bottles with lean fingers, hearing the sharp crack of the seals breaking, the tinkling sound of the salt slipping out of its vial into the water. Mrs. McClain seals
them both upon finishing, shaking them and watching as the salt dissolves into the liquid, slowly but surely.

“Here,” she sniffs, her voice warbling, and Luis sits himself down beside her, throwing his arms around her shoulders. She smiles gratefully, wiping a single tear from her cheek, and her smile is vulnerable, blinding, almost disbelieving. Her slender hands reach out, each one wrapped around a bottle, and she leans forward as Lance and his uncle wriggle closer, elbows over water over sand.

“Come on. Let’s finish this,” she says, her face strong, shining.

Keith watches as Lance gingerly takes the bottle out of her hand and untwists the cap in a snap, his head tilting back to gulp it down like a shot, his face twisting with vague disgust. Lance’s uncle laughs beside him, shaking his head, and he guzzles it down just the same, plugging his nose with one hand.

When Lance’s lips detach from the bottle the first thing he does is gag, his eyes beading with tears, and Hunk slaps him on the back to break up the heaving chokes.

“Never said it’d taste good, but it does the job,” Pidge cheerily says, looking over at Riel’s pained expression. “It’ll kick in. Hopefully you’ll feel it somehow.”

“Oh,” Lance wheezes, flopping down on the sand, and Riel flips to his back, sighing.

“And I thought mer-food was bad,” he chuckles, to which Lance barks out a laugh, nodding in intense agreement.

“Yeah, I almost died when that one lady offered me raw shrimp. Like, she’d just killed it! I swear it was still twitching! And — oh.”

He shuts his mouth with an audible click of the teeth, pausing, his eyes sliding over to meet his uncle’s, whose are as wide as platters. For a second they just look at each other, unmoving, and Keith is about to say something when Riel flips back onto his stomach, bracing himself on his elbows.

“It’s so much clearer,” he mutters, a hand clutching at his temple. Even after all this time in the ocean, his skin isn’t wrinkled the slightest bit, Keith notices.

“I actually don’t feel seasick with our connection!” Lance sputters, eyes still stuck on his uncle. “I mean, it may still be rocky, but…”

“It’ll take about a month for it to really kick in at full force, I think,” Pidge says, and Hunk unloads two towels out of his bag, placing them in front of the mers. Lance’s uncle looks at them like he hardly knows what they are, stretching out his arm to feel the soft material.

“I haven’t walked in 15 years,” he murmurs, elbowing his way up the surf until hesitate or worse to get entirely on land, unfolding the towel and wiping away at his scales. Lance does the same, scrubbing vigorously like he can forcibly shed the scales through this method, and Keith watches as his fins shrink, the blue melting into a deep tan, separating into toes, the flesh parting almost like a zipper up his now-forming legs.

“Amazing,” Pidge breathes, squatting down and watching the progress with her glasses perched further down on her nose. “Lance, mind if I —“

“No blood or tissue samples! I will not be your lab rat!” Lance shrieks, wrapping the towel around his waist and clambering to his feet on shaky legs. Hunk immediately wraps a supportive arm around
his back, and Lance leans into him, giving him a grateful smile formed from years of shared experience and love.

“T'm so glad you could come back,” Hunk says, his eyes glimmering, and Lance clings onto him like a koala, sniffing away tears.

“Thanks, man. Me too.”

“I actually wouldn’t mind figuring the science of this,” Lance’s uncle muses, carefully balancing on his knees, blinking down at his legs like they don’t belong to him. “My muscles feel the same. They haven’t degenerated in my time as a mermaid, but they do seem different. Almost sleeker.”

He places a flat foot on the sand, testing its weight, and winces, casting a grateful glance at Angelo and Valeria as they both come take one of his sides to help him up. The first attempt goes about as well as Keith thought it would — Riel sways dangerously, chest pitching forward in a dramatic swoop, and it’s about all they can do to keep him upright — but it’s worth it, because the second attempt has him on his feet and laughing, his eyes squeezed shut, his mouth pulled into a smile so big it looks like it hurts.

“Oh, Riel,” Mrs. McClain says, dusting the sand off of her pants as she stands, glowing with emotion. She places her arm on his shoulder and squeezes, choking down a happy sob when he reciprocates. “Welcome back.”

