At the End of the Road with You

by [RangoAteMyBaby (FormallyKnownAsFreya)](http://archiveofourown.org/users/RangoAteMyBaby)

**Summary**

Incident One started the zombie outbreak two years ago. Now most only survive thanks to organized groups like The Garrison. Lance, Pidge, and Hunk are members of the Echo Scouting and Scavenging Team. They find themselves out on the far outer regions when they come across a survivor from another team that they were lead to believe were killed. This discovery leads to a new horrifying truth and the team has to find another way to survive in this cruel undead world.

**Notes**

I wrote this for NaNoWrimo and it would be a shame to let it sit in my docs forever so I thought I'd give it to you guys.
How far away from the Garrison are they?

Hard to know for sure. Both the speedometer and odometer on the bus hasn’t worked since before Incident One. They have to use an old map and use the local signs to figure out their location each time they travel. Everything is practically guesswork now. They mark off buildings they’ve done sweeps of before moving on to the next small town.

Luckily, Pidge paid more attention than Lance ever did in geography classes, otherwise, they’d end up in the same towns over and over, picking over buildings that had long since been cleared out.

“Where’s next?” Lance asks, eyeing the landscape as they drive.

“We’ve got about half a tank left in the bus,” Hunk comments, checking the dials. “And two full petrol containers. Might get us another...hundred miles before we have to turn back.”

“We’ve barely found anything to make this scouting mission worth it,” Pidge shakes her head, scribbling on maps and making guesses at good locations to hit. “We need to bring back food. Medicine. Ammunition, if we can find any. Might need to switch to the bats and knives soon to conserve bullets.”

Lance nods but he doesn’t like the idea at all, in fact, he grips his rifle a little closer to his chest.

He’s terrible with the melee weapons. No good at all. Nearly got bit by one of the deadheads when he used the bat earlier that week. He shudders to think what would have happened if that creature had gotten his soft squishy arm in its filthy teeth. Pidge or Hunk would have had to put him out of his misery and it’s not something he wants to put them through.

“How much power is left on the short-range radio?” Lance wonders.

“Not much. Low on batteries. And we haven’t found a lot of buildings with working power,” Pidge sighs. “And even less empty of ‘occupants’.”

The zombies.
Even when they find a good rummaging spot, if it's full of the undead they don’t even try going inside. Ten or less, and they’ll give it a shot, otherwise, they avoid it all together. Lance’s eyes flick at the half dozen dog tags hanging around Pidge’s neck. They can’t afford stupid decisions anymore. It’s just the three of them now.

If they’re going down the road Lance thinks they are...then they might be following Alpha team’s last known route.

Alpha scouting team is the best. Or rather, was the best. No one’s heard from them in over two months. No attempts to contact them have had any success and they had one of the best long-range radios the Garrison had.

The Admiral says they make risky decisions far too often, choosing to go further when they should turn back. That that’s probably why no one’s heard from them. Everyone else considers them MIA. Lance doesn’t like to think it but they may have been overrun. It’s the only reason he can think of as to why they wouldn’t respond.

Gone.

Of course, Lance would never say as much. Pidge’s brother was on the Alpha team. Her father too. To insinuate for even an instant that they were dead, or undead as the case may be, is just asking for a beating from the girl. And she would lay him out too. Pidge fights dirty and she uses her bony elbows. It would probably take Hunk to stop her so he'd rather not incur a wrath.

“So where do you want to hit next?” Hunk asks as he narrowly avoids a trudging zombie. He tries not to hit them with the bus if he can help it. Slows them down if they have to clean out innards from the undercarriage. "Pidge?"

“There’s a small town coming up. About eighteen miles,” Pidge reveals, pointing to the spot on the map. “Has a couple of gas stations. If we’re lucky we can get a few gallons of fuel. Some food in the store. I know Morrison said he’d score us some spare parts if we bring him a carton of cigarettes.”

“Jeez, I haven’t seen cigarettes in months, Pidge,” Lance sighs. “He’ll be lucky if we find half a pack.”

“We can still keep an eye out,” Pidge argues. “It’s hard to get new parts before anyone else. We’re just Echo Team .”

Echo Team. The lowest of the scouting teams.

They always get the last pickings. Which ends up limiting how much they can do. They don’t have the newest vehicles, which is why they got saddled with their current ride, an old-school short bus. They had to black out their windows with glass paint instead of tinting like the other teams get so when they park for the night nothing comes looking for movement inside.

No one ever expects much from their team. Whenever the teams are sent out theirs gets stuck with minimal supplies so they don’t cost the Garrison more than they can afford to lose. The other teams are able to go months without returning. Their team can only manage weeks unless they find stuff along the way to prolong their journey.

This is the longest they’ve managed. A whole month. If it weren’t for all their losses they could almost be proud of it.

“There’s the turnoff, Hunk,” Pidge points and Hunk turns the bus down the other road.
The bus shifts with the turn and Lance has to hold onto a seat to keep from rolling out of it. He scans the map that Pidge has written all over. X’s mark all the towns they’ve hit. Red ones for undead. Black ones for being empty, with not a salvageable item left in it. Sometimes she scribbles little notes about her brother.


This is the only way she’s going to find what happened to him. With her skills, she should have gotten Bravo or Charlie but somehow she got stuck with Echo. And with this new mission, she finally has a chance to look for them. Searching everywhere, one infested town at a time, until she finds even a trace of them.

Honestly, selfishly, Lance hopes they don’t find them.

Alpha team was huge, no less than twenty of the best men the Garrison had including the Takashi Shirogane. Guy’s a living legend and runs a legendary team. Even when Echo was full up, all nine of them, there’s little doubt in Lance’s mind they’d get decimated by anything that could take out Alpha team without even a distress signal. If they were taken out then what chance does their little three-person nobody team have?

Pidge sits back on her seat, dog tags jangling as she tilts her head back for a sip of water. She passes the bottle to Lance who takes a sip as well. He passes it to Hunk to takes the last of it. They cap it and toss it in the box with all the other empty bottles. They need to find a place to refill those too while they’re at it, Lance mentions.


*****

It’s not long before they arrive in another town, bringing the bus to a stop at the edge.

Abandoned like all the rest. Deathly quiet. It’s all broken storefront windows and busted down doors now. Cars in the street with the doors flown open as some hapless civilian ran for the safety of the buildings. Or as they were torn from the seat by an undead monster. From the blood smear, the latter seems more likely.

“I’m going up,” Lance announces.

He pops the emergency exit up top and pulls himself up, his rifle on his back. Once there he takes a seat and looks through the cracked scope to get an idea of the situation.

“Don’t fire unless you have to Lance,” Pidge reminds him.

“I know,” he huffs.

It looks pretty occupied, with the dead at least. More than a couple dozen wander about aimlessly in the town center. Most of them are slow. That makes them old ones. They haven’t had a meal in a while which means the three of them can outrun them provided they don’t get backed into a corner.

There are two gas stations, one close but the further one looks in better condition. A couple of business buildings. Some apartments rising high in the area. And on the far side a Walgreens. Good locations considering what’s shuffling around in their way. Lance lowers the sights and calls down.

“We got any of those bottle rockets left?”
“Maybe. Let me check,” Pidge disappears and returns with one. “Yeah, we’ve got about three left after this one.”

“There’s maybe...about thirty,” Lance estimates. “Two gas stations and a Walgreens. Might be worth a rocket. What’s Hunk think?”

Pidge disappears yet again and comes back a few minutes later. She gives him the thumbs up and he readies the rocket. Sticks the wooden end into his rifle barrel and flicks the lighter. He aims the rifle toward the east side of town as the sparks crawl up the wick.

It shoots out and into the air, getting good distance on it before it explodes with a loud pop.

“Let’s give it about ten minutes,” Pidge tells him as he comes back in. “Then we’ll hit the gas stations first. The Walgreens next.”

Lance nods and the three of them sit at the front of the bus, watching as the undead shuffle their way towards the sound. Looks pretty good.

Lance checks again through his scope to confirm that they’ve taken the bait. One or two remain, caught on cars or sandbags. Nothing they can’t handle.

So they drive in, slow and quiet, parking the bus at the gas station.

“Hunk will check for gas and siphon what he can from the nearest cars. I’ll go inside the station to see if there’s food. You coming this time, Lance?” Pidge asks.

He shakes his head. Something feels off about this location and he can’t put his finger on it. Something unnerving. Feels like they’re not alone and not because of the reanimated corpses.

“I think it’s better that I stay on the roof,” Lance offers. “I can keep a lookout for the group in case they start heading back.”

“Fine, I’ll go alone then,” Pidge sighs, clearly disappointed. “Keep an eye on Hunk while you’re up there. Don’t let anything get close.”

Lance nods, relief evident on his face. He’s glad to keep his distance from the zombies but still be useful. He clambers back on up the bus and takes his post on the roof, scanning the surrounding area as the others go in their respective directions.

Hunk checks all the pumps first, despite all of them knowing the chances of there being any gas slim. They’re empty as they figured. So he moves on with his tube and canister to start siphoning what he can from a few cars.

Pidge heads into the station, her steps light and cautious as she steps over tipped over bottles and trash. She disappears from Lance’s sight within seconds. He sighs and scans around, keeping an eye out for danger and making notes on good spots to hit.

First, a quick check to see if anything unsavory is trying to creep up on Hunk. Nothing. So Lance lifts the scope and looks at the buildings.

From what he can see the front doors of the businesses have been barricaded with desks and furniture. It’s unlikely they’ll find anything good in them anyway. They’re just office buildings. Nothing but printers and papers, though maybe the bathrooms still have some toilet paper. Might be worth checking later after everything else.
Further off are some apartments but they’re just as blocked. The stair entrances have vans and such in front of them. A sound strategy to keep out zombies. They aren’t too bright and the older ones are even less so. If nothing else it’ll slow down anything trying to scale the stairs.

Lance catches a flash of something in the scope. He blinks and refocuses until he finds the red that caught his eye. Someone climbing down the fire escape, landing on top of a news van. They then hop down the van and dash into an alley out of sight. Lance puts the rifle down and furrows his brows.

There’s a person living here.

Lance looks around and nearly chokes seeing how close one of the zombies have gotten to Hunk. Christ, he’s within ten yards! He could shout out but the last thing he needs is the rest of them hearing and shuffling back. Shooting will get the same result so Lance runs down the length of the bus and jumps down, rolling when he hits the ground.

Just as it’s about to lunge for Hunk, Lance butts its leg with his rifle throwing it off balance and onto the ground. It groans and growls, trying to get back up, but Lance steps on it and hits it more, crushing its skull in with a grunt and bloodying up the stock of his gun.

Hunk just looks on from his seat on the ground, eyes wide. It takes him a second to shake it off and let out a pathetic laugh.

“Thanks, Lance,” he swallows.

“Sure,” Lance nods, wiping the blood on the zombie’s pant leg. No need for Hunk to know how close he came to dying on account of him. “Someone else is here. I saw them at the apartments.”

“Alive? Out here?” Hunk questions and picks up the gas canister. He’s gotten a bit from a few cars but it barely fills the tank up a quarter of the way.

“Someone’s out here?” Pidge asks, a bag hefted over her shoulder.

“Yeah. What’d you find?” Lance gestures to the bag and keeps his eyes open for any more surprises.

She opens it up to show them a few goodies that were left. A bag of jerky, crackerjacks, a couple of cans of soup, and a single roll of cheap toilet paper. There were also some hand towels and bandanas.

“Found a gun safe but it was empty,” Pidge sighs. “All the other food is spoiled or taken. Someone’s picked it pretty clean of anything edible. Maybe the person you saw?”

“Should we try to find them? Get them to come back to the Garrison?” Hunk wonders. “It’s gotta be better than what they’re doing now. Safer at least.”

“Maybe, but first things first,” Pidge starts and gestures to the bus. They all board before she continues. “Other gas station and the Walgreens. If we find them, we find them. If they’re not hostile, we offer them a ride back to the Garrison.”

“And if they are hostile?” Hunk asks.

“Easy, we leave them,” Lance answers.

They all nod in agreement.
The other gas station yields better results than the first in some respects. Someone still picked over the best stuff but Pidge manages to find a jar of Nutella, some hand soap, half a dozen cans of refried beans, and not one but two packs of Camel cigarettes squished inside the cash register. Oh, and a handful of various batteries.

The cars in the lot get them another quarter of a canister of gas. Hunk spends the next ten minutes gagging and wanting to gargle with literally anything to get the taste of petrol out of his mouth. This is no way for someone with a refined palette to live, he always says. Lance rummages around in his pockets and offers the last piece of Doublemint gum he’s got to help him out.

“Problem,” Pidge announces when she clears the gas station. “There were booby traps inside the station. Primitive but effective. A nailgun affixed to a door in there to shoot when a pressure plate is stepped on. Also found a bear trap, recently triggered and reset. Still has congealed blood on it.”

“The stranger maybe?” Hunk suggests.

“Then he’s doing better than we thought,” Lance admits. “Also means this place is dangerous. We should watch out for more while we’re here.”

Walgreens next and so far the team hasn’t seen hide or hair of the mysterious civilian Lance spotted. He knows he saw someone but maybe they’re...Lance shakes his head. Maybe they’re dead. This world has never been safe for someone on their own and it’s even truer nowadays.

“Together this time,” Pidge insists. “We go in, get anything of value and then get out. It’s getting dark and I want to be safe, back in the bus, and out of the town before nightfall.”

Together they step through the broken glass of the Walgreens. It’s dead quiet and dark. No power, just like everywhere else that doesn’t have its own generator. Anything in the fridges is toast and the building smells like it. The three of them cough at the stench initially but soldier through it.

“I’ll take the pharmacy, Pidge check food, Hunk you get anything in between,” Lance assigns. They all nod and get straight to it.

Lance stalks his way down the aisle to the dispensary, rifle drawn as he walks. He’s hesitant to just jump the counter since sometimes zombies just stand in places, waiting for a sound to come to life. He picks up a can from the ground and tosses it over the counter. The sound feels deafening as it clatters around on the other side. But he hears nothing in response so he shoulders the gun and vaults over.

He opens his bag and starts eying labels on medicine containers.

“Anything that ends with -cillin or -cin,” he repeats from the medic’s guide.

Amoxicillin. Ciprofloxacin. That looks useful. He pockets them from the shelf. Azithromycin. Yeah, why not. He grabs that too. Percocet. That’s not an antibiotic as far as he knows but it does sound familiar. Pain relief, maybe? He tosses it into the bag as he slowly shuffles his way along the shelves.

There’s more than a few over the counter meds too that he shoves into the bag. Allergy medications. Fever reducers. Cough suppressants. He finds a few asthma inhalers and remembers there are a couple people back at the Garrison that use them. Wasn’t there a married couple looking for vitamins? Prenatal kinds? Are those prescription only or over the counter? He’s not sure.

Something comes running around the corner nearly right into him. If he hadn’t ducked the knife that came swinging out it would have sunken right into his eye. The second swing comes from a fist and it clocks Lance, a direct hit into his nose. He reels back with a yelp and hits a shelf, knocking it over
and sending bottles flying everywhere as his head slams into the ground.

“Fuck me,” Lance groans, warmth pouring down his mouth and chin from his aching nose. Broken, bloodied, and dizzy.

The person who accosted him grabs his bag from him and rifles through the bottles. He tosses them aside until he finds the Amoxicillin and another bottle. He pockets them, then snatches bandages off the shelf. And a sling from the wall. Lance’s head is spinning but he sees the red jacket from earlier. A black bandana tied around his face to obscure his features.

And yet, the stranger looks familiar as he leaps over the counter to escape out the back.

“Lance, what happened?” Pidge calls from the snack aisle as she runs over.

He’s gone already. It all happened so fast. Like a hit and run.

Pidge leans over the counter to look at him on the ground with a confused frown. She climbs over, helps him up, and gathers up the bottles on the floor.

“I think…” Lance says, wiping the blood from his face. “I think that was Keith. Kogane.”

“From Alpha team?” Pidge asks, eyes wide. “Really? You think so? Did you see anyone else with him?”

Lance shakes his head. “No, alone. And he nearly took my head off to get to my bag.”

“What did he take?” Pidge asks as Hunk shows up, his own bag filled with amenities. Lance rummages through it to check.

“The Amoxicillin...and the Percoset?” Lance blinks, his head a little fuzzy. “He grabbed some bandages too. And an arm sling.”

“Did he look hurt?” Hunk wonders. “That’s everything you need to treat a broken arm. A badly broken one. Like pain and infection bad.”

Lance shakes his head again. No, he looked pretty healthy. Used one arm to stab at him and the other to punch him in the nose. Asshole. They’re supposed to be on the same team. Lance shoves a dirty bandana from his pocket to his face to stem some of the bleeding as he jumps the counter again.

“He went that way,” Lance points with his elbow. “Probably back to the apartments. It’s where I saw him climbing down from.”

Pidge looks eager to follow but it is getting dark. And running off in the middle of the night to chase after anyone sounds foolish. That’s how you lose team members. But this is the closest they’ve come to any evidence of Alpha team even being alive and she wants to follow up on it.

God, they’re only about a week or so out from the Garrison. Especially if they don’t make too many pit stops. Why didn’t Alpha team head back to safety if they were so close?

“Up to you Pidge,” Lance says, blowing his nose a little and cringing at what a mistake that was. “Follow or not. We have our orders and it doesn’t include finding lost scouting teams.”

“Matt could be there,” Pidge says, eyes hopeful. She looks to Hunk and he nods.

“Then let’s go now,” Lance sighs and re-shoulders his rifle. “With all the noise we made, we’ve probably got a number of those things heading back.”
They book it to the bus and Hunk throws it into gear, slamming the doors shut. Lance points the way to the apartment he’d seen at the start of the town. That has to be where Keith’s holding up. Him and whoever is hurt.

The bus comes to a screeching stop at a crosswalk down the street and they watch as Keith climbs up to the fifth floor. Unfortunately, he disappears around a corner and none of them are able to see what room he went into.

“Somewhere on the fifth floor then?” Hunk guesses. “Should we all go up?”

“No one gets left alone again,” Pidge argues. “We go together or not at all.”

“Drive up to the fire escape,” Lance points. “Then lock up the door. Barricade it with the bars.”

It’s a setup they have for when they sleep at night. If a bunch of undead push and bang on the door enough it’ll cave and open. It’s how they lost Linden that first week out. Hunk fixed it up to set a series of bars against the door. Makes it hard to leave but even harder to get in.

Keeps out zombies and looters. But that makes up the only way out.

So up they go.

“I’ll cover you until you get across,” Lance assures them, scoping the area. There are more than a couple zombies shuffling around the complex. If anyone falls he needs to be able to shoot to protect them.

Hunk jumps to the top of the news van with relative ease and holds out his hand for Pidge. She jumps it too and right into his hold. They signal Lance across and he hops over, an easy feat with his long legs but he grabs Hunk’s hand too so he doesn’t risk slipping. Then they go up the ladder one at a time, uncertain how much it can hold.

Up and up they go as the sun dips lower. Lance can already feel it getting colder. As much as he doesn’t want to share a space with the guy who just decked him, he would like to get out of the cold air and into a warm room. Especially if there are other members of Alpha team.

The Admiral’s going to be thrilled to hear they aren’t all gone.

“Which room do you think…” Hunk says as he checks the handles. Locked.

“This one,” Pidge says, plastering her hands on the door. “Look. KT. Katie. Matt wrote that. So I could find him.”

“It’s locked too,” Hunk hums.

Pidge starts beating on it, hard and fast. The sound echoing loudly around them. Lance and Hunk grab her hands to stop her from making too much noise but then she resorts to kicking it with her little feet.

“Matt! MATT!” she calls. “I know you’re there! It’s Katie! Let me in!”

“Hush, Pidge,” Lance urges. “You want to bring the whole lot of them around the complex?”

“He’s right,” Hunk agrees, whispering. “Besides, I can pick it. Just stop kicking.”

This calms her enough. She shakes their hands off her but she huffs and gestures to the door impatiently. While Hunk works, she taps her feet and squeezes her arms tight to her chest, breathing
loudly through her nose. Scared, anxious, excited and impatient all rolled up into 90 pounds of computer nerd wound so tightly she’s likely to uncoil with a pop.

“Got it,” Hunk clicks his tongue.

Pidge puts a hand on the door and Lance reaches out cautiously to stop her. Her eyes look questioningly at him but he shakes his head. They didn’t answer after all. If they were allies, they’d have opened the door to them. Best to be careful. He raises his rifle and uses his foot to push open the door.

He leads, gun first. Pidge holds tight to her knife while Hunk grips his bat, raising it high.


Yeah, Lance saw it too.

“There’s three of them,” Hunk adds and points with the bat. “There. There. And there.”

They step over them carefully and maneuver through the flat. It’s pretty bare. Stains from whatever fight happened in there last blot the walls and floor. All the furniture is destroyed, the fridge empty. There’s an open window, showing them the setting sun.

It doesn’t look like anyone’s lived there for a while. Abandoned.

“But I’m sure of it,” Pidge shakes her head. “Matt has to be here.”

Lance wonders if maybe it’s a feint, some kind of ruse to distract them from the real door. But if that was the case, why didn’t any of the other doors open? Matt would recognize his own sister’s voice. He’d let her in.

Unless he’s gone. The big ‘gone’.

He approaches the window and sighs. Maybe they should head back. There’s nothing in the apartment here for them to sleep on and at least they have a blanket in the bus. Cushioned seats too. And it’s safer. They won’t have to worry about tripping a booby trap in there.

How’s he going to tell Pidge that they need to move on? That Matt’s not here. He scratches his head and looks out the window with a disappointed sigh. Wait, what’s--

“Hello?” Lance blinks at a length of rope tied off to the side on the balcony. It goes down into the flat below. “Pidge,” he calls her over and points.

She steps through the broken balcony door and eyes the rope before she leans over the edge to look down.

“Matt. Matt! Are you down there?” she urgently whispers.

A few seconds pass in silence.

“Katie? Is that...It really was her,” a voice gasps. Their head peeks out and up. “Katie?”

“Matt!” she nearly cries.

Pidge repels down before anyone can stop her. In the time it takes for Lance and Hunk get down to join her, the two siblings are clutched in each other's arms, balling their eyes out.
He looks terrible. Scraped up with bandages over his eye. Just as dirty as they are thanks to weeks without a shower. The tears cut a clean river through the muck of his face as he cries into Pidge’s neck. It’s a touching scene until the other occupant becomes aware of their presence.

Keith comes out onto the balcony and immediately draws his weapon, a large knife, and points it at them. Lance brings up his rifle just as quickly, putting himself between Keith and the others.

“What do you want?” he practically growls, his other hand out and behind him to guard the entrance to the rest of the abode.

“Keith put away the knife,” calls a weak voice from inside. Whoever it is groans before adding, “If they wanted to hurt us, they wouldn’t have announced themselves.”

“We can’t trust them, Shiro,” Keith asserts, not lowering his weapon. “They’re from the Garrison.”

“So are you,” Lance argues but that only serves to make Keith’s glare worse, if such a thing is possible.

“Keith,” Shiro coughs. “Stop. The last thing we need is a fight.”

Keith takes a deep breath in from his nose as he debates whether or not to listen to his captain. His eyes defiantly glare before he sheathes the blade with a scowl. He steps back into the apartment grumbling, his hand on the door.

“Get in. We need to close the door to keep the cold out,” Keith huffs.

Lance lowers the gun and nods to Hunk who takes a knee to gently encourage Pidge and Matt to go inside. The two manage to get off the ground but never let go of each other as they enter the room. Hunk follows them in but Lance stays back for a moment, wary of the guy that just threatened to stab him for a second time that day.

“You coming in or what?” Keith asks hotly.

This guy. Where does he get the gall to give them attitude?

“Yeah, but you point that knife at me or my friends again,” Lance strides over and puts his face right in Keith’s. “I’ll put a bullet in you like I would any deadhead out there and I won’t lose a wink of sleep over it. Got it?”

Keith just seethes quietly as Lance marches by him. The door closes and Lance takes in the barely lit living room.

There’s a couch set up with the leader of Alpha team laid out on it and it doesn't look like he'll be getting up real soon. He’s clearly hurt. Badly. His arm has been bandaged up but there’s a pile of bloodied rags in the bin from frequent changes. He’s sweating from a fever and looks tired as hell but he smiles nonetheless.

“What team are you guys?” Shiro asks, wincing as he tries to move.

Keith pushes past Lance with a huff and helps Shiro sit up. Gives him water and some pills. The ones Keith stole from him. 10 milligrams. That’s some serious pain then. Keith pushes the bottle into Shiro’s hand, insisting he drink more water.

“Echo,” Lance answers.
Keith almost snorts a cynical laugh that immediately brings a glare to Lance’s face. He returns his attention to the Captain who maintains his weak smile.

“That’s a short-range scouting team, isn’t it?” Shiro asks and Lance nods. “Are you the leader?”

“No, well. Yes. For now,” Lance shakes his head with a sigh. “It’s a sort of democracy.”

“Why are you this far out?” Keith asks, eyes still suspicious of them.

“The Garrison sent us out to collect food, medicine, and ammunition from K-Quadrant,” Lance straightens up as he answers. “We never thought we’d run into the Alpha team. How many of you are left?”

“You’re looking at them,” Shiro says sadly and Lance takes a step back in shock.

Just three? Out of an elite twenty-person team? Just three are left? That means...Matt’s father, Pidge’s dad, is gone. Dead.

Poor Pidge. Lance looks over and sees the two siblings have found a place in the corner to just hold each other, pat each other’s heads, and cry. Looks like she’s already fallen asleep in her brother’s arms. Face wet with tears.

“Christ,” Lance sighs and scratches his head. “Everyone thought you guys were dead. Admiral Sanda assured—”

“Sanda is the reason we’re in this mess at all!” Keith steps in, his voice rising high. Shiro gives him a look, and if it was supposed to help him reign it in it doesn’t. “That—monster—sent us on that scouting mission to die! She knew we’d never make it. And when we called for evac, begged them to send the chopper for pick up—they—they—!”

Red-faced, Keith slams his fist through the nearby drywall, next to a series of other holes. His jaw clenches as he inhales a deep breath through his nose. He pulls out his fist and draws back, ready to hit again.

“Keith,” Shiro reaches out and pats his arm. Keith jerks out of his reach and stomps away, out onto the cold balcony, slamming the door shut behind him.

“Temper,” Lance observes with a sneer.

“He lost someone very close to him when the mission went sour,” Shiro reveals. “We lost twelve people in 36 hours. Five to the undead infection.”

Lance looks down, appropriately contrite for his off comment. Well, of course, he’s testy then.

“Keith took it upon himself to sort the infected ones. Watched over them until they passed and put them out of their misery,” Matt finally speaks. “My dad was one of them. I...I couldn’t do it myself.”

Now he feels even worse about it.

Lance hasn’t had to end any of their comrades. Just a bunch of faceless unknowns. People he never met and could never recognize as ever being alive in the first place. Sometimes he has nightmares where he waits for Pidge or Hunk to die, watching as the infection burns them up in their own skin, and then...Lance swallows as he shakes away an old memory.

He couldn’t do it either if it came down to it.
“What about you?” Hunk asks, kneeling to look at Shiro’s arm. “I was an EMT for a summer before Incident One. Want me to look?”

“Ha, nothing more to be done,” Shiro tries to chuckle but offers the arm to him anyway. “Could use a bandage change, if you want to help.”

Hunk gestures for Lance’s bag, stuffed with medical supplies. Alcohol and antibiotic cream. No swabs but they make do with a relatively clean bandana. Hunk unwraps the arm to look at the break.

It’s pretty bad. He can smell the infection from there. Not the undead kind, just the normal sort which is just as dangerous. It’s foul. Pus oozes from the wound where the bone had previously broken through the skin. And it’s poorly set so it must be exceptionally painful.

“Needs a good cleaning,” Hunk admits. “It’s infected but...Keith gave you the Amoxicillin?”

Shiro nods and winces when Hunk gets to work cleaning.

“It should help. And the Percocet?” Hunk asks.

“It’ll kick in eventually,” Shiro chuckles. “I won’t be able to move for a bit though.”

“You shouldn’t be moving anyway,” Hunk tells him.

“Seems like a silly question at this point but, is it alright if we stay here tonight?” Lance asks.

“Stay as long as you want,” Shiro nods. “We can discuss further matters in the morning.”

Hunk cleans and dresses Shiro’s wound while Lance wanders around the flat. No power like everywhere else. Probably no water either. The front door is barricaded with any furniture they can’t sleep on. A fridge is pushed up against the door along with an old heavy space heater and coffee table.

It’s smart. Makes the only way in the window. No zombie is clever enough to use a rope and any person coming down has to come down one at a time. Makes it easy to dispatch looters or dangerous others. But when it’s time to leave they’ll have to unbarricade the door. Shiro can’t climb a rope, not in his condition.

The other rooms are fairly empty. Just mattresses and a few old blankets. From the setup, it looks like there were five people staying there at one point. Shame they couldn’t have gotten here sooner.

The last room has a few boxes with food in them. Not much though. A lot of it is junk food and Gatorade bottles filled with water. The three of them weren’t going to be able to stay much longer. There’s a couple of battery powered lamps around here and there but long out of juice.

Lance hears heavy steps behind him and turns to see Hunk waving him over. The look on his face says ‘bad news’.

“It’s bad, his break. Worse than I said,” Hunk admits in a low tone. “He has a fever. The infection is wrecking that arm. Swelling. Discharge. He needs an actual doctor. Someone who can remove the damaged tissue and properly set his arm. The antibiotics should keep him from dying in the next couple of days but…”

“He needs to get out of here,” Lance nods.

“Here’s the thing,” Hunk adds. “I could probably do it in a pinch if we had proper equipment.
Scalpels, sutures, antiseptics. Maybe some whole blood. But the longer we wait, the more likely we’re going to have to cut it off. I’m really worried about gangrene too.”

“The Garrison is over a week back in the direction we came,” Lance shakes his head. “Even if we didn’t stop...He’d never make it.”

“Pidge’s map says there’s a hospital, two days to the west,” Hunk suggests. “It may have supplies and such but no one from the Garrison’s been out there. It could be just as empty. What do you want to do?”

Lance hates when this stuff comes up. Serious decisions. Normally the three of them work together to make the best choice. But then things like this happen and the others leave it up to him. He can’t make this call on his own. Either way could get Shiro killed and this guy’s his hero. He’s part of the reason he even joined a scouting team.

The longer they wait the weaker Shiro’s going to get. Until eventually he can’t function at all. A choice needs to be made now before they turn in for the night.

“I’ll talk with Keith,” Lance sighs, not at all excited about it. “He’s a dick...but he’s smart. He’ll know what’s best.”

Hunk nods then looks worriedly at him. “Do you think it’s true? What Keith said? About Admiral Sanda sending them out here to die?”

“No way,” Lance shakes his head. “He lost someone. Needs someone to blame and that’s Sanda. Go ahead, I got this.”

Hunk nods. He gives him a pat and a look that says ‘play nice’ before they return to the living room. Hunk’ll keep an eye on Shiro’s condition and check on Matt’s eye while Lance goes outside to have a talk with Keith. He slides the door open and steps out into the cold air before sliding it closed again. Keith’s still out there, hunched over and arms braced on the balcony edge as he glares out into the darkness.

Christ, isn’t he cold? It’s fucking freezing but Keith doesn’t seem to notice or maybe he just doesn’t care. Lance shivers as he approaches and leans his back against the balcony.

“About Shiro,” Lance starts but Keith says nothing to interrupt him. “Hunk says it’s bad. He needs medical treatment. And soon. Or his arm will kill him.”

Keith’s eyes soften a little and lid. Lance takes that as license to keep going.

“The Garrison has doctors but it’s too far,” Lance says. “He’d never make it.”

“We wouldn’t go back to them anyway,” Keith huffs and crosses his arms. He looks contemplative before turning a little and meeting Lance’s eyes. “There’s another option, or you wouldn’t be out here.”

“A hospital, two days away. He could make it but there’s no guarantee we’ll find everything we need, could even be overwhelmed with undead,” Lance explains. “Do you want to try for that instead?”

There’s quiet between them as Keith runs scenarios. Dark eyes furrowed with thought, a frown pulled tight on his face. His hand cards through his hair to the base of his skull, letting out a sigh as he grabs and cracks his neck.
“Why are you even asking me?” Keith asks, eyes darting to Lance’s busted nose.

“Shiro’s compromised which gives you seniority as next highest ranking officer,” Lance admits, though it pains him to say so. “What do you want us to do, Lieutenant?”

Another long pause.

“Don’t call me that. Ranks don’t matter anymore,” Keith sighs but nods. “It’s better than doing nothing and waiting for him die,” he adds somberly.

“We’ll leave at first light then,” Lance suggests and Keith nods again, not looking at him.

Lance reaches into his pocket for some gum but opens the pack to find it empty. He’d forgotten he gave the last of it to Hunk. He crushes the little box and tosses it over the edge with a disappointed sigh. Keith just leans over the railing again, staring out into nothing.

Nothing more to say, so Lance adjusts his rifle and turns to go back inside.

“You know,” Keith calls out. “K-Quadrant is where they send teams they don’t want to die.”

This again?

“Then why did they send Alpha team?” Lance asks. “You guys are the best. Bring back the most stuff with the least fatalities.”

Keith pauses and stares with disbelief. Lance has to be pulling his leg. Has to be playing dumb but he doesn’t falter under Keith’s scrutinizing gaze. He really doesn’t know. Then...Keith levels his eyes at Lance, countenance suddenly serious.

“The Admiral...she didn’t like the support Shiro was getting,” Keith tells him. “Thought he’d try to take over…that’s why she turned off the radios. Why she abandoned us. We were a nuisance to her command and if they sent you, they never expected you to come back either.”

“That’s--” Lance starts to object.

“How many were you when you left? Fifteen? Ten?” Keith asks, his eyes focused on him. “And now you’re just three? Like us? Face it...they saw you as a burden to be alleviated. A drain on their resources. It’s amazing you even made it this far.”

Lance gapes, his mouth hanging open with nothing to combat against these outrageous claims.

“Don’t believe me? Try them on your Sat radio,” Keith huffs. “They won’t answer. Probably doesn’t even work.”

They’ve been trying their hardest to find things for everyone back home...was it all a ruse? To get rid of dead weight? He hates the growing feeling in his gut that Keith might be right. Try as he might fight it, that sinking feeling builds.

He doesn’t want to believe it. Wants to deck Keith. Call him a liar. Instead, Lance clenches his mouth shut, about faces, and goes back inside where it’s warm. He’s not willing to talk about this further with Keith, not without getting his fists involved. Once inside, Lance looks on the rest of his team after closing the door.

They’ve been through hell. Beaten up, tired, and filthy, all for a camp that doesn’t even want them anymore. A camp that actively sent them out to die. He remembers the list of objects they were given
and with new eyes sees there’s no way they could have located it all.

Naive...they were so naive.

Keith comes back in without a word. Just walks past Lance and sits on the floor next to Shiro’s couch. He picks at his nails with a small pocket knife by the light of a candle, periodically flitting his eyes up to look at Lance for a brief second before returning to his cuticles. His eyes are hardened, steeled from the hardships of the past two years but there’s no sign of deceit in them.

Keith’s not lying about it.

They’ve almost died multiple times trying to find things. Starved themselves to make the food stretch. Functioned on less than four hours of sleep on some nights. Lost so many people, their dog tags strung around Pidge’s neck as a constant reminder to keep going. To not let their deaths be in vain.

But it was in vain.

It was for nothing.

Lance has to swallow back the beginnings of a sob creeping up his throat. He doesn’t want anyone to see him fall apart. Not like this.

He’s supposed to be the leader.

He steps into one of the back rooms and leans against the wall. His hand cups over his mouth to stifle the noise he wants to release. Tears trickle down Lance’s cheeks as he slowly slides down to the floor with a thump, his rifle sliding off his shoulder and falling to the ground. He doesn’t bother picking it up, just buries his face in his hands, sobbing hard but as quietly as he can manage.

It’s not quiet enough, however. Boots step their way over and come to a stop next to him before a hand comes down on his head. It pats gently as Lance just shudders out more sobs. A cloth gets pushed into his hands that he wipes his face with and cries into some more before choking out a ‘thanks’. Whoever it is says nothing, just give him another pat and walk back into the living room, leaving him alone with his tears.

How could he be so blind? Did Hunk and Pidge figure out before he did? If not, now he has to tell them too. More leader things he doesn’t want to do. He’s going to have to tell them that no one expects them back. No one wants them to return.

His mom. His family. He may never see them again.

If he’d known he’d never have left.

*****

Lance isn’t sure when he fell asleep. He finds himself in the same knee-hugging position he’d been crying in, but when he opens his eyes the room is brighter. Morning. Someone draped a threadbare blanket over his shoulders in the night. They even picked up his gun and propped it up on the wall. A Gatorade bottle, half full of water sits next to his foot.

Right. The apartments.

Lance stretches, the blanket falling off as he reaches high. It’s quiet. He’s the first awake today.

He opens the water and drinks only a little as he’s still used to having to share. He caps it and stands,
then steps over to grab his rifle and shoulder it again. The blanket gets scooped from the ground as Lance comes back into the living room where everyone is still sleeping.

Hunk, Pidge, and Matt are squeezed together for warmth, sharing a single blanket that is far too small for them. Pidge sits squeezed in the middle, marks from her tears still there from the night before. Matt has new dressings on his eye and Hunk’s got an arm around Matt’s shoulder, holding the three of them together.

Shiro’s still on the couch under a blanket of his own, sweat on his brow from fever. The minute Lance steps in his eyes flutter open.

“Morning Captain,” Lance tries to smile and kneels with the water bottle, offering it to Shiro.

“Heh, morning,” Shiro sighs and sits up with Lance’s help. He drinks the water as Lance talks.

“We’re going to take you to a hospital. Lieutenant Kogane and I worked it out. You can’t stay here any longer or you’ll die,” Lance says quietly.

“You two are in charge, I guess,” Shiro chuckles a little. “Not like I can fight you on it. And don’t call him that. He hates it.”

Lance nods with a smile and takes the extended water bottle back. “Yes sir,” Lance casually salutes with two fingers.

He scans the room and finds Keith sleeping on the floor by the far wall with nothing but a pillow under his head. He’s curled up as small as he can get to conserve heat. His face is the most relaxed Lance has seen it. More human than the night before but a frown still sits on his face.

Lance nudges his foot with his own with no response. He does it a couple more times and Keith reaches out for something before his eyes blink open, resuming their stern appearance.

“Time to get people moving,” Lance says as he squats down and shakes the last of the bottle at him. “Drink up. We need to gather what we can to take with us and get out of here.”

Keith eyes the bottle before sitting up and taking it. He coughs a few times to clear his throat before drinking the last of the water and nodding. No other words, he just gets up, snatches his bag from the floor, and heads to the other bedrooms to grab what’s left of their food stores. Lance won’t complain about the silent treatment—it’s better than getting an argument.

Lance wakes the others and lets them know what the plan is, minus the horrifying truth revealed to him by Keith the night before. They don’t need that right now. The longer he can go without telling them the longer they’ll be able to keep their spirits up.

It’s for the best.

They fold and pack up the three blankets, any medicine they can, and the battery lamps from the other room. Keith returns with two backpacks, one a little more stuffed than the other. He passes them off to the Holt siblings and helps Hunk unbarricade the door.

Once it’s clear Lance takes point. Hunk and Keith shoulder Shiro who’s too weak to make the trip on his own. Pidge brandishes her blade, standing protectively in front of her brother.

“We’ll have to take the stairs all the way down,” Lance sighs. “Shiro’s not going to be able to use the fire escape ladder without falling.”
“It’s blocked off from this floor anyway,” Matt tells him. “To keep people from getting up here. We’ll have to fight through more than a few dead ones once we’re down there though. Then across the courtyard to your bus. It’ll be dicey.”

“We’ll be fine,” Lance tells him, more to convince himself than the others.

“Maybe I should make a run for the bus and drive it over here,” Hunk suggests. “Not to worry anyone but it’ll be slow going if we have to carry Shiro the whole way. And that puts everyone at risk.”

That is a better idea but Lance doesn’t like the thought of Hunk going it alone. Once they get down further, to the blockage, he likes it even less. There’s gotta be at least a dozen of the dead shuffling around. Their group keeps low and hidden so as not to draw attention but now a new decision has to be made.

“Hunk you really want to go alone?” Lance asks, worry in his tone.

“Got my bat,” Hunk assures him. “I may be slow but I hit hard. Nothing’s getting back up after it goes down.”

“I’ll go with him,” Keith finally speaks, pulling the ka-bar knife from his hip.

Is that a good idea? An extra person does improve his chances but...he doesn't know Keith. Well, he knows his skills but not the way he operates or how reliable he is. Will he watch Hunk’s back? Or abandon him to his own if things go south? Hunk doesn’t look worried about it so maybe it’ll be okay.

“Fine, you go with him,” Lance agrees.

“I wasn’t asking for your permission,” Keith raises a brow.

“Whatever,” Lance grumbles. “I’ll cover you guys from up here. I’ve only got about...four rounds left in the chamber so try not to get into trouble.”

They both nod and make a run for it. The others stay hidden behind the railing while Lance stands and looks through the scope of his old but trusty Ruger M77.

Keith goes a little ahead of Hunk since he’s smaller and faster than him. He weaves through some of the slower ones, sinking his blade into the skulls of any that might get in Hunk’s way. The way he wields his weapon is so fast and smooth that Keith hardly stays in one place for more than half a second before the knife sinks into another head.

Hunk follows along. Any zombies Keith missed, that have started chasing after him, get whammed while unaware in the back of the head with Hunk’s bat. Everything looks good until something reaches out from under a car, snagging Hunk’s boot and dropping him with a yelp.

“Shit!” Lance curses and aims.

The zombie is pulling himself to Hunk’s boot but his bat is on the ground out of reach. Keith shoots a glance over his shoulder and doubles back, narrowly avoiding the clawing hands of another deadhead. He slides in and slams the knife into the one that’s got Hunk just as it’s rearing its head back to take a bite.

“Christ,” Lance sighs with relief. Guess his worries were unfounded.
Keith helps him up and makes sure he’s not injured. But in that moment of calm another crawls out from under the car, it’s face inches from Keith’s leg. A shot rings out through the air as Lance pegs it with perfect accuracy, brain matter splattering the ground. The body goes slack. Keith stares with shock and looks up at the origin of the shot, surprised to find it was Lance.

“Get moving!” Lance shouts and the two run off for the bus again, Hunk limping a bit from twisting his ankle a little.

But they make it to the bus. Keith hops up on the hood and helps pull Hunk the rest of the way. When they drop down into the bus from the emergency exit Lance lowers his sights with a relieved sigh.

A little too much excitement for his morning.

He checks on the others and gets approving nods from the Holt siblings and a weak thumbs up from Shiro. Good work. And no one’s died yet. That’s a win if he’s ever seen one.

Hunk starts up the bus and drives it over to them, running over two crawling zombies on the way. He uses the bus to push the van blocking the stairs, taking its place to prevent anything from getting in. Then he opens the doors to let them in. Lance makes sure they all get in first before following them in and closing it.

“Great job,” Shiro smiles as Keith sets him up in a seat. “You guys make a pretty good team.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Lance manages to smile too. “Let’s get out of here Hunk.”

“Aye aye, Sergeant Mcclain,” Hunk chuckles as he throws it into reverse.

*****

Once they’re on the road again and not worried about hitting any more bumps, Pidge goes through the food supplies and passes out something for everyone to eat. Some crushed pop tarts, a few granola bars with raisins, and a bottle of water to pass around.

Lance happily takes a seat and opens his pop tart, taking care to not drop a single crumb. While he eats he eyes each of the others until his gaze falls to Keith. Keith just holds his granola bar in his hands, unopened, and watches as Shiro eats his. It’s not until Shiro’s finished, until everyone’s had something to eat, that Keith finally opens it. He only eats half before handing the last of it to Shiro. Saying something about not having much of an appetite but it feels false.

With a sigh, Lance looks sheepishly down at his empty wrapper. It obvious from how thin he is that Keith’s used to making his food stretch, further than they’ve had to. How many times has he given his food to Matt? To Shiro? And just gone to bed hungry?

Lance puts his hands in his pockets and finds the cloth from earlier. The one pushed into his tear soaked hands. He pulls it out to wipe his brow and finds himself staring at it until recognition comes over his face.

It’s Keith’s. The bandana he had wrapped around his face when they clashed in the Walgreens. It’s further confirmed when Lance looks up and finds it nowhere around Keith’s neck. Confusion abounds as he looks at it again.

Why would he do that? Perhaps to comfort him after dropping that bomb last night?
“Lay down Shiro,” Keith says, looking tired already. “Get some rest.”

Keith pulls the blanket from one of the bags and drapes it over Shiro. Makes him take more pills and water too. Shiro thanks him before drifting off again. Only then does Keith take a seat at the back of the bus and away from everyone else. He coughs again and curls up tight to get some sleep of his own.

Was the blanket his doing too?

Lance furrows his brow and frowns. Maybe he was wrong about him. Keith gave him his bandana and then his only blanket. You don’t do that if you’re an asshole. And now he has a cold but he didn’t say anything about it.

With a sigh, Lance pulls a blanket out from the bag along with the cough syrup from the med bag. Carefully, he goes down the aisle until he can sit in the opposing seat from Keith.

“Hey, man,” Lance says, nudging him.

Keith opens his tired eyes and covers his mouth to cough.

“What?” Keith asks, with a little more attitude than necessary.

“Drink this.”

Keith eyes the medicine but takes it. He pops the top off and measures out a small amount of the liquid into the cap. The artificial grape smell fills the air and reminds Lance of days when he’d fake sickness to get out of school. That seems like lifetimes ago now.

Keith’s barely taking enough to combat the cough.

“More than that,” Lance tells him. “We’ve got plenty. Just take the recommended dose.”

Keith huffs and pours more before downing it. He twists the cap back on and tosses the bottle into Lance’s hands before rolling away to prop himself up on the window for sleep.

Rude little–He may have done something nice but it doesn’t change that Keith’s a sourpuss. Lance shakes his head and tosses the blanket on top of him. Keith hardly moves to acknowledge it, just grumbles annoyed.

“Use a blanket,” Lance says over his shoulder as he heads back to the front. “Don’t need anyone passing around a cold.”

Lance sits down in his own seat near the front, leaning back and sighing. His fingers play with the bandana in his pocket again. Keith’s bandana. He came in there last night, saw him crying, and pet his head. No off comments. No anything. Just handed him something to wipe his face with and left him alone.

He pulls the cloth out and looks at it. It’s not actually black like he thought. A deep dark red with a paisley design in black. There are a few old bloodstains on it. He wonders if it smells like Keith at all but when he puts it to his face all he smells is salt. Like tears. He pockets it again and makes himself comfortable.

Keith must know what it’s like to feel that way. Didn’t Shiro say he’d lost someone?
He’s had his whole world come crashing down, smashed to pieces. There must have been a time when he felt like he’d rather drown himself in tears than accept the new truths of this world. And someone must have comforted him too. Why else would he do something so kind for someone he obviously doesn’t like?

“When you get tired Hunk, I’ll take over for a bit,” Matt tells him.

“Should you though? I mean, you’ve only got one good eye,” Hunk wonders.

“It’ll be fine,” Matt assures him. “Pretty sure the cops won’t notice.”

The lot of them chuckle a little and it makes the bus feel warmer. Safer. Happier than it has in months.

It’s nice to have others with them again. Even if one is in the process of dying from infection, another is a grumpy anti-socialite, and the last is almost blind and making jokes about it. And all of it surrounded by the apocalyptic deathscape that is the new world order. And yet...Lance shifts with a half smile.

It feels like a family again.

Chapter End Notes

Did you like the chapter? Give it a kudos! Really like it? Leave a comment or rec it to a friend!
Don't know what to say? Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that stuff and I'm no exception!

Also, if you really like Voltron stuff and want more, check out my other fics. Tell me what you think of them! If I'm stagnating on one maybe YOU can be the one to inspire me to keep writing!
The first day on the road is uneventful. Every two hours or so Hunk stops the bus, people hop off to take care of business, and then Matt takes over. This repeats for the whole day.

Every time they stop, Lance takes a seat up top to survey the land. Keeping an eye out for anything that might harm them. Luckily, these back roads never had much in the way of people to begin with, so they have even less undead to worry themselves with. The first time something came in sight that morning Keith was already taking care of it before Lance could announce it.

Keith.

Ever since they left the apartment he’s been quiet. Spends most of his time checking on Shiro, making sure he’s comfortable and taking his pills regularly every six or so hours. He doesn’t talk much. When the bus is in motion he sits, eyes far off, mouth set firm. That or he naps. When they stop moving he cleans his knives and sharpens them.

At one point, they stop at a creek and start bottling up as much water as they can. Later they’ll find some time to boil it to make it safer for drinking. Probably when they stop for the night. They’ll need to anyway if they want to clean out Shiro’s wound again, which they definitely should do according to Hunk.

For now, the whole team is taking a moment to wash up in the creek. Clean their faces, hands, and rinse out dirty clothes. Best way to prevent illnesses and such even if they don’t have time to do a thorough cleaning. Keith had been washing out his socks and putting them on a tree branch to dry when Lance announces their incoming visitor.

“We got another one,” Lance calls down from the top of the bus. “Northside. About a hundred yards.”

Keith’s already rushing to put his boots back on even though he needn’t hurry with how slow it’s shuffling.

“Keep an eye on it,” Pidge tells him. “When it gets closer we’ll take it out.”

Keith jogs over and climbs up the bus to where Lance is to see where it’s coming from. Lance passes him the rifle and Keith raises it up to peek through the cracked scope. Keith hands it back without
looking at him and hops down the hood. He draws his weapon and goes ahead to take care of it.

“We had time,” Lance huffs.

“He doesn’t want anything getting closer than it needs to,” Matt explains. “Better to do it sooner than later. You never know if it’ll come back to bite you, literally and figuratively.”

Lance furrows his brows and watches as Keith kicks out the leg of the zombie. It falls and he drops into it blade first. Keith searches the body for anything useful and then heads back, cleaning his knife off with a scrap of fabric. That sour look still sits on his face.

“He’s so grouchy,” Lance comments.

“It’s the end of the world, Lance,” Matt chuckles. “Not a lot of us are happy about it.”

“You know what I mean,” Lance rolls his eyes and looks up at the sky.

“Give him a little time,” Matt sighs and adjusts his glasses. “Once Shiro’s out of danger, he’ll be better. Not more friendly but more talkative.”

That’d be great. He’s getting sick of the awkward silences and humorless staring.

“Anything good?” Lance calls down as Keith passes by.

He says nothing. Just glances up, shakes his head no, and goes back to his drying socks.

Lance has been making an effort to be nice; for Shiro’s sake and the sake of a smooth operating team. There haven’t been any more arguments and he hasn’t been on the receiving end of anything violent from Keith since the pharmacy. In fact, Keith’s been keeping his distance from pretty much everyone who isn’t Shiro.

It’s weird to Lance. That in a time like this, Keith doesn’t want to be closer to people. Doesn’t want to talk or gather around the others. Even now he puts himself further down the creek from Hunk and Pidge filling up water bottles.

Keith kicks off his boots again and rolls up his pant legs. Ties his wild hair back from his face before kneeling down to rinse his hands and face of residual blood from his latest kill. He absently pats as his neck for something and in remembering it’s gone he shakes his head. Instead, he uses his sleeve to wipe his face of water drops.

Lance fingers the bandana in his pocket. Should he give it back? Keith hasn’t asked for it.

“If it’s not dry, grab it and we’ll hang it up in the bus,” Hunk calls out.

“We want to get a little more distance in before stopping for the night,” Pidge adds.

“We’re stopping once it gets dark?” Keith asks as he grabs his socks and boots. It’s the first complete sentence he’s said to anyone besides Shiro since they got on the road. Everything else has been ‘yes’, ‘no’, or a shrug.

“Have to,” Hunk tells him. “Bus doesn’t have working lights for night travel. Even if it did, it’d just attract zombies. Best to find a side road with trees for cover for the night.”

“We can even get a fire going. A low one but enough to boil some water and eat something warm for a change,” Pidge hums.
Keith nods his understanding but he’s clearly not happy about having to stop. Shiro’s condition makes him want to hurry. Even these little stops bother him if they last longer than ten minutes.

They pile back into the bus and take off again. Matt drives them for the next bit, allowing Hunk a good two hours to catch up on some rest. Poor guy is used to only getting to sleep at the end of the day, so a nap next to Pidge is a welcome change to their usual.

Lance knows the two of them are an item but never comments on it. They’ve always been close since before Incident One but afterward, it’s only become more prominent. He’s never seen them kiss but he doesn’t need to for confirmation. There’s something about the way he holds her in his big arms, like he dares something to try and pull her away. And then there’s the way she fondly runs her tiny fingers through his hair when he’s driving. There’s no doubt in Lance’s mind that they’re together and that they’re happy.

Lance can honestly say he’s happy for them. Pidge and Lance had a number of interludes before Incident One but they never worked out like that. So it’s nice that someone can make her happy and he’s even gladder still that it’s his best friend. In a time like this, it’s hard to find someone to share affection with.

Even harder to keep them safe.

It gets him wondering about what Shiro said. About Keith losing someone close to him. Who? Lance can’t remember who all the members of Alpha team were other than the three currently in their bus. Who was it? A friend? A lover? A brother?

Lance has been exceedingly lucky in this respect. His family is safe in the compound. He has no significant other. And his best friends are right alongside him, safe and capable of protecting themselves. He couldn’t have it more made.

He glances at the back of the bus to find Keith turning over a small knife in his hands, flipping it to look into the shiny surface on both sides. His eyes sullen and mouth pulled into a thin line.

Keith’s had to kill members of his own team. Was that important person he lost one of those people? What kind of number does that do on a person? Having to kill someone you care deeply about? Lance shudders at the thought and turns back around in his seat, not wanting to think about it too long.

Shiro sleeps most of the time, too tired and weak to be awake for more than half an hour at a time. When he does wake up he talks to anyone who’s close enough to converse with. If Pidge is close he talks about her dad, stories of them working together before and after Incident One. Good stories that bring a smile to her face and everyone else’s as well. Even Keith manages the smallest of sad smiles before turning somber again.

That’s right, Lance remembers. He put Captain Holt down...Keith’s memories of him are tainted by what he had to do.

Hunk mostly talks to Shiro about his injury as he’s cleaning it or changing the dressings. It seems friendly at first but Lance catches Hunk asking questions to test memory and cognitive thinking. He wants to make sure the infection isn’t making Shiro delirious or hallucinatory. The answers sound alright to Lance, correct at least, but Hunk still looks worried.

His responses are slow. And his fingers are cold too, so he’s losing circulation. Even if they save his arm, he’ll never use those fingers again. Never regain full range of motion. Not exactly good news but Hunk lets Lance know about it before anyone else.
“We should tell Keith,” Hunk sighs while scratching his head.

“If that a good idea?” Lance asks, glancing over at the sleeping subject of their conversation. “Guy’s worried enough.”

“Might be best to prepare him for the worst. Shiro likely knows he’s going to lose his arm,” Hunk explains. “Keith won’t like it but it’ll get him ready to help when it comes time to cut it off.”

“Then I’ll tell him tonight after dinner,” Lance concedes but he’s not happy about it. He hates being the bearer of bad news.

“Hope he doesn’t stab the messenger.”

“You and me both,” Lance smirks.

*****

Hours later they make their final stop for the night. They pull off into a country lane an hour before sunset. Pidge divvies out jobs for everyone and no one fights her on it. If there’s one thing Pidge is good at it’s delegating responsibilities to the right people. The right tool for the right job, she likes to say quoting Hunk.

Pidge and Matt set up a perimeter around the bus. It’s simple really. They have a long string of cans and metal scraps that they tie up in a circle around the camp at night. Usually a good distance from them to make noise if something gets caught in it and give them ample warning of danger. It’ll keep them safe while they cook and such.

Hunk takes care of preparing the food and boiling water. He pulls down anything from the bus they’ll need for this endeavor. The big stew pot for boiling water and a small pot for cooking dinner. Tonight it’s going to be refried beans and canned corn. Not a feast but, hey, plenty of protein. Once he’s done with that he helps Shiro out of the bus to take care of business and get a little fresh air.

That leaves Keith and Lance to gather up firewood. Anything dry that they can find. Twigs, branches, and logs. Enough to keep the fire going for a good couple of hours to cook and boil.

Lance grabs up all the little kindling he can find while Keith grabs up broken branches. As per usual Keith is silent as they go about the woods. It’s the quietest this job has ever been for Lance. It’s unnerving. So to alleviate some of the awkward boredom he hums.

It last about a minute and a half before Keith says something.

“Could you not?” Keith huffs as he bends over to grab a big branch.

“What?”

“Hum. It’s distracting,” Keith tells him as he breaks it in half. “Can’t hear if anything’s coming.”

“We already did a sweep, nothing’s in here. Plus, Pidge and Matt have already set up the cans,” Lance argues. “We’re fine.”

“Sure,” Keith rolls his eyes with a frown. “Famous last words.”

“Nothing’s getting in here,” Lance insists. “Not without our knowing about it. And if it does, I’ll take care of it. It’ll never get close. I’m a great shot.”

Outside of the towns Lance never worries about their gunfire attracting too many zombies. And he
recently refilled the cartridge in his rifle. It’s full with a few rounds to spare in his pockets. It’s the last of the .243’s but it’s full. The next time they do a run for supplies they need to hit a pawn shop or something.

Lance steps past Keith for another bundle of sticks. When he turns to see if Keith’s keeping up he finds the guy standing still, contemplatively looking at the ground. Keith turns his head away to look back in the direction of camp. Probably thinking about Shiro.

“Thanks,” Keith says quietly. “For before. At the complex. You are a pretty good shot.”

“Oh, sure,” Lance shrugs. “I wasn’t about to let anyone get nommed on by some corpse. Even if they did break my nose. Still hurts by the way.”

There’s a quiet pause.

“Sorry... for everything,” Keith says and walks back to camp, his arms full of branches.

Lance just stands there, not sure if he heard what he thought he heard. Everything? What does he mean by that? Other than socking him in the face Lance can’t think of anything else he’d need to apologize for. Unless he’s talking about the reveal on the balcony…?

Regardless, it was nice to hear. A thank you and an apology? All in the span of fifteen seconds? From Keith of all people? Feels nice. Lance smiles a little and follows behind Keith resuming his humming from before.

And this time, Keith makes no comment on the noise.

*****

The heat from the fire is enough to warm them up despite the chill in the air. Shiro’s joined the lot of them against Hunk’s suggestion. He allows it provided they wrap a blanket or two around him. He looks like a cocoon but not uncomfortable as they all talk by the fire.

It’s not much to eat but everyone gets some beans and some corn. And it’s warm which Lance finds better than jerky or eating cold from the can again. They still have a couple MREs in the bus as well but they try not to break into them unless absolutely necessary. Eat one of those and you shit a brick two days later. A painful brick.

“Water’s boiled,” Hunk announces and pulls the pot off the fire. “Once it cools a little I’ll need help pouring them back into the bottles.”

Pidge and Matt volunteer for that job. Good, because Lance prefers to get back up on the bus roof for first watch. But that’s not for another good hour. For now, they can just enjoy the warmth of the fire and eat and talk.

Lance talks about some of their escapades around the Garrison before Incident One. All the trouble the trio would get into sneaking around the complex. Hiding General Iverson’s hat in one of the simulators. Hacking the Garrison website to show a candid video of the officers drunk dancing. Stealing into the cafeteria to gank a couple gallons of chocolate pudding. Hunk whines and rubs his belly at the memory, wishing they had some right now. He’d kill for some chocolate.

“Not me,” Lance shakes his head with a smile. “I’ll break out. I’d kill for some gum though. The cinnamon kind.”

“It’s good! Do I have to have a reason?” Lance asks with a laugh.

“What about you, Keith?” Hunk calls over to the other side of the fire.

Keith just blinks, almost confused, like he didn’t expect to be part of this conversation. They look at him, waiting for an answer. His mouth opens but nothing comes out. He then shuts it with a frown and looks away.

“Keith doesn’t like candy,” Shiro chuckles. “He’s partial to blueberries though.”

“Shiro,” Keith huffs, clearly not wanting him to talk about this.

“Good luck finding any of those,” Pidge sighs. “Maybe if we find a garden. Me? I’d love an unopened soda. Fizzy and sweet.”

“Ugh, stop. You’re going to make me cry,” Hunk whines.

The group laughs a little but Lance can’t help but notice Keith’s distracted gaze. His eyes fall and stay on Shiro’s arm, worry pinching his features together. He can’t even consider joking around about food with this bigger concern looming over them. Suddenly he stands, puts his half-finished bowl in Shiro’s lap and takes off for the bus.

“Keith,” Shiro sighs but he’s long gone.

“He do that a lot?” Lance asks.

“He’s very...private. Got a lot of walls,” Shiro tells them as he finishes off Keith’s food. “I promise he’s not a bad guy.”

“I meant the food thing,” Lance elaborates.

“Oh, ha. Yeah,” Shiro chuckles. “He feels responsible. I broke my arm saving him. Thinks he has to make it up to me. He doesn’t, but that doesn’t stop him.”

“It’s not healthy,” Hunk comments. “I know food’s scarce but he needs to eat more or he won’t have the energy to fight.”

“Good luck telling him that,” Shiro smiles weakly. “I’ve tried but…”

But Keith’s not one to listen. He’s hard-headed and stubborn.

They finish up the food, not willing to let a single bit go to waste. Pidge and Matt practically lick the pot clean before helping Hunk pour the water into the bottles. It’s great that they found a creek earlier. They can go a while without food but water...they’d make it three days before dying of dehydration out here.

Lance helps shoulder Shiro back to the bus. Sets him up in his seat and administers pills. Shiro thanks him while he wraps two blankets around him. He needs more now. The bus only had one blanket to begin with. With the addition of the ones from the apartment that only makes four. Mentally, Lance adds blankets to the list of things to grab up when they find another town to hit.

A cough wakes him from his thoughts. It came from above. Keith’s on the roof of the bus.

Lance snatches the cough syrup again, along with a blanket. His eyes fall on the food supply box, thinking about how little Keith’s been eating. He rummages through it until he finds the exact pop tart he wants and water bottle before taking all the items up.
Keith’s sitting cross-legged, arms hugging close to his body for warmth. His eyes are focused on the stars above, searching. Doesn’t even take notice of Lance when he comes up, so the first thing he does is throw the blanket at him.

“For fuck’s sake, use a damn blanket,” Lance scolds. “What, you too cool for them?”

“I don’t need one,” he insists but leaves it where it’s landed on his shoulders.

“Drink more of this,” Lance says as he sits next to him, handing him the cough syrup.

Keith takes it, measures out the right amount to avoid any more guff from Lance, and swallows it down before shoving it back into his hands. Lance then throws the water and pop tart into his lap.

“I don’t need your help,” Keith tells him with a glare. “Stop being nice to me.”

“I don’t need your help,” Lance mocks him with a frighteningly accurate imitation. “Jeez. My motives are purely selfish. If you’re weak and tired and sick, you can’t exactly help protect the group. I’m being practical, not nice.”

“Then why this?” Keith shows him the pop tart wrapper, tapping it with his finger. “Blueberry?”

“I...thought you could use a pick me up. It’s not that deep dude,” Lance assures him. “Everyone needs one every once in awhile. Dunno if you noticed but it sucks out here. Take your pleasures where you can get them. Even if it’s a shitty blueberry pop tart.”

Keith doesn’t know what to say to that. And he is really hungry. He opens the bag and starts eating. Slowly.

He thinks Keith’s only going to eat half when he stops and looks down into his lap with a sigh. For a second his eyes look shimmery, like he’s going to cry. Keith reaches for his missing bandana but since it’s in Lance’s pocket he just ends up rubbing his neck before looking up at the stars to push back his emotions.

Lance wonders if he should leave. Go back down for a bit before returning for the night watch. Give Keith a few minutes alone since Shiro said he’s a private person. Likes keeping things to himself. But Keith beats it back, his eyes returning to how they were before he stopped eating. Somber and tired.

“Thanks,” Keith mumbles as he eats.

“It’s fine,” Lance shrugs. “You can’t keep giving your food away. It’s already barely enough to keep going on. If you only eat half, you’re just going to get tired and make yourself sicker.”

“Yeah,” Keith nods.

Lance doesn’t like this heavy atmosphere. He’s going to be up here for a while and it doesn’t look like Keith’s going to leave until he finishes his food. They could talk to pass the time but Lance isn’t sure what kinds of things Keith will talk about that won’t just piss him off. Or make him close off entirely. But he can’t know if he doesn’t try something.

Keith’s thumb absently rubs the handle of one of his many blades as he eats and it gives Lance an idea.

“So, I was wondering,” Lance starts. “You have like eight knives. What do you need so many for?”
There’s a spark of interest in his eye and Lance thinks--jackpot! Keith swallows his mouthful of food before he turns to Lance with skepticism.

“You really want to know?” Keith asks, surprised Lance even cares.

Lance gives him a shrug. He doesn’t have anywhere to be, sure. Why not?

Keith smirks and puts down the pop tart. Lance is partial to exaggeration; there’s actually only four. He pulls the blades off his person one by one. Each one is laid out for Lance to see and hold if he likes while he explains their purposes.

The Ka-bar tactical knife for zombies. It’s not used for anything other than that. It’s not new by any means. Issued to him after joining Alpha team. It’s the one he keeps on hand the most for obvious reasons.

He has a swiss army knife for all the little tools they might need. It looks well worn, a little older than the others. Some initials are imprinted on it but they’re not Keith’s. Not his originally but he doesn’t say where it came from. It’s the knife Lance saw him using the other night on his nails.

There’s also a serrated blade of some sort that hardly ever leaves its sheath. It’s technically a saw, for cutting rope or branches and the like. It's also the knife he rubs his thumb on most frequently, Lance has noticed. There’s a story there but Lance doesn’t pry.

“And that one, the little one,” Lance points at the knife still on his hip. Keith pulls it out of the sheath, turning the edge away from Lance before handing it to him handle first.

It’s ridiculously sharp. A double-sided spear point blade and very clean. Not a speck of rust on it. He’d think it’s never seen any action but there are a few scratches to suggest otherwise. He recognizes it as the one Keith was staring into earlier.

“That’s...for people,” Keith says seriously. “When they pass from the plague.”

“You have a separate one for them?” Lance blinks as he turns it over in his hands. “Why?”

“Because they deserve something that doesn’t have the blood of the monster that killed them all over it,” Keith tells him as he puts the others away.

Yikes. Things went back to being serious again. Not exactly what Lance was shooting for but there’s nothing for it now.

“It sucks that you’ve had to use it,” Lance tells him as he turns the knife, taking care to avoid the sharp edge. “I mean it. Sorry man.”

“Yeah,” Keith agrees with a sigh. “Me too.”

He takes Keith’s hand without much thought and puts it back in his palm. His hand must linger a little too long because Keith eyes him, raising a suspicious brow. Lance withdraws his hand quicker than he cares to admit and stretches.

“I’m gonna take first watch soon. You should go in and get some sleep,” Lance tells him, his eyes on the stars.

Keith gives an understanding nod as he finishes his snack and tips the crumbs into his mouth. He drinks half of the water and puts the bottle down next to Lance. When he stands he drops the blanket on top of Lance then hops down into the bus. Then he closes the hatch behind him.
That wasn’t so bad. It was almost friendly even.

Lance smiles before readjusting everything. Puts his rifle on his lap, checks his watch, and wraps the blanket tight around himself, ready for the first couple of hours in the cold air.

The others tuck in and set up the bars for the night. Normally that’s enough and Lance doesn’t need to stand watch but he feels safer keeping an eye out. It’s not for zombies honestly. Even if they got to the bus they can’t break down the door.

What Lance really worries about is other survivors that don’t think twice about slaughtering people for their things. Smart and desperate people who can and certainly will find a way into their bus. They’ve met more than a few like that. Of course, Lance has never had to kill them himself. When there were more of them the older members handled it.

Lance sighs sadly, looking at the rifle in his lap.

They knew Lance couldn’t do it. His hands shake and his breath catches just at the idea of shooting an actual living person. His threat to Keith the other day was nothing more than a well-done bluff bolstered by his annoyance at his broken nose. Aiming was easy...but pulling the trigger would have been impossible.

He can’t kill someone. Not even if that person was an asshole. If there’s a human soul looking out at him from behind their eyes...he just can’t.

Guess that means he'd have never cut it as a soldier in the old world.

Lance shivers a little as he checks through the scope at the landscape. Looks good. He’s seen a deer in the time he’s been up there. A raccoon and an opossum too. Would’ve shot the deer if it was daylight and they had all they needed to skin and cure the meat but as it is...they’ve got nothing and besides that, they don’t have the time. No point in wasting the bullet.

A knock on the emergency door gets Lance’s attention. It opens and Keith’s head pops up.

“It’s been four hours,” Keith tells him.

“Already?” Lance yawns.

“Want me to take over?” Keith asks.

“Hell no,” Lance shakes his head. “You’re sick. You need the shuteye. Get Pidge. Hunk and Matt need sleep to drive the bus. The rest of us can nap while they drive.”

Keith disappears and Lance takes a last chance to look up at the stars for the night. Never could see them like this in the city. It’s all so beautiful. Why didn’t he take the time to appreciate it all before this?

Pidge comes up grumbling, draped in her jacket and Hunk’s too for the extra warmth. He offers her the blanket but she waves it off.

“You give me that and I’ll be so warm I’ll fall asleep,” she tells him. “Give it to Keith. I can hear him shivering from across the damn bus.”

Lance nods, hands her his rifle as she takes a seat. Pidge won’t fire it, her accuracy isn’t that great, but she’ll use the scope to watch out. If she needs to fire she’ll call for him. Once she gets comfortable she pulls something out of her pocket. She smacks a pack of cigarettes on her palm
before slipping one out and lighting it.

“I thought you quit. Anyway, aren’t those for Morrison?” Lance asks as he shakes his head, semi-disappointed in her.

Not that it matters, he suddenly remembers. They’ll never get back to the Garrison.

“He won’t know if one is gone,” Pidge shrugs and puffs with a grin. “Not unless you tell him. Night Lance.”

He bids her good night, then hops down and closes the lid. Hunk and Matt are squeezed together sharing a single blanket, a blank space where Pidge used to be. Shiro’s sleeping deep, a result of his wonderful painkillers. Keith sits at the back of the bus, already curling up to return to sleep.

Lance eyes the blanket in his hand and steps quietly over.

Keith gave up his blanket that night, he can do it this time. Even the score. Gently he lays it out over Keith who is, in fact, shivering like Pidge said he was. He turns to go, ready to tough out being cold through the night, but Keith shifts and sits up.

“What about you?” Keith asks, covering his mouth to prevent a cough but he fails and ends up with three consecutive ones that sound just awful. Croaky like a frog.

Lance tosses him the cough syrup from his pocket again. Keith doesn’t even bother to measure this time, just takes a little chug from the bottle. Seems to help.

“I’ll be fine. I’m not sick,” Lance shrugs and then jokes. “Unless you want to share?”

Lance can see the gears are turning but Keith’s face remains stern.

“Yeah, didn’t think so--”

“Sure,” Keith says.

Lance’s brows furrow high in surprise.

“Really?” Lance asks, eyes squinting and suspicious.

“There’s only one blanket,” Keith points out the obvious. “But it’s big enough for two.”

“Yeah, but…” Lance says, uncertain.

“I’m not being nice, just practical,” Keith tells him and it sounds vaguely familiar.

No one needs to freeze if they’re willing to share. He just didn’t think Keith would want anyone in his space if he didn’t have to. Especially not Lance since they didn’t exactly get off on the right foot. But maybe this is Keith’s way of extending an olive branch, it would be rude not to take it.

And sleeping next to a warm body does appeal to Lance. He’s used to doing so with Pidge and Hunk. So he approaches and takes a seat next to Keith.

“Just keep your hands to your side,” Keith demands as he adjusts the blanket.

What a presumptuous--!

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Lance huffs, his cheeks tinting pink. “You’re not that hot and my standards
aren’t that low.”

“Whatever,” Keith snorts and rolls his eyes.

It’s the first instance of real laughter Lance has heard out of Keith. It’s...nice. A shame so much tragedy and terror has reduced it to a short clipped chortle that dissolved so quickly.

They settle in, their shoulders touching as they drift off into sleep. It’s colder than Lance expected so he scoots just a little closer to keep from losing any of that warmth. And maybe it’s just him, but he swears Keith leans into him more too. A wisp of his soft hair just tickles Lance’s neck when he shifts.

Lance closes his eyes, trying to focus on the only other sounds he can hear. Crickets chirping in the woods. Pidge shifting occasionally on the roof. Hunk snoring slightly. The raspy breath of the person next to him already long asleep. That last one is distracting but he's not sure why.

Keith shivers a little despite everything. Lance guesses it's thanks to his cold. With a swallow, Lance extends his arm over and behind Keith’s head. This way he can hook his arm around his neck and pull him in a little closer so they can share not just the blanket but some body heat as well. As long as he doesn’t get handsy, he can’t imagine it bothering Keith too much.

Not like they can be picky about where they find warmth nowadays.

The gesture brings Keith in, his head tilting to rest on Lance’s shoulder with a sigh. Already that feels better and no matter what, Lance is going to attribute the heat to the blanket and not his flushing cheeks. It’s certainly not because Keith’s lashes are so long. It’s not because of his serene sleeping face with dark locks framing it perfectly. Or that his parted mouth is literally inches from his face.

Okay, so he lied before. Keith’s good looking and more than exceeds his standards. He’s actually super hot. Too bad he’s such a frigid customer. What a turnoff. And with Lance’s luck, he’s probably not even into guys.

Though on the off chance that he is Lance’ll definitely make an offer for a diversion sometime, provided he stops being a dick. But now’s not the place. Not the time. There’s too much uncertainty and too many problems to deal with before they can even consider any fun distractions.

They need the sleep. Tomorrow night they should make it to the hospital. And fuck! He still hasn’t told Keith that they may have to cut off Shiro’s arm anyway. What a mood killer. And that’s not including the fact that they have no idea what they’ll do after that.

Tomorrow’s going to be a long day.

*****

Keith blinks awake with the morning sun. He coughs and clears his throat while trying to find the bottle of syrup under the blanket somewhere. He pats and grasps, searching until his fingers land on a knee and not his own. He turns to see Lance, arm around his shoulder and dead asleep with his head tilted close to his own.

His visceral reaction is back away to the window, to put distance between them but Lance’s arm has him. He thinks to shove him right out of the seat before he remembers; they agreed to share the blanket. Right. So he takes a moment to calm down and study the face in front of him while he’s still asleep.

Smooth skin and, Keith can admit, fairly handsome features if they weren’t so dirty. There are a few
small recent scars on his chin. Full lashes. Another small scar on his eyebrow he nearly missed. And of course, a great big bruise surrounding his nose from when Keith clocked him. It’s still pretty dark too. Purple but starting to get green around the edges.

At least it’s healing.

As bad as Keith feels about it, he thought maybe Lance was a zombie with how he was shuffling around the shelves. But he avoided his attack. So Keith went with a safer alternative. A left cross into the face. That way if he wasn’t a raider the worst he’d get was a little disorientation and a busted nose.

Keith grimaces when he remembers his first strike had been the knife. Jeez, if he hadn’t avoided that...right into the eye socket. He’d look worse than Matt if he didn’t bleed out first.

It’s little wonder Lance was shooting daggers out of his eyes when they met again. Standing there, rifle aimed at him, Garrison badge flashing on his jacket sleeve. Threatening to shoot him but with his finger off the trigger. A bluff he realized much later.

Keith honestly thought the Admiral had sent them to finish them off. Talking with them had all but proved how ignorant Echo Team was. Keith couldn’t even feel sorry for them initially, thinking no one could be that naïve. But then Lance’s reaction, when Keith told him what the Garrison was really like, had struck him hard. He recognized the look on his face. That stifled wide-eyed fear. That realization as denial melted away and despair filled his eyes.

He felt bad for being so harsh but Lance needed to know the truth. It’s not surprising that he broke down in the other room afterward.

He could recognize muffled cries anywhere from the number of times he’d done it himself. The others were already asleep. No one else heard him. He was alone with his sadness.

