Flirting With Danger

by GemmaRose

Summary

Lanse is many things. Or, he was, before the war left him without a home or family or mentor. Now he’s just a Paladin, one without a team or crown to be loyal to. But as long as he has Blue, the two of them won’t rest in their search for new Paladins to reform Voltron. Being captured by the galra is just a temporary setback.

Or: In which Lanse struggles to live up to his predecessor’s legacy, Blue is as stubborn as she is supportive, and Keith has no idea how far in over his head he’s gotten until it's way too late.

With art by aru-paru.
“Don’t worry, Lura.” Lanse said as he propped his half-sibling’s body up into one of the cryo-pods. “Father has a plan.”

“Lanse.” Father said, but he waited until the stasis program had initiated before turning around and straightening to full attention.

“Yes?”

“Go to the Paladins.” Father said as Lanse followed him towards the doors. “Tell them that they will not be fighting, and to await me for further orders.”

Lanse opened his mouth to ask why, then shut it and nodded sharply. With the Black and Blue Paladins gone, Voltron could not be formed, and without Voltron this battle would be the death of them all. “Yes, sir.” he turned and ran the tick the door shut behind them, taking the stairs with reckless leaps and skidding through familiar halls until he got to the room where the Paladins gathered to await orders.

“Lanse?” Rylak stood quickly as he walked in, chair skittering out behind her. It was strange, having Trigel and Gyrgan’s undivided attention as he walked down the length of the table towards his peer. “Are we fighting?” she asked insistenty, red irises alight in her golden eyes.

“No.” he shook his head as he sat down across from Gyrgan. The thought of running from this made him sick to his stomach, but without Voltron they were hopelessly outgunned and outnumbered.

“What?” cried Rylak, hands curling into tight fists. “Why?!”
“You are to await Father for further orders.” he said, and Trigel leaned across the table to place one deceptively slender hand on his shoulder.

“Breathe, Lanse.” the Green Paladin said softly. “Blaytz may be gone, but we will not let any harm befall you.”

Lanse inhaled deeply, held it for a tick, then exhaled all at once. “I know, I just—” he sighed, and let Rylak pull him into leaning against her shoulder. The castle shook slightly, and Lanse reflexively reached for Rylak’s hand. She caught it, and he relaxed slightly in her hold. They weren’t lovers, not anymore, but she was still the best friend he had outside of his family. Hell, she practically was family now that her pack had disowned her for refusing to turn against Voltron. He rested his head on her shoulder, and let his eyes slide shut as he reached out with his magic.

He could sense every lifeform on the castle if he focused, but right now he only cared about two. His father, a crimson-edged flare of light standing at the control pillars on the bridge, and his eldest half-sibling, a duller purpled signature tucked away in a cryo-pod. Another signature entered the room his father was in, and he recognized it immediately as his dad. He widened his awareness to the whole ship, and his breath caught briefly in his throat. He could count the number of people in his home on his fingers. The staff, the people whose faces he’d seen almost every quintant growing up, they were all gone, evacuated into the chaos which reigned outside.

He should have sided with Allura, should have insisted that the two of them could fill in for Uncle Blaytz and Zarkon as pilots if nothing else. Allura hadn't been chosen, but her signature was close enough to Black's that she should be able to pilot the great head of Voltron at least for one battle. They should be standing and fighting, not running away and leaving their people to die. A hand ran through his hair, brushing it back away from his face, and Lanse leaned into the contact. He slowly drew his consciousness back into himself, and a knot of emotions rose in his throat as he honed in on the room he currently occupied. The energy flares around him were familiar enough he could read their emotions, and right now they burned with anger, grief, confusion. He pulled his consciousness back into himself fully, and opened his eyes.

Rylak was carding her fingers through his hair idly, her expression pensive. Trigel and Gyrgan were deep in conversation in their new seats at the other end of the table, though from Trigel’s expression it was probably more of an argument than a simple conversation. Even without extending his consciousness back into the castle’s web of quintessence, he could sense the dark spots in the room. The empty spaces which should be filled by warm bodies in shining armour. They ached like old wounds battered open again, and Lanse focused on his other senses. The gentle scratch of Rylak’s nails over his scalp, the ever-present hum of the castle making everything work, the familiar non-smell of his home’s filtered air.

He pushed himself off of Rylak’s shoulder to sit normally once he’d drowned out his awareness of the quintessence that surrounded them, and his ex gave his hair one last ruffle. “Thanks.” he said with a small smile, shoving down all the emotions clawing at the inside of his chest and throat. He couldn’t break down, not in front of the Paladins, not when his father would be here soon to give them orders.

“Paladins.” Father said from the doorway, and Lanse turned to look at him. He looked exhausted, like the weight of the universe itself rested on his shoulders. “I’m sure you have questions.”

“Quiznak yeah, we do!” Trigel shot to her feet, bayard materializing into its usual elegant blade. “Why weren’t we out there fighting? Voltron could’ve taken them!”

Voltron? Lanse frowned. They couldn’t form Voltron with only three Paladins, it just wouldn’t work. Sure, he and Allura could play pilots, but they didn’t have the level of experience necessary to
actually form Voltron.

“We cannot know that for certain.” Father said, his voice firm and even. “My children may be compatible with the ships, but there is no guarantee that they could synchronize with us.”

“We should’ve at least tried!” Trigel insisted.

“I refuse to risk your lives, or your ships.” Father said, growing taller until he stood a full head over the Green Paladin. “You and my children are all that remain of the potential of Voltron, and I will not see that potential squandered in the event that your are overestimating their abilities.”

Trigel stood her ground for a long tick, glowering at Father, then backed down with a jerky nod of her head. “Understood, Al.” she said, her tone clipped and teeth gritted.

“Then you will understand this, as well.” Father shrank back closer to his usual height, his eyes passing over each of the Paladins in turn. “You are to leave your bayards on the table with Blaytz’s, and take your ships far from here.”

“What?!” the three of them cried as one.

“You know as well as I what the quintessence he seeks can do.” Father warned. “He knows our system too well, so you have to take your ships beyond his reach, where he will never find them.” he looked past Lanse to Rylak, and Lanse gripped her hand tight under the table. “Rylak, I have things I must do here. As such, I am entrusting Red’s safety to you. ”

Lanse’s eyes widened, and he froze when Father’s gaze shifted to him. “Leandro Avalo Nuñez Smythe-Ebaran,” Father said, and Lanse straightened up slightly at the use of his full name. “I am trusting you with the safety of Blue and my children.” Father said, his voice level and not the slightest bit demanding. “Take her, and protect them.”

“Yes, Father.” Lanse nodded, and stood as the Paladins whispered amongst themselves. Rylak gave his hand one last squeeze, and Lanse almost wished they were still involved enough for a parting kiss to be appropriate. But as it was, he simply let his hand slip free of hers and drew on his lifetime of court training as he strode towards the door. For once, he was actually grateful Father had insisted all of them be tutored in court etiquette and not just Allura. Without those lessons, he certainly would’ve been shaking as he left the room. Take the Blue Beast, one of the ships of Voltron, and protect his siblings and half-siblings? That was more responsibility in one order than he usually had in a movement!

A hand landed on his shoulder, and Lanse jumped before realising who it was. “Dad!” he spun on his heel and threw his arms around his dad’s chest. “Father wants me to take the Blue Beast after Fernanda and Amalia and my half-siblings.” he blurted, pulling back and looking his dad in the eyes.

“Does he, now.” Dad frowned, patting Lanse’s head before extricating himself from his hold. “Come with me, quickly.” he gestured, and Lanse followed him through the halls of his home towards the corridors he knew well enough to walk in his sleep. Dad walked into his room, and came back out with a drawstring bag. “Take these.” he said, draping the bag over Lanse’s shoulders. “I meant to give them to you and your siblings when you came of age, but...”

The unspoken words hung over them, and Lanse’s throat tightened at the thought that his dad might not be around to give the gifts at the right time. “I’ll come back.” he promised, sliding his arms through the string shoulder straps. “If Father doesn’t call for us to return by the end of the deca-phoe, I’ll bring the Blue Beast home with his family.” he tried to grin and Dad pulled him into a tight hug, moustache tickling against his cheek.
“Wait for your father’s signal.” Dad said firmly, pulling away and moving his hands to cup Lanse’s face, thumbs brushing over the bright blue marks under his eyes. “I’ll make sure he sends it as soon as we find somewhere safe to regroup. No, better yet, I’ll send it myself.”

“But-”

“Leo, promise.” Dad said firmly, and Lanse swallowed his argument with a minute nod at the use of his childhood nickname.

“I’ll wait for Father’s signal to bring them home with the Blue Beast.” he agreed.

“Good boy.” Dad smiled, leaning in to kiss his forehead. “Now, I dare say there’s a ship down in the hangars waiting for its new Paladin.”

Lanse turned at his dad’s gentle push, and got all of three steps before turning back around. “What if she doesn’t like me?”

“Lanse, don’t be ridiculous.” Dad sighed, walking after him and placing a hand between his shoulder blades above the drawstring bag to guide him forwards. “Blue adores her Paladins, and you are no exception. Blaytz frequently told me that she would pester him about when she would see you again.”

“Really?” Lanse couldn’t help but smile. One of the ships of Voltron, the most powerful weapon in the universe, was excited to have him as a pilot? As a Paladin?

“Of course.” Dad grinned, moving his hand to Lanse’s shoulder and pulling him into a one-armed hug as they walked towards the elevators. “The only people who don’t like you are ones who don’t know you, and Blue quite possibly knows you better than you know yourself!”

Lanse ducked his head, a smile spreading across his face. “Viv is gonna be so excited to get a chance to see one of the Beasts up close.”

“You could give her a tour.” Dad suggested, and Lanse chuckled.

“I can give them all a tour. Show off how awesome the Blue Beast is.”

“That’s my boy.” Dad hugged him tighter, then released him completely as they stopped in front of the elevators. “Now, I believe it’s time for you to head on down to the hangars.”

Lanse turned to his dad and opened his mouth, but nothing he could say felt right so he just stepped in closer and wrapped his arms around his dad, shifting shorter as he did so his head fit under Dad’s chin. “I’ll miss you.”

“I love you too, Lanse.” Dad gave him one tight squeeze, then slipped out of his hold as the elevator arrived. “Now, go. Protect them.”

“I will.” Lanse nodded solemnly, and the elevator doors shut behind him before he could say anything more.

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The ride down was shorter than he’d expected, and when he stepped out into the hangar hallway Lanse was surprised to see Father and the Paladins in some sort of argument. Gyrgan shut his mouth as soon as he spotted Lanse, and the other adults turned to look at him. Lanse straightened up, curling his fingers around the strings of his bag as he lifted his chin. “Dad gave me something to
“Bring to my siblings,” he said by way of explanation, and the Paladins both nodded while Father smiled. He looked tired, Lanse realized. The white hair had never made him look old before, but now he looked older than Dad’s parents had been.

“Paladins, to your ships.” Father said, dismissing them with a wave of his hand. Lanse hesitated by the elevator doors, and Father grinned at him. “That includes you now, Lanse.”

Lanse nodded quickly, and pressed his palm to the operation panel for the Blue Beast’s hangar door. It opened, and his breath caught in his throat as he stepped in. He’d never been unaware of the Beasts’ presence, per-se, but it was the same kind of background noise as his awareness of the quintessence running through the castle’s walls. Now, though, it was impossible to ignore. The Blue Beast’s power filled the room, surrounding him and pulling him towards her like a riptide.

In his head, he heard water. Waves on a beach, a babbling stream, the crash of a waterfall, it all melded into something like a roar, and he stumbled slightly as he stepped into the Blue Beast’s mouth. She was, excited. Excited to meet him, grieving the loss of Blaytz, anxious about leaving her pack for an unknowable period of time.

“Don’t worry.” Lanse found himself saying as he climbed the ladder towards her operating level, where the speeder and cockpit were. “Dad will make sure Father calls as soon as it’s safe. We’ll probably barely have time to reach Fernanda and Amalia before we’re called back.”

The Blue Beast rumbled in his head, gentle waves against sheer stone, and he hung his bag from the back of the pilot’s chair before sitting down in it. The holographic panels lit up as soon as the chair pulled forwards, and he griped the controls firmly. “Ready to go, girl?” he asked, and the Blue Beast bounded forwards in response. She leapt into the chaotic inferno which raged outside his home, and Lanse gripped the controls tightly as he pulled her up towards the smoke-filled sky.

“Remember, kids.” Gyrgan’s voice came over Lanse’s comm, which had apparently tuned to Voltron’s frequency when he wasn’t paying attention. “Find somewhere safe to hide your ship, and stay nearby until Al calls for our return.”

“Understood.” he chorused with Rylak. The line went dead after that, and Lanse only exhaled when the orbital ring stations were behind him. “Alright, Blue.” he said grimly. “Amalia said they were headed for Tociri, so that’s where we’re going.”

The Blue Beast purred under him, and took off with the slightest nudge of the controls. Once she reached cruising speed, though, the pilot seat pulled back away from the controls. Lanse looked up at the ceiling, and felt more than heard the Blue Beast’s nudge towards the pair of rooms lower in her body. He glanced in the tiny living quarters, and quickly shut the door. Uncle Blaytz’s armour was still strewn across the floor, his blue-edged plates mingling with some of Father’s red, and even looking at the mess Lanse felt like he was intruding. Intruding on what, he didn’t allow himself to think about. He ducked briefly into the storage unit across the hall, tucking his bag into an empty space, then followed the Blue Beast’s undertow pull towards the end of the hallway where it widened to accommodate a food goo dispenser and... a single, shining pod leaned up against the wall opposite the food machine, with a familiar two-layer bodysuit hanging next to it.

“No.” Lanse shook his head, taking a step back. “No, I’m not going into one of those.”

The Blue Beast pulled at him harder, and he leaned back against the pressure. “I don’t care that it’ll take a movement and a half to catch up to them, I’m not going into cryo.”

The Blue Beast growled, waves on a breakwater, and Lanse stilled as he processed what she’d said. “What do you mean there’s no food?” he asked, though he knew the answer before she gave it.
Uncle Blaytz had died before resupplying, and the food machine was empty from his last extended mission. If he stayed awake, he would suffer, and the Blue Beast wanted to spare him that pain.

“Can you maintain a faster speed without burning out your engines?” Lanse asked, and the Blue Beast rumbled back an affirmative.

“Alright, what’s the fastest we can catch up to my siblings without experiencing burnout?” Lanse asked, turning away from the empty cryo-pod and food machine and starting back towards the cockpit. “As long as the water and oxygen recycling systems are working I won’t die, I’ll just be a bit hungry when we get there.”

The Blue Beast’s roar in his mind made him stop, and he glared up at the ceiling. “Why does Father want me in cryo so badly? It’s not that far to Tociri.”

The Blue Beast’s voice softened to waves on a shore, and Lanse grimaced at the explanation. Of course his siblings and half-siblings were in cryo, they’d left the planet in an old transport meant for long flights without the aid of teludav or slipstream. How could he have forgotten that? “Fine.” he grumbled, undoing his shirt and folding it on the tiny counter next to the empty food goo machine. “But you’d better wake me up when we approach their ship.” the Blue Beast protested, a sound like steam escaping a kettle, and Lanse scowled up at the ceiling. “I don’t care if I’ll have to go right back into cryo, I want to see their ship.”

The Blue Beast said nothing more as he stripped off his informal clothes and slid into the inner layer of the auxiliary space suit. It shrank to fit him, and after a moment he put on the airtight outer layer too. He was going into cryogenic suspension, not a healing sleep, so he didn’t need to consider would interfere with the pod’s more sensitive scanners. Instead, he could just dress for convenience. With the full flight suit on, all he’d need to do to go personally check his siblings' pods was put on a helmet. “See you in a few quintants, Blue.” he said with forced cheer as he climbed into the pod. He hated cryo, having more than a few vargas pass in what felt like the blink of an eye was the most disorienting thing in the universe.
Lanse groaned, lifting one stiff arm to rub his head as he stumbled out of the cryo-pod and caught himself against the food goo machine. “Quiznaking sleep-chamber knees.” he grumbled, pushing himself upright and shaking his legs out as he headed blearily towards the Blue Beast’s cockpit. She was making concerned sounds in the back of his head, and he waved a hand near his ear as it batting away a whining insect. “I’m just gonna look at their ship, then I’ll get right back in the pod.” he promised. Checking on his sisters personally had seemed like a much better option when he wasn’t stiff and groggy from cryo. The Blue Beast made another, more insistent sound of worry as he climbed up to the main operating level, and when he sat down in the pilot’s seat Lanse realized why.

His family’s ship was nowhere in sight, and the stars weren’t even slightly familiar. “Blue, where are we?” he asked, fear gripping his chest and making his breaths come short. She rumbled with uncertainty like the deep, distant sound of thick ice cracking over a frozen lake, and Lanse’s hands tightened on the controls. “How far- no, nevermind.” he shook his head. The distance between systems was forever changing, especially the ones in separate galaxies. Instead, he called up the calendar screen. Every ship was equipped with an infallible internal clock which counted not only local years but also galactic standard deca-phoebs.

Only, The Blue Beast must’ve taken a hit to that system while he was out because that number couldn’t possibly be right. There were too many digits, he couldn’t- his stomach lurched, and he gripped the controls so tight the Blue Beast growled in protest. “Blue, show me cryo-pod files from the last two movements.” he said, fighting to keep his voice steady. There should just be a handful, labelled with his name and how many quintants he’d been in there. They must’ve spun off-course at some point and were just, pointed in a weird direction. Yeah, that made sense. If the Blue Beast’s internal clock had been damaged, there’s no way it was the only thing out of whack.

Ten files appeared on the screen in front of him, and Lanse tapped the most recent one. Subject L A N S-E - Quintant... no. Lanse’s heart dropped into his stomach, and he felt himself stop breathing as he took in the number. Divided by quintants to movements, and movements to a deca-phoeb, that was too high. It matched the date from the internal clock, which meant that Dad, Father, his siblings-

“Blue, show all messages received since we left Altea.” he said breathlessly, heart beating far too fast in his chest.

A window came up between him and the stars, and Lanse choked at the sight of a string of messages from home, each one thumbnailed with an image of his dad looking progressively more exhausted and worried. There was one every quintant for two and a half movements, and then they stopped. “We have to get home.” he declared, dismissing the screen and grabbing the controls. “Blue, emergency wormhole to the castle.” he snapped, and the Beast bucked under him, jarring not his body but his mind. She growled at him like waves on jagged stone, and he maneuvered her until her sensors said the nearest star was directly behind them.

“Fine, we leave the system and then wormhole home.” he snapped, pushing her forwards. They’d barely been moving five ticks when his heart leapt into his throat and he pulled back on the controls. A galran battleship. He quickly maneuvered the Blue Beast down to hide behind the nearest hunk of space rock, probably a moon or planetoid given its size, and scrambled out of the pilot’s seat. He had to put on armour on if he was going into battle. Cuirass and helmet, if nothing else. Uncle Blaytz’s helmet was easy enough to find in the mess on the floor of the tiny sleeping quarters, and it fit him nicely; the HUD that popped up almost identical to the one he was used to from his training gear. Locating the cuirass took another tick, and Lanse struggled with it briefly before it shrank and seemed to fasten itself, moulding to his form.
“Thanks, Blue.” he gasped, looking around for something, anything he could use as a weapon. Wait, *duh*, he was inside one of the ships of Voltron! She was a weapon! He scrambled back up to her cockpit, and his heart plummeted well past his feet as he looked at the viewscreen. The battleship was coming into view, and between him and it was a small spacecraft parked on the ice. Three altenoid figures in bulky suits were looking at the Blue Beast, completely oblivious to the danger coming up behind them. He could take the Beast and run, wormhole back home and hope, *pray* that he wasn’t too late. That Dad and Father were still alive and he hadn’t lost everything yet.

But this armour fit him now, which meant he was a Paladin, a defender of the universe and everyone who lived in it. Including these aliens who didn’t realize they were about to be murdered by the galra simply for existing. He activated the air seal on his helmet, turned on his heel, and rushed to the main airlock. The Blue Beast opened her mouth without being asked, and Lanse bounded out into low gravity. “Run!” he yelled, flicking his comms off of Voltron’s frequency and into civilian and military bands. “Get back to your ship, they’re coming!” he gestured to the galran battleship, and all three turned around to- stare at it and stand still. By the Ancients, did these people know *nothing*?

Lanse barely managed to stop before crashing into the shortest one, and grabbed them by the wrist. “Move, dammit!” he yelled, planting his feet as well as he could and twisting his whole body. He wasn’t sure if this species had an especially low density or if it was due to the planet’s low gravity, but he managed to fling them almost to the open hatch of their little ship. One of the larger two started running after their teammate, or at least they were approximating a run with long, low bounds that utilised the planet’s low gravity, but the other turned to Lanse and raised their fists.

“Run, you idiot!” Lanse yelled jabbing a finger towards the other two. A hot pink beam hit the ground not far from where they stood, and he bounded away back towards the Blue Beast. The alien trailed after him, and he’d made it all of two leaps before he halted and started moving up towards the battleship. No, no! He couldn’t let them take the Blue Beast, couldn’t let the galra have one of the ships Zarkon had been willing to kill for. “Blue, shields up!” he screamed, and as the familiar wide hexagons materialized he reached for his helmet.

Blaytz had told him that the Blue Beast was the most accepting of new Paladins. She was also the most attached to her Paladins, and he couldn’t afford to let the galra wield him against her. “I’m sorry, Blue.” he said solemnly, gripping the sides of his helmet. A hand closed around one of his wrists and yanked it away, and the motion spun him around enough that a matching hand could grab his other wrist. The alien was stopping him. They didn’t know, didn’t understand. He’d sat in on Voltron mission debriefs, he’d seen what was left of prisoners the druids had extracted information from, and that would not be his fate. He pulled his hands free, but as he yanked his helmet off they were surrounded by purple metal and cold, recycled air. No, no, no!

He managed to spin and push off of the alien, generating enough momentum to leave the miniature gravity well. Robotic sentries aimed their guns at him, and a mad idea flashed through his head. If he could get one of their weapons, he was a good enough shot to take them all down before the beam picked up the Blue Beast. Then all he had to do was hold the door, or break the opening mechanism, and he could save the aliens *and* get home with the Beast entrusted into his care. He let a grin slip across his face, twisting his lips to mimic Rylak’s sneer as he jammed his helmet back on. Time to put all that combat training to use.

He charged the nearest robot with his deepest roar, and ripped the gun from its hands. One point-blank blast to the neck had it crumpling, and he rolled past it at the rest opened fire. Coming up in a crouch, he spun on the ball of his foot and picked off three sentries with near-perfect accuracy. He was totally keeping this gun, it had a decent balance and impressive power for its size.