“It’s good to be here, sis. Let’s go home.”

Lance wasn’t kidding when he said he was exhausted three hours ago, packed into the car with the rest of the family and practically sitting on Hunk’s lap, leaning back into Dani’s shoulders and playing up the dramatics because he knew it would make her giggle. He hadn’t been kidding when he slumped at the kitchen table as they all caught up, either, watching his uncle discuss the past 15 years with the nieces and nephews he remembered and learn everything about the ones he didn’t know. And he especially wasn’t kidding when he suggested that they all hit the sack early tonight, thankful when they took his advice.

But for all those words and all that truth, Lance can’t fall asleep to save his life. The sheets are too hot, but there’s no power and therefore no air conditioning, so what’s to be done? He could turn the portable fan on, sure — Hunk wouldn’t mind it. He'd probably fight for it if he was currently awake instead of passed out on the floor in his beloved pillow-den, belting out the occasional snore, but Angelo would wake up instantly and kill him for it — he's tucked up in the other twin-sized bed at the other side of the room, and he hates having the fan on with a burning passion. The house obnoxiously creaks under the influence of the fallen tree, but there’s not really anything he can do about that, either. And those are nothing compared to his spiraling thoughts, spinning with relief and energy and Keith, the slew of it as strong as the spinning arms of Helene herself.

So when he hears a soft pluck of a guitar string in the living room, he may as well follow it to the source, because what else can he do on this fine night?

Of course, it’s Keith. Keith in a pair of Lance’s sweatpants, the loose fabric gathered up to his knees because it’s hot as hell in the house. Keith with a walnut-wood guitar, playing as quietly as possible to make sure he doesn’t wake anyone. Keith sliced up by strips of moonlight that flood through the front door — the only place they’ve removed the shutters from so far.
Keith, who looks up at the sound of Lance’s soft steps, giving him an equally soft smile.

“Hey,” he whispers, pulling his legs up underneath him on the couch, nestling the guitar in the dip his legs create.

“Hey,” Lance responds, decidedly ignoring the rush of blood to his head, the way his heart is suddenly jumping up and down like a pogo stick. “Can’t sleep.”

“Me neither.” Keith plays another single note, clear and deep, as Lance plops down on the couch next to him, his thigh pressing against Keith’s knee. “I feel bad staying here another day.”

“Where else are you gonna go?” Lance quietly answers, nudging him in the side because he just can’t help himself. “The dorms are still closed, and you can’t exactly get to Shiro with the roads as screwed up as they are. It’s fine. We’re happy to have you.”

“Okay,” Keith quietly says, eyes flickering down to the guitar. Lance can see his eyelashes carved out of his profile against the bright moonlight, and just beneath that his sharp jawline, his nice nose. He’s a marble man, carved in silver and shadow, so beautiful that Lance aches.

God, what am I going to do?

“I don’t think I ever thanked you,” Keith suddenly says, turning toward Lance.

Lance blinks, swallowing the urge to duck away out of sheer squeamishness. His nerves are on fire, alight with every brush of Keith’s skin against his leg. “What for?”

“For saving my life, you dumbass.”

“I mean, what was I supposed to do, let you drown?” He laughs nervously, the sound high-pitched and awkward, and promptly wants to slap himself.

Keith pins him down with a look. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah. I guess I do. But I owed it to you.”

“Why’s that?”

Lance knows why. He knows exactly why. But saying it is something entirely different, so he’s not surprised when the words come out bitter, painted over with regret.

“Because I think it was my fault in the first place.”

Keith pulls back, tucking a spare bang behind his ear, allowing both of his eyes to be seen, which is just — great. Wonderful. The kind of distraction that Lance both craves and pushes away out of — out of what? Denial? Fear of judgement?

“What are you talking about?” Keith asks, low and serious, and Lance heaves out a heavy breath. Who knew lungs could hold so much weight?

“What are you talking about?” Keith asks, low and serious, and Lance heaves out a heavy breath. Who knew lungs could hold so much weight?

“Keith, I…I was putting you, everybody, in all kinds of danger just by being around you. And I daresay I was around you more than I was around the others, so that’s — yeah. What if it was my shitty quintessence that spat on the universe and caused you to be pulled underwater?”