A horrible place to be.

Shiro used to pet his head to comfort him when he was a kid. And after his mom--Keith didn’t even know Lance but he felt responsible for those sobs. He used to be that hopeful kid. Used to think the world of the Garrison. Without a word, he’d padded over and did what he could. Even gave him his bandana to cry into and wipe his face.

Lance never moved from that spot the whole night. Just cried until he fell asleep, cold and alone. Keith gave him his blanket without saying a thing. He’s never been good with words anyway. The next day Lance seemed alright but gave Keith no indication that he knew where the goodwill came from. Still gave him attitude.

So Keith returned it in kind.

It surprised him that Lance suggested sharing the blanket. He didn’t exactly make a good impression that first day. And Keith’s not the nicest person in general. Mostly from lack of trying. No point in being pleasant and making friends if they’re just going to end up zombie food.

But Lance got him talking last night, which is more than he’s done with anyone the past several months. He’s alright, Keith supposes with a roll of his eyes. Too nice for living out here though. Gonna get himself killed one of these days trying to do the ‘decent thing’.

Pidge comes down out of the emergency hatch. Stretching and yawning. She eyes the two of them but says nothing. Not that she could comment, they weren’t doing anything. Just sleeping.
She walks down the aisle to shake her brother and Hunk awake. Lets them know they need to take
down the perimeter and get moving as soon as everyone’s taken a piss. They’re off the bus in
moments, grabbing up their weapons and heading out to work. He should go to.

But Lance still has an arm hooked around his neck. When Keith tries to unfurl it off him Lance
instinctively squeezes tighter. Pulls Keith in closer to Lance’s parted mouth and it brings a flush to
his face.

“L-Lance,” Keith huffs trying to free himself.

Lance’s eyes sleepily blink open and he notices lips inches away from his. Keith’s lips. Then Lance
comes to focus on flushed cheeks. Keith’s cheeks. Is Keith blushing? Cute. And is that a hand on
Lance’s thigh? Does that mean he’s--

Maybe Keith was just being coy earlier and it wouldn’t be so bad to just...but before Lance can move
even a millimeter in any direction he receives a stinging slap on his cheek.

Stunned, he relinquishes his hold as a red-faced Keith stands and pushes past him. Lance rubs his
smarting cheek with a whine, the mark already starting to swell.

“Sor--” Lance tries to apologize.

“Keep off me,” Keith growls, embarrassed. “And take your damn blanket!” he tells him, shoving it
into Lance’s face. Keith then stomps his way off the bus and out of sight.

Ouch.

He remembers the last time he got smacked like that. It was by a girl when he misread a cue at a
club. That was before incident One. Touched her hip thinking she wanted to dance. She didn’t. Laid
him out with a smack the entire club heard. Keith’s wasn’t nearly as hard but damn...it still stung.

Did he misread the signs again?

“That sounded like it hurt,” Shiro chuckles, sitting up with a wince.

“It did,” Lance admits, still rubbing his face. “What’s with him and hitting people? Namely me.”

“What did you do?” Shiro asks, curious.

“I...” Lance pauses as his cheeks flush. “I may have almost kissed him. With my arm around his
neck, after he told me to keep my hands to myself. May have also said that don’t find him attractive.
Oh and that he doesn’t meet my exacting high standards.”

Shiro laughs harder than he should, considering his injuries.

“Can’t imagine why he was put off,” Shiro says sarcastically with a smile, wiping his eye.

“Yeah,” Lance looks sheepishly to the ground. “Probably should apologize?”

“For starters,” Shiro nods with sympathetic eyes. “But maybe later. He takes a while to cool off.
Help me up, nature calls.”

Lance helps Shiro off the bus for a little relief while the others take care to pull down the perimeter
cans. He can hear them clanging and it takes everything for him to fight the panic that naturally
occurs when he hears them at night. He looks around while he’s out there but Keith’s nowhere in
sight. Off somewhere fuming because of Lance.
Hunk does a quick clean and bandage change for both Shiro and Matt when they get back. He’s going to be up first for driving and he doesn’t want to have to stop if they can help it. The sooner they get there the better. Speaking of leaving, Keith still isn’t back.

“Probably kicking a stump,” Shiro sighs shaking his head. “Just give him a whistle,”

Pidge sticks her head out the door, her fingers in her mouth before blowing the shrillest whistle Lance has ever heard. Makes his ears ring.

“Let’s go, Keith! We don’t have all day!” she shouts.

He shows up half a minute later running for the bus, clambering up the stairs and down the aisle for his seat. His face is still flushed but it’s a more acceptable shade of human being instead of fire-breathing dragon. Doesn’t even spare Lance a glance as he passes and falls into his spot, arms crossed.

“Alright, let’s get out of here,” Hunk hoots and throws the bus into drive.

*****

It’s an hour of silence before Matt and Pidge start pouring over her maps. They mark some stops they want to make on the way. Short ones for a quick supply check before moving on. It shouldn’t hold them up for more than fifteen minutes at each and could yield some food.

“Speaking of,” Hunk licks his lips and checks his watch. “Breakfast?”

“Lance, pass out something,” Pidge gestures over at the box.

Lance nods and rummages through the supplies. There are a couple of ziplock bags full of cereal still. Enough for three people. Some banana chips. A mashed muffin of the chocolate chip variety. And still nearly a dozen granola bars with those horrid raisins that everyone hates but need to be eaten.

He passes out a little something for everyone. Gives Hunk the muffin. A bag of cereal for the Holt siblings. A granola bar for Shiro and himself. He eyes Keith at the back of the bus, who is avoiding his gaze, perturbed furrow in his brow. A clenched jaw as he frowns. Clearly still mad.

Now’s a good time to apologize he supposes. And maybe bring up the eventuality that Shiro’s going to lose that arm if they don’t find what they need. Lance digs into the food box for another pop tart thinking it might make a good peace offering.

Before he even reaches the back seat Keith huffs.

“Not hungry,” he mumbles.

Lance sighs and takes a seat across the aisle. He turns over the pastry in his hands, trying to find the words.

“Sorry about earlier,” Lance frowns.


“Can’t. There’s something else we need to talk about,” Lance says, lowering his voice. Keith flicks his eyes over at Lance finally, sensing this is something far more important than an attempted kiss.

“Shiro?” Keith asks, a little worry in his tone.
“Hunk says we may end up having to amputate,” Lance reveals and Keith pales. “It’d go a long way if you’re ready to help with that. Hunk can do the actual cutting. But we’ll probably have to hold Shiro down. You up for that?”

Keith starts to bite at his lip then immediately covers his mouth with a hand to hide his nerves as he thinks. His other hand touches the handle of his serrated saw. Thumb rubbing it in circles.

“We won’t have anesthetics. And there’ll be a lot of blood. We’ll have to cauterize it too,” Lance tells him, not sugar coating it. “Can you help? Or should I ask Matt?”

“I can’t,” Keith shakes his head. He looks extremely nauseous the way he’s covering his mouth. Like he’s going to--

Lance reaches for a bucket without a second thought and puts it down at Keith’s feet just as he expels. He hasn’t eaten anything this morning, just water and cough syrup, so purple water is all that comes out. He moans and coughs a little before spitting more out. Lance holds his hair back as Pidge looks down the aisle.

“Yep, deep breaths between your legs,” Lance says, waving off Pidge’s concern. “He’s fine.”

“I can’t,” Keith repeats after hurling again.

“I got that part,” Lance pats his shoulder. “No one’s forcing you. Don’t worry about it. We may not even have to if we’re lucky.”

Keith nods, more grateful than Lance could ever know. He can’t go through that. Not again.

Lance passes him a bottle of water to replenish his fluids, which he gladly takes. He even takes the pop tart this time when Lance offers it. Blueberry again and Keith could almost laugh. It’s the last thing he wants to eat right now.

“Thanks,” Keith coughs a little. “Can I have a raisin bar instead? Something this good; I don’t want to end up tossing.”

“Good idea,” Lance manages to smile as he takes it back. He trades it out in the box and brings back the granola. “So...now that that’s taken care of…I really am sorry. About earlier.”

“I told you to forget it,” Keith tells him, tilting the bottle back to drink his water.

“For the record, did you hit me because you didn’t want a guy to kiss you? Or because I was an ass, said you weren’t good enough, and then tried to kiss you anyway?” Lance asks.

“What do you think?” Keith gives him a disbelieving glare.

“I can’t tell, but I kinda hope it’s the latter,” Lance admits.

Keith raises a suspicious brow wondering where this is going.

“Cause I can apologize and possibly be forgiven for being an ass ,” Lance tells him. “Can’t do anything about being a guy though...Either way, sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Keith stares as Lance shoots out of his seat, clearly embarrassed and wanting to exit this awkward scene. He walks back up toward the front of the bus to his usual spot, a hand rubbing nervously at his neck and up into his hair before plopping down into the seat. He then leans over to look at the
maps with the Holt siblings.

Keith watches as he makes a few comments and points to spots he thinks they should check. Lance then reaches into his pocket, pulls out the bandana, Keith’s bandana, and absently wipes his neck and face with it. Keith has to wonder...does he know it belongs to him?

Lance looks over at him with an awkward smile and waves it at him. Waving him over to join them with a nod of his head. A feeling of heat blooms in Keith’s chest so he slides further into his seat so no one can see him turning pink.

Who does Lance think he is? Being nice. Picking out snacks specifically for him. Asking about his knives with that interested look on his face. Dopey grin when everything around them is a shithole hellscapde of death and decay. What an idiot.

People like him get killed because they’re too kind for this world. A light that always gets smothered before the day’s out. That being said...he discretely peeks out into the aisle again.

Lance laughs, a beaming grin on his face as Pidge kicks at him. Everyone is chuckling at whatever joke he’s told. He’s tied the bandana around his arm, half covering the Garrison badge. Keith huffs and leans back in.

“Moron,” he grumbles but finds himself biting his lip to keep from smiling, scolding himself all the while.

There’s nothing to smile about anymore why does he even bother?

Chapter End Notes

Did you like the chapter? Give it a kudos! Really like it? Leave a comment or rec it to a friend!
Don't know what to say? Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that stuff and I'm no exception!

Also, if you really like Voltron stuff and want more, check out my other fics. Tell me what you think of them! If I'm stagnating on one maybe YOU can be the one to inspire me to keep writing!
Hey young blood, doesn’t it feel like our time is running out?

--Fall Out Boy, The Phoenix

“Hey young blood, doesn’t it feel like our time is running out?” Keith asks, his glare strong.

“Cause these are the only stores on this road for the next fifty miles,” Pidge tells him. “And we need to stock up on any food. We’re not super low but we’re six people. We eat a lot and that food will go fast.”

Keith just barely stifles a grumble. He doesn’t like this. Every minute they waste is one less minute Shiro has to get to that hospital. That puts him one minute closer to having his arm cut off or just dying outright from infection. On top of it all, Shiro doesn’t look good either, his eyes a little sunken and his face paler than the day before.

“She’s right, Keith,” Shiro sighs, holding back a groan. “Gotta think about the big picture.”

Keith clenches his jaw but doesn’t argue. He doesn't want Shiro wasting his energy on a pointless back and forth with him. He'd probably lose anyway.

“And the sooner we go the better,” Pidge adds. “Hunk will stay here with Shiro. Matt and me will go into the restaurant across the street. Keith, you and Lance should take the convenience store.”

“Alright,” Lance nods as he shoulders his rifle, ready to get on it.

“I don’t have to tell you this but--”

“I know, don’t shoot if I don’t have to,” Lance finishes. “We’ve only got ten rounds left. I’ll take Hunk’s bat in case.”

“I didn’t see anything out front,” Hunk tells them. “Doesn’t mean the inside is empty.”

“I know,” Lance says, rubbing his nose at the memory.

“Be careful,” Matt pats Keith’s shoulder.

Keith nods and pats back before stepping down the stairs. Lance follows him and the two of them quickly head inside.
A generic convenience store and it’s pretty ransacked. They’re not going to find much of anything good, Lance guesses. When it comes to places like this, only the gross food no one wanted is ever left behind. Or little hidden things that no one took notice of.

They try stick together but it's not easy because Keith’s in a hurry. He has a mind of his own about how this should be done, quickly going up and down aisles with his weapon drawn. Barely stopping for anything. Makes it hard for Lance to keep up.

“Slow down,” Lance complains and kneels to pick up a small bag of chips. “You missed food already.”

Keith doesn’t answer him, just looks around and listens for any sound that isn’t them. There’s a dragging sound a little ways off. A few lanes down. Lance narrows his eyes when he hears it too.

He puts the food in his bag and raises his rifle. Lance nods his head to the other end so one of them can distract while the other gets behind it. Keith understands and goes around the aisle slowly. Lance turns the corner and sees three of them ambling about. Keith peeks his head around and signals that he’s ready. With his hand, Lance beats on the shelf twice to get their attention.

“Over here assholes,” Lance calls.

They all turn, their dead eyes falling on Lance as they walk his way. One of them is significantly younger than the others and takes the lead towards him. He’s ready to fire if he has to but Keith’s already sneaking up on them, low to the ground and not making a sound.

He takes out one, stabbing right into the temple and dropping the body. The others hear it fall and turn to face the noise of closer prey.

“Nope, over here,” Lance smacks the shelf again. “Yeah, there you go. Come on shithead.”

The one closest to Lance turns back at him but the other isn’t giving up on going after Keith and shuffles after him. Nothing for it. Keith dodges it’s lunge, kicks out its knee and jumps on its back to sink his blade into the base of his skull.

“Nice,” Lance hums. “You gonna get this one too or is it mine?”

“Yours,” Keith nods. “If you can handle it.”

Lance laughs a little and leans the rifle against the shelf. He pulls Hunk’s bat out of the bag on his back and winds up. The hit is solid with a metallic clunk as it connects with zombie skull. It’s staggered for a second but lunges forward. Lance swerves too fast for it making it fall onto its hands. Lance brings the bat high and slams it down once, twice, three times, reducing the creature's skull to pulp.

“To think I was cut from softball,” Lance smirks.

“You’re not funny,” Keith huffs, wiping off his blade on the cleanest zombie. “I don’t hear any more. Let’s search and get out of here.”

Lance looks mildly offended, hand on his heart as if shot and face incredulous. Mouthing ‘not funny?’ and looking aghast. As if that’s the most offensive thing he’s heard in his life. Keith rolls his eyes with a frown and pushes past him as Lance snorts with laughter. They then begin a search of the premises.

Lance manages to find two intact jars of olives, a bag of salted almonds, a small pack of black
licorice, and a six-pack of ginger ale. He even finds a nice tiny bottle of hand sanitizer.

It’s not much in terms of food. He hates olives but he’s been hungry enough to eat Spam straight from the can in the past so it’s not like he’s never offended his senses before. He opens the bag of licorice knowing no one on the bus is going to want to eat that tripe and chews on a stick as he does an additional sweep.

He checks a few of the aisles again and narrowly misses a container of coffee pushed all the way back on the shelf. With a shove, it's in his bag too. He straightens up with a sigh. Guess that’s it. There really wasn’t much which is disheartening. Maybe Keith had better luck so he strolls back to the exit to find him.

Keith’s at the front register waiting for him, kneeling down to where there used to be candy on the shelf as his fingers fiddle around inside.

“Find anything?” Lance asks making him jump. Keith shoves his hand in his jacket before shaking his head.


“Ooo, Hunk’ll love that. I found some soda for Pidge. The two of them are going to love us for this,” Lance says proudly. “Major hugs.”

“I'd settle for no more stops,” Keith admits.

“I think there’s one more on the way. Hardware store. Hunk needs a few things to keep the bus running,” Lance tells him.

Keith looks downright displeased to hear this. Lance wants to reach over and give a reassuring pat, like he would with anyone else, but he’s fairly certain it'll just result in another smack. Instead, he leans on the counter and tilts his head sympathetically.

“It'll be fine. We'll get there soon,” he assures him and laughs a little as he offers the candy in his hand. “Relax, eat some disgusting licorice.”

“Ugh, that's so annoying,” Keith mumbles, clenching his fist. “The world’s a mess, everyone's going to die a horrible painful undeath, and you're eating candy. How do you do that? Make jokes at a time like this? How can you laugh?”

Lance shrugs and chews thoughtfully on his food before answering.

“It's the only way I can open my mouth nowadays without screaming,” Lance sighs as he looks around the store.

Keith just stares with mute shock. He hadn’t expected a serious answer. And a practical one at that. Humor to deflect.

He hadn’t thought that Lance was just as disillusioned and horrified by everything he's seen too. But it makes sense. Those jokes and that smile protect him. He doesn't let anyone in on it, and instead of pushing them all away like Keith does he brings them together with laughs. Even tries to get Keith in on it but he’s been too stubborn to join in.

Lance tries again. Gives him an encouraging smile and shakes the pack at him for a second time. Keith let out a resigned sigh and takes a stick. Biting into it results in a disgusted grimace he can’t
stop from forming. Lance holds in his laughter behind a shit eating grin as Keith chews.

“That's the most horrible thing I've ever put in my mouth,” Keith nearly gags and Lance has to bite his lip to not make an incredibly inappropriate joke.

“Yeah and it has no nutritional value either,” Lance instead adds with a chuckle. “People literally torture themselves eating this garbage for no gain at all.”

“Masochists,” Keith huffs.

Not one to waste food, no matter how worthless or terrible, Keith shoves the rest into his mouth. It takes some doing but he manages to grind it into mush without betraying his cool exterior. He wills himself into swallowing it but he still gags again making Lance laugh. Lance just pops another stick into his mouth, chewing on the end with a pleased smile.

“Don't tell me you actually like that stuff.”

“Oh no, it's absolutely horrible. An abomination before man and God. But it's better than nothing. I love candy but we never seem to find much anymore,” Lance shrugs with a sigh. He checks his watch and nods at the door. “Time's up. Let's head back to the bus with our haul.”

*****

Pidge and Matt hit the motherload at the Italian restaurant across the way. Only one deadhead inside but over two dozen unopened family size boxes of pasta in their storage. They even found jars of sauce, cans of green beans, and a whole cured salami. Took them two trips to get it all.

“Look at this!” Pidge beams while holding up two little boxes. “Salt and pepper too! I couldn't be happier!”

“You sure about that?” Lance asks and tugs the sodas out of his bag.

She nearly screams as she drops the salt and pepper, but luckily Matt catches them before they can hit the floor to spill everywhere. Pidge wraps her arms around Lance and squeezes as she giggles with excitement. Her grip is so strong he almost chokes in the middle of his laughter.

“I think she hates it,” Lance coughs looking at Hunk.

“Definitely,” Hunk smiles fondly at her.

“There's one for everyone! We should drink them tonight once we get to the hospital,” Pidge suggests with a grin.

For a moment, Keith feels like he doesn't belong. The air is so jovial. They all look so happy. Even Shiro’s smiling. It's just a few sodas but you'd think Lance just cured the undead plague with how their faces light up.

He could be a part of that but...

Lance finally gets released from Pidge’s hold long enough to drop off the rest of the supplies into the food boxes. Keith does the same, watching as the chocolate egg tumbles out of his bag. Lance grabs it up and turns it over in his hand.

“You should give this to Hunk,” Lance suggests. “He's been working his ass off to get us there before nightfall. It'd make his day.”
“You do it,” Keith shakes his head.

“But you found it,” Lance frowns.

“So? It's not like I knew he'd want it. I didn't go looking for it with him in mind,” Keith shrugs. “So there’d be no meaning in it coming from me.”

Lance furrows his brow and looks at the egg.

“I dunno about that but...If you say so,” Lance relents and carries it to the front.

Keith takes his seat and tries not to look too terribly curious as to what is being said between Lance and Hunk. The big guy takes the object, his eyes flashing with excitement. He then stands and gives Lance a big bear hug, lifting him off the ground and bending his spine in ways it was never intended. Lance squeaks something out with what little breath he has and Hunk puts him down again with a smile.

Seeing his friends happy puts a spark in Lance's eye that Keith can't help but stare at.

It's admirable in a way, even if it is futile. Can’t keep everyone happy forever. Eventually there won’t be any more Cadbury eggs. Or soda. Or, frankly, terrible blueberry flavored pastries. Nothing but cold, uncaring reality will remain in the end.

That being said...

Keith breaks away from looking at them to fiddle with the item he shoved haphazardly into his pocket. He doesn't know why he went looking for it. Probably because of Lance and his stupid pop tarts. What’s more shocking? That he actively searched for it or that he found anything at all?

He pulls out the stick of Big Red gum and looks it over. It was hidden pretty far back on the shelf. The wrapper looks practically new if not for the dust Keith wiped off it. He puts it to his nose and breathes in the sharp cinnamon smell through the paper.

Maybe he'll give it to Lance. Just to see what his reaction would be. Would he respond the same way as the others? A big bracing hug and smile? Keith shakes his head of the idea.

Maybe he'll just slip it into his jacket pocket. Anonymously without saying anything. Just like the bandana and the blanket. He's not sure. For now, he puts it back in his own pocket with a sigh.

The switchover is made and Matt drives for a good two hours. Good thing too because it means Hunk’s free to check on Shiro who makes the alarming announcement that he can’t really feel anything below the wrist anymore. And he does it so casually with a pathetic smile that Keith’s not sure which he feels more, scared or angry.

Doesn’t he realize how serious this is?

“It’ll be okay,” Shiro tells Keith when he moves to the seat across from him.

“You don’t...know that,” Keith grits his teeth, keeping his voice low so as not to wake Lance napping two seats down. “Wish you’d stop saying that. You sound like her.”

“Sorry,” Shiro apologizes.

Shiro reaches out with his good hand. It’s heavy and he lacks the energy to get too high. Keith can see he’s trying to pat the top of Keith’s head. But he can’t quite raise it enough so Keith takes it and
just clasps it low in his. His face grows worried and Shiro sighs.

“It has to come off,” Keith whispers as if saying it too loud makes it more real.

“I know,” Shiro admits, closing his eyes.

“What if...it’s like last time?” Keith swallows nervously.

“It won’t be,” Shiro blinks them open again. “You’re smarter now. Faster. You can do it.”

“But last time--” Keith cuts himself off, that sickly feeling rising in his gut. He doesn’t want to throw up again.

“She was bitten Keith,” Shiro says firmly. “I’m not going to turn if I don’t make it.”

“No, you’ll just die,” Keith says bitterly, his face screwing up into a pained grimace. He presses his forehead to the back of Shiro’s hand. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. This is all...it’s my fault.”

Before Shiro can say something else Keith stands, hand covering his face as he strides down the aisle to the back of the bus again. His leg hits Lance’s as he passes and he jolts awake, his first thought to grab his rifle. But he sees the bus is still in motion so he relaxes. Keith, he just bumped him but…

He looks terrible. As much as he’s trying to cover his face and sink into his jacket when he sits down, Lance can see he’s upset. Distraught and trying desperately to not cry.

“Hey man, you okay?” Lance asks, leaning over the back of his seat.

“I’m fine,” Keith answers but there’s a crack in his voice.

“Doesn’t sound like you are,” Lance mumbles. He leaves his seat and to be respectful of Keith’s boundaries, sits across the aisle from him. “Want to talk about it?”

“No,” Keith shakes his head.

Keith’s trying to look stoutly ahead. Trying to keep a stone face as he clenches his jaw and breathes through his nose. He looks up at the ceiling to try and beat back tears again, the same way he did last night. But this time there’s too much. He can’t fight them. Fat drops roll down his cheeks and Lance has to avert his gaze initially.

It’s just heartbreaking to see.

“He’s going to die,” Keith whispers though it’s almost a whimper. “All because of me.”

Lance sighs and unties the bandana around his arm. Hesitantly, he dabs Keith’s cheek. When Keith says and does nothing to stop him, he continues to wipe the wet from his face.

“You don’t know that,” Lance tells him as more tears squeeze out. He takes Keith’s chin in his hand to turn him and wipe the other cheek. “Shouldn’t lose hope. Everyone’ll feel it.”

Keith closes his eyes and bows his head feeling contrite.

He knows Lance is right. He can’t know any more than Shiro can. Nothing is predetermined. And getting morose will devastate morale.

It’s just...really hard to be optimistic when nothing has gone right since this all began. When he keeps losing things. Losing people. Keith swallows back a weak sob and Lance pats his shoulder.
"Scoot over,” Lance tells him. “Go on scoot.”

Keith does so but not without asking, “what are you doing?”

“Nothing,” Lance assures him as he slides into the seat with him. “Promise I’ll behave myself. Learned that lesson. But if you need a shoulder, it’s here. That’s what a team is for.”

Lance half smiles at him and ties the wet bandana around his arm again. Keith’s uncertain but he leans his head on Lance’s shoulder. Feels odd but comforting in a way. Warm. He turns his face into the fabric and just like that the wall breaks.

Most of it is muffled by the jacket but Keith just weeps into Lance. Lance sighs and puts an arm around him, the other hand patting gently on his head. Keith lets him pull him in, his body limp and unresisting as he now sobs into Lance’s chest.

“It’s alright,” Lance says in a soothing voice.

He’s not how sure how long Keith cries. Seconds. Minutes. But eventually, he stops shaking and whimpering. His breathing returns from the short panicked gasps to deep calm breaths. After a few more minutes, Lance gives Keith’s shoulder a bracing rub to perk him up.

“Better?” Lance inquires.

Keith doesn’t answer at first. He just stares into nothing, emotionally spent and mind elsewhere. He does feel better. Maybe. A little bit at least.

“Keith?” Lance calls again and he looks up.

“You really think he’ll be okay?” Keith asks numbly.


“I can’t be there,” Keith tells him. “When it happens.”

“Uh...I’m going to have to disagree,” Lance frowns, shaking his head. He then clarifies when Keith goes pale. “You don’t have to do it but...you should be there. Shiro’s going to need support. You’re the closest one to him. If nothing else you can hold his hand through it.”

*Hold my hand, Keith. It’ll be okay. Just...hold my hand.*

Keith’s lip trembles but he takes a deep breath and looks away.

“We’ll see,” Keith sighs raggedly. “Think I’ll take a nap. Thanks, for...before.”

“Sure, anytime,” Lance nods.

He gives him another reassuring pat on the shoulder before standing and traveling up the aisle back to the front.

The group, minus Keith and Shiro, chat a little, making a list of things to be on the lookout for at the hardware store. Within minutes of talk, Lance glances back over at Keith. True to his word, he’s out like a light.

Good, the guy needs it.

“We need to top off the oil in this thing,” Hunk explains. “Needs a full change but I don’t think we
have time for it now. Maybe on the next long stop, I can do something about it.”

“What else?” Lance looks back over to them.

“Maybe a first aid kit if we can find one. Matches. Rope. A saw, fine-toothed,” Pidge sighs and looks at the sleeping Shiro. “If not we’ll have to get an axe.”

“Is it necessary?” Matt asks over his shoulder, still hoping they won’t have to do it at all. “His arm--”

“The infection is already making him weak. He’s having trouble breathing. And he’s getting paler. It’s...gangrenous,” Hunk grimaces. “There’s not much else we can do at this point. If we don’t cut it off in the next twenty-four hours...Shiro won’t have another twenty-four after that.”

Lance is glad Keith’s not awake to hear this. It would dampen his spirits even more especially after that bold claim saying everything would be fine.

“Then we make this next stop as fast as possible,” Lance decides. “No lingering. If it’s got more than seven deadheads outside, we move on. No stopping.”

They all nod in agreement with him, returning to travel in silence.

*****

It’s not long when they come to a stop at the hardware store. Two dead ones out front start for the bus as soon as it stops. Keith’s still sleeping and Lance shakes his head when it comes to someone waking him.

“Just let him sleep,” Lance insists. “Us three will go in and find stuff.”

Without delay, Echo Team hops off the bus. Hunk swings and knocks down a zombie. Just for good measure Pidge goes in after it hits the ground and stabs into its skull. Lance uses the butt of his rifle to knock out the knees of the slower, older one. Smashing its skull in while the other two head inside.

His job is lookout so he stands at the open doorway, looking both ways and periodically peeking inside to check on Hunk and Pidge. He hears them wham another shambling corpse. Then one more before they start going for the shelves. While they do that Lance eyes the area.

On the outside, there’s a knocked over display. Used to hold flower seeds and such but the bags are destroyed by the weather and various creatures stepping all over them. He kicks it to roll it over, to check underneath. Jackpot. Seed packets protected from the elements.

Lance kneels down and scoops up the paper bags, shuffling through them to read the labels. If they find a permanent set up, might be a good idea to grow a garden. Mostly flowers but he finds radishes among them. And cucumbers. Nice. He pockets them all in time for Pidge and Hunk to return, their bag more empty than they’d like.

Hunk opens the hood of the bus real quick and pours the entirety of three bottles into it. Then checks the dipstick. He finds it satisfactory enough to slam the hood down and announce they’re leaving again. Everyone hops back on and Lance’s ass barely hits the seat before Hunk takes off.

Keith bolts up, suddenly awake and looking around. He hurries to his feet and makes his way towards the front.

“How far now?” Keith asks, realizing they made a stop without him.
“Hospital is about hmmm...whatcha say, Pidge?” Hunk asks over his shoulder.

“If we’re here then maybe an hour away,” Pidge reveals as she looks over the map again. “It’s on the outskirts. Ah...shit...”

“What’s up?” Lance leans in to look at it.

“It’s not a problem.” Pidge assures him. “It’s just not the kind of hospital we thought it was. It’s a vet clinic? Should still have plenty of stuff. Surgical supplies. No one thinks to loot medicine from animals.”

Better than nothing, Lance thinks.

He steps over to check on Shiro who’s sweating profusely and writhing a little in his seat. He’s shivering but his skin’s red hot. Not the best sign.

Keith wipes the sweat from his brow, his mouth a thin line. He makes Shiro sit up to drink water and take more pills but realizes with dismay that they’re out of Percocet. He turns to Lance trying to mask his panic as he shows him the empty bottle. Without missing a beat Lance grabs some ibuprofen from the med bag. It won’t help much but at least Shiro will think he took some heavy duty painkillers. He passes them to Keith who makes Shiro swallow them down.

Nearly forty minutes pass as everyone takes turns watching over Shiro.

“Not to be an alarmist,” Shiro pants and groans. “But I can’t...it’s hard to think. Dizzy. And cold.”

“You feel pain? Ask him if he feels any pain,” Hunk calls over his shoulder.

“Where’s your pain at?” Pidge asks, looking into his eyes. They’re unfocused. She gestures for the last blanket and Lance passes it to her to throw on him.

“Haven’t been able to feel my hand for a while,” Shiro reminds them. “The wound still hurts...really bad actually.”

“Good. I mean, not good, obviously, but you know what I mean,” Hunk rambles. “If he can’t feel anything, that’s a problem. Means he’s not getting enough blood flow. Keep him awake. Does he know his blood type?”

“It’s A negative,” Keith answers.

“Okay…” Hunk works it out in his head. “Then...we need someone with the same or O negative. That sounds right. Doesn’t that sound right? Yeah, it’s right.”

“Why?”

“Cause he’s probably going to need a transfusion afterward,” Pidge answers. “Matt and I are AB positive. Hunk is B positive. Keith?”

“I’m B positive too,” Keith reveals with worry.

“Lance?” Pidge asks, her eyes wide.

“Uh, I don’t know. Hold on,” Lance digs into his shirt to pull up his dog tags. He squints and then smiles. “O negative.”

They let out a collective sigh of relief. At least they’ll have someone who can donate a little.
Everything they need should be at the clinic. At least they hope so. They just need to get there.

*****

They finally arrive near sunset.

The clinic is only one story but a decent size for a rural office. Looks modern too, so made with a
year or two before Incident one. And since it’s on the outskirts and horses are frequent patients,
there’s a barn not far off the complex in a pasture attached to the main building. No sign of any
animals in the outdoor kennels though. Alive or otherwise.

With any luck someone took them away. That or they were eaten by survivors. Lance is betting on
the latter but they have bigger problems than wondering if Fido was put on a rotisserie.

“Fuck, there are so many,” Matt curses, biting on his thumbnail.

Fifty...maybe more. And half of them are beating on the front door made of plexiglass. He guesses
it’s plexiglass. It would have to be something strong for there to be that many wailing on it and not
break.

They didn’t drive right up, instead choosing to stop a ways from the building to look through the
scope. Good thing too. Too many of those surrounding the bus and they won’t be able to move.

Still, something about what he’s seeing bothers Lance, but he can’t put his finger on it. So many.
Why so many?

“We’ve still got three rockets left,” Pidge reminds him. “Might be enough to get most of them out of
the way.

“Then we run into the problem of getting out of the clinic afterward,” Lance bites his lip as he lowers
the scope. “That’s if the doors aren’t locked and we can get in at all. Think it might have a garage?
Or something? Another door other than the front?”

“Sure but it’s probably on the other side of the building, nowhere near the road. Inaccessible to our
huge bus,” Pidge gestures around them. “Probably has its fair share of rotters too.”

Lance looks through the scope again, trying to find another means. There’s got to be some
way...That’s when he sees something. He passes the rifle to Pidge and points.

“There’s someone on the roof,” Lance gestures.

“Alive?” Pidge asks, disbelieving as she looks. “He’s right. A woman. She’s collecting bottles of
rainwater.”

“That’s why they’re so many beating on the door,” Lance realizes with a snap. “There are people in
there.”

“Maybe a vet? Think they’ll help? We might be able to get their attention,” Matt poses. “With the
rockets?”

“If we clear them out, they might be grateful. Maybe help,” Lance nods in agreement.

“That’s a lot of mights and maybes,” Keith puts forward, the worry still evident in his tone.

“Keith’s right,” Pidge sighs and hands the rifle back to Lance. “But we don’t have many other
alternatives if we want to keep Shiro alive. So how do you want to do this?”
All eyes are on Lance again, waiting for him to put forth a plan but now he has more riding on him than a simple supply run. He swallows his nerves and nibbles at his bottom lip as he tries to map out his ideas. Running scenarios and outcomes.

If they clear it out but the people inside don’t let them in...they’re screwed. If they don’t take out all the zombies they could get overwhelmed before they ever reach the doors...again screwed. And if they wait too long Shiro dies in painful agony as his arm kills him...screwed to the max.

He peeks up and finds the woman is still collecting water from the roof. Lance thinks he has an idea. It all rides on a couple contingencies but it’s all they have left. He hopes it all works out.

“Get me a rocket,” he says with staunch determination on his face.

Chapter End Notes

Did you like the chapter? Give it a kudos! Really like it? Leave a comment or rec it to a friend!
Don't know what to say? Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that stuff and I'm no exception!

Also, if you really like Voltron stuff and want more, check out my other fics. Tell me what you think of them! If I'm stagnating on one maybe YOU can be the one to inspire me to keep writing!
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year and stuff~!
Your comments are a treat to read! Thanks for making them!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The path to heaven runs through miles of clouded hell

--Imagine Dragons, It’s time

She’s used to hearing the clawing and moaning of the zombies on the bottom floor. Ever since they set up there half a year ago it’s all they wake up and go to sleep to. Sometimes at night they’ll still and drop in front of the door, conserving their energy for when they can see. But they’re always a few that don’t, a solid reminder to those inside that the undead hold to their vigil at the door.

It’s all so routine that she’s gotten used to it, so the loud pop definitely catches her attention.

“A firework?” she stares confused at the smoke.

She goes to the edge of the roof and scans the landscape. Ten of the zombies at the front door start shuffling off towards the noise. Her fingers squeeze at the edge as she leans forward to peer out on the landscape. Where did it come fro--She blinks and spots a small yellow school bus. That wasn’t there yesterday was it?

There’s...someone waving on top of it she realizes. She pulls the radio off her belt.

“Coran,” she says into it. “Over.”

“What is it, Princess?” he asks. “Over.”

“Stop calling me that,” she scolds. “There’s a bus down the road that just shot off a firework. It drew off a dozen of the corpses. I need the binoculars. Over.”

“Roger. Over and out.”

Moments later, an older man with an orange mustache that would put Tom Selleck’s to shame comes up to the roof. He runs across and passes the binoculars into her hands. While she peers through he stands by and twists his facial hair.

“It’s a young man,” she reveals.

“Does he look dangerous?”

“He has a gun,” she tells him. “Oh, a white flag. He’s pulling something out of his pocket.”

“What is it, Allura?” Coran asks.
“A short-range radio. Numbers now...Coran, adjust the radio to the following station.”

He does as she says and hands it back to her.

“Who are you?” she says into the receiver. “Over.”

“Oh thank god, it worked guys! They have a radio!” Lance laughs with relief.

“What would you have done if they didn’t?” Pidge asks.


Allura looks to Coran, to garner his thoughts. He sounds nice enough. Not rough and he hasn’t threatened to take anything or hurt anyone. Just wants help. They nod and Allura opens up communications again.

“We do Lance, but you’ll never get in. The front door is swamped with corpses,” she tells him.

“Unless you have a lot more fireworks, I don’t imagine we’ll be opening these doors. Not unless it’s clear. Over.”

“If we clear it out, will you let us in?” Lance asks them. “We’ll help you out in any way we can to pay you back for anything we use.”

Keith takes the receiver and practically begs, “Please, he doesn’t have much longer.”

There’s a long pause.

“We have an agreement,” she tells them. “Clear the doors and you’re more than welcome to come in. I’ll treat your wounded as well. Over and out.”

The whole team lets out the deepest of breaths. That fixes the problem of the locked doors and people inside. Non-hostile, which is good. They deserve some good news for a change.

Now they just got to clear out...about forty-two more zombies, give or take. Piece of cake. Lance gestures for the next bottle rocket and Pidge passes it up. He aims it in the same direction of the last one and lights it up.

It pops and draws off and additional twelve zombies. They wait for them to shuffle a good ways down the road before shooting off the last one. It only nets about eight more. Leaving them about twenty plus zombies to deal with by hand. With the four of them, it shouldn’t be too hard.

“Drive on up Matt but not too close,” Lance calls down, holding tight to the emergency hatch.

“Keith, Pidge, Hunk, ready your weapons. I’ll try to keep them from doubling up. If you’ve got too many run back a bit, make them chase you around the bus.”

The minute the bus stops the remaining zombies turn. Lance can already see the woman behind the interior doors. She looks concerned, worried that there are still too many for them to handle. Suddenly her eyes light up as an idea strikes her. She bangs on the doors to keep the attention of few of them. It helps. Five turn back to the door and start smacking it with their bloody fists.

“Nice,” Lance grins and nods his thanks. He readies his aim as he calls down. “Bus door is clear, get out. And close it behind them, Matt.”

Hunk opens up with a home run on the closest corpse. Nearly takes its head right off. Pidge rolls
around, dodges and keeps them distracted enough that Hunk gets in another two kills with powerful
hits.

Keith runs, weaving in and out, getting in close and slamming his knife into skulls. Before they can
even drop he’s moving on to another. One gets right up behind him and Lance shoots it in the eye,
leaving Keith even realizes it’s there. He fires three more shots into the three chasing after
Pidge allowing her a chance to re-engage a different target.

“Twelve more,” Lance announces. “Pidge, your six.”

“I smell it,” Pidge responds.

She rolls between its legs and it tumbles over trying to follow her. Blade right into the face.

“Could use a little help here,” Hunk calls up, running around the bus. “They know I’m the slow
one,” he laughs with a pant.

“I got them,” Keith says.

Keith pushes the straggler into the bus with a shove from his shoulder, then rears up his knife
plunging it into its head. He takes out the next one clambering after Hunk, kicking out its leg and
dropping down with his weight to sink the knife into another skull.

“There’s one crawling under the bus!” Keith announces.

“Got it.” Lance aims down and whistles when it pops out its head. It turns slightly at the noise and
Lance fires, splattering its brain.

Now, all that’s left are the ones still hitting the doors. Keith takes the one on the far right. Pidge
dispatches the one on the left. Hunk hits a double with two that are close to one another. Keith then
takes the last one, slamming his knife into it with a grunt. It slumps and drops leaving the area silent.

Done.

Boy, they must be a sight to their hosts.

Their clothes are covered in blood splatter and rotten viscera. Hunk’s bat drips reddish brown along
with Pidge’s knife. Keith’s jacket and cheek are splattered with rotting slime. But Lance is as clean
as a daisy. Another reason he loves being the sharpshooter.

“All right, all that fire’s gonna bring them back,” Lance announces and hits the roof with his fist.
“Matt, you and Hunk grab Shiro. Everyone else, bring in any supplies you can, just in case we can’t
get back out to the bus tonight.”

The woman from before stands there, absolutely stunned that they managed to clear the doors, albeit
temporarily. She scrambles to unlock them, not wanting to keep them waiting. The inner doors open.
Then the outer ones.

“Hurry,” she urges. “Inside before they return.”

Hunk and Matt have shouldered Shiro, who’s in and out of consciousness, and carry him inside.
Keith’s got two food supply boxes and Pidge has all the blankets and water. Lance closes the bus
door and bars it. After a once over, he climbs out of the roof with their bag of medical supplies. Not
that he thinks they’ll need them but he’s not about to leave them unguarded in the bus. He slams the
hatch shut and hops down the hood of the bus stopping at the doors for a second to look at their
“Wow, you’re cute...and young,” Lance comments with a smile. “I thought...well, you have gray hair and the scope isn’t that great.”

“Get inside already,” she shakes her head and rolls her eyes. “I want to lock this back up.”

Once the doors are closed and locked again Allura strides over to the couch they’ve propped Shiro up on. She puts a hand to his sweating forehead and then checks his pulse at the neck. Not the most favorable of looks on her face.

“Let me see,” Allura demands, pulling the bandages off.

“Are you a doctor?” Keith asks, hopeful.

“I went to medical school yes,” she answers and eyes the wound with disgust. “This is...he has gangrene! It’s horribly infected. How are you still...What on earth did you do?”

“I broke my arm,” Shiro manages to smile but it gets cut short with a wincing groan.

“I’m sorry to say but I’ll need to amputate that,” Allura tells them. “Immediately.”

“Just met and you’re already going to cut me down to size,” Shiro chuckles. “At least buy me dinner.”

“Perhaps afterward,” she manages a short-lived smile. “We have to hurry. Before it travels any further. Carry him, follow me. Coran! I need surgery set up! Amputation!”

“Yes Princess!” a voice down the hall shouts, his steps echoing as he runs back to the E.R. to prepare.

“Princess? Is that literally your name?” Lance waggles his eyes. “I’d believe it.”

“Lance, is it? No, it’s not my name. Just a sobriquet,” she tells him as she strides urgently yet elegantly down the hall.

“A what?”

“Princess is her nickname, Lance,” Pidge rolls her eyes.

“Oh. Why didn’t she just say that?” Lance furrows his brows in confusion as he follows.

“She did,” Pidge and Matt say together.

They follow her brisk pace as she takes them to the operating room and lay Shiro out on a gurney outside. Unconscious again but not for long. All the tools have been rolled past them and into the room, including a bone saw.

“We don’t have much in the way of sedatives, nothing a human can use I’m afraid,” Allura tells them as she pours a chemical into a basin and proceeds to wash her hands with it. “Any of you have medical training? Of any kind?”

They all point to Hunk who raises a hand sheepishly.

“Then you wash up too,” she suggests and looks at who’s left. “I’ll need one more hand in there. Volunteers?”
Keith remembers what Lance said. He should go in. If he can keep his wits about him, there’s no reason why he shouldn’t be there for Shiro. He just has to remember this is nothing like before. It doesn’t have to go that way. He’s scared but that’s not going to stop him.

“I’ll go,” Keith steps forward, swallowing his nerves.

“There will be a great deal of blood. Ever seen an amputation before?” she asks.

“Yes,” Keith answers solemnly. “I did one myself. Once...They didn’t make it.”

Lance feels his heart sink at that information. His throwing up on the bus makes a hell of a lot more sense. Jesus, no wonder he didn’t want to be a part of this. He was terrified at the prospect of having to do it again, only to fail for a second time. Makes Lance regret suggesting Keith be there.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Allura frowns sadly. “I just need you to help hold him down. I will be making the incisions. Fret not.”

“Understood,” Keith nods and removes his jacket to wash up with Hunk.

Lance thinks to step in. For some reason, he feels like Keith shouldn’t do this.

“Keith, maybe I should--” Lance starts but Keith shakes his head.

“I got this,” Keith insists, his face serious.

“The rest of you, wait outside. There’s water and some food in the rec room. Blankets and pallets too. Please, help yourselves,” Allura nods. “This will take some time.”

A bark suddenly resonates down the hall.


“We hear it,” Matt tells her.

“It’s leashed,” Allura says in a tone to suggest she doesn’t want to alarm them about it. It continues to bark and whine. “It won’t cause trouble for anyone. I promise.”

That’s not why Pidge is so animated. She fucking loves dogs. She’s already dragging Matt down the hall to see it. And to get food, water, and rest, of course. But dog first. No point in worrying about Shiro when there’s literally nothing they can do about it but a lonely dog? That they can fix, she says. Practical Pidge.

Allura chuckles but before she can turn to enter the E.R. Lance clears his throat.

“Is there a window, where I can watch from?” Lance wonders.

What is he doing? He could be joining the Holts as they play with a dog. They don’t need him here but...

“Worried about your friend?” she asks.

“Yes,” Lance nods, looking down at his feet.

“There is,” she tells him and gestures with her clean hands but taking care not to touch anything. “Through there. On the right. Observation room two.”
He nods his thanks and power walks to the aforementioned room.

The first thing he does is lean his rifle against the wall before approaching the window. Beyond the glass, he sees the surgical table centered in the room surrounded by no less than six battery operated lanterns. Even with them on the room doesn’t feel like it’s bright enough to Lance. But they hardly have an alternative. Lance presses his hands and face to the glass to peer inside.

Shiro’s on the table, breathing rough. From here Lance can see he still has a fever. So pale and clammy, sweat dripping from his brow. Hunk stands at Shiro’s feet, where Allura instructed he be to keep him from kicking. Keith is at the shoulders looking determined to do this and not run away. He’ll be holding Shiro’s shoulders.

He can’t hear anything from this side, Lance realizes. Just barely audible mumbling. The intercoms would only work with power and since there isn’t any, he’ll have to guess as to what they’re saying behind their masks.

Looking at the necrotic flesh crawling it’s way up Shiro’s arm makes Lance feel ill. It’s all black and sickly, traveling down from the wound near his wrist to his fingers and up towards his elbow. It’s swollen too, brown and red anywhere it isn’t black with pus seeping from the wound. Luckily Allura covers that up with a cloth, focusing now on the procedure.

Allura’s quickly tying a tourniquet tight and high on Shiro’s arm. Just below the deltoid. She sterilizes and marks with a pen the exact place they’ll be cutting, halfway down his upper arm. Lance cups a hand over his mouth in morbid shock.

They’re cutting that much off?

He can see that Keith’s having much the same thought with how wide his eyes get.

Allura stands in the way of the arm. Lance can’t see what she’s about to do but he can see how both Hunk and Keith ready themselves to hold him. The assistant she yelled for earlier puts something in Shiro’s mouth to bite down on and then moves to hold the damaged arm in his own, to keep it from moving as well.

He knows the second she begins cutting because he hears a piercing shout through the glass. Lance closes his eyes but it doesn’t erase that sound echoing in his ears. Whatever is being used to bite down on isn’t doing much to muffle Shiro’s screams of blinding pain as she cuts into his flesh. It doesn’t even sound human, more like a wounded beast.

Lance opens his eyes and sees there’s blood dripping onto the floor. He quickly averts to look at Keith who’s gone completely white and rigid as he holds Shiro down on the table. He just stares at the incision as Allura works. Absolutely petrified. Hunk has his eyes squeezed shut, not wanting to see anything more than he has too.

He has the right idea, Lance thinks as he blinks slowly, wary of opening them each time to inflict a new horror on his memories.

Open. Shiro’s shaking body. Close.

Open. Tears streaming down his face. Close.

Open. More and more red. Close.

He’s just glad he can’t hear the blood splattering to the floor. Can’t see it all over the front of Allura’s apron. Dripping down onto her shoes as she cuts through muscle and closes off blood vessels. It’s
bad enough just seeing the puddle on the ground slowly expanding.

She steps aside for just a second but it's enough for Lance to see the exposed bone. He feels woozy and leans against the wall near the trash can. Gagging and retching but nothing comes out. God, why is he subjecting himself to this?

He should just go get some rest but--

Keith’s in there. With no plate of glass to shield him from this. No way to prevent smelling the blood. Nothing to dull even the sound of Shiro's screams. Though it’s gruesome and horrifying it’s something Lance should see...in the event they need to do it again.

Hopefully, that never happens.

Lance swallows as he brings his eyes up to watch her saw through the bone. Shiro’s long since stopped moving, possibly passed out from the excruciating pain. Thank god, Lance sighs. He doesn’t know if he could listen to him scream for much longer.

Poor Keith is shaken, eyes blown wide by what he’s seen and hands gripping tight onto Shiro’s shoulders, fingers digging into the flesh. It isn’t until Coran walks by that Lance realizes he’s carrying Shiro’s amputated arm. Limp and lifeless. Lance covers his mouth to keep from being sick but Keith doesn’t even notice, just stares numbly ahead.

Allura’s been talking the whole time Lance realizes. Hunk is listening and reluctantly watching as she stitches the flaps of skin over bone. He nods on occasion, taking note of her procedure in case it’s ever necessary for him to know. Hunk says a few things back to her too, answering questions she has about the patient.

Once everything is stitched and sterilized and bandaged the assistant pushes the gurney out of the operating room. Probably to put Shiro somewhere quiet and clean to recover. It's finally over.

Lance looks at his watch and realizes it’s been an hour. God, it felt like longer.

Allura takes her gloves off and knocks on the glass to get his attention. She can’t actually see him but she signals to the exit. Hunk is gently guiding Keith to the exit too, too dazed to pay attention to much of anything. Lance runs to the operating room door, panting when she comes out.

“So?” he asks, looking behind her waiting for Hunk and Keith.

“He’ll recover. He mustn't move for at least two weeks,” she tells him as she tosses her gloves into the trash. “Your medic Hunk says you’re able to donate blood? He’ll need it. And soon. I’ll have Coran take some in the rec room. Try not to dally, the sooner the better.”

“Sure,” Lance nods as Keith comes out.

He just stands there. Stunned. Pale. Blood on his hands from some of the spray.

“Keith are you--”

Lance doesn’t even get the question out before Keith just drops to the ground. He doesn’t even try to break his fall. Just collapses like a matchstick house, his head nailing the floor. All three of them rush down to sit him back up. He's a ragdoll in Hunk's arms. Allura opens his eye and checks his pulse.

“He’s just in shock,” she tells them. “Emotional, not physical.”
“What do we do?” Lance asks.

“Blankets, fluids, and rest,” Hunk answers before she can.

“All of which you’ll find in the rec room,” she adds. “Just follow me.”

Hunk lifts Keith up easily and Lance follows alongside him as Allura leads them to the room. Once they arrive she gestures to a cot which Hunk lays him on. While she’s gone the two of them remove the bloody apron and shoes, along with his belt of knives. They pile them up off to the side until he’s nothing but jeans and t-shirt.

She returns with an IV bag, stand, and needle. Lance bumbles trying to get out of her way but still lingers close to watch, unintentionally standing in her light.

“Lance, please sit over there next to Coran,” she instructs, trying her best to be patient. “He’ll take your blood while I take care of your friend.”

Lance nods and does what she says. Takes his jacket off and rolls up his sleeve so Coran can get to work. His eyes never leave Keith’s cot, watching as they throw a couple of blankets on him and stick in the IV. Lance doesn’t even notice when Coran takes the needle back out of his arm.

Is this his fault? His insistence that Keith be there feels like the worst suggestion he’s ever made, churning his stomach with guilt. He hopes Keith’ll be okay.

*****

Several hours later color returns to Keith’s face but he remains asleep. Hunk’s passed out on a pallet on the floor next to Pidge, with a little fluff ball of a dog clutched in her equally tiny hands. Pidge mentioned a breed but he can’t remember it now. Pallon? Papsilon? Something...Lance doesn’t care enough to ask a second time.

Matt’s busy organizing their things and taking inventory but he’s starting to doze a little. Lance still sits hunched over on the chair, hands crossed and in front of his face as the events of the day play in his mind.

Was there something he could have done differently?

“I never should have let him help,” Lance finally utters, to no one in particular.

“Keith?” Matt sleepily asks and Lance nods.

“He...didn’t need to go through that again,” Lance shakes his head. “I can’t even imagine--”

“It was his mom,” Matt reveals and Lance looks over with dismay. “We were all separated. Keith was with her. She’d been bitten on her arm. She asked him to cut it off.”

“She bled out?” Lance guesses and Matt nods.

“He hesitated. He was too scared. For ten minutes he just...cried. He couldn’t do it,” Matt explains. “Then when he finally could it was too late. The infection reached her brain in his delay and after she bled out she turned on him.”

“Jesus,” Lance wipes his face. “Fucking...Christ.”

Like he needed another reason to hate himself today.
“Yeah,” Matt sighs. “We found him again two days later. Still holding her.”

Poor Keith. Lance rubs his sore arm where the blood was taken.

The worst that’s happened to him in the last two years is a couple of scrapes and cuts. His broken nose ranks pretty high too. Of course he’s seen people die, people on his team but he hardly knew them. It was horrific but he could still sleep at night, sometimes with a little crying if it was particularly gruesome.

That’s nothing compared to Keith. Guy just...pulls in tragedy.

Lance stands from the chair and steps quietly over to Keith’s cot. He feels his forehead and finds it a little warm. His fingers retreat but then return to Keith’s hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. He hopes it’s reassuring as it’s the only thing he can do.

“Mom?” Keith rasps, opening his eyes.

Lance swallows a lump in his throat, takes his hand back, and kneels.

“Hey man,” Lance whispers. “Sleep for a while.”

“Lance,” Keith corrects himself. With a gasp he tries to sit up suddenly, “Shiro--!”


“He made it? I...that’s right. I was there,” Keith rubs his head, trying to remember. “My head hurts.”

“You may have taken a header into the floor,” Lance grimace smiles but then frowns as Keith fiddles with the IV. “Don’t take that out, just leave it. At least until you empty the bag. What are you doing?”

“I’m going to see Shiro,” he argues, pulling himself up using the IV stand.

“No, you’re not,” Lance sits him back down but it hardly stops Keith. It just earns him a burning glare before he resumes. “Keith,” Lance frowns.

“I have to see him,” Keith tries to explain, his voice cracking before he coughs a few times. “You don’t get it. I have to see.”

Lance feels a pang of sympathy for him. He’s lost everyone except Shiro and Matt. He’s not about to believe Lance, a guy he just met, when he says things are fine. His word isn’t good enough and Lance gets that. He scratches his head and sighs.

He supposes it couldn’t hurt but everyone else is asleep at this point. He’s not even sure what room Shiro was sent to. The one called Coran enters and stops at the foot of Keith’s cot.

“Feeling better are we?” he asks checking the IV drip.

“Where’s Shiro?” Keith demands, his voice a dry rasp as he begins a new round of coughing.

“Shiro? The muscled fellow?” Coran asks and Lance nods. “He’s in recovery with Allura.”

“Could you take us there?” Lance asks before Keith tries yelling again.

“Hmmm, she’s going to bite my head off,” he warns, twisting his stache. “You must be very quiet.”
“We will,” Lance assures him and gives Keith the eye. “Won’t we?”

Keith looks ready to argue but he reluctantly nods instead. Anything to get out of this room.

Coran gestures them to follow and Lance attempts to help Keith out of the cot but gets a shove for his trouble. Keith stands and with a single quick movement, he wrenches the IV out, abandoning the stand to follow Coran unimpeded making Lance frown yet again.

So reckless. He didn’t even stop to put his shoes back on.

Down a few halls, lit only by a battery operated lamp, the two of them follow close. And as they promised, without a word. Coran stops outside a door, puts his hand on it to push gently open, and sticks his head in.

“Prin--Dr. Allura. Can he have a visitor or two?”

“I suppose,” she huffs, clearly not happy about it. “They must be silent. Nothing louder than the whisper of a mouse, do you understand?”

Coran looks to them and they both nod, promising to do as she says. So he pushes the door open to let them in.

It’s a small room with two lanterns on each side of the cot inside. There are a couple of thin pallets for cushioning but it’s barely a step above sleeping on the floor. It can’t be comfortable but it’s as much comfort as they can expect nowadays. Allura stands next to it, taking notes on a clipboard.

Shiro’s been laid out and tucked in with a couple of blankets, an IV of blood dripping into him. He’s sleeping as far as they can tell. Maybe it’s just him but Lance swears he’s less pale than before. His breathing is more regular too. Who knew just getting rid of the arm would improve him this much?

Keith steps in tentatively, his eyes on Shiro. Positively shocked to see him.

Alive. He really is alive.

It’s such a relief Keith let out a short laugh but immediately covers his mouth when Allura gives him a look. He just swallows and approaches the bed, knees hitting the floor so he can take Shiro’s hand in his. Warm. And he’s not shivering.

“Your brother?” Allura guesses, her eyes as soft as her voice.

“He might as well be,” Keith whispers and then looks up at her. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome,” she says. “Your medic, Hunk, provided a few over the counter medicines. They aren’t strong by any means but...it should help alleviate some pain. Allow him some sleep.”

“When will he--”

“Perhaps in the morning, but I wouldn’t push it,” Allura sighs, clipping a pen to the board and putting it down on a counter.

“Can I stay in here?” Keith asks, face hopeful.

“Absolutely not,” she shakes her head. “Perhaps in a couple of days. For now, he needs uninterrupted rest. The less stress the better.”

“Then will you--”
“I will inform you when he wakes,” she promises and gestures for the door. “It’s late. You both helped save a man’s life today. An accomplishment deserving of rest. Go. Sleep.”

“But I--” Keith starts but Lance pats his shoulder and shakes his head. This is not a fight he will win. Keith nods weakly and stands. “Understood, ma’am.”

“Don’t worry! He’s in good hands!” Coran assures them as he sees them out. “Allura’s an amazing doctor. And brilliant scientist. You won’t have to worry about a thing. He’ll be up and about before you know it.”

Lance smiles and Keith just nods his head.

“I have some chores to do, least of which is clean the operating room. Don’t want things to stay messy in there. Can you make your way back on your own?” Coran asks, offering the lantern.

“We’ll be fine,” Lance tells him waving it off. He follows after Keith who’s already a hallway ahead of him.

Keith feels like he’s walking on air. Like everything is light, the ground soft and fluffy. Even his heart feels lighter. He may even be smiling, the most relieved smile on the planet.

He never thought...never thought Shiro would make it. Expected that he’d spend the rest of his life alone and wondering what he could have done differently to save him. This guy who’d always been there for him. Had been his role model and practically family since he was a kid.

Keith stops to lean his back against a wall and take a cleansing breath. He’s still alive. It’s such a surreal thought. Who’d have imagined it? Lance runs down the hall to catch up, coming to a stop next to him.

“Slow down man,” Lance pants. “I don’t want to get lost in one of these creepy hallways.”

Lance never doubted it, Keith remembers. Even when Keith was already mourning Shiro’s loss, when he’d already given up, Lance told him to cheer up. That things would turn out alright.

“Hospitals are so eerie right?” Lance asks, eyeing the dark corners. “I know it’s a vet clinic...but it’s still spooky. Like there are ghosts...just watching you.”

Lance told him everything was going to be okay, and it was. It is.

“What’s up? You’re freaking me out...is there...” Lance gulps and then lowers his voice to an unnerved whisper. “Is there something behind me???”

Keith nods and Lance turns with a frightened squeak. He pants, eyes scanning for anything out of the ordinary but the hallway is empty. Just messing with him. Lance has to admit, that was a good one. He turns to congratulate him on a prank well done.

“Jeez man, you really got--oof!”

He wavers for a second from the impact. A bracing hug, arms wrapped around his middle and face pressing into his chest. Keith’s shoulders shake a little and Lance worries for a second that this is another round of tears. He readies a hand to pat his shoulder in reassuring fashion but then he hears laughter. Keith is laughing.

How is he supposed to respond to this?
“Keith? You okay? You’re hugging me and laughing in the middle of a dark hallway, and frankly it’s a little creepy,” Lance informs him, unsure if he’s aware.

Lance’s arms stay high and away from his body, not sure if he should touch Keith even in the midst of receiving a hug. He did tell him to keep his hands off before and he is nothing if not respectful of people’s wishes.

“I can’t believe it,” Keith says between breaths. “He’s really okay.”

“Of course he is,” Lance flushes, feeling Keith squeeze him. “I told you so.”

Keith nods in agreement with another laugh and Lance wonders if it would be all too forward to hug back.

The danger is over for the time being. They needn’t worry for the next couple of days about keeping watch for monsters. Or freezing on a bus. Or scavenging food from abandoned buildings. Or worrying that Shiro might succumb to his wounds in the middle of the night.

They’re safe. For now. There’s probably no harm in returning the hug. A supportive, non sexually charged hug, of course.

He lowers his hands and places them around Keith’s shoulders. So warm. Keith even sighs into his hold. Lance nibbles his lip thinking this is still pretty intimate for people who don’t know each other.

That’s not entirely true though, he thinks. Lance has known of Keith since before Incident One. It’s just that Keith never had any cause to know him. Completely different sections of the Garrison. And in whole other leagues of each other. Keith a part of special tactics and rescue. Lance in the infantry. They had a couple of classes together but Keith always sat near the front and Lance in the back.

Their paths barely crossed before Incident One.

Lance had been trying for the sniper position in the infantry when everything went down. After that day, no one needed overseas combatants anymore. There were no more tests. No more shooting range evaluations. No more marching practice or drills. Just survival skills. Keith and he crossed a few times after that but there was never any recognition in his eyes when they met. Keith didn’t know him.

Not long after, he got paired with Pidge and Hunk for Echo team. They’d always been friends since they arrived at the Garrison but being put together on a team made them even closer.

Hunk was there to learn to be a combat engineer and became a pretty good one too. Every team needs someone who can repair the vehicle and it didn’t hurt that he could perform basic first aid. A holdover from a summer he trained as an EMT. He’s just a little...apprehensive about the combat aspect, especially if alone. It’s why he ended up on the lowest team.

Pidge became the radio sergeant and geographer while training for communications. She definitely should have been put with Charlie Team. Or even Bravo. She knows what she’s doing better than most. Lance suspects it’s her attitude that got her saddled with Echo. Lance remembers her practically screaming at Iverson on more than one occasion about his procedures and how inefficient they were.

Then of course there’s Lance. He was one of many members stationed with Echo to protect the group. An excellent sharpshooter but other than that—it’s not that he’s bad at other things, just average. He can do a little bit of everything. A jack of all trades. If someone needed a fill-in, he did it, which can be useful out here when your team members are dying left and right.
Keith though...

Keith is what all the cadets aspired to be like. He was no good with a gun but with a knife--Keith could run circles around some of the veterans of close quarters combat. Best at infiltration tactics. Top marks before everything went to shit. Fit and ready to fight. The only cadet chosen for Alpha team.

A star.

God, Lance was so fucking jealous. He remembers sulking for days. Bitching and whining about how unfair it was. Because wasn't he just as good as Keith?

But seeing Keith now...he’s not sure he’d want to take his place. True, he’s very good at what he does. And he’s reaped the benefits of being on Alpha Team. All the prestige of being the best. All the admiration of the Garrison. But losing nearly everyone and having to kill a few of his own members, including his mom. No reverence is worth the cost of all he’s suffered.

Lance squeezes him a little closer, pinching his eyes shut, his empathy overwhelming.

“I am...so sorry,” Lance tells him.

“What for?” Keith asks, his face finally unburying itself from Lance’s chest.

“For putting you through the surgery with Shiro,” Lance swallows. “Had I known about--I should have done it instead.”

“What are you talk--” Keith starts but then goes stiff and growls with realization. “Matt,” he grumbles.

Lance feels sorry for him. How dare--He was...he was about to kiss this guy but now there’s a foul taste in his mouth and it tastes like pity. Disgusting.

Keith shoves him off, losing that comforting warmth and disregarding the confusion in Lance’s eyes. He stomps his way down the hall and away from Lance, seething with resentment, leaving Lance to trail after him trying to catch up.

“If you’d just said something, I’d have taken your place,” Lance tells him.

“I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want any more people feeling sorry for me,” Keith huffs. It’s hard to tell who he’s specifically mad at. Lance, Matt, or himself. Maybe a little of all of it. “Save your pity for the dead,” he spits. “I don’t want it.”

Lance stops at the door, wincing at the acid in Keith’s words. He doesn’t want to get too close with the fire Keith’s spitting. The last thing he wants is another swing in his direction. Instead, he braces a hand on the frame and looks into the room as Keith strides across.

Keith snatches up a blanket with an angry frown, kicks over the IV stand, then bitterly takes off for the cot furthest from the others. The clatter wakes them, of course, making them jolt up in a panic to look around for danger. Finding nothing, just Keith settling into his squeaking cot, Matt and Hunk plop back down into their spots. Pidge makes a displeased face at Keith, yawns and then looks at Lance waiting by the door.

“What’d you do?” she asks accusingly.

Lance enters with a shrug because honestly, he’s not sure. He just wanted to let Keith know he
understands. That he wants to help, is willing to. No one should have to carry as many burdens as Keith is. He can’t erase his problems but he can carry them for a while so he doesn’t crumble under the weight.

That’s not pity. It’s compassion. Doesn’t he know the difference?

With a sigh, Lance rummages through the med bag. Grasps the half-empty bottle of cough syrup. He turns it over in his hand and then eyes Keith. His back is to them all, body hidden under the blanket. The best way to shut people out that he knows how.

Maybe, he doesn’t know...because no one’s told him otherwise. He might already be asleep but Lance approaches anyway.

He stops at the foot of the cot. Keith’s body is curled up small and tight with the blanket engulfing him. He’s too stiff to be out but his breathing sounds regular if not a little raspy. Expertly pretending to be asleep.

“You know, it’s only pity if I just acknowledge your pain but do nothing to help,” Lance says, fairly sure Keith’s awake to hear him. He puts the bottle next to him on the cot. No response, so he sighs with disappointment. “See you in the AM.”

Keith doesn’t move, just stares at the wall. He listens as Lance steps back to the other side of the room. A clink of him righting the IV stand. There’s a creak and ruffle of blanket as Lance settles into his own cot. The room goes completely dark as he turns off the only lamp still lit in the room. Even then Keith doesn’t move, not until it’s been what he guesses is an hour.

He sits up and scoops the bottle up from the foot of his bed. He twists the cap and tilts it back. A long gulp to help his cough, the artificial grape flavor coating his tongue and throat to soothe its soreness. It doesn’t hurt that it helps remove that unfortunate taste in his mouth.

Before it tasted like damnable pity...now it’s sinking regret.

The moment had been so genuinely comforting before. The first time in months he felt like someone wasn’t walking on eggshells around him. Lance gives off such a feeling of warmth, even when he’s nowhere near. Keith was ready to kiss the hell out of that mouth in that dark hallway.

Curse everything, he’s still thinking about those lips, even now.

But just the idea that Lance was only acting like that because of what Matt told him--it drenched him in cold, snuffing out the warmth he felt. Apologies and offers of assistance suddenly sounded false, insincere. Patronizing. And nothing burns him up like that sort of treatment.

Keith’s emotions have always bubbled very near the surface. He has to work so hard to stay indifferent but that anger rises so easily when the right buttons are hit. Makes him hasty in his actions and then of course he feels like a fool later.

And he very much feels like one now.

Shiro always warns him about his temper. Honestly, he’s about 75% of Keith’s impulse control when things get heated. If their leader weren’t hurt then half of Keith’s arguments and attitude would never leave his mouth. He certainly has less battle wounds than he should because of how often Shiro’s stepped in. There are a lot of people out there with broken noses and black eyes from when tensions got high and he had no one to help reign it in.

Maybe it's high time he started policing himself. Lance looked hurt when he shoved him and not just
because he was physical. Confusion laced with pain. It was...uncalled for, he thinks guiltily. Lance was just trying to help. Not like it's his fault that Matt can’t shut his mouth.

He’ll apologize. In the morning. If he tries now he’ll end up tripping over every little object strewn about the floor trying to reach him. And he’d rather not make a public display of it. He has his dignity after all.

For now he rolls over in his cot, hand rummages around in his pocket to pull out that pack of Big Red digging into his side. He’d forgotten about it. Gives it a deep smell, the warm spice of it filling his nose and comforting him for some reason.

He’s never liked candy. Or anything sugary really but...perhaps the flavor would improve on the tongue of another, he thinks. Might taste better coming from Lance’s mouth than it ever would on its own. Is Lance a good kisser?

A stirring below makes him swallow and bite his lip. He really shouldn’t indulge this. It's a very slippery slope that leads to giving a shit. Plus, there’s no privacy here but...he rubs himself a little, face warm thinking about gifting Lance the candy with his apology. Kissing him, tongue swirling to chase that saccharine flavor of gum in his mouth.

Keith bites his lip a little harder, nose buried in cinnamon as he squeezes himself under his waistband. He barely keeps himself from gasping when he thumbs his head, the tip sticky.

Nope. No. He needs to stop. Not here. He won’t be able to be quiet here.

Hating himself for it, Keith takes his hand away and grasps the cot edge instead. His knuckles turning white as he wills himself to relax. He tries to not think about trivial things like Lance’s mouth or how he wants to feel it on his. Or his wet lips brushing his neck. Or anything else. Slow deep breaths as he ignores his erection stubbornly trying to maintain firmness.

He just needs to stop thinking about Lance. Period.

It’s going to be a restless night.

Chapter End Notes

If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment! Don't know what to say?
Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Fair deal?

(Also, if you really like Voltron stuff and want more, check out my other two fics. Tell me what you think of them!)
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

How did it end up like this

It was only a kiss, it was only a kiss

--The Killers, Mr. Brightside

Lance is absolutely shocked that Keith’s not up with the morning sun. With how worried he is about Shiro, he expected his cot to be empty when he woke but there he lays. Curled up with blankets tangled around his legs, hair a mess from tossing and turning the night before. All the others are already up, sitting at the little table and divvying out food.

He decides to leave it to Matt to wake him, not wanting to overstep his boundaries again. But before he can even ask Matt to do so, Keith sits up. Blinks and rubs his tired eyes. Awful. Like he didn’t sleep at all.

Lance watches as he stands up and pads across the room to the table where the others are sitting. Keith’s fist clenches and raises like he’s winding up to hit someone. Lance thinks to warn Matt because that’s where Keith’s eyes are but to his surprise he doesn’t need to. Keith just grits his teeth and lowers his hand as he takes a seat at the table without a word, his self-control apparently stronger than Lance has come to expect from him.

Keith may end up having words with Matt later but at least he didn’t hit him.

“Guess that’s just reserved for me,” Lance jokes to himself from his cot.

He joins the others and they eat from their own stores, not wanting to be a burden on Allura and Coran’s supplies. It’s quiet. Too quiet for their group honestly. Everyone’s still waiting for more news on Shiro before they feel safe enough to relax so no one talks as they eat.

News comes sooner rather than later as Allura enters with a knock. She looks positively exhausted from watching over Shiro all night.

“He’s awake,” she says. They all stand up suddenly but she puts a hand up to slow their roll. “I insist it be one at a time. To keep the noise level down and to keep him from getting overstimulated. And for my peace of mind, I’d like to request that Hunk be first.”

Keith looks dissatisfied with this decision but holds his tongue.

“What? Why me?” Hunk asks, looking apologetically to Keith.

“You’re the only other person with medical knowledge and it would be a good idea to familiarize you with his treatment, so that I may get some rest knowing he’s in capable hands. Coran can take shifts with you for his care,” she explains. “If you will follow me, Hunk. The rest of you can decide the order in which you visit while we speak.”

Hunk stands, looking uncertainly around at his comrades but obeys and follows Allura out. The
others take their seats again with a sigh. Pidge smiles at them all and adjusts her glasses.

“At least he’s okay,” she says.

“Keith, you want to go first after Hunk?” Matt asks and Keith nods. “I’ll go after you, if that’s cool with you guys.”

“Sure,” Lance shrugs. “I was thinking of helping Coran and the ‘Princess’ with anything they need done around the place. Since we’re gonna be here for a while.”

Lance finishes his granola bar quickly and chugs down half of the bottle. He stands and hands it off to the nearest person as he usually would. Keith takes it but not without a questioning glance. He expected Lance to be mad at him. Lance doesn’t notice the look and is already out in the hallway, his rifle shouldered as he looks for Coran.

“He said something dumb last night, right? That why you’re mad at him?” Pidge asks Keith. “He doesn’t usually think before he speaks.”

“I noticed,” Keith nods and drinks the water.

It’s not like Keith’s any better, he tells himself. He resorts to physical violence far too often for anyone’s comfort. So having no filter is hardly that bad as far as Keith’s concerned.

“You get used to it. It’s not even the most infuriating aspect about him,” Pidge tells him.

“What is?” Keith asks, curious.

Pidge shrugs and swirls the water in her bottle, like she doesn’t want to say. She props her head in her hand, staring into the plastic.

“Lance is a nice guy,” Pidge tells him. “He cares too much...about others.”

“You make it sound like a bad thing, Katie,” says Matt.

“It is. Sort of. When you spend all your time trying to make everyone else happy you don’t exactly have time for yourself,” Pidge sighs. “Like with the sodas. And he’ll put himself through hell. Take stupid risks just to keep our spirits up. Moron. It’s going to get him killed or worse--turned.”

At least Keith’s not the only one to think it.

“That being said,” Pidge lids her eyes with a fond smile. “I’d take a bullet for him. Hunk would too. He’s saved our lives more than once and I’m not talking about deadheads.”

Keith turns his eyes down to the water bottle in his hand but his mind wanders elsewhere. Lance handing him the pop tart after finding out his likes. Bringing him medicine and willing to give up his blanket for Keith. Genuine offers of help and kindness, some at the expense of his own comfort. And Keith’s been less than appreciative of his gestures.

“Don’t forgive him too easily though. It’ll inflate that massive ego of his,” Pidge laughs. “He can’t stand when people are mad at him. If he really messed up, he’ll pull out the puppy eyes.”

“Never work,” Keith insists with a huff.

It hardly matters, as Lance isn’t the one that needs forgiving but they don’t need to know that. If Keith has a vice it’s his pride. The last thing he wants to admit is that he’s the one who actually screwed up and needs to apologize.
“Ha, only people who haven’t see it ever say that,” Pidge laughs and chants. “All succumb to the eyes.”

“Keith,” Matt nudges him and gestures at the door.

Hunk is back and enters with a wave. Allura waits patiently for the next person and Keith shoots out of his chair to join her. All thoughts of Lance’s puppy eyes gone in his excitement to see Shiro. Awake but more importantly, alive.

*****

“So, you actually have a garden up here?” Lance asks as he follows Coran up to the roof.

“A small one,” Coran admits. “A few potatoes. Lots of peppers and tomatoes. Been working on a little strawberry patch lately but it’s hard to keep the birds off them.”

“I didn’t notice it through the scope,” Lance admits. “Oh hey, maybe you can use these? As uh, payback for Shiro’s surgery?”

He hands the little bags of seeds he’d shoved in his pocket to Coran who goes through them with an approving smile.

Lance looks up, shielding his eyes to take in the blue sky. No clouds and plenty of sun. It’s even kind of warm. The older man then gestures Lance over to their setup to give him a rundown of what they have.

It’s small, like Coran said, but bigger than Lance expected. Shallow plastic containers, rectangular in shape, full of soil from the pasture with plants growing out of them. The area must have been clear at one point for them to get enough to fill—six, seven, eight—ten makeshift pots that he’s now seeing used to be litter boxes.

“What do you need me to do?” Lance asks as he follows him to the ground.

Looks like the pieces of a bunch of gates. Like the kind used to fence in puppies so they don’t go running off all over the house. Getting stuck under furniture and what not. Lance remembers using them to trap his cousin in when she was a baby so he could cook without having to watch her.

Coran picks a few up and hands them to Lance.

“We’re going to make a little something to protect the garden from birds,” he reveals.

Lance grins and nods, taking off his jacket and rolling up his sleeves, ready to get on it.

*****

The first thing Keith sees is that Shiro’s been propped up in the cot. Pillows supporting him to keep him comfortable. An IV drips something clear, fluids and antibiotics, he guesses. It’s not like he knows anything about after surgery procedures. He just has to hope Allura knows what she’s doing.