A bolt caught him in the chestplate, nearly knocking him off his feet, and he lunged sideways for
cover behind some crates. Two more robots down, four, seven, and the other two aliens were lifting up to join the first. Where was the Blue Beast? A stray bolt streaked in front of his face, close enough he could feel the superheated air of its wake on his skin, and he turned back to picking off robots.
The doors opened, and a live soldier ran in along with another dozen robots.

“Turn around right now, and nobody gets hurt!” Lanse shouted across the room, lowering the pitch of his voice to make the Galran words sound more threatening. The galra didn’t even slow their stride, drawing their gun and aiming at Lanse. He ducked down behind the crate, and chuckled as the bolt whizzed over his head. He could take out the idiot’s gun arm in one shot, if he had a few ticks to aim, but for that he needed a distraction. He glanced at the labels on the boxes he was hiding behind, and his heart sank. Strings of letters and numbers, that wasn’t good. Especially when the symbol underneath the writing was very clearly a grenade.

He heard the sound of another blaster shot being fired, then an explosion of heat and light threw him back against the wall and everything went black.

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When consciousness returned to him, it did so painfully. He could feel blood on his skin, dry and flaky and rubbing off against the inside of an unfamiliar suit with a heavy zipper running down along his spine. He was on a hard surface, thinly padded, with a poor excuse for a pillow under his head. His entire body ached, especially the back of his head and upper shoulders, and the lower part of his face stung like that time he’d let Amalia paint him with the juice of fresh-crushed lepon berries after Dad made them wash off the face paint they’d gotten at the Festival of Al'terrath. He took an experimental deep breath, and sighed in relief at the lack of pain. No damage to his ribs, then, just bruising and maybe a low grade burn. Ancients, he hoped it wasn’t bad enough to scar.


Lanse sat up, and glared at the bulky soldier standing on the other side of a set of glowing bars. Cell bars, he was in a cell. They’d tossed him in a cell, which meant they didn’t know who he was. If they knew, he’d already be in the hands of a druid and probably on his way to Zarkon, or whatever was possessing his corpse. He deliberately crossed his legs, maintaining eye contact with the guard as he did it. “No.” he replied, placing his hands on his knees.

“Great.” the guard grumbled, and turned towards what must’ve been a panel set in the wall next to the bars. “You’re a stubborn one.” they punched a few buttons, each one beeping in turn, and Lanse shifted as the seat under him grew warm. It wasn’t burning, per-se, but it was too hot to be comfortable. Lanse managed to remain seated until the padding began to smoke, and when he stood he did it gracefully.

“Good.” the guard grinned, a harsh slash of a smile. “C’mon, hands out.” Lanse scowled, but lifted his hands out in front of him. No sense in dragging this out. If he was being cuffed, he was being removed from this cell, and the more of the ship he saw the better he could guess where escape pods were located. If nothing else, he had to get those three aliens in one so they could return to wherever they came from. Of course, that meant he’d have to pick their quintessence signatures of everyone on board, but it shouldn’t be too hard. They’d be together, and non-galran, that should be enough.

The cuffs around his wrists were heavy as he was marched to the bridge with a gun barrel pressed between his shoulders and conspicuously armed robot sentries on either side of him. The galra who’d shot at him was there, along with one in nicer armour who must’ve been the commanding officer onboard. “Here’s the one.” his guard said, prodding him forwards with the gun barrel. “The pointy eared brat who took a couple a potshots at our sentries.”
“Potshots?” Lanse bristled, electing to ignore the slight about his age. By galran standards he was pretty short, so they were underestimating what he was capable of. Uncle Blaytz had always advocated that an enemy who underestimated you was something to be grateful for, but he couldn’t just let someone claim he took down all those robots on pure dumb luck. “I’ll have you know that I took those robots down with pure skill and nothing else.” he bragged, lifting his chin defiantly. It was stupid, oh so stupid, but since the loss of Daibazaal galra had become volatile and unpredictable, especially those in their military. If he could get this one mad enough, he could still deprive them of a bargaining chip against the Blue Beast.

“Interesting.” the commander smirked, stepping down from the raised center console and gesturing for a robot to take his place. “And how did a kit such as yourself end up so far from civilized space?” he asked, gripping Lanse's chin and tilting it up.

“Like I’d tell you.” Lanse spat, curling his hands into fists. He could get one good punch in, and then the officer would strike back. The question was, how could he make sure the blow was fatal? Oh, wait, duh. Galra were vain and prideful, all he had to do to piss this one off enough for a lethal blow was talk shit. “Why waste my breath talking to an officer so petty he got assigned to a backwater patrol?” he grinned, refusing to break eye contact. This broke literally every rule of galran diplomacy he’d ever learnt, but you didn’t get people to fly into a fit of rage by being diplomatic. “Or did you piss off some higher-up so bad they dumped you out here as-” the blow to his jaw was jarring, and Lanse sprawled across the floor with shooting pain radiating from the point of impact.

"Bring ket to the druids." the officer sneered. "See if they can loosen kes tongue. Once they've set kes jaw, of course."
Lanse stumbled through the halls as the robot sentries marched him along, blinking back tears and struggling to breathe through his runny nose. Something was wrong with his jaw, really wrong, he couldn't open or close it and it hurt in a way no left hook ever had before. He collapsed into a conspicuously solo chair in the middle of a room when he was pushed, and didn't struggle as his cuffs energized to the solid arms. A pair of metal loops emerged from underneath to latch around his ankles, and once he was bound the robots marched over to stand on either side of the door.

Lanse tried to count the ticks passing, but his jaw hurt too much, a burning pain he couldn't ignore. He squeezed his eyes shut, and took a deep shuddering breath through his mouth. He couldn't let them use him against the Blue Beast, he had to be strong. They expected him to be weak, to act as childish as he surely appeared in their eyes, but he could not allow them to be right. He couldn't let them have the Blue Beast. He couldn't let Zarkon get his creepy, undead hands on any part of Voltron.

The Blue Beast purred in his head, calming as waves on a beach, and Lanse relaxed minutely. She was here, they were still together. He hadn't just abandoned one of the Beasts on a tiny moon in an unnamed backwater solar system whose local intelligent life forms probably hadn't even developed slipstream technology yet, gauging by the size of their space suits. If he lost one of the Beasts, he'd never hear the end of it. Assuming, of course, that Father and Dad were still around to chew him out, that Rylak and his siblings were still around to tease him. He sniffled, a hopeless gesture considering he couldn't even lift his hands to wipe his nose, and an unfamiliar laugh came from off to his side.

Lanse jolted, and winced as the movement jostled his jaw. “So you made Commander Paranar lose his temper after all.” a smooth, almost lilting voice spoke from just outside his line of sight. “I must admit, I am impressed with your... efficiency.” a figure in dark, flowing robes stepped into view, and Lanse shuddered at the four glowing golden eyes on their pointed mask. It reminded him all too much of a riphor, only larger and even more deadly. Purple hands with slender fingers ending in wickedly curved claws reached for his face, and Lanse flinched away.

The druid laughed, and gripped his jaw tight enough to drag a moan of pain from his throat. “I'm supposed to get answers out of you, little one.” they crooned, and a sudden twist of their wrist made the pain vanish. “Can't do that if your jaw is out of alignment.”

“Quiznak.” he spat, once the pain had faded to a more standard just-got-punched level. That really, really hurt. He’d have to be faster with his punch next time, or dodge until an opening for a fatality presented itself.

“Much better.” the druid sounded pleased as they withdrew their hands. “Now, what were you doing out this far from any colonised world?”

Colonised? Lanse’s stomach dropped as the word, and all its implications, registered. Outright colonisation of inhabited worlds had been illegal for ages, but this druid was talking like it was common as anything.

“How scared, little one?” the druid crooned, hooking one curved claw under his chin and lifting it so he had no choice but to look directly at their mask. “It will only hurt if you lie.”

Lanse glanced down as best he could without moving his head, and his heart sank at the sight of dark purple energy hovering in the druid’s other palm just inches away from his chest. This was going to be a bitch. “I’m not telling you anything.” he hissed through clenched teeth. The ball of energy shot
out a jagged spear that pierced his abdomen, and he screamed as pain ignited through his entire torso.

The Blue Beast screamed with him, drowning out his thoughts with the sound of an avalanche, and Lanse sagged when the energy withdrew from his body.

“Tenacious.” the druid said. It sounded like they were smiling. “But you will talk. It’s only a matter of time.”

“Never.” Lanse spat, and then screamed again as the dark energy filled his body. He would sooner die than tell them what they wanted to know.

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Lanse groaned softly, curling his fingers against the thinly padded surface under him just to make sure he still could. His whole body hurt, like his bones had splintered and fire was seeping out through the cracks. His throat felt especially bad, dry as a desert and rough as sandpaper. The Blue Beast purred soothingly in the back of his head, like gentle waves on a beach, and he sighed as her energy washed over him. It was like ice water sweeping through his veins, quenching the flames, and when it retreated he felt marginally better. Still like shit, but not flaming shit. He coughed, and immediately turned sideways to curl in on himself. Oh Ancients, everything hurt.

He was reasonably certain it had been three quintants since his awakening and capture. Three quintants of screaming himself silent in the druid’s chair, of waking up in agony the Blue Beast could only barely dull from her place in the hangar bay, of grieving his home and family in every quiet moment he could snatch for himself. He couldn’t perform the rituals of mourning properly, not when it hurt to move and his voice was little more than a rasp, but as he laid on his shitty excuse for a bed and breathed through the pain he managed to clasp his hands together over his chest.

He had no charm, no pendant or likeness of Lyn’carlith to focus his thoughts on, but it was easy to call up the temple in his mind. He hoped it would be enough. The Ancients’ language felt heavy on his tongue, though he put little more than a breath behind the words. He was thousands of decaphoeb late, and he had no offering to give but his loosely focused psychic energy, but to not ask the deity of death to guide his family’s souls to the unending starstream felt wrong on a deeply visceral level.

The Blue Beast sang in the back of his mind, waves echoing in the crystal caverns of Jalid to the tune of the song of mourning. He metered his words to the rhythm and prayed for their safe passage to the afterlife, where their souls could find peace amongst the stars. When the prayer for the dead ran to its end, he took up a more familiar chant and prayed for Lyn’carlith to forgive him for not honouring his family’s passing sooner. When he fell silent, his throat worn too ragged to make another sound, the Blue Beast’s singing changed to a tune Lanse had known as long as he could remember.

He laughed, a silent shake of his shoulders. The Blue Beast was one of the five most powerful weapons in the universe, sought after by Emperor Zarkon to the point he had returned from the dead and turned on his fellow Paladins in an effort to acquire her and her pride for his own. She was the size of a building, designed with teeth and claws suited for rending open the thick hulls of starships. She was dangerous, Lanse could all but hear Uncle Blaytz scolding him and Rylak that the Beasts were not toys, but much more clearly he could hear her humming a lullaby as old as the stars themselves. He smiled, and let the Blue Beast’s song lull him to sleep.

If nothing else, his chest felt lighter now that he’d given his family’s souls to Lyn’carlith. The weight would probably never fully be gone, but it no longer felt heavy enough to crush him.

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“On your feet.” a guard ordered. Lanse ignored them, curling up tighter. His throat felt even worse now than it had last night, and trying to speak even to pray for Al’terrath’s guidance had produced no sound. What was the point in subjecting himself to more pointless druid torture when he couldn’t even voice his noncompliance? “I said, on your feet.” the guard snapped, and Lanse wondered if this ship had a quintessence web he could connect to. Before he could try, though, he heard the sound of the bars deactivating and cold metal hands were gripping him roughly by the arms.

He cried out silently, staggering as he was pulled from the cell, and gritted his teeth against the pain. “Move it.” the guard barked, jabbing him in the back with the barrel of one of those nice rifles as the robots started to drag him down the hall. He managed to keep his feet for a ways, but when they passed the druid’s door without pausing his legs gave out. Wherever they were taking him, whatever fresh hell awaited him at the end of this march, he couldn’t bring himself to take another step towards it.

The robots kept up their pace, and Lanse tried to cry out in pain at the pressure on his shoulders but again no sound came out. It felt like forever before he was released, roughly shoved into a seat obviously designed for a full-grown galra. The cuffs around his wrists energized to the sides of the seat, and he hung his head back with a silent groan. He focused on his breathing, and once the guard’s footsteps faded away he shifted his focus to outside himself. The quintessence web of this ship felt wrong, thick and concentrated and burning, so he spread his consciousness through it gingerly.

He was in a transport, a large one, probably meant for hauling smaller damaged crafts to repair docks in atmo. There was a galra in the pilot’s seat, a robot next to them, and he could vaguely sense more robots milling around outside, their signatures identical and just as burny as the larger web. Lanse made to pull back into himself, but paused as a door opened and another living being entered. Two, actually, one flanked by robots and the other trailing behind them. Another prisoner? Lanse withdrew from the ship’s net quickly, and his head was still spinning when he opened his eyes.

For a tick, his breath caught in his throat, and had his voice still worked he would have certainly screamed. Then he got a better look, and slumped in his seat. The alien’s ears were too small, too round, and they lacked the under-eye marks which anyone with more than a few drops of altean blood was guaranteed to have. They looked exhausted, and when they looked his way Lanse offered a small smile.

“My name’s Shiro.” they said with a smile of own, the words coming out Galran but with an echo underneath that spoke to translator tech at work. Lanse mouthed his own name, and Shiro grimaced. “Sorry, I’m not very good at lip-reading.”

Lanse shrugged.

“Wait.” Shiro squinted across the transport at Lanse, scrutinising something about him. “117-9874?”

Lanse looked down at the patch on his ragged, too-short tunic. The numbers were upside down, but still readable. He looked back up and nodded.

“You’re him.” the alien gasped. “The one from Kerberos.”

Lanse frowned. He was pretty sure he’d never met this alien before, considering he’d been awake for less than a varga before being pulled onto this battleship.

“I stopped you from removing your helmet?” the alien prompted, and Lanse’s eyes went wide. Shiro chuckled, and leaned back against the seat. They looked tiny, with how the back towered over their head, but if he had to guess Lanse would say they were close to the same height. “I’m 9875.” they
said, indicating the patch on his chest with a jerk of their chin. “They processed me and my crew right after you.”

Lanse made a sympathetic face, and Shiro sighed. “I hope they’re alright.”

An excited bubbling noise sprang up in the back of his head, and Lanse’s head snapped sideways towards the rear of the ship. If he’d gauged its size correctly, it was big enough, but only barely- he shut his eyes, and powered through the burning quintessence to scan the ship’s hold. “Blue!” he shouted, but of course no sound came out. She made the happy bubbling noise again, and Lanse pushed his consciousness from the ship’s web into hers. Her quintessence web was cold, almost too cold, but it wrapped around him like a blanket and he relaxed into it.

*I’m so glad you’re coming with me.* Lanse whispered directly to her quintessence web. Her answering purr resonated in his very soul, and he let her energy embrace him. Wherever they were going, they would go together, as Beast and Paladin should.
Lanse was really, really tired of screaming. True, this quintant’s screaming had been because his throat was being magically reconstructed, but still, ow. His new cell was marginally bigger than the last one, and now had an actual guard posted outside. Not a robot, but a flesh and blood galra soldier. Thank the Ancients for small mercies.

“So, what’s your name?” he asked for the fifth time in as many doboshes.

“None of your business.” the guard snapped, sounding even more irritated than they had the first four times.

“Gee, sue a guy for trying to be sociable.” Lanse bent one of his knees up and crossed the other over it so one of his feet bobbed in the air. “You’re the closest thing I’ve had to intelligent company in, like, almost a whole movement.”

The guard grunted, and stepped away from the bars to greet another galra guard. This one was shorter and skinnier, with less decorations on his armour, and gave a crisp salute before the one Lanse had been talking to stalked off.

“Change of shift, or are you covering a break?” he asked as the new galra walked up. Lanse could probably take this one in a fight, as long as the cuffs around his wrists didn’t activate mid-brawl. Under the armour they were probably no bulkier than him, maybe even less so.

“Wow.” the newcomer said, leaning up against the side of the barred opening and smirking. “The guys in the mess really weren’t kidding when they said you looked like shit.”

“Who said I look like shit?” Lanse sat up quickly, uncrossing his legs. “I’ll fight them, I’ve never been anything less than an 8.”

“An eight.” the guard said flatly.

“Hey, everyone’s got their off quintants.” Lanse defended.

“You have got to be the weirdest prisoner I’ve ever met.” the guard shook their head and turned away, straightening up to stand facing the hallway.

“And you’ve got to be the shortest galra I’ve ever met.” Lanse huffed, leaning back against the wall. Come to think of it, he hadn’t taken a proper shower in a few thousand deca-phoebs, and his last couple quintants hadn’t exactly been easy on him physically. He lifted a hand to run through his hair, and grimaced at the feel of it. By Schee’rit, he needed to get his hands on some shampoo and conditioner. If he looked as bad as he felt, there was no way he was more than a 6 right now, and that was just plain old unacceptable.

The Blue Beast chuckled in the back of his head, like bubbles coming up from deep underwater, and Lanse relaxed slightly. He’d shut her out after they were both brought aboard, to keep out any druid who might go digging in his head for their bond, and as her energy washed through him like cool, soothing water he slumped against the wall fully. She was okay, the galra hadn’t even tried to break through her shields, just dragged her into the only hangar on the ship large enough to hold her. Her, and one other.

Lanse sat up straight, eyes flying open as his heart clenched in his chest. The Red Beast. Zarkon had the Red Beast, his father’s ship, the one his best friend had been assigned to keep safe. His breath
caught in his throat at the thought of Rylak, now surely thousands of deca-phoebs dead, in the hands of the druids. He hadn’t even thought to pray for her soul. His breath caught in his throat again, and he swallowed down a sob. He couldn’t just let this be. He had to get back to the Blue Beast, had to take her and Red back home, had to get out of here before he was turned into a bargaining chip or worse, a tracker.

“So, what’s your name?” he asked, forcing himself to sound casual.

“Nunya.” the guard answered brusquely.

“Huh, that’s-”

“Nunya business.” the guard grinned over his shoulder, all teeth and smug satisfaction. Lanse gaped as the galra turned back to the hallway, then leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. This guard was far more reactive the last one, which made him a good candidate for use in whatever escape plan Lanse came up with. When he came up with one, eventually. It also made him the most entertaining thing Lanse had seen since waking up, and after the last few quintants he sorely needed some entertainment.

“So, Business.” he said, and the guard twitched. “What were the names of those guards shit-talking me again?”

“My name’s not Business.” the guard snapped, turning around fully to, well, probably glare from the way his jaw was set. The helmet hid his eyes, though, so Lanse couldn’t be sure.

“You just said it was, though.” Lanse pointed out. “Now come on, I wanna know whose asses I’m kicking when I get outta here.”

“I was- do you people not have jokes?”

“Jokes?” Lanse affected innocent curiosity, tilting his head slightly to the side. “Is that a galran food?”

“No!” the guard snapped. Lanse fought to keep a smile from his face. This was far more entertaining than he’d anticipated. “Jokes are- they’re like-”

“If you don’t even know what a joke is, how am I supposed to?” Lanse asked, pouting slightly so he wouldn’t burst out laughing. He was kinda glad of the guard’s helmet, now. This one seemed to have a very expressive face, and without half of it being covered up Lanse definitely would’ve broken down in giggles by now.

“They’re supposed to be funny.” the galra spat.

“So you wanted to make me laugh?” Lanse asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“No, I-”

Lanse snorted, and clapped a hand over his face to hide his spreading smile. The galra’s jaw went slack as they stared at him dumbly, and Lanse broke down, laughing so hard his ribs ached.

“You were messing with me.” the guard said slowly. Lanse nodded, and the galra chuckled. “You’re a real piece of work, you know that?”

Lanse nodded again, and tipped sideways to lie on his shitty cot until the giggles subsided. “So what is your name?” he asked after a dobosh of almost companionable silence.
“Still none of your business.” the guard said, but Lanse could hear them smiling.

“You know I’m just gonna keep calling you Business until you tell me.” Lanse pointed out.

“That’s Mr. Business to you.” the guard retorted, though there was no heat behind his words. Lanse chuckled, and turned to lay on his back.

“Well then, Mr. Business. I don’t think you ever answered my first question.” he folded his arms under his head and cast a sidelong glance at where the galra was standing guard. “Are you on shift now, or just covering your buddy’s break?”

“He’s not my buddy.” Business said sharply.

“You know we’re not supposed to talk to the prisoner.” a gruff voice reprimanded, and Business startled to attention.

“Yes, Sir. Sorry, Sir.” he said quickly.

“Get back to your post.” the guard from earlier grunted, dismissing Business with a wave of his hand.

“Later, Business.” Lanse called after the retreating guard as cheerfully as he could manage. The galra flipped him off, and he laughed as he made himself comfortable on the narrow, thinly padded cot.

That guard probably didn’t even realize how much he’d said, without saying much of anything at all. He and the other one were both alphas, the larger one was his superior, and as a runt he was likely at the very bottom of the pecking order on this ship. Hell, that was likely the case everywhere he went. The galra weren’t kind to those they viewed as falling short of standards, and that guy was quite literally falling short. All together, those things added up to a single, very nice data point.

Mr. Business was a perfect target.

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Lanse woke with stiff limbs, and an uncomfortable pinch in his neck. Untangling himself to lie sprawled on the floor, he tried to remember how he’d wound up here. He’d been dragged from his cell, through the halls into a room, and then... he winced, and pressed a hand to the space just under his ribs where he could feel tender flesh. Right, the druids. His throat didn’t feel quite so raw as it had after his first few sessions, at least. Not because he’d given in or anything, but because he’d blacked out from the pain of having it reconstructed at the end of the session. He wondered if that was better or worse than his treatment on the first ship.

“And don’t talk to ket.” a deep voice growled.

“Sir, yes sir.” a more familiar voice answered, and Lanse smiled.

“Hey, Business.” he mumbled against the smooth metal floor.

“What was that?” the deep voice asked.

“Probably nothing.” Business said casually. “He just got back from the druids, right? You know what those witches can do to a brain.”

“You make a good point.” the deep voice said. “Keep up the good work and you may get an actual promotion by the end of the deca-phoeb, Kogane.”
Heavy footsteps headed off down the hall, and Lanse pushed himself up into something resembling a sitting position. Kogane, that was a nice name. Not that he’d be using it, of course. Business was much funnier.

“You look even worse than yestertant.” Kogane remarked once the footsteps faded away.