“Well, even if it was, I survived, so,” Keith begins, but Lance makes a noise in the back of his throat.

“That’s not the point though! I get it, now. Get why my uncle ran,” he chokes, furiously wiping
away at his eyes. “I-I mean, I got it before, but to actually see it in action…”

He wants to say more, to dig into the meat of the situation and root out every rotten, worm-filled bit of it, but when Keith slips his hand in his, warm and inviting, it turns out that he doesn’t have to. The quintessence does it for him.

He feels it a second after Keith sucks his breath in, quick and hitched — the invisible lines tying them together with heady knots, on the wavelength just below the surface of everything, so other and yet so familiar. Keith grips his hand like it’s an anchor, digits pressing into Lance’s wrist, and he can only respond by intertwining their fingers, his heart beating so hard he thinks he’s going to pass out right then and there, and the world is weirdly fuzzy, almost unreal —

Until it isn’t.

Lance slowly unfurls himself like a flower coming into bloom, his senses returning to him one by one — the sight of Keith’s swollen pupils, the sound of his breathing, the sensation of his hand against his, scorching hot in the best way possible.

“D-Do you feel that?” Keith breathes, and Lance squeezes his hand to steady its slight shake.

“Yes. That’s our quintessence mixing together,” he answers, his mouth toppling into a smile. Because this is it. The two-way street. Keith’s disbelief is Lance’s own, now, punched into his chest like a shovel into soft earth, and he can feel his pain, his pain at Lance’s pain, and beneath that stacked layers of hazy wonder, velvet fondness, deep, deep, deep, all the way down, down, down.

“This is…” Keith says, his voice fading out like he forgot he was saying something in the first place, opting to stare at Lance instead. His mouth is dropped open, outlined in the silver of the moon, and God, he’s stunning, everything about him, and —

“I can — really?” that mouth stutters, cheeks flushing even in the dark, and Lance swallows uncertainty.

Shit. He felt that, didn’t he?

“I —“

“Is this — do you really —“

“I dunno, do you?” Lance hastily responds, not entirely sure what he’s asking, but then a feeling floods into him from Keith’s end, exasperatingly affectionate and as warm as hands wrapped around a cup of tea on a chilly day, and he gets the answer he’s looking for.

For a second, they just stare at each other, and they’re close, much closer than before, close enough for Lance to see that Keith’s eyes are darker than he originally thought, layered with even more shades of lavender, and —

“I’m kind of scared,” he admits, swallowing, and Keith’s eyes track the movement of his throat.

“Me too,” he whispers, his head tilting to the side seemingly without his notice, “but.”

He doesn’t finish that thought. Maybe because he’s breathing in Lance’s air like Lance is breathing in his, skin flushed, and Lance is again struck with the duality that Keith is a boy, he’s doing this with a guy, but you know what? He doesn’t care. He really, honestly doesn’t.

And the realization of this is probably what does it.
“I —” he starts, but Keith cuts him off just the way Lance wanted him to, like he’s reading his mind — which he probably is, in a way.

His lips are soft, barely there, and Lance automatically chases after them, pressing more firmly against him. Keith’s hands ghost over his sides, landing somewhere near his shoulders, and Lance can feel his smile, the little breaths of his slight chuckle puffing against his face. He pulls away the slightest bit to grin, startled at the straight up macking noise the disconnect makes, but Keith grabs him by the front of his shirt and pulls him down, mashing their mouths together again, and he’s making these little contented noises in the back of his throat, his hands moving to Lance’s neck, jaw, hair —

“Oof!” he breathes out as Lance accidentally elbows him in the side upon falling forwards, his two hands braced by Keith’s sides, and Lance winces.

“Sorry,” he whispers, but Keith giggles, literally giggles, and Lance can’t really process that adorable noise before he’s being pulled forward again, horizontal, everything filled with skin and warmth. Their legs are tangled up like they’re playing a game of twister, but Lance really can’t bring himself to care when he can tilt his head just so and get the fix he’s been waiting for, the thing he didn’t even fully know he wanted. Keith’s bangs are mixing with Lance’s, mirroring their lips, and it’s slow then fast, push then pull, an ebb and flow that feels just as natural as the ocean’s waves.

Lance isn’t really sure how long it lasts, but he’s okay with that, because when they finally part Keith is fucking glowing, teeth glittering and eyes crinkling in an all-encompassing smile.