“Hey,” Shiro smiles weakly when he comes in. “I’d wave but I’m afraid the doctor will scold me.”

Keith steps in and sees there’s a chair next to the cot now. He falls into it and leans forward to take Shiro’s hand. He looks exceptionally tired but there’s a smile on his face. Keith will take anything positive at this point.

“ Heard you helped out with the surgery,” Shiro says sympathetically and weakly squeezes Keith’s
hand. “Way to go. She’d be proud of you. I am.”

“Shut up,” Keith huffs with half a smile. “I’m sick of crying.”

“Sorry for putting you through that,” Shiro admits. “How’s everyone else holding up?”

“Who cares,” Keith shakes his head. “They didn’t get their arm chopped off.”

“Yeah, guess I just became a lefty,” Shiro jokes and winces in pain. “Hurts. A lot. But hey...I’m alive. I’ll take it.”

For a bit they just sit. Allura appreciates it as she’s constantly checking his pulse, blood pressure, and temperature. All the while Shiro puts up a tough front. He’s clearly in a lot of pain from how frequently he clenches his jaw and closes his eyes to focus. The generic painkillers aren’t helping much.

“Know what’s funny?” Shiro asks.

“Nothing about this is funny,” Keith sighs, shaking his head.

“Feels like it’s still there,” he says. “More than it did yesterday. It was numb then. Now I feel my fingers waggling but...nothing’s there. Just itchy. Very surreal.”

“That’s normal,” Allura cuts in. She’s been doing her part to not interrupt, to allow them to converse without intruding. “Common in amputations. It'll decrease with time.”

“Time I have thanks to you Doc,” Shiro smiles at her then looks to Keith and lowers his voice a little. “When I woke up, I thought I’d died. Saw this beautiful woman and thought...angel.”

“Please,” Allura flushes with a frown. “Don’t say such things. Coran hears you, it’ll become the new moniker he calls me by. Princess is bad enough.”

Shiro laughs but then his body tenses up in pain so he makes himself stop. Keith manages a smile, glad to see nothing dampens Shiro’s spirit. Not even almost dying.

Allura tells Keith that he may need more blood. While she doesn’t want to ask Lance to donate again so soon it may become necessary. So if Keith wouldn’t mind letting Lance know when he leaves, she’d appreciate it.

“Lance...that’s the tall one? Echo Leader?” Shiro double checks. He yawns and Allura sits him back into a better position for sleep. “The one you hit, is that right?”

“Yeah,” Keith nods and looks away.

“Owe him a lot,” Shiro says as he shifts in the bed to get comfortable. “For the medicine. For the blood. For getting us here. If I fall asleep before he gets in today, thank him for me?”

“Sure,” Keith agrees with a sigh.

“Good,” Shiro sighs. “Be nice.”

“Perhaps he should be the last visitor for now,” Allura tells him. “You need more rest.”

Shiro nods but his eyes are already closed. His face looks a little tense, his brow furrowed in pain. His sleep will be fretful but Allura assures him he’ll be okay. That he’s recovering nicely considering the circumstances and lack of necessary materials.
“Go ahead, Keith. I’m fine,” Shiro assures him. Keith gives his hand one more squeeze which Shiro returns before letting go.

Once he’s out in the hall again he leans against the door. Within moments he hears a pained groan from Shiro. He’d been holding back how badly it hurt for Keith’s sake. Allura does her best with vocal reassurances, probably squeezing his good hand for support but it’s hardly enough to stem the waves of agony.

There’s nothing Keith can do. Just has to let Shiro ride it out. As much as it hurts him to walk away he does so. Shiro told him to. Besides, he’s heard enough of those pained cries than what’s good for him. He doesn’t want to end up collapsing again, triggered by his trauma.

So for now, he chooses to wander the building to familiarize himself with it. It’ll give him something to do and take his mind off of everything else.

*****

It’s a clever idea Lance thinks, using the gates like this. The openings are small enough to keep bigger birds and some smaller ones from squeezing in to take their produce. A shame they don’t have any screening they can attach to it too. They made a border first to surround it all and then a piece to go over the top, like a lid. They end up securing it with a couple carabiners when finished. Easy enough to remove when it comes time to harvest but secure enough that it won’t be bumped off.

“Excellent work,” Coran compliments while rubbing his chin. “Perhaps now my strawberries will have a chance. Willing to assist me some more? We didn’t quite finish collecting the water from yesterday.”

Lance nods. According to Coran, they used to be able to get water from a well in the pasture. That was before the door was swarmed. And unfortunately for them, in the middle of the night, a good number of the undead returned to the front door.

It’s inconvenient but not immediately life-threatening for them. They have plenty of containers to capture rainwater in and they’ve been fortunate to get regular precipitation. Half of it goes into jugs labeled with green tape around the handles, the other half with blue.

“Why’s it divided up?” Lance asks.

“Ah, well the blue ones we’ll filter for drinking later,” Coran tells him. “The others we use to water the garden. Oh and bathe, about twice a week.”

“Twice a week?” Lance whines with jealousy. “We haven’t bathed in over a MONTH.”

“I can tell,” Coran chuckles. “The Princess insisted we gather enough for each of you to clean up a little. Enough for a sponge bath at least. We have soap as well, as long as you don’t mind smelling like a dog.”

Lance doesn’t care if he smells like a dog for the rest of his natural life if he can get a legitimate bath. That little splash in the creek was hardly enough. He can finally wash his hair. Scrape all the grime, dirt, and zombie particles from his skin. Feel refreshed and clean again.

“We can warm the water too, if you like,” Coran tells him.

“Are you serious?!” Lance shrieks, almost dropping the jugs.

“Of course, see that there?” Coran gestures. “Those are solar panels. Only three are working right
now, not sure what’s the matter with the other ones. We’re doctors, not engineers. Anyway, it’s enough to power the labs but we hardly ever use the lights if we don’t have to. Attracts undead.”

“Solar panels,” Lance muses.

“Yes, and we can boil the water on the hotplates downstairs,” Coran tells him. “Warm bath. Warm meal for dinner. Sound alright to you?”

“Does it ever!” Lance clutches Coran around the middle, on the verge of dramatic tears. “I could kiss your mustache!”

Coran laughs and laughs. Lance continues to sing his praises as he helps gather the water and set up the empty bottles for collection. When they finish Lance follows Coran with two jugs in each hand.

They take them to a room on the east end of the building. A good number of gallon containers sit inside already, revealing that they have plenty of water to last them for some time. Coran says they like to be overly prepared, collecting and storing as much as possible after each rain. It’s smart.

Each person will be allocated about half a gallon to clean themselves with. It isn’t much Coran admits but should provide enough to get clean. Lance doesn’t care as long as he gets some alone time with some shampoo and a sponge.

“I’ll go ahead and get on filtering the drinking water,” Coran tells him and passes him a fresh bottle. “I’ll find you when it’s done. Why don’t you take a break? You’ve helped a great deal already.”

Not a bad idea, Lance thinks. The roof was warm and kinda nice. Might be fun to relax up there and sunbathe a little. Lance thanks Coran for the water and heads back on up.

Fresh breeze and no claustrophobic bus stench. Lance takes as big as a breath as he can, holds it in, and slowly lets it out with a smile. The world is shit but the sky...the sky’s just as blue as ever. Lance pulls off his jacket and sprawls out on it to look up at the drifting clouds.

“Rabbit. Tractor. Whale,” Lance guesses at the shapes as they pass. “Cow!”

It’s been so long since he’s done this. Just looked up. They’ve been so busy keeping their eyes on the ground for zombies. The only time he gets to look up is at night. Stars are nice, great even, but it’s a welcome change to see far off clouds and sun.

Some of those clouds in the distance look dark. Maybe some rain in a few days. Oh man, he’d love to just lay out in the rain. He’d always do that with his little cousins and go hopping into puddles. Make a filthy mess of themselves and get a beating from his Nana’s chancla for tracking it all into the house.

Lance lids his eyes with a sigh. His hand goes rummaging through his jacket pocket to pull out a photograph. It’s old. Crinkled and damaged from all the time he’s kept it but it still brings a smile to his face.

“What are you doing?” comes a voice from the roof door.

Lance sits up and turns to find Keith.

“Just...taking a break. You come to check out the garden? It’s pretty cool,” Lance gestures over to it. Keith glances at it but steps over the threshold towards him instead.

“What’s that? A picture?” Keith asks as he takes a seat next to him. Lance nods and passes it for him
to look at.

It’s a large family gathered on the beach. The adults have drinks in their hands, gesturing cheers towards the camera. Children run and play and make sandcastles in the background. A grinning boy who looks vaguely like Lance is in the foreground. He’s holding the camera as far back as he can to get the entire group into the shot.

“Your family?” Keith guesses and hands it back.

“Yeah,” Lance nods, leaning back onto his jacket and holding it up to look at.

Such a big family and yet Lance never felt smothered by them. Never thought they were too many. He was only eleven in the picture but everyone is there. His mom. His dad. Siblings and cousins. All of them.

“They alive?” Keith asks but then realizes how insensitive that sounds. “I didn’t mean--”

“It’s alright,” Lance laughs. “They’re fine. All back at the Garrison.”

Lance explains that he took a job on Echo team, to scavenge and such in return for their safety. Most of them have jobs back there to help out. Cooking, cleaning, etc. His older sister helps take care of the armory. Repairs and cleans guns for the scouting teams. If it weren’t for Lance and her his family may have been stuck outside the compound with the rest of the survivors.

“You worried about them?” Keith wonders.

“A little,” Lance admits. “My work on Echo Team keeps them fed. Well, it did. Now I don’t know what will happen to them. Will the Admiral let them stay? Or turn them out to fend for themselves?”

He’s never heard of such a thing ever happening there. But to be fair, he’d hardly have noticed if they did. Blinded by the generosity of the Garrison. And with the revelation of K-Quadrant he has to wonder what else he’s ignorant of. Probably a lot. Lance squeezes the photo a little between his fingers and presses it to his face to cover his eyes.

“I’ll miss them,” he admits with a sad smile.

Keith sees a small tear trickle out from under the photograph and trail it’s way down his cheek. But Lance doesn’t make a sound. It drips off his face and onto the ground, evaporating with the heat. No more follow it and the wetness on his cheek dries up.

It’s horrible to see someone who’s constantly smiling denying himself a moment to let go. All that work to help the team but all he allows himself is a single tear. It’s too sad and there’s nothing Keith can do to help.

Well, that’s not entirely true. He fingers the gum in his pocket, biting his lip.

“Here,” says Keith.

With a swift gesture he pulls it out and tosses it onto Lance’s chest. He jolts a little, grabbing whatever hit him and sitting up.

“What’s--holy shit!” Lance stares wide-eyed. “I can have this? All of it?”

“Yeah, all yours,” Keith assures him.

Lance almost can’t believe it. Keith has to know how hard it is to find intact candy. And it’s even
Big Red! He keeps waiting for a caveat but Keith doesn’t say anything more about it. No catch.

Most people hoard this stuff back at the Garrison. Those who have excess in the way of food and water will trade for luxuries such as shaving cream, lotion, or candy. If you want a week’s worth of terrible rations you can get it for a couple of candy bars. Lance knows a guy who’ll give up his bathing privileges (much to everyone’s dismay) for a can of root beer.

A stick like this could get him some decent stuff back at the Garrison. Not that they’re going back. He’d never give it up anyway. It’s Big Red! Lance unwraps a piece immediately and pops it into his mouth.

“I could kiss you,” Lance jokes as he chews.

Keith turns his head away with a huff but his stomach does a flip. Really? All because he gave him some gum?

“But I won’t, cause you’ll probably deck me again,” Lance laughs and pops.

Lance sighs and moans as he chews with dramatic revelry. It’s almost obscene the way he carries on. But Keith likes the look on his face. That pleased smile as he pops his gum and when he licks his lips to get it all back into his mouth Keith’s heart thrums.

“It can’t be that good,” Keith shakes his head, trying to deny the thrilling sight of his tongue. “It’s just gum.”

“Just gum!” Lance says incredulously, feigning offense. “Just gum! Have you ever had Big Red?”

“No,” Keith admits with a shrug as Lance pops it.

“Okay. Nope. This cannot stand,” Lance sits up and fiddles with the pack. He extends one of the sticks to Keith and shakes it. “Try it. If you don’t like it, it’s no big deal. Just give it to me. I don’t care about cooties. But you have to try it.”

Keith raises a brow. He looks so genuinely excited, it feels unnecessarily mean to deny him. Damn it, are these the puppy eyes Pidge was talking about? He pulls the gum from his hand and looks at it skeptically. He’d get to know what Lance’s mouth tastes like at least. Just like he’d been fantasizing last night.

Lance ushers him on so he opens it and puts it in his mouth to chew.

“Well?” Lance asks, biting his lip in anticipation of Keith’s response.

Warm, he thinks. He knows it has nothing to do with temperature and everything to do with the spice. But there’s the thick sugary sweetness too. The combination of which gets into his teeth and burns down his throat. Not in an unpleasant way though. Reminds him of spiced cider in the fall.

So this is what Lance’s mouth tastes like right now.

“It’s a little too sweet,” Keith tells him and Lance’s face falls a little. “But it’s alright. I guess. Better than that poison you fed me.”

Lance brightens back up with a boisterous laugh at the memory of the licorice. Of Keith’s disgusted grimace and how funny it looked as he tried to keep cool to soldier through eating the rest. Keith remembers too and chuckles for longer than Lance expected him too.
Guess he’s feeling better, Lance thinks as he smiles.

“How did it go with Shiro?” Lance asks, scratching his head.

“Good,” says Keith. “Oh...the doctor. She said he might need more blood. You up for that?”

Keith looks at him as if he’s worried Lance will say no.

“Sure,” Lance nods and the relief is measurable.

“Thanks,” Keith sighs. “I don’t know how we’ll pay you back for all this.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Lance puts a hand on his shoulder. “We’re a team now right? We look out for each other.”

Keith eyes the lingering hand. Thinking maybe it’s too familiar, Lance takes it back and folds it into his lap with a cough.

“Sorry. Wonder what we should call ourselves now,” Lance ponders. “We’re not Alpha or Echo anymore.”

Keith watches as he grabs his jacket and slides the bandana down from his arm. It reveals the Garrison patch underneath. Lance sighs and starts tearing the patch off, leaving a section of unfaded fabric in its place. When he’s finished he turns it over in his hand with a disappointed sigh.

Lance stands and looks over the edge of the roof. Nearly two dozen corpses moan and smack the doors. From here Lance can smell their rotting flesh, the stink of putrefaction wafting up from the ground and ruining the smell of his gum. He crumples up the patch and throws it as far as he can.

“Wish I had more bullets,” Lance huffs.

Keith joins him at the edge to look down on the zombies.

“Even if you had all the ammo in the state, it wouldn’t be enough,” Keith tells him. “The city is so full of them it would take years to eradicate everything with just guns.”

“You’d think with all that’s happened, Incident One, Two, and Three, we would have figured out something by now,” says Lance with a groan. “How to stop it all. A cure or something to wipe them out. Someone out there has got to be working on one.”

Why is he not surprised that Lance is so optimistic as to believe in a cure? If such a thing were going to happen it would have already. They’ve had...two years of this hell? It’s beyond naive to think someone might be able to eradicate the infection. Even then, the world wouldn’t go back to being the same.

But here’s Lance, not giving up.

“You’re ridiculous,” Keith tells him, but there’s no hint of malice in his tone. “It’ll never happen.”

Lance doesn’t turn to argue otherwise. He knows it’s foolish to think about it. But he can’t keep going on, day by day without hoping that it’ll all end. And not in blood and decay but with the sun shining and people laughing again. That one day he’ll wake up and not be tired. Not have to wonder where they’ll get their food. Their water.

To wake up one day and not smell or see rotting corpses trying their damndest to devour the living; that’s what Lance hopes for above all else. He can’t expect Keith to underst--
“But it's a nice thought,” Keith admits.

Lance does turn then. Keith’s looking sadly down at the corpses, his eyes lidded and tired.

“You shouldn’t entertain the idea too much,” Keith tells him, his hand absently resting on his knife handle. The one of the serrated saw. The one he likely used to cut his own mother’s arm off. “Life’s got a way of taking those thoughts...and drowning them in blood.”

“Jeez, you’re so morose,” Lance snorts. “Lighten up.”

“Can’t. It’s just who I am,” Keith huffs.

“Doubt that,” Lance pokes. “You were laughing like five minutes ago. You just need a distraction. Something fun to take your mind off it.”

“Because fun will fix everything,” Keith says sarcastically.

“No but it's...” Lance shrugs as he pops the bubble as he thinks. “It’s like the gum. Or Pidge’s sodas. Hunk’s chocolate. They’re not much. Something to look forward to. If you don’t have anything...you’re just waiting to die.”

Is Lance...scolding him? Or maybe that’s too harsh a word. More like lecturing him. Regardless, it doesn’t change the feeling it imbues in him. Shame. Almost as bad as Shiro looking at him with disappointment in his eyes and tone of voice.

Is he just waiting to die? He never thought about it that way but it feels true. And he doesn’t like that at all.

“Something fun, huh,” Keith chews, the cinnamon flavor still strong.

“Exactly! What’s the first thing that comes to mind?” Lance pats his shoulder. “Knowing you, nothing but stabbing deadheads brings a smile to your face. Ghoul. We could clear out the front door if you want, I guess. Or you could always punch me in the nose again. That was fun right?”

Keith snorts and covers his mouth so he doesn’t spit out his gum or choke on it.

“No?” Lance laughs.

“No,” Keith shakes his head, hiding his smirk behind his palm.

Lance appealing to his macabre sense of humor. Something about that warms him.

“Well, then I’m all out of ideas,” Lance shrugs and pops another bubble.

Something fun. Kissing those lips...might be fun. Lance already tried to kiss him once. He doesn’t imagine he’d object. And they’re alone, with nobody to see them.

“I’ve got one,” Keith swallows but carefully so as not to lose the gum.

“Let’s hear it,” Lance leans in.

Keith grabs him by his shirt and for a split second Lance thinks he’s going to flip him over, kung fu style. He doesn’t, just pulls him in until their lips crash together.

After that stinging slap from before, the last thing Lance expected was Keith to kiss him. And he certainly wasn’t expecting to feel a tongue plying his mouth open to taste inside. He’s got no
complaints however. Lance lids his eyes and parts his lips, welcoming Keith’s massaging tongue in against his own. He sighs into the kiss but Keith’s keeping quiet despite the eagerness of his tongue.

It’s over too quickly. Keith releases him, taking those warm lips away. He looks embarrassed. Like he’s made a mistake. Looks ready to run and Lance doesn’t want that. They were having a good time he thought.

“Wait,” Lance leans forward grabbing his wrist, his breath shallow. “Why are you stopping?”

“This is stupid,” Keith says but his cheeks are a little flushed.

“So it didn’t make you feel better? At all?” Lance asks, sounding a little hurt.

“I didn’t say that,” Keith shakes his head. “I just know it’s pointless. Like putting a bandaid on a bullet wound. Doesn’t fix anything.”

“It’s not supposed to fix it,” Lance reminds him. “Doesn’t mean it’s pointless.”

Keith furrows his brow. It’s like he’s still uncertain and wary of trying.

Lance has to admit that he’d very much like to keep going but he has no interest in forcing someone to see things his way. They never have to touch again if that’s how Keith wants it but…Lance is not about to forget that kiss anytime soon. Warm and filled with cinnamon sweetness.

He’s going to be thinking about it in the middle of the night and he’s sure Keith will too.

“It’s fine. We don’t have to keep going. But if that’s what makes you feel better,” Lance starts and looks around to gauge their aloneness. “You know, kissing or whatever, I’m game for it. It’s way better than chewing gum. Speaking of, you can keep mine I guess.”

Keith blinks and feels in his mouth. The piece he has does feel bigger. Lance grins as Keith turns red with embarrassment. He can’t believe he was so into that kiss he’d stolen Lance’s gum right from his very mouth. It betrays how detached he was trying to be in the midst of it.

“Sorry. You want it back?” Keith asks, pulling it from his mouth and avoiding Lance’s eyes as he extends it towards him.

“Only if you give it back the same way you took it,” Lance waggles his eyes suggestively. “I have absolutely no shame and I won’t deny that was fun. Could be even funner if you want. I’m very good with my hands, you know. Just say the word.”

That brazen--He can’t believe--!

Keith turns red, giving another pouting frown as he puts the gum back in his mouth and shakes his head. It makes Lance chuckle out a ‘your loss’ as he picks up his jacket from the ground. He puts his photograph back in the inside pocket and puts it on. Lance shoulders his rifle, even though he’ll have no need of it for the next week or two. Just makes him look cool as he steps back to the roof door.

That was unexpected, Lance thinks, but not unwanted. Guess Keith’s not so cold as he thought. And he’s into dudes! It opens up all sorts of possibilities.

“Gonna see if I can get Pidge and Hunk to fix up the other solar panels,” Lance lets him know. “Might be able to get the power going in the whole building. That means AC and heat. Then I’ll stop by with Coran. Get more blood to Shiro again.”
Keith nods as he chews his gum. Lance’s gum, he remembers.

Lance turns to give him one more look, bites at his lip as he eyes Keith from toes to head with a knowing smile. Keith knows when a person is undressing him with their eyes. He can’t believe how forward Lance is being when all they’ve done is kiss.

Once.

“See you later,” he calls out with a wink. Lance then turns and heads on down the stairs, whistling merrily.

Once he’s gone and Keith can’t hear his footsteps he drops to the ground, a palm pressed to his face. It’s hot and not from the stupid gum which he’s come dangerously close to choking on.

Fuck that kiss was good. So good it scared him a little. He’d forgotten for a second where he was. As much as he wants to think Lance is full of himself...he has to wonder how good he really is. Especially in areas outside of kissing. Keith thinks about those hands Lance is so proud of roaming his body without restraint but then he shakes his head of the image.

He shouldn’t be considering this. It’s dangerous this thing that Lance is encouraging him to do. Does he know that? Having fun, getting used to something that won’t always be there, becoming dependent on it...It’s tantamount to setting himself up for failure, not to mention tragedy. He may as well shoot himself in the foot because in the long run it’ll be just as fruitful.

But perhaps it’s not as deep as all that. The risk only comes with getting attached. As long as he doesn’t get used to it where’s the harm? After all, he could be dead next month. Why not take advantage of the offer? Why not enjoy these fleeting pleasures while he still can?

It’s not like Lance is proposing they go steady or proclaiming some kind of undying love. If he was it’d be infinitely easier to decline.

Keith maneuvers the gums around his mouth, catching the last of its flavor and committing it to memory. With closed eyes, he thinks about Lance’s tongue sliding in to taste him again, recreating the feeling of their kiss. A hand on his chin to open his mouth wider to accept more than just tongue. Something more than sweet spices going thick down his throat.

God, he can barely contain a whine at the thought of it.

“Dammit,” Keith coughs and chokes.

He swallowed the damn gum, much to his chagrin. And now to make things even more embarrassing he’s sporting a boner pressing hard against his jeans, tenting them. All that just from his imagination.

Maybe he will take Lance up on that offer. In private of course.

With any luck, it’ll be nothing but a disappointment and he can put this all behind him.

Chapter End Notes
If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment AND tell a friend! Don't know what to say? Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Fair deal?

(Also, if you really like Voltron stuff and want more, check out my other two fics. Tell me what you think of them!)
Coran and Allura are thrilled that Pidge and Hunk are able to repair the broken solar panels. Turns out it’s a bunch of poorly soldered wiring that probably got knocked around and separated during a storm. They’re more than capable of fixing with their tools and more than willing. The two of them sit up there for most of the day fiddling with them and making sure the cables are all going to the right places.

They say with any luck, it’ll be done by dinner.

Around lunch, Lance sits down to give another pint of blood and when finished Coran insists he lay down for a bit to recuperate. He’s given twice in the past twenty-four hours, the last thing he needs to be doing is walking around. Even gives him a water bottle full of powdered orange drink to replenish his energy. After Lance is situated, Coran takes the blood quickly down the hall to Shiro’s room. He’s absolutely drained, literally and figuratively, but that doesn’t stop him from chatting with Matt as he lays there.

“What are you working on?” Lance eyes the tools in his hands.

“Ah, fixing some of their hotplates,” Matt shows him. “They were down to two when we arrived. Now they’ve got four working again. Figured it’s something I can do to help out.”

“Weird question, don’t answer if you don’t wanna,” Lance prefices with an apologetic glance. “What happened to your eye?”


“You got pegged by your own trap?” Lance tries his hardest to not snort. Dude got hurt, he shouldn’t laugh but...Matt’s laughing at himself. That makes it okay right?

“It was pressure activated. And uh...I thought it would be a great idea to test the sensitivity,” Matt
chuckles. “I forgot to take the nails out first. Rookie mistake. Keith got hit by a few when he pushed me out of the way. Had to pull five nails out of his shoulder and two out of my eye. Probably would have died if he hadn't gotten in the way.”

“Jeez dude,” Lance grimaces with sympathy.

“That was...over a month ago? I can’t remember. It’s mostly healed up by now,” Matt waves it off and continues with a laugh. “After that Keith would ask me every time if something was loaded. ‘Do you know how to use that?’ ‘Are you sure?’ ‘Maybe you should stick to radios, for everyone’s safety’.”

The two of them laugh a little at his impressions as Matt screws the bottom off of another plate. He adjusts his glasses and leans in to mess with wires. More corroded ones. Busted. He tosses it aside into the pile of junk before starting on another. Lance leans back into the cot with a sigh and hums a little.

An hour later the lights flicker on over them and Matt cheers. Looks like Pidge and Hunk managed to fix the panels. And it's only three o'clock.

“Guess that means we'll be warm tonight,” Matt smiles at the thought of not needing a blanket for once.

Lance doesn't hear him. He hadn't realized how tired he was and drifted off. He dreams of the beach and riding on the waves of the incoming tide. Laying back on his board to stare up at the pink sky as the sun sets. Heaven.

The only thing that wakes him is the smell of something cooking. Dear God is that marinara? He begs the Almighty not to tease him like this as he opens his eyes with a hum to sniff the air.

“Mmmm. That smells so good,” he says, practically salivating. “Time is it? Dinner? How long have I been asleep?”

“Couple hours,” Pidge calls over her shoulder and she stirs a pot. She looks different for some reason and he realizes it's because she's clean and wearing scrubs. “Coran came to get you for clean up but we didn't want to wake you. How much blood have we pumped out of your hide?”

“I dunno, I feel like a family of mosquitoes had me for lunch,” Lance yawns.

The little dog jumps around Pidge’s feet and stands on its back paws trying to get her attention. She apologizes and says dinner’s for people not the cutest little angel on Earth. The dog doesn’t get it, of course, and just whimpers for pets. Pidge fawns a little and picks the fluffy beast up to hold while she continues to stir.

Hunk comes in at that point and welcomes Lance to the world of the living. Figuratively anyway, he jokes. He lets Lance know he's the only one who hasn't cleaned up yet for dinner which should be in about half an hour. Lance stands and wobbles a bit before stretching.

“Bath sounds great,” Lance admits and Hunk joins him in the walk down the hall to pick up his water from Coran.

The black bucket in Coran’s hand sloshes around with hot water. A clean washcloth hangs over its edge. Lance perks up and takes it by the handle with an excited squeak. Finally, a chance to feel clean again. After the last month he desperately needs it.

“You'll have to borrow the shampoo from Keith when he's finished. Shouldn't be long now,” Coran
checks his watch. “You'll probably bump into him along the way.”

They give him directions to the kennels. It's the only room with drains in the floor to catch the water. He's informed there are towels and scrubs there too for him to change into afterward. That way his travel clothes can be washed in the morning. Lance almost vibrates with excitement at the prospect of clean clothes so off he goes to the kennels.

Keith's cleaning up is he? He's not so uncouth as to walk in on him on purpose hoping to catch a glimpse but he's not so chaste as to deny how interested he is in the idea of seeing him in the nude. He settles for a knock to announce himself.

“Knock knock,” Lance repeats. There's quiet but he hears movement inside.

“It's open,” echoes Keith's voice.

Lance doesn't need to be told twice and shoulders his way in.

A nice size room with chained off sections. Made to hold a couple dozen dogs of varying sizes. There are counters, cabinets, and sinks on the far wall. The drains are over there he guesses as the room feels like it slants that way a little. That or he’s still dizzy from donating.

Keith's at a sink his head tilted over it as he lathers shampoo in his hair. Much to Lance’s disappointment he's wearing a pair of scrub pants, pulled on in a hurry and clinging to his still damp legs. At least he’s not wearing a shirt. Lance grabs a plastic stool and heads on over.

“I'm almost done,” Keith tells him.

“Take your time,” Lance says as he puts down the stool.

He wasn’t going to use the sink anyway. Lance puts the bucket down and notices the pile of Keith's dirty clothes and shoes.

“Mind if I throw my clothes into your pile? I'll take the bunch when I'm finished,” Lance assures him as he pulls off his jacket.

“Go ahead,” says Keith.

Lance takes his photograph and gum out of the pocket and lays them on the counter before tossing his jacket onto the mound of clothes. Kicks off his shoes and socks. Pulls off his shirt too and chucks it. He's about to pull off his pants when a thought crosses his mind.

“You don't care if I go ahead and get started?” Lance asks.

“Nope,” Keith answers.

“Pass the shampoo then,” Lance gestures.

Keith grabs the bottle and underhands it over. Lance catches it with ease and bends over to put it on the ground next to his bucket. Keith stares at that rear for a second before returning his gaze to the bottom of the sink.

Lance drops his pants and throws them over before taking a seat on his stool. Dog shampoo, huh? He squirts some on the cloth, wets it in the warm water, and lathers before putting it to his feet.

“Oh my God,” Lance moans, unable to contain himself.
Keith freezes at that sound. He knows it's because of the warm water. Knows it's because he's finally getting clean after all this time. Hell Keith made a similar exclamation. He knows those things and yet the way it came out of Lance's mouth and echoed off the walls sends a tingle down his spine.

“Think I'm going to cry,” Lance chuckles as he scrubs his legs. He can already see grime coming off and coloring the soap a dingy brown.

Keith says nothing, just continues to take his time lathering his hair. As Lance works he finds his eyes falling on Keith's back. He's thin but fit, but then again, one has to be out here. That or die.

He's littered with old injuries and some fresh ones. There are cuts on his arms, healing bruises on his shoulders, and some old scarring at the base of his spine. His shoulder blade has three dots that he can see from the nail gun Matt mentioned. Practically healed.

Lance scrubs up his legs to his torso when Keith finally starts rinsing his hair out. One little cup of water at a time over his bucket in the sink so he can make sure to get all the soap. Lance's eyes linger on his frame, taking in his ass as he bends his head to the sink.

Stop that, Lance scolds himself. He said he wasn’t interested.

Lance starts rinsing off his own body using the washcloth, squeezing drops out on his skin to chase the soap down the drain at his feet. Dirt and blood color the water as it slips down the drain. It's absolutely filthy but it's what he's come to expect over the years.

“Gotta say, this is the cleanest I've felt in months,” Lance admits.

“Me too,” Keith nods. He shakes his head over the sink to get rid of excess water before reaching over for his towel.

“Oh yeah, what cabinet did you get the towel and scrubs from?” Lance asks as he lathers soap on his head.

Keith turns to point but stops when he sees Lance sitting there naked on the stool. The angle makes it impossible to see his crotch but he's got plenty of other things to look at.

He thought Lance was just lanky but...wrong. So wrong.

Lean and wiry. An athlete’s body, a runner or maybe a swimmer. Long legs with muscled thighs and calves. Soap from his hair slithers down his neck and over a brown nipple, then down his stomach to the start of a dark patch of hair. Keith remembers himself before Lance looks up at him.

“It's uh, there,” Keith points and turns back to the sink with a swallow.

“Cool, thanks,” Lance nods.

“What happened to your leg?” Keith asks to quell his nerves and fill the silence. “Nasty scar.”

“Hmm? Oh,” Lance looks down at it. “Got that long before Incident One. Surfing. Shark.”

“You were bit by a shark?” Keith asks. Why is he not surprised?

“Just a little one,” Lance shrugs nonchalantly. “Happens sometimes. Not nearly as bad as a jellyfish sting. Here, look.”

Keith swallows again, prepared to see some full frontal but Lance has his back turned to him and tapping his lower back at the long scar. His gaze falls to his ass crack before it focused on the actual
injury. Looks like wavy ribbons with the way they curve and swirl.

"That fucking hurt," Lance assures him before turning back around to rinse his hair out. "Worst pain I've felt in my life."

Keith turns away and hoods his head with the towel. He keeps eyeing Lance as he goes through the cabinets to grab himself a scrub shirt. Each time he turns he doesn't allow himself to stare for more than a millisecond at exposed flesh.

But Lance catches the glances. Oh ho? Maybe not not interested?

Lance finds it hilarious that Keith's going out of his way to not look at him. Or rather, he's working hard to try and keep Lance from knowing he's looking at him. Wants to see but doesn't want to seem too curious. No doubt thinking about his offer, seriously considering it.

Brings a prideful grin to his face but he has to wonder why Keith won’t just...be open about it.

Lance rinses then stands and walks to the cabinet Keith's at to grab a towel. Keith tenses up, knowing that all it'll take is a quick glance to get an eye full. But he doesn’t. Lance pulls a white towel from the shelf and wraps it around his waist before leaning back on the counter with a sigh.

“If I cared about you looking, I'd have waited until you left to get started,” Lance smirks.

Keith turns his head to look at Lance's face and what a change after he's cleaned up. Hair damp but no longer slick from weeks of oil and sweat. No dirt on his cheeks. Are those freckles? He looks so soft and smooth. Smells good now too.

“Thought about it? My offer?” Lance asks leaning in a little.

Keith doesn't back up which is a good sign.

“I have,” Keith says as he combs his fingers through his hair. “I need...reassurances. How would this go?”

Lance shrugs noncommittally.

“I'm not one for rules but we can keep it private. If that's what you want. I'm not picky about activities either," Lance says as he cranes his neck until it pops then turns to face Keith again. “I guess, just tell me what you're into and we can do that. If you don't want to do anything, just say so. I won't get butthurt about it. That's what wanking it is for.”


That makes this loads easier.

He's glad that Lance isn't one of those wishy-washy romantic types to get hung up on the connotations of sex. Lance won’t be able to cater to his specific desires but there’s nothing wrong with Vanilla when your options are limited. Could even be enjoyable. Keith turns and sticks out his hand.

“We're going to shake on this?” Lance almost laughs.

“He want to do this or not?” Keith huffs.

Lance smirks and takes his hand, grasping it firmly. With a not so gentle tug Lance pulls him into his space for a kiss. Lips crashing down on his as a hand cradles Keith's head, fingers knotting
themselves in thick black hair and tugging that head back for more access. A tongue slips in and gives his mouth a gentle massage. Teeth nibble on his bottom lip before pulling away leaving Keith wanting more.

“So do you like it rough or gentle?” Lance asks as he looks at Keith's neck, thinking how nice it would look with a hickey on it. “Actually don’t tell me. Figuring it out is half the fun.”

Keith rolls his eyes but notes the fingers kneading at his scalp, massaging with twitching fingers. Lance’s body crowds in just a little bit closer and Keith’s only now noticing how much taller he is. Lance stares down at his lips, leaning in to go for them again when a knock echoes through the room. Keith goes rigid and Lance lets out an annoyed sigh.

“Yeah?” Lance answers as he steps back from Keith. He doesn’t care if they get caught but Keith seems to at least a little. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have frozen like a deer in the headlights.

“Lance, dinner’s almost ready,” Coran calls. “Can you find Keith and tell him too? I need to check on Shiro.”

“I guess I could look,” Lance shrugs with a smile at Keith who just rolls his eyes again.

“Great, thanks!” Coran finishes up and heads down the hall.

“Oh man, look who I found. It’s Keith!” Lance jokes as if he hadn’t just had his tongue down his throat. “Time to eat, dude. A shame it’s spaghetti and not dick, am I right? Ah well, might as well settle for the next best thing.”

Keith snorts and covers his mouth so he won’t allow himself to laugh. Lance bellows at the reaction and smacks his leg in hilarity before turning and grabbing a pair of scrubs. Keith leans back and watches with wide eyes as Lance drops his towel without prompting.

Oh boy.

Just little kissing has got Lance sporting a semi-hard cock. Thank god Keith’s already covering his face because his mouth is watering at the sight. Long. Full. If that’s just a little turned on...Keith flushes and turns pointedly away. The last thing he needs is to think about sucking that when they’re about to join the others for dinner.

“Nice, always looked good in blue,” Lance hums after dressing. He grabs his things from the counter to shove in a pocket. “Where’d others put their dirty clothes?”

“There’s a hamper in the hall,” Keith mumbles.

Lance gathers it all up and gestures to the door. Keith opens it for him and they find the aforementioned hamper in the hall with Hunk’s clothes on top. Must be it, so he dumps them in and the two of them make their way back to the rec room for dinner.

*****

The smell in the rec room is thick with tomatoes, garlic, and peppers. It smells divine which isn’t surprising since Hunk is such a good cook. They haven’t had a full meal in quite a while, so everyone’s looking forward to it. All the carbs of the pasta, the savory flavor of meat sauce from a jar, with a sprinkling of salt on top since there’s no parmesan.

Hunk thought it might be a great idea to cook in honor of their hosts so they’re also invited to the table. No one has any objections to that so they all sit down for the meal.
Pidge pours her sodas into cups so that everyone can get some. Each person ends up with a little solo cup about half full, leaving two of the cans unopened for now. Coran provides his own contribution, a fresh bowl of sliced red and green peppers. Once everyone sits at the table they begin passing around the plates.

“This is very kind of you,” Allura comments as she takes a serving.

“Oh please,” Pidge waves. “We have more than enough of this pasta to last two weeks. Sit Rover. Good puppy!”

Pidge doesn’t reward the dog with any of their food but gives him a little pet which he gladly takes before pattering over to his bowl of dog food. There’s a surplus of it here, it being vet clinic. Lucky dog. He won’t have to worry about food for a while.

“It’s our pleasure. Plus, you must be exhausted after watching over Shiro,” Matt adds. “We’re glad to repay you.”

“You’ve already fixed the power. And Lance, you helped Coran protect the garden, even gave him new seeds to plant,” she chuckles. “You’ve more than held up your end of the bargain.”

“All in a day's work, Princess,” Lance winks at her.

“Ugh, I blame you for this Coran,” she says pointing her fork at him and the others laugh.

“Oh, I’ve set up some of the cots in the examination rooms,” Coran brings up. “Since we have power to warm the rooms now you don’t all have to sleep in the same space to stay cozy. Thought maybe you’d all appreciate the private comfort of an individual room.”

That’s good to hear. Keith’s been wanting a place to call his own for a while. Back at the apartment he had that. It was a sty of course but he liked having his own space. The last couple of days hasn’t been easy on him. He hates feeling like someone’s always watching him, makes it hard to sleep.

Dinner gives them the chance to learn more about Allura and Coran.

They aren’t vets as it turns out. Allura is a surgeon and pathologist. Coran is a knowledgeable diagnostician and researcher. Both a part of a team of scientists from the neighboring state. They were trying to reach a larger hospital when they stopped here to recuperate.

There were some injuries among their group so they holed up here. But when it came time to leave they were surrounded. Multiple attempts to clear the door failed, resulting in deaths. So they stopped trying to leave.

“Our escort, a team of soldiers, they were...ah, well. I suppose it’s a story that’s all too familiar to everyone by now,” Allura sighs with a sad frown.

They all nod in understanding.

“We...honestly thought we could make it to the city. To the hospital in Dallas. It has labs, equipment, everything we could possibly need,” she says looking downtrodden at her food. “Suppose it’s impossible now.”

“No joke, the city is full of zombies. You’d never reach the center without running smack into thousands upon thousands of bloodthirsty corpses,” Lance laughs nervously at just the thought. “Why would you want to go anyway?”
“Do you know what a pathologist does?” she asks and Lance shrugs. No idea at all.

“They study and diagnose disease through the analysis of tissue, cells, and body fluids,” Pidge recites. “Some spend their whole lives learning the actual progression time and stages of various diseases including infectious ones like tuberculosis, AIDS, and influenza.”

“Correct,” Allura smiles, pleasantly surprised. “I’ve been studying the zombies these past two years.”

“That’s neat. Know a little something about the undead plague?” Hunk asks as he slurps up his noodles.

“I would say she knows more than a little,” Coran laughs.

“I know the contagion inside and out,” she says, almost bashfully. “How long it takes to incubate. Infection rates dependent upon bite locations, body types, and sex. Success rate in an amputation after infection. It’s all fascinating if not very macabre. I’m probably the most forefront authority on it, if that means anything nowadays.”

“Amazing,” a few at the table nod.

“I was hoping to put an end to it all,” Allura chuckles and drinks her soda as the others stare. “Ambitious, I know. I even thought I had a working formula.”

“For a cure?” Lance asks, suddenly very interested.

“No,” she shakes her head with a sad laugh. “You can’t cure a viral infection in the traditional sense. All who turn will stay turned.”

“You have to use a vaccine, right?” Hunk remembers. “Preventative measures to keep the infection from spreading. So that those infected don’t pass it on further until it eventually dies out.”

“And you have a formula for it? You think you could do it?” Pidge asks, suddenly not interested in the food on her plate.

“I can’t even create a prototype here, let alone test it,” she sighs. “So I suppose we’ll never know.”

The table goes quiet as they process the information. Impossible. There’s no way in hell they’d ever make it to the Dallas hospital. No way they’d even get through the outer city. They’d need an army. Even the Garrison wouldn’t have enough people or guns for what it would take to storm into the hospital.

They’re just eight people including Shiro who’s out of commission and the scientists who are not trained combatants. They have a single gun with only...five shots left in it. Well, Shiro has a sidearm but it's empty. But even if they all were in tip-top shape with guns and ammo to spare, they couldn’t go headlong into the city. It’s suicide.

It’s a pipe dream and they all know it.

“Wish we could take you but,” Pidge says glumly, “our bus would never make it. It’s on its last legs anyway.”

Keith scoffs. “As if that’s the only thing keeping it from being possible,” he says, his plate clear. “Ridiculous. I’m heading to bed.”

Table’s quiet for a moment and the minute his steps aren’t audible anymore Lance whistles.
“That’s Keith for you,” Lance thumbs over his shoulder with a smile, trying to keep things light. “He’s our standard issue wet blanket. Don’t listen to him.”

“Yeah,” Pidge agrees. “Talk to Shiro about it when he’s better. He’ll think of a way to get you there, I’m sure. If nothing else, you can come with us back to the Garrison.”

Lance looks away from the table, nervous and tapping his fingers on his knees but no one takes notice. Guess that means they still don’t know. When should he tell them?

“Thank you for your support,” Allura smiles a small spark in her otherwise sad eyes. “I won’t be giving up any time soon.”

The rest of dinner is more upbeat. They talk about things that can be done around the building. Thanks are shared for all the work already being done. Every morsel of food gets devoured with the exception of a plate set aside for Shiro.

Matt and Lance promise to do the dishes and Allura leaves with Coran to see Shiro again. To see if he’s awake and ready to eat. Pidge scoops up the dog and jumps on Hunk’s back. She ushers him to the examination rooms, insisting upon putting his cot in her room. No way they’re sleeping alone.

“You want Matt to share a room with you, Lance?” Pidge asks before they take off. “I’ll make him if you’re lonely. Or maybe Rov--no sorry, I lied. You can’t have Rover. I’ll fight you.”

“No, I’m good,” says Lance with a laugh.

“You sure? You can bunk with us if you want,” Hunk turns, a little concerned. “I’m sure two cots can support the three of us.”

They know Lance never likes sleeping alone. Too afraid of waking in the middle of the night and finding everyone gone. He usually sleeps with a candle or lamp lit when there’s no one around. And it’s very odd that he’s declining the invitation.

“No, I think I’ll be okay here,” he tells them. Partially so they’ll stop worrying and partially because he doesn’t think he’ll be sleeping alone. So it’s not really even a lie.

“If you say so, but take a lamp,” Pidge points to the supplies. “Just in case.”

“I will,” Lance nods, because he wouldn’t dream of going anywhere without one.

“And come see us if you change your mind,” Hunk repeats.

“Got it.”

The two of them take off and Lance helps Matt clear the little table of plates. He drains any cups that still have soda in them, which isn’t much but enough for a solid gulp of ginger sweetness. Together they clean the plates and pots in record time.

Matt says he’ll be heading to bed in an hour or so, since he still wants to fix a few more appliances around the place. Feels like a lie. There isn’t much left to fix technology wise. The dark circle under his only eye suggests he’s having trouble getting to sleep.

“Try not to wear yourself out,” Lance tells him before snatching up a battery lamp from the supplies. He turns it on and heads down the hall for the examination rooms.

Hunk and Pidge’s door is open and he hears them as he passes, shifting the cots around the room. It’s
almost too small for two cots but they make it work. Lance opens the next door and finds it empty. Then the next finding it empty too with the exception of a cot. So the last one at the end of the hall is Keith’s he guesses.

Lance gives it a gentle knock so that Pidge and Hunk don’t hear him.

“Want any company?” Lance asks.

“Later,” Keith mumbles from within.

“Alright, I’m next door,” Lance informs him and steps into what he’s now designating as his room.

He drops into the cot immediately, putting the lamp on the counter. With a sigh he pulls his photograph out and smiles at his parents in it. He wishes them good night and puts them on the counter, propped up against a jar of q-tips. Then he proceeds to hum to himself, a little song from his childhood to help him fall asleep.

An hour later he wakes to a sound. A knock on the wall. At first, it doesn’t register until he remembers Keith’s on the other side. So he does want him to come over. With a grin he sits up, grabs his lamp and peers into the hallway. Empty and quiet. He steps out and opens Keith’s door.

Keith’s leaning against the wall, his arms crossed and avoiding his gaze. There’s a sour look on his face but a tint to his cheeks as if he’s embarrassed to be doing this.

“Don’t look so serious,” Lance jokes and puts the lamp down. “Or neither of us are going to have any fun.”

Keith huffs and tries to keep from frowning. He watches at Lance crosses the room and takes a seat on his cot. He shifts and shimmies until he’s comfortable before looking back at Keith with a sly but inviting smile.

“Come on, sit here,” Lance says, patting the space between his legs. “We can start with something simple.”

Keith still looks hesitant.

“What, you scared of me?”

Keith gets off the wall at that comment and resolutely drops into the seat between his legs. As much as he looks like a petulant child doing so, he’s not about to let someone insinuate that he’s afraid—of anything. Nervous is different from afraid however. He swallows anxiously as Lance chuckles at his behavior.

To get started, Lance’s hand brushes aside the hair at his neck to expose skin. It sends a shiver down his spine and only intensifies when Lance nuzzles there before mouthing his pulse. Hot lips on his cold neck.

“You’re so stiff,” Lance breaths against his flesh.

Hands snake around Keith’s torso and under his scrub top to touch his stomach and up his chest. Warm fingers massage at the flesh and slide across his skin, feeling each muscle and scar. All the while, Lance kisses and grazes his teeth on Keith’s neck, relishing in the little intakes of breath Keith releases when he thumbs his nipples.

Still being so quiet but definitely enjoying it. Looking into Keith’s lap show’s he’s more than
stimulated by just a few kisses and touch. But Lance wouldn’t mind a moan or two.

Lance brings a hand lower. His fingers rub in circles just above his waistband, hinting at where he’s going next before dipping into his pants. Fingers splay into the short patch of hair, taking time to run through it before getting to Keith’s thick base. He curls his hand around and gets ahold of him, hard and jumping at his touch. Keith finally makes a noise louder than a mouse when Lance gives him a squeeze. A gasp that makes Lance feel like he’s finally letting go. Finally relaxing.

“That’s better,” Lance purrs into his neck as he strokes down his base to the tip. Now they can actually have fun.

Lance leans back a little, encouraging Keith to lean against him with his other hand perched on his chin to tilt his head to face him. He lowers his lips to Keith’s parted mouth, capturing a quiet moan as he kisses him. Lance pants excitedly as he kisses, glad to finally be getting something out of Keith that isn’t a frown or indignant huff.

Keith is reeling from the all the sensations at once. It’s been months and Lance’s hungry kisses have his head spinning. Christ and that hand hasn’t lost its stroking rhythm since it started. He’s working his hard cock up and out of his scrubs with each masterful stroke. Lance slowly rubs the tip of his thumb over Keith’s leaking head and gets a loud gasp as he spreads around sticky precome.

Guess Lance isn’t all talk.

“You think that’s good, you should feel what I can do with my mouth,” Lance whispers into his ear, stroking him faster with increased pressure.

“F-Fuck,” Keith pants out, dangerously close to just letting himself climax. “I-I--”

“But I’d rather see what you can do with yours,” Lance adds as his fingers surround Keith’s throat firmly, tilting his head and exposing his neck for a sucking kiss. “Would you do that? Get on your knees for me? Open your mouth and take me in?”

“L-Lance,” Keith whines at that. “I--”

God, he wants to but he’ll never make it to the floor before he comes.

Lance chuckles and lowers his voice. “Would you swallow me down too?” he whispers into his ear, seeing how the dirty talk brings a red flush to Keith’s face and makes his mouth water. Keith feels himself nod despite himself, because god, he’d love to do exactly that.

The hand Lance has around his throat inches up and fingers plunge into Keith's panting mouth. Keith closes his eyes, his moan stifled by Lance’s probing fingers. With all that talk of sucking cock he can’t not imagine it now. His lips wrapped around Lance, his cheeks hollowing as he sucks and his tongue swirls.

It doesn’t take much to see it in his mind. Fingers tugging his hair, pushing and pulling him as he’s thrusted into. He can just envision himself choking on his length, swallowing his--

Keith whines behind those fingers, his head tilting back on Lance’s shoulder as he goes over the edge with pleasure. Lance holds him tight to his body and aims him so that every drop of come ends up on the floor rather than Keith’s clothes. His body turns into panting shivering mess once Lance takes his spit-drenched fingers out of his mouth.

“That was fast,” Lance chuckles.
“I-I…” Keith gasps. He’s not sure what to say.

“Feel good?” Lance asks with a debonair smile and Keith nods, his eyes still clouded from the high. “Good, it’s supposed to.”

“Do you want me to...do something for you?” Keith asks, breath still ragged.

“You can,” Lance says but notes the lack of strength in his body. “But you look kinda tired.”

Keith nods again, eyes closed. He is. It’s been a long week. A long year. And that little interaction absolutely drained him. He may even sleep through the night for once.

“Sorry,” Keith apologizes, ready to pass out.

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it,” Lance assures him.

There’s always tomorrow.

Lance maneuvers the body in his hold to lay out on the cot and Keith goes without a fight. He practically melts into the pallet, his head sinking into the thin pillow. Before Lance even throws the blanket over him Keith’s already gone. With a chuckle, Lance grabs his lamp to leave.

Keith didn’t say he could stay so he shouldn't be there when he wakes. Maybe next time. As he lifts the lamp to look at Keith one more time he stops.

It almost looks like he’s smiling.

He wonders for a second if that’s a rare sight before turning to leave and returning to his own cot. With a sigh, he kicks back into the bed and thinks about the fun they just had. Looks at his hand, the one that stroked Keith into whimpering orgasm. The hand that dripped with Keith’s come.

Lance sticks those fingers into his mouth with a content sigh, the unmistakable taste of semen still on them. Tastes...so good. Now he’s wishing they’d started with a blowjob instead. He sucks on them further and strokes his quickly hardening length out of his pants, thinking about Keith. That flushed face, dark curls of hair, lidded eyes, and desperately panting mouth.

Keith nodded when he asked if he’d suck him off. God--

He pants as he works himself closer and closer to the edge, the taste of Keith on his tongue. With as much self-control as he can muster Lance stops. Lets his twitching cock go. He waits a few minutes for himself to calm before doing it again. Stroking until he’s about to burst then stopping.

Lance isn’t normally one for delayed gratification but he wants to save that climax for Keith and his mouth. He can’t forget that look of desperation when he suggested Keith swallow him. Lance wants there to be so much it drips out and down his chin. Wants to see Keith look a mess on his knees and flushed as he swallows him down with a grateful moan. Lance bites back another groan, taking a deep breath after edging a third time.

Just looking at Keith tomorrow’s going to bring him to a full salute.

At least he’ll have something to look forward to--and isn’t that the point to all this anyway?
If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment AND tell a friend! Don't know what to say? Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Tell me what you'd like to see more of. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Sounds fair right?
Chapter 7

Hey honey you could be my drug
You could be my new prescription

--Neon Trees, Everybody talks

The desert cottage. It still looks the same as it did when he was a kid. The cinder blocks and old books providing legs for the coffee table. The ancient ham radio. No cable either. Just an old tv with a VCR. God, it was so low tech they didn’t even have a phone line out there.

But that’s what Keith loved about it. Devoid of the noise of others, of the city. Only three movies on the shelf for them to watch. Open windows for fresh air. With the best view of the stars. They only ever went in the Fall, when they didn’t have to worry too much about the AC giving up on them.

He remembers his mom and him sitting on the roof. Listening to the radio inside and stargazing. She let him drink out there long before he was legally allowed to do so. Sh treated him like an equal, not like her little boy. They’d talk about the special tactics team and ways to improve his test scores in school.

It’s a dream and he knows it. One he’s had before.

The real cottage was demolished during a tropical storm when he turned sixteen, long before Incident One. They hadn’t been able to go back or find time to build a new one. But that doesn’t change the nostalgic feeling he gets looking over and seeing her there. Sitting on the roof after a long day and passing him a newly opened bottle of amber beer.

She still looks so real. His mom. All he ever wanted to do was be just like her.

This is the part where he reaches over and instead of the ice cold bottle, it’s her severed bloody arm. He knows this. It’s how it always goes. A reminder that things can never be as they were and hoping for something better is just futile.

Better to just get this over with.

His fingers wrap around the glass but it stays cold. It drips with icy condensation in the Texan heat.

“Drink it before it gets warm,” she laughs and sips hers. “Or are you like your dad? That always grossed me out.”

Keith looks down at the beer, because it still is very much a beer, and back to her. The dream didn’t change. Then he recognizes this as the same talk she gave when he got accepted into the Garrison. Incident One happened two years later.

He’s never gotten this far in this dream before. Not without blood, and pain, and screaming. Not without waking in a cold sweat, with tears down his face. He keeps expecting rotten corpses to breach from the ground and surround them but things stay quiet. Peaceful even. But for how long?
“Should we be relaxing like this?” Keith asks as he nervously looks around.

“Take your pleasures when you can get them,” she smiles and then clinks their bottles together. “It’s a short life Keith. Treat yourself. You’ve earned it.”

Keith smiles, his brows furrowed. Maybe it’s okay. He follows her lead, tips the bottle back and swallows a gulp of beer. Before he can tip it back down to look at her again his eyes open to a dark room.

The veterinary hospital. Right.

He sits up and brushes his bangs from his face. He can’t tell what time it is and this room has no windows. He can hear some distant, garbled chatter though so someone’s up. Opening the door to the main hall brings in lots of light and the smell of coffee down the hall. Morning, maybe. Feels later than that though.

He pads his way down to the rec room, the smell of coffee getting stronger. A few people sit at the table, two of which drink from ceramic cups.

“Ugh, it’s so gross,” Hunk complains. “Wish we had some sugar. Creamer.”

“Well, Lance only found coffee,” Pidge tells him.

“So ungrateful, you can all suck my--” Lance stops as he turns. He looks at Keith and gives him a smirk as he offers him a cup. “You’re the last one up. Sleep well?”

Lance’s hot lips on his neck, fingers muffling Keith’s moans. His hand squeezing and stroking him into shaking release. Keith does a quick turn and covers his inferno of a face. That really happened? That was real?!

“You okay Keith? You look like you’re gonna be sick,” Hunk observes. “And I’d know. I throw up all the time.”

“Don’t sound so proud,” Pidge scolds him with a roll her eyes.

“I’m fine,” Keith swallows and builds up his stoic face.

This is fine. He’s fine. Just...be natural.

He takes the coffee from Lance’s hand and sits at the table, doing his best not to look at him or think about in intimate detail about the night before. Lance is just as good as his word, keeping their interaction private and not dropping subtle hints or clues about what happened. He doesn’t even act like Keith’s there, turning to talk to the others.

Keith looks good this morning, Lance thinks. The circles under his eyes less prominent. Less of a scowl on his face. And it was clear when he walked in that he’d completely forgotten the night before. Probably thought it was all a dream.

Lance certainly didn’t forget. He can’t wait to do it again but now’s not the time to make plans.

The table talks about Shiro for a bit. Allura told them he’s progressing well, likely because of how physically fit he already is. The pain is still strong but he’s awake. And what’s more, he’s eating, so more good news. In a few days, he might be able to take a small walk about the premises. Nothing too strenuous but enough to keep his legs from getting weak.
“That’s great,” Lance says.

“Have you seen him yet?” Matt asks. “I went in this morning.”

“Not yet, but I should,” Lance nods as he drains his cup. “In fact, think I’ll go now.”

He wants to talk to Shiro anyway. Shiro’s the ranking officer and as much as Keith says titles don’t matter it feels important to defer to the one with the most experience as the true team leader. He’ll know what to do about accessing the pasture for the well, clearing the doors, and maybe even a little something about getting the scientists to the city.

Lance drums the table before getting up, pouring a fresh cup of coffee, and walking down the hall to Shiro’s recovery room. He doesn’t even think about knocking, just opens the door. Shiro’s already sitting up and makes a gesture telling him to stay quiet before pointing at the chair.

Allura’s sleeping, leaning on the wall with a clipboard dangling precariously from her fingers.

“She fell asleep while writing,” Shiro whispers and beckons Lance over to the other chair. “She’s a trooper. Deserves a little shuteye.”

Lance nods and passes him the cup of coffee before taking a seat. He breathes in deep over the cup with a weak smile, then takes a long sip.

“It’s perfect,” Shiro comments with a thank you. “How’s it going, Echo Leader?”

“It’s Lance,” he says and shakes his head. “And I’m just a staff sergeant, hardly fit to be a leader.”

“I don’t know about that,” Shiro disagrees. “Thanks for everything. I wouldn’t be alive without you.”

“Aww, jeez. Stop! You’re making me blush!” Lance grins as he leans back in the chair.

“How’s everyone? All anyone wants to talk about when they come in is me,” Shiro chuckles and winces. “Getting tired of it in all truth.”

Lance gets it and goes through the team one by one, giving Shiro the lowdown on everyone and the things they’ve been up to. Protecting the garden. Fixing the solar panels. A bath for everyone but Lance is pretty sure he knows about that one already. He looks squeaky clean himself, probably thanks to the ‘Princess’.

Lucky duck.

“I actually came to get your thoughts on something,” Lance explains. “We can get regular access to the well in the pasture if we can find a way to it. The door’s got too many deadheads. But if we can get down there and flank them maybe we can clear it.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Shiro smiles, impressed a little at his initiative. “What’s stopping you?”

“Uh, well. Finding a way down. And back up. Since just jumping down’s a terrible idea,” Lance rubs his chin. “Specially if things go sour and we need to get out of there in a hurry.”

“You trained at the Garrison, didn’t you? If you have the materials, make a couple of rope ladders,” Shiro suggests and Lance looks guiltily at the floor. “Bad with knots?”

“I never thought I’d need to learn them...so boring...so I may or may not have slept through those classes,” Lance admits sheepishly with a shrug.
“There are plenty of ropes in the storage room,” Allura yawns. “Used for horses and like, I imagine. Feel free to take them.”

“Morning Princess,” Shiro smiles fondly and she flushes red.

“Enough of that,” she scolds and looks at her clipboard.

She comes over and checks his temperature and pulse. Asks him to move his arm a little and to describe his pain levels. She gives him some pills then insists he lay back down for a while. Before he complies he turns to Lance.

“I’d make them for you but I’m a hand short. Ha. Keith’s great with ropes though. Passed all of his survival training on the first go,” Shiro says proudly. “He can make you some ladders. Just tell him I asked and he shouldn’t give you any grief.”

Lance nods and exits the room, ready to give Shiro some space to sleep. He thanks him for his help before having Allura direct him to the second storage room.

She wasn’t kidding. There are lengths upon lengths of rope hanging up on the walls. Great for cattle and other farming creatures. How many should he…? With a shrug he puts as many as he can into a box and carries it back to the rec room but the only one there is Matt. No sign of Keith.

“Where’s Keith?” he asks, hoping he’s seen him.

“I dunno, could be training,” Matt shrugs. “He’s the most dedicated soldier I know--after Shiro, of course.”

“He’s the most dedicated soldier I know--after Shiro, of course.”

“Where would he do that?” Lance wonders. There’s not a lot of open space here.

“Where would he do that?” Lance wonders. There’s not a lot of open space here.

“The roof?” Matt guesses.

“Are you talking about your brooding friend? With the rather imposing knife on his hip?” Coran asks as he comes in. He takes the coffee cup Matt offers him and drinks. “Passed him earlier on the way down the stairs. Didn’t say anything but he was heading up. May still be there.”

The roof then. Lance nods his thanks and heads that way. The box is cumbersome and he has to stop a number of times to readjust his hold. Once he’s at the top of the stairs his pits are sweaty and his arms a little sore. With a shove of his shoulder, the door opens to the sound of Keith’s footsteps.

He’s training, like Matt said he’d be.

Lance gently puts down the box and watches as Keith practices his steps and swipes. His eyes are cold and focused while he strikes and spins. Must have been working himself hard in such a short time because he’s panting and already sweating through his scrubs.

It’s...attractive. Not just his body but the effort he’s putting into practice. Lance never got to see it at the Garrison, only heard about his fighting skills through rumors. A whole nother league they said and Lance believes it. A bead of sweat drips down his brow when he finishes the end of his set.

Applause alerts Keith to an audience.

“You’re like a different person when you fight,” Lance comments.

“I guess,” Keith shrugs and sheaths his knife. It wasn’t really a compliment but it didn’t seem like an insult either, so he maintains a blank stare.
“I was never good at hand to hand,” Lance admits and approaches. He takes a fighting stance. “Show me a few moves?”

Keith expected some awkward conversation about last night and he’s glad to oblige Lance with sparring to avoid that. Plus, showing others up appeals to him and always has. Keith shrugs and takes a stance, trying not to smile because he knows this will end poorly for Lance. He doesn’t lose and he doesn’t go easy. On anyone.

“Just don’t punch me in the nose again?” Lance requests.

That garners a smirk for a second before it disappears.

Lance barely blocks the first hit and it surprises the both of them. The shock doesn’t last for long and Keith swings out a second strike that almost catches Lance’s cheek. Lance hits back which Keith easily dodges and even uses the momentum to push him away. Lance stumbles but turns. “Pretty fast,” Lance laughs.

“I...try,” Keith shrugs. Again, not really a compliment or insult, so he doesn’t know how to react.

Lance tries to go on the offensive again. His strikes come close but not nearly close enough to cause Keith any concern. He really is bad at this. It’s amusing but Keith’s tired from his earlier training and he wants to take a break. When an opening presents itself Keith grabs, turns and flips Lance onto the ground with a thud. Lance groans at the landing but doesn’t look too hurt.

“You done?” Keith asks, smugly over him.

“Nope,” Lance grins, kicking out his leg and catching Keith’s feet.

Keith throws out his hands to cushion his fall but he ends up landing hard anyway and right on top of Lance. His knees and hands hit the ground with a hard smack on either side of Lance. His face makes a direct hit on Lance’s sternum who in turn groans with pain.

“Ouch, that hurt,” Lance chuckles.

“Moron! You could have sprained my ankle,” Keith huffs.

“You okay?” Lance asks. “Nothing broken? Let me see your hands?”

“I’m fine,” Keith grumbles, sitting up on his knees and showing him his barely scraped up palms. “You’re--”

Lance grabs his wrists and flips the both of them so they’ve switched places. Keith’s pinned and Lance smiles insinuatingly down on him. He’s got a strong grip on him but he doesn’t need it. Keith feels his will to fight being sapped from him with the way Lance looms over him, his eyes raking down his body.

“I’ve got you nailed down,” Lance grins victoriously. Keith’s eyes widen as if he’s said the magic word.

Is he trying to--

“Oh right,” Lance blinks in sudden remembrance. “I came up here to ask a favor.”

A favor? Keith’s mind goes straight to the gutter, especially with how they’re positioned. They’re not alone by any means but they’ll hear someone coming up the stairs in time to stop, he supposes.
Keith swallows, waiting for Lance to start something but he takes his hands off him. He stands and pulls Keith to his feet waving him over to the box by the roof door. It’s full of ropes and Keith’s stomach does a flip. A favor involving...ropes?

“Can you make a rope ladder?” Lance asks handing the box to him.

“A ladder,” Keith mumbles as he takes it.

He wants a ladder? That’s what his favor is?

“Yeah, Shiro said you could. Is this enough rope for that?” Lance nods his head to the box.

Of course, Lance wants to use rope for its intended purpose. Why would he think--Keith looks into the box at the varying lengths. Yeah, there’s enough for at least one. He nods and sits down with the box next to the garden. He’s got nothing better to do so he pulls out the different ones and without a word gets started.

Lance takes a seat and watches with interest. He never cared enough about survival knots at the Garrison but then they had old Dos Santos teaching it. Slow and boring. And condescending as hell. Keith just weaves the lengths together at a rapid pace. Smooth, quick, and practiced, hardly stopping for anything and entirely focused.

Keith’s definitely not thinking about the feel of the knots in his fingers. Or Lance hovering over him a minute ago, eyes deliberately disrobing him while he laid there, vulnerable. He honestly thought Lance wouldn’t be able to keep his hands to himself. That he’d start something despite the discretion of their arrangement.

“Ugh,” Lance groans. “How are you doing this?”

Keith looks over and sees Lance is trying and failing to copy him. Lance glares at his hands, studying them and trying to begin again. He fails once more and Keith almost smirks.

“I thought you were good with your hands?” Keith comments coolly.

“I am where it matters,” Lance winks and returns to the rope. “I just...thought this stuff was stupid. So I never paid attention in class.”

“You’re trying to do difficult knots without learning the basics. Here,” Keith sighs and pulls the rope from his hands.

He does an exceedingly simple square knot, unties it, and then does it again as Lance watches. Lance takes the rope back and ties the knot. He looks surprised and then does it again. Keith snatches the rope and shows him another one, a bowline knot. Lance performs admirably and completes the knot after the third try.

“Guess you’re a fast learner,” Keith huffs, taking it again. “Try this one.”

He gives him a pretty hard one and returns to his ladder work. Lance leans back and tries the knot with little success. Keeps trying to do it too fast, Keith notes. The way Keith does. Lance slows down and eventually gets it, showing it off with a grin.

“These aren’t so hard,” Lance comments. “You should have been teaching the class.”

“Uh-huh,” Keith nods, not really paying attention to him as he twists rope into expertly made loops.
“Know any naughty knots?” Lance asks inquisitively.

Keith’s hands still for a second before returning to work but it’s long enough for Lance’s eyes to widen with interest and his mouth spread into an incredulous grin.

“Oh ho! You do! Teach me one!”

“No,” Keith frowns. “The ones I know are too complicated for you.”

“Oh come on,” Lance rolls his eyes. “An easy one then. The easiest one you can think of.”

Lance keeps repeating ‘please’ over and over in the most obnoxious voice he can. Like a child begging for sweets. It’s messing up Keith’s concentration on the rope ladder. With an angry grumble he puts down the ladder and snatches the length from Lance. He ties a simple single column with three chains in less than thirty seconds and throws it back into Lance’s lap for him to inspect before returning to his work.

“Nice,” Lance hums, turning it over in his hands. It’s not that hard from what he saw. “And this is a naughty one? Where do you tie it? Hands? Feet? Neck?”

Keith pauses at the last one and his cheeks tint. Lance smiles as he undoes the knots in his little length. He scoots in real close and loops the rope around Keith’s neck.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Keith grumbles.

“Nothing,” Lance insists and Keith just glares at him. “Just practicing the knot you showed me.”

Keith rolls his eyes, doubtful that he picked it up that quickly. Lance’s fingers move slow. Looping and pulling, his fingers brushing Keith’s neck. The rough hemp sliding against his skin as Lance adjusts.

The rope isn’t the only thing being tied in knots. Lance sees Keith’s holding his breath and fighting the heat threatening to take over his cheeks. He’s not having much success. Eyes closed and frowning but his face warms as Lance progresses. Keith’s into it. And it’s getting him into it too.

“What does that look right?” Lance says quietly.

Keith opens his eyes and glances down with a swallow. He doesn’t trust himself to speak without sounding heady. The feel of the rope is arousing him into having trouble maintaining control. He averts his eyes but nods to answer Lance’s question.

Lance gives it a gentle yank to pull him closer and Keith gasps at the suddenness of it. He tries to glare but his fervent blush betrays him. Lance laughs, low and rumbling before biting his lip.

“Who knew Keith Kogane was such a deviant pervert?” he asks, his hand holding the rope taut and eyes running over Keith’s body again. He waggles his brows at him and his mouth curls into a smirk.

“Says the guy getting off on pulling my lead,” Keith grumbles.

“Oh man, is that what it’s called? A lead, huh?” Lance laughs and gives it another tug to bring him in close so he can whisper with a grin. “What if I ‘lead’ you to my cock, hmm? Would you like that?”

Keith swallows as a pang of yearning shoots down his bound neck straight to his crotch. Feels like Lance knows how it affected him even though he doesn’t show a reaction.

“This isn’t the time or place, Lance,” Keith reminds him, face stern and unamused. “Take it off.”
“Yeah, I know,” Lance sighs, disappointed. He unties the rope and pulls it off him.

With a sigh, he flops backward and practices with it again. Square. Bowline. Each one better looking and quicker than the last. His fingers dexterous as he twists and pulls them. He even does the single column a few times.

Keith tries to focus on his own ropes but catches Lance experimenting, trying to make a knot of his own from what Keith showed him. Most don’t turn out. But one, he notes, comes dangerously close to being a double column knot. Good for making restraints but Lance keeps tying it wrong.

He doesn’t correct him on it. The last thing he wants is Lance to know how to do one of those and practice it on him. He might just faint with those tight around his wrists and there’d be no end to his shame.

A bark makes them both look up as the puffball comes bounding onto the roof. Pidge trails after the little bugger and Hunk follows slowly behind her. She plays with Rover, rolling a little ball around for it to chase. It’s ears flop up and down like little butterfly wings as it runs around. He brings the ball back and rolls over.

“Good Rover! Who’s the smartest doggie in the world?” Pidge coos. Rover barks and she throws the ball yet again.

Hunk sees the two of them near the garden and wanders over to see what they’re up to.

“That ladder looks great,” Hunk comments and then looks to Lance. “What are you playing with Lance?”

Pidge snickers as she leans on Hunk with the dog in her hand. “Hope you’re not trying to teach this hopeless cause, Keith. He failed the test for basic knots like...three times?”

“Now hold on Pidge,” Hunk blinks and squats down on his haunches to look at Lance’s knot. “A double column. Er, well. It would be if you started it right. Planning on taking hostages?”

“Maybe,” Lance grins.

“Ha, not with a knot like that,” Pidge snickers and hands the dog to Hunk. “Give it here. This...then that...and boom! Texas handcuffs.”

She tosses them into Lance’s lap with a prideful smirk. Lance turns it over in his hands, impressed look upon his face. Pidge has an excellent memory, so it’s not surprising that she can recall any and all of their training at the Garrison.

Keith wills himself not to look at her work, as he’s intimately familiar with the knot and doesn’t trust himself to keep a straight face. He’s been in it more than a few times. In private. Willingly of course, because no one could get him in cuffs if he wasn’t. Anyone who tried to subdue him in combat training got a mouthful of fist because hell if he was going to let anyone see how it affected him. Lance has already gotten a glimpse of that.

“Neat,” Lance comments as he looks it over.

“Easiest way to restrain a hostile. Gotta tie off first though. You don’t remember that from class?” Pidge shakes her head, disappointed in Lance. “Of course you don’t. You were sleeping, weren’t you?”

“Maybe,” Lance shrugs without an ounce of remorse.
“Keith, you were there. Dos Santos called you up to demonstrate it for us,” Hunk points out.

“I don’t remember,” Keith lies as he turns away, mortified at the sudden memory of it.

How shameful. A dark spot on his time in the Garrison. He was young. Too young as he remembers it, for what he was doing and who he was doing it with.

Dos Santos called him up on purpose to demonstrate it because of their after-hours interactions. At first, Keith thought he was going to hand the rope over to him so he could tie it. To show the others how it was done. It wasn’t until he’d gotten to the front of the classroom that the Major insisted on showing it on Keith. To arouse him and consequently embarrass him.

Thank god his back was turned to the class while Dos Santos tied his wrists. He remembers clenching his teeth so hard his jaw hurt. His shoulder so tense he might snap bones.

Dos Santos learned a valuable lesson that day, that submissive in the bedroom does not mean he’d take to being humiliated in public. Keith beat the shit out of him in combat practice and finished up with a private threat that if he ever did something like that again, with any of the cadets, he’d be eating his rations through an IV. It goes without saying that they never slept together again after that.

He stopped with the older men then but he never stopped with the ropes.

Keith looks up from his half-finished ladder to find Lance staring at him, a suspicious look on his face. Like he’s been watching the memory play across Keith’s face. He clears his throat before returning to his work.

“Should be done with this in another hour,” Keith says.

“So, what’s the plan, Lance? For the ladder?” Pidge asks as she tries to get the dog to do a soldier crawl.

He explains that once they have a working ladder they can go down into the pasture. Bait the zombies over to the fence. Since they aren’t too smart, most won’t get over or under so it’ll leave them open for blows to the head. Once they’ve got all of them cleared they can push the cars into a reliable barrier to protect a route from the front door to the fields.

Easy access to water and fields for planting more food. Sure they’re not low on anything right now but it’s always best to think about things in the long run. Better to be prepared for the worst case scenario and the only thing they can think of is any kind of complication with Shiro’s arm. Hunk and Pidge agree, especially if they end up having to stay longer because of Shiro’s recovery.

“Plus, can you imagine? An entire tub full of water to bathe in?” Lance leans back with a sigh.

“You’re part dolphin, I swear,” Pidge laughs and pats Hunk. “Come on, let’s see if Coran has anything for us to do.”

Pidge and Hunk leave them, their voices carrying up the stairwell as they descend. Eventually, it’s quiet and the two of them are utterly alone again. Lance looks over with a sly smile.

“Texas handcuffs, huh?” Lance asks and Keith swallows nervously. He scoots in now that no one’s there to see. “Want me to tie you up sometime?”

“No, I don’t trust you,” Keith huffs with a frown.

“Oh, but you trusted Dos Santos? What is he like fifty?” Lance asks, scandalized.
“Thirty-nine,” Keith corrects him.

“Whatever, guy likes tying up cadets half his age who can hardly refuse without getting kicked out of the Garrison. It’s weird and creepy. What a manipulating slimeball,” Lance claims with a grimace.

“And you’re a gentleman?” Keith says sarcastically with a roll of his eyes. He’s not arguing with Lance’s description of Dos Santos though.

“No, I’m an absolute scoundrel,” Lance admits with a grin. “But at least I’m honest about it. And I don’t exploit impressionable youths.”

Well, that is a plus, Keith acknowledges.

Lance loops the rope in his hand around Keith’s neck, no knots, and pulls him closer. Again Keith thinks Lance is about to kiss him and he wishes he would be more careful. The last thing he wants is anyone catching them. Lance pulls past his face instead and puts his lips next to Keith’s ear to whisper.

“If you want me to lead you around like a dog then wear this when you call me over tonight. I may not be experienced but I am versatile and, as you pointed out, a fast learner,” Lance tells him, his voice teasing and delicious. Keith has to take calculated breaths so he doesn’t sigh as Lance pulls a little on the rope.

Keith is...considering it.

It’s been awhile for him. Dos Santos introduced him to bondage. While he is a horrible person, no one since has been nearly as competent at meeting his needs. Well, there was one but...that partnership had issues all it’s own. Other than that, some came close but with the world like it is it’s harder and harder to find people to trust with his appetites who won’t be dead the next month.