“Feel it, too.” Lanse groaned, slumping forward over his knees.

“Well, you get your shower tomorrow, so there’s that.” Kogane shrugged.

“I only get to shower once a movement?” Lanse frowned. “That doesn’t sound right.”

“I don’t make the rules.” Kogane shrugged again.

“Don’t seem to follow them much, either.” Lanse pointed out, stretching one leg out along the floor and wrapping his arms around his still folded one.

“I follow the ones that make sense.” Kogane scoffed.

“Oh, really?” Lanse grinned. “What if I was a druid and twisted your mind to help me just by speaking to you?”

“Then me not saying anything wouldn’t help anyways.” Kogane turned to look at him, expression unreadable under his helmet. “You’re not a druid though, right?”

“Nah.” Lanse shook his head. Learning to properly manipulate quintessence had never really seemed important, especially with the expectation that he would eventually inherit Uncle Blaytz’s bayard and title. “I’m just a pilot.”

Blue huffed in the back of his head, like mist coming from the nozzle of a spray bottle, and Lanse did his best to ignore how her insistence made something cold and heavy curdle in his gut. He wasn’t a Paladin, not really. Sure, he could fly her, but that was only because Uncle Blaytz was- he looked down at his knees and blinked hard. It had been almost ten thousand deca-phoebs, everyone he’d ever known was dead now. He shook his head, and pushed himself to his feet. Just because they were dead didn’t mean he could sit here and mope. He had to find a way to get out of this cell, back to Blue, and then get her and Red back to the castle together.

“What about you?” he asked, turning his attention back to Kogane.

“What about me?” Kogane frowned.

“Well, how’d you end up guarding little old me?” Lanse asked, walking over to the bed and sitting down on the edge.

“I was assigned here?” Kogane’s mouth pulled into something resembling a pout, though it was hard to tell his expression with his eyes covered by the helmet.

“What were you doing before?” Lanse probed, pulling one knee up to his chest and resting his chin on it. This guard was going to be his ticket out, he could feel it, but first he needed a weak spot to work with.

“Guarding other shit.” Kogane turned around. “What were you doing before you got picked up by Paranar’s ship?”

“Nothing.” Lanse said reflexively.
“Sure.” Kogane drawled. “You know your punishment can’t really get any worse, right?”

“I somehow doubt that.” Lanse grumbled.

“Well, short of Haggar taking an interest in you, I think you’re fine.” Kogane said flatly.

“Haggar?” Lanse felt his eyebrows lift on his forehead.

“You haven’t heard of her?” Kogane asked, and Lanse shook his head.

“You know where I was found.” he said as casually as he could manage. “I’m a bit out of the loop.”

“’Nackin hick.” Kogane snorted.

“Excuse you.” Lanse huffed, crossing his arms. “I’ll have you know I was the height of sophistication back home.”

“Riiight.” Kogane shook his head. “Look, you can lie all you like but—”

“I’m not lying, you quiznack.” Lanse fired back.

Kogane laughed, a short sharp bark of a thing, and leaned against the side of the cell’s barred opening. “You really are a piece of work, 9874.”

“You’re a piece of work.” Lanse retorted without thinking.

“Maybe.” Kogane admitted. “But I’m not the one in handcuffs, now am I?” he smirked, and Lanse flopped down on his back to glare up at the ceiling. What an asshole, looking all smug about the fact that he was a guard not a prisoner. Maybe he wasn’t the answer after all, Lanse mused, staring at the dull purple ceiling without really seeing it. He hadn’t interacted with the other guards assigned to his cell yet, maybe one of them would be more useful in his escape plans. Whatever those wound up being.
“Y’know what I miss? Flowers.” Lanse said to nobody in particular. “Amalia and I taught Viv how to make crowns of angel bells, to wear at the festival of Ke-pheo. We got in so much trouble for taking them from the garden without asking, but they were so fun to wear we didn’t give half a damn.” he sighed wistfully.

“I’ve never heard of that festival.” A voice said in Galran, and Lanse turned his head to blink lazily at the guard standing outside his cell. Guard, cell, oh right. He groaned and pressed his face into his arm. The druids had done it again, hadn’t they? His throat hurt from speaking, and when the guard-Kogane, Business, his ticket out- turned to look at him Lanse let his eyes slide shut.

“What time is it?” he groaned.

“Just past 15:00 vargas.” Kogane replied. “You’re usually not this coherent for another tock.”

“Ugh.” Lanse draped an arm over his eyes, grateful not for the first time that his cuffs weren’t kept activated 20/5. “My throat is killing me.”

“Considering you haven’t shut up since they dragged you back here, I’m not surprised.”

“Ancients, how long was that?” Lanse grimaced. He didn’t want to think about what he might’ve rambled while he was out of it.

“Not long.” Kogane assured him, and Ancients how weird was it that his cell guard was trying to comfort him?

The Blue Beast purred in his head, an assurance that he’d said nothing of importance under the druids’ influence, and he relaxed a little against his bed’s thin mattress. For all that his sessions with the druids were agonising, they were also pretty monotonous. Between the druid’s repetitive questions, the unchanging light, and the bland prison food, he was starting to lose track of time. The Blue Beast assured him it hadn’t been long, but the Beasts had a different perception of time than most organic species so that didn’t really mean much.

“Is Ke-pheo one of those Ancients you keep talking about?” Kogane asked, breaking the silence which had settled between them.

“Yeah.” Lanse nodded. “God of growing things.” he grinned, recalling the last festival he’d been to. Ke-pheo’s festival was his favourite, the streets full of children and families and so many flowers the ground was absolutely carpeted with their fallen petals.

“So do all the Ancients have festivals?” Kogane prodded.

“Of course.” Lanse scoffed. “Not honouring one of them is a really quick way to get brain blasted.”

“So, how many festivals do you have every deca-phoeb?”

“Six.” Lanse answered quickly. “Aside from Ke-pheo there’s Al'terrath, Lyn-carlith, Solari-thain, Ko-vidath, and Schee'rit.” he rattled off with ease. “Each of them is slightly different, but all of them celebrate things the Ancients patronize.”

“ Weird.” Kogane muttered.
“It’s not weird.” Lanse pushed himself up to glare at the back of the guard’s head. “It’s a tradition we’ve honoured since before recorded history.”

“So?” Kogane looked over his shoulder at Lanse. “Our tradition says we leave a plate of food untouched through dinners on Imperial feast quintants, that’s weird.”

“You’re weird.” Lanse sniffed, infusing the latter word with as much disdain as he could manage. The untouched plate was a mourning custom, one which had been observed at the funeral his father held for their Emperor and Empress. The fact that this guard didn’t know what it meant was frankly bizarre.

“You’re weirder.” Kogane retorted childishly.

Lanse resisted the urge to stick out his tongue, but only barely. A sudden longing swept through him; Kogane’s demeanor was so like Amalia’s, he couldn’t help but miss his family. Amalia’s teasing, Fernanda’s hair ruffles, Dad’s hugs...

“Are you okay?” Kogane asked.

“I’m locked in a cell.” Lanse retorted, too tired to care about his voice was coming out thick and teary. “What do you think?”

Kogane didn’t respond to that, and Lanse let himself sink into the Blue Beast’s soothing purr as tears beaded in the corners of his eyes. He needed to go somewhere else, to not be himself for a while, but he couldn’t just shift and change clothes and disappear into a crowd like he’d done back home. He couldn’t even set foot outside his cell unless it was with his hands cuffed and a sentry on either side. His chest ached, breath stuttering on an inhale, and he wiped his running nose on his sleeve for lack of anything else to use.

Turning onto his side, back to the hall and the guard, Lanse shut his eyes and reached not for the Blue Beast’s signature but the Red Beast’s. Red wasn’t his, would never be his, but she had been Father’s and Rylak’s and neither of them had ever hesitated to throw themself at a problem that needed solving. He could only sense her dimly, the way he’d been able to sense all the Beasts for as long as he could remember, but even the barest brush of her warmth was enough to spark an idea in him.

It hurt to slide his consciousness into the quintessence web which powered this ship, but he bit back a whimper and pushed past the pain. He traced the electrical wiring along the halls, following them until he reached the distinct signatures of the Blue and Red Beasts in their hangar. The Blue Beast’s energy wrapped around him, carrying images of her quintessence ensconcing his so he didn’t have to feel the pain of the corrupted quintessence in the ship, and he drifted away from her over to the Red Beast. The concentrated energy burned against his consciousness, but when he brushed against the energy of the Red Beast his whole being lit up in flaming agony.

Even separated by most of the ship, he could feel his physical body spasm at the sensation. The Blue Beast’s growl resonated through him, her quintessence coating his like a shield, and when she nudged him to return to his body he did so. It was easier to find his way back than it had been to find his way to the hangar, and as he hovered on the edge of falling back into himself an idea occurred to him. He cast his consciousness to the hangar and back several times, following the same path on each pass until he could visualise every twist, turn, and tightly wound stairwell between him and the Beasts.

Satisfied with his knowledge of the route, Lanse settled his awareness around the door to his cell and widened his focus. There was his body, an unusually dim blue light against the burning web of
purple quintessence all around him. Outside the door, Kogane shone so brightly his quintessence signature was only visible around the edges, violently saturated magenta accents on a pillar of white. He moved away, down the hall towards the Beasts, and cursed at the presence of another galra at the corner. Their quintessence signature was less blinding, bearing the same purple tint as Rylak’s and Maremra’s, but it was distinctly different from the burning condensed signatures of the robot sentries.

They really didn’t want him escaping, did they? Of course not, he was the last altean alive. He drew back into himself, and forcibly unclenched his jaw. The Blue Beast’s cool energy lapped at the edges of his awareness like a balm, soothing where the ship’s quintessence web had left him frazzled, and he opened his eyes to stare up at the ceiling. He had to get better at navigating outside of his body. If he could learn the sentries’ movements, figure out a way to get the cell door open, and manage to knock out both guards without letting either of them call for backup... he might have a chance of actually escaping.

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Lanse sighed when he sensed the sentries turning down the hall. Did the druids never take a quintant off? He pulled his consciousness back into his body, and sat up with a yawn. The guard outside his cell stepped aside when the sentries marched up, and Lanse pushed himself to his feet. “That time again already?” he quipped. None of them reacted, and he sighed as his cuffs activated. He really had to figure out how to make them not do that; getting to the Beasts would be way harder without full use of his hands.

The path to the druids’ room was familiar by now, and he grimaced at the sight of a robed figure with broad shoulders. There was little to distinguish the druids from each other, but this one meant it was going to be an especially bad quintant. He let the sentries push him into the chair, didn’t fight as his cuffs energized to the arms, and levelled the druid with his flattest stare. “We both know I’m not going to talk.” he deadpanned.

“I know.” the druid sounded like they were smiling, their voice cruel and sharp. “But your resistance is amusing.”

Dark energy speared through his diaphragm without warning, and Lanse didn’t even have enough air in his lungs to scream as he arched off the seat. The druid chuckled darkly, and as he slumped back down Lanse felt the Blue Beast’s roar building in the back of his head. Quiznack, he’d been so preoccupied with his planning he hadn’t remembered to shut her out. Lanse squeezed his eyes shut, and projected his consciousness out into the ship’s quintessence web. It seared against him, caustic as any acid, and he focused on that pain as his body screamed in agony.

It was hard to think through the twofold pain, but he only had a few doboshes before the druid was done ‘softening him up’ and started asking questions. The Blue Beast responded readily to his call, and he felt himself scream louder as he started pulling at her quintessence. The energy she wrapped around him only ever felt like a cool blanket of water, but this hurt like sticking his hand out of an airlock. The cold cut through his entire being, but when he pulled away from her presence with a jerk there was a tiny fragment clinging to his own energy.

His body spasmed violently, almost hard enough to shake him back into himself, but he managed to resist the pull. He had to know if this would work, and testing it in his cell would surely draw suspicion he couldn’t afford. The Blue Beast’s quintessence clung to his like frozen metal to warm skin, and ripping it free hurt almost as bad as holding it in the first place. Once separated from him it went into the ship’s quintessence web with only a little forcing, and Lanse nearly cheered as the locking mechanism on the door across the hall spontaneously fried.

He dropped back into himself mid-scream, tears running freely down his face, and the druid pulled
their hand away from his chest with a distinctly satisfied nod.

“Where can we find the other Beasts?” they growled as Lanse gasped for air.

“I don’t know.” he spat breathlessly. Ancients, that had taken more out of him than he’d thought it would. If not for the pain, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to keep his eyes open.

“You are connected to the Blue Beast.” the druid said, leaning in so their riphor-like mask nearly touched Lanse’s nose. “You will tell us where the other three Beasts are.”

“No.” Lanse leaned forwards and pressed his forehead to the druid’s mask. Drained or not, he wasn’t going to behave for them. “I’ll never tell you anything.” he snarled in his best Galran, the guttural syllables adding an extra edge of threat to his words.

“Then you will suffer.” the druid spat, and Lanse’s back arched under a fresh wave of agony. The Blue Beast growled in his head, waves crashing against the inside of his skull, and it took everything Lanse had to shut her out. The druid’s dark lightning crackled out from his core, spreading agony to every limb, and he clenched his teeth against a scream. This one liked it when he screamed, and by Ko-vidath he was going to do everything in his power to deny them that pleasure.

When he was pulled from the chair vargas later, Lanse actually managed to keep his feet under him until they reached the hallway. His stumbling sent him pitching forwards a few steps after the door shut behind him, but he smiled to himself as the sentries dragged him back to his cell. The door across the hall was jammed wide open. Not bad for his first ever quintessence manipulation.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After a few more tests, Lanse thought he’d just about gotten the hang of basic quintessence manipulation. He wouldn’t be making balls of lightning any time soon, but if he concentrated he could wrap a sliver of the Blue Beast’s quintessence in his own and shove that into something in the ship’s quintessence web to blow it open. It was exhausting, but he didn’t have time to wait until he figured out a less draining method. Every quintant the Beasts were in Zarkon’s possession was a quintant he risked the former Black Paladin remembering some way to use them to find the others, and that was something that could not be allowed to happen.

All he needed was to figure out how to disarm the guard, and he was basically home free. He knew the sentry patrols, the route to the Beasts, and he could blow the handcuffs to stop them from activating. But how to disable the guard? His body would be helpless when his cuffs and cell bars deactivated, which would give the guard time to get in and block his escape. There were no evident weak points on the armour to exploit, and if he tried to shift larger to make up for his lack of unarmed combat skill his jumpsuit would probably either kill his circulation or rip at every seam. It wasn’t like there was anything in the cell he could use either, unless...

Lanse projected himself into the ship’s quintessence web, and focused in on the bulk of his shitty bed. It was inactive, which meant it’d take more power, but he could almost definitely make it overload and blow up. It even felt like it was in three distinct segments, so he could roll out of the way and let it explode in the guard’s face. It’d have to be before he was taken to the druids for the quintant, because afterwards he’d be too shaken and weak to run all the way there, but he could make that work. He had to make that work.

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Lanse was nearly dragged back into himself by the explosive pressure at his wrists, but he forced himself to remain in the quintessence web. Blue’s quintessence burned against his own, and he shoved it into the panel that controlled his cell bars. Dropping back into his physical body, he found his ears ringing and turned onto his side to see the guard sprawled on his face. Oh, right, that galra had been leaning up against the panel when it blew. Well, there was a step he didn’t have to deal with.

Rolling off the bed, Lanse shook the ruined cuffs free of his wrists and grabbed the guard’s rifle and lifted it to briefly sight down its length. It wasn’t the same as the really nice gun he’d picked up from the sentry right after his capture, but it still had decent balance for what must be a mass-produced weapon, and the bar on the side said it was nearly at full charge. Lucky him.

“Hey, what are you doing out of your cell?” a voice snapped.

Less luckily, he’d forgotten to account for the fact that explosions tended to be loud and attention grabbing. “I’ll shoot!” he yelled, shouldering the rifle and thumbing the safety off.

“Try me, you-”

The galra shut up pretty quick when a blaster bolt to the chest knocked them off their feet, and Lanse rushed forwards to crack the butt of the gun against the guard’s head. It rang against the metal of the helmet, and Lanse took off running. Right, left, down the stairs... he skidded to a halt at the first
doorway with an actual door in it, and slammed his hand against the operation panel. It flashed red and beeped angrily at him. He pressed his palm to the handprint more carefully, and it beeped at him again.

“No.” he breathed, despair coiling around his heart as his chest tightened. “No, no, come on!” he slammed his hand against the panel harder with each word, and on the last he drew it back with a hiss. Shards of glass stuck out of the heel of his hand, his blood dripping down them to colour the floor like it had already coloured the broken edges of the sparking operation panel.

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a mannequin to one side, and from behind the door in the wall behind it Lanse could hear the sound of water on tile and off-key humming. That armour looked similar to what Paranar had worn, on the ship that captured him, but bigger. Whatever this ship’s captain was like, he didn’t want to fight them.

The door opened, and Lanse’s eyes flicked over the galra’s body. They were missing an arm, had a clear implant in place of one eye on the same side, and wore only a white towel around their waist. The galra’s organic eye widened, and Lanse turned on his heel to sprint back down the hall. He didn’t have to outfight the captain if he could outrun them, and with the amount of visible muscle they had they probably weren’t-

Something struck Lanse between the shoulder blades, and he toppled forwards with a grunt of pain. He pushed himself up onto his hands and knees, and looked at the weight as it thudded to the ground. An- arm? It was an arm. A pretty damn big arm. He’d barely regained his feet when an equally big hand wrapped around his neck from behind and slammed him against the wall.

“Guards!” the captain bellowed, almost deafening Lanse for a tick. Two unfamiliar galra and half a dozen sentries came jogging around the corner, and Lanse’s heart fell. There went his last slim chances of escaping to the hangar.

“Commander Sendak!” one of them snapped a salute.

“What is this prisoner doing outside kes cell?” Sendak growled, pulling Lanse away from the wall and showing him to the guards. Lanse scowled at them.

“We- we don’t know, sir.” the second guard said breathlessly.

“Well find out.” Sendak snapped. “And get ket to the druids, see if those witches are as useful at obtaining information as they claim to be.”

“Sir, yes sir!” the galra said in unison, both giving a quick salute. One ran off, while the other pulled out a pair of handcuffs and snapped them on Lanse’s wrists. They energized, and a pair of sentries grabbed him by the elbows.

“You heard, the Commander, get ket to the druids.” the guard ordered, and a tick later the sentries started to march. Lanse sagged between them, despair stealing the strength from his limbs, and he blinked back burning hot tears. He’d failed. He’d done everything in his power, and he’d still failed. There was no way he’d be able to pull off a trick like that again, either. The hangar would probably be guarded 20/5 now, and he wouldn’t be surprised if patrols were more frequent too.

His breath hitched, and he choked down a sob. In the back of his mind, the Blue Beast purred like she was trying to comfort him. He let himself drift free of his body and rushed through the burning web of quintessence to the Blue Beast’s cool, enveloping presence. I’m sorry, Lanse gasped against her energy, letting her wrap him up completely. I failed. She should just leave, find another compatible pilot to begin the search for the rest of Voltron.

The Blue Beast’s chastising rumble permeated his entire incorporeal being, filling him with her thoughts for a moment. They were strange, fragmented, alien things, but he understood them clearly anyways. Blaytz was gone, long gone, and even had he still been around- no, that couldn’t be right, he had to be misinterpreting that bit. Blue rumbled again, this time more insistently, and Lanse was nearly thrown back into his body by the pressure of her mind against his.

Even if Uncle Blaytz was still around, she would choose him. She had known him from before his birth, been with him his whole life, comforted him and guided him as he grew into someone who
would be better matched with her than any other could ever hope to be. He was her true Paladin, her ideal partner, one she had waited over ten thousand deca-phoebs for. She could stand to wait a little longer for him to find another way back to her.

Thank you. Lanse murmured, letting her energy mingle with his own. I promise, I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.

Blue’s purr reverberated within him even as her energy withdrew, until all that remained was a protective shield around him and a sense of something close to peace. He drifted slowly back towards his body, the burning quintessence web of the ship deflected harmlessly away from him by Blue’s presence, and he paused before dropping back into himself. He was being brought to the druids, who would surely rip into his mind in search of answers as to how he’d escaped. He wasn’t sure if he’d be able to hide the truth from them, but he had to at least try.

Chapter End Notes

Haha, Blue locking him out in s3 would hurt so much more in this au. (not that this fic is gonna get that far, but still)
“Leo!” Amalia cried, her arms wrapping around him tightly. Lanse staggered at the impact, hugging her back. “When you didn’t arrive after us I was so worried.” she backed away and cupped his face, turning it side to side as she examined him. “What took you so long?”

“I-” Lanse hesitated. His head hurt, and something about his twin looked... wrong. He couldn’t explain it, it was just as much like looking in a strangely coloured mirror as ever, but something about her was off.

“Whatever.” she rolled her eyes and grabbed his wrist, fingers circling it like a cage. “C’mon, the others are already at your Beast. We’ve been waiting for you to get here and take us home for ages.”

Her ginger hair was pulled up in twin braids which looped around her head like a crown, exposing the freckles on the back of her neck. “Where are we?” Lanse frowned, bringing his free hand to his temple and pressing as if that would mitigate the headache forming there.

“Tociri, duuhhh.” Amalia laughed, and Lanse stopped. Amalia’s nails bit into his wrist, but he dug his heels into the soft soil.

“Tociri is endless deserts.” he said slowly. “Amalia, where are we really?”

“What does it matter?” she huffed, turning around to pout at him. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but her face looked distinctly wrong. “I’ve been waiting for you to come take me home for ten thousand deca-phoebs, stupid-” her mouth moved, but the word that came out wasn’t in Altean. It was Galran.

“Your eyes.” he gasped, trying to pull his wrist free. Her claw-like nails dug into his skin, biting almost hard enough to draw blood as her golden, glowing eyes bore into his.

“Take me home, Lanse.” she hissed in Galran, her face melting into a gaunt mockery of what he remembered.

“No!” he screamed, struggling to pull his arm free. She was withering before his eyes, her hair going limp and white, back bending with age, yellowed eyes glassing over. Through it all her grip remained strong as a shackle, keeping him in place.

“You failed at so many things.” she hissed, her voice like dry leaves in the wind. “The least you can do it take me home so I can die where Dad died.”

“No!” he screamed, and everything exploded in white. His vision came back quickly, blocks of purple filling in as his eyes focused on the druid in front of him, sprawled groaning on the floor with their mask fallen aside. They were gaunt, their fingernails sharp as claws, and Lanse shuddered to think that they had been in his head. They’d taken the shape of his sister, his twin, and tried to use the memory of her against him. Rage boiled in his veins, and he wondered briefly if it was possible to force quintessence into another living being, to overload their body the way he could overload a machine.