“I’ve never had anybody like me back before,” he whispers, his mouth brushing against Lance’s, and Lance can’t help but press a sloppy kiss to his cheek. “I didn’t… I really didn’t think it was possible.”

“Keith. Buddy. It’s possible,” Lance promises, to which Keith rolls his eyes.

“Well, there’s a first time for everything.”

“I just made out with a fish,” Keith stresses, to which Lance barks out a laugh. He winces when Hunk lets out a particularly loud snore from the other room, noisily turning over in his nest, and waits until he stills again, biting his tongue.

“I literally can’t believe this,” Keith offhandedly mentions, laughing quietly. "We're just...on the couch."

"Thank God everyone in this house sleeps like the dead, amirite?" Lance mutters, sheepishly covering his eyes with a hand. "Christ, Hunk would've never stopped teasing me if he got up for a midnight snack or something and saw us."

"Woudln't he have said aww or something? I feel like that's his style."

“Maybe for half a second before transitioning straight into said relentless teasing. We’d never hear the end of it.”

“Maybe I don’t want to hear the end of it.”
“You’re such a sap.”

“You’re worse.”

“No, I’m totally not. There’s a difference between being suave and being sappy.”

“Oh? Do tell.”

And it goes on like this until they both succumb to the very real, if evasive, exhaustion, Lance’s head on Keith’s chest and Keith’s arms wrapped around his back.

Chapter End Notes

Yes indeed folks Keith is an ace that enjoys kissing

Also I was channeling heavy “the house is crowded because all of your relatives/people you know are staying over for the hurricane because your house has a concrete block frame instead of a wood frame” vibes, you feel? Do people do that for snowstorms too? I don't know, I've never really been around snow.

Anyways! We're approaching the end, sadly. There will be one or two more chapters before this fic closes out. After this one I'm thinking either an elemental magical realism fic or one that isn't an AU, meaning that they’re in space in the lions and such. We'll see I guess!

As always, thank you so much for reading! Kudos/comments/constructive criticism are appreciated!

Edit: Oh my God so I don’t have a beta right and I noticed while checking this chapter that I somehow missed the fact that I wrote Keith pulled Lance down by his skirt, not his shirt, I’m laughing so hard lol If you guys catch any lil dumb mistakes like that please let me know!
“Oh my God.”

“What?”

“That, Elisa, is the physical embodiment of Pidge owing me some serious cash.”

Keith opens his eyes to see two blurry silhouettes, one several feet taller than the other, and both are leaning above him, getting closer by the second.

“Aaah!” Keith jerks up, his entire body twitching with the sudden surge of adrenaline that rips through him, but he finds that he can’t lift his chest. Not really. There’s something heavy on it, something tickling underneath his chin and piled on top of the rest of his body.

Something loud.

“What the hell, man?” Lance groans, stretching his lanky limbs and burrowing his cold nose further into the crook of Keith’s neck like the comfort it brings is the answer to all of his problems. The words from there are muffled, but still understandable. “Give a guy some warning! Wake me up with, like, a nudge, not a punch!”

“I didn’t punch you, drama queen!” Keith blearily rubs at his eyes, watching as the shadows in front of the couch transform from splotches of color to rough sketches to the identifiable images of Hunk and Elisa.

And Hunk is grinning like a fool, his iPhone held up near eye-height.

“Lance.” Keith’s voice is rough, scraped raw by sleep and all the salt water he downed a few days earlier. “You should look up.”

“Why? So I can look at your beautiful face? Because honestly, I’d be down for that, no matter how much I want to go into a coma for 20 years right now,” Lance mumbles.

Keith’s face flushes scarlet, the color creeping up his cheeks to take over the curve of his ears. Hunk laughs, high-pitched and endearing, and that’s when Lance freaks — he barely misses falling flat on the floor, saved by Keith’s arms locking him in place.

“Aaah!” he howls, but Hunk is already kneeling down to show the video to Elisa, who’s bent over in half from the force of her giggles. Her hair is a mess, tangled in the kind of knots that even a skilled sailor couldn’t replicate, and hanging from her front bangs is a comb held captive by the living, breathing curls.