And that’s his biggest issue.

Not only is he not sure he trusts Lance that much but he also doesn’t know if he wants to put in the work it takes. Takes too much time and that’s short for everyone nowadays. That’s a lot of labor for the chance it’s not worth the effort.

“And if I don’t want that?” Keith manages without his voice cracking.

“Like I said, I’m not picky,” Lance shrugs and lets go of the rope. Keith takes a breath with the release of the tension. “We can do whatever you want.”

Lance stands, leaving the rope dangling around Keith’s neck, then walks across the roof to check on the laundry. He gives the fabrics a squeeze, testing for dampness. When he finds it dry he starts pulling the articles down one by one into a hamper to fold later. While he does that Keith removes the rope from his neck and starts winding it into the ladder.

He’s not pushy, Keith thinks. Flirty and shameless beyond belief but...he remembers when Keith slapped him. Lance stopped getting too close, respecting his desire for space. It’s why he looked so shocked when Keith kissed him. He hadn’t expected it. Lance doesn’t impose his desires on people. Just tells him he’s down for anything Keith’s wants and ready to roll with it.

Isn’t that a sign that he’s worth the effort? Trust is earned, but Lance can’t get that if he’s never given the opportunity.

“Maybe,” Keith says finally, his cheeks pink. “But don’t get your hopes up.”
“My hopes aren’t what’s going to be up,” Lance jokes with a waggle of his brows. “Gonna take this stuff down. Later.”

Keith nods and gets back to work, his hands twisting ropes with renewed vigor as Lance carries the hamper down the stairs.

Lance doesn’t care what he chooses either way. The fact that Keith is willing to do more elates him beyond belief. Keith told him he thought distractions like this were pointless and if he truly felt that way he wouldn’t be down to do anything more at all. It makes him smile as he takes the basket down.

Lance folds the laundry on the rec room table, a dopey but pleased look on his face.

He wonders what they’ll do that night. From the look on Keith’s face when he yanked on his rope--Lance licks his lips at the memory. Mouth parted and eyes wide. Not in fear but surprise tinged with need. And deep in those eyes, a spark of desperate excitement that Keith couldn’t hope to smother, no matter how good his poker face.

What would he have done if Lance pulled it harder? Would that defiant glare have weakened in his hold? Eyes lidded and heady. Or would they have intensified? Pumping enamored fire through Lance’s veins. Either would be fine with him. Keith has a face that looks good with any emotion.

What if Lance had hovered his lips just over Keith’s, teasing with a soft breath, just out of reach...Would he have whined at the denial of a touch, pleading for a taste of something in his mouth? He could almost bet Keith would. Makes him wish he’d kissed him a moment ago.

Until now, Lance never saw the appeal of bondage but now he wants to practice a little more, just to see how Keith will look dressed in nothing but hemp. Perfect collar twisted around his neck. His arms cuffed at the wrists behind his back. His legs trussed to the frame of his cot, keeping them spread open so there’s nothing to impede Lance when he--

His face flushes red at that image and he sits down so he doesn’t swoon. He seats his chin in his hand, to lean on the table and daydream with a sigh.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Lance repeats with a calming breath.

It’s too late for Lance. He’s a kite on the wind without a tether. Going higher and higher. Not giving one shit about the pain from crashing. He’d get right back up into the air, no consideration that he might fall again, just for a chance at that high once more.

Hopes are Lance’s drug of choice and Keith’s dealing it to him without knowing it.

Chapter End Notes

If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment AND tell a friend! Don't know what to say?
Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Tell me what you’d like to see more of. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can
inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Sounds fair right?
Dinner is much the same affair it had been the night before. Pasta and sauce is still novel so there are no complaints from anyone. Before the week is out they’ll be sick of spaghetti and sauce but for now they slurp and gobble it down like it’s a banquet feast in a royal palace.

Pidge shows off the new things she’s been teaching Rover. The little papillon sits without having to be told twice and rolls over, eager to please his new owner.

Allura says he’s been there as long as they have. Found chomping away on one of the many bags of dog food in the kennels. Someone must have abandoned the guy or he’d hidden so well his owners couldn’t find him. Either way, he was there when Allura arrived and not wanting for a good meal. She’d never thought to name him since he wasn’t hers. Until Pidge came along he was just ‘doggy’.

Matt finally had his eye looked at by Allura. He looked absolutely smitten after her inspection too. Not much for it, unfortunately. The damage is extensive but it must have been cleaned fairly well. No signs of infection and it’s mostly healed. He’ll never be able to see out of it but he’s past the stage of worry.

Shiro comes up again, as he often does when injuries are the subject. Allura says he’s eating and keeping food down. The wound is closing and swelling is reduced. Pain is still quite high but other than that, Shiro’s holding up well. He’ll be eating with them again before they know it.

Keith’s rope ladder came out great and so did the second one he made from additional ropes in the storage closet. He only made the additional one to keep himself busy through the day. Mostly so he wouldn’t spend it thinking about Lance. Matt and Hunk compliment the knot-work, very impressed that he was able to make them so quickly. Lance notes the way he shrugs nonchalantly, used to high praise and clearly thinking it silly to receive such for a simple thing.

“It’s just a ladder,” Keith says. “Any of you could have made one.”

“Not that fast,” Pidge shakes her head. “Does that mean we can start clearing the door tomorrow? Good. Cause I was getting bored. Who else is in?”

“Keith will help,” Matt elbows him. “He’s probably going stir crazy in here too. Sitting still makes him grouchy.”

Keith just huffs, rolling his eyes. The others take that as all the proof they need and they laugh. Matt leans over and whispers in Lance’s ear.

“Actually, I’m surprised at how well he’s behaving. Stuck indoors like this with nothing to do but worry…” Matt tells him. “Back at the apartment, he had to leave every day or get edgy. You saw the walls right? With the holes? I don’t know how he’s managing it right now. It’s eerie.”

Is that so? Lance finds himself smiling as he drinks his water. He doesn’t want to be so bold as to assume it’s because of himself but…he’s pretty sure it is. Keith eats quietly, no further comments on anything. He never speaks unless directly spoken to and it seems to be the way he prefers it.

Coran tells them a few stories about working for the CDC a couple of decades ago. Hated the job, no fun at all he said. But that’s where he met Allura’s father and they became the best of friends. He practically helped raise Allura after her mother passed, watching over her when Alfor went overseas for special seminars.

“He treated her like royalty. I joked and called her Princess one day when picking her up from school,” Coran remembers fondly.

“And it stuck all through my educational career, thank you very much,” Allura sighs. “And now your gallant leader won’t stop calling me that either.”

“I don’t think you mind so much when he does,” Coran winks and the table laughs as she frowns with a blush on her face.

Keith excuses himself as soon as his plate is clear. Not one for conversation and small talk; he just gives the table a nod, not even a good night, before turning and leaving. Lance tries to discreetly catch his eye but Keith doesn’t see. With a frown, Lance returns to finishing his meal at his leisure.

*****

Keith makes it down the hall and to his room. Inside his clean clothes sit on the counter, folded neatly. He would change but he’s gonna head to bed soon. Better to just wait until morning. His eyes fall on the coil of rope he tossed onto the cot earlier, just before dinner.

Does he want to? Or not? Lance said he was fine with anything. He sits on the cot and fingers the rope, pulling it over his knuckles in loops.

Whatever he wants, Lance had said.

Keith looks at the rope again, taking in all the associated emotions and memories with it.

He closes his eyes. Pulls it tighter to feel the abrasive scratch on his skin. He presses the length wound tight around his knuckles to his lips, inhaling the scent of the fibers. Biting his teeth into the braided strands, remembering the feeling of a gag before letting out a sigh.

Whatever he wants, huh?

*****
Lance finishes up his food and the doctors take it upon themselves to clean the plates this time. Pidge, Hunk, and Matt extend an invitation to Lance to join them on the roof. They’re gonna stargaze before bed.

Normally he’d jump at the chance. They used to do that together after returning to the Garrison after a supply run. It’s the closest thing to entertainment anymore. But Lance shakes his head, stating that he’s actually very tired. He helped Coran move a bunch of equipment in the labs and even did a complete cleaning of his gun.

He’s wiped, or so he tells them.

They buy it and leave without him. Lance walks them some of the way, stopping at his door and telling them to have fun. He even goes into his room as if to truly get ready for bed. Takes his family picture out and puts it on the counter like before.

He keeps hoping he’ll hear Keith knock again. Even leans on the wall to listen in. Sounds quiet. Maybe he fell asleep. Or he’s not in the mood. Lance knocks on the wall, the whole ‘shave and haircut’ tempo and waits. Five minutes later there’s a ‘two bits’ response.

Lance beams. Already excited for any kind of fun as he opens Keith’s door.

The urge to clutch his heart in stunned awe is strong but Lance resists. Keith’s leaning against the far wall, like the night before. His arms crossed like before too. But he’s only wearing his boxers, exposing his stomach and firm legs. Hair tied up high off his neck to keep it from getting caught in the twisted noose of rope expertly knotted around it.

A lead, Keith called it. More like a leash.

Lance licks his lips and bites them inward as his eyes scan his body. Lots of little scars, old and new. Solid build, a body trained for the strain of combat. Though he’s still a little thin from lack of food. God, Lance wants to get his hands on it again, feel it shudder under his fingertips. But Keith’s needs first, his later. If Keith’s wearing the rope then he wants something very specific out of this.

That’s when he remembers the look on Keith’s face when he tugged earlier.

Lance crosses the room, his eyes hungrily devouring Keith’s body. His hand comes to rest on the part of the rope around his neck. Trails down the length until his fingers grasp where the knots are and he tugs Keith forward. He gasps but his face maintains its detached facade.

“You like when I pull but I get the feeling you’re not the type to take being hit,” Lance guesses.

“I’m not,” Keith warns, his eyes flashing. “You hit me, I’ll hit back.”

“Good to know,” Lance grins.

What does Lance know of bondage and all that? Not much admittedly, but he’s fairly sure it has less to do with sex and more to do with control.

So then, Keith likes being controlled. Broken down but not with a good smack. Might be that Keith digs the humiliation aspect and if yesterday was any indication some dirty talk. Lance leans in to observe the changes in Keith’s face as he pulls the lead a little.

“What if I could get you hard with just words,” Lance suggests and Keith’s eyes widen a little. He’s onto something there he thinks. “I wouldn’t even have to touch you below the neck,” he grins and gives Keith a good yank to which Keith has to take a calming breath. “Hmm?”
“If you think you can; be my guest,” Keith dares, pulling back against the lead so he can eye him defiantly.

Challenge accepted. He'll have to adjust his tone but...This is going to be fun, Lance thinks.

“You think I’m oblivious,” Lance smirks before bringing his lips close to Keith’s ear. “But I’m a sniper. I notice everything and I don’t miss. Ever.”

“That so?” Keith scoffs.

“In the kennels yesterday. You were trying so hard not to look at me for more than a second and it’s not because you’re a prude. You’re not exactly innocent, are you?” Lance asks and gives a not so gentle tug, expecting an answer. “Are you?”

Keith shakes his head no.

“You wanted to look but didn’t dare and I think I know why,” Lance says as his free hand brushes Keith’s bangs aside so he can see his eyes better. “You knew if you looked for too long you wouldn’t be able to stop yourself. Because what if I had a good, thick, cock? It would make you weak. You’d want it. Bad. Did you want to drop to your knees when you finally saw it?”

Keith swallows and his breathing slows. Lance doesn’t tug on the lead so he doesn’t answer. Not that he needs to. Lance hasn’t gotten anything wrong yet.

“Ooh, and last night?” Lance sighs breathlessly at the memory. “You were so eager. I barely said anything at all about you sucking me off and you came in seconds! Sucking down my fingers like that...”

Keith feels his face go warm and he knows he’s blushing. He feels embarrassed but in a good way.

“If I’d asked you to strip you’d have done it without a second thought,” Lance guesses. “Especially if I promised to tie you up, to a chair maybe? Am I right?”

Another tug and Keith gives him a small weak nod. It’s true.

“And why’s that? So you’d have no way out? And I could do whatever I wanted with you?” Lance asks, his voice getting raspy and just as heady. “Shove my cock into your mouth at my leisure. Use you up. Like a plaything.”

Keith bites his lip and closes his eyes to try and focus. How is Lance doing this? Breaking him down and nurturing the excitement he gets from being scrutinized. He’s not even supposed to be good at this. He’s supposed to fail. No experience at all.

“Sounds like fun. Tying you down. Fucking your perfect mouth,” Lance tells him, pressing his nose into his hair to inhale his scent. “Bet you’d even love it if I came and called you a slut for swallowing me down.”

Keith can’t not whimper because damn if Lance isn’t right. He’d fucking love that. Lance grins at that sound. He threads his fingers into his hair, yanking back and Keith gives out a delightful yelp. His breath is ragged, face hot, eyes dilated as he bites his lip.

“If I left, right now, without doing a thing, I bet everything I own that you’d come crawling over to my room begging for it. I wouldn’t even have to ask, you’re that thirsty for it,” Lance berates him with a gentle voice. “Probably done it before and gladly, right?”
Keith doesn’t answer him. He’s red as hell and panting in his hold, body tilted forward but head pulled back. Uncomfortable but aroused beyond knowing. This kind of treatment really does it for him, Lance muses.

“How hard are you right now, Keith?” Lance whispers, knowing full well his boxers have been tented by his erection for the past several minutes. “You look pretty desperate. Want to get on your knees?”

God yes he does. Keith nods without a word, mouth parted and panting. Lance lets go of his hair but holds onto the end of his lead. He gestures his head to the floor.

“There’s the floor. What are you waiting for?” Lance asks.

Keith drops like a rock, knees hitting the ground with no grace whatsoever. Just a solid wham into the floor and Lance breaks character for a second to worry what kind of damage an impact like that makes. Keith gives no indication he felt anything, just breathes heavy on his hands and knees. If it hurt at all he doesn’t let on. Moving on then.

Holding onto the end of the rope, Lance takes a seat on edge of his cot. He beckons Keith over to him, biting on his own lips at the sight of him obediently crawling over.

Jesus, this is way more fun than the typical shit he’d do back at the Garrison. Never been into the humiliation thing but...subservience has never looked so enticing. He could definitely get into this. The closer Keith gets the more Lance winds up the excess rope around his fist so there’s no slack.

Keith sits up between his legs, his eyes lidded but locked on the bulge in Lance’s pants.

“Go ahead, pull them down,” Lance tells him.

Keith’s hands slide up his calves, curve around his thighs, squeezing his legs with a sigh. Lance watches as his fingers slip into the waistband and pull down to reveal a patch of dark hair followed by Lance’s swelling cock. It springs out of the confines, curving up towards Lance’s stomach. The semi was impressive enough but this--Keith’s mouth parts and he licks his lips, hungry and watering.

Keith seems to be waiting and Lance isn’t sure why. Permission? A request? No, not Keith. It then hits him. Lance grabs Keith’s chin firmly eliciting a gasp when he turns his face up to look at him. Keith’s eyes go wide at the authority in Lance’s face as he looks down on him.

“Get to work,” he commands sternly.

He immediately takes Lance in hand and obediently lowers his mouth with a moan. Lance shudders with a groan of his own as warm wetness encompasses the head of his cock and slides down further and further. Keith sucks eagerly away, sighing and moaning as he stuffs Lance as deep as he can.

Lance is having a hard time keeping up the tough guy facade. His brows furrow high as his face flushes red. It’s difficult to look detached when Keith is unravelling him one desperate lick at a time. Lance threads the hand with the rope wound around it into Keith’s hair, taking purchase deep in his roots, while the other hand covers his own mouth to stifle his moans.

Keith bobs over him, sucking and swirling his tongue, doing anything and everything he can to coax come out of Lance. He strokes the base with his hand while his mouth laps and laves at the sensitive head, his breath short and gasping. A drop of precome coats his tongue and Keith gasps out a moan before plunging Lance’s cock in again.
“Christ, Keith…” Lance groans behind his hand. He’s close.

With a yank Lance pulls Keith off his cock. He yelps at the initial pull and whines desperately in his hold as he pants. A spit trail drips down his chin and Lance really wants his come to take that route as well.

But he needs to hear Keith say he wants it. Thinks it’s one of those things that’ll get Keith off just as much as it gets him.

“You can...have it on your face or in your mouth. Which one?” Lance breathes raggedly, his face just as flushed as Keith’s.

“Mouth,” Keith answers quickly, and as soon as he does Lance shoves him back down onto his cock, rocking his hips into that wet opening.

“Of course you do, slut,” Lance tells him and Keith’s whimpering moans vibrate around his cock at the insult. “Fuck, Keith...I’m...”

Keith’s fingers grip tight on his calves, spit dripping out of the corners of his mouth. Lance is close, he can taste it, feel it in his tone. In the way his drawn out breaths get shorter and shorter. God, he can’t wait for it.

Lance decides he’s going to have to come silently. Not because it’s his preference but because he thinks the others might be back from their outing soon and he doesn’t want them hearing him. Keith asked for discretion after all.

His fingers tighten in Keith’s hair as he pushes him down until his nose is buried in his patch of hair. Keith moans weakly, almost choking as Lance shudders through his climax. Keith feels the spurts of come hit his throat in huge bursts. With a grateful moan, his tongue swirls to spread the thick salty substance all over his taste buds. There’s too much for him to swallow at once and it leaks out just like Lance wanted to see. Dribbling down his chin. A right mess. Keith raises a hand, to wipe it off but Lance catches his wrist.

“No, come here, o-on my lap,” Lance says as he takes calming breaths. “Kiss me. I-I want to taste myself on you.”

Lance pulls as Keith crawls up to straddle him, leaning forward eager for those lips. Their mouths capture each other. Lance’s tongue darts in to taste Keith, lapping at his mouth and sucking the remainder off his chin with a groan.

Keith feels Lance’s hand before he sees it. Pressing aside the folds on his boxers to pull his cock out. He strokes and kisses Keith. Teeth nibbling on his lips. Hand squeezing up his length in firm pulls, faster and faster as Lance sucks on his neck hard. Keith whimpers and shakes as he gets closer to orgasm.

“W-Where?” Keith manages to gasp.

“On me if you want...but you gotta clean it up,” Lance whispers into his chest then licking up his collarbone. “Not a problem for you, right? Dirty slut?”

Keith flushes anew and shakes his head. No, not a problem for him at all. Keith puts his hands on Lance’s shoulders to steady himself so he doesn’t fall off his lap. He slides them until they reach neck and hold tight, his thumbs fingering Lance’s rapid pulse.

Lance sucks and bites Keith’s nipples as he reaches the apex of his stroking. Keith whines, a little too
loud for Lance’s preferences so he lets go of the rope and puts a hand over that noisy mouth. It does something for Keith, so much that he instantly comes with a mewling whimper. He spurts and drips down Lance’s chest and stomach with a heady whine.

“Shhh,” Lance reminds him.

Keith weakly nods and Lance removes his hand to pull Keith's lead to the fluids.

“Now, clean up your mess.”

Keith, shaky but obedient, laps his semen off of Lance's body. He relishes in the taste and the firm muscles underneath as Lance watches, relaxed smile on his face. It isn't long before Keith finishes and sits up with an exhausted sigh.

“That was fun,” Lance chuckles with a smile. “Not my usual forte but...I did alright, right?”

“Yes,” Keith breathes.

More than alright. It was fantastic. It’s amazing how good that was. Lance…He's a natural.

Lance unties the rope from around Keith’s neck and tosses it to the floor before helping Keith off him. He stands and stretches while Keith adjusts his boxers and pulls on his scrub pants to ready himself for bed.

A bracing hug from behind surprises Keith. It feels romantic which isn’t something they agreed on.

“What are you doing?” Keith asks with a huff.

“It’s called aftercare right? So you don’t feel like shit when you go to bed?” Lance inquires and gives him a second squeeze. “I think I read that somewhere...maybe?”

“You don’t have to do that,” Keith assures him.

“Sure I do, or you won’t want to do it again,” Lance tells him, pressing his nose into his neck.

“Ugh, I’m not into this,” Keith shakes him off.

“Fine, fine,” Lance waves his hands defensively in front of him. “Tuck in for the night, I have a better idea anyway.”

“You’re not staying in my bed,” Keith makes himself very clear. He doesn’t do sentimental and he doesn’t spoon.

“I figured as much,” Lance sighs with disappointment and gestures to the cot. “Just lay down already.”

Keith gives him a wary frown as he pulls on his scrub top. It covers all the nice hickies Lance plastered all over his chest while he jacked him off. Only one remains visible on his neck, just under his hairline. Lance doesn’t point it out to him, hoping that maybe tomorrow it’ll still be there and he can look on it to remember their night.

He pulls the blanket from his cot, lays down while facing away from Lance, and then brings the covers to his ears. Lance sits down on the edge of the cot. His hand plucks at Keith’s hair tie until it’s pulled away, letting loose his wild hair. Fingers run up the base, buried thick in his strands of hair to massage his scalp. Lance combs through in sweeps while humming.
Keith...surprisingly finds he likes it. Far better than a hug in any case. He relaxes at the rhythmic sweeping of fingers and lets out a sigh. Feels...good.

“I’ll go once you’re asleep, don’t worry,” Lance tells him.

“Okay,” Keith yawns, practically asleep already.

Lance pets his head for a while. Keith’s soft long hair between his fingers, curling up at the ends. Looks better after the bath. Before it was sticking up in all directions, clumped and spiked with dirt and sweat. Now it looks almost as good as it would in the old days.

Keith falls asleep after he finishes the first song. His face relaxed and mouth parted as he breathes. There’s no rasp. His cold is gone. And he hasn’t coughed for the last couple of hours. Good. Means Lance probably won’t catch it, not that he’d mind entirely. Keith could have mono and it wouldn’t stop how much he likes those kisses.

He knows this feeling starting to bloom. It’s happened to him a dozen times in his life. Yearning. And not just the sexual variety. Growing adoration. A shame Keith doesn’t want him to stay. He’d love to curl up in that blanket with him.

Oh well.

Lance sticks around to hum one more song while petting Keith’s hair but true to his word he does leave. After all, Keith asked him to and he wants to respect that need for space. He adjusts Keith’s blankets, tousles his hair a little, and takes his lantern to return reluctantly to his room. Before he goes he gives Keith’s hand a gentle squeeze. Not sure if it’s involuntary or not but Keith squeezes back with a sigh.

“Night, Keith,” Lance whispers before leaving.

He pauses outside his own door for a moment, not exactly happy about spending it alone again. What he does with Keith is enjoyable but...it doesn’t exactly help him sleep at night. Exhausts him but doesn’t stem the fear that he’ll wake and no one will be there, especially with the sound of the zombies groaning at the entrance down a ways.

“You okay, Lance?” Pidge says as she comes down the hall with Hunk. “Scared?”

It's not an accusation or comment to make him feel bad. She’s concerned. They both are. He nods, not willing to lie again. Pidge gives him a sympathetic smile. She and Hunk give him a big hug that makes him feel much better.

“Want to stay with us tonight?” Hunk asks. “It’ll be a tight squeeze but we can make it work.”

He doesn’t want to burden them. The rooms are small enough without Lance trying to squeeze between two people. Plus, he doesn’t want to be in the way of anything they might want to do. Doesn’t want to cock block anything.

“Nah, that’s alright,” Lance shakes his head with a smile. He grabs his rifle from inside his room and shoulders it. “I’ll see you guys in the morning.”

“You’re not going to bed?” Pidge asks as Lance walks down the hall.

“Maybe later,” Lance waves.

“Well, don’t stay up too late. We’re clearing out the door tomorrow,” Pidge reminds him.
Lance hums his acknowledgment as he turns the corner.

He rummages through his pockets for his gum, smiling fondly at it when he finds it. Keith must have looked for this specifically for him. No way it was a coincidence that he had it when Lance was upset earlier. So maybe he’s not so distant as he plays it, at least, that’s what Lance would like to believe.

Maybe they can be something more. One day.

He walks into the lobby. Most of the zombies are standing stock still but they reanimate when they see the light. Lance stands there and looks at them, even counts them. More than twenty. His eyes lid with sympathy at the poor sods.

Women and men. Nice Sunday dresses with shining shoes. Smudged dirty stockings from stepping through puddles of mud and blood. A farmer with overalls. Ripped and torn, a hammer still on his work belt. A runner, still in her tracksuit and broken in shoes, her hair pulled away in rotting patches.

They were all people once. Went to work. Paid bills. Saw movies on the weekends. Loved their families. Now they just walk and eat and rot, no spark of what they used to be in them.

Monsters.

Lance shivers as the fear washes over him. To become something else after being so human. Walking around without a soul. He used to believe there wasn’t a worse fate than becoming one. He knows better now.

...she turned on him...

Matt’s words echo in his mind as his stomach sinks. The pain and despair invoked by watching someone beloved turn before your eyes as you stand by helpless to stop it. Nothing is worse than that.

Lance’s loathe to call him lucky but Keith’s fortunate she passed before turning. He didn’t have to watch the infection burned her up in the days that followed. Watching as she contorted in agonizing pain and screaming about the fire in her brain. Choking on her own blood.

Lance saw it on more than one occasion. Not because he wanted to but because it was his job. It was horrible. One in particular still haunts him to this day.

She was a random civilian they couldn’t save in time. Looked directly into Lance’s eyes when she saw his rifle. She begged him to shoot her. He couldn’t. Not only because he lacked the will to do so, but because the Garrison ordered him not to. It was the early days of Incident Two. They needed subjects to study the infection as it progressed and he happened to find her on his first real run.

Now he wishes he’d shot her the second he saw the bleeding bite on her stomach.

He was made to stand guard over her but it made him ill to do so. For days she screamed and squirmed. Blood doesn’t make him nearly as nauseous as that horrified shrieking. Like an animal in a trap. At the end of each day, his guilt had him puking in the ditches outside. It’s little wonder that Shiro’s shouts of pain nearly brought him to vomit.

Her last hours...he remembers them like it was yesterday. Five days of dying of thirst and hunger but nothing brought her relief. Writhing and coughing up blood. Sweating and wincing as her head split with aching pains. Skin painfully sloughing off in bloody patches. Five days of begging for anyone to kill her.
No...not just anyone...Lance.

“Please, do it. Why won’t you help me?” she asked him, weakly pulling at her restraints.

Lance remembers flinching when she tried to reach for him. At the time they weren’t certain bites were the only way to transfer it, so he was terrified of her touching him. There was no way she could break through their bonds but it didn’t stop him from recoiling. She laughed pathetically and fell back onto the table she was tied to. Her eyes went from pleading to condemning with tears in them.

“You’re afraid of what I’ll do,” she scowled. “What you’re doing is worse than anything I’ll do after it’s done. I’ll still be more human than you are.”

How he wishes that had been the last thing she said.

The Garrison nurses recorded every change in temperature, heart rate, and breathing rate. Taking samples from her. Running tests constantly. Her eyes were clouded with pain but Lance felt her looking at him. Dead eyes with a human voice.

“You there? Rifleman?” she croaked out, her throat dry.

Lance wouldn’t answer. He wasn’t required to but more than that he was afraid to. She tried to laugh bitterly but coughed up blood and bits of her lungs as she wheezed.

“I know you’re there. I can smell...your cowardice,” she gurgled and choked. “I hope one day...you wake up and find nothing but monsters around you...then you’ll be right at home, won’t you?”

Lance remembers biting his lip inward and clutching his rifle tighter.

“Or maybe...it would be more fitting...for you to end up here? With no one to save you,” she laughed ruefully. “It’ll be...your fault...just like it is now. All I wanted....was to die human... you could have saved me ...from this...”

Her body shook like she was seizing. She gurgled and spat pink foam from the blood in her lungs as she convulsed. The doctors and nurses backed away from the body, so as not to be within reach of infected fluids. Lance remembers looking away. He couldn’t watch, her death rattle the only thing he couldn’t block out. Sometimes he'll hear it in the middle of the night and it wakes him in a panic.

But she stilled. No breath. No pulse. New studies commenced after that. Time between death and turning. More samples. Then neutralizing it. ‘It’, because after changing no one ever referred to them as ‘him’ or ‘her’. God she was right...she died as nothing more than a monster.

He never even knew her name.

Lance looks over at the lobby door at them all. Still beating their hands and moaning on the doors. Bits of flesh sloughing off with each strike. Hollow, empty eyes that follow the light and any movement. Lance turns off the lamp so the only light is that of the moon highlighting their figures. Some of them still and sway. Others continue their pathetic assault on the door, certain Lance is still there.

Perhaps they can smell them all. Won’t rest until they can sink their teeth into delicious flesh. Pidge’s soft shoulders. Hunk’s sturdy neck. Keith’s arms. Lance’s legs. Ripping out their organs and swallowing their life’s blood for a hunger that can’t ever be satisfied. They’ll eat them all before it’s over. His heartbeat increases rapidly at that and a panic fills him.

Not if he can do something about it.
Lance picks up his rifle suddenly and runs towards the roof. His boots trip over debris and boxes but he stabilizes before climbing the stairs two at a time. Gets up there and goes to the edge of the roof, drawing his rifle and aiming down at the doors.

First round goes into the head of a big burly businessman who could have been Hunk in another life and he drops. He reloads and aims again. Fires into a teenager with broken glasses. Reload and aim again.

The whole time Lance is breathless, nothing goes in or out. He can’t draw in any air. Not until he drops more. He can’t breathe until they all stop.

He empties his cartridge. Dropping a body for each bullet he had left. But even then he doesn’t stop firing. His gun clicks and shoots nothing. He keeps trying, his mind putting a bullet in them all. He can’t let them get his team. Never wants to have to make the decision between putting down a dying friend or a friend turned monster.

“I won’t...let that...happen,” Lance says in ragged gasps when he can finally breathe again.

Keith’s right, he can’t kill them all. But now there’s five less. Already, the world is a little safer for them as he sinks to the ground, leaning against the edge. He looks to his empty rifle with a lamenting sigh. What it’s capable of repulses him and yet he needs it to stay alive. He wraps his arms tight around it and shivers in the cold.

He doesn’t know how long he sits there. The wind carries the moaning and shuffling below. An hour later, maybe two, he finally stands and stumbles his way back in, his shoulder sore from improperly holding his gun in his panic. Body tired and emotionally spent.

Time to sleep. If he can.

Chapter End Notes

If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment AND tell a friend! Don't know what to say? Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Tell me what you’d like to see more of. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Sounds fair right?
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

A little more ANGST for you guys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

This is gospel for the fallen ones

Locked away in permanent slumber

-Panic!At the Disco, This is Gospel

Keith wakes early, sitting up and popping his neck as he stretches. It hurts a little and when he sees the rope on the counter he remembers. Ah, Lance did yank pretty hard last night. Not that Keith had any complaints. It felt great. He’s never slept better.

He looks around the room, half expecting to find Lance on the floor. No sign of him. No evidence that he was even there. Guess he kept his word.

Keith pulls off the scrubs for his preferred clothing. Slipping his jeans and shirt on, then his jacket. All his knives in their proper place, ready for a full day of zombie killing as he opens his door. There’s some conversation in the rec room down the hall but before he heads that way Keith stops at Lance’s door. Thinks about knocking to wake him, and even raises his fist to do so.

“He’s not in there,” Pidge tells him, bringing a coffee cup down the hall.

Keith opens the door to check and she’s right. Empty. His clothes sit on his neatly made cot, undisturbed. He didn’t sleep there. His rifle is gone though. Where is--

“He’s...probably in the storage closet. Again,” Pidge sighs and hands the cup to Keith who takes it with a thankful nod.

“Why?” Keith asks, taking a sip. He notes the use of the word ‘again’ but doesn’t comment.

She shakes her head and leans against the wall, her arms crossed.

“There are two things Lance is terrified of,” she says, numbering them with her fingers. “The corpses, like every other reasonable human being on this planet, and being alone in the dark. He can handle one without the other but that’s impossible with our current setup.”

Keith shrugs to indicate he doesn’t follow.

“The rooms are small and very close to the lobby,” Pidge explains. “He can hear them moaning. And honestly, our room is too small for three people. I tried to get him to share a room with Matt but he doesn’t want to burden anyone.”

“The closet helps? It’s just as close to the lobby,” Keith notes. “And it puts him even further away
from others.”

Makes him even more alone.

“Can’t hear anything through it though. Door’s thicker,” Pidge points out. “I saw him coming out of there yesterday morning too. Must have been really bad last night, if he’s not up yet.”

Guilt plants itself in his gut, slowly building. Keith practically kicked him out of his room last night...but Lance didn’t say anything. Seemed alright to him. More than alright. Very content. It’s hard to imagine that he was upset. Or scared. Or hiding behind a friendly smile so he wouldn’t trouble anyone with his fears. Actually...He remembers Lance’s solitary tear behind his family photo. That does sound like something he’d do.

If it was that big of a deal...why didn’t Lance just say so? He’d have let him stay, if nothing else then on the floor of his room. He’s private but he’s not heartless.

“Want me to wake him up?” Keith asks, looking into his coffee.

“I dunno,” she sighs.

If he didn’t sleep well then he needs the rest. But they also need to get started on clearing out the door. The sooner they do that the sooner Lance can get some decent sleep. But if he’s too tired to help, it might put him and the others in danger. It’s a vicious circle.


Keith nods and takes the coffee with him as he walks down the hall. The corpses at the lobby spot him and follow his movement as he goes by. Keith doesn’t even spare them a second glance as he passes. Lance is far more worth his time and attention than they are at the moment.

The door is heavy and thick like Pidge said it was. He pulls it open enough for his head to squeeze in and look for Lance.

Lance’s in the far corner, on the floor and pulled in tight like the night he cried at the apartment. The rifle is clutched in his hold, with his cheek resting on it. His face is puffy and red around the eyes as if he’d been crying not long ago. In one drooping hand is Keith’s damp bandana.

He looks positively like a kicked dog. All these nights Keith’s been sleeping like a baby but Lance has been barely catching any sleep. And he didn’t say a word to anyone.

...he cares too much...about others...

Keith steps quietly in, avoiding items on the floor so he doesn’t make any noise. Once across he takes a knee next to Lance. His face is tense and he smells like gunpowder. Keith has to wonder if he fired his rifle recently. He doesn’t remember hearing shots and Pidge didn’t say anything about it.

Were there more slumped corpses at the front than before? Did he shoot some in the night? To calm his fears? The thought brings a frown to his face, his brows furrowed high. Why does he feel so bad? It’s not like he knew. How could he?

He almost wakes him. His hand reaches out for his shoulder but pulls back. Lance looks so worried, even in sleep. Instead, he takes a seat scooting in so that their sides are touching. Keith puts his hand on Lance’s back, rubbing gently in circles. Seems like something Lance would do for someone else in the same predicament. Maybe it’ll make him feel better. Lance’s face relaxes at the contact and he
lets out a sigh. Eyes slowly blink open and look over at Keith.

“What are you doing in here?” Lance mumbles, giving Keith a sad smile.

“I could ask you the same question,” Keith says back.

“I was…” Lance closes his eyes. “I was taking inventory. Guess I fell asleep.”

“Sure you were,” Keith mutters, looking at the state of the room. An obvious lie, to the both of them. He removes his hand from Lance’s back and hands him the half-empty cup of coffee. Lance takes it after leaning his rifle on the wall. “Whatever. You’re not obligated to tell me anything about yourself.”

“How’d you find me? Pidge ratted me out, didn’t she?” Lance sips the cup and Keith nods. He lets out a disappointed sigh as he sits up against the wall, looking at the ceiling. “Just as bad as her brother. I should tell Hunk that she’s smoking again. Even the playing field.”

Lance pulls out his gum from his pocket and eats a piece, calling it the breakfast of champions. He offers one to Keith but he declines. Lance chews and pops while they sit there. Occasionally he’ll sip the coffee, tinting its flavor with his gum.

He’s not ready to leave yet. Sure, he’s not required to tell Keith anything but he’s still sitting there with him when he could just go. If Keith didn’t care at least a little, he wouldn’t be there.

“I...got scared…” Lance admits, looking down at his shoes.

“Happens,” Keith shrugs. “You could have come back to my room.”

“You didn’t want me there,” Lance points out. “I get it. You like your privacy.”

Keith says nothing to that. It’s true but it hardly seems appropriate to acknowledge right now.

“Besides, you looked so comfortable,” Lance smiles as he shakes his head. “Didn’t want to ruin that for you by asking for more.”

...when you spend all your time trying to make everyone else happy you don’t exactly have time for yourself...

Their arrangement is unfairly skewed, Keith now realizes. Lance gets the same carnal pleasures as Keith but where it’s enough for him it’s only half as effective for Lance. Feels good but doesn’t satisfy him and he’s too nice to say so. He needs something more. But...what?

“Want to go again tonight?” Lance asks with a grin.

There it is, the smile, and it’s like Keith’s finally seeing it for what it is. Feels like it’s mostly real but something’s off about it. A hidden fatigue behind it. Strained. Like trying to hold up something heavy for a prolonged period of time.

A well-constructed mask, perfected over the last two years.


“Great,” Lance sits up, almost excited. He passes the coffee back to Keith. “Tell me?”

“No. You’ll just have to come over to find out,” Keith smirks into the cup as he finishes it off.
“Ooo, mysterious. Trying to keep me on my toes,” Lance winks. “I like a good surprise.”

Lance stands and stretches before reaching down to help Keith off the floor. He grabs the rifle off the wall and contemplates whether or not he should carry it. It’s empty but he doesn’t feel safe without it on his back. He shoulders it and leads the way out. With his boot, he kicks items aside so Keith doesn’t trip on anything the way he did last night and then holds the door open for him.

They walk together towards the rec room but Lance stops off at his room. He goes inside and changes out of his scrubs and into his clothes. Transfers over all his things from the pockets and pulls on his coat. He puts the useless rifle on the wall and exits to find Keith waiting for him.

“What hap--”

“Morning Lance!” Hunk calls from the coffee pot. He throws a granola bar at him and Lance catches it in his left hand with ease. “Ready to knock some heads?”

“You know it,” Lance nods and tears open the wrapper to eat. “Hit me with another cup of coffee though.”

They sit and eat and drink for a good fifteen minutes. All conversation stops however when Allura comes in. She’s wearing a tank and coveralls tied around the waist instead of a lab coat. Odd enough but leaning on her well-toned shoulder is a smiling Shiro.

“Morning Team,” he says.

Everyone jumps up and rushes the door as she’s telling them to calm down. Congrats and excited shouts ring out as they surround him. They all help carry him to the table so he can sit before she can tell them otherwise.

“He wanted to see you all himself,” Allura tells them. “I told him it was too soon but a small walk could do him some good.”

“I’m glad you let him,” Matt tells her.

“Me too,” Shiro chuckles. “She could definitely have prevented it.”

“No kidding,” Pidge awes looking at her muscles. “Who knew doctors worked out?”

“Yes, well,” Allura coughs and flexes a little making them all swoon. “A healthy body leads to a healthy mind. I encourage you all to keep to regular exercise if you are not already. Muscle and cardio.”


“Think I could jog with you sometime?” Matt asks, blush on his face. “I could use it.”

“Of course Matt,” she smiles and he nearly faints. “You’re all more than welcome to join me on my rooftop run in the mornings. I run approximately for an hour.”
"Pass," Hunk waves.

They all laugh and continue to chat.

Lance brings Shiro the last of the coffee which he takes with a grateful smile. Everyone takes care to not mention Shiro’s arm or even look at the place it used to be. Shiro doesn’t say much, concentrating on keeping cheerful in the face of his aching pains so it’s hard to know whether he appreciates or resents the lengths they go to avoid the topic. The others tell of their little adventures around the clinic. But all the excitement takes its toll. Shiro closes his eyes, trying to block out the ache in his arm with a sigh.

"Might be time to take a break," Shiro lets Allura know and she stands to help him up.

"Alright then, easy does it," she says, helping him to his feet.

"I’ll see you all again later," Shiro promises then looks pointedly at Lance. "Report on how the op goes?"

"Yes Captain," Lance casually salutes and Shiro chuckles.

"Be safe guys," Shiro tells them before he leaves. "One amputee is enough for this group."

"Seconded," Allura adds.

Allura shuttles him slowly back to his room for rest. Lance gulps down the last of his coffee before he looks to Pidge and Keith, the only ones other than himself to volunteer for the work. No time like the present. They both give him a nod, ready to get started, and follow him out.

*****

There’s no reason this should be dangerous at all. Keith tugs the second rope ladder, ensuring that it’s secure. The ropes will take them down into the field, which is fenced in pretty well. If it wasn’t there’d be corpses roaming all over it.

No, the only danger he can think of comes after drawing the zombies over to the fence. Some might be able to reach over and grab at them if they’re not careful. So luring them over a little at a time is key. But Lance seems to have an idea on that front.

"You in position, Coran?" Lance asks through the radio.

"Ready when you are number three," Coran answers.

"Number three?" Lance asks confused and looks at Pidge for clarification.

"Called me number five earlier...I think it’s a height thing," Pidge pouts.

Keith sees him trying to work out the numbers in his head. Grinning when he’s got it. He’s not counting Shiro since he’s out of commission. So...Matt, Hunk, Lance...He points at Keith.

"Number four," Lance smirks.

"Ugh, figures," Keith huffs. "Just my luck."

"You got something against being four?"

"Later," Keith shakes his head. "Let's just do this."
Keith goes first down the left ladder, while Lance takes the one next to him. They wait in the long grass for Pidge to join them. The grasses come all the way up to Pidge’s hips, bringing even more attention to her height. Keith reminds them to listen up for snakes, as zombies aren’t the only dangers out here.

They cut through the field until they reach the fence. There’s a pretty clear view of the front door, with all the corpses pushing on it. Lance cues Pidge and she starts banging her pots and pans.

Immediately a dozen turn at the sound and start heading over. Pidge stops and the three of them ready their weapons.

“Too many,” Lance frowns and calls into the com. “Coran that’s your cue.”

Back inside Coran hits the door and makes all sorts of noise, getting a few to come back.

That makes...nine. Nine’s a little more manageable. They shamble over to the fence and reach out for them. Gurgling and clawing at the air, caught on the wooden posts. One tries to climb over but flounders, not completely in control of its limbs.

Lance slams the bat into it’s head and it slumps on the fence. Pidge finishes the job with a quick stab into the ear. Keith grabs one by the neck and shoves his knife into its temple with a huff before waiting for the next one.

“Don’t let them get to close to each other. Lead one off if you have to,” Lance tells them.

This is loads easier than running around. Safer too. Just wait for one to get caught on the fence. Stab. Done. As long as they don’t let the roters get a hand on them it’s practically danger free. And he doesn’t let them group up too much so the chances of one grabbing while the other bites are low.

“Next round,” Lance says into the com.

Coran stops while they make a bunch of noise again. Leads off another ten in their direction. Inside Coran entices a few back with some gestures and noise.

They continue this for a while until there’s only a dozen left at the door. These ones don’t want to leave the front, groaning and biting at the glass because of what they can see inside. Lance tells Coran to make himself scarce, that maybe that’ll help. It only makes three lose interest and head over to the next closest meal.

After dropping them Keith climbs over the fence, impatient to get started on the next ones.

“Keith, what are you doing? Stick to the plan,” Lance urges.

“They’re not coming over,” Keith tells him. “I’ve got this.”

Lance waves Pidge over to join him, helping her over the fence and running to catch up with Keith. They stick close together, keeping their eyes open for anything that might be biding its time under a car. Luckily, nothing reaches out as they pass.

“That’s close enough,” Lance whispers, pulling a glaring Keith to cover behind a car. “Pidge.”

“Got it,” she nods and gives a shrieking whistle as they duck down.

Three break off from the door, searching for the origin of the sound. Pidge gives them another whistle and those three, plus two more head over to their position. More than Lance wants out in the
Two come around one side and three on the other. Keith feints one way and sinks his knife into the slow old zombie. The other is bigger and faster so he has to lead it around until he can get an opening.

Lance slams the bat into the legs of the first one on his side. Pidge jumps onto it with a grunt, stabbing into the base of it’s skull before it can right itself. She rolls out of the way of the next one lunging for her. Lance hits it’s back, making it stumble. Pidge takes advantage a second time dispatching it with ease.

“Lance!” she says, slightly panicked. Her knife is stuck.

The noise from her shout gets the attention of the others at the door and they quickly make their way to them. Lance reaches down and picks Pidge up under his arm and books it towards the bus. Keith’s just finished with the big guy and as they pass Pidge grabs his jacket tugging him along with them.

“What are--”

“Pidge lost her knife,” Lance pants. “And now they’re all heading this way. Up. On top of the bus, Pidge.”

“Why--”

“Don’t want her getting swarmed without a weapon,” he answers, practically shoving her up the hood.

“And I didn’t think you’d want to fight seven on your own,” Pidge explains, finally letting go of Keith’s jacket.

He could have handled that, Keith frowns. Lance stays on the ground with Keith as the lot of zombies comes around the back of the bus. He’s now wishing he’d saved the rounds in his rifle for now. Probably didn’t do them any favors shooting last night. It may have even added to the numbers up front.

“Distraction, Pidge?” Lance asks as he winds up for a hit.

“I’ll try,” she says as she climbs up the top.

She calls down to them, curses and shouts to get them to look up. Works for the one up front so Lance lets loose a swing, dropping it. No time for a second skull crushing swing to finish it off as one steps over its body forcing Lance to step back.

Lance looks around to find he’s alone. Keith’s gone.

Where the fuck did--

He spots his red jacket on the other side of the horde. A pincer attack. He must have dropped and rolled under the bus to get around them all. He dispatches two before they realize he’s even there. Lance swings knocking down another as he backs up.

Working together they take down the last of them. Keith shoulders the last one into the bus and stabs it. It slumps and drops, the last to land into the rotting pile.

“Great job,” Lance pants, wiping sweat from his brow. He lowers the bat for a second, to catch his
breath. He’s too tired for this shit.

Something grasps his foot and pulls. It knocks him off his feet with a yelp as the one corpse he smacked but failed to finish off pulls his leg towards it’s snapping mouth. Lance’s eyes go wide and he freezes.

A woman. Young. There’s a familiar air about her even though they’ve never met, in this life or a previous one. Her appearance... it's not unlike the nameless woman he refused to kill and it paralyzes him. Is this what she meant for him? His past coming back to get him...

He can’t breathe. He can’t move.

“Lance!” Pidge shouts trying to wake him.

Keith jumps forward and slams the knife into the skull all the way up to the hilt, inches from Lance’s ankle. Everything goes silent again as Lance just stares at the zombie that held him. Eyes wide and pupils barely pinpricks. He doesn’t breathe until Keith shakes his shoulder.

“Lance!” he calls, perturbed. “Where’s your head, moron?”

“I uh...right. Thanks. Great...job...everyone,” Lance blinks dumbly. “Let’s...do a sweep. Make sure everything’s down.”

“You up to that?” Keith asks, doubtful. “Or would you rather just...sit there?”

Lance shakes his head no and kicks the dead hand off his shoe. He stands, grabbing the bat from the ground. His hands are shaking but Keith makes no further comment as they check all the bodies for any more movement. Even going the extra mile to stab them all a second time in the head.

He calls into the radio, telling them stage one is done. Matt and Hunk come out the front doors to help clear the corpses out and away from the building. Once that’s finished the tech-trio hotwire any cars they can and move them around the entrance. The others just pull the parking brake and push the others.

Car by car they make a walled path to the pasture, just like Lance wanted. In the spaces underneath, they fill up sandbags to block off any crawlers. It won’t keep every deadhead out but it’ll slow them down considerably. Should be able to clear out the two or three that make it over on a daily basis more manageable.

“Once that last one is parked we need to get on siphoning these tanks,” Lance points.

“On it,” Hunk salutes and gets his tools from the bus.

“I’m gonna check on the well,” Lance announces and hops the fence. “See if it needs a pulley.”

Keith watches as he walks away. The further Lance goes the more his shoulders slump. Keith just gathers things from the trunks of cars and carries them to the group, trying not to concern himself.

“Is Lance okay?” Matt asks Pidge.

“No,” Pidge answers. Matt looks like he was expecting more of an answer than that but Pidge just turns and gets back to work.

*****

The well is deeper than he thought. Lance drops a pebble in and hears a wonderful splash. Not
empty so at least their efforts got them something. There’s a very simple pulley set up already with yellow rope and a matching bucket.

He gives it a test, pulling up a full pail. Looks clean. Crystal clear. It’ll be a lot of work since it’s not a pump well but it’s better than waiting for it to rain anytime they need to drink. He pours the water back in and sets the pail on the ground before taking a seat and leaning against the stones.

What happened back there?

It wasn’t really her but he froze in panic. The bat was right there. Or he could have kicked with his other leg. It’s never happened to him before but then...he’s never been grabbed by one. He never let them get close. The disadvantage of the rifle, he realizes. He’s never had to react to being held by one.

...It’s amazing you even made it this far...

Lance closes his eyes with a sigh, ashamed. Keith’s right, again. With all that’s happened in the last two years he’s been lucky. He was never meant to make it out here. Without a gun, he’s just zombie fodder. And the team would hardly lose anything in his absence.

Tears squeeze out and down his cheeks. Quickly he wipes them away with Keith’s bandana. He looks down at it with a sad smile. Would Keith lament his loss at all? Miss him even? Or would it be a ‘told you so’ moment? He shakes his head. Doesn’t matter he supposes. For now, he can continue to be useful.

Lance ties the bandana back around his arm and stands. There’s a barn a the far end of the field he remembers Allura saying. He spots the building and heads toward it with the hope that there will be a few things they can use. Maybe even weapons.

At the doors, he finds a padlock. It’s in excellent condition. The staple and hasp it’s looped through appear rusted though. A good couple of hits with the bat should break it free from the door.

He slams it over and over as hard as he can, which isn’t very hard. His shoulder still hurts from the night before and he’s exhausted from their op so his swings lose some of their potency. Eventually, it pops and swings open a few inches. Lance stands, taking a break to breathe before using the bat to open it up cautiously.

It’s silent inside. It smells like hay and animals but nothing moves around. There’s no scent of decay. No undead. That’s enough to convince him it’s safe. He walks in and eyes the walls.

Empty pens for horses, sheep, and any other number of animals. Ropes hanging up on hooks and saddles sitting on the pen gates, ready for use but untouched in years. Rakes, pitchforks, and brooms on the floors. Lance peeks into each pen, finding nothing but feed buckets and in one of them a wheelbarrow.

Ah! Lance spots a gun mounted on the wall and runs up to it. A deer rifle, he thinks and pulls it down to check its specs.

Marlin 336. That’ll give quite the kick. Bigger caliber than he’s used to. Not his preferred type but...it’s loaded which is more than he can say for his Ruger. And the scope is way better than his. Six shots completely fill the chamber.

“Gotta be some ammo around here,” he guesses as he shoulders it to look through drawers.

He finds a half-empty box on a shelf up high. Only ten rounds. The others probably went into a
coyote who thought it would be a great idea to wander on the property. Or to put down a horse with a gimpy leg. What a way to go, he thinks as he pockets the box.

The door swings open with a creak and instinctively Lance draws the rifle up before turning to face the noise. He lets out a sigh of relief and lowers the barrel when he sees it’s Keith.

“Just me,” Keith raises a brow.

“Maybe say something next time?” Lance laughs pathetically. “I could have shot you.”

Keith walks slowly down the aisle, eyeing the walls and things.

“You weren’t at the well,” Keith tells him. “The others thought you fell in.”


“I wasn’t worried,” Keith shrugs.

Lance turns and pats around on the shelves some more. Checks drawers for more ammo boxes but...nothing. Looks like that’s all there is. Shame. He leans against the wall and inspects the rifle again.

“Can you use it?” Keith asks, looking it over.

“It’ll kick a lot harder than the other one, but I shouldn’t have too much trouble,” Lance tells him. “Larger cartridge by one round which is nice. Heavy though.”

Keith puts a hand out and Lance hands it to him. Keith raises the sights to peer through the scope. More weight to it, like Lance said. The scope’s a lot clearer, no crack in it like the Ruger. A fine weapon.

“Scopes better,” Keith comments and hands it back. Lance shoulders it, winces and switches sides. Lance is clearly favoring one side over the other. Been doing it since this morning so it’s not from bashing zombies. Must have pulled something. Or it’s just sore. Gives him an idea for later, for when they’re alone for the night.

Anyway, he’s not here about Lance’s shoulder.

“You froze,” Keith brings up and Lance goes rigid for a second.

“I...yeah,” Lance nods. “She reminded me of someone…”

“A friend?”

“No...I...never even knew her name,” Lance admits. “It was early after Incident Two. She was one of the infected. The Garrison studied her decline. I was posted to watch over her.”

Keith remembers those days and not fondly.

They didn’t know what caused the infection. If they found someone infected and in the early stages they were to bring them back. To learn more. Keith never had to do anything more than hand them over and he hardly liked the idea at all. It was risky, especially if they happened to bite one of the few doctors they had. But that’s what sentries are for. To keep that from happening.

Keith was never posted to watch over the subjects but he heard horror stories from those who did.
More than a few switched to non-combat roles after that. One cadet killed himself in the showers over it.

So Lance was one of those sentries.

“How many times did you have to watch?” Keith asks, looking away.

“Too many,” Lance shakes his head. “But I found her on my first real run. Brought her back myself. She was different.”

“Why?”

“I knew what would happen. What awaited her. The fever, the pain, the...change. Problem was she knew too,” Lance says as his lip trembled. “Begged for me to spare her that fate.”

“And you couldn’t,” Keith guesses.

“No,” Lance confirms. “We were told to reassure them. That the Garrison would find a cure. Don’t worry. It’ll all be fine. You’ll see. You’ll be out of here before you know it. Trust us. And they did. All of them. They believed us. Me.”

Lance slips down to the ground, a hand on over his face to hide his shame and his tears as he sobs. Keith takes a knee with him, untying the bandana from Lance’s arm and pressing it into Lance’s other hand. He buries his face in it as he hiccups.

He remembers her lying there in that town, the zombie that had been chewing out her stomach dead on the ground thanks to Lance’s shot. The fear as she cupped her wound to keep from bleeding further. The look on her face when Lance said it would be alright. To come with him. That they’d take care of her.

“She didn’t believe it for a second,” Lance whimpers. “She knew I didn’t believe it either.”

Lance sobes more, sick to his stomach with the memory. Them taking her in, restraining her to a hospital bed, acting like they were doing her a favor. Except she was just a piece of meat for them to poke and prod for science. And Lance just sat there and let it happen.

“She never stopped asking me to end it. I had so many chances to make it right,” Lance shakes, his arms hugging his knees in. “You know, I’ve never killed a person. Isn’t that funny?”

Keith wishes he could say the same and he wishes he could say that it was funny. Something like that irrevocably changes a person. Looters that tried to end him met his blade and he never felt the same. Even the mercy killings like he’s done on multiple accounts have warped him. It’s made him numb to the point that when a person he hardly knows dies, he feels nothing. Not even cold. Nothing at all.

He doesn’t know which he feels more, envious that Lance has never had to stain his hands with blood or dismayed with the knowledge that Lance will die if he keeps those hands so clean.

“I thought it was her, holding my foot,” Lance whispers. “She was human, reaching out for help. Not some random deadhead. I couldn’t do it.”

...I can’t do it, mom...

...Please don’t make me do this. I can’t...
"You can’t afford to think like that out here," Keith says firmly, shaking the memory. "Human or not, hesitance like that gets people killed."

“I know...I’m sorry,” Lance nods and wipes his face. “I’m lucky you were there.”

“Yes, you were,” Keith smirks. “Don’t let it happen again. This team needs you.”

“Yes sir,” Lance chuckles weakly.

“Ready to head back?”

Lance shakes his head ‘no’ and sighs. Keith ruffles his hair a bit, gentle rubs like the night at the apartment. Lance leans into the touch, familiar and calming. After a moment of that Keith stops and stands, then extends a hand out to help him up. Lance looks at it for a second and then up at Keith smirking down at him.

Almost a real smile. It’s still so smug but his brows aren’t so harsh. His eyes aren’t so judgemental. Lance could very easily call it fondness and it looks good on Keith’s face. Lance takes his hand and pulls himself up.

Keith takes the bandana from his hand and wrings it out a little before rolling it back up to tie around Lance’s arm again.

“You ever going to take that back? I know it’s yours,” Lance says with a smile.

“You use it more than I did,” Keith comments then smirks. “Crybaby.”

“I am that,” Lance chuckles. “It’s so nice though. Soft. I just thought maybe it was important to you.”

...here Keith...don’t forget me...

“Nope,” Keith lies with a somber face. “It’s just a bandana.”

...It’ll keep you safe...

There’s a long pause between them. Keith tightens the knot but holds onto its edges. His fingertips brush the fabric as he replays a memory. Lance isn’t sure if it's a good one or not because Keith lets it go with a sigh, his face blank.

If it really keeps people safe then...

“You need it more,” Keith shrugs. “Keep it.”

“This is almost romantic, you know?” Lance waggles his eyes. “Giving me something of yours, so there’s a piece of you always with me. You sure you’re not sweet on me? Seems like you are.”

“I could always choke you with it instead,” Keith suggests with a frown.

Lance laughs at that. An unbridled laugh that makes him look positively giddy as he clutches his stomach at Keith’s mordant response. It brings him a little closer to the person he was on the bus when he was handing out goodies. The way he is when laughing with his team. But this time it’s...
private, just for Keith and he doesn’t have to share. Makes his chest feel warm at the sight of those flashing teeth.

When he can breathe again, Lance wipes happy tears from his eyes with a sigh.

“I can’t tell if you’re serious or if threats are how you flirt,” he snickers and pats Keith’s shoulder. “Either way, let’s head back. I need to give Shiro my report.”

They leave the barn and cross the field to rejoin the others. Lance continues laughing a little to himself while Keith walks behind him with a tiny smile on his face.

Chapter End Notes

If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment AND tell a friend! Don't know what to say?
Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Tell me what you'd like to see more of.
Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Sounds fair right?
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Don't be too hard on Pidge guys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I'm not looking for somebody
With some superhuman gifts...
Just something I can turn to
Somebody I can miss

--The Chainsmokers, Something just like this

“Sounds like it went well,” Shiro nods from his bed with a soft smile.

Allura changes his bandages out for fresh ones as he listens to Lance’s report. Gentle fingers firmly wrapping the stump of his arm. He winces on occasion but not through any fault of hers. It’s going to be painful no matter how soft her touch is.

“Yeah, no problems at all,” Lance lies with a smile as Keith stands nearby, not contradicting him.

“We should post a duty log to do a sweep every couple of hours to keep them from piling up again,” Shiro suggests. “Teams of two to clear any new arrivals at the beginning and end of each day.”

It sounds like a good idea to Lance. The last thing they need is all their effort to go to waste. Pidge and Hunk can work together for a shift. Keith and Lance can take the next. Matt can switch off with other members of the team as needed. That way no one gets bogged down with doing all the work.

“Wish I could help,” Shiro sighs and looks to Allura. “Is there anything the clinic needs?”

“Well, we could always use more food. I’d like to expand the garden to meet that need,” Allura tells them.

“The hardware store might have things we can use,” Lance mentions.

“When are we leaving?” Keith asks and all eyes land on him.

It’s the question no one was willing to ask.

They never intended to stay for a long time since it’s not their place. That being said, the setup here is nice even if it is still awfully close to the city. An hour away are hordes of zombies with tons leaving every day in every direction. It’s safe for now but it won’t always be.

And again, the place is not theirs to confiscate from Allura and Coran. They are guests. Shiro looks pensive as if he’d been thinking about this for quite some time.
“For now, we stay here,” Shiro says.

“You can’t leave yet anyway,” Allura adds, while looking at Shiro’s arm. “You’re not done recovering.”

“Then we need to fortify,” Keith puts forward. “This place needs more than a line of cars to protect the doors. More than a weak fence to protect the field. And more than one rifle to defend us.”

“I’m with Keith on this,” Lance nods. “This place is great, lets keep it that way.”

“That’s if you’ll have us,” Shiro says to Allura. “It’s your stronghold. If you’d rather we didn’t linger we’ll go once I’m well enough to travel.”

“No, please stay as long as you like,” she smiles. “The more the merrier. We’ve grown rather fond of you all. Like having a family again. And we’d welcome any help you can provide to make it safer.”

Shiro says it’s settled then. They’ll stay, as long as they can. That means they need to make plans for an extended residence. Which means supply runs again, among other things. So they better get started.

“Gather the others, we’ll discuss the first steps together,” Shiro nods to Keith.

Once the whole team crowds into Shiro’s room they begin sharing ideas and plans.

They put together a comprehensive list of things to be on the lookout for. Materials for building a sturdier fence wall, one that will hide their movements from corpses on the roads. Tools for tilling the field and expanding their garden. Weapons and ammunition for defending the area from threats other than the undead.

It’s a lot of stuff. They have a couple of petrol canisters full for a truck to make the trip to the hardware store again a number of times, so no problem getting tools and materials. But there’s not much they can do for weapons without finding another town. And going into the city is out of the question.

“There’s a nice little town nearby,” Pidge taps the spot on her map. “No one from the Garrison’s checked it. Could have some stuff.”

“Then we’ll check there after the Hardware runs,” Keith nods.

“Not to sound ungrateful to our hosts,” Pidge starts and leans back on the stool. “But why are we doing all this? The Garrison is like...a hundred times more safe than this place. We could just all head back there.”

The room goes silent and Lance’s stomach sinks.

He knew this would come up eventually but he hadn’t thought it would be so soon. Part of him hoped they already knew so he could forgo this conversation completely. And now he’s got both of his Echo Team members looking at him expectantly. He’s not ready. Not prepared in the least but there’s no putting it off anymore is there? His head dips and takes in a deep breath.

“We’re not going back to the Garrison,” Lance tells her.

“Why the hell not?” Pidge asks, her eyes narrowing. Hunk puts a hand on her shoulder, anticipating something bad.
“They don’t want us there,” Lance looks up. “They sent us out here to die.”


Lance explains how expendable they are to the Garrison. A rifleman with no special skills. A mechanic not amenable to combat. A willful communications expert who openly challenges the upper commands’ authority. The same goes for the rest of Echo that has long since perished.

Ultimately they weren’t worth the resources it took to keep them fed and trained. A thorn in the Garrison’s side.

The more he says the more he wishes he’d said something sooner. Hunk blanches at each word and Pidge’s face reddens. She doesn’t want to believe it and holds to her denial as long as possible. Her hands shake at her sides as her back tenses, trying to hold in her frustration at his words.

“No. No! It can’t! That’s—it’s bullshit,” Pidge clenches her jaw and glares at Lance who won’t meet her eye. “How long have you known this?!”

He doesn’t try to avoid her stinging slap when he neglects to answer her. It echoes in the silence of the room.

Hunk pulls her back to keep her from doing it again and she keeps trying to pull out of his hold. Lance winces in the direction her strike sent him as his cheek swells with heat. Keith says nothing but notes the way Lance’s hand shakes as he comes up to cover the mark.

“You’re—you’re a liar! Lied to your own team! I thought we were friends!”

That visibly affects Lance more than the smack did, his eyes wide with shock and guilt. Feels like he’s been punched in the gut, all the air stolen from him. Even Keith feels the burn of her words and flinches at them.

“So if we opened up the coms—”

“No one would answer,” Keith assures Hunk. “We’re on our own.”

“No....no, no, no,” Pidge mumbles. She wrenches her hand out of Hunk’s and runs out of the room to check for herself. No one attempts to stop her but Hunk and Matt chase after, so she won’t be alone.

That could have gone better, Lance thinks as tears well in his eyes. He takes the hand away from his red cheek and focuses on the ceiling to get the tears to recede. They do, for now. Shiro sighs sympathetically.

“I’m sorry Lance,” Shiro apologizes. “I thought your team was aware. If I’d known—”

“I should have told them earlier,” Lance interrupts. “It was my responsibility as their leader. I shirked it...so I wouldn’t bring them down. Which I’m now seeing was a mistake.”

“I can’t believe she struck you,” Allura says and stands to inspect it. “And so hard, too.”

Lance waves off her hand.

“She’s upset. It’s not her fault,” Lance shrugs, a guilt-laden look on his face. “She’ll cool off eventually. She’ll be fine.”

Something about Lance’s answer doesn’t sit well with Keith. She’s upset. Not her fault. She’ll be
fine. Validation of Pidge’s emotion but nothing of his own. What about Lance? Does his pain matter little in comparison to hers? Or does he feel this outburst is justified?

After all is said and done, it was a hard decision to make. He was just trying to protect them from the harsh truth. That impact might not have been so hard if he’d said so earlier. But it just seemed a bad time, what with Shiro’s arm and all. And with how comfortable it was here...he hadn’t thought it necessary to bring up.

Guess he just...wanted things to stay happy. Hoping they’d never question their situation and just roll with staying there. It should have occurred to him that they’d want to go home eventually. Hunk has family there, just like Lance. Pidge’s mom too. Lance just didn’t have the heart to tell them home was no longer an option.

“Didn’t want to dash their hopes,” Lance sighs, rubbing his cheek. “I ended up making it worse.”

“You meant well,” Shiro tells him.

“Yeah, best intentions. I’ll just...make myself scarce for the next couple days,” Lance shakes his tired head. “Get well soon, Shiro. We could use someone who knows what they’re doing in charge again.”

Shiro tries to get him to stay but Lance gives a nod to excuse himself before leaving the room, a hand rubbing gently at his cheek.

Keith fights the desire to follow him out. He wants to say something comforting to him. After all, it’s not Lance’s fault that the Garrison is full of assholes. But he needs to stay and go over the list again. Make sure everything is in order before they make the first runs.

So he sits with Shiro and Allura to pour over the list again all the while thinking about that hurt in Lance’s eyes. Like the spark in them died a little in the wake of his friends running from him.

*****

The first place Keith checks for him is the storage closet, thinking it’s a quiet place where no one will go looking. It’s empty though. The room has been organized and tidied. It was a mess that morning which means Lance stopped by but didn’t stay. Did enough to keep himself busy but when finished left to find something else to do.

He’s not in his room either. Or the rec room. Pidge and Hunk are in there though. The small girl holds the long range sat radio in her lap, looking at it with a mix of grief and anger. Hunk does his best to comfort her with a back rub and kisses atop her head.

Lance isn’t there so Keith doesn’t linger.

If he knew Lance better he’d know where to look. And he doesn’t want to ask his teammates and risk the small one’s ire. Not because he’s worried she’ll hurt him but he knows he won’t be able to keep himself from hurting her back if she succeeds. Best not to tempt fate with that. But where does that put Lance?

Where the hell did he go?

The roof is his next stop and it yields the same result. Keith crosses his arms and huffs in annoyance. He was certain Lance would be up here. He even checks next to the garden thinking he might be sleeping behind it but no. Lance isn’t there either.
Keith takes a step to the edge of the roof and looks out on their car path. He follows it to the field and blinks with surprise to see someone walking across. It’s Lance. He’s carrying a backpack and stopping at the well. Looks like he’s filling up bottles and jugs.

“What is he…” Keith shakes his head.

They don’t need water right now, in fact, they already did a big fill up. They should be good for a while but there’s Lance refilling them again. Keith sits down and discreetly watches from the edge. Lance dredges up water from the bottom and fills up his jugs. When finished he trudges back to the clinic and towards the front door.

Curious. Keith sneaks back down the steps, watching for Lance to come back inside. He spies on him from corners and follows him as he walks to...the kennels? After a few minutes Lance comes back out, all the jugs empty and heading back to the fields yet again.

He waits until Lance disappears down the hall before entering the kennels to find what Lance is up to.

There are two hotplates plugged in with large stew pots on top of them. Both are full of water and being heated to a boil. A great big tub has been pulled over, something the size for a shepherd or dane. About two feet deep. It’s got a little water in it already, enough for someone to get their ankles wet.

A bath, Keith realizes. Lance is doing all this to take a nice hot, relaxing bath. One of those little things that fixes nothing but makes him feel better. After an altercation like that, he can hardly blame him wanting a luxury like this.

And he didn’t ask for any help. Just went about doing it for himself because he didn’t want to burden anyone else with the work. He has to make five or six trips to the well and back just to have this opportunity. If he’d asked for Keith’s help he could have halved that trip.

Steps coming down the hall. Lance heading back already. Should he be in here? Maybe it’s something Lance intended to be private. Keith hides behind one of the kennel walls just as the door opens.

Lance trudges in with a tired sigh and immediately starts pouring cold well water into the tub. Keith peeks around the edge to see Lance checking the pots. They’re boiling hot but if he pours it into the cold water, it should even it out. With a towel as his potholders Lance hefts the pots over and pours the scalding water in. One and then the other before turning the hot plates off.

Lance walks over to the kennel door and flips the latch so no one will interrupt him and Keith curses when he realizes he missed his chance to sneak back out. Now he has to wait. That or announce himself.

Keith watches with keen interest as Lance strips and tosses his clothes into a pile. Kicks off his shoes and peels his socks off. Last he throws his pants and boxers in with the rest. A big purple bruise sits on his chest, the wound he was nursing earlier. Looks nasty, almost as bad as the busted nose Keith gave him.

Lance sinks into the hot water with a groaning sigh. He’s too tall for the tub honestly. He can’t submerge without his knees poking out of the water but he tries anyway, coming back up after dunking himself. His arms rest on the rim as he tilts his head back, a hot washcloth resting on his eyes.
Lance hums a little before singing.

“Faaar away...this ship is taking me faaar away,” he sings. “Far away from the memories of the people who care if I live or...die...”

He hums the next few lines before continuing.

“Staaaarlight...I will be chasing that staaaarlight. Until the end of my life,” Lance sings somberly but then he stops. He doesn’t sing any further, just sighs and hums the rest.

Now’s his chance to leave but... Lance looks like he could use a pick me up. Something to take his mind off of things. Something fun right? Kinda wants to…Keith takes his shoes off silently and steps over on the balls of his feet without making a sound. He then crouches down, very close to the tub and leans in to Lance’s ear.

“Hey,” is all Keith says.

He would not be surprised if Lance astral projected right out of his body in heart pounding shock. Lance jolts up and slips right back onto his ass and into the water. He comes up sputtering and wiping his face. Keith has to admit, it’s fun giving him a little fright and even chuckles a little.

“Christ! How’d you--”

“I was spying on you,” Keith tells him. “You were acting suspicious.”

“Jeez,” Lance says taking a breath to calm his thundering heart.

Keith reaches into the water and swirls it a little. Pretty hot still. Feels nice. Lance wipes his face with the washcloth again with a sigh.

“Do you have room for one more?” Keith asks.

“Uh...well,” Lance looks in the miniscule tub. “Not really but please try?” Lance grins.

He rolls his eyes as Lance chuckles and moves his legs to make some room.

Keith stands and pulls his shirt off with a swoop, tossing it aside. Drops his pants and steps out of them. All the while Lance stares with a smile on his face as he lewdly appreciates the angles of Keith’s body. He can’t not scan up and down as Keith steps into the tub, slowly sinking into the water between Lance’s legs. It raises the level nearly to the top as Keith sits and leans back with a sigh.

Really does feel good.

“We’re just two guys sitting in a tub,” Lance says and laughs to himself, a reference to something that Keith doesn’t get. “I gotta say of all the things I miss about the old world...I almost miss memes the most.”

“I...don’t know what that is,” Keith says seriously.

“If you didn’t know what they were before, then there’s no point explaining them now,” Lance waves it off. “Here, turn and lay this way, it’ll make more room.”

Keith shakes his head.

“No, you turn, I want to do something,” Keith tells him. “And don’t get any ideas. It’s nothing
illicit.”

“Aww,” Lance says, feigning disappointment. But he does as Keith says and turns, putting himself firmly between Keith’s legs.

“Down a little,” Keith maneuvers him so he can reach his shoulders better.

Keith massages him at the juncture of his neck and Lance hums with understanding. A massage. Now this is what he’s talking about. Once he starts working out the knots in his back Lance just sighs and relaxes.

Guy needs this. A chance to fully unwind. Their nighttime escapades aren’t enough for Lance and this is the only thing Keith can think of that might help. His years of practice with others makes him exceptionally good at it. He squeezes and pushes the muscles and Lance just melts.

A hot bath. A nice massage. From a super hot guy. What could be better?

Keith’s hands travel to his chest and squeeze at his sore pec. Not too roughly but enough to get Lance wincing a little.

“Hurts,” Lance says.

“Just trying to stimulate healing,” Keith informs him. “Can’t be too ginger with it. Looks like a recoil bruise.”

“It is,” Lance sighs as Keith rubs.

“I thought you were better than that,” Keith huffs. “What happened?”

“Just a little midnight shooting in the midst of a panic attack, no big deal,” Lance jokes but goes quiet with a frown, clearly not proud of it.

It would explain why there were so many at the door. The sound may have attracted more. Lance likely knows that so Keith doesn’t comment. Probably feels bad enough about it. That added to everything else today, Lance has had a rough enough time without criticism from Keith.

Keith pours hot water and soap onto Lance’s head. Starts a lather that has Lance practically singing again. He works his fingers into his scalp, more rough than Lance would prefer but it still feels pretty good. When done he rinses it all out into the tub. Bubbles float around on the surface and the water clouds with soap.

“Thanks,” Lance says while turning to look at him. “Want me to do you?”

“Do?”

“Your hair,” Lance laughs at the tint on Keith’s cheeks.

“S-sure,” Keith huffs.

They switch places, Keith between Lance’s legs but curled up small to hold his knees. Lance ever so gently adjusts his sitting position so Keith will tilt his head back for easier access. Doesn’t want to get soap in his eyes. He wets Keith’s head and lathers up soap in his hair.

Where Keith is rough and fast, Lance is tender and slow. Long fingers working into his roots but not yanking. Lance hums a little song as he takes care to wash Keith’s hair. His fingers thread in and pull a little, enough to make Keith sigh. Normally this gentle thing isn’t his speed but...Lance has golden
fingers.

“Really are...good with...your hands,” Keith comments with a sigh as Lance’s fingers swim in his hair.

“Told you so,” Lance chuckles warmly. “Gotta be good at something.”

Lance rinses his hair out and runs his fingers through it again to make sure he didn’t miss any lather. He rinses again and when he’s satisfied that it’s clean Lance leans in to whisper.

“All done.”

Already? He was getting so comfortable. And more than a little turned on.

“Want me to do anything else?” he insinuates, nosing his neck.

Lance always asks if Keith wants to do something and never takes initiative himself. He’s so eager to please he only ever wants to do what others expect of him. Never says what he wants. It’s considerate but maybe just a little too considerate. Makes Keith feel selfish and spoiled and he’s had enough of this unfair set up.

Keith clears his throat while he stands up and steps out of the tub.

“Tonight,” Keith says as he pulls a towel down. “I don’t want you to come over.”

“Oh,” Lance says, clearly disappointed. “That’s fin--”

“I’ll come to you,” Keith interrupts as he dries off.

“Oh?” Lance’s brows furrow high in surprise before he leans on the edge of the tub with a naughty smile. “Will you wear that rope around your neck again?”

“If you want,” Keith answers coolly as he pulls on his clothes. He’d love to wear the rope again but only if that’s what Lance wants.

“Know how to do the ones made to look like a...like a...hmmm,” Lance fumbles over the word trying to find right one. He goes through a few before he snaps. “Harness. You know how to do one of those?”

Keith smirks. That’s not even a challenge for him. He gives Lance a nod to confirm his question. Lance’s face flushes red at the image but then he breaks out into a big grin.

“I’d like to see that,” Lance admits. “Only if it’s not too much trouble…”

“It’s not,” Keith shakes his head as he pulls on his shoes.

He’ll just have to find a longer and thinner length of rope for that. Might be one in the storage closet. Getting it out of there without anyone noticing or asking what it’s for is another matter. Ah, he’ll figure it out. Keith’s about to go when Lance waves him over.

“Can I kiss you before you go?” Lance asks curiously. “Since we’re alone.”

It’s the one thing Lance has actually asked for without prefacing or ending with some form of ‘if you want’.

“I guess.”
Keith approaches and kneels down so Lance can reach him. A wet hand cups his cheek and pulls him in for a deep kiss. Two. Three. After the fourth Lance lets him go with a heady sigh. He clearly wants more, wants to pull Keith back into the tub, clothes and all—but it’s enough to hold him over until later. Keith’s face is a faint pink around his cheeks as he pulls away.