He shook that thought away after a heartbeat, though. Even if he could, it would be wrong. It was one thing to knock out a guard in his escape attempt, and wholly another to attempt to fry a living person with his own life energy. The druid sat up with a groan, glaring at him with glowing yellow eyes as they picked up their mask. “I see.” they hissed, voice raspy. “You are one of us.”

“No.” Lanse bared his teeth in a snarl, letting his features subtly shift towards Rylak’s. “I’m a
Paladin. I’ll never use my gifts to hurt people like you do.”

“What kind of Paladin does not answer to kes leader?” the druid asked, slipping their mask back on.

Lanse bristled, but kept his mouth shut.

“Very well. I’ll just have a look for myself.” the druid placed a hand on Lanse’s head, and he gasped as the room faded away, leaving just him and the druid in a void of darkness. The druid’s fingers pressing harder against his forehead, and Lanse gritted his teeth as old memories were dredged up. They floated past like small clouds, each filled with pictures moving without sound. Talking to a young Amalia, holding a tiny Vivian as Uncle Blaytz supported her head, clinging to Father’s leg and staring up at the red-armoured figure of Zarkon. Watching the Beasts flying drills outside the window while a tutor wrote something on a holoboard, training against Uncle Blaytz with his trident, Zarkon catching him by the back of his shirt when he tried to sneak out. Fighting with Rylak, crying against Gyrgan’s shoulder at the news of Uncle Blaytz’s death, staring at the screen as Zarkon threatened to turn his homeworld and the trillions of people on it into nothing more than dust.

“Such a life you’ve lived.” the druid murmured as more and more memories came up around them, populating the void like stars in the night sky. They began to coalesce behind the druid, and Lanse’s eyes widened as they assembled themselves into an unmistakable form. He opened his mouth, and a roar echoed through the darkness. A wall of colour approached rapidly, and Lanse felt weightless as it crashed over him. The void was now underwater, but without even shifting gills he could breathe it. Blue was protecting him, he realized, and when the druid staggered back from him he dropped back into the waking world.

“I told you, didn’t I?” he smirked, flexing his fingers against the arms of the chair. Blue’s energy rested in his chest like a shard of space itself, searing cold and yet somehow comfortable against his quintessence core. “I’m a Paladin. I thought with your Emperor calling himself one, you would understand what that means.”

“I understand.” the druid grinned, a slow spreading thing that unnerved Lanse immensely. “You do not understand how to close off your mind, little kit.” they stepped closer, lifting their hand towards his face again. “So I will have to do it for you.” energy flowed from their fingertips as soon as they touched his forehead, and Lanse cried out as it seemed to press itself into every crevice of his brain. Blue roared, a desperate crash of waves on jagged stone, but it was so quiet it was almost inaudible. When the druid stepped back Lanse reflexively tried to reach out to Blue, but there was nothing, not even the ever-present web of quintessence which powered the ship. The druid laughed, and Lanse’s eyes flew open wide.

“What did you do?” he asked, not bothering to keep the horror from his voice.

“A simple thing.” the druid sounded like they were smiling. Lanse didn’t like that one bit. “You truly aren’t one of us, if you cannot comprehend so simple a spell.” they tutted, patting his cheek like he was a child. “Now that’s settled, and your pesky pet can’t interfere…” they set their fingertips on Lanse’s temples, and the darkness enveloped them both again. “Let’s take a closer look at this escape plan you so carefully concocted..”

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Lanse groaned, and immediately regretted it. His head was throbbing, pain pulsing through every inch of his skull, and the noise made it worse. He turned onto his side, burying his face in the thin, shitty pillow provided in his cell. He tried to reach out to enter the ship’s quintessence web, but something stopped him. It was as if his consciousness had been bound to his body, his gift stripped away to leave him nothing more than a mere altean. He forced himself to take a deep breath, trying
not to panic. Even if he couldn’t cast himself free of his body, he could still reach out to Blue.

Her voice echoed softly in his head, the quietest whisper of water against the edge of a pool, and he frowned into the stiffly starched fabric of his shitty pillow. She felt so distant, moreso than she ever had when he was a child and Voltron was away on a mission across the universe. His heart stuttered in his chest, and he gasped for air. How far from him had she been taken? How was he supposed to get home without her? What if Zarkon tried to hurt her?

Her purr flowed weakly across the inside of his skull like the trickles of a dammed river, soothing his aching head the slightest little bit as she reassured him. She hadn’t been moved, and nor had he. There was magic woven around him, within him, the work of a stranger who wanted to sever their bond. Lanse scowled into his pillow. A druid. A druid had woven their energy into a cage to keep him from getting back into the quintessence web and freeing himself again.

Blue tried to soothe him again, and Lanse relaxed slightly as her energy pressed against his mind like a balm. The druid had tried, and had failed. Their bond was too strong to be broken by the whim of some measly pawn. Lanse chuckled silently, and then tensed at the sound of soft knocks which felt very loud to his overworked mind. “Dinner.” Kogane said, and Lanse sat up with a groan. If he didn’t eat, he’d have no strength to figure out a way to escape without using Blue’s energy or the ship’s web.

“Is it any good?” he asked, his voice raspy. Evidently, the druid hadn’t bothered to heal his throat before sending him back to his cell.

“Was it any good yestertant?” Kogane asked, and Lanse dropped the pillow back onto his shitty bed as he opened his eyes enough to glare at the guard. Kogane was leaning against the edge of the bars, opposite the operation panel, and seemed completely at-ease despite the fact that Lanse had probably put two of his coworkers in cryo-pods just a few vargas ago. Weird, but from everything he’d picked up so far Kogane was exceptionally odd for a galra, so weird was normal.

When it no longer felt like he was being stabbed in the retinas by every little bit of light, Lanse carefully slid off the bed and shuffled over to the tray. Its contents were the same as ever, a bowl of thin reddish brown gruel which smelled bitter and tasted faintly of iron next to a cup of something that looked like water but tasted like the electrolyte drink pouches which had always been stocked in the training room. He drank from the cup first, keeping half an eye on the guard who was watching him. Normally Kogane stood facing out, watching for anyone who might come to try and break him out. Apparently, the galra had finally realized that he was the real threat. Lanse would’ve been a little smug about that if it didn’t mean escaping would be harder next time.

“They change up the healing parameters or something?” Kogane asked when he was halfway through his meal. Lanse cocked his head and raised an eyebrow. “Usually you’re way more chatty.” he shrugged.

“Mr. Business.” Lanse grinned, suppressing a wince at the way his voice grated in his throat and ears. “Are you worried about me?”

“Not in a million deca-phoebs.” he said flatly, but the tense set of his shoulders and purse of his lips betrayed the lie.

Lanse grinned, and finished his meal in silence. Kogane watched him the whole while, or at least Lanse assumed he did. The helmet disguised exactly where his eyes were pointed, but at the very least his face remained pointed at Lanse. He pushed the tray back towards the bars, and slumped forwards with a groan. Kogane straightened up, and Lanse stifled a smile. So, his initial assessment hadn’t been wrong at all. Kogane was going to be his ticket out of here.
“Are you hurt?” the guard asked, concern unmistakable in his tone.

“Yeah.” Lanse made a soft noise of pain, not hard considering how much his head hurt, and pushed himself to his feet. “I’ll be fine, though. It’s just my head.”

“Oh.” Kogane visibly relaxed, and Lanse turned faster than was advisable to hide the smile spreading on his face. He kept his head down as he staggered to bed, and only once he was curled up with his back to the bars did he allow himself a proper smile. Kogane wasn’t like the other guards, not at all. He was shorter than even Lanse’s default form, smaller than his co-workers in every dimension, and that made him a social outcast in a society which prized strength the way the galra did. He was an outcast, and it hadn’t made him hard against the universe. It had made him kind, empathetic. Somebody whose trust Lanse could gain, who he could convince to help him escape.

Whoever put Kogane in charge of guarding him was going to be getting a demotion, if nothing else. Just as soon as Lanse figured out how to turn him to his own advantage.
“Uncle!” Lanse squealed, running past where Father knelt with his arms open and flinging himself into the Black Paladin’s hold. Strong hands tossed him up in the air, then caught him again and hugged him close.

“You’re getting big.” Zarkon laughed. “I swear you were smaller when we left last movement.”

Father’s hand ruffled his hair. “What am I, chopped liver?” he asked, his voice somehow clearer than Zarkon’s. Lanse giggled, leaning into the touch.

“We have a bond.” Zarkon defended, an odd note of playfulness in his voice. “The Black Beast has chosen both of us.”

“And Uncle will have to go home.” Lanse huffed, looking from Father to the foreign King holding him. “Can’t you stay?”

“I wish I could, squirt.” Zarkon sighed, and flickered. His mouth kept moving, but Lanse couldn’t hear anything over the rush of blood in his ears and the sourceless sound of distant waves on a stony shore. This wasn’t right. He wasn’t Black’s chosen, had never even wanted to be. He looked aside at some input from one of the other Paladins, and there was Zarkon, helmet tucked under one arm and looking both fond and tired. But then, who was holding him? He turned back to the Paladin in flickering armour, the one whose entire being was stuttering and glitching like an overworked holoprojector, and everything shattered at once.

He went limp against the purple metal seat with a gasp, eyes flicking over his surroundings. Purple, sharp angles, cloaked figure with glowing golden eyes. Druid. That was a druid, he was on a galran ship. He was a prisoner on a galran ship. “What was that?” he gasped, and though the druid’s mask fully hid their face he got the impression they were smiling.

“A test.” they answered simply, turning to record something on a datapad. Lanse forced himself to take a deep breath. Panic wouldn’t save him, he had to think. That had been a memory he was just in, just reliving. A memory that had been tampered with, obviously. He was Blue’s Paladin, not Black’s. It had been Uncle Blaytz who Father loved, who in turn loved him as if they were related by blood and not Altean law.

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He tripped with a yelp, and went tumbling down the sandy hill head over heels. Salome sprinted down ahead of him, screeching happily until he rolled right into the back of xir legs and knocked xir over. They came to a stop, and Lanse elbowed his half-sibling in the back as well as he could. “You’re heavy.” he complained, and Salome turned over to lie across his lower back.

“Nuh-uh.” xi rebutted. “I’m light as seafoam, Daddy says so.”

“Maybe underwater.” Lanse grunted, pushing himself up and pouting at his younger half-sibling over his shoulder. “But up here you’re heavy.” he managed to squirm out from under xir, and xi grinned up at him angelically. “And Uncle is bigger than me, so of course you’re light to him.”
“Are you squirts okay?” Zarkon asked, kneeling next to them and helping Salome to xir feet, dusting off xir clothes carefully.

“Yep!” Salome chirped.

“I’m good.” Lanse grinned, getting up and shaking sand from his hair. He ached a little, but no worse than after a round or two with the gladiator in the training room. “Dad is coming with towels an’ stuff.” he gestured over to where a set of stairs was built into the hill a ways down the beach.

“I’ll go help him with that.” Zarkon nodded, and tugged gently on one of Salome’s feelers. “Don’t go too deep, okay? That goes for you too, Lanse.”

“I don’t even have gills.” Lanse huffed.

“Then it shouldn’t be a problem.” Zarkon smiled, and ruffled his hair. “Go, have fun.”

Salome grabbed him by the wrist, and Lanse let xir drag him down to the waterline. Xi was younger than him by a few deca-phoebs, but with xir nauoese strength it was easier to just go along when xi got excited enough to grab and drag. “Let’s go!” xi warbled, yanking him into the water until it came up to her shoulders.

“I can’t dive like you and Uncle, remember?” he laughed, finally freeing his wrist.

“But you can shapeshift.” Salome pouted. “And you promised I could show you the reefs this trip!”

“I’ve never tried to shift into something with gills, though.” Lanse objected. “What if I mess it up?”

Salome cocked xir head at him, dark blue eyes boring into his paler ones. “Daddy says you’re supposed to take over Black, when he’s done being a Paladin.” xi said matter-of-fact-ly. “Isn’t Black supposed to be the Guardian of Water?”

“Well, yeah, but-”

“But,” Zarkon said, one of his hands landing on each of their heads. “You both promised not to dive that deep.”

“Daaaaad.” Salome whined, and Lanse blinked. That- Salome looked nothing like Zarkon. Xi was nauoese, he was galran. Black wasn’t even the Guardian of Water, that was-

The druid snarled, and Lanse struggled to breathe. It had felt so real, like he was really back then. Like it was really Zarkon who had made them swear to stay in the shallows, who had brushed sand from Salome’s swim-skirt and ruffled it from his hair. The druid was muttering to themself, displeased by something, and Lanse took the chance to draw a deep breath and ground himself. He was the Blue Paladin, nothing would change that. No matter how many memories the druid tried to tamper with, they couldn’t change the present. They couldn’t change how deep his connection to Blue ran, or how much he hated the monster which ruled the galaxy with Zarkon’s name and face.

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Lanse opened his eyes, just a slit, just enough to see Kogane leaning against the edge of the barred wall of his cell. His mouth was turned down slightly at the edges, and his entire posture screamed boredom. Good, if he was bored he was more likely to answer Lanse’s questions. But what to start with? It had to be something small, inconsequential. A tidbit that Kogane would think nothing of disclosing but which Lanse could spin into greater and greater confessions with time. Either that, or something he could work with to uncover a weak point.
He looked the guard up and down as well as he could without opening his eyes any further, and ran over the facts he already knew. Kogane was an alpha, had no friends amongst the other guards, and was seriously undersized for his presentation. He also cared, which was the only real chink in his metaphorical armour Lanse knew of. He had seemed eager when that other guard mentioned a promotion, though, so that was a potential opening. His stature was another possible weak point, alphas were supposed to be larger than average and he was tiny even for an omega. There was a strong possibility he wasn’t full-blooded galra, which Lanse could definitely use. Lineage had been a big thing amongst the galra even before the war, with anyone less than a certain percentage relegated to life in a lower caste. The laws had probably changed while he was in stasis, but he somehow doubted that the public attitude had.

Kogane straightened up, and Lanse swore internally. He’d been spotted, time to play sleepy and hope something came to him. He pushed himself up, yawning wide, and blinked at Kogane with his best bleary expression.

“It’s almost dinner.” Kogane said, and Lanse swung his legs over the side of the bed. “How’s your throat?”

Lanse paused, and stared at the guard for a tick. That sounded suspiciously like Kogane actually cared about him. “Fine.” he said slowly, folding his hands in his lap. “And you?”

The guard seemed surprised, though Lanse couldn’t be a hundred percent certain with half his face covered by the helmet. “I’m fine.” he said after a few ticks.

“Come on.” Lanse leaned forwards, resting his elbows on his knees. “Nobody’s ever really fine.”

“I don’t think I should talk about something like that with you.” Kogane frowned.

“What, want me to go first?” Lanse asked, lifting his hands over his head and arching his back in a stretch. “My head hurts like quiznack from spending the last few vargas being forced to relive memories with my dead family, and I feel grody as hell because my last shower was three quintants ago.”

The helmet hid his eyes, but Kogane was definitely staring at him. His mouth had fallen open slightly, revealing strangely blunt teeth which basically confirmed Lanse’s suspicions about his heritage. No adult galra would have teeth like that unless they were inherited from a non-galra parent. He was a halfie, at best.

“I’m so sorry.” Kogane said softly, head tilting down. “I know what it feels like, to lose someone important to you.”

Bingo.

“Who was it?” Lanse pried. Kogane didn’t answer, shoulders hunching as his head ducked lower. For a dobosh Lanse thought he wouldn’t answer at all, and then-

“Everyone.” the guard said softly. “My pack, my clade, all of them.”

Briefly, Lanse felt sorry for Kogane. Then he mentally shook himself, staring at the symbol on the guard’s breastplate. This galra was a willing part of Zarkon’s army, the same army which had turned their weapons on trillions of innocents to draw Uncle Blaytz out for execution. Kogane didn’t deserve his sympathy, he was nothing more than a ticket out. And as a packless, friendless member of a social species, he would serve that end perfectly.

“That’s awful.” Lanse said, pitching his voice to sound sympathetic and silently thanking the
Ancients that Dad has put him through court etiquette training. He may not remember any of the rules, but he could still act however the situation required. “How long have you been on your own?”

Another long pause.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Kogane said at last, and Lanse pouted at him.

“Come on, I opened up to you about my tragic backstory.” he needled. If he could get Kogane to spill his guts here, then he could use that knowledge to convince the guard that they were clade, if not outright pack. From there it would just be a matter of staying close to him until he figured out the sentries’ new pattern, and then getting Kogane to release him at the right time.

“I said I don’t want to talk about it.” Kogane snapped, turning his back to the cell and crossing his arms. Lanse stood, and padded silently over to the bars.

“Hey.” Lanse kept his voice soft, gentle, and reached out through the bars to lay a hand on the guard’s shoulder. “If you’re worried about me telling anyone, well, I don’t even talk to the other guards.” he admitted, like it was some big secret. Delivery was key here, if he wanted Kogane to trust him. “You’re the closest thing I’ve got to company.”

Kogane looked over his shoulder with a smile, and Lanse let himself smile back but kept it small, like he was shy. This was so easy he almost felt bad. Only almost, though. Kogane was an enemy soldier, someone who served Zarkon and the Galra Empire. He was nothing more than a pawn, a tool, something to be used and disposed of. You didn’t feel pity for tools.

“There’s not really much to say.” Kogane turned around, looking into the cell again. Lanse lowered his hands to his sides, and wished he had pockets to hook his thumbs in. “I got a message one quintant saying...” he paused, and chewed on his lip briefly. “Saying something had happened to their space station, and they would contact me again once they got to safety.” Kogane fell silent, looking down at the floor where the glowing bars vanished into the metal. “That was the last I heard from them.”

Lanse made a wordless sound of sympathy, and Kogane smiled at him again. Ancients, this was easier than he’d thought it would be.
Chapter 9

Lanse stretched out on his shitty thin bed, staring up at the ceiling as he took stock of himself. His skin still felt slightly raw from the abrasive soap and frigid water, and his hair was slowly forming a big old damp spot on his pillow. His head hurt, but that was normal by now. The druid’s inelegant attempts at manipulating his memories were painful to come back from, and he suspected that while they hadn’t yet made him loyal to Zarkon they were managing to do something else. He couldn’t recall the name or face of Blue’s previous Paladin.

He knew they had been a King, a member of the Alliance, and process of elimination meant they must’ve been nauoese. He knew they had loved Father, enough to have Isidora and Salome and Vivian, and- he blinked, mouth curling up in a smile. Isidora, Salome, and Vivian Denkin-Ebaran.

“Uncle Denkin” he murmured, and it felt almost right. They must’ve been close, if he’d been allowed to call a foreign King by given name. Though, well, if Uncle Denkin had been Blue’s previous Paladin of course they’d been close. He’d been raised to be the nauoese’s successor as a Paladin of Voltron.

Blue purred in his head, the faint sound of waves on a distant shore, and he sighed heavily. If he hadn’t been brought up to be her Paladin, perhaps he would know enough about quintessence manipulation to rip away the druid magic which bound him in his own body. Perhaps he would’ve been able to escape sooner, get back to Blue and bring her and Red home. He gritted his teeth, and looked over at the guard watching him without moving his head. Not Kogane, but a full sized galra. Not one who was responsive to his needling, he’d figured out pretty quick.

It was another dobosh or two before he heard footsteps, and Lanse took a deep breath as he prepared himself for several vargas of pretending to care. “You can go punch out.” the familiar voice said, and Lanse turned his head as the guard stepped out of view. A tick later Kogane was in view, and Lanse pulled up a smile. “Afternoon.” he greeted the guard. Kogane looked over after his coworker, then turned back to Lanse with a small smile.

“I brought you something.” he whispered, reaching up under his breastplate to pull something out of it. It was small, roughly rectangular, and wrapped in shiny blue plastifoil. Lanse sat up, cocking his head curiously.

“What is it?” he asked, and Keith slipped it up under his vambrace.

“I’ll put it on your meal tray, when it gets here.” he promised. “But you have to make sure the cameras can’t see your tray.”

“I can do that.” Lanse nodded. With Kogane standing where he was, he could use his body to make a small blind spot. He got up, stretched leisurely, and though he couldn’t see the guard’s eyes he felt the gaze on him. He stretched side to side, and suppressed a smirk when Kogane looked away.

Evidently, his efforts were starting to pay off. “Soooo.” he affected a yawn, crossing the floor to sit so Kogane’s torso blocked his face from the view of the camera in the hall. “What’s life like outside my little cell this time of phoeb?”

“Same as ever.” Kogane shrugged minutely.

“You ever get that Rygan guy back?” Lanse asked, and for the thousandth time wished he could see all of Kogane’s face. It was so hard to read the guy when everything from his nose up was covered.

“Nah.” Kogane scowled. “If I try anything, he’ll claim I started it and I’ll be demoted at the very
“That doesn’t seem right.” Lanse frowned, hoping Kogane would take the bait.

“It’s not.” he huffed, and Lanse fought the urge to grin. “We’re peers, I’ve got seniority on him, but just because my dad was human I have to put up with his shit?” he snarled, and Lanse had a hand halfway lifted before he stopped himself. This wasn’t Rylak, this was effectively a stranger.

“What’s a human?” he asked instead, folding his hands in his lap.

“A species from some backwater planet on the edge of the Empire.” Kogane scoffed. “Only good thing about them is that Champion is one.”

“Champion?” Lanse cocked his head to the side.

“Of the arena.” Kogane elaborated. “He was transferred here a few phoebs ago and hasn’t lost a single fight since.”

Lanse’s face pulled into a frown. He hadn’t thought about it before, but it only made sense that the galra’s love of blood sport hadn’t faded in their thousands of deca-phoebs of conquering every bit of the known universe they could get their claws on. He had little hope that their more refined traditions had survived half as well.

“I mean, I don’t like the fact that they throw any old prisoner in the ring either, but if the rumours are true then Champion slaughtered half his fellow inmates so none of them could enter the ring before him. I heard one of them was even another human, from his own crew.” Kogane smiled, and something cold coiled in Lanse’s gut as a memory flashed through his head, one yet untouched by the druid’s magic. Zarkon’s face split in an unnatural smile as he held up Uncle Denkin’s decapitated head, the photograph a wordless warning to Father and the other Paladins. Or perhaps it had been a promise, he couldn’t recall.

“Hey, are you alright?” Kogane’s voice cut through Lanse’s thoughts, dragging him back to the present.

“I’m fine.” he managed a weak smile. “Just, doesn’t sit right with me.”