A rapid-fire string of Spanish suddenly sounds from across the house, followed by a short “Elisa, get back here!” in English. Lance’s eyes widen, a different kind of panic sparking in his eyes, and even Keith feels a jolt trace its startled way down his spine.

It’s Lance’s mom.

Keith quickly looks at Lance, his fingers absentmindedly tracing circles against his back. Yesterday’s
dregs of quintessence are still threading them together, and although it isn’t as intense as it was last night, his message is still clear.

_Do you want to cover this up?_

Lance thinks about it. He nervously bites at his lips, eyelids fluttering in alarm, and for a second it seems like he’s going to do it — a surge of mania in his eyes, a tensing in his muscles.

But then he shakes his head. _No. Let her see._

So Keith wraps his arms around Lance once more, squeezing tightly as Mrs. McClain dashes into the room with light, well-trained feet.

“Elisa, I have to get those knots — oh.” She cuts off, face blank for a single, heart-stopping moment, her eyes tracing over Lance’s head on Keith’s chest, over Keith’s arms keeping him safe.

He can’t read her.

He hates it.

“G-Good morning,” Hunk nervously pipes up from beside them, oblivious to Elisa, who’s just scattered into another room like her life depends on it. Mrs. McClain seems fairly oblivious to it too, still staring with a certain kind of nothing lurking behind her eyes, like her brain is running over the same skipping note on the record of the world. Lance is physically shaking in Keith’s arms, breath shuttering, and to be perfectly honest, Keith just wants her to say _something_, because he can’t _stand_ it.

“Good morning,” Keith echoes, pasting on his cheeriest grin — which probably looks like a bland smile to anyone else, but he’s trying his best. “I—uh—“

Mrs. McClain seems to find herself, then, blinking up a storm and shaking her head as if to rattle it into running smoothly. “I’m sorry, I was just — surprised.”

Lance lets out another involuntary shiver, sucking in a lungful of air, and then quietly peels himself away from Keith to stand beside Hunk on jello-legs. Hunk slings a hefty arm across his shoulder in a show of support, and Lance sends him a weak grin before taking yet another astronomically deep breath, locking eyes with his mother.

“M-Mom,” he says, ready to spit out more through chattering teeth, but she interrupts him with a soft smile.

“It’s ok, Lance,” she whispers, taking a step forward. Stopping. Eyes welling with tears.

“Yes, really?”

And that does it. Lance’s mom rushes forward, gathering her son in her arms, clean tears streaking down her cheeks and dangling at the edge of her chin.

“Yes, really,” she says, squeezing him so hard that her arms tremble. “You’re my son. I love you no matter what, and you better not forget it.”

“I love you too,” he chokes, resting his forehead on her shoulder, and Keith watches him cry soundlessly, eyes pinched shut, sagging into his mother’s arms like every ounce of energy has been sucked from him.
But all Keith can feel from their bond is relief. Pure and simple. Enough of it to make tears slip out of his own eyes, accompanied by a genuine smile.

“There’s it is!” Hunk crows, leaning forward to scoop Keith off the couch like he’s made of styrofoam and wrap him in an embrace that feels a lot like being near a hearth in the midst of winter. “Even Keith’s really smiling! Oh, you guys, I’m so happy!”

Lance’s mother chokes out a sound that’s half sob and half laugh, parting from Lance to hug Hunk, and that’s when Lance snatches Keith’s hand and yells a hoarse “group hug!” while smushing the four of them together. It’s awkward, Keith thinks, a mishmash of limbs and personal space, but he doesn’t mind.

It’s actually the best thing he’s felt in a long time.

A throat clears behind them, sharp and pointed, and they all drift apart to see Angelo and Riel in front of the living room, their hands decked out in old garden gloves, empty trash bags slung over their shoulders.

“I’m sure something cool is happening, and like, congrats I guess, but we have about fifty thousand palm tree branches in the yard — and an uprooted stop sign bent into a 90-degree angle — and we should probably clean that up.” He pushes the bags forward, eyebrows rising. “Some help would be appreciated.”

“Way to kill the mood,” Lance mumbles, but he takes them anyways. “Oh, and I’m bi, by the way.”

Angelo doesn’t even blink. “Oh. Cool. I think we should keep the stop sign, guys. I could put it in my room, and —“

“No, we’re not keeping the stop sign,” Mrs. McClain sighs, rubbing her temples.