Don’t fall for him, Keith reminds himself. It's not worth it.

Nothing lasts forever.

“Enjoy your bath,” Keith tells him before splashing water into his face. Lance’s little laugh echoes off the walls as Keith walks away to the door and it gives him butterflies in his stomach.

Lance flirts, “Hate you see you go, but love watching you leave.”

Keith huffs as he goes, but he can’t help smirking to himself. “I should have drowned you.”

“Is that you flirting again?” Lance asks with a smile as he bites at his lip. “You’re terrible at it.”

Keith just shakes his head with a snort before leaving. Lance hums happily and slips back into his tub. Warm and roomy but certainly less for Keith’s absence. Nonetheless, he sinks into the water with a content sigh, ready to enjoy his soak for as long as possible before having to return to the real world.

*****

Lance avoids Pidge for the rest of the day which means he spends most of his time on the roof, keeping watch over the car path. He thinks it might be a good idea to add a hunter’s blind to the list of things to look for at the Hardware store. Something to get them up even higher and give them a better vantage point.

The most basic of deer perches will provide some cover and block the cold night breezes too. So they won’t have to shiver the whole time while keeping a lookout. But that’s for later he supposes. What’s more important is that they set up a perimeter wall on the ground floor for the garden Allura wants to make.

He also wonders about the nearby town on Pidge’s map. No one from the Garrison ever made it out this far.

Are there people still alive in that town? Friendly or not? If they’re friendly do they bring them back with them? Or just let them know where to find them if they need help? What if they’re not friendly? How dangerous will it be for their group to go poking around? And then of course there’s the chance no one’s there at all. Just a bunch of corpses shuffling about looking for another meal.

His biggest concern is how big their group should be to check it out. Tomorrow they’ll just be hitting the hardware store again and multiple times. So anyone who’s able bodied will go to help collect things. But after that they’ll have to decide what kind of team goes in for supplies at the town.

A small team might be best. In a car capable of a fast getaway if things go sour. Pidge would be his first choice. She’s small and good at getting out of tight spaces. And Lance is great at running far and fast. So they’re both capable of booking it out of rough spots but...Lance shakes his head.

Too soon. She won’t be ready to forgive him yet and it’s not that he doesn’t trust her but being in a bad mindset isn’t best for supply runs. Holding grudges inadvertently affects the outcome of a mission whether you’re trying to or not.
Hunk would go with him but he wouldn’t like it. He’ll have forgiven Lance by then but the big guy hates small teams almost as much as Lance does. There’s safety in numbers and he knows it. Shiro’s a no go. And the doctors would be more hindrance than help which leaves...Keith.

Lance isn’t completely opposed to it. Keith’s been doing all the scavenging for his team since Shiro got hurt. He’s good at getting in and out of places without making a sound or attracting attention. But that makes him impatient with others. Lance frowns when he remembers the way Keith took off in the convenience store and then again when clearing the doors.

He’s headstrong. Not exactly a good thing when working as a team. Maybe he can talk to Keith about it later. Lance flushes a little remembering that Keith’s coming over to his room tonight.

What prompted that? Was it his breakdown in the barn? The fight with Pidge? Or that little shared bath? Keith’s being nice to him. Feels good but also a little strange. Hard to know what’s in his head when he looks so aloof all the time. Maybe he’s just warming up to Lance finally?

Lance hears steps behind him. Slow, heavy ones. When he looks over his shoulder Hunk is there putting up a weak smile and waving. He steps over and sits next to Lance, looking over the edge with him.

“How’s Pidge?” Lance asks, his eyes lidded and looking at the ground.

“Shocked. Scared. Angry,” Hunk answers. “She didn’t mean what she did. What she said.”

“I know,” Lance nods with an understanding smile.

They sit quietly for awhile in silence. He always appreciates the way Hunk bounces back from things. He was just as floored as Pidge but here he is, on the roof with Lance, putting a comforting arm around his shoulder and pulling him in for a hug. He always sees the whole picture faster than anyone else in their group.

“So we really can’t go back, huh?” Hunk sighs and turns to look at Lance. “You going to be okay? Your family needs--”

“They’ll be alright,” Lance interrupts. “My sis, she’ll keep them going.”

“Won’t you miss them?”

“Of course,” Lance swallows a lump in his throat but smiles. “But I’ve got this family so I’ll be fine.”


Lance laughs a little and tries his hardest to wrap his arms around Hunk for a big squeeze. Hunk gives the best hugs. Always feels nice and warm. Feels like...going home for Christmas. No wonder Pidge can’t sleep without being encompassed in them.

“She’ll say she’s sorry in a few days,” Hunk assures him, rubbing Lance’s back a little. “You know how she is. It takes a while for her data to compile when she’s made a mistake. She doesn’t go back in with anything less than a perfectly corrected program.”

“Yeah,” Lance nods with a laugh and releases his hold. “You should get back to her. Double time. She’s going to need those hugs.”

“Aye aye, Sergeant Mcclain,” Hunk salutes and stands to go.
“Hey, Hunk,” Lance calls up before he leaves. “Maybe don’t…call me Sergeant anymore.”

Lance looks solemnly down at the ground and Hunk nods his understanding. He doesn’t much feel like a leader anymore, let alone a sergeant. Like he doesn’t deserve his rank. Just reminds him that he’s done a piss poor job.

“Sure, Lance,” Hunk says, patting his shoulder. “See you at dinner?”

“Maybe,” Lance shrugs.

Hunk gives his hair a tousle before heading back inside. Lance stays out a bit longer, watching the lot from the roof. All clear except for the pile of corpses dumped as close to the main road as possible. Coran comes up at some point to collect a few veggies from the garden and to water it but he doesn’t bother Lance who’s fallen back to just stare at the sky.

They did so much today. Most of it good and some of it pretty bad. It’s not the worst day he’s ever had since everything went to hell but it ranks pretty high up there. He can only hope things get better from here on. Lance lets out a deep sigh and closes his eyes.

“Tomorrow is…another day.”

Chapter End Notes

If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment AND tell a friend! Don’t know what to say?
Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Tell me what you’d like to see more of. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don’t silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Sounds fair right?
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

All of you are weak for them cuddles I hear...

ALSO: I can't tell you how much fun it is to read all the comments on this fic. You guys are hilarious and beautiful snowflakes and I love each and every one of you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_I was a rebel but I had a cause._

_Till you came to town, pushed me around._

_And showed me what love was._

--Allison Weiss, _I was an island_

Lance doesn’t come to dinner and it's amazing how much his presence changes the entire atmosphere at the table. For the first time in years, Keith is uncomfortable with the silence.

Everyone eats their food with hardly a word. Hunk tries to get some conversation going. Just little stories about growing up in Hawaii and how much he misses the beach. Allura and Coran ask a few questions about his childhood, to be polite and alleviate some of the quiet, but within minutes it’s back to silence again.

Keith eats quickly, like he does every night, but this time so he can just leave the awkwardness. And that’s not the only reason. He shifts his shoulders a little to fix the fit of the rope harness under his clothes.

He’d gone into the storage closet earlier to get the rope but didn’t want to worry about explaining why he was taking such a long length of rope to his room. So while in there, he locked the door and knotted together the harness.

It took a few minutes as he had to remember the spacing for it. Once he finished the top portion he went on to grab another bit of rope to extend the design down to wrap around his thighs as well. Afterwards, he slipped his clothes back on to hide it. Easy as that.

He thought to take it off once he reached his room but he’d forgotten how nice it felt to wear. So he simply left it on the rest of the day. Not like anyone could tell unless they hugged him and he’s not about to let anyone do that. Not that anyone would want to, other than Lance.

“Keith, you heading to bed?” Hunk asks as Keith stands. He nods. “Can you drop this off to Lance?”

The plate of pasta set aside for him. Keith nods and takes the plate without a word. Hunk thanks him as he leaves and they all go back to their silent meal.
Lance is probably in his room. Or the roof still. They’re the only two places that Pidge has been avoiding. Going to roof means walking by Lance’s door and she doesn’t want to risk running into him. Not before she knows what she wants to say. From the look on her face at dinner, it’ll be another day or two before she’s ready to talk.

Knock Knock!

“Who is it?” Lance calls out.

“Keith,” he says.

“Door’s unlocked,” Lance tells him.

Keith opens it up and finds Lance sitting cross-legged on the floor, his new rifle in pieces on a towel on the ground as he cleans it. He doesn’t look up, his focus necessary for aligning two of the parts together.

“Sorry, I’m...doing a little maintenance. I didn’t think you’d be here this early,” he comments as he works.

“Dinner,” Keith announces and joins him on the floor. He hands the plate off and eyes the gun parts.

“Ah, thanks,” Lance chuckles and takes a bite. He sees Keith analyzing the pieces and gestures at them with his fork. “If you know what to do, you can finish up for me. It’s all clean. Just needs to be reassembled.”

Keith’s intimately familiar with all manner of firearms. A requirement for the special tactics and rescue. Knows how to strip, clean, and reassemble pretty much anything with accuracy, even if he’s never used it before. He’s just never been any good with the actual shooting part. Too impatient Shiro tells him.

He takes the parts and starts assembling them while Lance eats. Lance notes the way his eyes narrow as he works, entirely focused on the task at hand. So cold and emotionless, which is odd to see considering Lance has seen him warm and vulnerable on multiple occasions now.

A wallbuilder. Afraid of making connections.

When Keith finishes the last part he checks the cartridge, making sure it’s full and clicks it in to secure it.

“You know your stuff,” Lance nods with approval. “Though, you’re slower than I thought you’d be.”

“I don’t use a gun often,” Keith admits.

“You’re too impatient right?” Lance smirks and slurps down the last of the spaghetti noodles when Keith frowns at him. “Ha ha ha, don’t be mad. It’s just an...observation. Speaking of...”

Lance takes the gun and leans it against the wall. Then slides his finished plate onto the counter before scooting a little closer.

“Wanted to talk to you about the supply run in a couple of days,” Lance tells him. “I’m thinking a two-person team, so we can get out of there if it’s too dicey. I’d ask Pidge but she’s gonna be mad for awhile.”
“And?”

“I was thinking you could partner up with me,” Lance suggests and Keith raises a suspicious brow.

“Why me?” he asks, thinking it sounds a little fishy. Like he wants to take advantage of them being alone and away from the others. Which he doesn’t have a problem with but he’d rather Lance just come out and say it if that’s his intention.

“You’re fast, quiet, and capable. You’ve been doing these runs on your own for a while,” Lance explains. “You’ll know where all the good stuff is like it’s second nature. You’re a good candidate for this run….”

All of these things are true yet...

“But?” Keith responds, sensing a caveat.

“But you shouldn’t accept if you’re not willing to work on a team,” Lance says seriously. “You can’t…run off without your partner. I can’t read minds. I won’t know what you’re trying to do if you just take off and then we’ll both be in danger.”

“Hmph,” Keith huffs. This is not the kind of scolding tone he likes.

“So, think about it before it comes time to leave,” Lance suggests. “I think we could work well together, and not just in the bedroom.”

Keith’s not a moron, he knows how to take orders and follow them. He just works better when he doesn’t have to think about others. Makes him incredibly efficient although it leaves something to be desired in terms of teamwork. If Keith wants to go on this run, and he does if for no other reason than to get out of this stuffy clinic, he’s going to have to be more considerate.

“Now that that’s out of the way,” Lance smiles and leans over.

Lance puts a hand on Keith’s cheek and slides it down his neck, thumbing his pulse before sliding down his shoulder. His hand pauses there for a moment, feeling a ridge under the fabric. Lance looks puzzled for a moment before he remembers.

“You put it on already?” Lance asks, pulling his collar down to get a peek.

“For about three hours,” Keith admits as Lance’s fingers brush the thin rope.

“How...far down does it go?” Lance wonders curiously as his fingers press over his shirt, following the lines as they go down.

“Uh...well...it’s a karada,” Keith swallows as Lance’s fingers press near his hips. “My take on one anyway. It goes down and around my thighs.”

Lance can’t see under everything but the implication is there. Keith’s going to have to strip to expose the full extent of his knotwork. Lance licks his lips and scans down Keith’s body with anticipation.

“I’m...can I ask…” Lance starts. “Will you strip for me?”

“Not if you ask like that,” Keith huffs and turns his face away.

Is that how it’s going to be? Well, if that’s what it takes...Lance’s fingers grasp Keith’s chin securely in his hold and jerk him to face him.
“Don’t be rude,” Lance says firmly.

Keith’s breath catches at the 360 in Lance’s attitude.

“Strip. And do it slow. Got it?”

His gut tightens at the tone and solid hold on his face. He’s learning what gets Keith hot and changes his tune accordingly. There’s even what a looks like a glare in Lance’s eyes. Keith nods and Lance releases his chin with a bit of a push.

“Good. I’m sure you’ve done it before and with far less dignity. Put on a good show for me.”

Lance takes a seat on his cot, leaning back against the wall with his arms folded behind his head to enjoy himself.

It’s been awhile since he strip teased for anyone.

Keith slips his jacket off one shoulder and then the other, dropping it to the floor. He runs his hands slowly down his body until he reaches the bottom edge of his shirt. His fingers curl around the edge and pull up, one inch at a time, revealing skin and rope to Lance’s enraptured face.


Keith nods and keeps pulling off his shirt. Heat rises in his cheeks with his eyes on Lance’s. Feels like he’s stopped breathing. Only when they lose sight for a second, when he pulls the shirt completely off, does he take a breath.

The knots take Lance’s breath away. Looks like a ‘V’ at the neck but breaks down into three diamonds that go straight down and into his pants. The hemp rope winds into those diamonds and frame his pecs perfectly, above and below with pert nipples in the center. Then more ropes wrap around his torso and dip into his jeans. There are little imprinted red marks underneath the braided strands, proving that Keith has in fact been wearing it for hours.

“Let me see the back,” Lance bites his lip.

Keith does so and even lifts his hair on his neck so he can see better. Tensed muscles straining against the tight hold of his ropes. And he did this all by himself? No help needed?

“Looks like two ropes,” Lance muses as he tries to break down how it was done. It doesn’t look terribly complicated. He could probably learn how to do it with some practice.

Next he turns to face Lance again, remembering that he said to keep eye contact. His eyes return to Lance’s, whose eyes fall to his waist as Keith undoes his belt with his knives. Slowly unbuckles it and pulls it from the loops before laying it across the counter.

“Leave your gloves on,” Lance stops him before he can pull them off.

Keith unbuttons his jeans, unzips, and runs a hand down his crotch to fondle himself and bring Lance’s eyes down to his hardon. Lance notices alright and resists the urge to touch himself in the same way. Doesn’t stop his cock from tenting his jeans, however. His eyes lid and breath shallow at the way Keith bends over to slowly slide his pants off.

“Ho boy,” Lance mumbles in awe.

The ropes twist and wrap around Keith’s thighs, just like he said. Tight and curving around to
accentuate his muscles and bulging crotch. He even turns so Lance can see the back and the way the rope cradles his ass. Lance inwardly cries at what a shame it is that Keith’s wearing underwear under the ropes.

Maybe he can make a suggestion about that for next time.

“That looks…” Lance tries swallowing but finds his mouth dry. He clears his throat and gestures him over. “Come here. I want to uh...look at those knots closer.”

Keith obeys, approaching the cot as Lance sits up over the edge. He reaches out and puts his hands on the ropes, testing them for tension and strength of hold. Very tight, he notes. He can barely get his fingers underneath the bindings.

“This isn’t too tight?” Lance questions, with concern.

“No,” Keith shakes his head.

“So it doesn’t hurt?”

“I didn’t say that,” Keith amends. “It does, a little...I uh...like the friction. The heat.”

“The heat,” Lance repeats and pulls at a knot. The one he needs to undo the rest. “I’m taking this off...so I can see the marks.”

Keith doesn’t object as it’s about time it comes off anyway. Wearing it too long isn’t the best for his skin.

He watches as Lance unfurls the knots one by one. The rope grows in length and slackens. The hold gets looser and looser until the final knot around his neck is undone and slides off onto the floor.

Lance’s eyes roam over the expanse of skin with rope burns.

“You’re lucky they don’t scar,” Lance comments as he presses his lips to a warm red line.

“I never do it tight enough for that,” Keith assures him as his face flushes in part to Lance’s tender kisses and massaging fingers.

It’s an odd position for Keith. He’s not used to standing tall over someone as they worship his body. No other word would suffice for what Lance is doing. Pawing at and kissing the individual rope burns, tasting his skin and sighing at the flavor on his tongue. Nose buried in Keith’s stomach, in the creases of his abs as his fingers play with the band of his boxers.

“I still haven’t gotten to show you how good I am with my mouth,” Lance breathes hot down his shorts, making Keith shiver. “How quiet can you be?”

Keith’s not entirely sure. He’s not known to be silent when it comes to these matters. Life has a funny way of balancing things out like that. Quiet in public but in private? Keeping his little moans and whines down is hard enough. The only reason he was so quiet before was thanks to Lance. He muffled him, on both accounts.

“Not very,” Keith admits.

“Then maybe I should gag you,” Lance smirks and Keith swallows at the prospect. Lance stands and threads his hand through Keith’s hair and yanks a little. “Oh ho. Would you like that?”

Keith gasps a little and nods.
“I can’t hear you, slut,” Lance says and yanks a little harder.

“Y-Yes,” he whispers and Lance leans in licking his neck.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I’d...like you t-to gag me,” Keith whimpers as Lance’s fingers tighten. “P-Please.”

“I guess I can do that then,” Lance smiles devilishly and releases him. “Since you said please.”

Lance pulls the bandana off his arm and ties a knot in the center. Keith watches as the fabric is raised up to his mouth. He opens without being told and takes it in with a sigh as Lance ties it behind his head. He’s not sure how much help it’ll be but it feels amazing to have something in there.

“There we go,” Lance says softly into his neck. “Now sit.”

Keith does as he instructs, sitting on the cot, legs slightly spread to show off the bulge in his boxers. Hands on his knees, back straight, and head down. It’s the way he would have been asked by other more experienced doms, not that Lance would know that. They’d have asked him to undress completely too, to make Keith do all the work.

But Lance prefers using his own hands.

For the second time in the past few minutes, Lance lowers himself, to his knees, so that Keith towers over him. He hooks his fingers into Keith’s boxers on both sides, sliding them down slowly while maintaining eye contact with Keith. Lance scrapes his fingers down his thighs as he pulls them off and Keith closes his eyes with a sigh.

“The friction right?” Lance guesses and digs his nails in a little harder and Keith whimpers as his cock twitches.

Lance pulls the boxers down and off, his fingers trailing back up Keith’s calves and pressing his knees further apart, spreading him so he can get a better look. God, that cock just looks so inviting and Keith’s eyes are begging for Lance to close the distance.

“I know you don’t trust me to tie you up,” Lance says, sucking on Keith’s inner thigh as he looks up at that weak face. “So do me a favor and put your hands behind your back. We can just...pretend you’re completely powerless.”

Keith eagerly nods, twisting his arms behind him and clasping his hands in each other. At least this way if Keith wants to stop it’s as easy as letting go and pushing Lance away. Not that he wants to at the moment. This is almost as good as being tied up.

Lance kisses his thigh again before sucking hard on the flesh there. Keith watches as he slowly inches his way up, leaving dark sucked bruises as he progresses. He switches sides with each kiss, prolonging the wait and making Keith whine for more.

What a fucking tease Lance is and Keith’s cock just trembles when he gets closer and closer only to be denied.

Lance swears he hears Keith say ‘please’ behind that gag. Muffled and needy. So he takes Keith’s shaft in hand and lowers his mouth, not to his cock but to his balls instead. His tongue laves hot and wet in long sweeps making Keith shiver with a moan. Another begging but muffled ‘please’.

“Listen to you,” Lance purrs before licking between them. “So impatient. Just wait.”
Keith’s trying so hard not to shake at each slide of tongue, each sucking of his testicles into Lance’s warm mouth. He bites down on the bandana and claws his nails into his own skin, determined to not just grab Lance by the face and force him where he really wants him.

But there’s something exciting about not being able to do so. Having to just sit there and take what’s given to him. Being vulnerable is exhilarating in a world that requires he never show weakness.

The whole idea of tonight was to do what Lance wanted but it feels like Keith’s getting spoiled again. He got to wear his ropes. Demanded to strip for Lance. Even gagged to stifle each gasp that wants to burst from him. All things Lance enjoys doing to Keith, clearly, or he wouldn’t do them. But…

Are they the things Lance desires most? Does he get anything out of it like Keith does?

Keith doesn’t know and isn’t sure how to find out.

Lance’s eyes are constantly making contact with his own as he works. Gauging for reactions so he can adjust his technique accordingly. Lance’s tongue sweeps up the underside of Keith’s cock, slow and dragging. Makes Keith shiver and groan thinking he’s finally going to suck on him. When Lance doesn’t, only kisses his way back down, Keith lets out a pathetic mewling whine.

“You really can’t wait can you?” Lance chuckles.

Keith shakes his head, cheeks flushed.

“Needy little--You can either wait patiently and come when you’re ready...or...I can get sucking now but you can’t come at all tonight. Which one?”

What kind of choice is that? A cruel one, Keith thinks, and both equally delicious in their own way. The slow build up torture with a promised release. Or the immediate gratification with no grand finale. Lance gives him a moment to think about it before untying the gag from his mouth. Keith pants and licks his dry lips.

“I-I...I w-want…” Keith stutters, his body still shivering thanks in no small part to Lance’s stroking hand.

“Tell me what you want,” Lance leans in and mouths along his neck. “Pretty slut.”

“I w-want you...to take your time,” Keith whimpers as Lance’s thumb spreads sticky warmth over the head of his cock.

“I’m glad you chose to be patient,” Lance smirks and kisses Keith deep and probing. It even coaxes a moan out of him. “I’ve been wanting to taste you for days.”

The torture recommences. Lance puts the gag back in place and resumes his slow licks around Keith’s sensitive flesh. Licking and lapping his wet tongue all over and breathing hot on his skin. His neck, his chest, down his stomach. Lance’s hands squeeze those muscled thighs and pry his legs open each time he twitches trying to bring them closed again.

Keith’s face is flushed red with how he’s trying to moderate his noise level. He can’t keep his mewling to himself each time Lance gets close to his crotch. When Lance finally slides the flat of his tongue across the top of his leaking cock, Keith arches and shakes with a muffled cry. His eyes roll back each time and he breaks out with a pitiable whine when Lance pulls away.

God he could cry. This is the best kind of torture.
“I think...I’ve made you wait long enough. What do you think?” Lance asks, his breath panting and shallow.

Keith nods, his eyes begging.

Lance wraps his lips around the head of Keith’s cock, swirling his tongue around just the top and tonguing the precome leaking out. Keith almost breaks down there. Lance doesn’t even have all of Keith in his mouth but he wants to explode right now. Keith feels Lance’s hands squeeze hard on his thighs, dragging his nails down his muscles.

Keith moans something. It sounds like Lance’s name but with the gag he’ll never know. He’d remove it if he thought Keith would keep quiet. Maybe some time they can take it out to the barn. Keith can scream and moan as loud as he wants without anyone hearing them. And Lance has to admit, he’d love to hear Keith shout his name in blinding ecstasy.

Maybe one day...

Lance sucks a little further down on the head of Keith’s cock. Keith’s eyes go wide with anticipation. Surely this time--? Lance closes his eyes and slides down, down, and down until his lips reach Keith’s little patch of hair, burying his nose in it with a hungry moan.

Keith could wail if it weren’t for the gag in his mouth. A keening noise akin to a sob is all that shakes out of him as Lance deepthroats him with no sign of gagging. Is this what Lance meant about his mouth? No gag reflex...and that swirling dexterous tongue? God, it’s sending shivers from the base of his spine all the way down to his curling toes.

Lance goes up and down slow, each time he reaches the base of his cock Keith lets out another trembling whine just a little louder than the one before it. But he doesn’t come. Again, like he’s waiting for someone to tell him to. Lance pulls off and strokes Keith’s slick length.

“When I go down this time you’ll come for me,” Lance whispers low in his ear. He yanks a handful of Keith’s hair to tilt him back and it makes him whine. “You’ll come for me. And afterwards...you’ll get on your knees and suck me off. Do I make myself clear?”

Keith nods meekly, complying with a flush on his cheeks.

“Good,” Lance smirks, letting go with a little shove. “Keep those hands behind you.”

He sinks his mouth onto his cock and Keith arches as Lance bobs there between his legs. Keith lets the pleasure mount and instead of beating it back, trying to hold in his revelry, he releases with a quivering moan that sounds like Lance’s name.

Lance swallows it down with a heady moan of his own. Lapping at Keith’s length and licking his lips when it’s all gone. Keith’s looks faint and falls backwards onto the cot with a weak exhausted sigh. Lance chuckles at that. He loves the way that blush travels down Keith’s cheeks to his neck and chest. Too cute.

“Was it good? Or am I just all talk?” Lance smirks as he leans over him and unties the gag.

“Very...good,” Keith gasps, trying to get his head back on his shoulders. “I’ll get you...in a second. Just need to...breathe.”

“You don’t have to,” Lance dismisses with a wave. “Just said that ‘cause I know how much you like it. I’m actually ready for bed.”
“You don’t...want anything?” Keith asks as he sits up. Lance shakes his head with a tired smile.

“You don’t...want anything?” Keith asks as he sits up. Lance shakes his head with a tired smile.

“Nothing you’d be interested in,” he shrugs.

Lance picks up Keith’s clothes from the floor and hands them back to him. He even winds up the rope in a nice big loop before tying it off and putting it away in a cabinet for later use. His empty plate sits on the counter, a reminder that he needs to wash it before bed. He snatches it up and turns to Keith.

“I’m gonna go take this to the dish pile,” Lance tells him as Keith’s pulling on his pants. “If I don’t see you again. Night.”

Lance exits, closing the door gently behind him, leaving Keith to ponder. He sits on the edge of the cot and blinks, perplexed by Lance’s behavior.

Nothing? Lance wants nothing from him? Then what’s the point of their arrangement? Keith’s good at a lot of things, especially in the bedroom. But Lance didn’t even tell him what he wanted. Which means...he doesn’t want something sexual.

Lance wants something outside their agreement. Something more.

And he doesn't think Keith will give it to him.

*****

Lance walks quietly down the hall and peeks into the rec room. Empty except for Hunk who’s piling up the dishes. He waves as he enters and Hunk smiles back. Hunk extends a hand and takes the plate from Lance.

“Feeling better?” he asks.

“That’s not really...” Lance shakes his head. “I miss her tiny hugs already.”

“You’ll get them again,” Hunk chuckles. “Want me to give you one?”

“I’d love one honestly,” Lance nods with a smile. “Let me help with dishes first though.”

Lance washes while Hunk dries. The big guy talks about dinner and how weird it was. Lance is hardly listening, just absentmindedly washing and handing off each utensil and plate.

It’s not that Lance isn’t horny because most of the time he can’t even start the day without rubbing one out. As attractive as Keith is there’s something missing in their interactions. He’s hot and incredibly invigorating but...Lance misses the warmth of someone. An intimate closeness. He wants to hold and be held but Keith is closed off. Detached and cold.

He doesn’t mind the agreement but he wishes there were more to it. Too late to amend it now. Keith would never agree anyway. And he’s not obligated to.

“You seem down, more so than usual,” Hunk comments. “And not because of Pidge.”

“I uh...” Lance starts and considers telling him about Keith. Normally he’d never keep something like this from his best friend. Ultimately he shakes his head at the thought. “It’s just a headache I can’t shake at night. For a couple days now.”

“Oh? I think we have some ibuprofen in the med bag,” Hunk mentions and dries his hands. He goes and retrieves it while Lance dries his hands too. “Here, take some and drink more water.”
“Thanks, Hunk,” Lance gives him one of his best false smiles as he pops two pills.

Hunk nods and gives him the promised hug. Big and bracing. Warm and all-encompassing. Hunk even pats his head a little. Lance squeezes him back with a deep sigh.

“How come we never hooked up?” Lance jokes and buries his face in Hunk’s shirt.

“You’re too high maintenance for me,” Hunk jokes back. “Plus, the two of us? Too much handsome will blind the lesser mortals. For the sake of the universe, we mustn’t entertain such dangerous ideas.”

“That must be it,” Lance laughs. “Shame, bet you’re great in bed.”

“That I am,” Hunk nods proudly. “Best little spoon this side of Texas.”

“Oh man! You’re even the little spoon?” Lance whines. “Wish I had a--Pidge you lucky little shi--”

Hunk laughs and gives him a big squeeze, crushing all the air out of him with a whoosh before letting Lance go. They still have to put the dishes away so Hunk hooks an arm around his shoulder and pulls him over to finish the work, both unaware they had an onlooker who is now taking off down the hall.

*****

When they finish Lance scoops up a water bottle and walks with Hunk back to the rooms. They stop outside Hunk’s door, give another round of hugs before splitting off. Lance chugs down half the bottle of water before capping it and entering his room to bed down for the night.

Two cots, touching side by side.

Lance blinks and looks around thinking he walked into the wrong room. But his family picture is on the counter and his rifles lean against the wall. The light’s off but a dimmed lantern is on in the corner. It just barely illuminates the room and the person curled up on one of the beds. Keith.

He steps forward and takes a knee.

“What are you doing Keith?” Lance asks, baffled.

“You’re supposed to play with my hair,” Keith tells him and then yawns. “My aftercare?”

“Yeah, okay,” Lance nods but his eyes remain furrowed with confusion. “But...why’d you move your cot? I’d have come over.”

“No reason,” Keith shrugs, a little blush on his cheeks.

Lance’s eyes soften a little as a small smile spreads on his face. Did...did he figure out Lance wanted him to stay? Maybe he doesn’t give Keith enough credit. He’s a warm person, just doesn’t like admitting it. Lance stands from the ground and pulls off his clothes, changing into only scrub bottoms before sliding into the adjacent cot.

He sits up on his elbow and glides a hand through Keith’s hair. Keith relaxes and lets out a content hum as Lance works. Fingers combing through and massaging scalp as Lance hums a song. Just like before. Keith sighs and rolls over to face him, his eyes closed as fingers detangle hair and smooth it out. Lance goes quiet thinking Keith’s asleep.

“Another,” Keith yawns.
“Another…?” Lance mumbles and realizes.

Another song. How funny, in the woods he wanted Lance to shut his mouth. Now he’s singing a different tune. So with a content smile, he starts up humming again as his fingers massage. One of his favorites about rolling waves and sandy beaches.

Keith scoots closer and to Lance’s bemusement he rolls so his back is pressed against Lance’s chest. His eyes are lidded but they’re open, making this a conscious decision to crowd into his space. What is he--?

“You’re into cuddling and stuff right?” Keith asks, a pink tint to his cheeks. “All that intimate mushy crap.”

“I am,” Lance admits, not ashamed of it.

“Then you can hold me,” Keith tells him. “For tonight.”

“Why?” Lance asks but he’s grinning. He wants to hear what Keith’s reasons are.

Well it’s certainly not because he overheard the conversation about big and little spoons and how much Lance wished he had someone to do that with. That’s for sure.

“Cause I can’t stand being indebted to anyone,” Keith says with a huff. “And right now I feel like I’ve gotten more out of this than you have.”

So practical and fair. But if that was all it was...Lance curves into Keith’s body, pressing in close and nosing his hairline. His hand palms down Keith’s side and rests on his hip as he kisses his neck. Keith holds in a breath but can’t stem the heat rising in his cheeks.

“Can I keep kissing you?” Lance whispers against the back of his neck. “Until you fall asleep?”


Lance threads fingers into Keith’s hair and massages gently as he mouths his neck, getting a sigh out of him. He runs his hand up Keith’s stomach and chest, gently caressing flesh until he’s holding him in a soft embrace. Whispering Keith’s name along with silly little compliments, most of them in Spanish. Growing up in Texas, Keith catches all of them.


Precious.

Makes Keith melt a little at each word. He even feels a little guilty for enjoying it after being so adamant about how stupid sweet things are.

Lance grinds his hips against Keith’s ass and Keith gasps feeling that hard shaft pressing into the cleft of his cheeks. Keith brings a hand up to his mouth to keep from making that sound again but Lance takes his hand and pulls it away from his face.

“I want to hear you,” Lance whispers, kissing and sucking on Keith’s fingers with a heady sigh.

This is the sort of thing Lance likes? Tender touches. Charming compliments. Little gasps of pleasure out of his partner. Things that build a person up instead of tearing them down.

But he’s so good at the other, at breaking Keith apart. Putting him in his place. Keith can honestly say he prefers that type of treatment to get off but...maybe this isn’t so bad, every once in awhile.
And if it’s what Lance wants...if that’s what makes him feel better...

Keith rolls over and starts kissing back. Soft kisses on his neck until he finds Lance’s mouth and dives in, his tongue sliding in to caress Lance’s. Makes Lance gasp his name, so Keith knows it’s doing it for him. Lance pants and bites at Keith’s lips in little nibbles, a hand cupping his neck and the other gripped tight on Keith’s ass pushing him forward into rutting against him. Lance is rock hard, groaning each time his cock rubs on Keith’s. He’s more than ready to just come in his pants at this rate.

“K-Keith,” Lance sighs, already pulling himself out.

“You’ll make a mess of the bed,” Keith tells him. “Let me...take care of it.”

Lance nods eagerly, throwing the blanket off himself. Keith crawls and before he can even get between his legs, Lance grabs his wrist.

“No, the other way,” Lance says, licking his lips. Keith gets the message and turns, repositioning himself over Lance.

Sixty nine. Something he used to love doing when he was a teen. Keith’s mouth sinks onto Lance’s hard cock making him gasp aloud. Almost too loud as Lance bites into his fist to silence himself. Once the initial elation shudders through him, Lance lets go and pulls Keith’s boxers down over his rear.

He hadn’t expected Lance to go straight for his ass. Thank god he has Lance’s cock in his mouth to muffle the surprised noise that erupts out of him. Lance sighs and groans as his tongue slides over his hole, tasting and reveling in it. His fingers squeeze hard into Keith’s cheeks, spreading him and allowing Lance more access.

The tongue that worked wonders on Keith’s cock earlier now it spears him with abandon.

“God, Keith,” Lance moans and pants. “I could...eat you...all night...so good .”

Keith can’t tell if that’s supposed to be dirty or one of those flirty compliments but either way he moans on top of Lance’s cock as Lance continues to lick and thrust in his tongue.

He wants to be good for him. A good boy as opposed to a naughty one in need of punishment. Keith wraps one hand around the base of that cock and pumps it while cradling his balls with the other. His mouth goes to work sucking on the leaking head.

“F-Fuck,” Lance curses. “You’re so... good .”

Keith whines without meaning to. The praise sounds so delicious coming out of Lance’s mouth. In that ragged, fucked out voice of a man basking in revelry. Keith takes him deep, not nearly as deep as Lance can go without gagging but enough that Lance arches with a loud gasp.

“Christ I’m--” Lance chokes back a moan. He arches, his nails digging into Keith’s ass cheeks as he shakes out his climax into Keith.

The pressure and hardness of his fingers are all Keith can feel. That and the semen spurting into his mouth and sliding hot down his throat. Both make him whimper with excitement. It’s got him extremely turned on again. How is it that he feels good and dirty at the same time?

When Lance finally stops shuddering his nails release from Keith’s ass and he relaxes against the cot with a sigh.
“Keith...I...” Lance breathes.

“F-Finish me,” Keith begs as he pops off Lance’s cock. “Please.”

Lance grins impishly.

“Well, you did say ‘please’. Come here,” he says as he sits up on his elbows.

Keith turns and crawls over to him, on his knees but high enough to reach Lance’s mouth. Lance grabs his hips and plunges that swollen cock into his mouth with a happy hum as Keith gasps. He bobs there while Keith threads his fingers through Lance’s hair and pulls with each movement.

God what was it that made him desperate to get off again? Lance didn’t even say anything dirty to him. Nothing even remotely close to degrading. Maybe it was Lance’s writhing tongue inside him? Those fingers digging into his ass and spreading him open? It must have been. Otherwise, it would just be Lance’s coaxing voice praising the hell out of his body.

And that’s hard for him to believe.

Keith swallows back the sounds he wants to let out. He brings a hand up to his mouth and bites on his knuckles to remind himself he can’t be loud. Not here. Lance’s eyes flit up to look at him, a flush on his cheeks because he loves the way Keith sounds when he’s trying to control himself. Loves trying to get him to break that wall down by upping the ante and deep throating him.

“L-Lance,” he mewls behind his fist. “I--”

“Careful, Keith,” Lance purrs and sucks hard on him, gripping tight on his hips. “As much as I’d love to hear you scream—any louder and everyone will know who’s doing this to you.”

Keith covers his mouth with both hands to mask the shout he almost lets loose as Lance sucks him down for a second time that night. Another silent climax but in his head, Keith screams as pleasure wracks his body. Lance swirls the come around his mouth before swallowing with a grateful sigh. When he lets go of his hips Keith almost falls off the cot but Lance’s quick reflexes catch him. He chuckles before guiding him back down to his side of the makeshift bed. Keith just pants, too dizzy and spent to do otherwise.


Lance rights the blanket and adjusts the pillows. He settles in close to Keith, throwing an arm over him before pressing in close. Keith’s the perfect size for a little spoon, he muses with a smile. Lance then buries his nose into those black locks of hair.

“Thanks for staying,” Lance sighs.

“Too tired to move,” Keith answers back.

“Either way, thanks. Sleep tight Keith.”

“Night...Lance...” Keith yawns.

Lance snuggles in and provides comforting warmth, his breath soft on Keith’s neck. A long arm circled around him, not too tight but snug. To Keith, it feels protective and meant to reassure, not just his companion but Lance himself. One of those sentimental reminders that he’s not alone.

It’s not a bad feeling Keith thinks as he settles into the rhythm of Lance’s breathing. The steady rise
and fall of his chest. Lance’s thumb continues to rub gently on his stomach even in the midst of his dreams. There’s a soothing low tempo of his beating heart and it’s lulling Keith into sleep.

This is actually...kind of nice. Better than nice.

And now he can’t recall why he was ever averse to sleeping next to Lance in the first place.

Chapter End Notes

If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment AND tell a friend! Don't know what to say?
Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Tell me what you'd like to see more of.
Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Sounds fair right?
Chapter 12

There are many things that I would like to say to you but I don't know how
Because maybe, you're gonna be the one that saves me.
--Oasis, Wonderwall

It’s morning already.

Lance checks his watch and blinks the sleep from his eyes. Nine o’clock, kind of late for him but that hardly matters. It hasn’t mattered for over two years. No one has anywhere to be. No parties or classes. No boss at work to crawl up his ass for being late anywhere because no one’s ever late anymore.

Just the same, he shouldn’t sleep all day. He shifts a little and sits up with a yawn.

It shocks him to see that Keith’s still there.

He’s curled up small and giving off a ton of heat under the blanket. He hasn’t moved at all, just sleeping soundly. Lance wonders if he should wake him or just let him be. Looks like he’s having a nice dream from the relaxed look on his face. He reaches over and thinks to run a hand through Keith’s hair for a little scratch but he pulls back.

Better let him be. It’s hard enough to get a restful night’s sleep these days, even harder to look so content while doing so. He’d hate to wake him from something pleasant.

Lance quietly stands, fixes the blanket, and goes about changing for the day. He gets everything on and shoulders his new rifle before gently closing the door behind him as he leaves. The hall is silent but the noise picks up once he makes it to the rec room.

Hunk is frying potatoes on a hotplate. Lance starts salivating before he even sits down. Hashbrowns. Where the hell did they get butter? Out here? It’s not butter he realizes once he’s closer, just some kind of nonstick spray but Hunk’s being pretty generous with the salt and pepper so it should still taste amazing.

Matt’s already at the table with Coran, both holding utensils and practically vibrating in their seats with anticipation of their breakfast. Pidge is nowhere to be seen and Lance doesn’t inquire. Allura isn’t there either. Probably busy taking care of Shiro.

“First round!” Hunk announces and divides up the spuds on their plates. “Gotta carb up for the work today.”

“Coran, you’re coming too?” Lance asks and takes a bite of hot potatoes. He whimpers dramatically like it’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever tasted. “Delicious, Hunk.”

“Yes, the Princess as well! We’re pretty fit but more than that we’d like to help,” Coran explains and chows down. “Hunk and Pidge will be staying behind to design a schematic for the walls.”

“Oh, yeah. She’s great at that stuff,” Lance nods.
“Also, she’s still throwing a fit,” Matt adds with a disappointed sigh. “So staying here’s probably best for her.”

At least he said it so no one else would have to.

Allura shows up as Hunk’s starting on the second round of potatoes. She looks well rested, bright-eyed and a little sweaty as she plops down into her seat. Lance passes her a bottle of water which she drinks heartily as she fans herself.

“I didn’t see any of you up early this morning,” she comments after a swig. “Went running alone in the field. Haven’t felt so alive in months.”

“Aww man, I missed out on the jog?” Lance pouts.

“Like you would have run Lance...you’d have just watched,” Hunk insinuates.

“Well yeah,” Lance shrugs with a smirk and elbows a laughing Matt. “Nothing wrong with appreciating a gorgeous view, right?”

“Where’s the rest of your intrepid crew?” she inquires as she rolls her eyes with a smile.

“Pidge is already starting on designing the walls,” Hunk says as he flips the spuds. “On the roof.”

“Keith’s still asleep,” Lance announces as he chews.

“Well someone should wake him,” says Allura. “The earlier we head out the sooner we can begin construction.”

“Who wants to volunteer?”

No one answers.

Apparently Keith has a reputation for when he’s woken ahead of his time and Matt hasn’t been exactly flattering in the description. According to him, if Keith wakes on his own it’s no big deal. But if someone else wakes him...it usually ends in a bad day for the volunteer. Matt is deliberately vague as to what the damage is but hints that it’s scarring. And dangerous.

“I’ve been on the receiving end once,” Matt shudders in fear at the memory. “Never again.”

Seems odd to Lance. He woke Keith with a gentle kick to his foot that morning at the apartment. Nothing even resembling a meltdown occurred. He was grouchy but nothing that would warrant the trepidation in Matt’s eyes and tone of voice. It’s making everyone shrink back, all of them less and less willing to do the deed.

“I’ll do it,” Lance offers with a shrug. Probably should be him anyway since he’s still in Lance’s room. “How bad can it be?”

“On this day we honor Lance,” Matt says, a hand over his heart. “Fallen hero and great saint taken before his time.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Lance chuckles and pushes his empty plate away with a laugh. He stands and makes for the exit. “Bunch of cowards.”

“Good luck Lance!”

“Thank you for your service!”
“Stay away from his face!” Matt tells him as a last warning.

Lance just shakes his head and laughs. Imagine, the lot of them scared...of Keith. Cute, submissive, tie-me-up-and-insult-me Keith. If they only knew--

Sure he’s definitely a hothead. And sure he’s a fully trained, combat-ready soldier. With lots of traumatic history. Who almost stabbed Lance in a Walgreens before checking to see if he was human.

Lance swallows at that thought. The closer he gets the less difficulty he has believing that it’s entirely possible Keith really did hurt Matt upon waking him.

What did he do? Punch? Kick? Stay away from his face…? Jesus, did he **bite** Matt? Or maybe he just headbutted him? He’s starting to wonder if it’s incredibly lucky that he withdrew his hand earlier. Keith might have stuck a knife through it.

Maybe that’s why he prefers to sleep alone.

Lance looks down the halls to make certain he’s alone before opening the door to his room and slipping inside. He turns on the light, thinking it’ll wake Keith on his own but the lump under the blanket doesn’t shift. He supposes he could just...kick the cot a little? Just to be safe--

Lance rolls his eyes and shakes his head, ashamed of his hesitance. And he called the others cowards.

“This is ridiculous,” he mumbles.

He takes to the side of the cot and kneels. Out of caution, he peeks under Keith’s pillow where one of his hands is tucked, just to see if he’s holding a knife. He finds a knife under there but it’s sheathed and Keith’s hand isn’t touching it. That makes Lance feel a *little* better knowing he’s *probably not* going to stab him.

“Keith,” Lance tries whispering at first. “It’s morning.”

He doesn’t stir so Lance leans in a little closer.

“Keith, time to get up man,” Lance says low in his ear.

A mumble and slight shift in Keith’s body. Keith reaches out clumsily with his hand trying to find purchase on something. He recalls that Keith did something similar that morning at the apartments. Looking for something? Fingers find Lance’s neck, curl around it, and pulls until their faces meet. Oh...he’s...Lance closes his eyes and lets Keith kiss him.

If this is what all the fuss is about...he’ll volunteer as tribute every time to wake Keith. This isn’t scary at all. He doesn’t kiss back because...well, Keith’s asleep. Feels wrong to, so he just lets the sleeping beauty suckle and nibble on his lip. Keith sighs and then bites Lance’s lip. Hard.

“Ouch! Keith!” Lance yelps and Keith’s eyes blow open.

“What the--!” Keith exclaims and shoves Lance back. He tips over and lands on his ass.

“Jesus,” Lance rubs his bleeding lip. “I can’t believe you just--!”

“What are you doing in my--” Keith looks around and recollects the night before. “Right...I…s-sorry about...that.”
“Matt wasn’t kidding! It’s dangerous waking you up!” Lance says and licks his bloody lip. “Fuck that hurt. Now I get why he was so scared to do it himself.”

“Well, he’s straight so...” Keith frowns. “He finds it horrifying for a multitude of reasons.”

Lance snorts and picks himself up off the floor.

“Anyway, it’s after nine. We want to get going soon, so you should get changed and eat,” Lance tells him. He then waggles his eyes before asking, “need any help with that?”

“Eating? I’m sure I can manage,” Keith tells him with a smirk as he stands to get his clothes.

“Ouch, denied!” Lance snaps while chuckling. “Well...see you in the rec room.”

Lance makes his way back to the door. He pauses for a moment to look at Keith. Keith doesn’t catch on until he’s pulling on his black tee. When he raises a brow to question it, Lance smiles sheepishly at Keith.

“What?” Keith asks.

“Could I...nevermind,” Lance waves it off and adjusts the rifle on his shoulder.

“ What , Lance?” he asks more firmly with a frown.

“I didn’t kiss you back. You were asleep,” Lance tells him. “Could I kiss you now?”

Keith opens his mouth to say something then closes it. It’s more of the same sentimental crap Lance is into. He’s not really in the mood for it but he did just bite the shit out of his lip. Keith pouts but lets out a sigh.

“I guess,” Keith says, looking away. “Just...make it quick. You said we were in a hurry.”

Lance smiles and puts down this rifle before stepping in close. He brings a hand in to cradle the back of Keith’s neck, tilting him up as he leans down to press their lips together. Lance gives him little sucking kisses on his lower lip, working to part Keith’s mouth and slip his tongue inside. Keith opens for him and Lance hums happily as he tastes.

Keith sighs into the kiss, his tongue darting into Lance’s mouth just as fervently. He can taste blood, as well as salt and pepper. Each kiss has Keith sighing and Lance tightens his hold. Damn. He wants to go again, right now, but they have work to do. So he settles for the few kisses and lets go of Keith’s neck.

Lance gives him a smile and playful shove with his shoulder before retrieving his rifle again. Keith frowns at the childish treatment and rolls his eyes. Lance shoulders the gun and gives a casual salute before leaving Keith to finish changing.

When Lance returns the only one remaining at the table is Matt. Coran and Allura have left, likely to check in on Shiro before the trip. Hunk’s gone too, a plate of potatoes left on the table for Keith when he arrives. Matt sits up upon Lance’s arrival and gives him a sympathetic grimace.

“Ooo, he got you good,” Matt winces looking at Lance’s lip. “Sorry man.”

“Yeah, wish you’d been more specific,” Lance touches it again. Still bleeding a little.

“Better you than me,” Matt shudders. “He’ll do that to anyone who wakes him up, for the record. Anyone he can reach, that is. And then he gets mad like it’s your fault.”
“Ha,” Lance chuckles remembering the way Keith shoved him away, aghast.

“Next time just uh, poke him with the rifle butt,” Matt suggests. “He’ll be mad still but it’ll save your mouth the grief.”

“Why would I do that?” Lance insinuates with a wink.

“Oh, you’re...oh,” Matt nods with sudden understanding then lowers his voice to a whisper. “You should uh, let Keith know. In private. He’s pretty discerning but he might be interested. Might even loosen up.”

“I dunno, seems a little too uptight for me,” Lance puts forward but inwardly he grins with the knowledge that they’re well past that stage.

“Oh, morning Keith,” Matt waves nervously, as if afraid he’d heard him talking.

Keith just huffs and takes a seat on the opposite side from Lance. He takes the plate of food on the table and eats quietly as they all do their best to pretend like he didn’t just kiss Lance a few minutes ago.

“So...the hardware store,” Lance says turning to Matt. “You have the list from Shiro?”

The change of subject alters the energy in the room and Keith’s thankful for it. It’s not until he’s a few bites in that he thinks Lance did it on purpose so he’d feel more at ease. At least that means he can enjoy the meal without the two of them staring at him.

The last time he had potatoes it was the dehydrated variety and not nearly as delicious. It’ll be nice to have meals like this regularly. They can’t get a bigger garden soon enough in Keith’s honest opinion.

They discuss how they’re going to go about the run today. A truck has already been picked out and filled with gas. It’s big with a large bed and trailer hitch. Lance thinks with any luck they’ll find an attachable trailer at the store to hook to it for extra supplies.

The list sports all the expected items. Planks of wood, saws, hammers, nails. Concrete mix and metal pipes as well. If they can get a load of bricks it’ll go a long way in creating a more secure wall from the door to the new garden area. Any home improvement or reference books will be of great help if they can find some.

Mostly it’s going to come down to: is it useful? Yes? Then grab it.

“You finished?” Lance gestures at the empty plate. Keith just nods. “Then let’s get the doctors and head out.”

*****

They only had to clear out two deadheads that moved in after they last visited. One got downed by Keith before anyone could even notice it. Matt took out the other with a metal pipe he found on the ground. After dragging them out and dumping the bodies in the lot they got to work on finding things.

Matt and Keith gather up all the small things first. Boxes upon boxes of nails and screws are stacked up into Matt’s arms as Keith climbs up the shelves and drops them from on high. Allura and Coran heft up bags of heavy cement mix, stacking them neatly on the bed of the truck.

Lance searches high and low for a trailer. He finds a couple and opts for the biggest one so they can
make fewer trips. He loops his arm around the hitch, lifts, and slowly drags the trailer around the building to the truck, hitching it up once it gets there. Perfect timing too, because Matt and Keith arrive with a couple boxes full to the brim with hammers, nails, screws, and more to drop into the back.

“Looks good,” Matt nods. “What should we do next?”

“Lumber. And bricks if we can find them,” Lance adds, wiping his forehead.

“Think I saw some in the masonry section,” Matt says. “But the lumber will never fit in this...maybe if we move the cement to the trailer and then pile the wood in the bed. It’ll hang off but...might make it.”

“If not, we’ll have to cut it down,” Lance says, a hand on his chin.

There’s probably a sawhorse in there somewhere. It’s a fucking hardware store. It better have one. Speaking of, they should probably grab a few for when they start on the fence. Lance grabs the measuring tape out of Keith’s box and hops up into the bed to measure it.

“Hmm...ninety eight. So about eight feet,” Lance hums and tosses the tape measure to Keith who catches it easily. “Alright. Anything that’s ten feet or shorter load up in the back. Tell the others too. I’ll move the cement to the trailer.”

The two of them nod and head in as Lance gets started on the heavy lifting. Occasionally Lance will stand up on top of the truck and look out down the roads. When he finds nothing shuffling in the distance he gets back to work, hefting up the huge bags of cement and transferring them to the trailer. Keith has to admit, he’s impressed.

For someone who keeps claiming he has no skills as a leader, Lance’s doing well with his delegation of duties. Keeps them on task and constantly moving without being bossy about it. It’s that encouraging smile. And what’s more, he has just enough practical knowledge about everything to have insight for anything.

Don’t forget handsaws, he tells them. Grab a few and in different sizes. Oh, and a few levels as well, that way they can have multiple people working on a project at once and not have to pass it around as often. Safety shades are a good idea too. Rechargeable power drills will come in handy. Did anyone find books? Masonry ones? If there’s something they need, Lance is on it.

With all the work they’re doing, plus the heat of the rising sun, people start removing articles of clothing. Allura ties her jacket around her waist, showing off those guns and making Matt swoon. Most of the men just remove their shirts altogether but Keith doesn’t dare. He’s still covered in Lance’s hickies. Instead, he just tosses his jacket into the truck and resolves to do the less strenuous work so he doesn’t overheat.

Regardless, everyone is working up a sweat as they toil in the sun. Keith gets caught staring at the sweat dripping down Lance’s neck and back more than a few times as he hefts heavy lumber into the truck bed. When Lance catches on he shoots a wink at him, making Keith turn with a huff and tinted cheeks.

Matt drives the truck back with Coran and Allura for the first trip. There’s not enough room for everyone to ride after piling it with supplies. They have to come back for the next load anyway so Lance and Keith stay. In the meantime, they move piles of cinder blocks to the front to make the next load up easier.
“I’m gonna pass out when we get back,” Lance pants as he puts down another giant block.

“No kidding.” Keith huffs and puts down his block.

“Hope you’re not expecting anything tonight,” Lance says suggestively.

“Same,” Keith mirrors and wipes his forehead.

“Matt says I should let you know I’m interested in doing you,” Lance grins and laughs. “I know the guy’s missing an eye but he’s not that perceptive is he?”

“If he was perceptive he’d still have them both,” Keith smirks.

They both chuckle a little and grab up another set of concrete blocks. After moving a good number they take a break, sitting in the shade and drinking their water. They pass the bottle back and forth as they cool off.

For a moment it almost feels like nothing’s wrong with the world. Like they’re just a couple of guys doing some construction for a nearby house. Maybe building a privacy fence so the owner can sunbathe nude without his neighbor calling the cops. The only thing that would make it better is an ice cold beer, Lance thinks.

Oh and no zombies. That’d be a plus.

Keith’s leaning back against the wall, his eyes scanning the landscape and listening close to any surrounding noise. Lance is doing the same, never quite at ease when they’re out in the world. All it takes is one person not paying attention and boom—you’re dead and your friends are next. So as tired as they are, they don’t dare close their eyes.

Lance wonders if things will work out at the clinic. He’d like to think so. After getting a really good garden set up and proper defenses...they could live there for years in relative safety. He bets Keith doesn’t think so though. Keith’s shown that he’s fairly pessimistic when it comes to stuff like this.

“How long do you think we’ll make it out here?” Lance asks curiously.

“Depends,” Keith shrugs. “As long as no one does anything stupid...a year. Maybe two.”

“That long? You’re such an optimist.” Lance snorts.

“Less for you,” Keith looks over at him. “You’re not cutthroat enough to survive out here on your own.”

“Oh yeah?” Lance raises a brow with a smirk.

“Yes,” Keith nods. “To live out here...you have to be willing to take from others. Even if that means they might die. You...would give up your supplies to an injured stranger and they’d shoot you in the back for your trouble.”


“It’s what I know,” Keith sighs. “I’ve seen it happen.”

It’s so strange to think they’re only in their early twenties. All that’s occurred over the past two years and all they’ve struggled through makes them look older. Worn down. Eyes that have seen too much. Bruised and battered bodies that have been through the ringer. Hungry all the time. And tired. Always tired.
“Is that why you keep everyone at arm’s length?” Lance asks. “In case they might stab you in the back?”

“No,” Keith shakes his head. “I’m not worried about getting backstabbed. Too careful for that. I’m just used to people dying around me from making stupid mistakes.”

What a sad thing to say and Lance wishes he couldn’t understand the sentiment. More than a few people have died in his arms as well. All because they couldn’t be bothered to do a proper perimeter check or they neglected to clean their weapon causing it to jam. It’s why he’s so partial to a rifle. Minimize the risks by keeping as far away from danger as possible.

“So it’s better to not get too attached, especially if they’re foolish. Like you,” Keith says with a shrug.

“You think I’m going to end up dead?” Lance asks with a sad pout.

“I know you are,” Keith nods. “That or turned.”

“Yikes,” Lance shudders with a laugh. “Your vote of confidence is just...inspiring. Well, if that’s the case…”

Lance scoots a little closer and leans on Keith. He loops an arm around Keith’s neck that the other doesn’t try shaking off. Their heads touch and Lance nuzzles his hair a little.

“Better enjoy me while I’m still here,” Lance sighs.

Keith nods and leans into the hold.

They are both entirely aware of the cruel world they live in. No way anyone gets out of this with a happy ending. The Earth is in shambles. Humanity has been reduced to those who have the skills and attitude necessary for a ruthless world. Those who don’t have those skills must be protected by those who do if they are to live.

But that can only last for so long. Eventually everything is reduced to the strongest surviving and the weak falling by the wayside. No exceptions.

Keith knows he’s strong, he has no doubt he can make it. But Lance...Keith clenches his jaw and swallows. Lance is perfect for the old world when kindness wasn’t a liability. He’ll never make it unless someone is constantly watching out for him.

Keith doesn’t know if he can afford to babysit him and he hates himself for wanting to try.

“I’m coming on the supply run,” Keith announces.

“Oh, cool,” Lance says, sitting up with a pleased smile. “I’m glad.”

“But you need to learn how to use a knife,” Keith huffs. “Ammunition is limited. Can’t have you using it all on a simple run.”

Lance shrugs but agrees as it is a valid point. They don’t have enough ammo to be shooting off that rifle at every turn. He doesn’t like the idea of having to get in close to the rotters but...if learning to use one is Keith’s stipulation for coming then he can spare the time to learn. They’ve got a few days before they leave to do so.
Keith can’t save him every time he gets in trouble but maybe he can prepare him for more dangerous eventualities. It’ll reduce the chances he’ll come to an untimely end and that’s all Keith can really do for him without risking himself.

“There’s a few hunting knives inside,” Lance remembers and shoots another beaming smile at Keith. “You’re the expert. Help me pick out the best one?”

Keith stands with a nod, turning his face to hide his flushing cheeks. Expert? Stupid compliments from stupid Lance. Lance gets up too and follows behind him as they go back inside. If Lance is going to learn how to use a blade then he’s going to need a good one and he’s trusting Keith to find him one.

Better not let him down.

*****

When the team returns with the truck Keith and Lance are moving more cinder blocks out front. It cuts down on the time for load up considerably. People pass each brick to the next person as Coran stacks them in the bed and before they know it, it’s full again. The trailer gets loaded up with more concrete mix too, as much as it can hold.

Again Keith and Lance stay behind to prepare the next pile. Their intention is to clear the location out of anything and everything valuable so they won’t ever have to make the trip back out there. Once they’ve moved the last of the red bricks they take another water break.

Getting close to lunchtime and Lance realizes they didn’t bring anything to eat. Hopefully, the others will bring something back. That or this is the last trip and they can head home for something to snack on. Both of them are leaning against the building when Lance’s stomach lets out a horrendous growl.

“Same,” Keith admits with a sigh. He’s finally got an appetite again since they started living with the doctors.

“It’s all Hunk’s fault with his good cooking,” Lance points out and pats his stomach. “I want...mashed potatoes and gravy. Steak. Corn on the cob.”

“Stop,” Keith huffs. “You’re just making yourself more hungry.”

“Can’t help it...wonder if we could hunt ourselves up a deer or something,” Lance ponders.

He can’t remember the last time he had meat that didn’t come out of a can. Prior to Incident One, he used to help out on his uncle’s ranch. Sheep, pigs, cows. Lance’s job was just feeding the animals and cleaning out the pens but he got to eat the bacon straight from the farm, courtesy of those delicious pigs.

Now he’s wishing he’d learned how to process the hogs with his uncle, then he could help put some meat on the table. There are tons of wild boar in Texas and they can’t be that different from farm pigs. Fried pork. Sizzling bacon. Succulent ham.

“Stop thinking about food,” Keith scolds him again when his mouth starts to water.

“Sorry,” Lance sighs contritely. “Hard to take my mind off it.”

Keith frowns and looks down at the knife on Lance’s hip.

He picked out a good starter knife for Lance. A six-inch full tang hunting knife. Stainless steel and
sharp. The blade is fixed so it has a sheath instead of folding up like a pocket knife. So no worries about it folding in on his hand when he needs it most. A grooveless handle so his grip won’t be limited in how he holds it since he revealed to Keith that he’s ambidextrous.

Simple but efficient. Already Lance keeps bumping his hand on it, not used to it being there.

“Take your knife out,” Keith tells Lance.


“So you can learn how to hold it properly,” Keith points. “We don’t have anything else to do and we don’t need you cutting yourself.”

Lance turns and pulls the knife from his hip.

“Show me how you’d hold it for a fight,” Keith nods, scrutinizing.

Lance grips it out in front, clearly not sure how he’s supposed to do this. It looks like the basic hammer grip. Great for slashing but fighting zombies isn’t exactly about cutting.

“Great—if you want to mug someone,” Keith scoffs. “And where’s your other hand at? At your side? You look like you’re about to pull a cell phone out of your pocket.”

“Alright, alright. Enough dragging me,” Lance rolls his eyes. “Show me how it’s done.”

Keith swiftly pulls his knife out, already in the exact hold it needs to be without adjustment and takes a stance. Grip tight, knife pointed down but forward with the sharp edge facing upward. Knees slightly bent and ready to stay mobile.

“Icepick grip,” Keith tells him. “Great for close quarters and stabbing.”

Lance mimics the hold and stance.

“Put the blade forward more, you should be behind the knife,” Keith comments. “Normally, your other hand is ready to protect your vitals in a fight but since zombies won’t be knifing you...it’s best to have it ready for offense instead of defense.”

Keith shows him a fist and Lance copies.

“Ha, that’s why you punched me so fast,” Lance nods with understanding.

“Yes,” Keith smirks.

“You ever punch a deadhead?” Lance wonders.

“Not if I can help it,” Keith answers. “I try to keep my flesh away from rotter teeth. But you will have to put your hands on them sometimes.”

Keith shows him a few swipes in slow motion for him to try. A vertical one that’s especially good for Lance since he’s tall and it’s easier for him to reach an orbital socket. Then a couple horizontal and angular ones that can be done in quick succession. Great for multiple combatants. He even points out the best ways to get a hold of one without risking a bite.

“Stealth is your greatest weapon,” Keith tells him. “You could be the most skilled knife-wielder in the state and it won’t matter if they see you and swarm you into a corner.”
Keith sheaths his knife and approaches Lance. His hand reaches out and circles the area at the base of Lance’s skull.

“Here’s your best bet if they don’t know you’re there,” Keith taps and continues. “You reach up with your empty hand and grab the shoulder to stabilize. Then a quick thrust and pull out. It drops them before they can even turn their head.”

Keith demonstrates without the knife. His hand takes Lance’s shoulder for grip and presses his clenched fist against his head quickly. And then quickly out again like he’d been shanked. Dead. Makes Lance shiver to think how fragile the human body is.

“Oh otherwise, the temple is another thin area,” Keith tells him with another tap. “Through the eye works but I don’t like my hand getting that close to a face. Suppose you could go up through the jaw but your blade might not be long enough to reach brain. Risky.”

Lance is going to need more practice, on technique and stealth. Keith’s already so knowledgeable in both and on top of that, he’s battle-hardened. He’s so used to this kind of combat that nothing fazes him when his life’s on the line. He doesn’t freeze, ever.

“Bet the zombies never even see you coming,” Lance smiles weakly.

“People too,” Keith reveals.

“You’ve killed people?” Lance blinks, his face losing some color.

“Only when I had to,” Keith admits. “No one out here is innocent Lance. I’m not. And neither were they.”

“That’s…”

“That’s reality Lance,” Keith says sternly. “There’s no place for heroes and knights and all that anymore. There are no good guys or bad guys. There’s just dead or alive. Which would you rather be?”

There’s a pause as Lance takes in his words with a sad sigh.


“Then…”

Keith adjusts Lance’s hold and fixes his stance.

“...don’t get hung up on the moral details. Focus on yourself only,” Keith tells him. “And don’t be a hero. It only gets people hurt or killed. Shiro’s proof of that.”

“Shiro says he saved you. If he didn’t then you’d be dead,” Lance reminds him.

“And he’s all the more damaged for it,” Keith argues. “The game is survival now, Lance. It’s better to live a semi-long selfish life than a short heroic one.”

Lance’s eyes soften on Keith’s somber ones. Is this Keith’s way of saying he doesn’t want him getting hurt? Otherwise, why try to get him to adopt this new outlook? But if Keith really believes the selfish course is the best one...then why help Lance at all? Why spend all this time on someone he believes will die sooner rather than later?

Keith foraged through a town by himself for weeks to provide his team with supplies so they
wouldn’t put themselves in unnecessary danger. Regularly gave up his food for them. Took the brunt of a booby trap to save Matt’s life at the cost of an injured shoulder. Volunteered to end the lives of their plagued comrades so no one else would have to live with the guilt of killing their friends. Saved Lance’s life when he froze and comforted him on several occasions.

Perhaps Keith’s not so selfish as he pretends. A mask to protect himself from the inevitable pain of losing those around him.

“I’ll try my best not to disappoint,” Lance nods with a smile as he sheathes his knife.

“Good,” Keith says over his shoulder. “I don’t need another ghost following me around.”

Lance chuckles at that and leans back against the building. He fiddles around in his pocket and pulls his gum. After a quick count, he finds he still has...three, four, five--seven. Seven pieces still left. He pops a piece in and begins chewing with a content sigh.

Keith’s stomach growls when he smells it, just as loud as Lance’s had before and he coughs to cover his embarrassment. Lance laughs and extends the pack to him. It’ll curb the hunger temporarily, he tells him. Keith looks down at it with uncertainty, like he’s unwilling to take a fresh stick.

“Shouldn’t waste it,” Keith shakes his head.

“We can share again,” Lance suggests and pops a bubble.

He does want his grumbling stomach to shut up. It’s better than nothing. Keith sighs and puts his hand out, gesturing for it with his fingers. Lance shakes his head with a grin.

“Nah uh,” he declines. “If you want it...you gotta take it yourself.”

The road is clear of zombies. The truck shouldn’t be back for another ten minutes. He pouts, unamused by Lance’s behavior, but licks his lips nonetheless.

“Fine.”

Keith steps in front of him, pressing into his space as he raises on his toes. His hand reaches out and fingers press gently on the back of Lance’s neck so he’ll tilt down further. He pulls their lips together for a soft kiss. He expected Lance to open his mouth to give him the gum but he doesn’t. Instead, he only supplies him with pursed lips and a little chuckle.

Apparently, he wants Keith to work for it.

He sucks Lance’s bottom lip into his, tasting the bite wound from earlier. His fingers massage down Lance’s neck, down his bare chest and stomach until they’re tugging at his waistband, pulling them closer. Lance flushes at those fingers just barely dipping into his pants. Unable to keep his hands to himself he cups them around Keith’s face, fingers lacing in hair as he fervently returns those kisses.

They stay like that, pulling their bodies close and sucking the breath from each other. Keith finally slips his tongue into Lance’s parted mouth. He thinks Keith is going to take the gum so he can separate from him but he doesn’t. He ignores the candy and just continues to taste the sweet and hot flavors from his mouth. Makes Lance laugh.

“If you wanted to kiss me,” Lance pants with a grin. “Could have just...said so.”

“Same goes for you,” Keith retorts as he bites at Lance’s lip. “Mr. take-it-yourself.”
Their lips meet again for more hungry kisses. Lance realizes Keith’s not going to take the gum from him so with his tongue he pushes it into Keith’s mouth. He takes it with a moan and Lance grins. Lance’s hands then roam down that body and around Keith’s back. He claws down his shoulders and lower back, eliciting another moan out of Keith before perching at his hips. He nuzzles his neck with a hungry groan.

God, he loves touching Keith. It’s not just the way Keith feels under his fingers but the sounds he makes! Muted sighs and gasps as if trying entirely too hard to keep quiet, even way out here. Heady and weak. Oh, and the way he presses forward in his kisses, as if desperate for more contact? Lance can’t get enough of that.

Keith wants to melt into a puddle. Soft lips at his pulse, sucking hard. Thumbs squeezing his hips and pulling him closer. Lance’s hardon presses against his and Keith flushes red. Fuck, he wishes Lance would take him here and now.

“This...was a terrible idea,” Keith says, trying to shake the heat from his face

“No joke,” Lance mumbles as he mouths Keith’s neck and wraps his hands around that tight ass. “I want to take you inside and bend you over a counter.”

“Lance,” Keith whines. He loves that kind of talk but...they can’t.

“I know, I know,” Lance sighs with disappointment.

A myriad of problems with that. It's not safe here and they won’t be alone long enough for anything substantial. Not to mention they don’t have anything that would help make it enjoyable. Maybe Lance can keep an eye out for some lube when they go for their supply run. No one thinks to raid that from abandoned houses.

Lance lets him go with plenty of time to spare before the truck returns. Gives Keith time to throw his jacket back on to hide the new hicky he’s got on his neck and Lance time to will away his boner. When it parks they get back to work as if nothing happened.

Keith chews the gum while they load up and does his best to pretend like he wasn’t just sticking his tongue into Lance’s mouth or his hands down those blue jeans. Lance lifts and places the last of the supplies into the trailer, filling it up and leaving room for two people to sit in the back.

“That looks like everything we can make use of,” Allura comments, looking over the inside again.

The store is pretty bare now. No more lumber in the entire building. Every concrete block and red brick taken. Hammers, nails, screws and more all packed up too. They even grabbed all of the gardening equipment they could find. Trowels, hoes, and rakes. Should be more than enough to get a decent sized garden going.

“Excellent,” she smiles. “And fewer trips than we anticipated. Well done everyone.”

“Let’s get back,” Keith eyes the sun’s position. He’s ready to go eat and take a nap.

They all saddle up and get comfortable. Matt in the driver’s seat with Coran and Allura in the cab. Keith and Lance sit atop a bunch of lumber, uncomfortably but secure as Matt throws it into gear.

Keith closes his eyes as they get moving and halfway back Lance shakes his shoulder. He blinks and tilts to look at him. Lance taps his own lips and points to Keith’s, making the later flush red.

He wants to make out now? Right here?
“The gum,” he laughs at that look on his face.

He has to know Keith’s not about to kiss him to return it. He pulls it from his mouth, makes sure it’s sufficiently stuck to his fingers before extending it to Lance. Lance, in turn, takes his hand and raises it to his mouth. He engulfs the finger up to the knuckle and slides slowly off, eyes on Keith’s as he takes the gum off with a pop.

Keith looks at him with utter disbelief. With a slight panic in his eyes, he looks around to make sure no one’s looking at them in the rearview mirror. This truck doesn’t have one, it’s been broken off. Thankfully. He lets out a relieved breath and glares at Lance.

“Don’t do that,” Keith warns him. “Ever again.”

It was just a little playful flirting. Hardly indecent. What’s he worried about? Why does he care if someone sees--

“Wait…” Lance slowly draws a conclusion. “Are you...you’re not out?

“I’m not,” Keith huffs, his face red. “Only Matt knows...and those I’ve slept with at the Garrison.”

He almost can’t believe it but now Keith’s secrecy makes more sense.

The policy at the Garrison before Incident One was still don’t ask don’t tell when he was first admitted. It was a military school, so of course it was. Back then it was still very possible to get kicked out for your orientation. More than a few cadets got beat up if they even suspected it.

Lance gets why Keith wouldn’t say anything then. Hell, Lance kept his own preferences to himself then too for the same reasons. No one ever suspected him because he stuck to women while there. With a few very discrete interactions with guys that were never spoken of again.

After the outbreak though, no one gave a damn anymore. Everyone needed all the help they could get. One couldn’t afford to dismiss any help regardless of personal beliefs. Lance came out pretty much immediately after that. Might as well. No reason to hide if the world is ending, right?

He had no idea that Keith would still be clinging to that fear of being discovered and cast out. Now it’s ingrained. Makes it hard to let go of the habits that used to keep him safe.

So it’s not just that he’s private; he’s scared. Lance could assure him until the cows came home that no one in their group would care but fear isn’t rational. It wouldn’t help.

“I’m sorry,” Lance bows his head contritely as he scratches it. “I didn’t know.”

“You do now. So don’t worry about it,” Keith sighs, looking away. “Just...don’t do that again.”

“You okay with a hand on your shoulder? A friendly hand?” Lance clarifies.

“That’s...okay, I guess,” Keith shrugs.

Lance gives him an apologetic smile and pats his shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. He puts his hand down after, between them and stares out on the landscape as it passes by. He looks somber, which isn’t the best look for Lance. It’s clear he still feels a little guilty for scaring Keith.

Keith, certain no one will see, slides his hand over on top of Lance’s and pats it. He can’t give him kisses to comfort him but he knows Lance is probably into that cutesy stuff like hand holding. Keith can only hope it’s enough to make him feel a little better.
Lance doesn’t turn to acknowledge the gesture but he breaks out into a smile and whistles a song as they travel along, letting Keith know his message was received.

Chapter End Notes

If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment AND tell a friend! Don't know what to say?
Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Tell me what you'd like to see more of.
Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Sounds fair right?
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I guess there’s gotta be a break in the monotony

But jesus, when it rains, how it pours

–OK GO, Here it goes again

As soon as they return they have lunch. Nothing special, just a few vegetables from the garden to hold them over until dinner. Lance has a few sliced tomatoes with a sprinkling of salt. Oh and some crunchy cucumber slices. The strawberries are looking better now that they’re protected but they aren’t ready for picking yet. A huge disappointment but Coran assures them they’ll be ready in a week or so.

After lunch, everyone involved promptly drops off to their respective rooms for a nap. All that heavy lifting really took it out of them.

Lance is surprised to find Keith’s already on his cot and long passed out. He thought maybe Keith would have taken his bed back to his room. Could be that moving it is more work than Keith wants to do before sacking out for an hour. Either way, he’s there and not going anywhere.

Lance collapses into his cot and buries his face into the pillow with a sigh. Before he can close his eyes for that nap, Lance reaches over and runs his hand through Keith’s hair. Soft and silky. Keith makes some kind of hum noise and leans into the hand before returning to his regularly scheduled nap.

Makes Lance laugh a little and his eyes flutter closed with a sigh.

*****

The next thing he knows he’s waking to the sound of knocking on the door. Lance blinks, squinting at the cot next to him. It’s empty. His watch says it’s only been about an hour. The knocking recommences as he lets out a long yawn.

Can’t be Keith, he'd just walk in. Lance stands and scratches his head. Whoever it is isn't stopping.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m up, I’m up,” Lance says, thinking they’ll cease once they know he's awake.

More knocking. Geez what’s the hurry? With an annoyed grumble he swings the door open.

“Get off my di--oh,” Lance blinks at his visitor. He looks down the hall but it’s just her.

Pidge stands at the door, putting her hands back into her hoodie pockets. Toes tapping. Eyes avoiding his. She’s a fidgeter when she’s nervous so she pulls at her fingers and knuckles within the pocket as she readies her words.

“The others are heading to Shiro’s room for schematic review and job distribution,” Pidge tells him.

“Oh, alright,” Lance nods. “I’ll head over.”
“And…” Pidge sighs and grabs her arm, rubbing it anxiously. “I’m sorry.”

Lance’s eyes soften as he leans on the door frame.

“You were doing your best,” Pidge adds, finally looking up at him. “And that’s all anyone can do. I don’t know that I’d have done it any differently or any better.”

“It’s okay, Pidge,” Lance nods and puts a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“It’s not okay. I shouldn’t have hit you,” she frowns, ashamed. “You’re…you and Hunk are my best friends. Friends don’t…do shitty things like that. I was horrible. Can you forgive me?”

Lance can already feel himself getting all mushy seeing those big cute shiny eyes. He’s gonna end up crying if this conversation goes on too much longer. Lance pulls her in for a hug which she accepts with a sigh.

“Of course,” he says, pressing a chaste kiss into the top of her little head.

“Thanks Lance,” she sniffs and wipes her face into his shirt.

“Anyway, it didn’t hurt that bad,” Lance says, letting her go to look her in the eyes. “You hit like a girl.”

“Don’t ruin this by making me strangle you,” Pidge jokingly threatens as she lets him go.

“Stop flirting, you’re turning me on,” he grins and she punches his arm. “Ow, geez. Okay, okay.”

“That’s not the first time you’ve said that to me,” Lance winks and she punches his arm again, incredulous look on her face.