“Oh.” Kogane frowned, a little twist of his lips which vanished a split tick later. “Well, wanna talk about something else?”

Quiznack, did this galra actually care about him? This was too easy, he almost felt bad about it. Only almost, though. He did still have to get to Blue and bring her and Red home.

---

Lanse settled into a comfortable position, resting his hands on his folded knees. If he concentrated, he could sense Blue through the druid’s magic, though he couldn’t go to her. She rumbled, muffled by distance and magic, and Lanse focused his entire being on her quintessence. She was too powerful to slip through the ship’s system like he could, but if he focused... a purr from Blue stilled him, her calm washing over and through his entire being. After a tick, he realised she was trying to comfort him. He got an impression of warmth and companionship, Red was in the same hangar as her after all, and then-

His eyes flew open, and he quickly shut them again and focused back on Blue, trying to wordlessly ask her to repeat herself. She laughed, a happy bubbling noise, and sent him a sharper image of three quintessence signatures. One was his own, a blue that matched hers almost exactly, and the others
were just as familiar, mere shades away from Rylak’s and Zarkon’s.

“Are you okay?” Kogane’s voice reached his ears, and Lanse let his eyes slide open as a smile spread across his face.

“More than okay.” he grinned, shifting to make sure neither of the cameras could see his face.

“Oh?” Kogane tilted his head slightly.

“Yeah.” Lanse nodded. “I think-” he paused, curling one of his legs up towards his chest. “I think the successors of some people who were very dear to me are on this ship.”

“What’s that mean?” Kogane frowned.

“Well, a mentor and... my ex, were both pilots.” he said slowly. “And if I’m not wrong, then the people who can take over their old ships are both here.”

“You’ve had a partner?” Kogane said skeptically, and Lanse could hear the raised eyebrow.

“I’m almost an adult, y’know.” he huffed, lowering his leg to cross his arms. “Of course I’ve had a girlfriend.”

“Who broke up with you.”

“It was mutual, okay.” Lanse looked aside, mouth pulling down at the edges. “She had issues with my attitude, I had issues with her temper. We were still friends.”

“Were?”

“She died.” Lanse answered, glancing at Kogane. “You remind me of her, sometimes.”

Kogane looked away quickly, and Lanse felt his face heat. That was a really, really dumb thing to say. Galran alphas were weirdly vitriolic about being likened to omegas, even when it was a compliment, and the last thing he needed was for Kogane to stop liking him.

“Really?”

Lanse lifted his head, fighting back the grin which threatened to spread across his face. Kogane didn’t sound upset, he was still in the clear. In fact, the half-galra sounded almost pleased. “Yeah.” Lanse nodded. “She was a halfie too, and never really acted like a stereotypical omega.”

Kogane grinned. “I wish I could’ve met her. The rest of your clade, too.”

“I think she would’ve liked you. Not sure about her pack, but.” Lanse shrugged. “What about you?” he asked, steering the conversation back to topics he could make use of. “I’m sure you’ve got your pick of omegas, with a body like that.” he blatantly scanned his eyes over the guard’s frame, lean under the bulky armour and padded bodysuit.

“As if.” Kogane snorted. “Halfbreed, remember?”

“Still.” Lanse pursed his lips in a pout. “Good, dependable soldier with manners as good as yours? Hard to believe you haven’t found a mate yet.”

“Halfbreed.” he repeated flatly. “And it’s not like I have time for romance anyways.”

“Oh, there’s always time for romance.” Lanse grinned, waggling his eyebrows. “Even in war.”
“As if.” Kogane scoffed, but he looked away smiling and—was that a hint of blush on his cheeks? Oh, that was interesting. Halfbreed alpha with no romantic experience and an emotional attachment to the prisoner he was supposed to be guarding? It looked like he’d been right about Kogane being his ticket out of here.

“What’s got you so smiley?” Kogane asked, and Lanse leaned forward to rest his elbow on his knee and chin in his palm.

“You.” he answered mostly-honestly. Kogane looked away, blunt teeth digging into his lower lip as a definite blush became visible on his cheeks.

Jackpot.

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Keeping track of time was tricky without anything that resembled a clock, but with Blue’s help Lanse managed to figure out the schedule of the guards. Or, well, Blue was able to warn him when a guard was approaching for shift change, and that was all he really needed. Kogane was definitely attached to him, but he had to be certain that it was the kind of attachment which was strong enough for him to make use of. So the next time the druid took a quintant off of mucking around in his head, Lanse waited until Blue gave the two dobosh warning before rolling to his feet and sauntering over to the bars, where a guard whose name he’d never gotten stood like a statue.

“Hey there, hot stuff.” he purred, leaning as close to the softly humming beams of hard light as he dared and shifting ever so slightly. Nothing huge, just a partial shift towards Amalia’s softer facial features and narrower shoulders. “Ever been with a shifter?” he asked, shifting further towards his twin’s default appearance, jumpsuit growing tight around his chest and hips. The galra weren’t dimorphic, but even ten thousand deca-phoebs ago they’d had enough cultural exposure to species which were that the average alpha would find a curvaceous figure more appealing than his usual look.

Lanse stopped shifting when he felt the fabric begin to strain, and curled his lips up in a coy smirk as the guard blatantly checked him out. The galra let out a low rumble Lanse had heard from Rylak more than once, and he released the shift, reverting to his natural form just as Kogane came stalking up, teeth bared in a silent snarl.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he growled, shoving his coworker hard enough to make the larger guard stumbled a step sideways.

“Get lost, Kogane.” the guard growled back, turning to face the half-galra. “Take a varga of paid break, I’ll comm you when I’m done.”

“Fat chance.” Kogane snarled, fingers flexing like he wanted to claw at the larger alpha. “You try anything, I’ll report you for gross misconduct. You know we’re not allowed to interact with the prisoner.”

“Like you wouldn’t jump at the chance to have some fun with ket.” the guard taunted.

“No, I wouldn’t.” Kogane gritted out. “Because unlike some alphas, I think with my brain not my dick.”

“I could just knock you out.” the larger galra threatened, voice dropping to a rumble that made Lanse’s hair stand on end.

“On camera?” Kogane jerked his head towards the surveillance camera, trained on the entrance to
Lanse’s cell. “You’d be court martialed so fast your head’d spin right off.”

The other guard full on growled, the sound resonating in Lanse’s bones and pinged some ancient part of his brain to put as much distance as possible between himself and the source of the noise. Kogane didn’t so much as flinch, instead leaning forward into the larger galra’s space and growling right back, taking half a step sideways to put himself between Lanse and the other guard. The other guard glared, but backed down when Kogane snarled again, the sound seeming to fill the hallway.

“Fine, freak. Keep ket to yourself. ‘S the closest you’re gonna get to being with a real galra.”

Lanse scowled at the hulking galra stalked off, but smoothed his face out as Kogane turned around to look at him, his posture and the set of his jaw all but screaming concern. “Are you okay?” he asked, and Lanse nodded.

“Now that you’re here I am.” he grinned, keeping it small and shy. Kogane smiled back, shoulders slumping slightly as he relaxed.

“Good. If he tries anything again, tell me. I can get him dishonourably discharged as long as there’s evidence.”

“Well, I doubt he’d try anything if I was spoken for.” he grinned a little wider, tilting his head to bare the side of his neck. Kogane’s whole face flushed dark purple faster than Lanse had ever seen, and he found himself smiling wider.

“I- I can’t.” he stumbled over his words, adorably flustered. “There’s cameras, and- and Parvus will definitely be watching them. He’d love to see me demoted, if not discharged.”

“Some other time, then.” Lanse winked. Kogane spluttered some more, and Lanse turned around before stretching his arms over his head and sauntering back to bed. He was making himself comfortable when a thought stuck him, and his blood ran cold. His plan to seduce Kogane had worked, the half-galra’s reactions just now proved that, but it had also backfired horribly. When he blushed and stuttered, Kogane hadn’t just looked flustered.

He’d looked cute.
Chapter 10

Lanse pushed against the druid magic, but it didn’t budge. His entire body ached after the latest session, his head throbbing worst of all, and with the magic shutting him off from the rest of the quintessence on the ship Blue couldn’t get into his head properly to soothe the aches and pains. He thought back on the memories the druid had dug up earlier, and his lips pressed into a flat line. Logically, he knew that he and Zarkon hadn’t been close. Uncle Denkin was the one who’d flown Blue before him, who’d loved Father enough to have Isidora and Salome and Vivian, who’d sparred with him and shown him flying tricks and taught him how to swim. Not Zarkon, and certainly not the evil thing which now ruled the known universe with Zarkon’s face and name.

Blue purred, the distant sound of waves on stone pulling his thoughts back to her, and she showed him the signature for Black’s new Paladin. Or rather, someone who could be Black’s new Paladin. It was a bit brighter than it had been last time, and a subtly different colour. Somehow, Lanse got the impression that if he was able to touch this potential Paladin’s soul, it would burn him as surely as the quintessence web of the ship. In addition to that, Blue sent him a sensation of- distance? Not a great distance, but not a particularly small one either. Lanse frowned, doing some math in his head. If he’d gauged the size of this ship right, and ceiling height was uniform across all levels...

“Hey, Business?” he said, cracking an eye open to look at the guard. Kogane cocked his head slightly, and Lanse leaned back to stare at the ceiling. “What’s at the aft end of this ship?”

“Depends on the deck, and how far back you go,” the guard shrugged. “There’s sleeping quarters, some engineering stuff, the arena, more cells.”

“Lemme guess.” he looked back at Kogane, positioning himself so his lips couldn’t be read if anyone happened to be watching the camera. “The cells are right at the very back of the ship, on the lowest levels.”

“Yeah, actually.” Kogane frowned. “Why the sudden interest?”

Lanse chewed on his lip for a tick, then sighed. “I think, one of the successors I mentioned a phoebe or two ago is in that part of the ship.”

“Huh. What about the other one?”

“Lemme check.” Lanse shut his eyes, and Blue provided him with a vague but far more intense sense of proximity along with the signature that was so painfully similar to Rylak’s bloody fuschia. Unfortunately, this time there was no sense of direction, or even an indication of whether the potential Paladin was near him or near Blue. “Nearby, I think.” he frowned, prodding at Blue as best he could until she purred at him and clarified. “Within a few rooms, on this or either of the adjacent floors.” he opened his eyes, and gave Kogane a smile. “Who knows, it might even be you.”

“Me?” Kogane lifted a hand to point at himself, body language screaming confusion as much as his face surely was under that blasted helmet.

“Well, why not?” Lanse leaned forwards, gripping his shins just above where they crossed at the ankles. “You’re a soldier, strong and dependable and handsome.”

“What do my looks have to do with anything?” Kogane grumbled.

“Well, Father and Rylak were both lookers, so I figure you probably are too under that helmet.” Lanse grinned, lifting a hand to rest his chin on his knuckles. Kogane blushed that stupidly adorable
shade of purple again, and looked away.

“Obviously your sire was handsome, but why is that relevant?” he muttered.

“Oh, Rylak was Father’s successor.” Lanse answered easily. A tick later the full implication of Kogane’s words hit him, and he ducked his head to hide it in his hand. Quiznack, he had to get Kogane to let him go before this stupid crush turned into something he couldn’t ignore.

“You keep saying successor.” Kogane said slowly, and when Lanse glanced up the guard was still staring off down the hall. “Successor to what, exactly?”

Did- did he not know? That could work in Lanse’s advantage, certainly, if the guard keeping him locked up wasn’t aware of just how valuable a prisoner he was guarding. Kogane looked back at him, and Lanse summoned up a cheeky grin. “What type of prisoner goes around giving out secrets like that?” he winked. “But if you let me out, I could show you.”

“As if.” Kogane scoffed, but his lips curled up in a small smile. “What kind of guard goes around letting prisoners walk free?”

“Hmmm, one who wants answers?” Lanse suggested, raising an eyebrow. “Or maybe, one who wants something more.” he unfolded one of his legs, stretching it out to the side so his other foot didn’t quite touch his thigh. Kogane turned the darkest purple Lanse had seen him go yet, and actually turned to face down the hall. Lanse giggled, and re-crossed his legs. “I’ll let you do whatever you like, if you let me out of here.” he offered, electing not to think about whether or not there was any truth to his words.

“I’m going to take my break.” Kogane blurted, and rushed off. Lanse chuckled, and fell backwards to lay on the floor his his legs still crossed. Too easy.

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Some quintants, Blue was more restless than others. Lanse personally was of the opinion it had something to do with the Red Beast and Paladin proximity, but there was really no way of knowing. He laid on his bed, face buried in his pillow to block out the light that threatened to turn his druid-induced headache into a full on migraine, and wished this was a quintant when Blue was content to just purr at him worriedly from a distance. She meant well, he knew she did, but her presence was just too bright.

An alarm suddenly began blaring, and Lanse groaned as the sound pierced right into the middle of his throbbing head and made itself at home. Of all the times for some idiot to set off a false alarm, why did it have to be now?

The bed under him shook, and Lanse sat up quickly. Okay, maybe not a false alarm if something was shaking the entire ship. “What’s going on?” he asked, turning to look at Kogane, who was already pulling a short-range communicator from his belt and asking the same question.

“What do you mean, Champion escaped?” he snapped, turning away from the cell bars as he spoke. “I thought the Commander had him on high security!”

Champion, that was one of the slaves who fought in the arena, the human one Kogane liked so much. If he’d escaped, probably setting off at least one explosion on the way out, then that would easily explain the alarms. The galra were probably scrambling fighters, getting ready to chase down their escaped entertainment and drag him back kicking and screaming. Lanse gritted his teeth, and shut his eyes. Trying to get to Blue while everyone was on high alert was probably the worst
Blue nudged at his mind, and he tried to shut out the alarm and focus on the information she was presenting him. The signal of Black’s potential Paladin was outside of the battleship, moving away at high speed. “Quiznack.” he swore, scrambling to his feet. Champion was a match for Black’s signature? If the rumours Kogane had relayed him held any truth, the universe was well and truly screwed.

Lanse reached through the bars of his cell, and grabbed Kogane’s gun from its easy-draw holster on his back. The guard staggered backwards with a yelp, and Lanse hopped back from the bars before shouldering the stock and shooting the comm right out of the half-galra’s hand. Another two shots disabled the cameras, and Kogane spun to look at him with an expression of utmost shock.

“What are you doing?” he asked, sounding more bewildered than anything else.

“Making sure you don’t get in trouble.” Lanse said, lowering the gun. “I need you to let me go.”

“I can’t just—”

“Kogane.” Lanse shifted ever so slightly, adding a subtle purr to his voice that he’d heard Rylak use to wheedle favours out of Zarkon. “Please, if you love me at all, let me go.” the guard’s mouth opened, and Lanse swapped the gun to his off hand as he stepped back up to the bars. Reaching through them, he ran his thumb over the alpha’s jaw. “If we don’t leave now, the other successor will be lost. Please, Kogane, for me?” he tilted his head, chin up to expose his neck, and after a moment’s pause Kogane nodded.

Reaching over, the guard pressed his palm to the operation panel which controlled the cell bars. They vanished, and Lanse stepped out into the hallway. “Thank you.” he breathed, barely audible to his own ears over the alarm. He leaned in, and pressed his lips to Kogane’s in a brief, chaste kiss. His lips were chapped, unmoving in his evident shock, and Lanse slid a hand around the back of his neck. “I’m sorry.” he murmured when they parted, and Kogane frowned.

“What?”

Lanse tightened his grip on Kogane’s neck, leaned back, and quickly shifted his forehead into a set of stogian horns before slamming it into the guard’s helmet. The half-galra went down with a yelp, and Lanse released the shift with a sigh.

“I’ll be back for you, I promise.” he said, and took off down the corridor.

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Surprisingly, he didn’t run into many live soldiers as he tore through the ship, gritting his teeth against his pounding headache. Plenty of robotic sentries, but those went down with a single shot each, and after dispatching the first group he shot one of their arms off to bring with. Without being able to pull off his lock-bursting trick, he’d need it to get through the door to the hangar where Blue was being kept. He rounded the last corner at a dead sprint, and promptly scrambled backwards as a barrage of energy bolts came flying at him.

“Give it up, freak.” a deep voice taunted. “You’re not getting through these doors.”

“Wanna bet?” he shot back, checking the charge left on his stolen gun. Still about half, that was good.

“The druids want you alive, so I’ll give you one chance.” the voice said, sounding more than a little
displeased that they had to offer him a chance at all. “Come out with your hands in the air, and you’ll be brought back to your cell unharmed.”

“Now why would I do that?” Lanse retorted, trying to remember the holos he’d watched with Rylak. This was a different model of rifle, but all the buttons and switches were still there, so it might still work. “You’re gonna have to give me a better deal than that.”

“Sentries malfunction all the time.” the soldier around the corner snarled as Lanse started the combination. “If one happened to be set to lethal by mistake, how would I be able to tell?”

Lanse held his breath, finger on the final button, and grinned wide when he saw the bar beginning to build up. “Alright.” he called out. “I’m sliding my gun over to you.”

“Smart move.”

Lanse waited until the bar was just ticks from full, then whipped it around the corner so it skidded across the floor. The soldier laughed, and then half a tick later the hallway exploded. Lanse wasn’t sure if the ringing from the explosion was better or worse than the blaring alarm, but either way he couldn’t just sit and wait for his hearing to come back. He pushed himself to his feet, and prayed to every deity in the pantheon that his stunt hadn’t blown up the operation panel.

Thankfully, the door and its panel were still intact. The squad of sentries were pretty thoroughly demolished, and the soldier’s armour looked badly damaged, but they seemed to be breathing. No, not they, he. Lanse recognised this one. This was the guard he’d used to bait Kogane that one time.

“You’ll pay for this.” the guard coughed, and Lanse grinned.

“No, I won’t.” he informed the alpha, and stomped on the bastard’s crotch before opening the door with the sentry hand.

The hangar beyond was strangely empty, occupied only by a pair of large, colourful ships in equally colourful bubbles of shielding. They were unharmed, both of them, not a scratch on the paint which hadn’t been there thousands of deca-phoebs ago. That knowledge lifted a weight from his shoulders he’d forgotten he was carrying, and Lanse broke into a run as he crossed the wide open floor.

“Blue!” he cried out, using Altean for the first time since his capture, and the great beast roared as she fell into a crouch, shields deactivating just before he could hit them.

He leapt into her open mouth, and the metal jaws snapping shut behind him filled him with a sense of safety he’d sorely missed. The blue light was dim, easy on his throbbing head, and the metal of the ladder vibrated with Blue’s purr as he scaled it up to the active level. She was happy, oh so happy to have him with her again, and he emerged into the hallway to find the pilot’s seat waiting for him on the track which lead back to the speeder. He vaulted the arm, and the tick he touched the cushions the chair snapped forwards, pulling him right up to the dashboard.

The controls all but leapt into his hands, and when his fingers wrapped around them the druid’s magic shattered. Lanse gasped, Blue’s whole being crashing over him, and in an instant they were one, a single being, her quintessence flowing through him as she carried them out of the hangar. He felt her joy as his own as she stretched, swatting almost playfully at the fighters which tried to stop her. But they didn’t have time to play, the signal Black would accept was still speeding along towards its unknown destination and they had to follow it.

Blue roared, and they took off after the little ship which held Champion and, perhaps, a spark of hope for the universe itself.
Chapter 11

Only once the battleship had disappeared behind them did Lanse make an effort to settle back into
his own body. It was hard; he ached to twine his consciousness through Blue’s, to let her infinitely
complex quintessence web cradle him like threads of ice, to be anywhere but where he’d been
trapped these past phoebs. It was hard, but with some encouragement from Blue he slipped back into
his own skin. The air around him was cold, suffused with a sharp, clean smell that he couldn’t name,
and he smiled as he took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Thanks, girl.” he patted the dashboard,
and Blue rumbled around him.

A quick check showed all systems normal, and the escape pod jetting along ahead of them. Blue
could easily catch up, but Lanse’s jumpsuit wasn’t spaceworthy and he somehow doubted
Champion’s was either. He’d have to wait until they reached wherever this human was headed, and
pick him up then. But that would take a while, so in the meantime... Lanse called up the messages
screen, and his hand hesitated over the first icon. According the the timestamp on the file, and the
date displayed on Blue’s viewscreen, this was ten thousand deca-phoebs old now. Dad, Amalia,
Rylak, he was ten thousand deca-phoebs too late to help any of them, save any of them.

“Some Paladin I am.” he muttered, drawing his hand back towards his chest.

Blue purred soothingly in his mind, and the oldest file popped up to nearly fill the viewscreen. The
controls pulled away from him, locking into autopilot, and he curled a knee up to hug against his
chest as the image of Dad leaned back away from the camera. “There we go.” he grinned, smoothing
out his moustache. “Lanse, I know I said I’d call when it was safe to come home, but it’s not yet. I
just wanted to assure you that things are-” he frowned, but it was brief. “Well, circumstances being
what they are, things are as fine as they can be.” he flashed a grin that was too wide, too bright, and
Lanse’s throat tightened painfully.

“If you reach your siblings before I find somewhere to hide the castle, bring them to Isidora. Her
colony is more defensible than Tociri, and galra ships have difficulty navigating that system.” Dad
smiled again, softer, and Lanse felt tears pricking at his eyes. “I love you, Lanse. May Lyn’carlith’s
favour be upon you.” he touched his chest just under his collarbone, where Lanse knew a pendant
inscribed with the symbols of the pantheon lay under his uniform, and then leaned forwards. The
video stopped, and Lanse’s breath hitched in his throat.

“Play the next one.” he said thickly, and Blue’s comforting purr enveloped him in tight, searing aura
of cold that felt almost like a hug. The image changed, and Father leaned back with a wide, genuine
smile.

“Good news, Lanse!” he beamed, the expression simultaneously warming Lanse’s chest and making
it tighten. “The castle’s scanners have picked up a planet which seems both uninhabited and capable
of supporting life! Bad news, I won’t know if it’s properly habitable ‘til the end of the movement.”
he seemed to droop, and sighed softly. “Call back when you can, Lanse.” he leaned forward, and the
video jumped as he leaned back. Blue had started the next message without prompting, and the look
on his dad’s face made guilt and shame claw at Lanse’s throat.

“Lanse, I love you. I know lately I haven’t had as many chances to tell you, but you are my youngest
child and I love you with all my heart. I’m upset about Alfor’s decision as well, but it was the only
way to ensure your safety. Please, call back when you see this. I need to know that you’re alright.
The video jittered again, and Lanse squeezed his eyes shut in a futile attempt to slow the tears now
dripping from them. “Stop.” he gasped, unable to draw a deep enough breath for anything more
substantial. “I don’t wanna see any more,” his voice cracked on a sob, and he buried his face in his knees. He was so late, ten thousand deca-phoebs late, but he wanted to call anyways, to see his dad’s smile even if it was just on a recording. Blue purred in his head, a soothing shush of gentle waves on the hull of a ship, and he chuckled wetly. “Thanks, girl.” he patted the arm of the chair.