“Is it even legal to keep it? Government property and all?” Hunk mumbles.

“I would Google it, but wifi isn’t really a thing right now, so —“

“I said no, Angelo!”

Keith grins, knocking his shoulder against Lance’s, and Lance wipes at his eyes one last time with his shirtsleeve, gently reaching out to thread their fingers together.

“What say you? Should we keep the lovely gift the hurricane gave us?” he teases, and Keith fondly rolls his eyes.

“If all the hurricane can give us is a bent stop sign and a fallen tree on your house, I think I’ll flip it off instead.”

“Fair, fair. C’mon, let’s go.”

The classroom may be packed to the brim, but don’t be fooled. No one actually wants to be there. Especially the professor, judging by the dark half-moons pressed beneath his eyes and the use of his jumbo-sized, re-usable Starbucks mug, his sluggish fingers tapping at the keyboard to turn the projector on.

“All right, I know we’re all tired,” he starts, stretching his neck back and forth with some God-awful
creaks, “which is why I managed to get the professor to cancel the last lecture class we technically should’ve had two days ago. You’re welcome. Now, let’s get these presentations done, and we can all have a nice winter break, agreed?”

“Agreed,” the class sighs back, picking their heads up out of their hands — all except for one. Keith, predictably in the back left corner, grabs the back of Lance’s self-dubbed ‘don’t touch me, I’m exhausted and could kill a man’ hoodie and yanks him upright, taking on the following glare that’s about as intimidating as a soggy bowl of cereal.

“Let me go,” he moans, flopping his head all the way back to look at Keith upside down, and Keith yanks the hood over his eyes in response.

“No,” he stubbornly whispers back, trying not to grin. It’s a losing battle.

“Now I can’t see. Is this what you want, Keith?”

“What I want is for Pidge to calm down for two seconds.” He nervously casts a glance toward her chair, a few feet away to his right — a wired look is woven into her eyes, her legs bouncing to the sound of her own science-y beat. He’s known for years that a lack of sleep only makes her ultra-hyper, and that when she crashes, she crashes hard. That stage shouldn’t hit until about three hours from now, though, so they’re safe.

“Well, at least one of us is awake,” Hunk cuts in, his hands clasped together in his lap. He’s trying to keep it together, Keith can tell, but nothing can hide the off-kilter angel of his headband, the way his eyes can’t quite open all the way.

The professor weakly claps to capture the class’ attention, and the slight sound is enough to spook Lance, his eyes blowing wide and his pupils dilating into full eclipses.

“All right, who wants to go first?”

Nobody raises their hand.

“All right. Should’ve expected that. I’ll pick randomly then…”

Lance quietly groans, hefting himself back into a sitting position, and Keith internally does the same, because he knows. He can just tell that —

“Group three?”

Of course.

Lance releases a weary breath, stumbling out of his seat like he doesn’t know what walking is, while Pidge eagerly bounds to the front of the classroom, watching the rest of them blearily slog behind her into their positions. She clears her throat loud and clear before beginning, the cadence of her voice straddling the line between infomercial and doctorate thesis.

“So, our project is on Florida’s polluted waterways. And you should know that we went through hell during the process of getting this done” — the class laughs, images of the hurricane still fresh in their mind despite Pidge talking about something else entirely — “so you better enjoy it. We’ll start with fertilizer runoff.”

Lance perks up at the mention, rubbing the exhaustion out of his eyes and replacing it with some vague awareness — he has three slides to present, while Keith only has to read off the ending credits — and presses closer to Keith, his warmth bleeding through his cozy hoodie to battle the freezing air
of the classroom. Keith smiles, leaning into him, and lets Pidge’s words float in one ear and out the other, a story full of sulfur and iron and uranium.

It was hell, sure, but he wouldn’t change a thing.

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When they crash into Lance’s dorm an hour later, Keith immediately face-plants onto the couch, arms out as if embracing the furniture.

“And you always say I’m the drama queen,” Lance snorts, dropping his backpack on the floor. “All you did was say some names!”

“Yes. And it sucked the soul out of me,” Keith responds, flipping onto his back and covering his eyes with one limp hand. “Presenting is the worst.”

“Sleep, then. You need the rest.”