“Shameless,” she scolds as they both laugh.

He relents, promising no more innuendo jokes. At least, for the rest of the day. His arm is already sore enough from all the work they’ve done and her punches aren’t exactly helping. He won’t be able to feel it if he continues baiting her. That being said…It’s good to talk to her again. What a relief to see a smile on her face as they walk down the hall.

Pidge thanks him for the books he snatched up from the store. Because of them she was able to make some improvements to the design while he napped. They chat along the way to Shiro’s room, mostly about the fence and how she wants to include a gate for accessibility but that they can lock at their leisure. So no one can go sneaking into it to pilfer their food. Feels like there was never even a fight which is how it always goes with them.

Keith leans outside the door to Shiro’s room and spots them heading over with a furrowed brow. He didn’t expect to see them in the same room, let alone speaking. Lance looks happy. Or maybe that’s not the right word. Relieved. At ease. His arm hooked around Pidge’s shoulder as they talk and pour over her sketches. He’s even laughing.

Lance is one of those people that thrives on contact with his friends, physical and emotional. Keith imagines if they hadn’t made amends that Lance would be miserable for another few days. It’s good that they’re finally talking again but does that mean Lance will want Pidge on the supply run now? She was his first choice after all...
“I hope not,” Keith mumbles under his breath and blinks with startled confusion.

Is he...no. No. Of course, he isn’t. Why? Why would he be jealous of them? They’re friends so of course, they’re close. And they’ve been working together for longer. It makes sense for Lance to choose someone with whom he has a better rapport with. It’s the better tactical decision.

But for some reason, he’s still...not pleased with the idea.

“Everyone else in there?” Lance asks a distracted Keith. He doesn’t answer and Lance taps his foot with his boot. “Hey, mullet brain. We waiting on anyone else?”

Keith blinks and then frowns when he realizes he’s been insulted.

“You’re the last,” Keith huffs. “And don’t call me that.”

“Lance has nicknames for everyone he likes,” Pidge snickers and pulls open the door. “Calls me the green goblin. So...welcome to the club.”

The club?

“Ah...the green goblin. That’s right. You were sick from undercooked--”

“Shut up Lance,” Pidge says, jabbing a finger into his chest. “Come on, we have work to do.”

Lance just grins at the memory and follows her in. Keith runs a hand up his neck and through his long hair. Nicknames for people he likes, huh? Keith smirks for a second before turning and joining them in the room.

Once they're all together they begin discussing the fortifications. Where the wall will go and how it will be installed and who will be doing each part. All the while Lance, Pidge, and Hunk stick close. Sometimes Lance whispers something low into their ears, a joke from they way they snicker afterward.

Normally Keith would be annoyed by it. Because they aren’t focused on the conversation at hand. It’s distracting to tell stories or jokes in the middle of explanations. It's rude but Keith can’t bring himself to be mad. Instead, he wishes he was closer so he could hear too. If he scooted slowly over, would they notice him inserting himself into their conversations?

He doesn’t try but he considers it longer than expected.

Is he...does he... want to be a part of ‘the club’? To be one of the people that they lean over to joke with? Maybe a little. It wouldn’t be so horrible to...be amiable with the others. Lance would hang on him the same way he hangs on them and no one would think it strange.

The weather looks spotty according to Allura who was on the roof most recently. It’s definitely going to rain tomorrow. In fact, it might even start tonight. That’s not good for setting concrete. Which means they’ll have to wait a couple days after the rains to make much headway. For now, all they can do is gather everything, organize it for easy access, and make certain their diagrams are perfect.

“They’re flawless,” Pidge assures everyone, her face glowing with pride.

“She’ll find something to improve between now and dinner,” Hunk says as he elbows Lance.

“Oh, since that’s all done with,” Lance begins. “I was thinking about a supply run. To...here. This
The change in topic catches Keith's attention more than he cares to admit. Lance talks about some of the things he’s thinking to check first. Homes for basic goods and such. If there are gun safes maybe they can find some ammunition or weapons. Look for supplies like food, medicine, blankets, clothes, etc. He has a list drawn up of most important things to least.

“If there’s anything you want to add, go for it,” Lance tells them as they pass around the paper.

“Oh thank god, he put toilet paper on there,” Pidge sighs with relief and passes it on to Hunk who scrutinizes the list.

“It’s not important but if you happen to find a kitchen with some decent cookware,” Hunk hints and throws it down at the bottom of the list. “Not super important, definitely bottom of the priorities but, you know. If you find any--”

“Got it Hunk,” Lance winks. “A couple pots and utensils if we can find them. Want me to keep an eye out for spices too?”

“Don’t go out of your way,” Hunk tells him. “But...if you find them, I won’t complain. And neither will you once I get cooking.”

“Shiro? Anything?” Lance asks as Allura looks over the paper.

“We still have plenty of coffee right? I’m good,” Shiro chuckles. “Oh, maybe some nine mils for my sidearm. It’s been empty for a while.”

“You have medicine on here, so I think that’s sufficient for me,” Allura notes as she adds Shiro’s request and passes the paper to Keith. “Bandages or clothing that could be made into bandages would be nice to have. No terrible need for it at the moment but one can never tell when an emergency will hit.”

Keith looks over the list and finds it well organized and divided up by what is in most need. Food and emergency medical supplies at the top. Weapons and ammunition in the center. Less pressing things at the bottom.

“I was thinking a two-man team? Five-day excursion?” Lance puts forward to Shiro for approval.

“Two? Will that be enough?” he wonders.

“That way the majority stays here and works on the fence and wall,” Pidge points out. “A good idea. By the time they return it’ll be mostly done.”

“Volunteers?” Shiro asks the room.

“Me,” Keith immediately responds.

“No shocker there,” Matt rolls his eyes and laughs. He elbows Keith and Keith swats him away. “Knew you were getting restless in here.”

“And I want to go too,” Lance voices. “I won’t be much help on the construction. I’m...not good at that sort of thing. Better to use my skills as a lookout.”

“Can you two work together?” Shiro inquires, giving Keith a critical eye since he’s the one most likely to cause problems.
“I think we’ll manage,” Lance smirks. “Right?”

Keith huffs but nods just the same.

“Well then,” Shiro chuckles. “That settles that then. How about we disperse for now?”

Good time to do so. Everyone’s getting hungry and that means time to cook. Hunk volunteers for the job and no one has any objections to that.

They all leave one after another. Keith waits outside and down the hall for Lance to come out. Not for any particular reason. Maybe just to see what he’s going to do in his downtime before dinner.

Lance steps out of Shiro’s room and before he can close the door, Allura pops out behind him to tap his shoulder. Keith watches as she gestures Lance closer to whisper something to him. Lance’s eyes go wide and he nods with a kind smile. She thanks him and passes something into Lance’s hand before slipping back into Shiro’s room. Once Lance spots Keith he ambles over with a wave.

He doesn’t want to ask what that was about. It would betray how invested he’s become in Lance’s private affairs. Keith can barely call what they have friendship. It’s more like a mutual understanding. A casual thing. Nothing more and he shouldn’t go prying. Even if he’d like to know more.

“It’s our turn to clear the walkway,” Lance tells him as he swings a little ring of keys. The ones Allura just handed him and now Keith feels foolish for thinking it was something more.

“Right,” Keith remembers. “Let’s go then.”

“I’m gonna go grab my rifle,” Lance points and starts to head that way but Keith grabs his sleeve.

“Leave it,” Keith says and smirks. “Use your knife.”

“But--”

“How are you going to get better at using one if you don’t practice?” Keith frowns.

“I...fine,” Lance relents with a nervous swallow. Keith lets go of him and he leads the way.

They check from the roof first to see if there are any new arrivals. There’s one, a middle-aged man who’s been dead for quite a while. Slow with a bit of a limp. Hardly a threat at all. He’s milling around near the fence, which means they need to take the front door to sneak up on him.

Lance unlocks the doors and quietly they push through them so as not to alert the zombie to their presence. Then they close the doors just as quietly behind them. Keith pulls his knife and nods to Lance to do the same. Lance swallows and pulls the blade from his hip.

“Heel to toe,” Keith whispers and shows Lance what he means.

He mimics Keith, keeping low and taking his steps slowly. Heel first and slowly rolling forward to his toes. No sound.

The zombie has no clue they’re there. Keith nods at the target, encouraging Lance to go for it by reminding him what to do with gestures. Hand on the shoulder to brace, sharp thrust in then out. Lance’s whole body is jittery with nerves as he bites his lower lip.

Keith puts his hand on his arm and mouths ‘you can do it’. Lance knows he’s trying to help but he doesn’t feel any less nervous for the encouragement. Regardless, he nods and steps forward.
Better to do it fast, like ripping off a band-aid. Lance steps over to it and grabs its shoulder. It’s clammy and moist with putrefaction and the sensation sends a chill down Lance’s entire body. God they feel...so wrong. Never has it been more clear at how...inhuman they are. Cold. Dead. Unfeeling.

The sooner he can get his hand off the damn thing the better.


The body drops and Lance finally starts breathing again. His knife is slick with coagulated blood, brown from the advanced rot. Their blood isn’t even red anymore like his. Nothing to prove that this man was ever a human being and that’s...demoralizing like he wouldn’t believe.

Is that what will happen to him one day? What Keith thinks will happen to him?

“No bad,” Keith tells him with a smile.

An actual smile. Lance feels his spirits lift a little at that.

“You still hesitate too much though,” Keith adds as his face goes serious again. “Work on it.”

Keith kneels at the body. He tears off a relatively clean part of his shirt and passes it to Lance to clean off the blade. There aren’t any others which only leaves disposing of the body. Together they heft the corpse over the wall of cars. After that, they carry it over to the ditch near the road and drop the body into the pile.

Lance finds himself staring at the mass grave. So many people. Dead before their time. How many more before this is all over? Will his friends end up in a hole like this one? Will he?

“Don’t linger on it,” Keith interrupts his thoughts. “It’s pointless.”

Lance nods because he knows Keith’s right. No point in getting worked up over ‘what ifs’. What matters is that the door’s clear now. No more ‘visitors’. They go back inside, locking the doors behind them.

Keith catches Lance pensively staring at his hand as they walk back to return the keys. It’s the same hand he used to grab the zombie out front. Lance isn’t used to the feeling and Keith can’t blame him. It’s unsettling the first hundred times one touches them and to be honest Keith still gets goosebumps every once in awhile when he grabs one. Cold. Lifeless. Unreal.

But that’s what it makes it easier for him to end them. It’s not like killing a person. It’s like...deactivating a machine. He feels that clammy body and the hesitation dies instantly. *It’s a monster*, he hears in his head. It’s not alive. It doesn’t feel pain.

So don’t feel bad about it.

“Get anything out there?” Pidge asks as they enter the rec room. She’s playing cards with her brother. Gin.

“Just one,” Keith answers and leans on the wall away from the others. “It’s clear now.”


“Hey,” Matt pouts. “Katie, you know I’m bad at gin.”

“We can do Hearts,” Lance suggests as he takes a seat, a smile returning to his face. “Or how about
“Poker?”

“I’m terrible at all of it,” Matt admits with a chuckle. “Keith always beats me at Poker.”

Lance looks over at Keith with a grin. He doesn’t have a hard time believing that at all. Keith’s probably got a poker face that would put the Clear Eyes guy to shame. Now Lance really wants to play. Is there a way to entice Keith into joining?

Lance snickers and elbows Matt. “It’s that stone face of his.”

“Not only that,” Keith denies with a shake of his head. “It’s easy statistics.”

“Oh yeah?” Lance smirks. “Coran, is there anything we could use for poker chips?”

Coran finds them a jar of dog biscuits. They’re shaped like little squares and stack well. They’ll do.

Pidge passes Lance the cards and he shuffles them expertly. Matt and Coran stare, mesmerized by the way Lance fingers the cards. So smooth, quick, and effortless. The Blackjack shuffle. The Hindu shuffle. The Bridge. Pidge rolls her eyes, unimpressed because she’s seen this display before. It’s gotten him more than a few dates before Incident One.

“Who are you trying to impress Lance?” Pidge snorts.

Lance flits his eyes up at Keith for barely a second to find him hypnotized by his dexterous fingers as he bends and riffles the cards together. He’s never thought someone’s knuckles were sexy before. Keith looks away as if suddenly disinterested and Lance returns his focus to the cards with a chuckle.

“What, you’re not impressed Pidge?” Lance levels a pouty smile at her and then waggles his eyes. “Not even a little? Come on, you can be honest.”

“Lance, You forget that I’ve seen you at your least dignified,” she laughs and adjusts her glasses with a smirk. “I can’t be impressed anymore.”

“Me? Undignified?” Lance chuckles.

“Gather round everyone. On March 17th--”

“Okay, okay!” Lance cuts her off with a nervous smile and flushed cheeks. “You don’t have to bring that up, geez. You know right where to hit a guy.”


“Alright, Keith. You getting in on this? Or am I just going to annihilate these three?” Lance asks once his face loses that touch of red.

Keith has to admit he’s curious on two fronts. If Lance is really as good a poker player as he thinks he is and what horribly embarrassing thing did he do that warranted him blushing like that. Must have been bad if ‘I have no shame’ Lance was mortified at the notion of everyone hearing it. Maybe he’ll ask Lance about it later. Or Pidge, since she seemed eager to tell the story. For now, he simply nods and takes a seat at the table as Lance deals the cards.

They do a couple of rounds as a refresher course for Coran. It’s been years since he played. At least a decade. Once he remembers the rules and turn orders again they get right down to it.

Lance is...way better than Keith expected. More than once he saw through some expert bluffs and Keith’s not sure how he managed it. Pidge’s poker face rivals Keith’s but Lance seems to look right
through them. He scoops the pot twice from under Keith and all with an ‘I told you so’ smile.

*I’m a sniper. I notice everything and I don’t miss. Ever.*

Guess he wasn’t kidding Keith thinks as he weighs in the statistics for his hand. This one’s not that good, even after the draw. But he could still bluff it. Lance doesn’t look particularly pleased with his own hand and Coran’s already folded. Matt’s smiling like he might have something good but with a good bluff from Keith he’ll fold too.

“Raise,” Keith says.

“Ooo, raise huh?” Pidge asks, licking her lips. “I’m in.”

“Too rich for me,” Matt sighs. “Fold.”

Lance stares at Keith over his cards. His eyes fix on Keith’s but then trail down to his lips. Keith tries to not let it affect him and huffs with a turn of his head. Lance chuckles and fingers his chips.

“I think...Keith’s hand is garbage,” Lance grins. “Pidge’s might be good though. Better than mine. I fold.”

Turns out he was right. Lance had three of a kind but they were threes. Pidge eked out a win with her three eights. Keith loses out with two pair, fives and twos. Matt whines as he face plants in the table. His straight could have won that round but he chickened out thinking Keith had something really good.

Lance is reading him and a little too well. How’s he doing it? What is Keith doing that’s giving himself away? And why can’t Keith read him back?

He’ll figure it out, he just needs more time. Everyone has a tell when they lie.

Keith shuffles the next round and deals. Everyone antes and checks their cards. Keith almost smiles. Two pair right off the bat. Sixes and sevens. Lance hasn’t even looked at his cards yet, only stares at people as they eye their cards. He smirks and finally looks at his cards.

Everyone bets one until they get to Lance who then states he’s raising. Three ‘chips’. Pidge eyes her cards again and shakes her head. Not worth it. Fold. Everyone else stays and meets his raise. Then it’s time for the discard and draw.

“How many Coran?” Keith asks.

“Two,” Coran hums, pulling at his mustache.

“I’ll take two too,” Matt states.

“Lance?”

“None,” Lance smiles.

The table all look at him and his smug face with shock.

“He’s full of it,” Pidge points. “No way he has anything that good from the initial draw.”

“Think so?” Lance winks.

“I’m taking one,” Keith huffs, as he discards and draws.
Nice another seven. Full house. A damn good hand. He’s not losing this one.

“Keith thinks he’s going to win,” Lance says aloud.

“How can you tell?” Matt asks and stares at Keith looking for a clue but he remains stone-faced.

“He has a tell,” Lance announces and Keith looks back at him without reaction.

He’s been very careful about his facial expressions. Keith doesn’t lick his lips like Pidge does when she has a good hand. Or clench his jaw like Coran at a bad hand. Matt gives away every hand he has through his twitching nose and cracking voice. No, Keith’s sure he hasn’t given anything away.

“You’re full of shit,” Keith huffs, doubtful.

“Am I?” Lance furrows his brows knowingly. “I know what you have.”

“Sure you do,” Keith rolls his eyes.

“A flush or a full house at best,” Lance says with conviction.

Keith barely flinches but it goes unmarked by everyone at the table except for Lance.

He doesn’t know. He can’t. Lance has to be bluffing. Trying to unnerve Keith with a lucky guess to make him fold. But...he’s right. And he looks so certain. On top of that he doesn’t look worried at all.

Maybe he’s cheating? Somehow?

Lance chuckles. “This round is mine.”

Coran bets one. Matt meets it. But then Lance raises yet again. Five ‘chips’. That’s quite the raise. Pidge repeats that it has to be a bluff. That Lance is just talking out his ass and trying to scare them into folding.

Well, it works because Coran folds. And so does Matt. All eyes are on Keith, including Lance’s.

Five chips is a huge amount. A full house is nothing to sneeze at but there are definitely better hands. No fucking way Lance has a royal or straight flush though. Straight from the draw? No way. The odds are like 1 to 70,000 for the straight. And the royal’s even higher than that. No fucking way.

Four of a kind is more likely but still pretty hard to get right out of the gate. And no matter the numbers it would beat his full house. Then again...Lance could have a full house himself. It’s just a matter of what his set of three is. Eights or higher and he wins.

He doesn’t like these odds or the way Lance is looking at him with supreme confidence.

Keith sighs. “Fold.”

“What did you have Lance?” Coran asks.

“A pair of fours,” he laughs as he scoops up his winnings.

“What?! No!” Pidge gestures in outrage. “Check his cards!”
Matt flips Lance’s cards and everyone leans in. It’s true. Keith can’t believe it. He lost...to a pair of fucking fours. All because he let Lance unsettle him into folding.

“MY hand was better than that! I should have--you suck Lance!” Pidge huffs.

“Your comment about Keith’s full house,” Matt stares in awe. “Was that just a lucky guess?”

“No. I can read you all,” Lance shakes his head. “Pidge you had what, two pair? Coran, you had a straight right? Or maybe three of a kind?”

“Straight! That’s right!” Coran laughs. “You’re excellent at poker Lance!”

“No, just at noticing little things,” he smirks.

Before they can start another round Hunk lets them know dinner is ready. He asks how they feel about eating under the stars tonight before the storm comes through. Everyone jumps at the idea and bolts to grab everything they need for dining al fresco.

While they do that Lance gathers up the playing cards. He shuffles them up a few times, riffling the cards together with pizzazz and sliding them back into the box. Ready for another game the minute they come out of the box.

How did Lance know about the full house? Keith wonders, pensive curiosity playing across his face. The desire to know isn’t just plaguing him either. When they all walk together to the stairs, Matt continues to talk about the game.

“It’s weird that Keith lost so many times,” Matt discloses. “He’s very good at reading people’s nervous ticks. He can always tell when someone’s lying.”

“Ah, no wonder he lost then,” Hunk nods as if it all clicks. “Lance is a terrible liar.”

“So? Wouldn’t that make it even easier to read him?” Matt asks, looking over his shoulder at Lance who is eyeing his nail beds.

“No, no, no. You misunderstand,” Hunk laughs. “He knows he’s bad at it. So he doesn’t do it.”

Lance doesn’t lie when he plays poker? That’s not possible. Lying and bluffing are required for winning. One can’t win just by being brutally honest. He had to lie at one point.

“But that last hand--”

Pidge jumps in at this point. “He said ‘this round is mine’. Nowhere did he say his hand was better than Keith’s. He just knew Keith would fold. It’s not a lie if you know how it’s going to play out.”

“Is that really how you won?” Matt turns to address Lance, walking backward down the hall.

Lance shrugs before saying, “yeah, more or less.”

“Sneaky,” Matt says as he shoots a finger gun at him. “Oh hey,” Matt starts and then leans in. “Tell me Keith’s tell? So I can win next time?”

Keith steps a little closer and tries not to look too terribly interested in the conversation. Lance just laughs and denies Matt the information. He has to get the upper hand somehow and that’s not going to happen if everyone knows his secrets.

“What about mine?” Matt asks. “That way I can work on them.”
“Hmm,” Lance says, holding his chin. “I’ll tell you yours if you...do the dishes in my stead tonight?”

“Deal,” Matt grins and the two laugh as they shake on it.

Keith looks on their camaraderie with slight envy. Lance can make friends anywhere, even in people his senior. It took Keith three years to warm up to Matt. It took Lance less than a week. He makes it look so easy.

Keith can’t do that. He’s just too awkward when it comes to social interaction. The most he can do is hang around someone long enough that they grow accustomed to his presence. And then they eventually start talking to him. And then he eventually starts talking back.

It takes forever. And it’s hardly ever worth it in Keith’s eyes.

Everyone he’s made friends with over the course of his life at the Garrison is dead now, with a few exceptions. He could never offer his friendship so casually to people he’s just met. He has to trust them. That takes time. Though...looking at that beaming smile coming from Lance as they all laugh...he might consider trying harder.

On the roof, Allura’s laid out a couple of blankets. The plates are all set as Hunk and Coran put the food down. Everyone takes their seats while Allura and Pidge go to fetch Shiro.

Normally, Keith would take a seat somewhere at the edge. So he doesn’t have to be near too much conversation and so he can easily leave once he’s finished. But this time...he spots an opening between Lance and Hunk.

Welcome to the club.

He takes the seat without a word and ignores the look he gets from Matt. A shocked and surprised look that goes away the minute Shiro arrives with Pidge and Allura. Lance doesn’t comment on his seating choice at all, instead he just waves at Shiro.


“Yeah, and look at the view!” Lance points at the setting sun.

Luckily all the encroaching storm clouds are mostly above them and not in the distance obstructing their view of the sunset. They can smell the moisture in the air, hinting that their dinner won’t be particularly long out there and they shouldn’t dally in their meal.

This isn’t so bad, Keith thinks. He expected things to be a little louder sitting next to Lance but conversation makes its rounds to everyone and Lance listens intently when it isn’t his turn. Lance hardly acts like he’s there at all and only bothers him when he needs to pass something.

He wouldn’t mind if Lance turned and talked to him a little more though. Keith knows he asked for discretion but...no reason they can’t be friends in front of the others. Maybe he should mention it the next time they’re alone.

Eating out on the roof like this reminds Shiro of a cafe he went to in France once. Open air. The smell of a flower shop on one side and the sweets from the bakery on the other. They served the best cup of cappuccino he’s had in his life, along with a croissant that was to die for. He wishes he had a picture because the sunset then was just breathtaking.

Shiro’s good at telling stories that lift people up. Even Keith has a soft smile on his face listening to him talk. But in the midst of the story, Lance elbows Keith and nods his head towards Allura. She
can’t take her eyes off Shiro as he speaks. Her finger twirls in her hair absently and when she catches herself doing it she clears her throat and returns to eating while looking prim and proper again.

Smitten.

Keith doesn’t know why he thought for even a second that she’d be interested in Lance. Allura clearly has a preference for more mature fare. And Shiro is just as taken with her, though he’s doing little to hide it with his fond glances.

It’s good. Shiro deserves a little happiness after all he’s been through.

They clear their meal just as the sun dips below the horizon. Gone. Everyone lets out a disappointed sigh that gets interrupted by a loud roll of thunder. Then the first plip of rain hits a plate in the middle of their picnic.

“Inside, quickly!” Allura calls out.

Keith throws his jacket over Shiro’s bandaged arm, not sure it should be getting drenched with rainwater, and Allura shepherds him inside. The others go about grabbing all they can to bring inside.

“I’ll get the plates!”

“I got the pot! Lance, help me throw the silverware into it!” Hunk shouts.

“Got it!”

“Oh no! The blankets!”

“Just leave them,” Allura insists and gestures them to hurry inside. “We’ll retrieve them after the deluge.”

Lance and Hunk are the last into the doorway as the downpour really gets started. The shoulders of their clothes are wet but the rest of them is relatively dry. They all stare out as rain blankets the area and clouds the air, reducing visibility to the point of not being able to see off the edge.

The lot of them are quiet for a moment, just taking in the rain. Nature at its finest.

Finally, Allura announces she’s going to take Shiro back to his room and change the bandages. As quick as Keith’s thinking was and as appreciated as it was, his arm still managed to get wet and that’s bad for keeping out infection.

“I’m changing clothes,” Pidge says, wrinkling her nose. “I hate being wet.”

“I’ll help with Shiro,” Hunk offers and passes the big pot off to Matt, who then dumps all the plates inside for ease of carrying. “Lance?”

“Think I’ll stay here and uh, watch the rain for a bit,” Lance smiles and takes a seat in the doorway.

“Then I’ll get started on the dishes,” Matt announces and heads down the steps.

Keith decides it’d be suspicious if he stayed with Lance to watch the rain. He’s already taken enough steps toward being sociable today.

“I’ll help clean,” Keith adds and turns to follow Matt down the stairs.
He can just come back later, when there are fewer eyes.

Chapter End Notes

If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment AND tell a friend! Don't know what to say? Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Tell me what you'd like to see more of. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments, constructive criticism and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Tumblr Artist HannaLu has made some AMAZING fanart for a scene in this chapter! The link for it is in the End Notes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Run away with me

Lost souls and reverie

Running wild and running free

Two kids, you and me

-X Ambassadors, Renegades

“So,” Matt starts as he scrubs a plate in soapy water. He rinses it and hands it over to Keith who dries it before putting it on the counter.

“So?” Keith repeats, sensing this is going to go somewhere he’d rather it didn’t.

“Are you gonna...you know...” Matt tries to put it delicately but fails. “...with that Lance guy?”

“Christ, Matt,” Keith huffs and puts the next plate down harder than he means to.

Thankfully Matt has enough tact to wait until they’re alone for this. Keith doesn’t think he could be friends with him if he couldn’t manage some discretion. He yanks the next plate out of Matt’s hand and if at all possible dries it at his teammate, all the while exuding annoyance.

“What?” Matt shrugs with a nervous smile. “We’re friends. We can talk about that kind of thing, right? Crushes and stuff?”

“I’m not interested in--” Keith starts but Matt interrupts before he can finish with ‘talking about this’.

“You sure? I did some wingman recon for you, in case you were,” Matt reveals. “Just say... nothing if you want me to keep talking.”

Keith simply continues to dry dishes without saying a word, pretending like he doesn’t give a shit about what Matt found out. But that cold shoulder treatment betrays him since it just comes off as the silence Matt hinted at. Matt grins and continues with the information he garnered from Lance’s friends.

“Hunk says he’s forthright and trustworthy. And respectful. Never cheated on a single partner he’s had,” Matt tells him as he washes the silverware and hands them over. “That’s good right?”

“I don’t care about fidelity,” Keith huffs and dries the utensils.
“Figured as much,” Matt chuckles. “That’s why I asked Katie about his preferences and experience. She’s going to think I’m into this guy if I ask too much more.”

“What a nightmare,” Keith smirks.

“Single. He’s into guys. And girls. And anything in between. He’s been with tons of people,” Matt shrugs. “She said his kisses are dynamite. Lose your breath kind of kisses. Then I had to remember he’s a teammate and a nice guy so I wouldn’t go decking him for kissing my sister.”

Well, that confirms something for Keith that he never really needed to know. Pidge and Lance were an item at one time. There’s more there than just friendship. Or at least, there was once. Keith has to wonder why it ended and who initiated the breakup.

With Lance’s soft lips and masterful hands...he can’t imagine someone saying no to him, not even Pidge. Who wouldn’t want Lance touching them? Catering to their every desire and coaxing out little moans with a smile on his face. His hot skin pressed against theirs as he sucks their pulse. Fluid thrusts that build into a perfectly crafted climax...Keith shakes his head of the image.

Who confronts that and says ‘no thanks’?

Maybe it was mutual. Or they just didn’t click. They don’t really seem like each other’s type.

Like it matters anyway, Keith thinks as he dries. It’s not like they’ve shown any interest in each other other than the usual. Lance hanging on her shoulders, whispering jokes in her ear to make her laugh. Her jabbing at him and telling stories about their time at the Garrison. That’s just normal friend things, right? No way that leads to more...right?

It definitely doesn’t mean they’ll get back together.

And even if they did, it wouldn’t be Keith’s place to say anything. They’re just fuck-buddies, for lack of a better word. Keith doesn’t have the history with Lance that Pidge does. What if Lance loses interest? Now he’s thinking maybe he needs to stop milling around and start hanging out with Lance more before that happens.

“That everything looks in your favor if you wanna...you know...go for it,” Matt hints vaguely again and hands the last pot over to Keith for drying. “He’s kinda goofy but I think...he might be into you.”

“Matt,” Keith huffs and rolls his eyes.

Lance is only into their after-hours interactions. He thinks. All that joking around, it’s hard to tell sometimes. That being said, Keith does like what they’re doing and doesn’t want to stop. Maybe he should be more proactive with Lance. Extend his friendship to him more frequently to ensure they don’t stop anytime soon.

“I’m just saying that it has to be hard to find someone in your ballpark,” Matt gestures a little like a batter attempting a hit at the plate. “So maybe, don’t pass up an opportunity for...you know...stuff.”

“We’ll see,” Keith shrugs and puts down the pot. He dries his hands and throws the damp towel directly into Matt’s face. He just laughs and dries off his own hands as Keith puts away the dishes.

Once finished, Matt stretches and starts setting up his cot, which still hasn’t moved from the rec room. He doesn’t want one of the small rooms and Keith gets it. Matt’s not one for small confined spaces. They’re group once spent a week in a tiny basement, unable to leave until a swarm passed, and Matt was not happy about it. That was right after his dad passed away.
He wishes Keith good luck and good night before turning in a little early.

Before he leaves, Keith eyes the box of playing cards on the table. It might be fun to challenge Lance to a game of Gin. A good start at building a real friendship, right? He scoops them up and shoves them in his pocket before heading back to the stairwell.

Keith turns the corner and sees someone heading through the door to the roof. It’s Pidge and she’s alone. Heading up to see Lance who’s no doubt still sitting up there and reminiscing over the rain.

Part of him wants to turn back around. To just mind his own business and go to his room. But the other part wants to listen in. To hear if there’s something more to the two of them. So he steps lightly to the door and through it before sitting on the bottom step to eavesdrop out of their sight. He even uses his knife to peek up the stairwell.

Lance doesn’t hear Pidge until she’s at the top of the stairs. He turns to look, thinking it might be Keith, and barely masks his surprise when it’s not. Pidge hates storms. They mess up delicate equipment, ie her laptop and radios.

“Hey, Pidge,” Lance waves and moves his legs. He pats the top stair for her to sit. “What’s up?”

“Just wanted to make sure you were okay,” Pidge sighs and takes a seat. “I know the rain makes you miss home and--”

“No no no,” Lance cuts her off with a smile. “No talking about sad stuff. Just funny stuff.”

“Funny stuff huh,” Pidge cards through her memory for something good. “Like March 17th?”

“That’s not funny, it’s...okay, it’s funny in hindsight I guess,” Lance snorts out a chuckle. “I can’t believe you were going to tell that story during poker. God, your brother would have jumped the table and choked me.”

“Maybe,” Pidge shrugs with a grin.

“We were wasted,” Lance recalls. “St. Patricks day wasn’t it? Everyone was wasted. We barely knew each other like, what? A month? And we decided to raid the liquor from...I don’t even remember the officer’s name.”

“I’m surprised we remember anything from that night,” Pidge smirks. “You were trashed. I was trashed. It was the first time we hooked up. It was...”

“Bad! So bad!” Lance laughs, smacking his leg. Pidge laughs just as hard.

“God it was awful!” Pidge agrees. “You thought I was a guy!”

“That’s right!” Lance clutches his stomach for another laugh. “I was so confused! Like, I may have even said ‘wait, where’s your dick?’”

“You did!” Pidge points and shrieks with laughter. “I was so embarrassed. And you looked so disappointed. Slash that. More like, distraught!”

“I was in the mood to get boned,” Lance shrugs with a sly smile. “And I thought you were a cute guy. Can you blame me?”

“You were already apologizing and trying to gather your stuff to head back to your room. Thought I was gonna out you. But then I told you it could still happen and whipped out my strap-on,” Pidge
snickers into her hand. “Never seen someone go from sad to excited so fast.”

“Hey, I wanted dick, I didn’t care if it was synthetic,” Lance shrugs with a cavalier smile before laughing. “And you were pretty good with that thing. The start was bad but the evening ended up being really fun.”

They laugh a little more but then the chuckles die down until they become sentimental sighs. Keith senses the topic is about to change to a more serious one when Lance leans forward with a sigh.

“Why didn’t we work out?” Lance asks, soft smile on his face. He didn’t sound like he regretted what happened. It was mostly curiosity for what might have been.

“Uh, cause we could only get it going if we were sauced,” Pidge snorts. “We were never into each other sober.”

“That’s right,” Lance snaps as he leans back against the frame. “We were drunk every time weren’t we?”

“Yep. Not the best way to build a relationship,” says Pidge. “Plus, right after we stopped I started dating Hunk and you were really into that foreign guy...Sven?”

“Sven!” Lance exclaims and smacks his head in remembrance.

“Yeah, you were following him around everywhere. Crushing HARD,” Pidge smirks and Lance kicks her leg, telling her to shut up.

He remembers Sven. Handsome guy, strong jawline. An accent. He had sort of long dark hair too, one of Lance’s weaknesses. Something to run fingers through when kissing. But Sven couldn’t have been more disinterested. Lance gave him all sorts of hints and clues to his intentions but every single one went over his head. He could have screamed ‘blow me motherfucker’ and he’d have looked at Lance with a confused smile.

“He died about six months in didn’t he? On a run?” Pidge remembers.

“Yeah, a raiding group shot him for his gun,” Lance nods. “He never fired a shot at them.”

“Alpha team destroyed that group,” Pidge points out.

“At least someone avenged him,” Lance sighs. “Sven was thick, but he was a good guy. He didn’t deserve to go out like that.”

“It’s because he was a good guy that he went out like that,” Pidge tells him with a sad shake of her head.

“Too nice, huh?” Lance asks and Pidge nods her head as they turn to look out at the rain. After a pause, Lance hugs his arms around his knees while leaning forward. “Think we’ll make it out here Pidge?”

“Sure, we’re a good strong team now. Got everything we need to stay alive. Food, shelter, water. Each other,” Pidge nods. “As long as we defend it well, we could survive for years.”

“Keith thinks...I’ll be dead within the year,” Lance sighs sadly and buries his face in his arms, his shoulders slumping.

“I can see him saying that,” Pidge rolls her eyes. “Did he say why?”
“I’m too nice. Like Sven.”

Now Keith feels guilt stab at his gut. At the time it seemed like Lance treated what Keith said like a joke. It didn’t even look like it bothered him that much. But it must be eating away at him if he wants to ask Pidge what she thinks about it.

“Maybe I need to toughen up?” Lance suggests and Pidge reaches over to ruffle his hair.

“You are too nice...but don’t change that about yourself, Lance,” Pidge says softly. “The way you act...it’s infuriating on most days. Too bright and sunny for all the garbage we have to deal with but on those bad days it’s good to have your positivity.”

“Really?” Lance asks.

“Hell yeah, really. No matter how bad something got, you’d make us smile,” Pidge assures him. “You kept us going, Lance. We wouldn’t be here without you.”

“Aww, Pidge,” Lance sniffs as he raises his head. His eyes are welling up with dramatic sappy tears.

“Don’t cry, Lance. You know I hate that,” she says as her lips tremble.

He wipes them away with his sleeve. Pidge takes off her glasses to rub her face of any tear drops before climbing over to give Lance a big hug. He returns it, his arms wrapped around her shoulders. Pidge sniffs and sits back as she adjusts her glasses back onto her face.

“Anyway there’s nothing wrong with you and if Keith doesn’t like it he can suck my ten-inch synthetic purple shlong,” Pidge shakes a finger at him while he snorts. “Yeah, you’re in more danger than the rest of us because you’re not a selfish prick but...don’t change. This Lance is the best Lance.”

“Pidge--”

“Huh-uh! Let me finish!” she scolds. “I like the Lance that always sees the best in people. That trusts and never wants to hurt anyone. It’s why I like you and Hunk. It’s why I wanted to be on your team even when I was offered a spot on Bravo. You both care so much about people and that’s worth more to me than a hundred Grade-A computers at my disposal.”

“Wow, worth more than a hundred computers?” Lance asks, a smile spreading on his face.

“You know it,” Pidge winks. “I’m heading to bed. Don’t stay up too late okay?”

They say their goodnights with another round of hugs. Lance returns his gaze to the sprinkling rain with a bright smile as she descends the stairs. Keith moves out of the stairwell and into the hall, pulling his knife out and inspecting it casually. He’s not sure if he looks more or less suspicious because of it.

She gives him a raised brow, which he returns in similar fashion.

He expects her to lay into him for upsetting Lance but she doesn’t. She just bores into him with her discerning eyes. It reminds him of an owl appraising the landscape before swooping in. Her spectacles and flipped out hair do her no favors in deterring the image of a ruffled bird of prey.

Regardless, the staring is getting on Keith’s nerves.

“*What ?*” he asks, his tone less than polite.
“Nothing,” she shrugs. “I thought you were a jerk before.”

“Thought?”

“Jerks don’t try to scare people they don’t like into being more careful,” Pidge smirks then waves as she leaves. “Night.”

Keith watches as she strolls merrily along down the hall, whistling some inane tune until she turns the corner. He has to wonder how much she knows. If all she thinks is that Keith is secretly a softy then that’s fine with him. Instead of pondering it further, he turns into the stairwell and starts to ascend.

Once he can see Lance from the middle landing he stops. Lance is smiling happily out at the rain with a hand outstretched to catch falling drops on his fingertips. There’s a hum in the air, something lighthearted and cheerful. He looks chipper.

Keith wanted to extend an offer of his company, his friendship, to Lance but...

Maybe he shouldn’t bother him. After all, he’d hate to ruin Lance’s good time by reminding him of earlier. Of those comments about dying young, which in hindsight he sees were more callous than he meant them to be. What if his presence makes it worse?

No, Keith’s upset him once already today, enough that he felt the need to unburden himself to someone else about it. And they cheered him right up. Right now he looks so bright and he doesn’t want Lance to lose that light in his eyes. Keith isn’t sure he could improve upon that look, even if he tried.

He resolves to just go to bed early and turns to leave.

“Keith? That you?” Lance looks down, catching the red from his jacket. He stops but doesn’t answer. “Need something?”

“Just...wanted to see the rain,” Keith lies. “I’ll come back later.”

“There’s room for two. Sit here,” Lance pats the ground where Pidge sat only minutes ago.

Lance wants him to stay.

Keith nods and ascends the last of the steps, taking a seat across from Lance. The two of them look out on the cascading drops. Lance starts humming again, a different tune from before. It’s just as light-hearted but it’s slower than the previous one.

It’s not long before Lance breaks away from his song to talk to Keith.

“Know what I love about the rain?” Lance asks.

“Everything?”

“Well...you’re not wrong,” Lance chuckles and scratches his head sheepishly. “It’s the sound I love most. If you close your eyes and just listen...everyone hears something different. Go ahead try it!”

Keith raises a brow uncertainly but closes his eyes.

“Sounds like...white noise on a radio,” Keith tells him with a look of muted surprise.

“Ooo, never heard that one before,” Lance smiles, his eyes lit with wonder. He closes his own eyes
and sighs. “I hear...my dad cooking pan-seared steaks. Sizzling and popping in the oil.”

Of course, Lance would think of food. Keith’s not the least bit surprised at that response.

“That was before Incident One,” Lance says, opening his eyes. “They say rain reminds you of better times.”

Keith guesses that might be true. The minute he closed his eyes he heard the radio and immediately thought about the desert shack. It never even rained while he was out there but all the fond memories came flooding back instantly. Fun relaxing times with his mom.

It’s not like he’s never had anyone to talk to about his past before. He’s had countless opportunities to share with others but never the inclination. Now he wants to talk...to Lance about it. But will he even care? One way to find out.

“My mom...we had a place in the middle of nowhere,” Keith reveals and Lance blinks with keen interest.

“Oh yeah? What was it like?”

Keith leans forward to wrap his arms around his knees and smiles softly behind them.

They’d go in the fall, he tells Lance. The weather was best then. No phones. No cable. No anything. Just the two of them and a week's worth of supplies. They’d listen to baying coyotes and stargaze while drinking beer. Sometimes they’d turn the radio to the white noise to sleep at night.

His mom talked about her job at the Garrison. It was always so eye-opening for Keith and he’d beg her to teach him things he was definitely too young to know. He ran around the house with a knife at one point and she had to chase him down to get it back before he tried to fight a fox. But most of the time she talked about his Dad.

He died not long after Keith was born so he hardly remembers him at all. The only memories he has of him are from looking at his picture before bed. Sending prayers his way and then heading off to sleep.

It’s funny but Keith can’t remember the exact day he stopped doing that. One day he stopped being this seven-year-old boy who talked to his father every night. Suddenly he was fourteen and didn’t care about anything except being the best soldier like his mom and Shiro. There’s nothing in between. Like there’s a blank space that had memories but they’ve been burned away.

He’s not sure when it happened but there are cards laid out in front of them now. As Keith talks, they play a couple of rounds of Gin. Lance shuffles and deals out their next hand.

That’s how they spend the next hour. Listening to the rain, playing Gin, and talking about their past. They don’t keep score and no one gets overly snarky when they lose. They just call for another hand. It’s open and calm and relaxing. A feeling that Keith’s all too unfamiliar with but is starting to grow on him.

Yes...he could be like this on a normal day. Around the rest of the team. Could even be...fun.

“Oh, you’re close to Gin,” Lance grins.

“This tell you keep saying I have?” Keith frowns.

“Probably about two cards away,” Lance says and Keith’s frown deepens. “Yep.”
Keith draws a card and drops an unessential one.

“Oh, now you’re one away,” Lance hums. “What to do...what to do? Should I take your seven and drop this two? Yeah, you don’t need twos.”

Lance picks up the card Keith dropped and discards one from his hand. Keith huffs and draws up a new card. Nothing he needs so he drops it into the pile. Lance draws up and sighs.

“Ugh, I don’t need Jack’s,” Lance pouts and eyes Keith with a knowing smile. “But you do...ah, let’s end this. I’m tired of Gin anyway.”

He discards the Jack and Keith scoops it up.

“Gin,” he smirks as he lays down his cards. “How’d you know?”

“I’ll never tell,” Lance grins and stands to stretch. “It’s getting late. And I want to run around in the rain before bed. You don’t have to wait up. Would you mind taking the cards back to the rec room though?”

Keith nods his understanding and starts gathering up the playing cards. Lance pulls off his jacket and his shirt, leaving them on the landing. He kicks off his shoes and socks too. Without warning, he runs out onto the roof in just his pants with a celebratory hoot.

He rolls his eyes at the noise but watches as he splashes around and gets soaked to the bone. Luckily it’s not too terribly cold but it’s chilly enough that even Keith has second thoughts about running around out there. Lance doesn’t seem to care though. He just spins and jumps and laughs in the deluge.

That laugh with beaming smile...it's nothing less than pure joy. Like nothing could feel better than the water on his skin. Does rain really feel that good? At one point Lance stops running. He stands in the center of the roof and puts his cupped hands out in front of him to catch drops in them while he tilts his head up towards the sky.

Baptism by nature.

It looks...

Lance tilts his head over to look at the doorway and finds Keith’s still sitting there staring out at him. He runs back over to the door, bends over a little and extends a hand. Keith looks at it and then back to his dripping face with confusion.

“You looked like you wanted to join,” Lance says, wiping water from his eyes. “Your tell gave you away again.”

“My tell? We’re not playing cards,” Keith raises his brow.

“Ehh, you do it with just about everything,” Lance gestures as he rolls his shoulders. “I think it’s hilarious that you haven’t nailed it down yet. Cute too.”

“Hmph,” Keith frowns.

“How about this?” Lance says as he straightens up. “Catch me in the rain and I’ll reveal it.”

Reveal what? His tell?

Lance goes out into the middle of the roof and stands triumphantly with his hands on his hips as if
he’s already won. He can’t be serious?

Keith stands with a shake of his head and turns to go. He isn’t going to play this dumb game. Why would he? He’s not going to risk another stupid cold just so he can find out his stupid poker tell which probably doesn’t even exis--

“Aww, scared you’re too slow to catch me?”

That loud mouth son of a--

The taunt works just like Lance expects because a miffed Keith does a quick turn and tosses his jacket down onto the stairs before bolting out onto the roof. Nothing like a little motivation in the form of harmless teasing. And now Keith’s out in the rain with him making his evening all the more fun.

Lance readies himself and expertly jumps aside as Keith runs right at him. Keith skids to a slippery stop before turning and taking off again. Lance’s long legs take him all over the roof with Keith on his tail, his stare determined. The two of them run and jump everywhere but Keith keeps slipping in the water when he gets close.

He’s so fast! How is he not falling all over the place?

“Running in the rain is an art!” he announces as he deftly evades Keith again. “And I am a master!”

He can hear Lance laughing between his panting breaths and the energy of it is contagious. Keith wants to be annoyed, mad even but he can’t maintain it. He’s trying hard not to but he finds his mouth curling up at the edges as the chase goes on. Keeps trying to grab Lance but instead of getting frustrated at missing he’s excited to try again. Gets up off the ground and scurries after him with renewed vigor.

“How come you’re never this fast out in the field?” Keith asks as he swipes out at Lance. Another miss.

“I’m only...fast...when something….scary...is chasing me,” Lance pants with a smile.

He nearly tackles Lance. It’s another miss but he tumbles to his feet and changes direction instantly. He’s right back on Lance’s trail without missing a beat. He’s getting closer. Lance laughs and feints left while giving Keith a little push which throws off his balance, making him slide to the ground again.

They both still for a moment to catch their breath but Keith doesn’t look like he’s ready to stop. He gets back to his feet and instead of barreling in he cautiously approaches, watching for signs of where Lance will run next. A determined smirk on his face.

Lance might have to give up soon. It’s not that he’s tired but he’s lost the motivation to run. Before Keith looked ready to throttle him which made it easy to avoid him. Nothing like fear to keep him on his toes. But now...Keith’s almost smiling. It’s disarming in a delightful way.

Maybe just a little longer.

He tries another feint but Keith doesn’t fall for it and snatches his wrist. He looks just as surprised to have caught him as Lance looks to be caught. Keith grins triumphantly before Lance promptly slips in a puddle taking the both of them down to the ground. The fall doesn’t hurt. Or if it does, neither notices.
Keith got him. Lance starts chuckling but stops when hears something strange above him. Is that…

Keith is laughing.

His mouth is so wide and beaming that Lance can even see his teeth. Is this what he looked like that night when he hugged Lance in the hall? His face was hidden away then but now…It’s...Lance’s heart flutters as he takes Keith in. Eyes squeezed shut in unbridled laughter interspersed with a snort every few bellow’s. Cheeks red with exhilaration and a hand bracing himself on Lance’s chest as he sits on top of him.

He’s been caught which means Keith wins but Lance feels like he’s the one being rewarded with something rare. A priceless gift no one gets to see.

Keith tries to catch his breath between the laughs as his hand swoops through his hair to get his wet bangs out of his face and Lance has to say…it’s incredibly enticing. Makes Lance flush, feeling amorous again. He can’t get over how much he wants to devour that unguarded smile.

No one’s here. They’re alone.

Keith chuckles victoriously, “So much for being a master--”

Lance leans up, cupping a hand behind Keith’s neck and pulling him forward for a kiss. The laughter is immediately silenced as Lance sucks on his bottom lip. He mouths and licks rainwater from Keith’s lips before slipping his tongue in with a heady sigh.

Keith’s eyes lid and his tongue swirls with Lance’s as he returns the kiss. He can feel Lance’s hands sliding down his neck and shoulders before curling around his sides. A leg slips between them and grazes Keith’s thigh, the only hint that he gets to Lance’s intentions before hooks into Keith’s and flips him onto his back.

It catches Keith off guard for a second but he definitely prefers this position. Lance pins his wrists and goes for his pulse. Warm breath on Keith’s cold wet neck. A hot tongue sliding down so he can suck on his exposed collarbone.

“Keith,” he sighs and rubs his hardon against him. Keith moans at that and tries to thrust upwards against him, enjoying the pressure.

Lance noses his way back up his neck, jaw, then chin until he can capture Keith’s lips again. Elicits more sighs as Keith’s fingers flex in his hold, his mouth pressing forward for more as he gasps. God, he never wants to quit tasting the sounds coming out of Keith’s mouth. Ecstatic rain kisses. He could do this for hours.

The thunder overhead startles them into stopping with a jump. Right. It’s still storming.

“Let’s head inside,” Lance suggests with a nervous laugh. “Before we end up struck by lightning?”

They haven’t been struck by lightning? Could have fooled Keith with the electricity sparking through his blood but he nods in agreement. Lance stands and pulls him to his feet. Together they run back inside, dripping wet and more than a little aroused. Wet pants leave little to the imagination it seems.

“Oh, your tell,” Lance remembers as Keith’s ringing out his shirt. “You tap your feet to curb your excitement. Not loudly but it’s there.”

“I what? That’s not--I don’t--” Keith shakes his head, certain that’s not possible.
“The better your hand the more you tap,” Lance adds. “Right after the draw. And then again after the discard and draw.”

Keith frowns and wracks his memory for Lance’s claim. He remembers stopping himself from smiling at his good hand but...Keith blinks. His heel. He did hit it to the ground. Twice when he got the two pair. And a couple more times with the full house. He was too focused on keeping his face straight to consider his toes.

*Your tell gave you away again.*

Keith’s cheeks heat up with shame. He taps his feet outside of poker too? When he’s excited? It can’t be. He doesn’t remember doing...oh. When he was sitting there watching Lance dance in the rain. He kept thinking how fun it looked, like he was itching to run too.

His body betrayed him without his knowledge.

“I see,” is all Keith can say in response to that.

“Gonna drop off my clothes and pick up a towel from the kennels,” Lance lets him know as he descends the stairs. “Want me to bring one back to the room for you?”

“Sure,” Keith nods and stands there waiting for his steps to disappear.

“Meet you there.”

He doesn’t think anyone is up this late. No one would see them walking together, both drenched and one of them half dressed. But there’s always the chance and he wouldn’t know how to explain it away. So he waits a minute more before snatching up his jacket and trudging to the rooms, dripping the entire way.

And his heart beating a mile a minute.

Chapter End Notes

**Tumblr User HannaLu has made some AMAZING fanart for a scene in this chapter!**

**Please go check it out** and maybe give them a follow!

If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment! Don't know what to say?

Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.
Sounds fair right?

(Also, if you really like Voltron stuff and want more, check out my other two fics. Tell me what you think of them!)
Chapter 15

He follows Lance’s trail until it reaches their rooms. It continues on down the hall and around the corner to the kennels. With any luck, Lance will take all the blame for the messy hallway. At least, they will as long as no one catches Keith out there looking like a drowned rat. He’s almost home free.

His hand reaches out for the door when he hears a click. Another door is opening down the hall. Maybe they won’t look this way. With a yawn, Pidge exists her room.

Keith goes completely stiff but does his best to not let his discomfort and nervousness show as she spots him. The small girl looks him over with confusion at his drenched appearance, from his shoes to his sopping wet hair. Then her gaze falls on his extended hand resting on--Lance’s doorknob. That’s when a new thought comes over her. Like two trains colliding and her eyes go wide.

“Oh.”

Maybe he can salvage this?

“It’s not what you think,” Keith swallows nervously.

“No, with Lance I’m sure it’s exactly what I think it is,” Pidge says with a Cheshire grin.

Keith, absolutely mortified, turns red with shame. He looks ready to bolt down the hall and Pidge looks even more confused before she figures it out. At least it only took her seconds.

“Used to hiding it huh?” Pidge guesses, her voice low. “I get it. I’ll keep it quiet.”

She will?

“What you do is your business, no one else’s,” Pidge says, adjusting her glasses.

“Thanks,” Keith mumbles as he bows his head, feeling a little better in finding an unexpected ally in Pidge. He still can’t meet her eyes though.

“That said--if there’s anything you want to know, about Lance I mean, just ask,” Pidge smirks.
Keith swallows and nods his head without a word. She waves and heads out to attend to her original reason for leaving, the bathroom. He lets himself into Lance’s room as she turns the corner then leans against the door and lets out a deep breath.

That was...not as bad as he thought it would be.

With a flick of the light, he illuminates the room. Lance has already fixed up the blankets on their cots and piled his dry clothes on one of the countertops. Ah, a sink, Keith remembers. It may not have running water but the drain still works. He strips off his shirt again and rings it out some more.

When he lays his black tee out on the counter to dry the heat suddenly clicks on. Warmth comes pouring out of the vent and permeates the room. Feels great so Keith stands in front of it for a bit to remedy his shivering.

The door opens and Lance slides in. He’s still in his wet jeans but he’s carrying scrubs and towels. He tosses a towel to Keith who catches it and starts drying his hair.

“You turn on the heat?” Lance asks putting a hand in front of the vent.

“I thought you did,” Keith admits, gesturing to the walls. “No thermostat in here.”

“Must be a shared system. One dial for multiple rooms,” Lance guesses. “Someone must be cold. Lucky us.”

Keith thinks maybe Pidge turned it on for them. She’s the only other person who knows they’re wet and cold. He’ll have to thank her at some point later. Lance sidles over, pulling the towel from around his neck and dabbing it at Keith’s back.

“Thanks for earlier,” Lance whispers to him, sliding the towel down the curve of his spine. “It was fun.”

“Yeah, it was,” Keith nods, barely nibbling his lip.

“I was thinking we’d continue?” Lance suggests and nuzzles Keith’s neck. “I’ll dry you off.”

Lance fiddles with the button and zipper of Keith’s pants until it opens. His fingers hook into the waistband of both his pants and boxers and slowly pulls down making Keith shiver as he’s exposed. His legs are cold and damp so Lance’s tongue tracing a hot trail down his body is a welcome feeling. Sometimes he purses his lips and kisses Keith’s skin or sucks the flesh for a fresh hickey.

But he doesn’t neglect the drying. The towel rubs against Keith and catches all the drops of water Lance’s tongue misses. Lance’s body gives off so much heat. Keith can feel as his hot palms smooth over his skin and squeeze his hips. Lance’s breath caressing his pecs as his tongue flicks over nipples. At that Keith licks his lips with a barely contained moan.

It’s not long before he’s as dry as he’s going to get. Lance is on his knees and kissing his way up Keith’s thigh for the third time.

Worshipping again. Makes Keith feel like an idol of some sort.

“You going to dry off?” Keith asks, nodding at his wet jeans. The only reason he noticed is that he was busy looking down at Lance’s bulging hardon.

He stands and shucks off his pants, throwing them directly into the sink. Lance doesn’t spend nearly as much time on drying himself. It’s crude, quick, and done in seconds flat. Obviously he cares more about being tender with others bodies than his own.

Keith stares more than he really should. He’s seen Lance naked how many times now? But it’s almost like each time there’s a new freckle or scar he hadn’t seen before and he has to take note of it so he doesn’t forget. He wants to remember it all.

But...why is that?

Lance cracks his knuckles and Keith’s eyes are drawn to those slender fingers. He wants them on his body again. Running on his skin. Threaded through and pulling his hair. Roughly pressing into him. All this sweet stuff is alright but...nothing replaces the thrill that ropes and dirty talk give him.

Keith can’t believe it but...he’s considering giving Lance some real power over him.

Lance winks at him. “See something you like?” Lance waggles his eyes as he puts a hand on his hip, drawing attention to his crotch.

“N-No,” Keith stumbles.

“Oh? That’s not what your feet say,” Lance hums.

Damn it. Was he tapping them again? He glances down and Lance barely stifles a laugh.

“You really checked,” he snorts, covering his mouth. “I was just teasing.”

Keith frowns, displeased at being tricked into looking at his feet. Regardless of whether he was tapping or not, the fact he looked anyway betrays his inner thoughts. Lance chuckles again and leans on the counter.

“Lighten up,” Lance tells him. “We’re alone. You don’t have to act disinterested.”

“Fine. I’m...interested,” Keith admits, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Sweet,” Lance grins and leans in closer, suggestive look on his face as he looks over Keith’s body.

“What did you have in mind?”

Keith mumbles something but Lance doesn’t catch it. He furrows his brows and raises a hand to his ear, a sign for Keith to repeat. He does but it’s just as quiet as before as Keith shrinks in on himself and flushes red. Is it something embarrassing? Lance stands next to him and leans in close to his face.

“I...want...you to tie me up,” Keith murmurs.

Lance nearly chokes on his shock.

“R-Really?! I thought--” Lance sputters as he stands straight again.

This is a big deal. A huge deal. It was only a day or two ago Keith said he didn’t trust Lance. While Lance isn’t as big on the bondage thing like Keith is...he knows a rare offering when he sees it. Keith doesn’t let just anybody do this. What they’re doing together is more than just letting off steam now and just the thought makes Lance’s heart thrum.

“But not tonight,” Keith huffs, trying to will the heat from his face. “There are too many rules and you don’t know them. And you have to learn how to do a perfect Lark’s head double column, at the very least.”
“I’ll do it!” Lance promises with excitement.

“I’ll teach it to you, tomorrow,” says Keith. They won’t have anything better to do since it might still be raining in the morning.

“And tonight?” Lance insinuates while looking up and down Keith’s body. His semi is still pretty obvious. “Want me to be strict with you?” he asks, biting into his bottom lip with a smile.

Lance is starting to read his mind and it’s bothering him less and less. Keith nods. Lance sits on the cot and points to the floor in front of him with a smug look on his face.

“Crawl,” is all he says.

Keith goes to his knees and inches forward one step at a time as Lance strokes his own cock. He watches Keith approach and then sit up in front of him. Lance gently threads his fingers into Keith’s hair, feeling the smooth strands slide through his fingers. So soft.

Keith leans forward for a taste of Lance but gets stopped with a hard yank at his hair that makes him gasp.

“Who said you could have that? Pretty sure it wasn’t me,” Lance chastises him.

“S-sorry, sir,” Keith gasps an apology in Lance’s grip.

“Sir?” Lance blinks with confusion as Keith turns a blazing scarlet.

Fuck! He hadn’t meant to say that! A holdover from before that he thought he’d gotten over doing ever since he stopped with Dos Santos. Lance blinks again but then smirks.

“Can’t say I mind that,” Lance muses. “Now...how to punish you.”

Lance’s eyes scan down Keith’s body and come to rest on his twitching cock.

“No touching yourself,” Lance grins. “And now you have to watch me get off without tasting me.”

“But--” Keith’s eyes beg for an alternative. No touching? Either of them? And no tasting?

“You were the one jumping the gun there,” Lance points out with a scolding tone. He then shifts forward a little, so his crotch is even closer to Keith’s hungry gaze. “If you can... behave ...maybe I’ll change my mind on one of those,” he adds.

Keith flushes and turns his eyes to Lance’s swelling cock. Lance moves it closer in a such a way to deliberately tempt him. Slowly pumping it in front of him. It’s cruel but...so delicious. Keith licks his lips, trying not to break. It’s so close. He could literally stick his tongue out and he’d taste it but...he doesn’t pull in Lance’s hold.

“I’ll...behave,” Keith whispers a hair’s breadth away from his cock.

“Good,” Lance nods as he lets go of Keith’s hair.

After a few minutes of slow stroking at the most teasing of paces, Keith thinks he’s going to be able to hold out. At least on the wanting to suck the dick in front of him. His own desires however...

His cock is hard and throbbing, begging for some contact. He thinks to shift a little, maybe scoot a little to the left and brush it against Lance’s leg. He didn’t say he couldn’t do that and honestly, anything touching him down there would be a godsend. But then...that wouldn’t be behaving would
Keith huffs a little desperate whine when he sees Lance’s cock leaking precome. It’s starting to drip off Lance’s knuckles and it’s such a waste that Keith isn’t getting to taste it. God, it takes everything Keith has not to beg, to whimper a ‘please’ when it drips to the floor.

“You’re...being so good,” Lance sighs, impressed.

Lance lets go of himself and reaches that hand forward to caress Keith’s cheek. Keith can smell arousal on those fingers touching his face. He wants badly to turn and lick that hand, wants to shove those fingers in his mouth, but instead he swallows back a heady sigh.

“So good. Tell me what you want, pretty slut,” Lance demands, tugging on his hair and stroking again.

“You,” Keith answers with a flush to his cheeks.

“I know you can do better than that,” Lance grins and Keith gasps when he yanks a little harder. “Try again. Better hurry though. I’m...almost there.”

Lance strokes his cock nice and close to Keith’s face as he holds him there. Keith sees those dripping fluids and his mouth waters. He can’t let that cock come without his mouth on it. Lance’s flushing cheeks and panting moans spur him into desperate pleas.

“I...I want your c-come,” Keith tells him but when Lance doesn’t let go of his hair he keeps going. “I want it in my m-mouth...so I can s-swallow you down...want it...on my face. My body. I’ll take it anywhere you’ll give it to me.”

If all he gets is a drop on his cheek he’ll be grateful. But if Lance doesn’t let go, he won’t get a thing. And dammit--it’s dripping again!

“L-Lance, p-please!” he whimpers urgently, eyeing Lance’s leaking head.

“That was much better,” Lance pants and he releases Keith’s hair. “Help yourself.”

Keith’s eyes light up as he lowers his mouth to Lance. Starts with licking the precome off his fingers and wrapping his lips around the head of his cock with a grateful whine. Lance bites on his fingers to hold back his louder moans as Keith fervently sucks away.

“What a desperate thing you are,” Lance sighs. “That's right... Keep that tongue busy. Ah, ah! No touching yourself, remember?”

Keith almost grabbed himself, his hand hovers an inch over his cock. His fist clenches closed as it retreats and slowly forces itself to the ground, pressing his knuckles into the linoleum. Lance pets his head, combing his fingers through his hair and gently tugging at his roots as he bobs between his legs. A reward for obeying and he says as much.

Lance shivers as he feels Keith drag his tongue up his length with a sigh. Man, he wants to tease him a little more. That begging tone was like music to hear. He wants to hear it again. He pulls Keith off him and holds him mere centimeters from his cock as he strokes. Keith looks weak as he squeezes his length, unable to keep from biting his lip at the sight.

Is Lance taking it back? Just the thought that Lance is taking it away from him hurts in a delightful way. Maybe he wants him to beg more? It’s not like he’s above it.
“P-Please,” Keith pleads again. “I want to taste--”

“That so?”

“Y-Yes, I’ll do any--”


Keith opens without further prompting and Lance smirks. Pretty pink tongue only slightly sticking out, ready to catch any drops. He really is desperate for a taste. Better not disappoint him.

Lance strokes closer and closer to Keith’s mouth, his fingers entwined tight in dark hair. If he’s holding too tight Keith hasn’t said anything about it, only gasps at each pull as his eyes lid.

The pleasure reaches its apex and Lance hisses out a moan as he comes. Little spurts erupt and most of it ends up in Keith’s welcoming mouth. A drop or two ends up on his cheek and chin but…he looks a perfect mess.

“Close and swallow,” Lance commands and Keith does so. “Good. What do we say?”

“Thank you...sir…” Keith whispers, his voice small and meek.

“Damn right,” Lance smirks, liking the little ‘sir’ add-on more and more. No one’s ever said sir to him before. Not like this. Feels good.

There’s still come on Keith’s face and he hasn’t made a move to wipe it off. Probably because Lance didn’t order him too. Lance leans down and licks it from his cheek, kisses it from his chin with a sigh. Now for Keith…

“How do you want to get off, slut?” Lance asks in his ear, tonguing it and nibbling on the lobe.

Dear god, yes he wants to get off. But Lance told him he wasn’t allowed to touch himself. He nods, desperate need in his eyes.

Lance takes his hand from Keith’s locks and trails it down his cheek. He cups it for a moment then slides it down to Keith’s throat. Keith loses his breath for a second thinking Lance is going to choke him. Makes his face flush red and Lance picks up on it.

“You’d like that?” Lance asks in earnest and squeezes gently. Not hard enough for anything but it’s enough to make Keith close his eyes with a nod. His cock even twitches at the pressure. “Probably shouldn’t. I wouldn’t know how to without hurting you.”

At that, Keith’s hand comes up onto Lance’s. He slides his fingers, adjusts their position, while never taking his eyes from Lance’s. Once his fingers are exactly where Keith wants them to be, a thumb at his carotid and the rest gently cupping his neck, he sits up straighter.

“Here,” Keith breathes, his hand pressing on Lance’s thumb. “For a few seconds at a time. Then...release.”

“I…” Lance starts.

“Please,” Keith whispers, eyes begging. “Please, Lance.”

How can he say no? Especially with how he said his name. There’s such longing in his voice. In his eyes. Lance nods and gives him a gentle squeeze. Keith gasps and looks desperately up at him. No fear, just heady desire as he surrenders to Lance’s control.
He can’t believe Keith’s trusting him with his hand at his throat. It makes him incredibly vulnerable. But maybe that’s what he likes about it. Having his life in someone else’s hands and submitting to it.

Lance isn’t sure he’d like this done to himself. It would turn him off but...Keith just flushes with each squeeze. His hardon isn’t going anywhere. If anything his cock jumps and twitches every time. A little bead of precome even starts to pearl at his tip so it’s clearly arousing for him.

“This really gets you huh,” Lance manages a half smile. “Can you even get off like this? No touching? Just choking?”

“Y-Yes,” Keith gasps as Lance puts the pressure on. “I...can...takes a while.”

“Hmm, let’s speed it up then,” Lance smirks as he licks his hand and joins him on the floor. He reaches down and gets a hold of Keith’s throbbing cock.

“L-Lance,” he barely chokes out.

“Hands down,” Lance reminds him when Keith raises them.

Naked and kneeling on the ground and at another’s mercy. A hand at his throat and the other expertly stroking him. His hands clenched into tight fists, useless at his side and pressing into the floor. And Lance’s face grinning down on him as he works his body into knots. Helpless.

The best kind of helpless.

“L-Lance,” he moans and Lance puts the pressure on to stop the noise in his throat. God that's hot.

“Shhh,” Lance hushes, his lips brushing Keith’s. “You’re supposed to stay quiet. If you’re too noisy I’ll--”

“Don’t...s-stop,” Keith begs, his voice a barely audible rasp. “L-Lance! I-I’m--”

Lance gives him the squeeze he wants as Keith starts to let out a keening whine, his eyes rolling back. He doesn’t finish that cry because Lance muffles it with his mouth, sucking down that sound with a groan of his own. Jesus, the noises Keith makes...makes Lance wish they could go again. Makes him want to take Keith out to the barn and fuck him within an inch of his life. No holding back, as loud as humanly possible.

Bet Keith sounds just as delicious when he shouts.

Warmth pours over Lance’s hand as he coaxes out Keith’s orgasm. That body shivers and shakes in his hold as he drips. Positively spent. Lance removes his lips from Keith’s panting mouth and removes his fingers from his throat so he can catch his breath.

“Good boy,” Lance praises, cupping Keith’s hot cheek in his hand. “Sit still. I’ll clean you up.”

With a swipe of towel, Lance mops up the mess. He tosses the dirty rag off to the side before pulling Keith to his feet. He’s wobbly and wavers as he stands, lightheaded from all the deprivation of oxygen. Lance has two hands near him though, ready to catch him on his way to grab a pair of scrubs to throw on before bed.

“Want to sleep here again?” Lance asks as he changes too. “I put the spare cot from next door into your room. In case you didn’t want to.”

“I’ll stay. For my aftercare at least,” Keith answers, giving his neck a rub before cracking it loudly.
“And after?”

“We’ll see.”

Keith takes a seat on his side of the cots, making sure to put his knife underneath the pillow like he always does, just in case he falls asleep. After, he slips into the blanket and waits.

Doesn’t have to wait long because Lance’s fingers start massaging through his hair almost immediately resulting in a deep sigh. The familiar hum begins as Lance settles in. No words, just melody. Sounds similar to the song he sang in the kennels and Keith’s curiosity gets the better of him finally.

“What are you humming?” Keith asks.

“Hmm? Oh. It’s Muse. They’re a...uh, rock band? I guess that’s the best way to describe them,” Lance tries to explain. “Want me to stop?”

“No,” Keith tells him. “Do you know any of the words? Or do you always just hum them?”

“You want me to sing to you, Keith?” Lance grins and scratches his head at the base of his skull. “Aww. So cute.”

“Shut up, I didn’t say that,” Keith huffs but leans into the scratching fingers with a sigh.

He wouldn’t stop him if he did sing. He’d probably fall asleep before Lance got too far in anyways.

“I usually only sing alone,” says Lance with a yawn. “Hmm. Oh, I know one you might like,” he decides and settles in closer.

As he sings softly Keith wishes he had something to write with so he could remember it all. It sounds…too perfect for him, as if written especially for Keith. About knowing how he’s suffered and trying to hide. How hiding is cold and that the singer promises not to deny him.

“Soothing...I’ll make you feel pure,” Lance whispers the song to him. “Trust...me...You can be sure.”

He goes into a refrain after that and Keith closes his eyes to listen to that voice. Violence in one’s heart. Wearing a mask. Demons haunting the past. It’s a good song. A good singing voice. Great even. Keith could get used to hearing it all the time. Keith blinks his eyes open at the thought.

Shit.

This is exactly what he was trying to avoid. He shouldn’t be getting used to it. Relying on something that may not always be there is a mistake. Comfort is a luxury and no one can afford it. Not even Keith.

But...he likes the way Lance is serenading him. That silky voice tickling his ears and bringing a tint to his cheeks again. Doesn’t he deserve something nice? For once? Maybe just...one song won’t hurt anything?

“You trick your lovers; that you’re wicked and divine,” he smirks looking down at the blush on his face. “You may be a sinner but your innocence is mine,” Lance sings as he plays with Keith’s hair, twirls it in his fingers. He nuzzles into Keith’s neck before continuing, hot breath on his skin. “Please me...show me how it’s done. Tease me...you are the one...”
The refrain repeats again and Lance sings it slow against him. Keith finds himself trying to will away the warmth from his cheeks but it’s already travelling down his chest. It’s making his heart pound like a drum. What a sensual song...god, and it’s...romantic too. Damn it all, he’ll never remember the words. Only the feeling of his heart racing in his ears when Lance’s lips touch them as he sings.

Maybe he’ll ask Lance to sing it again.

He waits for the next part but the pause is longer than usual. Why did he stop? Is that the end? Keith turns and finds Lance has fallen asleep midsong, his fingers still entangled in Keith’s locks. Tired himself out. He feels a smile tug at his mouth. Well, it has been a long day.

Keith sits up and Lance’s fingers lose their hold in his hair, his arm resting on Keith’s pillow. He reaches over, fixes the blanket so Lance won’t freeze.

He could go but... instead, he settles back into his spot. Gets under the covers and making sure to move Lance’s arm so he doesn’t squash it. Then shimmies in close enough to partake of his warmth but without touching so he doesn’t impose on Lance’s space. For all the good it does him because immediately Lance shifts in the cot.

His arm curls around Keith’s side and pulls until their bodies are touching. Lance buries his nose into Keith’s hair like it’s where he belongs and lets out a sigh before laying a chaste kiss at his neck.

“Mmm...want to satisfy...the undis...closed...desires of…” Lance mumbles the song but trails off.

This is a mistake. And not the first one he’s made in a long list of mistakes involving Lance. He should leave now or it’ll just hurt that much more later. He knows this and yet...

“...my heart,” Keith finishes the last line of the refrain, his eyes lidding at the choice he’s making.

In his sleep, Lance squeezes him a little and Keith allows himself to drift away in his warm embrace.

Chapter End Notes

If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment! Don't know what to say?
Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Sounds fair right?

(Also, if you really like Voltron stuff and want more, check out my other two fics. Tell me what you think of them!)
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Some of you asked for more brotherly interaction between Keith and Shiro. Don't say I don't give you anything nice!
Also, more Pidge and Keith friendship! *wink*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

---Fall Out Boy, Death Valley

Hard times come
Good times go
I'm either gone in an instant
Or here till the bitter end
I'll never know

He doesn’t want to open his eyes.

It’ll ruin the illusion that things are normal. Yes, if Keith keeps his eyes closed he can pretend he’s back home for the summer. Listening to the patter of rain on the window. Buried in a soft bed, smell of coffee brewing downstairs. It’s a fantasy but he wants so badly to believe it.

In this dream his mom is still alive, cooking breakfast in the kitchen with Hunk. Shiro’s there too, with both arms and helping to set the dining table for a dozen guests. The Holt’s are already seated at the table. All of them and all in one piece. The whole lot of them laughing at a joke Lance is telling.

His new family and they call him to hurry up. The eggs are getting cold.

But he can’t pretend forever.

He opens his eyes to reveal the dim room he’s come to know. Creaky cots with a thin blanket. No home. No mom. But Lance’s soft rhythmic breathing remains at his neck and his arm around his waist. And the sound of rain pelting the roof continues as well.

Just like he guessed, it’s still raining. He glances over at Lance’s watch and with a sigh sees that it’s morning. Thinks about going back to sleep for another hour or two. No one’s going to be up yet anyway, especially since it’s raining. They can’t do anything outside today because of it.

He closes his eyes, to try and go back to that moment of contentment from imagining better surroundings, but no matter how he tries he can’t seem to fall back into that dream.

With a resigned sigh, Keith pulls himself out of Lance’s hold which doesn’t wake him surprisingly. He barely budges at all, remaining blissfully asleep. One arm rests under Keith’s pillow while the
other flops back down after Keith gets free. Lance’s portion of blanket has been kicked off exposing
his bare torso and legs, making it impossible for Keith to keep his eyes from traveling down that
body.

Soft tan skin with a dozen childhood scars. Lean muscles. So fit. Lance must do calisthenics or
something. He is a soldier after all, just like Keith. He’s never seen Lance work out but...How else
could his body look so good?

Keith’s eyes linger on him, cataloging the necessary exercises for such a form, starting with his chest.
Pull-ups. Then he trails down his stomach. Crunches. His scrubs are sagging slightly off his hips, too
big for him and exposing that little crease in the pelvis. Planks.

Lance sighs and rolls onto his stomach, burying his face into his pillow with a mumble. Now his
back’s to Keith but it’s slightly hunched, showing off those well-defined traps. Deltoids too. Push-
ups. Perfect lower back muscles, slender legs. Probably from swimming. Or running. Or
maybe...prolonged thrusting.

Damn. He just felt his foot tap with excitement on the floor.

Keith swallows and gets off the cot. He should go do some sit-ups. Push-ups. And then maybe a nice
leisurely jog in the freezing downpour outside. Yeah. That sounds like a great way to start the
morning and stop thinking with his dick.

It’s amazing what Lance can sleep through.

Rain. Low rumbling thunder. Keith’s grunting as he does his third set of one-handed push-ups. Once
he’s got a nice beading of sweat on his forehead he goes ahead and does some sit-ups too, using the
weight of Lance’s cot to keep him grounded. Each time he comes up he eyes Lance sleeping right in
front of him.

Lance rolls again onto his side, his face now turned towards Keith’s as he comes up. He can see the
slow rise and fall of his body. Sexy bed hair sticking up in every direction. A light dusting of
freckles. Gentle breaths through his soft parted lips. Damn...this isn’t helping at all.

Seventy sit-ups are enough. Time to leave before he feels another bout of arousal. Someone else has
to be up by now.

He changes clothes and just as his hand twists the handle to leave he hears a noise outside the door.
Sounds like light hammering. After double checking over his shoulder to see if it wakes Lance and
finding it doesn’t, he quickly slips out into the hall to find the source of the noise.

It’s coming from the front entrance and at first, he thinks there are zombies hitting the door.
Instinctively he puts his hand on his knife, gripping the handle in anticipation of danger, but he lets it
go when he turns the corner. It’s Pidge tapping a hammer to a nail with half a dozen more nails
poking out of her mouth.

“Sorry,” she mumbles, dropping a nail from her lips. “Wake you?”