“Leo.” the speakers said, and Lanse lifted his head to see Dad on the viewscreen looking solemn and sad. “It’s been a movement since I set the castle down on this planet. Neither you nor the other Paladins have returned, or responded to any kind of hail. I’m forced to assume-” he ducked his head, and took a shuddering breath that matched the ones Lanse was struggling to pull into his own aching chest. “Forced to assume that it is because they, and you, are-” Dad’s hands clenched into fists, white-knuckled and shaking. “I’ve put the castle to sleep, to protect Black from Zarkon.” he said, changing topic sharply. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this, or making this recording at all, but-” he paused to take a steadying breath, and Lanse made a small, pained sound.

“Leandro Avalo Nuñez Smythe-Ebaran, you were one of best things that ever happened to me. Watching you grow up and become a pilot, a Paladin, made me so very proud. I only regret that I didn’t tell you this more often.” Dad sniffled, and gave a watery grin. “May we meet again in the grace of Lyn’carlith.”

The video player closed when Dad leaned forwards, and Lanse scrubbed furiously at his eyes to wipe away the tears. He’d done his grieving already, sung and prayed for his family when he was lying in his cell on that first quintant in Imperial custody. There was nothing for him to do, ten thousand deca-phoebs removed from Dad’s death, and that made the pain in his throat and chest all the worse. Blue rumbled around him, and he swallowed around the lump in his throat as he fixed his eyes on the escape pod in front of him. There was a planet growing ahead, a ball of blue and green backlit by a brilliant yellow star.

“Stay on his tail.” Lanse said, and forced himself to his feet. He had no idea what kind of world this was, but it was always better safe than sorry. Even without a cuirass, Uncle Blaytz’s armour would provide more protection than his jumpsuit alone.

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After he got all the armour on, and kicked Father’s things into the closet to deal with later, Lanse paused in Blue’s tiny bathroom and splashed some water on his face. Any species strong enough to survive the arena was undoubtedly warlike, which meant he had to appear strong. Tear tracks and puffy eyes were not strong. Or maybe they were, to humans, but still. He scrubbed his face with cold water, and scowled at his reflection. He still looked like shit, but slightly more put-together shit. At least Blue had resized the armour as he donned it, so he didn’t look like a little kid playing dress-up.

When Lanse walked out of the tiny living quarters, Blue directed him not forward to her mouth but up to her speeder. Which, once he thought about it, made perfect sense. Champion had probably gotten out of the escape pod after landing, and the speeder would be more efficient than trying to catch up on foot.

The ground that Blue dropped him on was hard, the air cold and dry. Lanse let her guide him, speeding across the planet’s stony skin, and pulled up short at the sight of lights. Artificial lights, no doubt. Lights meant humans, and any light visible at a distance meant lots of them. He shut his eyes and reached out to Blue, casting himself through the planet’s own quintessence web. When he opened his eyes again, he saw with Blue’s sight. The ground pulsed green, and up ahead he could make out several hundred signatures. Humans, dim to her eyes but no more so than his own flare of blue.

“Alright.” he muttered, and started forwards again. It wasn’t until he’d nearly reached the first flares
of tickling off-white energy that emanated from human constructs that he was able to pick out Champion’s distinct signature. He was on the move, flanked closely by- oh, this was too good to be true. Or rather, too good to be anything but destiny at work. The humans flanking Champion burnt green and gold, achingly similar to Trigel and Gyrgan’s signatures.

Lanse revved the speeder’s engine, and let Blue’s quintessence-sight fade away to leave only his own vision as he sped towards a high fence of wide wire mesh. He yanked the handlebars sideways just before impact, leaning hard, and smashed the heated base of his speeder into the metal. It gave with a shriek, and he barely managed to right himself to continue towards the building. A door opened as he approached, bright lights coming on to illuminate it, and he skidded to a stop as three humans came out.

They looked surprisingly like alteans, missing only the marks under their eyes and points on their ears. “Get on.” he barked in Galran Standard, gesturing for them to climb on the back of his speeder. It wasn’t designed to seat multiple people, but it was more than powerful enough to support them all. The one in the middle, Champion, startled and stared at him openly for a tick before saying something in a language Blue couldn’t translate. The humans piled on the back of his speeder as more of their kind approached, these ones wearing body armour and carrying guns.

Lanse revved the engine, and spun the speeder in a circle to kick up dust as the extra lifters engaged. The human behind him yelped and wrapped large, strong arms around his waist, shouting something Lanse couldn’t understand. Then they were off, shooting across the artificial stone surface and out the hole his entry had left in the fence. He called to Blue, reaching out across the desert, and her roar echoed across the emptiness in response. The human clinging to him started babbling again at that, and Lanse laughed.

He pulled a tight turn when he saw her come bounding across the dirt, and a tick later she was over them and a tractor beam was drawing them back up into the speeder’s launch room. Lanse shut his eyes as Blue’s presence washed over him, and ticks after the floor sealed shut under them the human who’d been clinging to him so tightly fell off the speeder. When he smiled at them over his shoulder, all three looked dazed and vaguely stunned. Blue purred in his mind, giving him an impression of Voltron being formed, and he chuckled. To people who hadn’t grown up around it, Voltron was a bit of a shock the first time.

“What was that?” the darkest human gasped, and Blue made a smug bubbling sound, informing Lanse without words that she was the reason he could understand them, and they’d be able to understand him.

“Voltron.” he said simply, and swung one of his legs over the speeder to sit on it sideways. The other two humans, both still straddling his speeder, were openly staring at him. The one closer to him was small, almost childlike in appearance, while the one behind them was larger and more muscular. If the galran arm and scar across his face hadn’t given it away, the jumpsuit and prisoner tunic would’ve. He made eye contact, and nodded respectfully. “Champion.”

“Champion?” the scarred human frowned, and lifted his prosthetic to point at his chest. “Me?”

“Wait, you know him?” the small human blurted, eyes wide behind their glasses.

“In a way.” Lanse stood, and moved towards the corridor which lead to Blue’s cockpit. “I’ll explain once we’re in the air.”

“I can’t believe we’re getting abducted by an actual real life alien.” the small human whispered, sounding absolutely delighted.
“I can’t believe we got our asses saved by a crazy cyclist who doesn’t even wear a helmet!” the one in the yellow shirt exclaimed. Lanse grinned, but didn’t slow his walk to the cockpit. The humans trailed behind him, and when he sat down he saw a small convoy of vehicles parked in front of Blue.

“Great.” he muttered, taking the controls. “Now I have to do a vertical liftoff.” he leaned forwards, and Blue’s head tilted up as she crouched. The humans were talking amongst themselves, a conversation he largely tuned out, though they seemed to be turning to Champion for advice. Understandable, as he seemed to be the only one of them who’d met a non-human before. Blue’s tail flicked against the sand, and with a flick of his wrists she leapt upwards, paw rockets kicking in to keep her momentum.

“Where are we even going?” one of the humans cried as Blue evened out and sped skywards.

“Okay, so, crash course.” Lanse said as they left the atmosphere, dodging space debris and angling up from their system disc so he could focus on finding the emergency wormhole generator. “We’re going somewhere to locate the rest of Voltron. Voltron is a giant robot, and you three are likely Paladins for it. The known universe is currently ruled by a shithole Empire, and with Voltron we can topple that Empire a lot faster than without it.”

“Wait, what?” the brown-skinned human leaned around the side of Lanse’s seat.

“Abducted by an alien to help save the universe?” the small one grinned, wide and vicious. “Way better than going to class tomorrow.”

“Last chance to back out.” Lanse said as he found the button and pressed it. Blue’s energy pulled on him, and he let her have some of his power to jumpstart the mini teludav. If these humans were Paladin material, they wouldn’t back down.

“Shiro? You just got back from space, should we trust him?” the human who’d leaned over his seat asked. Lanse liked that one, he should ask for their name soon.

“Yes.” Champion replied, and Lanse guided Blue forward into the wormhole.
Chapter 12

The shifting blue of a teludav-generated wormhole surrounded him, and Lanse sat back as Blue’s controls locked in place. The coordinates Dad had sent were evidently pretty far out from this backwater planet, given how Blue was projecting almost a whole dobosh before they re-emerged into normal space. He looked over his shoulder, and gave the humans a grin. “I’m Lanse, by the way.”

“Pidge.” the smallest human grinned.

“Hunk.” the larger one in the yellow shirt said, raising a hand.

“Shiro, but you called me something else.” Champion frowned at him. “Have we met?”

“You don’t remember?” Lanse’s eyebrows lifted.

“I don’t remember anything.” Shiro shook his head, organic hand wrapping around the wrist of his prosthetic. “All I remember is someone showing up on Kerberos, then a bright light, and then waking up in that alien ship on Earth.”

“Yeah, that someone was me.” Lanse lifted his arm and patted the blue part of the vambrace. “The galra took us both, and I’m not sure how but you managed to break out. Blue and I followed, and here we are.”

“You said we’re probably Paladins, what does that mean?” Pidge asked, eyes sharp behind their round glasses. “Are we gonna get our own-?” their last word didn’t translate, but Blue gave him the impression of a very large and vicious cheoc. She seemed to like the comparison.

“Yes.” Lanse nodded. “Unless I’m wrong, each of you is compatible with a ‘Lion’ of Voltron.”

“Does that mean we have to fly them?” Hunk asked. “Because I’m not a pilot, I’m an engineer, and like, I get really really motion sick so-” he fell silent as they exited back into normal space, and Lanse pressed his lips into a hard, thin line.

“Take us in, girl.” he muttered, and Blue surged forwards. The castle, when Blue landed them in front of it due to the hangars all being sealed, was half buried. An ancient-looking courtyard was situated outside, level with the doors they opened during negotiations and parties and such with aerial people. The humans followed him silently, Hunk sticking particularly close on his heels, and Lanse didn’t break stride as he approached the doors. Blue roared, and they slid open as smoothly as ever.

Lanse felt a brief surge of pride in altean engineering, but that bright spark of warmth sputtered and died at the sight which greeted him. The castle, his home, was dark inside. Not dimly lit as it was during night cycles, or illuminated in pulses of low emergency lights, or punctuated by the barely-there glow of sleep mode; no, it was completely dark, the lights not responding even as he took a few more hesitant steps in. It was- it was dead. He felt a pained noise building in his throat, and gasped as a thought struck him.

Allura. Allura might still be in cryo, he had to make sure she was alive. He bolted, ignoring the humans in favour of sprinting through the halls of the only home he’d ever known. The thin soles of his jumpsuit skidded on the floor, and when he burst into the room where the cryo-pods were located he had to throw up an arm to shield his eyes against the overhead lights coming on. After blinking the spots from his eyes, though, he looked to the pod he’d left Allura in.
Its operation light was still on.

He scrambled to activate it, and when the tube rose smoothly from the floor he nearly sobbed. He wasn’t alone. He’d never been particularly close to Allura, but she was still family, still Father’s daughter. The front panel deactivated and Allura lurched forwards, eyes flying open.

“Father!” she reached out, and promptly overbalanced onto him.

“You’re so heavy.” he grunted, propping her up until she could get her feet under herself.

“Lanse?” she frowned, pulling back and looking at him. “What are you wearing?”

“Long story.” he grimaced, looking down at himself. On second examination, the partial armour didn’t make his raggedy prisoner tunic look any less awful. Good thing he was home now, with clothes to change into.

“And who are they?” Allura glared over his shoulder, presumably at the humans.

“Also, uh, kinda a long story.” he made his best apologetic face. “Are you okay? You were in stasis for... a while.”

“Lanse, how long has it been?” Allura frowned, doing a very good impression of Father when he was upset.

“Look, you should probably sit down.” Lanse said hurriedly. Discovering that you’d been asleep for ten thousand deca-phoebs and were now one of two survivors of your species wasn’t a revelation to be had in front of strangers. Hell, he wasn’t sure Allura would want to realise it in front of him. “I can get you some food, you must be starving.”

“That can wait.” Allura brushed him off, and strode over towards the control console in the middle of the ring of pods. It activated at her touch, and Pidge made an impressed sound.

“So that’s how that works.”

It was only a matter of time until Allura realised the date wasn’t a glitch, and then- A sharp inhale from behind him drew Lanse’s attention, and he turned to see a second cryo-pod had risen and opened. And stumbling free of it, eyes wide, was an altean he thought he’d never seen again.

“Leo?”

“Dad!” he rushed forwards, and nearly knocked his dad over with the force of his hug. Relief flooded through him, and he slumped in his dad’s embrace as tears welled in his eyes.

“I thought you were dead.” Dad rasped, hugging him tight, cheek pressing against the top of his head as Lanse shifted minutely shorter. “What happened?”

“Blue put me in cryo.” Lanse gasped, not fighting the burning tears which spilled from his eyes and into his dad’s uniform jacket. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s alright.” Dad soothed, running a hand through Lanse’s hair. “It’s alright, it’s not your fault.”

“It can’t be.” Allura gasped, and Lanse twisted to see her staring at a familiar section of the starmap. In the corner of the projected screen, the date and time were clearly displayed.

“What is it, Princess?” Dad asked, not relaxing his grip on Lanse in the slightest. Lanse turned his head and buried his face in his dad’s chest again, throat aching with the effort of not sobbing with
each shuddering breath.

“We’ve been asleep for ten thousand deca-phoebs. Altea, all the planets in our system, they’ve been destroyed.” in his peripheral vision Lanse saw her lift a hand towards a hole in the starmap, where home should be. “Coran, our entire civilisation...” her hand curled into a fist, and she brought it down on the console. “Zarkon!” she snarled, and Lanse turned his head to better see as Shiro’s eyes widened.

“Zarkon?”

“He was Emperor of the galra, a vile creature and enemy to all free people.”

“Rude.” Lanse muttered under his breath. Before his death, Zarkon had been the most compassionate galran regent in history. Not that the bar was particularly high, but still. He hadn’t been the Black Paladin for nothing.

“I remember now...” Shiro looked vaguely stunned. “I was his prisoner.”

“He’s still alive?” Allura gasped. “Impossible!”

“What the quiznack, Allura.” Lanse frowned, pulling away from Dad to turn and face her. “You know as well as I do he was dead before the war began. We were at his funeral!”

“His what now?” Hunk frowned.

“Wait wait wait.” Pidge grinned, rocking up on the balls of their feet. “Are you telling me that we’re here to save the universe from space zombie Hitler?”

There was a beat of silence, two, and Hunk sighed. “Pidge, I don’t think aliens know who Hitler is.”

“Anyways.” Shiro said firmly, giving the other humans a stern look. “Zarkon is the reigning Emperor, and he’s searching for Voltron. From what Lanse told us on the way here, it’s the only way to defeat him.”

“Which is precisely why he’s still searching for it.” Allura nodded once. “And precisely why we must find it before he does.”

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Dad eventually pulled him out of the room as Allura started configuring the computer for something, leaving the humans to talk amongst themselves. Once the door shut behind them, Lanse stepped in close and gave his dad another hug.

“I watched the messages you sent.” he mumbled, and Dad’s arms wrapped around him to squeeze his ribcage gently.

“Let’s talk about those later.” Dad soothed, running a hand over Lanse’s hair. “For now, how about you go put on some proper clothes while I fix up some food for us?”

“Food sounds great.” Lanse managed a chuckle as Dad gently pushed him away and tilted his chin up.

“And after this whole Voltron business is settled, we’re going to have a talk.” Dad said, his voice soft but firm. Lanse nodded, and took a step back.

“I’ve got clothes in Blue. I’ll go put her in her hangar and get those back on.” he said, and Dad
smiled.

“I’ll meet you back in the cryo-pod bay.”

Lanse nodded again, and turned to head to the doors he’d entered through. Blue could really get herself back into her hangar, but after spending most of a deca-phoeb disconnected from her... well, he didn’t want to be far from his Lion for any extended time, and he did have clothes in there.

Changing didn’t take too long, his old outfit felt a little loose at first but quickly adjusted as all altean-made materials did, and once he’d dusted himself off he gathered up the galran jumpsuit and prisoner tunic in his arms. Cramming them down the waste disposal chute was satisfying in a very visceral way, and only when he heard the shredder kick in did he turn to gather up the pieces of armour he’d shed all over the floor. After some thought, he brought them to the little living quarters and deposited them carefully in the closet.

He arrived back at the cryo-pod bay to find Dad already there, trying to convince Allura to eat. Which, really, was a cause lost from the word go. Allura was focused on something, and even though they hadn’t been particularly close Lanse knew that her concentration would be broken by nothing until she achieved her goal. Which, seemed to be setting up some kind of scan?

Hunk pulled a spoonful of nutrient goo out of the bowl Allura was ignoring, and tried it with an amusing amount of caution. He pulled a face, but put the spoon back in to scoop up another mouthful. Lanse supposed it had been fairly late in the quintant for the humans when he picked them up, though he’d only been awake for a few vargas. And hadn’t actually eaten yet, he realised belatedly as he approached his dad and half-sister.

“Oh, Lanse! Here, I brought some for you as well.” Dad held out a bowl, which Lanse accepted with a small smile. It wasn’t the most appetizing of foods, but he somehow doubted anything else left in the kitchen was still edible after ten thousand deca-phoebs. Or, well, anything that could be eaten without much preparation time. Regardless, it was the closest thing to real food he’d had since waking up from cryo.

“I can’t believe your civilization created such advanced technology ten thousand years ago.” Shiro said, addressing Dad. “It must have been an incredible place.”

“Yes, it was.” Dad smiled, a brief, sad thing. “But now it’s gone, and we’re all that’s left of it.” he rested his arm across Lanse’s shoulders, and Lanse leaned into the embrace. Ancients, he hadn’t realised how much he missed his family, how much he missed having someone he could hug. Dad held out his other arm, and after a tick Allura crossed the floor to hug him as well. Lanse shoved down a surge of jealousy, and just hugged his dad harder. Dad was her uncle, the closest thing she had left to a parental figure, there was nothing for him to be jealous of.

A squeaking noise drew his attention to the pods, which nobody had thought to set back down in the floor yet, and his heart leapt into his throat at the sight of four familiar rodents. Vivian’s mice, the ones she’d gotten Amalia to take care of whenever she was home on Nalquod. One of them must’ve put the little buggers in that pod, and he hadn’t noticed them when he was putting Allura in. Allura, who had pulled away from Dad and was now looking down into the pod at their half-sister’s pets. 

“Looks like we’re not the last after all.” Allura smiled, looking more at peace than she had since she’d come out of her pod.

For a moment, it seemed like everything was about to take a turn for the better. Then that moment ended, a blaring alarm making everyone jump. Dad’s arm around his shoulders tightened, and Lanse twisted in his grip to get a look at the console’s screen. It was red now, with a black spot in the
middle displaying an image that made him sick to his stomach. A galran battle cruiser, one which looked exactly like the one he’d escaped from not two vargas ago.

“A galra battleship has locked its tracker onto us!” Dad exclaimed.

“How did they find us?!” Allura asked, and Lanse gritted his teeth.

“Me and Blue.” he said, drawing every eye in the room. “They must’ve gotten a tracker on us when we were following Shiro out of there.”

“When you were what?” Hunk frowned, brows pinching together.

“How long before they arrive?” Shiro asked, straightening up minutely and squaring his shoulders. Lanse got the impression he’d been a soldier even before being Champion.

“At their speed?” Dad released Lanse to count on his fingers, muttering under his breath as he did so. “Oh, well, uh, carry the two... I’d say probably a couple of quintants?” he answered.

“How far out are they?” Lanse stepped closer and peered at the screen.

“It doesn’t matter.” Allura said, dismissing the alert with a flick of her wrist. “Let them come. By the time they get here, we will have reformed Voltron, and together we will destroy Zarkon’s Empire!”

“Uh, quick question.” Pidge raised their hand. “How are we going to form Voltron then there’s just four of us?” he gestured at themself, the other humans, and Lanse.

“Including myself, we make five.” Allura lifted her chin defiantly. Lanse raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. It was hard to accurately pick out people’s quintessence signatures without Blue’s help, but he was pretty sure Allura’s wasn’t a true match for any of the Lions. If it were, she would’ve been made to train with him and Rylak.

“So we have five Paladins, but there are also five of these Lions, Princess.” Shiro said, frowning in clear concern. “How are we going to find the rest?”

And, there it was. The part of the plan Lanse hadn’t actually thought through to. Black and Blue were here, and Red on Sendak’s ship made three accounted for, but he had no idea where the Yellow or Green Lions were, or how to find them except for a vague idea of somehow locating their signatures with the castle.

“Through me.” Allura said, deactivating the console’s screen entirely and turning to the door. Lanse looked at Dad, who gestured for him to follow, and then made the same motion at the humans. As they all headed out into the hallway, Lanse wondered idly if all humans moved in packs. Hunk and Pidge had barely left Shiro’s sides since- well since Lanse had met them, actually.

“What does she mean, through her?” he asked Dad as they headed up the stairs, slowing his pace so they fell behind the humans a bit.

“Before he left to face Zarkon, your father connected the Lions to Allura’s lifeforce.” Dad explained.

“What does that mean?” Pidge asked, looking over their shoulder as they neared the doors to the bridge.

“It means, she alone is the key to the Lions’ whereabouts.”

Lanse idly wondered when the humans had convinced Dad to call them Lions. Probably while he
was getting Blue back in her hangar.
Chapter 13

Once they reached the bridge, Allura took Father’s place under the crystal and pulled up the full starmap. The humans gasped in evident awe as the universe swirled around them in miniature.

“These are... coordinates.” Pidge said, head tilting as they watched the stars and planets swirl by. “The Black Lion looks like it’s in the same location as the Blue Lion.”

“Look at your primitive synapses, firing away in their little brain cage!” Dad beamed, leaning in towards the shortest of the humans with a fond grin.

“Very observant.” Allura smiled. “That’s because the Black Lion is in the castle.”

“To keep the Black Lion out of Zarkon’s hands, King Alfor locked it in the castle.” Dad explained to the humans. “It can only be freed if the other four Lions are present.”

Okay, that last bit was news. Lanse had kinda assumed Father just, locked the hangar to only respond to certain biosignatures. He was even more glad now that Dad and Allura were here.

“Allura asked. Lanse shrugged.