Keith’s hand slips away from his face, his eyes latching on to Lance’s with a glimmer of disappointment. “You’re not going to sleep?”

“I gotta do something first.” He bends down to take his laptop out of his bag, sending Keith a sly smile. “Don’t lie. I know you want to be cuddled.”

“You can’t prove that.”

“We both know the truth, you koala.” He plops down on the couch beside Keith and balances the laptop on top of his knees. “It’ll take five minutes.”

“Ok,” Keith mumbles, his eyelids falling shut, his chest rising and falling in a slow, rhythmic tempo. Lance watches him for a second, a comfortable contentment slipping into his chest, before opening a familiar Word doc, the one he hasn’t had the chance to write in for a while.

I think I’m technically at around tip number 30 in this Handbook, but I didn’t write down a few I thought of because I was tripping on the ocean this one time — it’s kind of a long story — so we’ll start with 20 again. A fresh start, yeah? Lord knows we need one.

20. You don’t have to worry about this now, but once you get older, your quintessence will start to get wild and you’ll have to take the elixir like me and your uncle Riel to sort it out. It tastes awful, I know, but it’s either that or being stuck in the ocean, and we’re trying to live our best lives here, so.

21. Just so you know, the fish can’t talk. Dolphins, though? Maybe. I haven’t cracked their code yet. Maybe you will.

22. You’ll naturally form one-way quintessence bonds with people you’re around, like your family and friends, so use it for good — help people when they’re upset, stuff like that. It may be hard sometimes when negative emotions come down the line, but in the end it’s a gift we have to handle the best we can.

23. If a bunch of bad things happen back to back, let me know immediately. It may means your quintessence is off and we need to handle it.

24. Be careful who you use your quintessence with. I wouldn’t recommend two-way bonding with people unless they know about it, or unless you absolutely need to. May freak some people out. It definitely startled me, at least.
25. Sometimes feeling the way everything connects, the constant flow of energy, can be overwhelming. Take a few breaths to ground yourself when this happens, and remember that it’s natural.

26. No, we can’t really control the energy. We’re not spirit-benders here. We can just connect to and sometimes re-direct it.

27. Quintessence is kind of like the Force. This isn’t really a tip, but it’s a cool way of thinking about it. You’re a Jedi, Elisa. Except you can’t move stuff with your mind. Sucks, I know.

28. Fun fact: apparently magic and science are kind of the same thing. You’d have to ask Pidge about this, but maybe by the time you’re my age, we’ll have figured more of this out. It’s a cool thought.

29. This should’ve been tip number one, honestly. I don’t know if this will be an issue with you, but it was with me, so I’ll put it in here — it’s okay that you’re a mermaid. I know it can be scary at first, but you’re not some freak. It’s just a part of who you are.

Lance glances over at Keith — who’s snoring, his bangs flopping adorably over his face — and smiles.

40. There may be other things about yourself that are hard to swallow at first, but don’t worry. You’ll be okay.

Wow, this is starting to sound like Lance’s ‘Life Handbook.’ That should be a thing. I may do that.

Lance clicks the save button and quietly shuts the laptop, placing it on the floor before snuggling up to his boyfriend. Boyfriend. He can finally think that without fear.

Keith shifts slightly, unconsciously tangling their legs together, and God, Lance’s cheeks hurt from how much he’s grinning like a fool.

He closes his eyes and sleeps, Keith’s heart beat-beat-beating beneath his ear.

Chapter End Notes

I actually originally thought of this story when I was cleaning up local damage from Irma. Gave my mind something to do for those long hours lol

The story is finished! It’s a cheesy ending, sure, but this is a cheesy story at heart, haha. I had so much fun writing this, and the response to it was incredible! You guys are so, so kind. Whenever I feel like shit about my writing (which is pretty often tbh) I look back to some of your guys’ comments and it makes me feel 10x better. Thank you so much!

Next time I write a Klance fic I think I'll have it where Lance knows he's bi but his family is homophobic so he hasn't come out yet and has to deal with the hate (rELATE), because I explored coming to terms with sexuality in this story but not really the family side too much. Anyways though - seriously guys. Thank you so much for everything. I'll see you in the next fic!

~ WriterlyOwl
EDIT: I had to re-post this because Ao3 was being weird about marking it as complete, sorry if that confused anybody.

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