“No, I was already up,” he answers, his hand relaxing at his side as he eyes the wall. A line of nails
and some of them have dog tags hanging from them.

“A memorial,” she says, dropping another nail which Keith kneels and picks up. “Thanks. Figured
we’re gonna be inside all day and I’ve got nothing better to do. Allura said it was fine.”

“What about people you don’t have tags for,” Keith asks, handing her the fallen nails.
“Matt snatched some paint from the hardware store,” she tells him, pointing at the can with her toe. “If you’ve got the names of everyone from your team I’ll scribble them up there when I’m done.”

“I’ll do it,” Keith says and retrieves the can. “If that’s alright?”

She nods and he pries open the lid to get started.

They do their work in silence. Seems to be the way they both prefer it. Pidge putting nails into the wall as Keith paints the names of every member of Alpha team. Their full names, complete with rank.

*Paola Himura, Sergeant*
*Jing Navid Seymour, Sergeant*
*René Marshall, Private*
*Elba Higgins, Captain*
*Morton Sanchez, Corporal*

He remembers them all and exactly how they died. Most were torn apart by undead, nothing left of them but bloody bones and viscera. That or they’re still wandering around the city, looking for their own meals. Others escaped with a single bite but that’s more than enough to condemn someone out here. Especially if it wasn’t a limb.

*Louis Herman, Corporal*
*Adam Emory Saunders, 1st Lieutenant*
*Selene O’Hara, Private*
*Abraham Bustos, Corporal*
*Samuel Holt, Captain*

Then there were the two that ended their own lives. That was a shock for everyone. They weren’t even injured but their despair took over. They couldn’t handle the thought that they were stuck out here. Young and afraid. Running out of supplies. No Garrison support. All their friends dying around them.

Keith pitied them at first but then grew angry when he thought about how those bullets could have been used to protect the remaining team. Two shots isn’t much but it’s the difference between life and death out here.

*Brayden James Kennedy, Private*
*Emma Raines, Private*

And the hardest name for last. Quietly he slides the brush in gentle strokes, trying not to think too hard about putting her name up there.

*Krolia Kogane, Major*

“My condolences,” Pidge comments after he stands there staring for a moment. “Your mom?”

“Yeah,” Keith nods and lowers his eyes.

“Sorry for your loss,” she adds and pats his shoulder once before taking her hand away. “I never thanked you for my dad. Matt says you...eased his passing. I know it must have been hard. Your team was close.”

“He said he’d rather die than let his family see him reanimated,” Keith tells her. “I made it quick and painless.”
“Thanks,” Pidge smiles sadly. “For the record, if that happens to me I’d appreciate the same treatment. Not because I don’t want those extra days but cause I don’t think Hunk or Matt could handle watching me suffer, no matter how much time putting it off buys me.”

“Noted,” Keith nods.

“And Lance would probably break,” Pidge says with a sigh. “He’s seen that too many times with strangers. Seeing it happen to a friend...it would shatter him.”

Keith agrees. It’s so strange in a macabre way to be having this talk. Back in the old world, no one talks about how they want to die... No one says they want their friend to kill them as painlessly as possible. Or says ‘thank you’ for killing their family members. And yet he’s had this conversation with everyone on Alpha team, in some cases multiple times.

Now it’s commonplace. How do you want to die? That’s the question that people ask themselves every day now. And the answer is frequently ‘human’.

“So uh, don’t get yourself bitten in a way that we can’t remove the infection,” Pidge jokes with a nudge. “I don’t want to deal with Lance’s crying about what a shame it is that such a hot guy died before they got a chance to bone.”

Keith rolls his eyes with a snort. Please. He doesn’t intend on letting anything get close enough to take a chunk out of his flesh. And if anything ever does and infection is inevitable, he’ll go down swinging and then end it himself. That’s for damn sure.

“So,” Pidge starts and eyes him with a smirk. “You and Lance huh?”

“...”

“It’s so funny to me,” Pidge chuckles, pinching her chin. “He used to hate your guts back at the Garrison.”

“Hate?”

“Maybe that’s too strong. Definitely envy though,” she amends adjusting her glasses. “Wanted to be as good as you were, before and after everything went to shit. Be an expert sniper. Be on a team with his hero. Adored and loved by everyone for being the best.”

Sounds like him.

“But you, his ‘rival’, seemed to catch all the breaks. That’s what he’d say anyway,” Pidge smiles. “What a whiner.”

“I don’t remember him,” Keith admits. Not from before almost stabbing him in the Walgreens.

“Really? No wonder he bitched about you so much,” she snickers covering her mouth. “You talked to him a couple of times after Incident...One? Two? Two sounds right. Lance helped his sister in the armory before joining Echo team. You don’t recall ever picking up a gun from either of them?”

Keith furrows his brows and wracks his brain for the memory. Tries to remember the early days of Incident One. Feels like eons ago but it was only two years. The armory. It comes into focus slowly along with the people who manned it.

Yes, there was a girl there. Tall. Flat chested. Her hair pulled tight into a short ponytail at the base of her head. Overalls and gloves that were too big for her. Cute but not his type for obvious reasons.
Sometimes she wore a ballcap. No wait...the hat was someone else. A guy? Was that Lance?

“Are they twins?” he asks, his brow raised.

“No, she’s a little older but I swear they have the same face,” Pidge admits.

“I think...I may have talked to him thinking he was her,” Keith reveals.

“Oh, you did. I didn’t hear the end of it for weeks,” Pidge laughs at the memory. “You called him Veronica. He couldn’t believe you didn’t recognize him from class before Incident One. Like at all. He sat two seats behind you for two years.”

“I...was focused on other things,” Keith says, guiltily scratching the back of his head.

“Clearly,” she chuckles and turns with a smirk. “You know, that’s when he decided to join a scouting team. He wanted to show you up. Make you acknowledge him through skill.”

That sounds like Lance alright, he thinks with a frown. Pidge laughs a little at his face before taking a deep sigh.

“I’m gonna go make some coffee and do some reading. Wanna come? Promise I talk a lot less than Lance does.”

Keith snorts at that but nods and follows her lead to the rec room.

*****

Floating down, down, down, until Lance lands softly on the ground. Endless darkness in all directions with only the spot he’s standing in illuminated with light. Where is this? He’s dreaming, right? What’s that on the ground?

A single dot. Small. The size of the head of a thumbtack and bright red. Followed by another. Then more.

It’s blood, Lance realizes when he touches the slick stain. And it’s getting bigger. There’s even shoe prints as the injured party steps through their own trail. Who? Who’s bleeding?

“Hey! Who’s there?” Lance calls out.

No answer but there is breathing coming from...Lance picks up the pace in that direction and hears limping steps increase their speed.

“Stop! You’re hurt!” Lance shouts, looking down at the growing blood trail. No answer again. Just a pained groan as they limp away.

Maybe it’s not a person. With that thought, there’s suddenly a rifle in his hands. His trusty Ruger, new as the day they issued it to him. He raises the sight and approaches the sound with caution. Someone’s coming into view. It’s…

“Keith?” he asks, lowering the gun and running forward.

Keith falls to the ground, first to his knees and then face down in a collapsed heap. Lance runs and slips through the blood puddles to his knees, leaving smears all over the floor and his jeans. He flips him over to look at the wound and when he raises the shirt he recoils in fear. A bite...through his stomach.
“How did this…” Lance whispers, losing his breath as blood oozes out in pulses from his wound. He puts pressure on it but it hardly helps.


It’s like the infection is spreading before his eyes. What normally takes days is taking minutes. Keith’s skin burns up with heat, his skin sweating beads on beads of liquid. Body shivering and shaking as aching pain courses through his muscles. Patches of skin already starting to deteriorate and slough off in areas where Keith can’t stop scratching.

No...no! This can’t be happening! Wake up!

“Lance! DO something!” Keith wails, his body convulsing in agony. “It’s--I’m burning! Make it stop !”

“I...I can’t!” he blubbers, tears pouring in rivers down his cheeks.

“Please!” Keith begs, his clouded eyes looking up at Lance. “I don’t...want to be this !”

He’s changing...he’s almost one of them.

Lance looks down at the blood splattered Ruger and snatches it up but he shakes with fear as he takes aim. Keith continues to shudder and jolt erratically as the infection takes over. His body arches as he shouts and screams in pain. Lance adjusts the aim to Keith’s face but his body freezes. His fingers have gone numb. He can’t breathe.

This...it’s a person. He can’t just...kill a person. Kill Keith. He can’t even consider hitting him, let alone shooting his brains out.

“I’m...s-s-scared,” Keith chokes out with a moan and blood drips from his lips. He’s on his hands and knees, spitting up blood and groaning. “H-Hurts...Lance...M-Make...it...s-s-stop....help me...please...”

He has to do it. He can’t let someone suffer like that again. It’s what Keith would want him to do, right? But he...can’t look. Lance closes his eyes and a shot rings out, making him bolt up from the cot with panting gasps and clutching his rapidly beating heart. Feels like it’s going to burst from his chest with how it thunders.

The room is quiet. Empty with the exception of himself but clear evidence that Keith stayed the night. His side of the bed is still a little warm. No blood on the floor. No suggestion at all that anyone is hurt, let alone Keith, but...he gets out of bed and rushes to the door, not stopping as he opens it.

He checks Keith’s room. Empty. Nothing out of place. That should make him feel better but it doesn’t. Then he strides down the hall quickly until arriving at the rec room.

Keith’s sitting at the table, coffee in hand as he flips through a book they took from the hardware store. He looks over his shoulder with a frown and eyes him up and down. With a roll of his eyes and a shake of his head, he returns to his current page.

He’s fine. What a relief.

“Morning Lance--ah, geez! Put some clothes on!” Pidge shakes her head at him and Keith stifles a snort. “Who raised you?!”
What? He looks down and sees in his hurry he came out in just the oversized, sagging scrub bottoms. They’re nearly ready to slip right off.

“S-Sorry...” he apologizes, taking hold of the drawstrings. “I was just...Let me uh...” He grabs a cup of coffee and gestures cheers at them before quickly taking it back out into the hall, his face red with embarrassment as he sips it.

Real smooth.

Lance returns to his room and begins his morning routine to forget the whole debacle. Does a few jumping jacks and push-ups to clear his mind. It reminds him of the early days living at the Garrison before the outbreak. Gives him a sense of normalcy when everything is anything but. It does make him feel a little better.

He’s finishing up his squats when there’s a knock at the door. Lance tells them to hold on a sec as he adjusts the drawstring on his scrubs again. Doesn’t need a repeat of Pidge scolding him. Pulling the door open reveals Keith standing there with his typical frown.

“Hey, morning,” Lance nods

“Hunk wants you to help him repair a few leaks in the roof,” Keith tells him. “That’s if you’re done wandering the clinic half-dressed.”

“You know you dig it,” Lance winks and flexes an arm making Keith’s cheeks tint. “I don’t know how you managed to keep a straight face, pun intended, when I walked in there.”

“I’ve had a lot of practice in the men’s shower at the Garrison,” Keith shrugs and averts his eyes so he doesn’t stare. “Come see me after you help. I’ll...teach you that knot.”

“Knot?” Lance raises a brow but then realization hits. “Oh! Right! Yeah, definitely. Uh before you go? Come in for a second?”

Keith scans the halls and listens for any approaching steps. They’re in the clear. Lance steps aside to let him in and closes the door behind him.

Lance directs him to the wall with hands cupping both sides of his cheeks, his lips pressed into Keith’s. Coffee kisses. He noses Keith’s nose before lowering his mouth to his again for another series of kisses. Lance’s favorite activity by far is just making out and Keith can’t say he minds provided they have privacy.

That tongue works wonders, massaging heady sighs out of Keith in a manner of seconds. His fingers curl around Keith’s neck, knotting into his hair and pulling Keith in for deeper, more probing kisses. Lance pulls back from his lips for a second to mouth along that jawline. Keith tilts his head aside as an invitation to neck that Lance jumps on. His fingers tug gently on Keith’s hair to keep his flesh exposed as he mouths and kisses. The fingers of his other hand slip up Keith’s shirt to palm his stomach.

No injury. No torn flesh. No hot sticky blood. He knew that was the case but that nightmare was hard to shake and feeling warm intact skin under his fingers brings him such relief.

Why is he freaking out about this? It was just a dream. Keith would never let some deadhead sneak up and take a bite out of him. But then...it sounded like Lance was the reason it happened. It was his fault.
Lance has stopped kissing his neck. Instead, he looks dazed like he’s somewhere else as his thumb gently rubs Keith’s stomach. He doesn’t even respond to his name. Keith frowns and flicks his forehead to which Lance yelps in surprise.

“Yeah, well you were just standing there staring. I called your name like three times, moron,” Keith huffs.

“Sorry, I was...thinking,” Lance tries to smile. “I uh, I’m gonna go fix up those leaks with Hunk. What are you going to do?”

“Visit Shiro. See how he’s feeling,” Keith shrugs. “If the rain lets up a little I’ll clear the walkway.”

“Tell me before you go and I’ll come too,” Lance says a little quicker than he meant to. “Uh, I need the practice right?”

Keith nods in agreement and just sees a flicker of relief in Lance’s eyes. A strange thing to be relieved about but Keith doesn’t comment. Maybe he’s finally taking his knife suggestion more seriously. Keith gives him a nod before leaving to let him change clothes.

Once everything’s on, Lance eyes the knife on the counter. If he wants to keep his dreams from coming true...He loops it through his belt and tugs it around a bit to make sure it's secure. With a quick gesture, he pulls the blade from his hip the way Keith would. He even swipes the air a few times, slower than Keith but faster than when he practiced at the store.

“You still hesitate too much.

“Guess I’ll have to work on that,” Lance says to himself and sheathes the weapon before leaving his room.

*****

Keith knocks on the door and waits for a response. Shiro tells him to come on in and Keith enters with a small smile. He waves a book in front of him as he takes a seat in the chair next to the bed. He offers the tome to Shiro who takes it with a curious eye.

“Found it at the store. State history book,” Keith tells him. “You’re the only person I know under fifty who enjoys this sort of thing.”

“Ouch, you calling me old?” Shiro chuckles as he flips to the inside cover.

“Old at heart,” Keith smirks. “I figure you don’t have anything to do to keep you from dying of boredom.”

“Not entirely true,” Shiro laughs and gestures to a nearby basket. It’s full of tennis balls and Keith’s now noticing more than a few in odd corners of the room.

Allura set them up for him. An occupational therapy of sorts. He’s to toss them and catch them to keep his mind occupied, though it seems more than a few get away from him. Keith does a run around to snatch them up and tosses them into the basket with the rest.

“Thanks,” Shiro nods. “Reminds me of softball practice when you were...what? Ten? You always volunteered to round up all the loose balls.”

Because he wanted to do the work no one else did. Work, any work, was what it took to be strong. And he wanted to be better than everyone else. Why not take the time to wrestle up the sports
“Do you remember the day we met?” Shiro asks and laughs a little when Keith shakes his head. “That’s fair. You were young.”

Keith remembers Shiro always being there. Teaching him at the Garrison. Coaching his little league baseball team. Camping trips. He can’t remember a time before Shiro.

“You were...eight? Maybe younger. I just joined your mother’s unit. She told me to drop by the house and pick up a few papers. Orders and forms. Stuff like that. You answered the door,” Shiro smiles as he reminisces.

Keith does remember that now that he’s mentioned it. He opened the door to a young soldier, still in his fatigues. Shiro introduced himself and shook Keith’s hand. So cool. A real soldier like his mom except...what Keith himself always wanted to look like. Shiro asked for Keith’s mom, who was busy in the kitchen starting on dinner.

And Keith’s first words to him were…

“Are you my mom’s boyfriend? Want to stay for dinner?” Keith recalls with mortification, his immediate reaction to cover his red face in shame.

Shiro bellows with laughter and Keith gives him a shove but it does nothing to deter him.

“So you do remember,” Shiro chuckles.

“I can’t believe I said that,” Keith mumbles, still embarrassed. “You were young enough to be her son too.”

“Isn’t that what I ended up being?” Shiro smiles fondly. “Felt like your mom adopted me right then. I came for work but stayed for dinner.”

Shiro came to dinner once a week after that. Like clockwork. They all needed it in their own way. It’s what started them on being their own family.

Keith’s mom finally had someone adult she could talk to after hours. Someone whose interests weren’t just in GI Joes and legos. When Keith really thought about it, she was lonely. And tired of doing things all on her own. Shiro alleviated her burdens when she needed it most.

Shiro’s family had always been so distant that he wasn’t sure what a real family was like. Joining the Kogane’s changed that for him. Shiro gained a mentor to learn from. A mother figure who gave a damn and constantly checked in on him to make sure he was okay. He even got the chance to be a brother to a sibling he never had.

And for Keith...the house was always happier when the three of them were in it. His mom sang in the kitchen on Friday’s. They’d all sit on the couch sharing popcorn as a movie played. Shiro’d throw a ball with Keith as his mom watched from the door. The only thought going through his head in those days was--

So this is a family.

His mom took the both of them camping a few times. Taught Keith how to set some snares for dinner. That didn’t last long though. One dead rabbit later and Keith was crying in his tent. They had to make a grave for it before Keith settled down. After that no more hunting, instead, they just ate the hot dogs they packed.
Man how things have changed.

Shiro sacrificed his weekends to coach his sports teams. To teach Keith how to change the oil in a car. How to replace a timing belt. His mom showed him how to make water drinkable when you don’t have filters. They both helped Keith train for the entrance exam for the Garrison. They gave up so much and what did it get them?

His mom bled out on the floor of an office building after taking the bite that was meant for Keith. She could have made it if Keith hadn’t panicked and did the amputation right. Shiro nearly died of an infection from an arm that wouldn’t have broken in the first place if Keith hadn’t tried to take on a horde by himself. If he’d just retreated when Shiro said so then he’d still have his arm.

Why did this have to happen to them?

“Why did you save me, Shiro?” Keith asks, his head tilted down, his eyes hiding behind bangs.


“But look what happened to you,” he says gesturing to his arm. “It’s my fault. It’s my fault you almost died. It’s my fault mom is…”

“Keith,” Shiro interrupts him and puts a palm on his shoulder. “Anything that happened to me or your mom wasn’t your fault. You didn’t pressure us into it. We knew the risks. It was our choice.”

“But was it worth it?” Keith asks, his eyes brimming with tears.

Was Keith worth it?

Someone knocks at the door and Keith hurries to wipe his face. No one needs to see him cry again.

Shiro tells the visitor to wait just a sec before he sighs and looks at Keith. His eyes are soft and sympathetic when he pats Keith’s head, just like his mom used to do. It brings Keith just as much relief to feel as it does nostalgic memory. Like his mom is still there in a way, living on through Shiro.

“If things hadn’t happened the way they did...we’d have never made it here,” he says softly. “I’m not saying be thankful it isn’t worse. Life’s full of give and take. Always has been. And it’s true that nowadays things are taken much more often...but we still get given things. And...I think it’s worth it.”

“You really think that?” Keith asks, trying not to let his voice waver again.

“I really do,” Shiro nods with smile. “My arm was taken from me but you know what I got for it? I got to keep my pain in the ass little brother and more. I’d give up both of my arms for that.”

“Shiro,” Keith snorts and gives him a shove before coming in for a hug. “Thanks, for saving me.”

“I love you kid,” Shiro tells him and pats his back. “As long as I’m kickin’, I’ll keep you safe.”

“Think mom would be proud of us?” Keith wonders.

“I think she’d be very proud of her sons,” Shiro nods and lets go to look him in the eye. “Prouder still if we keep out of harm's way from now on. Got me?”

Keith nods with a chuckle. Shiro always knows how to make him feel better.
He gets up and opens the door for Allura to let her in. She’s carrying a tray of vegetables and Shiro can’t hold back that fond smile as she puts it down on his lap. Her hand reaches over to feel his forehead and check his pulse, but it lingers long after necessary. Such affection in the contact.

Shiro lost his arm but it brought him to Allura...is that what he means? That strife is worth it? Does that apply to him and Lance as well?

Would he have ever met Lance at all if it weren’t for Shiro’s injury? If he tracks it back further, who takes credit for them ever meeting? Keith for being reckless and causing the injury? Lance for choosing the Walgreens to search? Sanda for sending them both to K-Quadrant? Was it all set in motion the moment they talked in the armory or when they both chose to join the Garrison?

Or is it all just...coincidence?

Guess he’ll never know for certain.

“Allura, can I get the door keys?” Keith asks before he leaves.

“I already gave them to Lance ten minutes ago,” she says.

He didn’t come and find him? That moron is going to get himself killed if he does things by himself. Keith nods his head and strides his way down to the main doors with a barely containable sense of urgency.

****

Lance was going to clear the walkway on his own. No reason for Keith to needlessly put himself in harm's way when he's fully capable of handling things on his own. But then he came by the memorial wall, keychain twirling in hand. The names and hanging tags caught his eye and stilled his steps and the jingling of the keys.

Now he just stares at the wall with his arms hanging at his side.

So many, and some are names he doesn’t recognize. Comrades of Allura’s he guesses from the swirling cursive. Lance reaches out and touches the tag of one of his teammates and sighs. Pidge kept them so they’d remember them and he reads over their names in silence.

_Linden Gebara, 2nd Lieutenant_
_Ariadna Blackburn, Gunnery Sergeant_
_Thea Kendricks, Private_
_Shannon Stanley, Captain_
_Tim De Voss, Corporal_
_Eric Garrard, Staff Sergeant_

He kissed Thea the day before she died. Lance pulled the ‘last night on earth’ line on her. Normally it never works but that night she laughed and took his offer. Kissed him on top of the bus. Then she got cornered in a store. Bitten but escaped. The Captain snapped her neck that night and they buried her in the morning next to an old church.

Tim was never the same after that. Didn’t take care of his gun. It jammed at the worst moment. Bitten, but he still did his best to push the walking corpses back. Gave Pidge and Eric time to escape back to the bus. Shoved his bloodied tags into her hands and begged them to go as he stayed. Pidge didn’t sleep for three days. Said she could still hear his screams of agony as they swarmed him.

Another hero taken before his time.
Lance sighs and shakes his head at the memory before looking on the names again. All of Echo Team minus the three of them.

He hopes he never has to see the names Sergeant Katie ‘Pidge’ Holt or Sergeant Hunk Garret hanging from a nail...Would his end up there one day too? Staff Sergeant Lance McClain. He clutches his dog tags at his heart tight in his hand at the thought but moves on to read the names on the wall too, out of respect for the dead.

Keith arrives at the doors and makes him jump when he speaks.

“What are you doing?” he asks and stands next to him.

“Paying my respects,” Lance answers and nods at the wall. “Your mom was a Major? That’s upper command. Why was she even on Alpha Team?”

“Technically she was demoted by Sanda to 1st Lieutenant and assigned to work under Shiro,” Keith reveals. “She thought it would sting to assign her to her own pupil. Jokes on her, she was honored.”

“Demoted? What for?” Lance asks and Keith smirks. He loves telling this story.

“She openly challenged her authority in front of other officers. Called her a murderer. Told her he didn’t deserve the silver stars on her shoulders that she got from bleeding innocents dry,” Keith says and crosses his arms with a dark chuckle. “She roughed up a few of the Admiral’s star lackeys on a regular basis too.”

“Wow. Sounds like a badass.”

“You have no idea,” Keith shakes his head. “Sanda insinuated that she better pick her battles more carefully or she’d end up with more than just a fistfight.”

“If she’s anything like you, I’m guessing she didn’t care,” Lance guesses with a laugh.

“Better,” Keith smiles. “She told her, straight to her face. ‘Don’t threaten me with a good time’.”

“Keith, I think I’m in love with your mom,” Lance dramatically sighs and Keith snorts.

“She taught me everything I know. She and Shiro. A great soldier. More integrity than the entire upper command. Shiro knew it. He deferred to her most of the time and everyone on Alpha still called her Major even after she died,” Keith nods solemnly. “She’s a hero.”

“She sure is,” Lance agrees.

That’s the most Keith has said in one sitting and glowing with pride the whole while. There’s no one in this shithole that he admired more than his mom and Lance can see why.

Lance puts the keys in his pocket and stands at attention in front of the wall. He raises his arm for a proper salute and Keith blinks in surprise. Lance looks more like a soldier now than he ever has. Keith straightens up and mirrors him, saluting the wall of fallen comrades as well.

“Thank you for your service,” Lance says then lids his eyes. “And your sacrifice.”

Keith can’t talk for the lump in his throat. This is far cry from a military funeral, one that all of their members deserved but...it’s more than they can expect nowadays. And it’s more emotional than he ever thought it would be. All Lance said was thank you but it felt more authentic than a twenty-one gun salute.
After they both salute they stand at ease and look at the names again with a sigh. Lance pulls the keys from his pocket and jingles them while looking at Keith.

“Come on. The rain’s let up a little. Let’s go clear the road before it picks up again,” Lance says as he raises his hood.

“How’s that?” Keith says quietly and Lance gives him a questioning glance. “For honoring her. She...I appreciate it.”

“Got to,” Lance smirks and pats his shoulder. “She saved your life. Gave you the chance to fall in love with this tall glass of water.”

Keith snorts at that and rolls his eyes while giving a flexing Lance a shove. But Lance notes that he doesn’t deny it. They draw their blades as Lance unlocks the doors and they step out into the rain. Together.

Chapter End Notes

If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment! Don't know what to say?
Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Fair deal?

(Also, if you really like Voltron stuff and want more, check out my other two fics. Tell me what you think of them!)
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

A little bit of a rush job. I have a convention coming up so you'll have to wait a bit before I have more ready. Show your love with kudos and comments.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hold on, to me as we go
As we roll down this unfamiliar road
And although this wave is stringing us along
Just know you’re not alone
-Phillip Phillips, Home

It’s a little misty. Little sprinkles of water continue to fall and dampen everything in sight. The walkway is clear today. Keith says it’s probably because of the rain. It throws off the undead with all its noise and decreased visibility. Makes sense to Lance. He always felt like it was safer on rainy days.

“We should check the snares,” Lance suggests. “Since we’re out here.”

Not a bad idea. If they do it before it starts pouring again they might even have some meat by dinner time. Some squirrel or rabbit. Hell, a rat would be pretty tasty about now. Meat is meat and they’ll take anything at this point.

The snares around the building are empty, though one looks like the animal had a lucky escape. That or the wind from the storm knocked it loose. It’s been triggered but nothing is in the noose. Keith takes a knee and fixes it up, resets the triggers while Lance keeps watch.

“Idea,” Lance hums. “Why don’t we set up a few around the barn too? Animals probably use it as a refuge from the rain.”

“I’ll go get the wire,” Keith nods as Lance tosses him the keys. “You scout good spots for set up.”

Keith runs inside while Lance makes his way to the barn. He spends a good few minutes walking around its perimeter, looking for little holes and such that rodents might use to enter and leave. He marks them with a little ‘x’ with his knife as he makes his second trip around. He looks up from the third one he’s found to see Keith approaching with a handful of tools. Stakes and wires.

“Told the others we’re setting up additional snares,” Keith tells him as gets down to inspect the hole. “Rat...or squirrel. Look at the chew marks. Small.”
“Sounds like food to me,” Lance shrugs and starts hammering in a stake.

They set up about two in each area. Should be enough to get something. Just as they’re hammering in the last one, the wind picks up. A sure-fire warning that another round of pounding rain is on its way. Doesn’t look nice at all. Grey and foreboding.

“We should head back,” Lance sighs.

“Wind’s fast, it’ll pass quickly,” Keith tells him. “We should set up a few inside too. Then we can wait for it to pass over before going back.”

“You trying to get me alone?” Lance winks.

“I’m trying to make sure we have enough to eat,” Keith huffs. “Even if it is barn rats.”

Rain starts to fall in fat drops again. They can literally see it approaching across the field, like a wave. Keith hammers one last time before grabbing it all up and scrambling inside, the two of them just barely avoiding the harsh slam of water as they close the door with a relieved sigh.

Warm and dry. Doesn’t look like there are any leaks in the roof either. They take off their jackets and shake them of drops before hanging them on stable hooks. Then the both of them look around for more hidden hidey holes. When they find a few they immediately set up some small snares. By dinner they should at least have something. When finished Lance takes a seat on one of the stable walls.

“That should be good. Bet Hunk could make a rat and tomato soup,” Lance thinks aloud. “Throw a few potatoes in there too. With some peppers.”

“Not a bad idea,” Keith nods. Soup sounds good with this weather.

Lance fiddles with a rope that’s looped onto a hook, probably for leading horses around the barn without having to saddle them. His eyes light up as he pulls it off the wall and alerts Keith.

“Heads up,” he says as he tosses it. Keith catches it with ease. “You said you were going to teach me a knot? Right? No time like the present.”

“This one’s too long,” Keith informs him and pulls his knife. He cuts it down to a much shorter length. Barely ten feet, if that. He tosses the excess aside and takes a seat on a stool.

“Kinda short, isn’t it?” Lance questions as he hops down to join him. He grabs a stool from the other side and drops into it next to Keith to watch.

“If anything it’s a little long. It’s not for leading or yanking anyway,” Keith says as he knots the ends so they won’t unravel. “Just for restricting movement. Let me see your wrists. I’ll show you how.”

Lance brings them out and Keith guides them closer together before beginning. Start with the bight, he says. It’s a loop created by the middle of the rope as opposed to the ends. Loop the tails through it around whatever two things you’re tying together and reverse the tension so it doesn’t go loose. Loop around and then pull the ends through the bight. He finishes up by separating the ends and running them between the wrists so he can’t pull his hands out.

“Guess it really was too long,” Lance muses as Keith runs the separated ends back up again between his wrists to shorten it further. Seems like there’s plenty of excess.

“Then you pull it as tight as needed and finish with a square knot,” Keith instructs. “Easy.”
“Hmm,” Lance hums as he inspects the work. “Doesn’t seem very useful for tying someone to anything.”

“It’s not for that,” Keith shakes his head. “It’s mostly for restricting limb movement but not the body. You can move me but I’m not able to move myself.”

“And it’s called a double because it holds two things at once right?” Lance asks as he looks it over again. Keith nods and Lance sits pensively for a moment as he breaks down the steps again. “Wouldn’t make more sense to teach me a single to start? Sounds like it would be easier.”

“We wouldn’t have anything you could anchor it to in the clinic,” Keith explains. “No point.”

“The cot is nothing?” Lance grins as Keith unties the knot so he can show it to him again.

“The cot wouldn’t be able to handle the strain of being pulled against,” Keith shrugs.

“You’re saying you’d break the cot?” Lance asks with a chuckle.

“I’d crumble it,” Keith smirks and Lance laughs harder.

“Show it to me anyway,” Lance insists.

Keith nods and shows him the knot. It is a bit easier than the double but only slightly. Lance decides that’s the one he wants to practice first. Once he takes the rope off again, he reaches for Keith’s to give it a try. The first try falls a little flat, but the second goes better. He gets all the loops and pulls right before turning Keith’s wrist over in his hand.

“Looks right. Is it too tight?” Lance wonders.

“Could be tighter. I can slip out of this,” Keith tells him and proves it by pulling his hand free. “See? Try again.”

Lance pouts and with firm concentration tries again. This time a bit tighter. He’s worried that maybe it’s too tight. Doesn’t want to hurt Keith after all. When he finishes Keith tries to wriggle out of it again but this time can’t quite get it out. Gets close though. If he wanted to hurt himself he could get out of it but he’d rather not.

“Better,” Keith nods with approval. “But it’s still loose. You can go tighter.”

“I keep thinking I’ll hurt you,” Lance says as he unties it again.

“I’ll let you know if it’s too tight,” Keith tells him. “If I don’t like something, I won’t be quiet about it.”

At least, now he’s not quiet about it. Have enough bad partners and you start getting a shorter tolerance for bullshit. It’s why he’d stopped for so long. Tired of getting hurt and in more ways than one.

“Oh, talking about those rules right?” Lance asks and tries retying again. “How does that work?”

It’s just basic communication rules but they’re the most important aspect to the type of play Keith likes. In Keith’s honest opinion, everyone should use them no matter how vanilla their sex might be. Words or phrases that let the other know it’s time to slow down or stop. To say if they want more or if they’ve had enough. As long as they’re respected, everyone has a good time. Keith never got into specific safe words or phrases. Mostly just stuck to colors and that’s it. Simple, fast, and efficient. No
“So if I wanted to do something to you but I didn’t know if you could handle it,” Lance starts and pulls tight on the rope. “I’d ask for what? Your color?”

Keith nods as his cheeks flush a little. The rope is nice and taut. He can’t even hope to wiggle out of it. Lance and his quick learning. Normally he wouldn’t use this scratchy rope for bondage. It’s too rough. The thinner synthetic stuff is better than hemp but...it’ll do in a pinch.

“Green is go. Yellow is proceed slowly. Red is full stop, no exceptions,” Keith tells him.

“Seems easy enough,” Lance nods with a shrug.

“You don’t have to ask for everything,” Keith tells him and tests the hold on Lance’s knot. It doesn’t yield under Keith’s pulling. “If I’m worried or something starts hurting bad enough, I’ll alert you with a color on my own. This one’s good. Much better.”

Lance beams with pride and winks at him. He knew he’d get it eventually.

The rain hammers hard on the roof and the two of them look up. It’s the middle of the wind burst. Another ten or fifteen minutes and the storm will let up again. At least long enough for them to run back to the clinic without getting drenched. So they have another fifteen minutes of privacy then.

Lance leans forward and pulls on the end of Keith’s wrist tie to bring him closer.

“Want to give those words a try for a bit? We’ve got some time,” Lance says, mouthing Keith’s neck. “I can even...practice my knotwork on you.”

It is the most alone they’ve ever been. No one within hearing distance. And he seriously doubts anyone will come out to look for them while the rain is at full strength. It doesn’t take long for Keith to come to a consensus about it. He nods and Lance pulls him to the center of the barn by the rope.

It seems Lance already has an idea for what he wants to do. He doesn’t bother untying the one good knot he already has on Keith. Instead, he ties the end to a post on one side of the barn. Keith stays there and watches as Lance retrieves the excess rope and cuts it down to another ten-foot length. He even knots the ends like Keith did.

“Give me your other wrist,” Lance gestures for it when he comes back. Keith lifts it and Lance clasps it firmly as he knots the rope around it.

Once it’s on and tight, Lance stretches the length to another post across the way so that Keith’s arms are outstretched. He can’t lower them more than an inch or two. When it’s secured Keith gives them a pull, tries to struggle free but to no avail. He really did tie them well. Keith flushes when Lance stands in front of him, admiring his work.

“Damn...I should have taken your shirt off first,” Lance sighs. “Oh well.”

Lance steps forward and runs a hand up Keith’s sides, thumbing the skin as the shirt raises. His fingers brush over Keith’s nipples and with hardly a warning he pinches one firmly. Keith gasps and the ropes creak as they strain. Lance does it again, this time with the other nipple and Keith pulls at his restraints as he tries to hold in his breaths.

“Barely even started and look at your face,” Lance chuckles. “How do you feel about scratches?”

“Green,” Keith breathes but then he lets out a loud surprised moan as Lance scrapes his nails down
"And if I scratched harder than that?" Lance whispers into his neck.

"Green," Keith says biting his lip to hold back the next one. Keith shakes as Lance scratches down his body even harder, leaving red marks pulsing with heat. God, is he hard already?

"What a look. Like a sex slave straight out of a porno. Wish I had a camera," Lance hums.

Keith hisses out a gasp as his nipple gets another not so gentle pinch, hardening it further. Lance sidesteps until he’s behind him and presses his body against Keith from behind, even runs a hand down his hips to rest at his belt while the other threads into his hair. A gentle combing through of his locks that Keith is sure will change into what he really wants in a manner of seconds.

He’s not wrong. Lance gives him a yank, forcing his face to look upwards to the rafters as he gasps.

"I could play with you all night like this and you’d have to sit there and take it," he purrs, kissing into his neck. "That’s the kind of thing you’d like, huh?"

"Y-Yes," Keith nods.

"Not good enough," Lance says with another tug to make him gasp. "Try again."

"Yes...s-sir," he stammers as heat rushes to his cheeks, flushing them.

"That’s better," Lance smirks.

Lance lets go of his hair and both hands work to take off his belt. Everything Lance does is so slow and purposeful. Fingers brushing the outside of his jeans as he unbuckles the belt. Hot breath on his neck as he slides that zipper open. He even palms his crotch between each layer until his hand is firmly on Keith’s cock, stroking him out of his jeans.

Keith can’t keep quiet and that’s the way Lance likes it. His little sighs and gasps are significantly louder out here. No fear of being heard or seen. Lance rests his chin at the juncture of Keith’s neck and shoulder, feeling and smelling that hair as he listens to those little noises.

"You ever been on a farm before?" he asks and then gives Keith a rough squeeze. "Answer me, slut."

"N-No, sir," Keith answers biting back a groan as Lance massages his balls. "N-Never."

"Look up. You see that, over there? Know what that is?" Lance asks but Keith shakes his head. "It’s a stock. Used to hold uncooperative animals in place so they can receive medical treatment without hurting anyone." Lance raises his mouth to Keith’s ear, a wicked smile on his lips as he whispers, "But I can think of better uses for it."

Keith’s eyes go wide looking at it now. Yes, he could easily fit in that. And with all the knots he’s been teaching Lance, he’d have no trouble trussing him to it. Lance is pulling him out now and stroking him firmly. Nothing like being helpless as Lance plays with him like a toy.

"Is it weird that I can see you strapped to it," Lance starts and strokes him a little faster before continuing with, "as guys upon guys lineup for the chance to fuck you? Bet you’d just love that."

God...he would now that he’s thinking about it. He’s never done anything with multiple people at once before but that doesn’t stop him from imagining it with a moan. Yes, bound and naked as a
train of men fuck him senseless, with Lance as the forerunner.

“If I wanted to do that to you, to tie you up like an animal and fuck you, what color would that get me?” Lance asks as he presses his hardon against Keith’s ass.

“G-Green,” he whines at the feeling.

“And what about all those guys? How would you feel about...all those cocks going into you?” Lance suggests. “I can think of about a dozen guys off the top of my head who’d jump at the chance to fill you up, both of your perfect holes. What’s your color on that, slut?”

“F-Fuck.” Keith whimpers. “G-Green…”

“What a dirty mouth you’ve got,” Lance grins into his neck.

He takes his hands off of Keith and he whines at the loss of contact. Lance pulls at Keith’s pants until they drop to his knees. Lance is exposing him, making him feel even more vulnerable as he pulls at his ropes. He squeezes at his ass, massaging it as he raises that shirt again and kisses down Keith’s back. Keith can feel his whole body shiver when his tongue darts out and licks from the base of his spine to his neck.

Keith can’t see it but he hears Lance put something in his mouth. He feels it before anything else. A finger. He lets out a shaking gasp when Lance presses the wet appendage against the entrance to his asshole. Gently he rubs as Keith pants at the feel of that teasing finger. When it loses the moisture Lance just sucks on a different finger and presses it against him again.

“Just imagine...you strapped right there, dripping with come...tender and sensitive...and me just...eating every drop out of you,” Lance rasps as his fingers tease. Keith whines and pants, thinking that he’s going to press it in but he doesn’t. He just teases. “You already taste so good...it’d be like licking icing off a cake.”

Keith whimpers at the image and pulls on his ropes, the strands creaking as they strain.

“And then I’d take you myself,” Lance promises. “Slow and deep. Fill you up. Maybe even make you hold it inside all day with a nice big plug. Would you like that?”

“Oh god...f-fuck,” Keith gasps as that finger circles his whole. He wants it so bad. “Please--”

“Want something in you now?” Lance asks and Keith makes a whimpering noise as he nods. “I can’t hear you slut.”

“Y-Yes sir, please...I w-want it…” Keith begs, his mouth hanging open as he pants. “F-Fuck me with it...I…”

“Nah ah. If you want it that badly…” Lance presses the slick finger against him but doesn’t penetrate, “…then you fuck yourself on it. I won’t do a thing. You have to work for it.”

Without hesitation, Keith presses back on that finger until it slides in. He then starts rocking with a moan.

“That’s it,” Lance sighs and bites at his lip while watching Keith go. “Show me.”

Can’t get in deep and like Lance promised he’s doing nothing to assist Keith in his endeavor. But god how he tries. Bucks his hips and squirms for more. It feels so good to have something inside him. Would feel even better if Lance added another finger...maybe two. Or...just that hard cock that
he knows Lance has right now from breaking him down. Hell, he'd jus take some movement on Lance's part at this point.

If he begs, will Lance give it to him? It’s worked before. And right now he'd take it raw and not regret it.

“M-more...p-please,” Keith pleads, sweat dripping down his neck as he strains. “L-Lance.”

“More?”

“Y-Yes, please…I want your--” Keith begs but Lance pulls on his hair to interrupt him.

“Listen to you,” Lance chuckles but shakes his head. “Maybe one day I’ll fuck you, when we have something better than spit. For now the most you’ll get is this.”

With that Lance finally moves his finger, purposefully curls it and presses in making Keith cry out with a shout. His fists clench tight and the ropes scrape roughly on his wrists as he pulls. They’re biting into his flesh but all he cares about is that probing finger, searching his insides.

Lance braces a hand on Keith’s hip to steady him and continues to leisurely thrust inside. Keith pants and moans as he strains against his ropes each time he goes in deep. Lance just watches as his back tenses, as sweat drips down his spine. Relishing in the accompanying moan each time his finger slides in. Then he goes for the best spot. That finger curls in again and this time Keith’s knees almost buckle when he rubs his prostate.

“F-Fuck!” Keith gasps, licking his dry lips.

Keith’s on the verge of snapping in half. His sobs and moans are so loud and each time he tries to quiet himself Lance thrusts harder or faster to get him screaming again. God his hands hurt. His shoulders ache. At this point Keith’s on his knees, arms painfully outstretched above him, and arching into each purposeful thrust of fingers with desperate moans. His cock hard, dripping, and just as flushed as Keith’s face.

“I wish I could do this all day,” Lance rasps in his ear.

He wraps his fingers around Keith’s throat and gives him a gentle squeeze as he picks up the pace. Keith only gasps and rocks onto that probing finger with excited pants, thinking finally he’s going to get to release. All he needs is Lance to tell him go but Lance only slows down to torture him more. He even chuckles when Keith whines at the teasing pace. The thrusting slows to a stop, the only penetration coming from Keith desperately rocking his hips for more.

Then Lance slowly slides out of him and stands up.

“N-No! Please,” Keith says looking up at him with desperate eyes. He pulls at his restraints in his frustration. He doesn’t want to stop yet! He’s so close!

“Rain’s slowed down,” Lance tells him. “The others might come looking if we take too much longer. We can finish later.”

Keith understands but...damn!

He nods, panting slowly to get his breath back as Lance unties his ropes. They go slack and he’s noticing now that he’s got more than a few rope burns. Some of them have broken skin and gotten a little blood on the hemp. He knew he was pulling that hard, could even feel the burning. But it paled in comparison to the pleasure Lance was dealing him so he let it tear into his skin without a second
thought.

Lance takes a knee to help untie the knots around his wrists and blinks with concern.

“You didn’t say it was hurting you,” Lance says, his tone worried as he looks over his skin. “I could have loosened them Keith. Christ. Why didn’t you--”

“It felt good,” Keith shrugs and pulls the arm out of his hold. “And I didn’t want to stop.”

“Didn’t want to stop? You’re bleeding!” Lance gestures to the injury. “Next time please say something. Hurting you is the last thing I want to do.”

That sounds entirely too sweet. Normally something like that would make Keith laugh. It’s so counter to what he’s into, what he's used to, that it sounds funny to hear someone say it. Doesn’t want to hurt Keith? But that’s kinda the point. Little bits of pain are what make this so enticing to him. This is barely a scratch compared to what his body’s been through in the hopes of getting off.

“It’s not that big a deal,” Keith huffs and stands to pull his pants up. “I’ve been through worse.”

“Worse?” Lance repeats, eyes widening with even more concern. “Are you ser--”

“Not all of my scars are from living out here,” Keith tells him and fixes his shirt to hide one of those marks. “I’ve been cut, scratched, bruised, and beaten.”

“But I thought...You said you don’t like getting hit,” Lance remembers and steps forward. His annoyance at Keith’s lack of communication is put on hold at this more troubling revelation.

“I don’t,” Keith sighs and puts a hand on his jacket, his back facing Lance. “I don’t like blade play either. But some people get off on those. And if I was desperate enough, I gave them what they wanted so I could get what I wanted.”

“Keith…” Lance starts but he’s not sure what to say to that.

Some of those scars were from things like this that were supposed to be fun?

Lance has seen so many on his body but he always attributed them to roughing it out here. Some of those were inflicted on him? On purpose? His chest tightens just imagining it. Keith...tied up and subjecting himself to being cut down, literally, for the chance to get off. Being smacked around just so someone will whisper dirty insults to him. Toeing the line of pain and pleasure but getting more of the former so he could have a small taste of the latter.

It’s not fair.

He tries to come in close with a comforting pat to the shoulder, to let him know that he would never do something like that but Keith shirks his hand. Now he’s not in the mood for anything, not even nice warm embraces.

“Keith, I--”

“Forget it,” Keith sighs as he shrugs on his jacket. “Like you said, we should get back. I’ll check the snares again. Don’t wait for me.”

Keith leaves ahead of him, letting the wind swing the door open and smack onto the barn repeatedly. Lance stands there, looking down on the length of rope on the ground with a smattering of blood. He did this. Unintentionally but it still makes him feel a little ill.
He tries to recall the marks on Keith’s body. There’s a scar on his lower back near his spine, jagged and poorly healed. He’d think it was from falling on broken glass but there’s another one on his shin. And one more across the top of one of his pecs. They’re similar. All likely from the same person. Someone with more dangerous proclivities than Lance.

If Lance gets a say, no one’s doing anything of the sort to Keith again. Keith might be fine with it but...he’s not. And he has to let him know that. He picks the rope up, winds it into a loop and drapes it over a stable wall with a deep breath before exiting the barn and closing the door behind him.

For now, Lance does what Keith asks and goes on ahead back towards the clinic, a pensive frown on his face. He’ll talk to Keith later about their mishap with communicating after he’s had some time to think.

*****

Allura is waiting at the door when Keith goes in, keys in hand and ready to lock up once he enters. He brings in his haul, two rabbits slung over his shoulder, and takes them to their resident chef. Pidge looks up from her book and with excitement elbows Hunk, whos’ fallen asleep next to her. He sputters out something incoherent before she elbows him again, this time waking him.

“Are those--” Hunk starts as he jumps up from the chair.

“Two of them,” Keith nods. “Need me to gut and skin them or can you handle that?”

“I got it,” Hunk nods as he takes them from Keith. He licks his lips thinking of the ways he can cook them. “Mmm, rabbit stew. Shame we don’t have some onions and carrots.”

“You’ll think of something,” Pidge grins and Hunk nods, taking the beasts to a different room to prepare them for later. “You just made his day.”

“And our dinner,” Keith smirks.

He looks around the room but the only other person there is Matt and he’s deep into a comic book, taking no notice of anyone else. No Coran. And no Lance.

“He’s in the lab, getting water,” she says as she picks up Rover for a cuddle.

“I didn’t ask,” Keith huffs and starts to leave.

“You didn’t have to,” Pidge smirks but then goes serious. “He asked for some bandages earlier and alcohol. Did he get hurt?”

Not physically, Keith thinks. He absentmindedly touches his wrist before swallowing. The supplies are probably for him, after scolding for his behavior. He shakes his head to answer her question.

“Gonna go work out in my room,” Keith tells her.

“We’ll come get you when it’s dinner time,” Pidge nods as she ruffles Rover’s fur.

Keith strides down the halls quickly. He passes by Lance’s room but doesn’t hear anything from within. Must still be out. He enters his own room and closes the door behind him. When he flicks the light on it reveals bandages and disinfectant sitting on the counter.

He tosses his jacket onto the cot and sits to begin treating the small injury. Dabs the alcohol swab over it, not even wincing as it stings. Barely worth the effort since it’s so small to begin with but he
would be remiss not to treat it. He really doesn't need an open wound or an infection near his
dominant zombie stabbing hand.

Ugh, Lance was right. He probably should have said something sooner when he first started feeling
pain. If for no other reason than to ration their medical stores better. Though supplies are probably
the last thing on Lance’s mind. With that thought, he bandages the wound and secures it with
medical tape.

With a shake of his head, he stands up from the cot and changes into his scrubs. He doesn’t like
getting his day clothes too sweaty. As he’s pulling the scrub pants on there’s a knock at the door. For
a moment, he considers not answering as he’s not in the mood for a lecture.

“What?” he says as he stretches to his toes.

“Can I come in?” Lance asks.

“No,” Keith huffs as he straightens back up and cracks his neck. “What do you want?”

“Just checking to make sure you cleaned your scrape,” Lance tells him.

“I did,” he assures him. “Anything else?”

“I uh…” Lance starts but lets out a resigned sigh. “No. You clearly don’t want to talk. Later,
whenever you’re up to it.”

Keith listens as his steps echo down the hall. A slow, somber gait that takes him toward the stairs so
he can watch the rain again. No humming or anything. Just silence fills the air and while Keith
doesn’t like that at all he starts on his workout regardless. Keep active and just don’t think about it,
he tells himself.

It’s not a big deal, right?

He barely gets a set of push-ups in before his stomach churns with guilt. Feels like a jerk. He
practically extolled the importance of communicating and trust. It’s about mutual respect, for both
parties. Lance understood that but then Keith went and--he tries to excuse it, thinking he didn’t want
to put a damper on how much fun they were having by whining about a little rope burn. He can
handle some pain and just assumed Lance wouldn’t care, just like...Keith shakes his head at an old
memory.

No, that’s not true...

This isn’t too tight?

Probably shouldn’t...I wouldn’t know how to without hurting you.

I keep thinking I’ll hurt you.

He didn’t say anything because he knew Lance would care. He’d stop everything they were doing to
make sure Keith was okay. And he didn’t want that. That’s really why he kept quiet. Because he
was selfish and wanted to get off, regardless of Lance’s feelings on it. For his pleasure and at
Lance’s emotional expense.

Next time please say something. Hurting you is the last thing I want to do.

It’s supposed to be balanced trade so that both sides get what they want but...Keith tipped the scales
so that it all came to him. He made Lance inadvertently do something he’s morally against just to feel
good for a few minutes. Figured he’d overlook the damage since they were having fun but...Keith
poisoned that entire interaction with that stunt. All he did was show Lance he couldn’t be trusted.

That’s...the epitome of disrespect. Lance should be bothered by it. Actually, he should be pissed.

“What’s--”

“Just tell me off already!” Keith grumbles. “It was stupid, alright? I was stupid. I’m sorry.”

Lance blinks but averts his eyes as Keith continues.

“I’m a selfish prick and all I care about is myself,” Keith tells him.

“If that were true, you wouldn’t be out here apologizing,” Lance says and gives him a smirk.

“I uh…”

“Sit up here,” Lance says, patting the seat. “So you don’t have to yell.”

Keith swallows and clenches his fists. This is not how he thought this was going to go. Lance is
supposed to yell at him and tell him to get lost but he’s gesturing him to come closer.

He slowly makes his way up the stairs and sits down a step below Lance’s. He pats the seat again
and Keith slides up one more so that they’re on the same one. On even ground. Lance doesn’t look
even moderately pissed and it’s confusing the hell out of him.

“Why aren’t you mad at me?” Keith frowns, his jaw tight.

“I’m furious,” Lance says with a smile and Keith blinks at him with disbelief. “At least, I was.”

“Was?” Keith repeats and Lance nods. He reaches over and takes Keith’s wrist in his hand.

“I keep thinking about what you said,” Lance sighs and massages the bandage. “That you’ve had it
worse. And that made me think...you had a few people who were more than okay with overstepping
your boundaries. So you thought it’d be fine if you did it with mine too.”

That’s... truer than he’d like to admit. He remembers the scar on his chest and rubs it through the
fabric with his off hand. Keith had thought about saying ‘red’ back then, thought about screaming it
but it had been so long. And...he wanted to impress his dom. Not to mention he wanted to be tied up
and teased. Wanted to be satisfied. And if that’s what it was going to cost him to feel
something...then it was worth it, right?

He figured if someone was going to do that to him, why not do the same back? Keith survived it
without any permanent damage, why shouldn’t Lance be able to handle it too? It’s not like he’s
physically injuring Lance. At least, that was how he thought but now he’s seeing he doesn’t have to
touch Lance to hurt him.

“I get why you didn’t say anything...still kinda bugs me though,” Lance explains.
“Lance--”

“I’m not okay with it...or with hurting you--not like that,” Lance says closing his eyes to focus. “The other stuff fine. I’ll give you all those things you like. The ropes, the insults, the hair pulling, the teasing, all of it. But if we’re gonna keep doing this, please don’t put me in a position like that again. It makes me feel...wrong.”

He made Lance feel like Keith's injury was his fault...it made him feel sick to his stomach. Keith looks down, appropriately ashamed of his behavior. Lance’s hand is still massaging gently at his bandages. His fingers curl around Keith’s and hold there for a moment waiting for some kind of response.

Of course he wants to keep doing things with Lance. And not just because it's hot and sexually satisfying.

“I’ll...be more considerate,” Keith mumbles out.

“Thanks,” Lance manages to smile. “Cool if I hug you? I’m a hug-it-out kinda guy.”

Keith shrugs but nods so Lance encompasses him in a warm hug and buries his face into his neck. Keith feels his heart thrum and rests his head on Lance’s shoulder. He forgave him so easily. And damn if this hug doesn't make him feel just as weak as having his hands tied.

“You don’t have to exceed your limits with me,” Lance reiterates and then chuckles. “I can’t think of a bigger turn-off. I’ll never get a boner again.”

“I somehow doubt that,” Keith snorts but pulls out of the hug, not able to meet Lance’s eye.

Lance fingers touch down on Keith’s chin and raise it up so he’ll look at him. His thumb brushes lips and Lance lets out a sigh. He wants to kiss him but...Keith already said he wasn’t okay with that. Not when someone could walk in at any time and he's not sure he'd be able to stop at just one kiss. He takes his hand back and shoves it into his jacket pocket.

“Will you come over tonight?” Lance asks, his tone hopeful.

“Depends,” Keith shrugs. “What do you want to do?”

Lance smiles and looks out at the rain.

“I was thinking we’d play cards again,” Lance says and snorts with laughter at Keith’s confused face. “What? You think all I want to do is fool around?”

When you’re good at something, why do anything else?

“Oh right. Keith blinks with sudden recollection. He’d completely forgotten about the run.
They haven’t done much in the way of preparing for it other than make a list of items they want. They haven’t even decided on which car to take. Matt picked up a local map from the hardware store too. They could mark out a route and divide up the search areas for each day they’re out there. Even pick a temporary home base on the outskirts of the town.

“Or we could just, relax tonight. Take it easy. Which do you want to do?”

If he had to decide between playing games while talking about nothing or making battle plans or not seeing Lance at all...

“Cards,” Keith decides and scratches his head. “We can look over the map with the whole team in the morning. Matt’s good at planning a route.”


“Rabbit stew,” Keith smirks.

“Ah Hunk. You’ve done it again you beautiful culinary angel,” Lance rubs his hands together with excitement. “Someone needs to marry that guy or I’m gonna end up proposing just for his food. Come on, let’s see if we can sneak a taste before dinner. “

Lance stands and cracks his knuckles before tugging Keith out of his seat and dragging him down the stairs. He thinks to say something as they reach the bottom landing, about the hand holding but Lance lets go before they open the door. He gestures ‘after you’ and follows Keith out. Then he rests a casual elbow on Keith’s shoulder as they walk the hall like they’re old friends heading to the canteen for dinner.

It’s not romantic he supposes. Friendly and something he does with everyone on the team, so he has no objections. Lance articulates his sentences with wild hand movements as he describes the most delicious goulash that Hunk made once. Keith shakes his head, saying that hedgehog is not an acceptable meat substitute for beef and never will be.

“You say that now,” Lance tells him. “But wait till we get a hand on another hedgehog. You’ll change your tune. Ah...but we don’t have paprika...I’ll add it to the list.”

“Are you talking about that goulash again?” Pidge asks, running to catch up and joining them on Lance’s other side with a dog on her heels.

“You know it! Hey, remember when--”

Lance just talks and talks as Pidge adds in her own commentary on the topic. She laughs saying something along the lines of Hunk’s snake jerky was so much better while Lance pretends to gag in Keith’s direction. Makes Keith snort as he shoves him off but agrees that snake jerky sounds terrible. And he was raised in Texas so he knows a good snake meat recipe when he hears it. Jerky just sounds...bad. Lance heartily agrees and Pidge argues it's merits once again.

Keith listens to them bicker about it more and he has to wonder if this is the sort of thing he missed out on at the Garrison, all because he saw friendships as a weakness to avoid. It's nice and wishes he'd tried making friends like this sooner.

Guess Shiro's right. Life really does bring good things with the bad.

Better late than never.
Chapter End Notes

If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment! Don't know what to say? Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Fair deal?

(Also, if you really like Voltron stuff and want more, check out my other two fics. Tell me what you think of them!)
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Need a little hiatus break so subscribe when you want to know about an update. (Convention was exhausting, I'm burning out)
Also, your comments give me life and energy. My writing subsists on your thoughts and ideas. Don't be shy. Write a thing at the bottom and maybe on any chapters you especially love.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

So come on, get higher, loosen my lips
Faith and desire and the swing of your hips
Just pull me down hard
And drown me in love

-- Matt Nathanson, *Come and get higher*

As hard as they try to sneak a taste before dinner, Hunk is not having it. Smacks Lance’s hand twice with a huge wooden spoon both times he tries to scoop some with a spoon on his own. Bumps Pidge away with his hips. Then with his amazing strength he simply picks the both of them up, one in each arm, and tosses them out of the lab he’s cooking in.

“And stay out,” Hunk jokingly threatens. “Or you won’t get any.”

“What about Keith? He’s still in there with you,” Lance complains.

“I haven’t tried to steal any,” Keith shrugs indifferently.

“He also brought the rabbits in the first place,” Hunk adds. “If he wants an early taste, he can have it.”

“What?! No fair!” the exiled duo exclaim.

“Get moving,” Hunk shoos them. “It’ll be done when it’s done. Go get set the table.”

Lance and Pidge go but not without some grumbling as they look over their shoulders to give Keith and Hunk the evil eye. Keith smirks with a haughty look on his face as Lance stick out his tongue and Pidge flips him the bird. But they do leave to go about setting up the table.

Matt’s still in the rec room. It’s become the place he lives now. His cot with thin pallet is set up in the corner, bed made with perfect hospital corners. He’s lucky the room is so big with room to spare, otherwise, people might be tripping over his living space. At the moment he’s sitting at the table, bouncing his head to music reverberating out of the corner of the room.
Pidge found a working plug-in boombox in one of the cars when they raided them. She also found a host of rotted away snacks in coolers as if the previous owner was on his way to a grilling party before shit hit the fan. Rotten hamburgers, moldy bread, and some pretty skunky beer, the smell of which almost made her forgo searching it at all. But the boombox was a good find, as was the huge case of CDs in the car.

Allura says its fine provided they don’t play it too loud. Corpses find their way to the clinic often enough without adding sound to the mix. Otherwise, she likes it. Creates an atmosphere of normalcy they usually don’t have, even if to her dismay there’s nothing classical in the cd folder.

“Is that Mumford and Sons?” Lance asks with a smile as he enters.

“It is!” Matt beams with excitement. “I haven’t heard music in forever. The Garrison never lets us play it because it drains resources. I get it but what a morale killer.”

“What else they got?” Lance wonders as he flips through the sleeves of CDs. His smile turns into a grimace as he leans away with disgust. “Nickelback? Come on...for a second I thought this guy had taste.”

“Lance, am I the only one who’s gonna set this table?” Pidge asks, gesturing to the silverware.

“Alright, alright. I’m coming,” Lance sighs and points at Matt. “If you put that in there, you’re dead to me.”

Matt laughs and flips through the CDs as they set down plates and silverware. He throws in a burned CD without a label and it turns out to be Coldplay and a mix of it at that. Some from their older albums others newer. Lance gives him a thumbs up of approval and they leave it in for the time being as they set up.

Coran returns from the roof, only slightly damp and carrying a little bowl. They eye it curiously and he reveals a total of eight strawberries. Small ones but fully formed and vibrant red. Enough for everyone to each have one for after dinner. Lance’s fingers twitch with excitement, thinking of screwing dinner and eating one now. It’s not like anyone would notice but then Pidge narrows her eyes at him.

Guess he’ll have to wait after all.

Allura arrives with the esteemed Shiro leaning on her shoulder. Each day he’s looking better and better at least where his arm is concerned. His face is another matter. Looks like he hasn’t been sleeping well and when Matt asks about it he tells them they’re out of painkillers. Makes getting rest difficult but he’s managing.

They take their seats around the table, discuss the music currently being played, and laugh at a few of Lance’s jokes. But all goes quiet when Keith opens the door and holds it for the stew’s grand entry. Hunk comes in beaming smile and flushed cheeks as he carries the warm pot, extremely pleased with how it turned out. Once it’s all divvied out they dig in.

It’s divine. Rabbit stew with tomatoes and potatoes and just the right amount of peppers. There’s some other kind of meat in there as well, cut into little cubes and Lance comically pales for a moment.

“Where’s Rover?” he asks but then there’s a bark at his feet. “Oh thank god.”

“Jesus, Lance. Like I’d let Hunk cook the dog,” Pidge snorts, almost choking on her food. “I’d cook you before Rover.”
“Gee thanks,” Lance frowns.

“It’s salami. Remember the restaurant? We found a whole cured one,” Hunk reminds him. “It’s super salty, so helps us save on using the salt. Plus, adds a little extra spice and meaty flavor.”

“Well, it’s delicious,” Allura smiles and sips her soup.

“It was Keith’s idea,” Hunk points at him with his spoon and everyone’s eyes fall on Keith.

He feels his cheeks heat up as he looks away with a frown. It was just a tip his mom gave him. Cured meats are great for adding extra flavor to soups. She used to pack jerky when they went camping and boil it with stuff they found out in the woods. Mushrooms, chicory, and wild asparagus. It’s not something he’d put on the table for a dinner party but...it was edible, nutritious, and better than bitter plants.

“My mom told me about it,” Keith mumbles, uncomfortable with all these eyes on him.

“She was an amazing cook,” Shiro compliments. “She’d have loved this Hunk.”

“Hey Keith, what happened? To your hand?” Matt asks, drawing even more attention to him.

“I snagged it on a nail in the barn while setting up snares,” Keith lies. “Nothing to worry about.”

“How’s the weather out there, Coran?” Lance asks, changing the subject and bringing the focus off of Keith.

It’s looking much better. When he went up earlier it had almost stopped. Just sprinkling. He’d even venture a guess that it’s done by now. Hunk gets up and opens the window to check. A burst of air enters bringing in the smell of residual moisture but he confirms Coran’s hunch. It’s looking pretty nice out there if not dark.

This is good news. If they give it a day, let the sun dry everything out again, they’ll be able to start construction soon. Probably on the same day Keith and Lance leave for the supply run.

“Good because Pidge and I finalized the designs,” Hunk nods as he takes a seat with them again.

“Yeah! Wanna see the plans, Shiro?” Pidge asks, eyes lit up.

“Of course,” Shiro chuckles as Coran takes his empty bowl.

It’s the doctor’s turn to wash the dishes and while they do that Shiro is swarmed by the tech trio as they show him the schematics. They point out every little thing and how it’s going to be done. Shiro looks it over and nods at the draft. He thinks they should consider a lookout spot on the wall somewhere and immediately the nerds snatch the papers from him to update the design.

Lance leaves the table and sits next to the boombox on the floor. He bobs his head around as he flips through the binder again for another cd, calling out the quality of the music as he reads the discs. Good. Good. Garbage. Trash. Dumpster fire. Good. Great. His eyes light up as they fall on a familiar cd and he pops it in.

Been a while since he’s heard Red Hot Chili Peppers.

When they finish badgering him for more input, Shiro palms the playing cards on the table. He makes an offer of old maid to anyone who wants to play. At least for a few rounds before he turns in. Allura and Coran take him up on it, along with Hunk. Pidge, on the other hand, picks up another
bored and kicks back on her brother’s cot to read it. Matt joins her but flips through one of Lance’s comic books instead.

Keith isn’t sure where he wants to be so he just watches the game from over Shiro’s shoulder.

“Have you picked out a car from the lot yet Keith?” Shiro asks as he draws a card. “For the run?”

“No,” Keith shakes his head. “We need something with plenty of trunk space and decent mileage.”

“Oh!” Matt snaps and looks up. “There’s a Prius out there that might work. Seats fold down too.”

“The red one?” Coran asks and twists his mustache. “I believe it has a manual transmission. Can you either of you youngins drive that?”

Lance nods his head to the tune of the music but answers while wagging fingers to the beat. “Most of the trucks at the Garrison are manual. I’m great at working a stick.”

Pidge and Matt snort but hide behind their books when Lance gives them a look of disapproval. The others in the room stifle little chuckles of their own. Really? A dick joke?

“Real mature guys,” Lance says shaking his head at them.

“You’re just mad that it was at your expense,” Pidge grins behind her book. “You would have jumped on that with a ‘that’s what she said’ if any of us had said it.”

“Maybe so,” Lance grins and pops in another CD. When the music starts both Holt siblings jump up from the cot, abandoning their books to the ground with excitement.

“Daft Punk! Hunk! Dance with me!” Pidge beams with stars in her eyes.

“Thanks, Lance,” Lance mimics her. "You're the best."

“Thanks, Lance,” Pidge smiles. “Now shut up, it’s technologic time!”

The tech trio starts dancing, all different renditions of the robot and all equally bad at it. That said it’s entertaining to watch and brings a smile to everyone’s face as they laugh. Lance drums on his knees to the bass beat while humming and Shiro taps his foot in time with the melody. Puts everyone in a fine mood. Even Keith across the way looks on with a small smile.

It’s not often a roomful of people has the chance to relax like this so they better enjoy it while they can.

“What about you, Keith?” Coran asks. “Can you drive a stick shift?”

“I can. We won’t have any issues,” Keith informs him.

“If you give Hunk an hour with it he can just remove the back seats entirely,” Pidge comments as she dances. “Room for more stuff.”

It’s a good idea but it’ll have to wait until daylight. They can do it tomorrow. Matt offers to help them plot a course and such too. Just let him know and he’ll get the map out with some pens.

After a couple of rounds of old maid, Shiro’s ready for bed. He stands and bids the team good night. Insists they don’t stay up too late. Get plenty of rest. They all nod and say goodnight as Coran walks him back to his recovery room. Surprises Keith because he half expected Allura to do it but she remains at the table, gentle eyes on him.
“Shiro tells me you’re quite reckless,” Allura says to Keith as she gathers the cards. “You tend to get injured a great deal more than most.”

“Shiro needs to shut his--”

“Now, now. No need for that,” Allura chuckles. “I put this together for you.”

She slides a little notebook across the table to him. Barely bigger than a checkbook. Keith takes it and turns it over in his hands before opening it to scan the pages.

Diagrams and instructions for all sorts of emergency situations. It’s handwritten and fairly detailed. Keith has some idea of basic first-aid, they all do, but this goes a lot further than their training covers.

“All that I think you’ll run into too much trouble. You all seem capable fighters,” Allura says as he eyes it. “I did simplify the procedures. No need for it to be extremely technical but it should cover all the bases.”

It’s divided up into sections depending on injuries. How to treat breaks, cuts, and puncture wounds depending on the material of which the injury was caused by. How to conduct CPR complete with illustrations. Identifying the difference between cardiac arrest and a collapsed lung. The only thing in the booklet he has any previous knowledge of is how to treat minor scrapes and pop a dislocated shoulder back in place.

In the case of undead bites there’s a guide she’s put together on how long one has to amputate in relation to the location of the injury before infection takes root. She even includes the best spots to cut and different ways to cauterize a wound when materials are scarce.

It’s very comprehensive. If this is simplified he’d hate to see the technical version.

“Thanks,” he nods as he flips through it.

“It is my sincerest hope that you will not need it,” she says with a sympathetic smile. “Coran’s put together a small medkit as well. Be sure to get it from him before you leave.”

Keith nods and looks over the pages. He’s not truly reading it so much as he’s cataloging what’s inside and where to find it. That way if they do end up needing it, he’ll know where to look. The song changes and loud humming interrupts his thoughts. It’s Lance humming along with the boombox.

I usually only sing alone.

Guess it’s true. Lance doesn’t sing when there are others in the room. Just to himself. Or to Keith in the middle of the night. With that thought, he blushes and gets behind his book to hide. At least long enough to quickly will the heat away.

“Are you leaving tomorrow?” Allura asks him as she puts away the cards.

“Day after,” Lance interrupts, snapping his fingers to the song. “It’ll give the muddy roads a chance to dry up.”

“Then be sure to clean up tomorrow,” she says. “You won’t get the luxury again until you return.”

“You better believe I’m taking another bath before we go,” Lance says, rubbing his hands together with excitement.
Allura lets out a long yawn that she seems almost embarrassed by before telling them she’s turning in for the night. Hunk says he’s ready to head out too. All that dancing has him exhausted. The Holt siblings stay, at least for another song or two before sprawling back out on Matt’s cot to read comics. Matt laid out on his stomach with his sister sitting Indian style on his back, both with their nose in a book.

“Nerds,” Lance jokes but stretches from his seat next to the boombox before standing. “Night guys,” he says, shooting Keith a subtle wink before leaving.

Keith waits a few minutes before grabbing the cards from the table and pocketing them. Gives those remaining a silent nod and leaves to wander down the halls. He knocks on the door and Lance tells him it’s open. After shouldering his way in he closes the door behind him.

Lance is already in his scrubs and sitting on the cot.

“Got the cards?” he asks and Keith tosses the pack to him.

“Here,” Lance says and tosses something back. Keith catches it easily and eyes it. Strawberry. “I was too full to eat it at dinner. You can have it.”

Keith frowns but his cheeks warm. Was Lance watching him at dinner? The way he took his own strawberry from the bowl with a flash of excitement in his eyes. As much as he hates candy and sweets, he does have a weak spot for fruit. It may not be a blueberry but it’s almost as good. He pops it into his mouth with a mumbling ‘thanks’ before approaching the cot.

Right away Lance pulls put the cards and shuffles as Keith kicks off his boots to get more comfortable. Tosses his jacket onto the counter and sits down with his legs crossed on his side of the cot just as Lance riffles the deck. It’s mesmerizing and he still can’t will himself not to stare at those dexterous fingers. He then begins dealing out the cards.

“Did you see the music selection? Some good stuff in there,” Lance tells him.

Lance does most of the talking this time as they play. Mostly about music and Keith just nods his head as he listens. He doesn’t know half of the bands Lance mentions but he doesn’t mind hearing about them. Lance seems to know everything about his favorites, including but not limited to every band member’s name, their ages, and the year their albums came out.

Keith keeps thinking to say something. Lance can’t want to just play cards but he seems to be having a grand time. Nonstop talking as they play.

“We really just gonna play Gin?”

“Why?” Lance asks as he draws up. “Did you want to play something else?”

That’s what Keith wants to ask. Is there anything Lance wants to do? Anything Lance specifically wants? But right now it looks like he’s content with this. Happy, just playing cards with him. Keith shakes his head.

“No, this is good,” he says with a half smile and draws up. “Gin.”

They play a dozen more rounds as Lance talks. Now it’s shifted to his family and some of their trips to the beach. How much he misses pizza and wants to go to the arcade. Such a shame that beach vacations just aren’t going to happen anymore. He’d even happily take another shark bite if it meant he could go swimming again.
Before they know it it’s nearly eleven. Lance does a double take at his watch before announcing the time with surprise. Did they really play for two hours? It went by so fast. He gathers up the cards and starts putting them away. Keith starts pulling his boots back on and Lance taps his shoulder.

“You don’t have to go,” he tells him.

“But we didn’t do anything,” Keith shrugs. “I don’t need to stay.”

“So? You can if you want to,” Lance chuckles.

He does want to but...feels like he shouldn’t. Like he doesn’t deserve it, hasn’t earned it. Guilt from his actions earlier still plants itself deep in his gut. Feels like he still needs to make it up to Lance before he can partake of that comforting warmth and those passionate kisses. He’s just not sure how to do that...

“No thanks,” he says turning away and shoving a foot into a boot. Fingers start tying before adding, “Think I’ll sleep alone tonight. Sorry.”

“It’s cool,” Lance says but there’s a slight disappointment in his tone. “I’ll be in here. In case you change your mind. Anytime. No strings.”

Keith nods his understanding and stands from the cots. He takes the cards and leaves Lance to his lonesome, returning to the rec room to drop off the box.

The room isn’t empty. Matt is sprawled out on his cot and out of it, complete with snoring. Pidge now sits at the table with her feet up on it, reading yet another construction book. She looks over the tome to eye Keith as he drops the deck of cards on the table.

“Oh man, what did he do this time?” she sighs as she closes her book.

“What?” he blinks with confusion but then understanding. She’s talking about Lance. “Nothing. He didn’t do anything.”

She takes the cards out of the pack and shuffles them, her face unconvinced.

“You look...weird,” she settles on when she can’t find the word she really wants. “If it’s about Lance, I’m all ears.”

This seems as good a time as any to discuss it with an outside party. Nosy Matt is asleep and everyone else is gone. Why not? Pidge has to know him better than anyone else on their team. They slept together on multiple accounts, so she must know things others don’t. He takes a seat as she deals him a hand of cards.

“I...upset him,” Keith says as he takes the hand.

“What you think he’ll hold a grudge?” Pidge snickers and adjusts her frames.

“He says it’s fine but...”

“If Lance says it’s all good, then it is. You’d know if he was lying,” Pidge shrugs and plays a card. “He’s really bad at it.”

They play quietly for a bit and Pidge takes the lead. She’s grabbing up all the good cards and leaving nothing but garbage behind for Keith. Not like he cares. His mind isn’t on winning. Pidge frowns at him and draws another card.
“What’s really bothering you?” she asks.

“Nothing,” he says and she flicks a card at him hitting him in the forehead.

“You’re worse at lying than Lance,” she claims and points a finger at him. “Spit it out.”

“I…” Keith starts and takes a deep breath as he lowers his volume. He doesn’t want to wake Matt or risk someone overhearing him. “I want to make it up to him but not until I know what he likes. He only ever wants to do whatever I want to do.”

“Alright, alright,” she says putting her cards down and rubbing her hands together with excitement. “About time we got to the dirty questions about Lance. What do you want to know? Seriously, nothing’s off limits.”

Keith stifles a snort but asks away. No time like the present for a little reconnaissance.

Favorite position? Anything where he can see his partner’s face. Next. Top or bottom preference? He's a fan of either. Turn-ons? Pidge laughs at that one and explains that it literally takes nothing to get Lance going. One could smile in his general direction he’ll probably swoon. Laugh and he’ll melt into a puddle.

Not exactly things that are Keith’s forte.

“ Weird kinks?”

“ Weird kinks? Have you met Lance? I don’t think he even has boring kinks,” she jokes. “Lance is more partial to lace than leather, that romantic sap. Poetry and walks on beaches.”

Keith sighs with disappointment. “So there’s nothing that he’s really into…”

“Sexually?” Pidge snorts and picks up her cards. “No, he’s so vanil--oh.”

She pauses as a sudden thought crosses her mind. Eyes blinking wide at a memory of something not so vanilla involving Lance. That’s the thing, he thinks. The thing that will excite Lance like nothing else and Keith has to know what it is.  He waits as patiently as he can, which is a total of three seconds before he asks.

“What is it?”

She shakes her head and reorganizes her hand. “I shouldn’t say. That’s not--he’s embarrassed by it.”

“You said nothing was off limits,” Keith reminds her.

“Yeah, but Lance will never forgive me if I scare you off,” Pidges shakes her head again. “It’s a huge turn off for most so he stopped doing it two years ago. If he wants you to know he’ll tell you...probably already has in a way.”

How bad could it be? Couldn’t be worse than knifeplay. Keith allowed that to happen just so he could be tied up. He once took a punch that bruised ribs for some dirty talk. Short of actually almost killing Keith, whatever it is, he’d probably let Lance do it. At least, he’d let him do it once. Even if it’s something a little unsavory. After all the stuff he’s done for Keith, he can soldier through a little discomfort.