“Allura nodded, and Lanse took it for the dismissal it was, returning to stand on Shiro’s right with a polite amount of distance between them. Looking over at Dad, he realised with a start that they’d fallen into formation. He was used to being the right flank in training exercises, but the humans had lined up without any kind of prompting at all. If he’d had any doubts about which Lions they were meant for, this firmly erased them.

“Allura said, setting the starmap spinning so Black’s hologram came to a stop in front of Shiro. “It will take a Paladin who is a born leader and in control at all times, someone whose team will follow without hesitation. That is why, Shiro, you will pilot the Black Lion.”

Well, that certainly sounded a lot grander than what he’d been half planning to say. Looked like her endless lessons had paid off.

“All the humans, and Lanse grinned.

“Not much. We were in a bit of a hurry.”

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“Allura continued, spinning the map again so the hologram of Green and its attached planet were sent drifting towards Pidge. “Has an inquisitive personality, and needs a pilot of intellect and daring. Pidge, you will pilot the Green Lion.”
The short human grinned, and Lanse’s chest ached with a dull throb of grief as he was reminded of Viv.

“The Yellow Lion is caring, and kind.” Allura smiled, using both hands this time to spin the starmap and send a glowing yellow ball spinning towards Hunk. “Its Paladin is one who puts the needs of others above his own. His heart must be mighty.” the yellow beacon came to a stop, resolving into a close-up of an asteroid. “As the leg of Voltron, you will lift the team up and hold them together.”

Hunk looked over his shoulder, then back to Allura with a worried expression and pointed at himself, making a confused sound which she ignored in favour of spinning the starmap again to place Blue in front of Lanse. He grinned, and lifted a hand to cup the image of his lifelong friend. “The Blue Lion-” Allura started, and Lanse all but rolled his eyes.

“Takes the most handsome slash best pilot of the bunch.” he finished for her. Allura stared at him, and he crossed his arms. “What? She does. Uncle Denkin said so.”

At the other end of the line, Dad sighed and muttered something which sounded an awful lot like “Why am I not surprised?”

Allura made an annoyed face, and conjured up an image of the Red Lion in her hands. “The Red Lion is temperamental and the most difficult to master.” she said, looking down at the hologram cupped in her palms. “It's faster and more agile than the others, but also more unstable. Unfortunately, I cannot locate the Red Lion’s coordinates yet. There must be something wrong with the Castle. After 10,000 years, it... might need some work.”

“Don't worry, we'll find it soon.” Dad said confidently, stepping forward. “They don't call me ‘The Coranic’ for nothing. It's because it sounds like ‘mechanic’. So... Coranic, mechanic. It's not- It doesn't sound... exactly like it. It's similar.”

Lanse stifled a snigger. Trust Dad to be able to lighten the mood, even now. That was a skill he was still trying to master. The holograms abruptly became much more vibrant, taking on a much more lifelike appearance, and bounded towards the center of the room as Allura spoke. “Once all the Lions are united, we will form Voltron, the most powerful warrior ever known, the Defender of the Universe.”

The little Lions combined, growing as they did so, until a miniature Voltron stood behind Allura in a battle pose. It dissolved into ambient light after a tick or two along with the starmap, leaving the room fully lit again.

“Awesome!” Hunk grinned, Pidge making a small sound of awe at their side. “Wait.” they frowned a moment later. “Okay, we're going to be in there and flying Lions. Got that part. How do Lions turn into legs? Also, is this going to be a long trip? Because I have to pee. Do you people pee?”

Lanse had to actually lift a hand to muffle his laughter this time. He really, really liked this human.

“We don’t have much time.” Shiro said firmly. “Pidge and I will go after the Green Lion. Hunk, you go with Lance and get the yellow one.”

“Yes.” Lanse pumped his arm. “Leg buddies!” he slid across the floor to link arms with Hunk, who looked slightly startled but smiled after a tick.

“In the meantime, I'll look for the Red Lion and get the Castle's defenses ready.” Allura said, a worried frown creasing her forehead. “They'll be sorely needed.”

“Actually, you don’t have to worry about Red.” Lanse grinned, unhooking his arm from Hunk’s and
reaching out to Blue as he stepped forwards. “Blue and I found her, and her Paladin to boot.”

“Rylak?” Allura’s eyes widened.

“No.” Lanse shook his head, activating a screen for Blue to send the coordinates to. “His name’s Kogane. He helped me escape.”

“Then why is he not with you?” Allura asked, eyebrows drawing together as her eyes narrowed.

“There wasn't time, I promised to come back for him.” Lanse replied, evading a full answer. Telling Allura that the final member of his team was an enemy soldier wouldn’t go over well. “But I won’t be able to get back on the ship to pull off an extraction without a distraction, or at the very least backup. Kogane will be alright until we collect with Yellow and Green Lions.”

“If you say so.” Allura muttered, pulling the screen over to herself with a flick of her wrist.

“I’ll ready a shuttle.” Dad said, breaking the silence before it could get awkward. “And load the coordinates so that you can reach the Green Lion.”

“Send Yellow’s co-ords to Blue, ‘kay Lura?” Lanse called over his shoulder, grabbing Hunk by the elbow and pulling him towards the door Uncle Denkin had shown him how to use once.

“Um, isn’t the hallway over there?” Hunk pointed after Dad and the other humans, who were heading out the door into the hall.

“Yeah, but this way is faster.” Lanse grinned over his shoulder, waving his hand over the sensor. The door slid open, and he stepped into the small room, a handle dropping from the ceiling. “Put your arms over my shoulders, and hold on tight.” he reached up, but didn’t wrap his fingers around the bar until Hunk’s arms were over his shoulders and hands fastened firmly on his sides.

The tick he grabbed the handlebar, the wall in front of them opened up. A heartbeat later the floor followed, and they were hurtling down the tunnel. Hunk screamed in evident terror, and Lanse laughed. Blue’s speeder was right where it needed to be when they got to the end of the zipline, and Hunk’s grip quickly changed to both his arms wrapped around Lanse’s waist.

“Please tell me my Lion’s shortcut isn’t like this.” Hunk whined, and Lanse laughed again.

“Sorry, all of them are like this.” he said as Blue pulled them up into her internal speeder bay. “Black’s is shorter, though, since that hangar isn’t as far from the control room.”

“I changed my mind, I don’t think I wanna be a Paladin.” Hunk groaned as the floor closed under them.

“C’mon, you’ll get used to it.” Lanse patted Hunk on the shoulder. “Uh, could you let me go now?”

“Oh, yeah.” Hunk’s arms loosened, then pulled away entirely. “Sorry bout that, bro.”

Lanse turned, lifting his leg high to swing it over the speeder’s handlebars, and once he was sitting sideways on the seat he looked over at Hunk. “Is that a human pronoun?” he asked, cocking his head slightly to the side. In all the rushing around, he hadn’t thought to ask.

“What? No.” Hunk frowned, dismounting after him. “Just, you’re a guy right? Like me and Pidge and Shiro? Sorry, I guess I assumed you people have the same genders as we do, since you’ve got a dad and Allura’s a princess and all.”
“Altean doesn’t have gendered language, actually. In any dialect” Lanse said as he headed to the cockpit. “Or, well, it didn’t until we picked it up from other species’ languages.”

“Huh. Weird.”

Lanse shrugged. “To you, maybe.”

“So, is there some alien word I should call you?” Hunk asked. Lanse grinned briefly as he settled into his pilot seat.

“You can keep calling me a guy, I don’t mind or anything.”

“Alright.” Hunk nodded, a slight motion in Lanse’s peripheral vision. “So, how are we getting to the Yellow Lion?”

“Same way we got here.” Lanse smiled, and pulled sharply back on Blue’s controls. She reared up on her hind legs and sprang upwards, twisting with each quick movement of his wrists to leap from wall to wall until she came to a rest on the rim of the spire’s opening.

“I’m gonna hurl.” Hunk groaned, doubling over. A disgusting sound followed, and Lanse grimaced.

“Dude, gross.”

“I told you I get motion sick.” Hunk complained. Lanse leaned forwards, and flicked the switch that turned on Blue’s interior cleaning routine before hitting the button to dial the bridge. Allura’s face filled the rectangle that popped up on the side of his viewscreen, and he gave her a little wave.

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“Hunk and I are ready for takeoff.”

“Excellent. Now, both these wormholes are fairly long-distance, so I can only hold them a short while.”

A second rectangle appeared beneath Allura’s and Pidge and Shiro’s faces filled it after a tick. “Hello~” Pidge waved, and Lanse chuckled when Hunk waved back.

“We’re ready for launch, Princess.” Shiro said, and Allura nodded.

“I’ll open the wormholes once you’ve all left the atmosphere. You’ll have one varga to locate the Lions, activate them, and bring them back.”

“What if it takes longer than that?” Hunk asked, leaning over Lanse’s shoulder.

“Well, according to my readings, both planets have breathable atmosphere and are relatively peaceful, so if you get stranded they should be relaxing places to live out the rest of your lives.” Dad joked, leaning into Allura’s frame.

“What if it takes longer than that?” Hunk asked, leaning over Lanse’s shoulder.

“Well, according to my readings, both planets have breathable atmosphere and are relatively peaceful, so if you get stranded they should be relaxing places to live out the rest of your lives.” Dad joked, leaning into Allura’s frame.

“Wait, what?!” Pidge yelped.

“I did not get the memo on this!” Hunk exclaimed.

“I’ll see you in a varga, Dad.” Lanse waved at the screen, and then they were flying straight into a blue-gated wormhole.

“He was joking, right?” Hunk asked, hands moving from the back of the seat to grip Lanse’s shoulders. “Please tell me your dad was joking.”
“Of course he was joking.” Lanse chuckled. “If we didn’t come back, they’d come for us as soon as they could. And anyways, Blue and I can make wormholes too, remember? And she knows where home is, don’t you girl.” he patted her dashboard, and her purr made the whole cockpit vibrate.

“Oh, okay.” Hunk visibly relaxed, and Lanse adjusted his grip on Blue’s controls.

“But that’s all irrelevant, because we won’t be late getting back. You ready to go bond with your Lion?”

“As I’ll ever be.” Hunk kneaded the back of the seat, clearly anxious.

“Hey.” Lanse looked over his shoulder, and gave Hunk his most reassuring smile. “There’s nothing for you to worry about. Yellow’s gonna love you, and this whole trip is gonna be a piece of cake.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Lanse.”
The trip was not, in fact, a piece of cake. But Hunk bonded with Yellow and they got both Lions back home with a few doboshes to spare so it wasn’t as bad as it could’ve been.

“You made it.” Allura grinned, clapping her hands together as Lanse walked onto the bridge with a groan.

“Yeah, just barely.” he complained, walking up on Shiro’s right. “That was a nightmare!”

“I’m honestly surprised I didn’t throw up.” Hunk grimaced, pressing a hand to his stomach. Lanse glared at him, nose wrinkling, and he at least had the decency to look a little ashamed about it. “In my own Lion.” he clarified.

“Yeah... We had a tough time too.” Pidge grinned up at Shiro, who returned the expression with a fondness that had Lanse wondering if they were related.

The screen Blue had put Red’s coordinates on flashed, and Shiro turned to look at it. “Did you confirm the Red Lion’s location yet?”

“Only just a dobosh ago.” Dad nodded. “There’s a bit of good news and bad news. The good news is, the Red Lion’s nearby. The bad news is, it’s on board that Galra ship now orbiting Arus. But wait, good news again. We’re Arus!”

“They’re here already?” Shiro asked, and Lanse’s heart leapt in his chest. Kogane was on that ship, in orbit on- gosh, it must’ve been on the other side of the planet when he and Hunk came back or they would’ve seen it. He was so close, but also so monumentally far.

“Yes. Guess my calculations were a bit off.” Dad admitted. Lanse rolled his eyes, shelving the idea of seeing Kogane again for the moment.

“It’s alright to admit you’re bad at mental math, Dad.” he teased. “And anyways, that ship’s hardware has ten thousand deca-phoebs on whatever you were working off of.”

The viewscreen behind Dad and Allura flickered, and a video popped up to dominate it. In the call window, a galra with red armour and a prosthetic right eye filled most of the frame. “Princess of Altea,” they began, and a shiver ran down Lanse’s spine as he remembered the last time he heard that voice. “This is Commander Sendak of the Galra Empire. I come on behalf of Emperor Zarkon, Lord of the Known Universe. I am here to confiscate the Beasts of Voltron. Turn them over to me, or I will destroy your planet.”

The transmission ended after that, video window automatically vanishing, and Lanse squeezed his eyes shut as the humans began to panic. This time would be different. This time, he’d have armour and his bayard and even if Sendak wasn’t in a towel he wouldn’t be prepared for the firepower Blue could put in his hands.

“Thanks, Coran. Thank you for that.” Hunk said, and Lanse blinked at the sight of the Yellow paladin pressing a finger to his dad’s mouth, squishing his nose a bit. “See? Now is the perfect time to panic!”

“Wait! This castle has a particle barrier we can activate.” Allura moved to bring up the defense systems, while Dad brought up a scan of the battleship.
“The particle barrier won’t hold Sendak’s ion cannon forever.” Dad said, highlighting the weapon in blinking red.

“Yeah, galran weapons tech has advanced a lot since the war.” Lanse nodded.

“Panic now?” Hunk asked, turning to Shiro.

“No.” Shiro replied firmly. “We’ve just got to figure out our plan of action. Aaand figure it out quickly.”

Hunk and Pidge looked at each other nervously, and Lanse stepped forwards to stand in front of Allura. “The plan of action is simple. Get on that ship, get Red and her Paladin, and get back out. Ideally, without going head to head with Sendak.”

“Okay, but how do we do that?” Hunk asked, raising his hand a little.

“Obviously, we fly up there and break in.” Pidge crossed their arms.

“But do we have to do that now? I mean, I already hurled twice today, I don’t wanna have to go flying into another firefight. Lanse’s Lion can do the wormhole thing, let’s use that to get out of here and buy a little time to learn how to fly these giant robot space cats.”

“And let Sendak destroy this planet?” Pidge scowled. “You heard what Shiro said back at the Garrison, the galra don’t stop. Sendak would blow this planet and anything living on it to smithereens, and then he’d chase us down and we’d still only have three Lions!”

“Enough.” Shiro snapped, stepping forward and physically pushing the other humans apart. “Princess Allura, these are your Lions. Lanse, you know what we’re facing better than any of us. What do you two think is the best course of action?”

Lanse looked over his shoulder at Allura, who looked as distressed as he’d ever seen her. “I- I don’t know.” she admitted. “Perhaps it’s best that Lanse take the lead, this time.”

“Perhaps your father can help” Dad said, and Lanse couldn’t help but gasp.

“Father?” he breathed, a heartbeat behind Allura.

“I’ll show both of you.” Dad smiled, soft and pained in a way that made Lanse’s heart twist in his chest. “You three, stay here.” he pointed at the humans, narrowing his eyes sternly. “And don’t touch anything.”

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The hall that Dad lead them down was darker than most in the castle, the near-black walls lit only by the blue glow of exposed bits of the castle’s power web. Lanse let his fingers trail along one of the thick glowing lines, and for a tick he was aware of the whole castle as if it was his own body. Then his next step pulled his fingers away from the wall, and he brought his hand back in towards his chest. Part of him ached to lose himself in the castle’s quintessence web, to reacquaint himself with the systems he’d once known as intimately as his own body, but right now he needed to be present.

Instead, he focused on Allura. They’d never been particularly close growing up, age and duty keeping them separate for most of Lanse’s life, but shortly after Red found and chose Rylak he’d started seeing more of his eldest half-sibling. She was the future queen, after all, and had things not gone wrong, he and Rylak would’ve been her Paladins. She’d never looked quite comfortable, when she was spending time with the two of them. She didn’t look comfortable now, either.
“Hey, Lura?” he whispered, reaching across the space between them to grip the sleeve of her dress. She looked at him, and he took a deep breath before continuing. “No matter what Dad shows us, I’m your Paladin, not Father’s. And the humans upstairs are yours too, nothing is going to change that.”

Allura smiled, and pulled her arm free to take his hand in a firm grip. “Thank you, Lanse.”

“No problem.” he smiled reassuringly, and gave his half-sister’s hand a squeeze. The door opened at a touch of Dad’s hand on the operation panel, and Lanse released Allura’s hand as she walked forwards into the round room beyond.

“Coran, what is this?” she asked, looking around. Lanse stopped next to Dad, looking into the room rather than walking towards the heart of it. He knew every system on this ship like the back of his hand, and this room felt strange, unfamiliar.

“Alfor knew there was a chance he might never see you again.” Dad said, hand resting between Lanse’s shoulder blades and gently pushing him forwards. “So his memories, his very being, he stored in this computer for you.”

Ahead of him, Allura reached out to the bulky contraption which dominated the center of the room and marked the end of the walkway. A flash of light had her staggering back a step, and Lanse gasped as a wave of gold spread out from the machine. In its wake, juniberry flowers bobbed in a non-existent breeze, and the walls transformed from dark metal to distant mountains. He knew this place, he’d taken Rylak here to cheer her up after the war started and her pack disowned her. It was a varga outside the capitol, back on Altea. Altea which had burnt behind him, ten thousand decaphoebs ago.

For a hologram, it was quite realistic. The only thing out of place was the flat-topped metal dome which marked the center of the projection, and the fact that the room still smelled like recycled air. And then, from the dome, another hologram rose. This one was far less lifelike, but still made his throat and chest tighten.

“Father.” Allura gasped, hurrying through the flowers to stand by the low pedestal and look up at the blue-tinted hologram. Lanse followed in her wake, and came to a stop just behind her a step to the right. “Father, it is so good to see you.” she grinned, tears glistening in her eyes.


Allura looked down, and Lanse took a step back. Of all Alfor’s children, Allura had been his clear favourite. This reunion wasn’t for him to intrude on. He took another step back, andanother, and turned away when Allura fell to her knees, decaphoeb-old grief welling fresh in his chest all over again.

“You don’t want to talk to him?” Dad asked softly. Lanse shook his head.

“It’s not him.” he choked out, and Dad pulled him into a hug.

“It’s all we have left.” he murmured into Lanse’s hair. “At least until you and those humans get his Lion back.”

“We will.” Lanse promised, hugging his dad back. “And I’ll get to introduce you to Kogane.” he managed a grin as he pulled away.

“Well, if you want to wait to speak with your father’s memory core, how about we step outside and give Allura some privacy?” Dad suggested, guiding Lanse to the door with a gentle hand on his arm. “And while we’re at it, you can tell me about this Kogane boy.”
“Daaad.” Lanse groaned, but didn’t resist being lead out into the hall. There were worse things than having to tell his dad about the half-galra soldier he’d somehow developed a crush on. Things like what he had to return to Sendak’s ship to save said soldier from. Lanse almost hoped he ran into the druid who’d spent most of the past deca-phoeb mangling his memories. Once he had his bayard in hand, and wasn’t bound to a chair, he had a feeling the playing field would be more than leveled.
Chapter 15

Keith came to with a groan, his forehead throbbing painfully. He tried to lift a hand to rub at his head, and was stopped by something wrapped tight around his wrist. Looking down, he realised several things in quick succession. He was upright in a chair, meaning someone had moved him while he was unconscious. He was still wearing his helmet, so whoever moved him hadn’t deemed him injured enough to need a full medical scan. His wrists were cuffed to the arms of the chair he was sitting in... he was boned.

“Awake?” a voice asked, sending prickles down his spine that had his fur bristling under his bodysuit. “Good, then you can answer some questions for me.” the druid walked into view, and Keith resisted the urge to bare his teeth. Druids were not to be trusted, druid suspicion was to be avoided at all costs, druid attention was best pointed at enemies. Acting aggressive would only make him look suspicious right now.

“I’d rather go lie down.” Keith managed not to growl, but only barely. “The prisoner gave me a killer headache.”

“And how did ke do that?” the druid turned to him, and Keith froze. Shit, he hated lying on the spot. But, upside, the cameras had been destroyed before anything incriminating happened, so they had no evidence he’d done anything wrong.

“I’m sure you’ve seen the security footage.” he said, trying to buy himself some time. “Ke stole my rifle, and shot out the cameras.”

“Yes, and then failed to shoot you.” the druid tilted its head. “Why is that?”

“Quiznack if I know.” Keith spat. “Ke fired off two shots, then knocked me out. What else is there to say?”

“Perhaps why you did nothing to stop ket from taking your weapon?” the druid pried, stepping closer, dark magic swirling around its fingertips. He couldn’t let it in his head, there were far too many things he couldn’t afford to let it know.

“Ke surprised me.” he said, leaning away from the druid’s lifting hand. “You must’ve seen that on the recordings.”

“But you are not telling the whole truth.” the druid lifted its hand, tendrils of darkness reaching like living smoke towards his chest. “What need has a loyal soldier to lie?”

“I’m not lying.” he lied through his teeth. “I just want to go to Medical for some painkillers and sleep for a few vargas.”

“And you can.” the druid said, its attempt at reassurance setting Keith’s skin crawling. “As soon as you tell me the truth.”

“I already did.” Keith insisted.

“A pity. I’d hoped to avoid doing this the hard way.” the tendrils of smoke sank through his breastplate, and Keith stiffened as he felt them reaching through the protective bodysuit underneath, burning cold between his ribs. “You enlisted soldiers always scream so loudly.”
"I don’t know!" Keith screamed again, thrashing in a futile effort to escape the tendrils of white-hot freezing pain coiling through his chest.

“How did the prisoner escape kes cell?” the druid snapped again, claws screeching on his breastplate.

“Quiznack, I don’t know!” he howled, straining against the cuffs which bound him in place. “I don’t know I don’t know I don’t-” cold coiled around his throat, choking him, and the druid leaned in uncomfortably close, the riphor-like eyes of its mask striking fear into some deep, ancient part of his brain.

“Hey, witch.” another voice snarled, and the pain abruptly vanished as the druid whirled around to face the newcomer. “Don’t lay a singly filthy claw on him ever again.” blue light flashed on the other side of the druid, and it fell backwards on the floor with a smoking hole in its chest easily the size of his fist. Keith stared at its corpse until a few more flashes of blue broke his cuffs open, at which point he looked up to see a figure in white armour standing just inside the door.

“Who are you?” he asked, staggering to his feet and ducking his head to remove his helmet easily. “I-”

Whatever he’d been about to say completely deserted him the second he raised his head, helmet in his hands, to see a very familiar face. Brown skin, white hair, blue markings just under kes eyes, and a look of absolute shock on kes face which was slowly morphing into something like horror.

“It’s you.” Keith grinned, relief flooding through him.

“You have a mullet?”

“What?” Keith frowned, and ke sighed.
“Whatever, we can get you a trim later.” ke waved a hand dismissively. “You coming?”

“Of course.” Keith nodded, stepping over the dead druid and into kes space. “But first,” he lowered his voice to a purr and switched his helmet to one hand, threading the fingers of the other through kes hair. “I believe you promised I could do whatever I wanted to you, once I let you out.” he leaned in, and kes arms wound around his waist as soon as their lips met. This time, now that he wasn’t frozen in shock, it was much nicer.

“Kogane.” ke breathed when they parted, the hand not holding kes helmet sliding up his body to cup his cheek. “Later. The others can only buy us so much time.”

“Alright.” he breathed, and stole another quick kiss. “There’s escape pods two levels down, on the starboard side. We can steal one of those.”

“No.” ke shook kes head, and fixed him with a look he couldn’t identify. “We need to get to the main cargo hangar.”

The cargo hangar? Keith frowned, but let ket lead the way. “What’s in the cargo hangar that’s so important?”

“Your-” ke said a word that didn’t translate, and Keith stared blankly at the back of kes head. “Your what?”

“Your ship, the Red-” there was that word again, the one that didn’t translate, but there was only one thing in the cargo hangar which was both red, and a ship.

“Whoa, whoa.” he grabbed kes wrist and pulled ket to a stop. “That ship is property of the Empire, it’s not mine.”

“Well, no.” ke grinned. “You’re hers.”

Keith blinked, blinked again, and ke sighed before taking his hand. “Remember how I said you were the successor to Rylak and my father?”

Keith nodded. He’d never figured out what ke meant by that.

“My father was the original Red Paladin of Voltron, and Rylak was his protégé.”

What.

“But that would make you-”

“Ten thousand deca-phoebis old?” ke smiled, sliding kes helmet back on. “I know, I look awesome for my age don’t I.” ke too Keith’s hand, and pulled him along down the corridor. “C’mon, We gotta get you to Red so you two can bond and we can get Black out of their hangar.”

“How can you be so sure?” Keith asked, pulling his hand free. Ke turned around, forehead creased between kes brows, then suddenly smacked ketself in the forehead.

“Doi.” ke lowered kes free hand to the pair of glowing lines on kes greave, and Keith could only stare in astonishment as light spilled from the lines like a physical thing, coalescing into a strange item which looked somewhat suited for use as a close range weapon. “This is a bayard, they only respond to their associated Paladins.” ke waved kes gun around, and it- dissolved into light and reformed as a smaller object, one nearly identical to the thing ke’d summoned from kes armour but
decorated in blue.

“Take it.” ke held the weapon, the bayard, out. Keith wrapped his fingers around the handle, and for a tick nothing happened. Then the end burst into light, and when he’d blinked the spots from his eyes there was a sword blade extending from just past his knuckles.

“Okay.” he admitted, giving the blade a twirl. It was perfectly balanced, and holding it sent a strange warmth up his arm which didn’t feel nearly as invasive as it probably should have. “That’s cool.”

“That means it’s yours.” ke grinned, and held out his hand. “Now, let’s get you to Red.”

Keith accepted the offered hand, and couldn’t’ve stopped his answering smile if he’d tried.

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“I’ll hold them off!” ke shouted over kes shoulder. “You get to Red.”

Keith nodded, and rushed across the room to where the Red Beast of Voltron hung suspended in its protective bubble. It looked like a cheoc, kinda, if cheocs were metal and the size of a small house. “Let’s get out of here.” he said, placing his palm to the force field. “Open up.”

Nothing happened.

“It’s me, Keith!” he yelled, though he could barely hear himself over the increasing sound of gunfire. “You buddy!” he raised his voice further. Still no response. “I am your Paladin!” he shouted, slamming his fist into the translucent red barrier. The great ship within remained dark-eyed and motionless.

“It’s not working!” he called over his shoulder, raising his voice enough to be audible over the sound of gunfire.

“Have you tried knocking?” ke fired back, no longer at the door but instead rapidly backing up towards Keith, a glowing blue shield attached to the arm not holding kes gun.

“Yes!” a laser bolt stuck the force field near his head, and he ducked into the narrow safe area behind the shield. Kes shoulders were broader than his, he realised, and quickly shook the thought away. Survive now, swoon later.

“Well try harder!”

“I’m bonding with you!” Keith yelled up at the cheoc-like ship. “Hey, come on! We’re connected!”

Nothing. He looked down at the weapon in his hand, and his mouth pressed into a hard line. Ke’d said this thing activating was proof of his connection to the ship in front of him, maybe it was the key to getting its guard down too.

“Kogane!” ke shouted in his ear. “My bayard isn’t optimised for this type of fight!”

“Well mine is.” he snarled, activating the weapon. Ke made a startled sound as he charged the sentries with a roar, swinging the blade with all his might. He took the head off of one, split another in two at the waist, and was hewing a third at the knees when a bolt caught him in the shoulder. He cried out as he was thrown backwards, barely managing to keep a hold on his bayard, and grunted as he slid into a control console.

The console for the hangar doors, he realised as he sat up. It wouldn’t be comfortable, but it would
force the hall doors closed and get rid of the sentries.

“Hold onto me!” he yelled, and grabbed the edge of the pillar with his free hand. The other one he slammed into the button to open the door, and kes arms wrapped around him.

“What are you doing?!”

Keith looked up at the red bubble in front of him, at the great Red Beast of Voltron, and a tight chill settled in his chest which had nothing to do with the encroaching void of space. It wasn’t moving, not the slightest twitch. Ke’d been wrong he wasn’t its pilot.

He was shaken from his thoughts by the lid of a shipping container smacking him in the face, and then everything went silent save his heartbeat thundering in his ears. The cold was worse than he’d expected, biting right through his regulation bodysuit and numbing his face almost instantly. His eyes burned, and the rest of his body felt strangely fizzy. He blinked, trying to ease the discomfort, and when his eyes opened he- well, he couldn’t exactly gasp in space but he certainly tried.

The Red Beast’s open mouth was close enough to dominate his vision, blue light pouring from the open airlock, and then a tick later he was inside, they were inside, and warmth was flooding his body like someone had lit a fire in his chest. He could hear it, the roar of flames in his head, burning through every corner and crevice of his mind with a sensation of sameness, of unity on a level deeper than he’d known existed.

Once the flames took hold, his chest and head began to fill with a sort of smoke. Lonely, cold, trapped. He’d been so lonely for so long, sealed away from his pride, grieving them and theirs.

“Kogane?” hands gripped his arms, then quickly pulled away, twin circles of blue filling his vision. “Kogane, hey, look at me.”

“Blue.” he murmured, and his voice sounded strange but he wasn’t alone anymore. Blue was here, Blue wouldn’t leave him.

“Quiznack.” Blue swore, and then the colour was gone. “Allura, I need you to sideswipe us with Blue.”

With Blue? But Blue was here.

“I don’t care about the fighters, just hit us!”

He opened his mouth to ask what was happening, why Blue was so upset, and then the world shook. The burning heat in his chest all but vanished, the crackling flames in his head dying down with it and leaving him sprawled on the metal floor gasping for air.

“What was that?” he panted, pushing himself upright. Grief and loneliness echoed in his chest, both for the ones he’d lost and the ones lost ten thousand deca-phoebs ago.

“That,” ke glared up at the ceiling. “Was Red overreacting.” ke looked back at him, and kes smile warmed him in a way not even Red’s fire had managed, banishing all thoughts of the dead. The flames in his head crackled apologetically, and he felt a tug on the warmth which had settled just behind his heart.

“I think she wants me to go up.” he said softly, looking at the ladder planted on the other side of the airlock’s interior door.

“Then let’s go.” ke grinned.
The pull only intensified as Keith followed it, climbing up to a second level where a chair waited in the hallway. He sat in it without hesitation, and it slid forwards along the track in the floor. The cockpit looked strange, at once ancient and incomprehensibly advanced, and when he took the controls a set of red-tinted screens popped up. After a tick of panic, he realised the red wasn’t an indicator of emergency but instead the system’s default colour. To match the bayard now in his lap, and the ship itself.

“Good Lion.” he murmured, and Red responded to the strange word with something that felt like a purr but sounded like a humming space heater.

Ke leaned over his shoulder, and tapped an icon that brought up multiple short, wide boxes of varying colours on one of the side displays, each of them filled with text he couldn’t read. “Lura, we’ve got a Red Paladin.” ke announced, giving Keith a roguish grin. “And a cute one, at that.”

“Lanse, be professional.” a voice scolded, the green box lighting up to indicate that’s who was speaking.

“Lanse, huh?” Keith turned to look at ket, a smile pulling at his mouth. “That’s a nice name.”

The face ke, Lanse, made was frankly indescribable. Something like a mix of shock, horror, and outright offense.

“You- I- How did you not know?” he yelled, and all the coloured boxes lit up as the people on the other end laughed. Keith sniggered, and reached up to curl a hand around the back of Lanse’s neck.

“Same way you didn’t know my given name is Keith.” he murmured, drawing Lanse down for a slow, lingering kiss as Red tailed after the other three Lions headed for the bright blue-green marble of Arus. When they parted, Lanse’s pupils were wide in kes beautiful blue eyes, and Keith smiled at ket. “Never asked.”
Chapter 16

Lanse’s pace slowed as they approached Red’s airlock, cold anxiety curling low in his gut. Shiro had spent a deca-phoeb in galra hands, Champion of their arenas while the other humans from that icy little moon, Pidge’s family, had been sent Ancients-knew where. It had been galra, following Zarkon’s orders, who burnt Altea and slaughtered every last altean they could find.

“Wait.” he said softly, and Keith turned to him with a low noise somewhere between confusion and worry.

“Is something wrong?” he asked, lifting a hand to rest on the lower edge of Lanse’s helmet. He pulled it off with a sigh, and leaned into Keith’s touch.

“I told my dad about you, but the rest... they don’t know.”

“Don’t know what?” Keith frowned, rubbing his thumb over Lanse’s cheek.

“That you’re an imperial soldier.”

“Was.” Keith insisted. “I was a soldier of the Empire. Now I’m a soldier of Voltron.” he smiled, and dragged his hand down from Lanse’s cheek to rest over the center of the Voltron symbol on his breastplate. “Like you.”

Lanse returned the grin, and leaned in to press a quick kiss to Keith’s lips. “Let’s hope the others see it that way.” he murmured, letting Keith lead him through the airlock with an arm around his waist.

“Well, if nothing else.” Keith kissed him on the jaw as they descended Red’s ramp. “They’ll see that you’re mine.”

“Your aim’s a bit off for that.” Lanse teased, sliding his arm around Keith’s waist and giving him another chaste kiss.

“Allura all but growled, and he blinked as he realised she was a lot closer than he’d thought. “A word.” she grabbed him by the elbow, tight enough to be distinctly uncomfortable, and he yelped as she yanked him towards the door, Keith’s claws scraping along his flight suit as he was pulled from the galra’s grip.

“Hey!” Keith snapped, and Lanse turned around to give him his best reassuring grin.

“Back in a dobosh, babe.” he waved with his free hand, and his heart did a funny little flip in his chest when Keith flushed at the endearment. Allura didn’t slow her pace, and a few ticks later they were standing in the hall. Only once the door had shut did she release him, crossing her arms and glaring as he rubbed at his elbow.

“Explain.” she hissed, shifting taller as she leaned into his space. “Now.”

“It’s alright.” he lifted his hands, refusing to take a step back. “He’s not going to turn on us, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it.” Allura snapped. “You’ve been keeping things from me since I woke from the cryo-pod. No more.” she unfolded her arms and jabbed one finger into Lanse’s breastplate. “Explain.”
“Okay.” Lanse sighed, letting his shoulders droop. “I said that Blue put me in cryo, which is why it took so long to get back here. That’s not entirely true.” he glanced up, and saw Allura had shrunk down to her natural size. “I woke from cryo a deca-phoebs ago, in the home system of the human Paladins. The galra captured me, along with Shiro and his crew, and I’ve spent the last few phoebs trying to escape. I only succeeded—” he paused to recall, then shook his head. “Quiznack, I only got back to Blue a few vargas ago.”

“You haven’t explained why that galra helped you escape.” Allura frowned sternly at him. “Or why he’s treating you like a mate.”

“That’s, mostly on me.” Lanse admitted. “He was a guard on my cell, halfbreed with no pack or clade, I figured I could seduce him into letting me go.”

“Seduce?” Allura lifted an eyebrow skeptically.

“Well it worked.” Lanse huffed, crossing his arms. “It just, kinda went both ways.” he mumbled, looking aside at the door which lead to the hangar. Keith was in there, meeting the humans, meeting his dad, and Lanse would so much rather be in there than out here with Allura.

Allura groaned, and at the smack of skin on skin Lanse looked back at her to see she’d dropped her head into the palm of her hand. “And you chose to offer him up at the Red Paladin?” she asked rhetorically.

“Father and Uncle Denkin made it work.” he pointed out.

“Father and King Blaytz were friends and comrades-in-arms for deca-phoebs before they became romantically involved.” she refuted. “You and this galra have nothing like that. You didn’t even know each other’s names until a few doboshes ago!”

“Because there was nobody else to talk to!” Lanse protested. “Look, if it’s teamwork you’re worried about, I can promise this won’t affect it.”

“That’s what you said about courting Rylak.” Allura scowled. “And this is no different. You’re jumping into this headfirst, and this time when it inevitably explodes you’ll be endangering the whole universe.”

“Keith isn’t Rylak.” Lanse snapped back. “I won’t make the same mistakes with him that I did with her.” he deflated slightly, glancing at the door again. “I don’t want to mess this up.”

For a few long ticks, silence hung heavy over them. Then Allura sighed, and put a hand on Lanse’s shoulder. “I don’t trust him.” she said simply. “But if you do, and Red chose him, then I suppose I have no choice. Just promise, swear to me, you will be responsible about this.”


“There’s some advice Father once gave me.” Allura mused, looking at the door to the hangar. “Duty before passion, when agreed upon, forms a stronger union than passion alone.”

Lanse nodded. “Uncle Blaytz told me the same, when I asked how he and Father had stayed married so long.”

“After your breakup with Rylak?” Allura teased. Lanse pointedly looked away, and she giggled. “Come, we must assemble the Lions outside of Black’s hangar to release the lock on the doors.” she opened the doors as she turned, and Lanse followed her back in from the hall.
Keith was at his side before he’d taken ten steps, fingers curling gently around the elbow Allura had gripped to drag him away. “Are you hurt?” he asked, prodding gently at the tender skin. Lanse didn’t doubt that he’d be feeling that later, Allura’s grip strength was a force to be reckoned with.

“Nothing serious.” he smiled, and apparently that was the wrong answer because Keith bared his blunt teeth and whirled to snarl at Allura, fur standing on end where it wasn’t covered by his armour and undersuit.

“You *bitch*!” he growled, hands curling to place his claws in optimal position. “Lay a hand on him again and I’ll-”

“Hey.” Lanse grabbed Keith’s shoulder and pulled back, breaking his stance and forcing the galra to look at him. “It’s alright, she didn’t mean anything by it. She’s family.” Keith stared at him blankly for a second, and Lanse repeated himself in Galran Standard. “She’s pack.”

Keith’s eyes widened, and motion in Lanse’s peripheral vision drew his attention to Hunk. “So, that makes you a prince, right?” the human asked. “Because, like, earlier you both called King Alfor your dad.”

“No I didn’t.” Lanse frowned. “That’s my dad.” he pointed at Dad. “King Alfor was my father.”

“You’re a *prince*?” Keith asked, sounding a bit strangled.

“No, no.” Lanse shook his head. “Lura and I only share one parent, and not the royal one. Dad and Father are both blues.”

“They’re what now?” Pidge frowned, head cocking slightly to the side.

“Later.” Allura said firmly. “We need to get Shiro in the Black Lion, and we need to do it now.”

“Agreed.” Shiro nodded his head once, terse and formal. “What do we need to do?”

---

“Let’s do this!” Shiro said, and Lanse pushed Blue forward out of the protection of the castle’s particle barrier. The air was full of fighters, too many to get a clean take-off, so he and Blue stayed on the ground, protecting Red’s right flank.

“Uh, how?” Pidge asked.

“Good Question. Lanse, any ideas on how to form Voltron?” Shiro’s asked, the purple-tinted status bar on the left of Blue’s viewscreen lighting up as he spoke.

“I don’t know.” he admitted. Uncle Blaytz had always said that he’d find out once he had a team to form Voltron *with*, but now that he did...

“I don’t see a “Combine Into Giant Robot” button anywhere on my dashboard.” Hunk said as they reached the end of the smooth stone path and leapt down to the planet’s surface.

“This is insane!” Pidge complained. “Can’t they just cease fire for one minute so we can figure this out? Is that too much to ask?” the Green Lion dropped back, and Lanse saw it spin a bit on his screen before taking out one fighter and using the wreckage to destroy another. Red skidded to a halt as well, turning sideways as two more galran signatures vanished from Lanse’s screen.

“We’ve gotta do *something*.” Keith insisted, and a heartbeat later Red went sprawling as Yellow
slammed into her.

“Combine!”

“Hey!”

“Okay, that didn’t work.”

“Quickly, Paladins!” Allura’s face appeared in Lanse’s peripheral vision. “Our energy levels are getting low!” the image stuttered, Allura grunting as the castle shook around her, then cut out entirely.

“Maybe if we fly in formation, we’ll just, combine.” Shiro suggested as they all fell back into place. “Take off on my cue. One, two, three, Voltron!”

Lanse pulled up on Blue’s controls as they leapt off a cliff, and the five of them soared upwards.

“Here we go!”

“Come on, come on!” Lanse squeezed his eyes shut, letting Blue into his head as much as he could without letting her completely take over. Please, we need Voltron.

“Nothing’s happening.” Shiro said, sounding very far away.

“Hey, wait! I feel something!” Pidge spoke up, and Lanse’s heart dropped into his stomach.

“I feel it too.” Hunk confirmed, and Lanse’s eyes flew open.

“Uh, guys, I think I know why.” Shiro’s voice was nearly static in his ears, barely audible over the pounding of his heart. “Look up.”

Lanse didn’t want to, he knew what he’d see, but he did anyways and his whole body went deathly cold as his vision was filled with pink light. The ion cannon fired again, and he didn’t even have to look to know that the castle’s defenses had given up the ghost. That his home, his family were defenseless in the face of Sendak’s brutality. That he’d failed, again.

“Lanse?” Keith’s voice cut through everything else, the static in his ears, the sound of the humans panicking, the frantically pounding waves in his head that matched his racing heartbeat. For just a moment, the world narrowed down to the two of them. “I love you.”

Lanse’s hands moved practically on their own, opening a video call with the Red Lion. “I love you too.” he managed a weak smile, drinking in all of Keith that he could see. His fluffed up ears, his unruly hair, his beautiful purple and gold eyes. There was so much he hadn’t gotten to do with Keith yet, like learn about the pack and clade he’d lost, and find out if he was fluffy under that bodysuit of his. “I wish-”

“No!” Shiro’s voice crashed into Lanse’s ears, jarring him back to reality. “We can do this. We have to believe in ourselves.” Lanse turned his head slightly towards Black, his eyes fixing on Shiro’s brightly lit icon in the line of comms connections. “We can't give up. We are the universe’s only hope. Everyone is relying on us. We can't fail! We won't fail! If we work together, we'll win together!”

“Yeah!” Lanse tightened his grip on Blue’s controls, and she flooded into his mind. Dad and Allura weren’t dead yet, he hadn’t failed yet. He let his Lion’s quintessence wash over and through him, his sight blurring into something like an endless field of stars as his body and mind became a conduit,
connecting her to the rest of her pride. He could feel them, flares of brilliant colour swirling through
the starfield with him, fusing together piece by piece until all five of them were made one, a column
of pure white so brilliant it was like looking into the heart of a star.

They were whole again, and they would not let their home fall to ruin.

When Lanse blinked the spots from his eyes, heart racing in his chest, waves roaring triumphant and
gleeful in his head, they’d done it. They’d formed Voltron, and with it redirected the ion cannon’s
shot to completely miss the castle.

“I’m a leg!” Hunk shouted gleefully.

“How did we do that?” Lanse asked, breathless and on the verge of laughter. They’d done it, his
family was safe, and those facts thumbed through him in a relief so powerful he was glad he was
already sitting down.

“I don't know, but let's get that cannon!” Shiro said, and Lanse grinned. Blue flooded back into his
mind like a tide returning, and he became aware of colourful sparks within the brilliant white of
Voltron. Grim determination, childish elation, steadfast resolution, vicious joy, each of them
resonated with a different emotion but all shone with purpose. Lanse shouted wordlessly as Voltron
flew fist-first into the heart of the ship, punching through the hull and every interior deck before
exploding out the other side. Voltron pulled up to land upright as the battleship exploded, and he felt
a wash of joy-satisfaction-awe from the bright pillar of Voltron.

They split up not long after that, and Lanse landed Blue in the crumbling courtyard outside the castle
along with the rest of the Lions. His legs shook when he stood, adrenaline ebbing from his system,
and he stumbled down Blue’s ramp to see the human Paladins emerging in a similar shaken state.

Then Keith emerged from Red, and Lanse found himself staggering forwards. Keith met him
halfway, arms wrapping tight around him, and Lanse gripped back as hard as he could without
denting the galran armour.

“We made it.” he gasped.

“We made it.” Keith agreed, lifting a hand to pull Lanse’s helmet from his head as they sank to the
ground together. “We’re alive.” he laughed, and Lanse laughed with him, dropping his head on
Keith’s shoulder.

“I want to court you.” he gasped, when the laughter abated some. “For real this time, properly.”

“Alright.” Keith tilted his head, pressing a kiss to his jaw. Belatedly, Lanse remembered galra had a
scent gland around there. “But I still get to call you mine.”

“Of course.” Lanse grinned, lifting his head and nuzzling at Keith’s jaw. “I’m yours. By the grace of
Schee’rit, I always will be.”

Keith made a deep noise Lanse had only ever heard in Rylak’s galran movies and serials, and pulled
him into a heavy kiss. Lanse brought one arm up to rest around the back of Keith’s neck, and twined
the other into his hair. Keith’s breath hitched when Lanse’s fingers curled, pulling him back just
enough for him to inhale, and Lanse filed that away with the rest of his Keith knowledge. Maybe he
wouldn’t ask his boyfriend to cut his hair after all.

“Mine.” Keith breathed when they parted again.

“Yours.” Lanse agreed with a smile, rubbing his nose against Keith’s. The universe still needed
saving, but the idea wasn’t as terrifying as it had been a few vargas ago. Now he had a team, a
boyfriend, and his family, what little remained of it. Together they could make this work.

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