“Come on,” Keith says and adds, “I won’t tell him you told.”

Pidge has to think about it. She pinches in her lips and focuses her eyes on her cards as she
considers. Taps her fingers on the table before letting out a deep sigh. She shakes her head and Keith
grits his teeth in disappointment.

“Sorry Keith,” she says. “I can’t break that trust.”

“I...understand,” he says, though his jaw clenches. He doesn’t like it but he’ll respect her answer.

“Look, go in there in just your skivvies and tell him you’ll do whatever he wants. He’ll probably
faint,” Pidge snickers. “I don’t see what’s stopping you from ruffling some sheets right now.”

He’s not in there right now because he feels like he doesn’t deserve it. Like he needs to earn his way
back into Lance’s good graces. Like he hasn’t done enough to show Lance he’s sorry. He needs to
prove he cares more about Lance’s needs and desires than his own. Isn’t there anything he can do?
That no one else can?

Pidge looks him over and frowns with a pout.

“Gin,” she says and yawns. “I’m heading to bed. Good luck, with whatever you do. Just don’t take
too long deciding.”

Keith makes a questioning glance at her as he gathers the cards back up.

“You think you’re being thorough with taking your time but all the time that passes...Lance will
think you’re mad at him instead of thinking of ways to make his night,” she explains. “He’d rather do
nothing together than think about doing something apart.”

Nothing together? Keith contemplates that as he puts his cards down. Nothing together...like...

Washing his hair in the tub. Playing cards. Running in the Rain. Kissing in his room, no pressure to
do more. Just talking together. Running fingers through his thick hair. Lance genuinely enjoys just
his presence without it turning into after dark yoga positions featuring heavy panting.

He’s over thinking this, he concludes. Lance isn’t the kinky deviant that Keith is, so looking for
hidden appetites was never going to work. Lance will do those things because they’re fun but he
doesn’t care about them. He likes platonic and romantic gestures. Something Keith’s wholly
unpracticed in and has made no secret of disliking.

“You don’t have to promise him the moon or recite sonnets,” Pidge chuckles when he frowns.

“I wouldn’t do those things anyway,” Keith huffs.

“Yeah, didn’t think you would. But you could just be there,” she reminds him. “No work required.
Night, Keith.” She gives his shoulder a pat as she passes, then leaves for her shared room with Hunk.

He stays, long enough to gather the cards up and put them away in the box. Reminds him that he’d
like to put a board game onto the list. Monopoly or Clue or something. He’s sick of cards and he’s
pretty sure the others are too. Bottom of the list stuff but he’s going to add it. Lance would probably
agree too.

Keith hits the light in the rec room and plunging it into darkness for Matt, who continues to snore
away. Takes his time walking the hall until he’s outside Lance’s door. It’s quiet inside. Should he
knock? Chances are he’s asleep already but...he’d probably appreciate not waking up alone in the
morning. Maybe he can slip in and under the covers without waking Lance.

Guy sleeps like the dead any other time, why would now be any different?
He opens the door faster than he meant to and it hits something hard. A slew of cursing in Spanish leads him to believe it was Lance and is confirmed when he sees him grabbing his forehead and reeling back from the door. Keith stands there stunned, an even worse guilt building up in his gut but then Lance starts laughing.

“What is it with you and hitting me?” Lance snorts out as he rubs the little bump forming there.

“Sorry,” Keith says, clenching his jaw and looking down. “I thought...you were asleep.”

“No, my room suddenly got cold. I was about to check to see if yours was too,” Lance reveals with a shiver. “Then I was gonna go door to door to find out who’s dicking around with the thermostat.”

Keith suddenly remembers the night when the heat clicked on. Pidge was the cause of that, he was sure. Is she to blame for this too? Maybe it’s not a bad thing when he thinks about it. What better way to ensure they stay the night together for the night than to share warmth.

“Yeah, my room’s freezing too,” Keith lies. He hasn’t even checked. “It’s why I came over.”

“Who’s ass do we have to kick?” Lance wonders as he looks down the hall. “Probably Hunk. Guy’s got his own climate.”

Lance stalks down the hall but the door is locked. If the thermostat is in there it’s not being changed anytime soon. Hunk sleeps like a log and Pidge will annihilate him if he wakes her. He’d rather not incur her wrath.

Guess it’s shiver city tonight. When he turns around Keith’s got an extra blanket, the one from his room. Must have grabbed it while he was turned away. He gestures with it and jerks his head at the door to make his point.

Guess it’s not shiver city then.

Brings a smile to his face as he rejoins Keith at his door and opens it for him. They head back into Lance’s freezing room and Keith throws the additional blanket over the cots. It’s not much but most of the warmth will be coming from them anyway. May even be too warm.

Lance is already under the blankets. He sits up on his elbow watching with a smile as Keith strips off his shirt. When Keith’s nothing but scrub bottoms he gets under the covers and Lance scoots in closer.

“Glad you’re here, even if it’s just cause you’re col--”

He doesn’t finish. Keith puts his hands on Lance’s cheeks and kisses him. Once. Twice. And on the third one, he slips in his tongue making Lance sigh into the kiss. He looks a little surprised but not unpleasantly.

“Keith--”

“I’m not here because I’m cold,” he tells him.

“Yeah?” Lance asks, the corner of his mouth curling up into a smile. He leans in for a few more kisses, his hand cupping Keith’s jaw.

“Yeah,” Keith says. “Now shut up. I need to pay you back for being an asshole. What do you want?”
“Yeah, that sounds more like you. So practical,” Lance snickers. “I’m down for a little makeout before bed if you are.”

Keith leans in and stops that chuckling with slow but eager kisses. Lance has no complaints on that and kisses back just as enthusiastically, fingers threading into Keith’s hair and gently massaging. Keith’s hand perches firmly on Lance’s shoulder as he kisses his way down his neck. Breathes hot on the flesh, then mouths and sucks hard on his pulse making Lance sigh.

He moves down to Lance’s shoulder and grazes his teeth on the skin. Lance’s body tenses but not with trepidation. Like he’s waiting for something to happen, holding his breath in anticipation. Is his face flushed red too? All he did was--

Keith’s eyes go wide with sudden realization. He remembers all the times Lance bit into his fist while they had their fun. Bright teeth sinking into knuckles as Keith sucked on him. All the times he eyed juicy parts of Keith’s body but settled on just kissing them or sucking hard bruises into his flesh. Breath ragged and hungry for more than sliding his tongue on skin.

Pidge suggested something he might be ashamed of...

He can’t be a hundred percent but...he thinks Lance might like bites. Giving them mostly but if his face is any indication getting them too. Keith tests it again by running his teeth over his collarbone and Lance sucks in a breath of air, waiting for the bite. It doesn’t come. Keith just sucks hard on his chest, leaving another red mark.

It’s true. Lance wants him to bite him and maybe bite Keith back though...Lance might be hesitant to say so for obvious reasons. Nothing turns people off more than a reminder of the number one way people die out here. And Lance might not be willing to admit it out of shame.

Best to just ask it right out. Tact has never been Keith’s strong suit anyway.

“Lance,” Keith addresses him looking at his blushing face.

“Y-Yeah?” he answers.

“Feels like you want me to bite you,” Keith reveals, eyes lidded.

Lance swallows with slight panic, his face flushes crimson as he avoids looking at Keith’s eyes. His confidence is suddenly gone and he looks almost...shy. He covers his mouth and part of his red cheeks in an attempt to hide his feelings on it but it fails. It couldn’t be more obvious that it turns him on. Who knew Lance could look so flustered?

“N-No, That’s--” he tries to deny.

“I want to. Can I?” Keith asks.

“I uh…” he says, hesitant. Lance licks his lips behind his hand before he looks down. It’s easy to see he’s incredibly nervous but he nods. “Y-Yeah. You can.”

Without hesitation, Keith sinks his teeth into his shoulder with a sigh and Lance releases a moan as he melts into the bite.

“Keith...I...ah!” he gasps when he bites again, falling back onto the cot. His fingers thread into Keith’s hair, pulling to guide him to a better spot on his chest. “Again...harder…”

Keith does what he asks. Bites on his pec, hard enough to leave teeth marks. It’s a good one because
Lance has to muffle his moan with his fist, biting into his knuckles. He’s starting to change his mind on fun times tonight. This has his motor running in a way it hasn’t in years. Keith hungrily bites him again, tongue laving on his hardened nipples.

“God, Keith--”

“You don’t have to bite that,” Keith tells him as he pulls Lance’s fist from his mouth. He brushes his dark hair aside to expose and offer his pale neck. “Bite me.”

If he thought Lance’s face was red already, now he’s a deep wine. He suddenly sits up and looks away, unable to meet Keith’s eyes. There’s a bump in the blanket that can be nothing but his raging hardon. Just the suggestion is enough to bring him to full salute but he looks utterly ashamed of it. That red face isn’t from horniness...it’s embarrassment.

“Sorry...I’m not, uh...I don’t...You don’t have to...do that,” he says, covering his mouth again as if that will keep the shame from pouring out.

“I know,” Keith nods and moves in. His neck close and tempting. “But I want to. Don’t you?”

“I...uh...but that’s…” Lance stammers behind his hand. “But that’s...it’s fucking weird, isn’t it? To like doing that to a person?”

Weird? Is he serious? Does he not remember half the things he’s done to Keith alone? Lance looks down in shame as his brows furrow and mouth frowns behind that hand. He really thinks it’s strange and bad. Someone or multiple someones have put that in his head and Keith hates that look on his face.

“No, it’s really not,” Keith tells him and puts a hand on his shoulder to assure him. “Lance, I have been spat on and called a whore, tied up and denied release for days, and even forced to my knees to lick boots while in lingerie...It was humiliating beyond anything you’ve done to me and I enjoyed every second of it. Biting doesn’t even come close to making my ‘weird’ list.”

Lance seems to be considering his words but he’s still hiding behind that hand. Those eyes wander the room, avoiding making contact with Keith’s. His cheeks are still bright red too. Keith would think it almost cute if he didn’t look so sickly nervous and uncertain.

With a sigh, Keith takes Lance’s hand from his mouth. Lance looks at him as Keith kisses down the knuckles to his fingertips. Keith takes one of those fingers and plunges it into his wet mouth, making Lance’s face soften at the sight.

“Keith...ah!” Lance gasps when Keith scrapes his teeth down the entire length of his finger.

“You like it,” Keith says and cups Lance’s cheek. “Why deny it?”

His thumb rubs down and presses to Lance’s lips, willing them to part. Lance lids his eyes with a sigh when Keith presses in and rubs his thumb over the edges of his teeth. Lance’s tongue darts out and licks at the finger as it passes over his teeth. He even puts a little pressure on the appendage with a muted sigh. It’s...so tempting. And Keith says he’s okay with it? Lance lets out a ragged breath when Keith pulls his thumb back out, scraping his skin against teeth.

“Is it really...okay?” Lance asks, voice a little weak.

Keith offers his neck again and Lance looks longingly at that stretch of pale flesh. His fingers curl around Keith’s neck and pull him slowly closer. Lance leans in and brushes his lips against the base, mouth parting and rubbing his teeth on the skin. Seems like he’s still hesitant.
He’s not going to do it, Keith guesses. Lance keeps kissing and licking his neck. He gets really close by grazing his teeth again but he keeps pulling away with a needy breath. Worried and holding himself back from something he desperately wants.

It’s not all bad Keith thinks. Still feels really good and if Lance is having a good time then...that’s enough for him. That was kind of the point of tonight anyway. Doing whatever Lance likes. He’s ready to settle in for the makeout session but lets out a sharp gasp as Lance sinks his teeth in.

“Sorry!” Lance apologizes immediately as he pulls back, embarrassed. “That--it was too hard, right? I can stop--”

Keith shakes his head. “No, I was surprised,” he assures him then adds, “You can bite as hard as you want.”

Lance disagrees. “Keith, I can guarantee you won’t like it if I--”

Keith quickly snatches Lance’s hand and rubs it against his hardon under the blanket. Stiff and tenting Keith’s scrubs. Lance’s argument dies in his throat as Keith makes him palm the bulge. Rubbing up and down the twitching length, making Lance nibble his bottom lip.

“Does it feel like I don’t like it?” Keith asks and tilts back his head, ready for another. “As hard as you want,” he repeats. “I can take it.”

Lance lunges in and bites into his shoulder and Keith shivers with a sigh. He asks for another and Lance is happy to oblige. With each subsequent bite, Lance gets more excited at the feel of Keith gasping out heady moans. Lets out a few of his own as he leaves bite bruises on his chest. Licks and kisses each mark before moving on to a new section to leave his marks on.

He hasn’t been able to do this in years and enjoys every clench of his teeth on Keith’s body and the response he gets in kind. When was the last time he did this? And didn’t have someone tell him to stop? Saying they didn’t like it. It scared them. Made them feel sick and he felt just as sick afterward, apologizing for it. But Keith...Keith just gasps as he receives the bites and Lance squeezes that stiff cock under the blanket.

“Can I...bite you anywhere?” Lance asks in panting breaths.

“Yes,” Keith nods, his eyes lidded.

He rolls Keith over onto his stomach and hovers over him. Bends down and noses the back of Keith’s sensitive neck. Makes his mouth water before sinking his teeth right below Keith’s hairline making him shiver with another sigh. Pins Keith down with a hand to his neck as he gives another hard bite on the shoulder that has the both of them groaning.

He can’t believe Keith is letting him do this. Even more, he can’t believe Keith seems to be enjoying it. If he wasn’t, Lance isn’t sure he could do this and feel good about it.

“I uh…” Lance breathes down his back. He hooks a finger into Keith’s waistband. “You sure I can bite you anywhere?”

“Yes,” Keith repeats.

“On your knees then,” Lance says, giving his ass a squeeze.

Lance scoots down Keith’s body as Keith gets to his knees. He slides down his pants, slowly revealing that firm ass. Good god, it looks good enough to eat. Lance squeezes both cheeks, giving
them each a kiss before biting down on a swell of flesh.

Keith loves being on his knees like this and loves even more how Lance’s fingers squeeze his thighs with each tender bite. Hot panting breaths on his ass preceding and following teeth clenching down. His mouth sucks and his tongue licks over each of the bruises he’s unleashing on him. Keeps coming dangerously close to his asshole which only makes him instinctively raise it and bury his face into his pillow in preparation for rimming.

If Lance does start that, Keith won’t be able to keep quiet. His whole body is already on full alert after their fun in the barn. He clutches the pillow tight in his arms and pants heavily into the fluff to mute his reactions.

Lance hugs his arms around Keith’s thighs and brings him higher up. Bites again as Keith moans into the pillow. He breathes hot on him, licking his lips hungrily. He’s left ten sets of teeth marks, three of them heavy. And now...now he wants to hear Keith fall apart the way he is.

He laves his tongue hot and wet over that puckered hole and Keith shakes out a moan into the pillow with each eager lap. Making him shudder and whine as Lance works on him. Between licks, Lance nibbles on his cheeks and exhales compliments with each breath. Spanish again. The same words from before.


Does Lance know he understands him? He’s not sure. One day he’ll have to surprise him by responding back. Keith muffles a keening whine into the pillow as Lance spears him with his tongue. But not today. He’s not sure he could properly translate any phrases as his mouth is already occupied with unending gasps of pleasure.

Keith sounds so good. Each bite and lick has him trembling, not unlike out at the barn. Too bad they aren’t out there now, Lance thinks. Keith could let loose the full extent of his volume. Those ecstatic moans transformed into desperate sobs. That’s right, he never did get him off and he did promise to finish him later.

“Get up,” Lance whispers against him, tonguing his hole one more time. God, he tastes too good it's making him heady. “In m-my lap. Face m-me.”

He sits up as Lance drops his pants and takes a seat on the edge of the cot. He straddles over him making it easy for Lance to eye the aftereffects of his earlier treatment.

Keith’s cherry red, eyes lidded with a lusty haze over them. Bitemarks frame his nipples and all over his chest. His cock’s hard and curling up against his stomach, dripping and eager for Lance’s touch. Lance grasps tight on an ass cheek to keep Keith from sliding off his lap as he takes hold of both of their cocks, stroking them together.

“Hold onto me,” Lance says into his chest. “So you don’t fall.”

Keith nods, doing what he asks and threading his fingers together behind his neck.

Lance can’t get enough of his face. Mouth parted and panting, licking his lips and biting down on them so he won’t make any noise. Lance isn’t making it easy either. His strokes and bites are testing the limit of how quiet Keith can be.

“Bet I can get you to moan...nice and loud,” Lance purrs into his neck.

“I doubt...it...” Keith pants back. After all, he’s got a pretty good handle on his volume now.
“God...I want to try,” Lance admits, sliding his tongue over his nipple and rolling the nub with his teeth.

“Go ahead,” Keith gasps as Lance bites his pec. “You won’t...get anything out of me ...”

Lance loves a challenge.

Keith almost squeaks with surprise when he feels a finger probing its way into his ass. A single finger from the same hand anchoring him in place. Here? He’s...going to do that here? He trembles but manages to not make a noise louder than what he’s been doing. His panting gets faster but he doesn’t get louder, as promised.

“You weren’t kidding,” Lance says, impressed.

“T-Told you,” Keith stutters.

“I’m not done yet,” Lance smirks.

He presses it in deeper and Keith has to resist the urge to rock on it. Keith presses his mouth to Lance’s shoulder to mask a grateful moan.

“Getting there,” Lance says and kisses his body.

“L-Lance,” Keith breathes.

“I’m not even moving and you’re shivering,” Lance says. “Can’t imagine what you’re like with a cock inside you.”

“F-Fuck,” he gasps and shakes as Lance resumes his stroking of their cocks. He rests his forehead on Lance’s shoulder, panting in an effort to calm down. To keep from letting out all the noise he desperately wants to.

“I’m not even moving and you’re shivering,” Lance says. “Can’t imagine what you’re like with a cock inside you.”

“Much...louder...than this,” he admits. “You’re...still losing...by the way.”

“That so?” Lance asks with a grin and massages his finger into Keith with purpose.

Keith bites down into Lance’s shoulder to stifle himself and it makes Lance let out a loud moan instead. Anyone in the adjacent rooms had to have heard it. But now Keith’s not even trying to pretend he doesn’t want it. He rocks his hips for more. Thrusts into Lance’s hand as much as he tries to sink onto that finger to get it in deeper. There’s a whine at the back of his throat slowly trying to claw its way out.

“Want me to fuck you, Keith?” Lance rasps against his sweating body. “With more than just my finger?”

Keith lets out a muffled whine that sounds something like a begging yes. He’s so fucking close. Drool is starting to drip from the corners of his mouth as he rocks. If it were Lance’s cock instead of his finger he’d have screamed for it. Damn the consequences of their neighbors. Lance leans as far as he can to whisper in Keith’s ear, low and rumbling.

“Good...I can’t wait...to be inside you.”

His teeth sink in deep at Lance’s shoulder to muffle his whine as comes, semen spurting out and dripping down both their lengths. His hips continue to hitch and shudder even after he’s spent and
his mouth stays clamped on Lance as he sighs out calming breaths.

Lance isn’t far behind him, coating his dick with Keith’s come as he strokes out his too with a hissing moan, getting it all over them. It’s a mess and they take deep breaths to get their composure back.

“You...were right,” Lance breathes, slipping his finger from Keith’s ass. “You didn’t get louder at all.”

“I told you so,” Keith says finally releasing Lance’s shoulder, a stream of drool trailing its way down his chin. His jaw is killing him from clenching it.

Lance smiles at the sight. Keith is positively radiant. He's so fucking sexy in that post sexual glow that Lance can't help but sigh.

“Careful,” Lance urges as he helps Keith to his feet. “Pass me that towel from the other night.”

Keith tosses it to him after swiping it against his own mess. Lance cleans off and drops it to the floor. He looks at his watch and his eyes go wide.

“Jeez, it’s after midnight. Wanna sleep here or…” Lance starts but Keith’s already crawling into the covers. “Guess that’s a yes,” he chuckles.

Lance adjusts the blankets and joins him. Even though they didn’t do anything that calls for aftercare, Lance runs his fingers through Keith’s hair anyway. There are no objections from Keith who’s practically unconscious already.

As he hums and looks down on Keith, that feeling starts happening again stronger than before. Like when he sang to him. That moment right before they kissed in the rain. And when he first put him to bed and hummed him to sleep. A feeling of blooming endearment for the man sleeping next to him.

This started out as a distraction but...he’s falling in love with Keith and it doesn’t bother him in the least. It feels so easy to do that he can’t imagine it’s a mistake. He sings a little, even though Keith is long asleep. Plays with his hair, parting it gently with his fingers. He caresses his cheeks as he looks fondly down at his face.

Does Keith feel the same way? Maybe.

Lance leans down and plants a chaste kiss on Keith’s temple. The body below him stirs and rubs his face with a mumble. Then he rolls over into Lance’s chest.

“Close the damn window...there’s a moth in the house,” Keith mumbles in his sleep.

Lance snorts a little with a smile. The window? The house? Where does he think he is? He shimmies down and lays his head down on the pillow, face even with Keith’s.

“Sure thing,” he tells him.

“And...the radio…” he starts but the sentence trails off.

“Got it,” Lance smiles and begins singing to him again. All his favorite Muse songs.

Keith nestles in, breathing lightly into Lance’s chest. Lance wraps an arm around his side and up his back, bringing him in closer so that Keith’s cheek is pressed against his heart. Can Keith hear it? The way it thunders? Does he know that, while he’s been in love before, it’s never beat like quite like
this? How is that a scary thought as much as it’s an uplifting one?

A flash of Keith bleeding in his arms makes his breath hitch and instinctively clutch the body in his hold tighter.

Right...that’s why it’s scary. It’s all so fragile. It could all fall apart so easily. But as long as they’re careful, take all precautions, protect each other...there’s no reason they can’t keep this. This sliver of warm happiness in a dark and dead world. Anything worth having is worth fighting for, right?

“I’ll...protect you,” Lance whispers. “I promise.”

He kisses the top of Keith’s head and he stirs.

“Radio…” he mumbles.

“Right,” Lance swallows with a smile before remembering where he left off. “Right, uh...You’re something beautiful...A contradiction...I want to play the game...I want the friction...”

Lance continues to sing to Keith as he holds him close. Pets through his hair and rubs his back as Keith falls back into deep sleep. Lance looks on that face with a fond smile as his eyes lid and then close. He nuzzles in close, burying his nose in Keith’s hair with a sigh.

Right...there’s no reason they can’t keep this.

Chapter End Notes

If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment! Don't know what to say? Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Fair deal?

(Also, if you really like Voltron stuff and want more, check out my other two fics. Tell me what you think of them!)
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Hope you guys like it. Another hiatus bit while I write out the outline for how The Run is going to go. Also, I got cosplays I gotta work on so it may be a while. Subscribe if you want alerts!

And thanks to everyone who comments, you're gems.

UPDATE: Reader diet affection has made some amazing fanart for this fic! Please, go check it out Click HERE and support a great digital artist! You are amazing!! Thank you so much!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

- The lonely moments just get lonelier

  The longer you're in love

  Than if you were alone

  --House of Memories, Panic! At the Disco

Where is he this time? Keith’s dreams have always been so reliable. He knows what’s going to happen and who will be in them long before they truly start as long as he recognizes his surroundings. Nothing but darkness and the feeling he’s being watched. It looks like...no. No, he doesn’t want to be here.

Arms enclose around his shoulders before he can run, warm and holding tight. They won’t be relinquishing him any time soon. He just has to ride it out. Like every time before this.

“Hello pet,” he whispers in his ear. “Missing me?”

Keith tries to say no. Every time he has this dream he tries to say no. That he doesn’t miss anyone and never has. And especially not him. It’s a lie but it doesn’t change how much he wishes it were the truth.

He tries to keep his mouth riveted shut this time, even as a hand snakes its way down and rubs gently on his chest. His shirt’s gone. Fingers press hard over the large raised scar near his heart and it sends a jolt of electricity down to the base of his spine eliciting an instinct to resist.

“No,” Keith barely chokes out but it’s so quiet, he might as well have said nothing.

“Come now,” he grins wickedly against his neck. Keith can feel his soft long hair touching his back.
“You haven’t been thinking about me? Late at night?”

He hadn’t. Not for a long time. Sometimes he forgets all about him, like he never existed. But when he gets close to someone, this dream starts up again and he remembers. He starts thinking about him. That hand continues its journey southward and caresses his stomach. Feels good but he knows it won’t for long.

“I...have,” Keith says then bites his tongue. He hadn’t wanted to say it but his dreams...they’re so hard to control.

The voice in his ear laughs, cruel and dark. There was a time when hearing that laugh turned Keith on like no one’s business. It was...he was so mean to him and so good at it. But right now the sound just makes his blood run cold with memory, even as a hand dips languidly into his pants.

“Pathetic little tramp,” he says and grips tight on Keith, making him yelp. “I was the best, wasn’t I?”

“You were the worst, bar none,” Keith grumbles as he wills himself to stay flaccid.

Wrong answer. He yanks Keith’s hair and forces him to his knees hard, slamming them to the ground. It’s just a little too rough but that’s how it always was with him. Keith’s arm twists behind his back and it takes everything he has not to growl. Knows if he does, he’ll get smacked. At least the hand isn’t fondling around his groin anymore.

“Still such a brat,” he chuckles. “You know I don’t like that but...You always gave me what I wanted so I tolerated it...Even gave you everything you wanted. Didn’t I? Whore?”

Keith clamps his mouth shut and the hand twists his arm further making him cry out despite himself. It hurts and not in a good way. He’s just ready for this to be over. And the sooner he says the right words it’ll end and he’ll wake.

“I expect my pet to answer,” he says, his voice no longer playful. “I only ever gave you what you asked for, didn’t I?”

“You did...” Keith admits with a whimper and the grip just tightens. Right, he likes full answers. “You only gave me what I asked for...” he says, amending his response.

“And you liked what I gave you, didn’t you?” he asks, going to his knees, pressing his body in and nuzzling Keith’s neck. Despite the gentle kisses at his pulse that hand still pins Keith painfully. Fingers digging in and not relinquishing their hold. “Wasn’t I good to you? Didn’t I make you happy?”

He was terrible to Keith but...there were times he was happy. There were times he relished being at his mercy. Tied down and treated like a pathetic needy slut. Scolded for being petulant and rude. Then punished in all the right ways late at night when they were alone.

Keith was in love then but he didn’t dare admit it. Not to him. It would have spelled his end to say such a thing to him.

Lotor wasn’t capable of loving anyone.

“...” Keith starts and clenches his teeth so he can push through to finish. “You were good to me...You made me happy.”

Makes his stomach churn to hear those words come out of his mouth but...the sooner the better.
“That’s what I like to hear,” he chuckles and relaxes his grip a little. He gives Keith a gentle pat on his cheek. “Make yourself useful. Get my uniform dry cleaned. Polish my boots. And sharpen your knife. Properly this time—don’t want another nasty scar, do you?”

The sound of a switch echoes in the dark and a spotlight illuminates the knife on the ground in front of him. Beautiful and in perfect condition, though slathered with blood. Keith’s blood. Lotor gave it to him—a gift for being such an adequate partner. Lord knows it wasn’t a romantic gift so much as it was practical.

He wanted a special knife for use on Keith. To remind him of his place and who he belonged to.

Dream’s almost over, just a little bit further.

“No,” Keith bows his head. “I don’t...want another scar.”

“Then be good and make me proud.”

The hands let Keith go and shove him forward on his knees toward the knife. He tentatively picks it up and sits back to clean and sharpen it. He’s long since gotten rid of it in the real world. He couldn’t stand to look at it and the memories associated with it. Made him sick to see the blade, to feel it on his belt. Made his heart ache in a multitude of ways but mostly with regret, shame, and disgust—mostly in himself.

Lotor...he’s the reason he’s so careful now. If there was anything good to be gained from that partnership, it’s that he’ll never make those same mistakes again. It’s no coincidence he’s showing up in his nightmares now that he’s involved with Lance. Wants to subtly remind him of what happens when Keith gives himself to someone. A warning of what happens when fools fall in love.

Couldn’t afford weaknesses before all this and it’s even truer now. After all, what is love but a giant bulls eye drawn on your back?

“Is it sharp yet?” he asks impatiently and Keith startles at how close the voice is to him.

He looks over the knife. A perfect spearpoint and as sharp as it’s going to get. Clean too, since he doesn’t want the cuts to get infected. Won’t heal properly if it’s dirty, Lotor always reminds him. Keith bites his lip and nods, squeezing his eyes shut.

He can’t bear to keep them open for the next part. Not anymore.

“Then let’s get started,” Lotor grins.

Keith sucks in a breath as he feels a burning pain right over his old scars, starting with the one over his heart. A blade sliding slow and agonizing, just the way Lotor likes it. He always enjoyed the pain flashing in Keith’s eyes as he bore the cuts. It made him happy and back then Keith would have done anything to see that face looking down on him, proud of how well he was doing.

Now he just feels disgusting when he thinks about how desperate he was for his approval.

“Open your eyes. And smile for me,” he commands. “I need you know you’re having fun.”

Keith does his best. Tries to put on a smile to mask how much it hurts as the sharp edge carves into him. Tries to ignore the blood as it drips in streams down his body, warm and sticky. Tries to ignore that tongue sliding across the wounds to taste him and the hand stroking him into hardness. It’s the most uncomfortable of smiles and it’s not fooling either of them.
Doesn’t matter. Lotor doesn’t want him to really smile anyway. If Keith enjoyed the cuts it would turn him off. But he does as he's told and Lotor laughs at him.

“Terrible. Smiling doesn’t suit you at all,” Lotor sneers and yanks on his hair. “You look much better when you’re desperate.”

The cuts continue. Ones that never happened when they were together. Ones that did and healed perfectly leaving no scars. All of them dripping and each time they open Keith cries out in pain. Eventually, it's too much, even for Keith.

“P-Please,” Keith whimpers but does his best not to cry. Lotor would hate it. “N-No more. R-Red.”

“How about one more?” Lotor asks, laving his tongue over the bloody cut and his hand stroking Keith’s cock faster. “Just one more...for me, pet? Then I’ll put you out of your misery, I promise.”

Lotor always keeps his promises. No exceptions.

That's when the blade presses to Keith’s jugular, the sharp point warm with Keith's spent blood, and with a frightened gasp, he wakes. He tries immediately to grab his neck, to check for warm sticky blood but finds he can’t move his arms. They’re pinned. Why can’t he move?!

For a second he almost panics before remembering where he is. Lance’s room. He doesn't even remember falling asleep.

Lance has his arms around him and tight in a viselike hug. Keith gives wiggling a try but he can’t get out. He’d think it funny if he hadn’t just had a fucking nightmare. It only gets worse when someone smacks on the door. Firm beats of a fist but not shaking the door on its frame. That’s when a new panic rises in him.

Is the door locked? What if they try to walk in?

“Lance! Get up!” Hunk calls in. Sounds like it’s not the first time he’s tried calling in. “One of those patch jobs didn’t take. Got another leak and I need your long arms again. Lance? Are you even in there?”

Keith tries to nudge Lance a little, bumping his head on him, but it hardly has an effect. He can’t move anything else.

“Dude, do I have to dump a bucket of water on you? There’s enough of it leaking from the roof…”

Now Keith feels a slightly more urgent need to wake him. He doesn't want Hunk coming in and seeing them in the buff like this. He wiggles a little more vigorously trying to get an arm free. Maybe he can-- Lance’s eyes flutter open and he yawns.

Lance tries to lean in for a kiss. “Morning beau--”

“Answer him, before he walks in!” Keith whispers, turning his head away.

“What?” he blinks and then hears the knocking. “Oh. Yeah! I’m up. I’m up.”

“Great, get dressed. I need help with that other leak. West side,” Hunk tells him.

“Got it. Be there in a sec,” Lance promises.

Hunk’s heavy steps fade down the hall and Keith takes the deepest of relieved breaths. Lance grins at him and releases his hold to ruffle his hair.
“You worry too much,” Lance chuckles and Keith huffs with annoyance, pulling from his arms.

“You don’t worry enough,” Keith says back.

“I worry the appropriate amount,” Lance shrugs, “and only about important things.”

Lance gets dressed but doesn’t bother putting on his jacket. It’s not so cold in the room anymore. Keith watches as he unties the bandana from the jacket sleeve and ties it instead to his wrist. When Lance looks back Keith averts his eyes, like he hadn’t just been watching with curious interest.

“You can go back to sleep if you want,” Lance nods at the cot.

“Can’t. Already up,” Keith says and not just in reference to his morning wood that he’s managing to keep hidden.

Lance comes back over to the cot and takes a knee, leaning in for a parting kiss. Keith’s come to expect these romantic gestures and finds himself leaning forward, eager to receive it. Yes, a nice warm kiss would do wonders for his anxiety right now.

His hand slides in behind Keith’s neck and tilts it back as he presses their lips together. Fingers twitching and tongue chasing Keith’s as it massages out a moan. It’s deep and slow and something about it has Keith’s stomach doing flips. Like Lance is trying to say something special with it but he’s not sure what.

That’s not true. He knows what Lance is trying to say but...this is what his nightmare was trying to hint at. Him falling again...reminding him of the consequences he’d rather not think about. But Lance would never...he’s nothing like Lotor. They have nothing in common.

It’s not like they’re both handsome, charismatic men. Both with smiles that make people melt. Both with a commanding tone in the bedroom that makes Keith shiver down to his toes to hear. Both capable of making him fall apart at the slightest inclination.

No...nothing in common at all.

“Why don’t you get started on the map with Matt?” Lance suggests.

“Sure,” Keith shrugs.

“Cool,” Lance smiles a little. “See you after I’m done.”

Lance ruffles the hair on the top of his head before exiting. Keith sits up and swings his legs over the edge of the cot. With a crack of his neck he stands and stretches. He gives it a few minutes before dressing and leaving into what he thought was an empty hall. It’s not.

“Morning,” Pidge calls out, carrying a cup of coffee. She extends it to Keith and he takes it with a stoic nod.

“Thanks.”

“Sleep well?” she asks, a tilt in her smile that comes across as mischievous.

“Yeah,” he answers, sipping his drink.

“You’d think you’d be happier considering where you slept,” she snorts into her cup. “You look like you could use a good laugh. Want to see something hilarious?” she asks and he shrugs. Anything to take his mind off of his dreams. “Follow me.”
They walk down the hall, drinking their coffee in silence. Before long they hear Hunk and Lance in the distance, talking about the leak. Turning the corner shows them both, Lance stacked on Hunk’s broad shoulders and reaching into an opening in the ceiling.

“Hunk, this one’s not coming through the actual roof. It’s a pipe,” Lance mumbles with a small flashlight in his mouth. Water drips into his eye and he curses as he wipes with the bandana. “Maybe it’s connected to the roof though, picked up a bunch of water when it rained.”

“What? Who the hell thought that was a good idea?” Hunk huffs, peeved about the poor building design. “Maybe they put it in with the intention of having a water tank on the roof? But never removed it?”

“Dunno, but it’s there and it’s leaking from a nut--er, bolt? Whatever, the thing,” Lance mumbles with a gesture signifying the shape..

“Probably just needs to be tightened,” Hunk guesses. “Size?”

“Think its three quarters,” Lance answers.

“If that doesn’t work we have plumbers putty in one of those boxes from the store,” Hunk adds as he bends down with a groan to grab a wrench.

Keith and Pidge watch from the corner, completely unnoticed by the two of them working. Lance gets another drop in his eyes and curses in Spanish as he tightens the bolt. Pidge smirks like she’s got something up her sleeve but Keith fails to see what’s so funny.

“You said hilarious,” Keith reminds her and drains the last of his cup.

“When we walk by, smile at him,” Pidge tells him.

“What?” Keith blinks in confusion. How is that funny?

“Unprompted, when you walk by,” she explains. “He’s used to dishing out his charming smiles left and right and then getting one back. If you give him one without him initiating...it’s like his programming gets fried. The more suggestive the better.”

“I don’t see how--”

“Trust me. It’ll be hilarious,” she says patting his shoulder and guiding him into stepping forward with her.

He’s not great at smiling but...he’ll try. It’s doubtful anything will happen though.

Lance is tightening the nut when he hears the steps. He glances over and sees Pidge talking with Keith as they come down the hall. She’s rambling about her laptop, the really nice one back at the Garrison and how much she misses it. She hates the old crappy one she’s been using on the bus to chronicle their journey. It’s basically no better than a diary, doesn’t even have minesweeper.

Keith looks disinterested but pays attention until he gets to where the two of them are fixing the leak. He looks up from the conversation and brings his eyes up to Lance. Lance feels his heart skip a beat when Keith shoots him a smile, complete with an insinuating wink. That was...directed at him?

Lance.exe stops working. His cheeks warm and his jaw drops a little as he turns his head to follow them walking down the hall. The flashlight falls out of his mouth and hits Hunk right on his head and then foot before rolling a yard away.
“Laaance!” Hunk gripes.

“Jesus, Hunk, sorry!” he stammers, coming back to himself. “It--it slipped!”

“What are you doing up there?” he asks, wincing. “Trying to kill me?”

“Sorry sorry!” he apologizes again, beyond embarrassed.

“Keith, can you get that?” Hunk requests. “My knees can’t take this.”

Keith returns and scoops up the flashlight. He makes eye contact with Lance but his face is back to it’s stoic, stone appearance. Maybe he imagined it? He passes the light up to Lance who takes hold of it but Keith doesn’t release it quite yet.

“Th-Thanks,” Lance says sheepishly.

“Sure,” Keith nods and raises a brow with a smirk. “Anytime.”

He lets it go and Lance takes it, almost dropping it a second time as he gapes at Keith.

It wasn’t his imagination! Keith...he smiled at him--on purpose! His eyes follow Keith as he returns to join Pidge, his cheeks flushing with heat as he stares. He gives his head a shake to focus, shoves the flashlight back into his mouth and reluctantly turns his attention back to the leak as his heart thunders in his chest.

The whole way down the hall Pidge tries hard to contain herself, biting her lips back with irrepressible glee in her eyes. Once they make it around the corner she can no longer hold it back. She bursts into shrieking laughter. Keith breaks that indifferent demeanor to chuckle too.

“Did you see his face?” she snickers, wiping her eyes. “Like his heart stopped.”

“That was pretty funny,” Keith admits with a smirk.


They continue on their way and Keith can’t help but swell with pride. He got Lance to blush and practically stop functioning with a single smile. That’s never happened to him before but that’s probably because Keith never wanted to try. All because--

Terrible--Smiling doesn’t suit you at all.

He only ever frowned after that. Keith believed Lotor when he said it back then too. Always saying that a smile just never looked quite right on his face. That he was far more attractive when he was serious or defiant. Or desperate.

Great...and he was feeling so good about himself a minute ago. Damn that nightmare for bringing that guy back to the forefront of his mind. Now every interaction today is going to be tainted with thoughts of him if he doesn’t try to push it back.

Luckily he’s good at compartmentalizing.

*****

After breakfast, Matt digs out the town map at Keith’s request. Brand new without a single mark on it. Makes Matt sigh with bittersweet sadness as he hands it over to Keith, who already has a marker
out and ready to ruin it with scribbles.

They splay it onto the table, nice and flat before studying it’s layout. There’s a couple of routes they can take but no matter what it’s going to be around a two-hour drive if they don’t go over 40mph. Might even have to go slower than that in areas congested with abandoned vehicles. Or filled with walking corpses.

First things first, they need a route to the town before they can consider what buildings to search. Luckily Matt and Pidge are well versed in finding the best backroads. Comes from having to navigate this hellscape for the past two years. So he lets the siblings bicker and debate over the roads while he listens.

Eventually they mark out two different routes they like most. The best one in blue and the other in green. Pidge has marked red on routes to completely avoid. She and Matt agree that the chances of them being clear are dismal. Don’t take them, for any reason.

With the way marked off Keith’s eager to get started on the town portion of the map. He spots a welcome center with a big star at the edge of the town. It might have more in the way of detailed building maps. The only things this one mentions is the location of the emergency services and gas stations, where the open air market used to be, and a quaint little blurb about the centerpiece of their town. A windmill from 1881 that still functions and pumps water from a well.

Shiro would find that fascinating but it's useless to them. Can’t exactly carry a windmill in a Prius.

Lance and Hunk come in after finishing their repairs. They ended up having to use putty to stop it. Hunk declares when they have the time he’ll pull the whole damn thing out. Surely, there’s something better to be made with those pipes and he’s already got some ideas.

“Nice, you guys marked out a driving route already,” Lance nods as he leans over the map next to Keith.

“Oh, speaking of driving--Hunk, let's go take care of their ride,” Pidge jumps from her seat. “Team Punk style.,”

“You got it!” he beams and they fist bump. “But first we need to clear the walkway.”

Hunk grabs up his bat and she pats the knife at her side before joining him in the hall to get started. Lance scoots in a little, unconscious of the proximity and looks over the map. His shoulder bumps Keith’s as he nods his head at the map.

“So where are you thinking?” he asks.

“Setting up home base. Around here,” Matt gestures.

“That’s three miles from the town,” Lance notes. “Think we’ll find a house or something that far out in the boonies?”

“There are lots of ranches and such,” Keith points out. “If not, we’ll have to risk a closer base.”

A spot on the outskirts is preferable. A place they can safely rest and recuperate when the sun goes down. Defensible. With a good vantage point into the town and strong, secure doors. That way they can retreat there and reconnoiter if things get hectic.

“Plus there are plenty of houses between there and the town,” Keith points. “Working our way out, we can clear them of danger to secure our safe house while gathering items. After that, we go deeper
into the town stores and shops. Provided it’s not too crowded.”

Lance blinks and taps the map. “What about here?”

A gated community on the map. Summer springs. It’s a little ways into the town but not quite at the center. If it was closed off and evacuated before Incident Two then there could be some valuable stuff. Provided the walls aren’t too high and they can get inside. That’s if it isn’t full of corpses. Or just other survivors. Seems like a good place to set up too, it has a creek running through it.

“Might be some good stuff there,” Lance says and takes the pencil from Keith’s hand. He scribbles a little circle. “If it’s safe, we should check it.”

“Worth investigating at least,” Keith admits as he takes the pencil back.

Trading the pencil back and forth, they mark the map with numbers to indicate the day in which they should hit each area. Designing themselves a gridwork layout to make it easier to check off. Matt gives his two cents too, warning them not to put too much on one individual day. Keith retorts with a comment about how he’s not a moron and that makes Lance laugh a little.

Lance puts a hand at Keith’s back, close to his neck to rub for a split second before realizing his error and pulling it back. Matt notices but doesn’t comment. He doesn’t even look surprised, just returns his eye back to the map and taps it with his pencil as he debates with Keith. Keith Pretends to have not noticed despite going rigid in his hand. Instead, he just frowns and grumbles at Matt as he reluctantly erases a mark on the map.

Last time Keith made it very clear he wouldn’t tolerate public displays. Maybe because it’s Matt he’s not as concerned about it. Lance hopes it’s not too big a deal and tries jumping back into the conversation as if nothing happened.

“Okay, so this area for day one--”

“No, day one should be spent getting there and setting up base. Perimeter and defenses,” Lance tells him. “Unload all we need. If there’s time we can check nearby houses but back into the base by sunset.”

“Fine,” Keith mumbles and adjusts the numbers on the map. He’s too eager to get started that he’ll forgo a restful night's sleep before the heavy lifting. “Then after that,” Keith says as he marks, “we work in a grid. Matt’s idea. Using the car only if it’s far. At the least, three miles.”

“Three miles? You want to carry supplies from up to three miles away?” Lance clarifies with disbeliefing blinks.

“What? You can’t handle that, Lance?” Matt asks with a smirk. “Maybe you should work out more.”

“I work out plenty,” Lance combats with a snort. “I ran a 5k in 23 minutes...three years ago.”

“Keith can run that in the same time with full pack,” Matt tells him. “Hope you’ll be able to keep up with him.”

That...seemed awfully insinuatory to Lance and it looks like it seemed that way to Keith too. He frowns at Matt who just shrugs as he adjusts his glasses. Oh, he knows alright but he’s trying to be subtle about it. Failing too.

“Just looking out for my best friend is all,” Matt says and tosses the pencil onto the map. “I think you guys are all good on this plan.”
“Did you finish all the preparations without me?” asks a voice from the door. Shiro, with Allura at his side.

“Morning Shiro,” Lance nods. “How are you feeling?”

“Good,” he says with a soft smile. “Better if you bring me back some decent painkillers,” he jokes and approaches the table. He looks over the map and all the scribbles. “Looks like Matt’s handiwork. Good job Matt.”

Matt beams and thrusts out his chest proudly, more than happy to soak up all the praise. Keith delivers a swift kick under the table. Nothing damaging but enough to make Matt wince and change his attitude.

“My sister helped,” Matt amends and then Keith glares. “And Keith and Lance.”

“What are you taking for weapons?” Shiro asks.

“Knives,” Keith answers.

“And I’ll bring the new rifle, just in case,” Lance adds. “The scope will come in handy.”

Shiro agrees that it seems like enough firepower. Should keep them safe but he does tell Lance to watch how much ammo he uses. They don’t have much and the sound could be more trouble than it’s worth. Lance understands of course, but he’s still bringing it. Can’t go anywhere without a gun or he’ll feel naked.

As for food, Coran is already pulling vegetables for them to take. Pidge told them to take some of the other stuff from the stores too. Cans of soup and olives, the mentioning of which makes Lance gag a little. He thinks to suggest they keep the nasty things but food’s food and he won’t turn his nose up at sustenance. Not anymore.

“Are you two going to wash up before leaving?” Allura asks.

“Yeah, I was actually about to go set up our water for the trip and grab some for a bath later,” Lance says.

“I’ll help then. Matt, you’re strong, would you like to assist us?” she asks and Matt flushes with a goofy grin before nodding.

Shiro follows along but doesn’t strain himself. Once outside he leans against the building and watches the team do their respective jobs. Lance, Allura, and Matt retrieve water from the well. Coran is on the roof and leans over the edge to keep a lookout on high for trespassers while Shiro watches from below. Keith joins Pidge and Hunk at the Prius when they wave him over with a question.

They’ve pulled out all the back seats and when finished they noticed it has a hitch. They can hook up the trailer they took if Keith thinks it’ll come in handy. It’s a lot of weight and it’ll destroy the mileage but if they can fill it up with supplies it might be worth it. Keith shrugs. Why not? They can always ditch it if it gets to be too much trouble navigating the roads and then come back for it later if they truly need it.

All in all the morning goes well. By lunch, they have everything they need packed away in the red car. Coran’s put together an emergency medical supplies kit for them and stuck it under the passenger seat. The perimeter setup box in the back with a couple of basic trip wires to make their base defensible. Other than food, which they can put in tomorrow, it looks like they’re set. Which
means they can kick back for a moment to enjoy the sun and eat.

The day only gets brighter as the clouds part and disappear from view. Nothing but clear skies. Birds start flitting by and the grasses start raising as the sun dries the heavy dew. Really feels like a day in late spring now. Makes Allura want to get started on clearing some of the field and Matt’s eager to help.

As soon as they finish eating they get right on it and Shiro is ever encouraging the rest to join in.

Keith doesn’t want to help honestly. He’d rather do some of this knife drills in prep for the run. Lance probably should be practicing too. He’s still not all that fast with a blade. But already Lance is excitedly following the others down to the ground floor so they can get the tools. With a resigned sigh, Keith trails after them.

At least it’ll occupy his mind.

*****

It’s hard work. Allura gave Pidge and Hunk an idea of how much she wants to expand and they mark out the area with bright little flags they brought back from the store. Looks huge and Lance has to wonder if they’ll have enough materials for building a fence or a wall or whatever. Hunk assures them that they’ll have just enough with maybe a few bricks to spare if Pidge’s calculations are correct and they usually are.

Lance looks over to see Keith right at home with the weed whip. A modern-day scythe for a lack of a better comparison. He’s hacking away, slicing through the thick grasses with strong swings. He’s grunting, building up a sweat, but otherwise, he looks like he’s having a good time. Must be a good outlet for all that energy from being cooped up all week.

Keith puts down the tool for a second and wipes his forehead. He moves as if to take his shirt off but then stops, his eyes wide as he seems to remember something. Lance snorts when he looks down his shirt and shakes his head with a frown. He can’t take it off, he’s covered in Lance’s teeth marks.

It’s not like he has any room to talk. Lance’s chest is peppered with marks too so he refrains from removing his either. Everyone else peels off their sweaty clothes though, including the women. Lance whistles at the two of them in their sports bras, shooting them winks before Pidge throws a rock in his direction to shut him up. He snickers to himself but returns to gathering up the bundles of grass Keith cuts and tossing them over the fence.

There’s a little excitement for about fifteen seconds when Pidge happens upon a snake. Fortunately, Hunk is right there with a shovel to take care of it. That’s a meal in itself Hunk promises and Lance gags at the thought. Not as good as rabbit but it’ll do. Hunk goes on ahead to skin it and throw the rest into a pot to simmer for the rest of the day so the meat will fall right off the bones.

Keith seems a little off to Lance but he can’t put his finger on it. Small talk only nets him a couple of assenting hums or indifferent shrugs. He wouldn’t go so far as to say Keith is mad but he looks preoccupied. Like he’s thinking far too hard about something he can’t seem to shake.

“You alright?” Matt finally asks just as Lance is about to.

“Hmm?” Keith raises a brow as he stops cutting down grass.

“You look...distracted,” Matt decides. “Thinking about the run?”

“No,” Keith shakes his head. “Just...old memories.”
“Good ones?” Matt asks with a hopeful smile.

“No,” Keith answers grimly and turns his back to them, then walks to a different section of the pasture to do more work. And to avoid further inquiries.

“He get like that a lot?” Lance asks after he’s out of earshot.

“Sometimes,” Matt admits. “He’s seen a lot of people die. Killed more than a few too. He tries not to dwell on it but I think it takes a toll on his emotions. Keeps all his feelings bottled away.”

“That can’t be good,” Lance says and looks over at Keith’s back as he works. His shoulders look tighter than usual too. Like a coil ready to pop.

“It’s not,” Matt sighs. “He’ll break down again soon. Happens when he holds the dam back for too long.”

Like when he cried on the bus. Felt like that was something that only happens once in a blue moon and only when Keith can’t hold it in any longer. The image of Keith sobbing into his jacket, nothing but tears and whimpering as he finally let go returns with glaring clarity. Other than their sexual encounters, it’s the only time Keith has been so vulnerable in front of him.

Does this mean he should give Keith some space? Or stay close? What’s best for him?

“Anything we can do?” Lance wonders.

“Not really,” Matt shakes his head. “Addressing it only makes him defensive. Best thing we can do is keep things light so he won’t have to think about it too much.”

“Hard to do when each day is just...survival,” Lance sighs.

“Incoming!” Coran says from the roof and points. “Four at 11 o’clock.”

The entire group goes silent and serious as they look over. Reminders like this always nail home that they’ll never be free of bad anything. Zombies still rule this new world.

Keith looks up and drops the weed whip to pull his knife. Without so much as a word, he vaults over the fence starts after the group of walking corpses heading their way. Lance scrambles to join him, dropping the bundle of grass and running towards the fence as well.

“Wait up, Keith!” he calls and pulls his knife too. He then calls over his shoulder to the others, “If you don’t have a weapon, stay in the pasture!”

Keith says nothing in response, he barely hears Lance over the blood rushing in his ears. He’s been itching to stick a knife in something foul since he woke this morning. What an opportunity to vent his frustrations with the ghosts of his past haunting him. With any luck, one of them will look just like him. Keith feels himself smirk.

God, he can only hope.

Keith dodges the first and trips it. Too slow to catch his movements it falls and flounders on the ground. He’d have finished it off but the others are far too close. Only a moron would go for it with another rotter in reach and Keith’s smarter than that.

He sidesteps over and draws the other three towards the ditch. Most of the time they’re too dumb to consider depth. It works. Two of them lose their footing and fall into the ditch, one of them making a
horrendous cracking noise as it’s leg snaps in two from the fall. Good. One less he’ll have to deal with.

The first one he knocked over is getting up just as Lance approaches. He grabs hold of its shoulder and shoves the knife in at the base of his skull. Rotten blood and mush slosh from the wound as he withdraws the knife. The smell makes him want to vomit but he pushes the body down and ignores the slick blood coating his knife and hand as he runs to assist with the rest.

Keith’s just now got a knife in one of the others. In through the side and out in an instant. The body drops and rolls into the ditch as the third climbs back up to reach him. It’s faster than the others and gains on Keith quickly.

“This one’s mine!” Keith tells him and points to the other. “Take that one!”

Lance goes for the one with the broken leg while it’s down. He has to clamber down the incline into the ditch to reach it but it’ll be an easy kill. After all, all it can do is pull itself by its weak arms.

That leaves the fast one for Keith. It’s already made its way back up the ditch and following Keith down the road. It might have been a woman once or maybe a man with exceptionally long hair. Thin and tall, just like–It’s missing several fingers, probably from the rotter than made them. It gurgles and trudges its way towards Keith before suddenly lunging with both hands out for him.

It’s got him!

The zombie’s hands grasp tight on his shoulders and lunges forward to take a bite. Keith drops and slides under its legs. The creature tumbles over losing its hold on him. But that puts Keith on the ground and in a difficult position to getting back on his feet. The creature grabs a hold of his shoe and Keith kicks as hard as he can, breaking the remaining fingers on the hand.

“Don’t touch me you fuck,” Keith hisses and kicks hard, with his heel directly into the rotter’s face.

It’s head droops with a snarl, disoriented but clearly not dead. Keith takes that chance to stand and drop his foot as hard as he can on the skull with a crunch. Yes, he’s never touching Keith again. Never touching anyone again.

Lance has finished off the one in the ditch. They got them all but...Keith continues to stand there breathing heavy over the corpse he stomped into oblivion, holding his knife tight in his hand. There’s nothing but a pile of rotten viscera where it’s head used to be but Keith looks anything but relieved. He’s still on edge.

“Keith?” Lance calls and reaches out to pat his shoulder. Just as he touches, Keith jumps back, knife at the ready. “I think you got him, buddy,” Lance nervously laughs.

It takes a second but Keith’s eyes focus on Lance’s in recognition. Suddenly he’s back from wherever he was.

“Right,” Keith swallows and looks down.

“You okay? You looked a little...spaced out,” Lance asks as he wipes off his own knife. “What were you thinking about?”

“I was thinking dying is too good for some monsters,” Keith says bitterly and Lance gets the feeling he’s not talking about the zombies. Keith stalks off back towards the clinic but not before stabbing each corpse a second time to make certain of their demise.
“What about moving the--”

“Ask the others,” Keith interrupts tersely. “I don’t feel like touching them.”

With that Keith leaves him there. He doesn’t stop for Matt when he asks if he’s okay. Doesn’t stop to talk to Shiro who tries to hail him down. Doesn’t stop for anyone. Just goes inside to be alone.

*****

No one sees Keith for a while. Lance checks his room, knocking to find no answer. Then peeking inside to find it empty. His own room shows the same result.

Something is clearly bothering Keith and he thinks it started this morning. That look on his face when Lance woke...it wasn’t typical of Keith. Sure he was worried about Hunk walking in on them but it seemed more than that. More than scared. Like...he was terrified.

Lance hears him before he sees him as he ascends the steps to the roof. Heavy breathing and grunting as he swings out his knife and practices his footwork. Lance watches from the cracked door as he trains. Keith’s strikes are fast but they’re off. Too hard. Too wild. Too much wasted energy expended, exhausting him sooner rather than later.

He nearly trips and braces his hands on his knees to catch his breath. With a heavy breath, he takes a seat on the ground and tosses aside his knife with an annoyed huff. Hunches his shoulders and buries his face in his hands. He’s tired and stressed. Clearly, Matt was right—he’s close to a breakdown.

Lance knocks on the door to get his attention. He doesn’t move but he does answer.

“I don’t want a pep talk, Shiro,” he mumbles.

“Not Shiro,” Lance answers as he approaches and Keith sighs without lifting his head.

“Still don’t want to talk,” Keith says.

“You don’t have to,” Lance smirks and stops next to him. “Mind if I sit here? Sun’s going down and I don’t want to miss it.”

Keith lifts and shakes his head. No, he doesn’t mind.

Lance won’t badger him about the specifics of what’s bothering him. Since Matt says that makes it worse. But...he can’t in good conscience leave Keith all alone to deal with it. But he can sit here next to him, close enough to lean on if he needs it. Maybe with a small reminder than he’s always available for conversation should he feel the inclination.

“You ever want to talk, I’m here,” Lance tells him, keeping his eyes on the sun.

“It’s nothing,” Keith says, looking at the ground.

“I’m great at talking about nothing,” Lance turns and grins at him. “I mean, have you heard me at dinner? What do I even say?”

Keith snorts and he almost smiles.

“You are good at that,” Keith admits.

“There’s a smile,” Lance says fondly. “Not as good as the one you shot me with earlier though.”
“Sorry. I don’t get a lot of practice in,” Keith frowns. “Doesn’t look right on my face.”

“Who the hell told you that?” Lance snorts with disbelief.

Keith’s hand raises and a thumb rubs his chest, right over his heart. Lance knows the spot. The one with the jagged and poorly healed scar. He avoided biting near it last night, thinking Keith wouldn’t appreciate pain near an old wound. The person responsible must have said that with the way Keith eyes lid in thought.

“I had a nightmare last night,” Keith admits. “Put me on edge. Tried to keep it under control but... you got caught in the crossfire. Sorry.”

“Oh,” Lance blinks and scoots in a little. “That all? No worries. I’m no stranger to nightmares, haha. Though...I’ve been having a lot less lately. Thanks for telling me.”

Lance raises an arm and hooks it around Keith’s neck and shoulder. It’s his patented ‘friend hold’. That’s what he calls it anyway. Keith’s taken to allowing it in public spaces provided he keeps his face from getting too close. Which he isn’t doing at the moment.

“You’re still so stiff,” he nuzzles into his neck, setting off a spark of electricity down his spine.

“Lance,” Keith mumbles in a warning tone.

“How about a massage later? In the bath?” he asks earnestly as he moves his face away. “Think that’ll make you feel better?”

“I don’t know,” Keith shrugs.

“Can’t hurt to try, right?” Lance smirks and checks his watch. “Gonna head down for a little music before dinner. Come with me? Found a CD with your song on it.”

His song? What is Lance talking about? His puzzled look makes Lance laugh a little. How can someone look confused and serious at the same time? He then hums a few bars and Keith finally catches on. The song Lance first sang to him.

He found it? What are the chances?

“Really?” Keith says, the barest hint of a smile.

“Yeah. Unfortunately, it’s a cover band but...it’s gotta be better than listening to me butcher it,” he jokes and stands. He offers his hand and Keith takes it without hesitation. Pulls him to his feet with a little tug. “I was thinking of a group game too, after dinner. Wanna join in?”

Keith’s not sure. He looks away at the knife he tossed to the ground. He should be preparing more for the run. Honing his skills and sharpening his knife--he can almost hear that cruel laugh sending a cold shiver down his back.

*You don’t want another nasty scar, do you?*

“It’ll help loosen you up,” Lance hints with a wagging brow, his hand still squeezing on Keith’s. “Something fun to do before buckling down for the serious work tomorrow.”

Keith swallows but nods. “Sure,” he mumbles.

He leaves the blade where it lays for once. Never picks it back up in favor of holding Lance’s hand for just a few moments as he pulls Keith across the roof. Keith’s finding it’s growing on him, the
supportive warmth of that squeezing hand. A firm hold that’s just soft enough to be considered gentle. He never liked that sort of thing before...but then, he never really experienced them before.

They walk together, hands only separating when they reach the threshold at the bottom of the stairs. Lance, still ever respectful of his preferences.

Maybe when they get back...he’ll let Lance do it where others can see. Maybe he’ll come out to Shiro too. Tell him everything he’s been hiding for all these years. Then maybe the burden of this weight and fear will leave. He’ll be as carefree and weightless as Lance always seems to be. Unapologetically himself. Allow himself to be happy for the first time in years.

Maybe--when the timing is right.

Chapter End Notes

If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment! Don't know what to say?
Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Fair deal?

(Also, if you really like Voltron stuff and want more, check out my other two fics. Tell me what you think of them!)

UPDATE: Reader diet_affection has made some amazing fanart for this fic! Please, go check it out Click HERE and support a great digital artist! You are amazing!! Thank you so much!
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Did someone order more Spanish in the bedroom?

Also, tags updated for a few things introduced in this chapter. Another long hiatus while I work on my cosplays. Yennifer isn't going to make herself. Thanks for reading and commenting guys. It really helps motivate me to keep writing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You got something I need

In this world full of people there's one killing me

--OneRepublic, Something I need

Supper finishes in record time. Working together to take a load off of Allura and Coran, the others do all the dishes so the doctors can go stargazing on the roof. Shiro wants to join them but gets scolded into turning in early to get some rest. He hasn’t been sleeping much due to the pain from his amputation and it’s all too obvious.

That just leaves the young soldiers of Echo and Alpha squads to spend a little time together, bonding over their meal and the game Lance has yet to choose.

“Dinner was great Hunk,” Pidge compliments. “You do things with snake that no other chef can accomplish.”

“Yeah...wish you’d stop reminding me that it’s snake,” Lance comments, stifling a gag. “I have a strong stomach but man...just thinking of something that used to be writhing and wriggling moving around in my belly...urf...”

“Stop talking about it Lance and you’ll stop thinking of a viper squirming around in your intestines,” Hunk chuckles as Lance nearly gags again at his colorful use of the word ‘squirming’ in regards to his guts.

“Grow up, that’s not even the worst thing you’ve ever swallowed,” Pidge grins suggestively, eliciting a high five from Hunk and laughter from everyone else.

“Haha, very funny,” Lance fake laughs but pouts. “You’re all going to hell for slut-shaming me. Just so you know.”

“For shaming you? I’m insulted. There are like thirty far more viable reasons we’re going to burn.” Pidge snorts and pats Hunk’s shoulder. The two of them whisper and erupt into laughter. “Lance, it’s like you don’t know us at all.”
“We’ll see about that,” Lance smirks. “Tonight's game is ‘never have I ever’.”

“What’s that?”

“We don’t have any booze Lance,” Pidge reminds him. “Thank god. I know how you are with liquor.”

“What’s he like?” Matt asks.

“Handsy,” Pidge chuckles. “You won’t be safe Matt. No one will be.”

“Like you can talk!” Lance exclaims, jutting a finger at her accusingly. “Who’s the one who--”

“Now, now,” Hunk hushes them by getting between them and clasping their shoulders. “Save it for the game. I’ll find a way to change the rules so we can still play.”

“Fine, let me go put the bathwater on the boil though,” Lance pouts and runs for the door. “I’ll be right back, don’t start without me.”

While he’s gone Hunk works out a way for them to play. Normally, it’s a drinking game, first to run out of shots is the loser and they begin all over. Those are Echo team’s house rules. But since they don’t have beer or liquor they’ll have to adjust by using fingers. Usually, it would be a ten finger game but they break it down to five fingers so that Lance can check the water between each match.

Keith gets the rules down after the first explanation. Each person exclaims something they’ve never done that they think someone else might have done. If they’ve done it they lower a finger. If no one has done it the speaker has to lower a finger instead. Once someone loses all their chances the game ends. If it’s a vague enough claim, and someone has done it, it’s better if they give an account of why they’re drinking—er, lowering a finger. Not necessary but makes the game more fun.

Seems simple enough.

Lance comes back in and takes a seat. Hunk explains the changes to the rules since there’s no drinks. Announces that a few rounds should be enough for his bathwater to boil. They do a quick round of rock, paper, scissors to decide who’s going first but from then on they don’t care too much about order as long as everyone goes.

“I’ll start us off,” Hunk says with his five fingers up. “Never have I ever...been bitten by a shark.”

“Aw come on!” Lance grumbles and lowers a finger. Hunk and Pidge give each other a high five across the table.

“Me next,” Pidge grins. “Never have I ever...misidentified someone’s sex or gender.”

“What?! Come on! This is bullshit! Borderline harassment,” Lance huffs but at least this time Keith and Matt lower a finger each too.

For Lance, Pidge is only one of several people he’s misidentified. Keith thought Lance was his sister, so that counts. Matt thought his CO was a guy for a year before someone pointed out he was using the wrong pronouns. It was...so embarrassing.

“I’m up,” Matt volunteers. “Never have I ever introduced a virus to an ex’s computer.”

“WHO TOLD YOU ABOUT THAT?!” Pidge exclaims and Hunk chuckles. “E tu, Hunk? How could you betray me like this?”
“Lower your finger, you know you’ve done it,” Matt points and she begrudgingly obeys. “How about you next, Lance?”

“Never have I ever...geez...I’ve done so many things,” Lance hums, tapping his chin in thought. “Uh...come back to me.”

“I’ll go,” Keith says. “Never have I ever dated someone on my scouting team.”

Pidge and Hunk immediately drop a finger with a nod at each other and a grin. Keith looks at Lance who’s pondering and looking at the ceiling as he counts in his head.

“We don’t have to lower one for each person we dated, do we?” he asks with a nervous smile.

“You’d be out for the next five games Lance,” Pidge jokes.

“HEY!” he says offended and the table laughs. He does end up lowering a single finger though.

“Me again?” Hunk wonders.

“No no no! I haven’t gone yet,” Lance gestures and thinks. “Let’s see...oh! Never have I ever broken a pair of glasses.”

All of the tech trio lower fingers to that one and Lance grins with victory. Nice three in one go.

“You wear glasses Hunk?” Matt asks curiously.

“No, they were Pidge’s haha,” he chuckles.

“Thank god that was before Incident One. I was able to get a new pair pretty quick,” Pidge remembers.

“How did--”


“Hmmm...Never have I ever...grown my hair out long enough to touch my shoulders at ANY point in my life,” Hunk smiles.

Damn. And Lance thought his was good. Such a harmless one too. Everyone person at the table lowers a finger. Matt looks over at Lance with confusion.

“You had long hair once, Lance?”

“I had an interesting childhood,” Lance shudders at the memory.

“And now to destroy Lance once and for all,” Pidge grins, evil in her smile. “Never have I ever been submissive in the bedroom.”

“AW COME ON!” Lance shouts. “Why do you come for my life like this?!”

Keith and Hunk lower fingers too but it doesn’t matter. Lance has no chances left. That makes Hunk, Keith, and Matt the winners with a three-way tie. Do they want to go again? Yes, of course! Lance thinks he can win a round but first, he makes a quick run to check his water. Once back he drops into the seat with an immediate claim.

“No more Mr. Nice Guy,” Lance says and points at Pidge in particular. “Never have I ever fucked
someone who was TALLER than me. Eat it!”

Pidge grumbles and lowers her finger since 95% of the world is taller than her. Hunk and Keith do so as well with a sigh. Matt turns and slaps Lance a high five. Lance figured Matt wouldn’t get caught in that one since he’s so tall. But Hunk is a pleasant surprise.

“Nice one Lance,” Matt chuckles and turns to Hunk. “How did that happen Hunk? You’re the biggest guy here!”

“I wasn’t always this tall you know,” Hunk explains.

“Okay this one will take ALL of you down one,” Matt says boldly. “Never have I ever...kissed a girl.”

They all gape in disbelief but Pidge is the first to say something.

“Liar!”

“Yeah, I’m with Pidge. No way you’ve never kissed a girl,” Lance says.

“It’s true,” he states.

“Let’s get Allura in here to test it,” Pidge says and turns to yell for the door. “Allura! Come kiss my brother!”

“Sh-shut up Katie!” Matt urges nervously, a blush on his cheeks.

“Oh my god, it’s true!” Lance laughs. “You’re totally a virgin! Holy shit! You’re an endangered species!”

“Shut your mouth, Lance. And take down your fingers already!” he points at them all. “I know you’ve all kissed a girl at one point.”

They all lower fingers but not without snickering at Matt. Can’t believe he’s the only one at the table who hasn’t kissed a girl. Lance has kissed boys, girls, and anything in between. Pidge used to date a girl in high school. Even Keith’s kissed a girl, though that was before he knew girls don’t do it for him. All that hype and he felt nothing when he kissed her. Spent the next several years denying what he knew to be true before just giving in.

“Alright, my turn. Never have I ever ridden on someone’s shoulders after the age of twelve,” Hunk says thoughtfully.

Everyone lowers a finger on that one too. Hell, Lance was on Hunk’s shoulders just today.


Who is this one directed at? They all look around the table and for a second it looks like Pidge is going to have to lower her own finger since no one’s moving. But she maintains her knowing smile which breaks out into a victorious grin when Lance finally sighs. He lowers a finger with a pout as he stares unamused at Pidge. Everyone else gapes in shock.

“Really??!”

“He was the guest of honor,” Pidge reveals and everyone’s eyes get wider.
“Wow...really going to have to slut-shame you now,” Hunk jokes

“It was ONE time!” he exclaims and Pidge cackles. “Shut up! God, I knew I never should’ve told you about that!”

“But you had fun though, right?” Pidge asks with a wink and Lance smirks back.

“You know I did,” Lance admits with a grin.

“You’re up Keith,” Hunk announces.

“Come back to me,” Keith shakes his head. “Lance?”

“Never have I ever eaten food off my partner’s naked body,” Lance says with confidence.

“Damn,” Hunk curses and lowers a finger. “Matt you’re up.”

“Never have I ever--”

“God he could say anything and take all of us down,” Lance interrupts, elbowing Keith.

“Never have I ever been in handcuffs--”

“HA!” Pidge laughs and points at Lance but he hasn’t finished.

“--for ANY reason at all. Including non-sexual things,” Matt clarifies.

Everyone at the table groans. Lance has been in them once and the person who put him in them sits across the table adjusting her glasses. He wasn’t a fan but then he’d been drunk enough not to care. Lance guesses that Hunk has been at her mercy like that too with the way he chuckles while looking at her. Keith neglects to mention his relationship with handcuffs though he does admit he got into a lot of fights when he was a teenager so that leaves the table thinking it was cop related. Pidge grumbles as she lowers her finger too.

“I knew that shoplifting thing would come back to bite me,” she huffs then mumbles. “Should have stolen a quieter parrot.”

“WHO STEALS A PARROT?!” Lance shrieks with laughter and smacks the table.

“I was twelve! Sue me!” she says, throwing a pencil at him that he easily dodges.

“They almost did,” Matt says shaking his head in disappointment at her. “You’re lucky you were just a kid.”

They’re all so close to losing with the exception of Matt. He’s got four fingers still left. Clearly, he’s going to win this round but who the biggest loser will be--that’ll be up to Keith. All he has to do is get just one of them and the round is over. He looks pensive as he comes up with something he’s never done that he’s sure the others have.

“Never have I ever--” Keith starts and then smirks. “Never have I ever told someone, who wasn’t family, ‘I love you’.”

The table goes quiet as they share glances.

“Are you serious?” Lance asks.
“Never?” Pidge blinks. “I told Allura I loved her this morning because she let me borrow her brush.”

“Nope, never,” he confirms with a stoic look. Doesn’t even seem bothered by it. “Well?”

Everyone at the table lowers a finger with the exception of Keith. What a somber note to end on but Keith smirks with victory. He took all three of Echo Team down with a single claim. Sure he didn’t get first but he didn’t lose, which always feels good.

“Game over. Guess I’m in first with Keith as the runner-up,” Matt chuckles and the two of them bump fists. “Go Team Alpha--”

“--only the best,” Keith finishes up with their motto. He then stands and makes his way to the door. “That’s it for me. Think I’ll take the first bath. Later.”

Keith leaves and everyone looks at each other uncomfortably. They don’t say anything but everyone’s thinking it. It’s just so sad, isn’t it? And he looked so proud of it, wore that exclamation like a badge of pride. If Keith could see the looks on their faces he’d hate it. Looks like...pity.

“Thanks for the game guys,” Lance tries smiling. “I’m uh, gonna get my stuff ready for when he’s done. Don’t want to waste that hot water.”

Lance does as he says, grabs a change of clothes and heads to the kennels. He’s a little worried though he can’t place his finger on why. Something about that claim bothers him. He tries to shake it off by the time he gets to the kennel door. Gives it a knock and waits for a response.

“What?” Keith answers.

“It’s me,” he says.

“It’s not locked,” Keith tells him.

Lance pushes his way inside and finds that Keith’s just now pouring the hot water into the cold, just like Lance did before. Towels for potholders he pours the contents of the first pot.

“Need any help?” Lance asks.

“Nope.”

“Want any company?”

“You offered to give me a massage right?” Keith notes as he pulls the other pot over and starts pouring.

“Best fingers in the west,” Lance claims with a wink, shooting off his finger guns and blowing the smoke from the ‘barrel’.

“Moron,” Keith says, shaking his head with a smirk.

Lance hits the locks before pulling off his shirt. Keith strips too without much ceremony, tossing the zombie stained jacket into a nearby sink. Before hopping into the water, he gives it a quick scrub to get the grime off the outside. Better than nothing. With any luck, it’ll be dry by morning.

Lance has already sunken into the tub with a content sigh. Feels good to soak again in the hot bath. From across the way he can see Keith’s still covered in bite bruises. They stand out dark against his pale skin. He beckons Keith over with two fingers and a suggestive smile, not so subtly telling him to hurry up.
Keith hangs his jacket on a hook and drops his boxers, kicking them aside before slipping into the small tub between Lance’s legs. Sits down with his back to the tub edge and facing Lance.

“Ahh…” Lance hums and leans back. “This is the height of luxury.”

“We’re bathing in a plastic tub made for dogs,” Keith reminds him and cups some water to his face to wash it. “Not exactly the Taj Mahal.”

“Oh yeah? You ever been?” Lance asks. “To the Taj Mahal?”

“No,” Keith admits with a huff.

“Then how do you know?” Lance smirks and Keith pinches his leg. “Ow! Hahaha! Don’t be sour. Come closer, I’ll wash your hair again.”

Keith turns and scoots in, the same position as the last time they did this. Fingers delve into his roots and lather slowly, humming all the while. Keith closes his eyes and just enjoys the soothing feel of a scalp massage as he works.

Lance wants to avoid talking about the game. Wants to avoid thinking about it too but each time he slides his fingers through Keith’s hair he hears him sigh. Keith’s clearly content. Happy even. Does Keith really mean it when he says he’s never loved someone before? Lance’s fingers slow their work as his head dips, eyes lidded.

What does that mean for them?

“You ready for the drive tomorrow?” Lance asks as he rinses Keith’s hair.

“Yeah, I’ll take the drive up. You can drive us back,” Keith suggests.

“Cool,” Lance nods. “Hair’s done. Want that massage still?”

“Like you said--can’t hurt,” Keith shrugs.

Lance smirks and squeezes his tense shoulders rhythmically, taking extra care wherever he sees bite marks. He massages those very gently and before he knows it Keith starts relaxing in his hands, his back untensing.

That’s much better, Lance thinks. Not so stiff. He gives his arms a good rubbing down as well and his lower back too. When he’s finished Lance’s arms wrap around him in a hug that for once doesn’t seem to bother him. He lets out a sigh and presses his nose into Keith’s neck.

“What is it?” Keith asks, sensing something on Lance’s mind.

“Did you mean what you said? During the game?” Lance mumbles in his ear.

“What?”

“You’ve never loved someone before?” Lance clarifies, an ache in his voice.

Keith sighs before answering. “That’s not what I said. I said I’ve never told someone I loved them. There’s a difference.”

“Oh,” Lance perks up a little, the information bringing him great relief. “Syntax. Clever. Who was your first love then? Tell you mine if you tell me yours.”
There’s a long pause as Keith pulls out of his hold. He turns and moves to the other side, bringing his knees up to his chest and curling up on himself a little. He rubs the six-inch scar on his chest. The scar itself is old but the wound still feels so fresh. Like it’s bleeding right now.

This is the last thing he wants to talk about but...its been years. He should be able to talk about it with someone. He’s never told anyone about Lotor. Not even Matt. It doesn’t make for pleasant conversation like when most people talk about love.

“He’s not worth mentioning,” Keith settles on.

“He...he did that to you, didn’t he?” Lance says, his eyes leveled on the starkest mark. His blood boils when he thinks he may have been in class with the person who carved Keith up. If he ever gets his hands on him--

“It doesn’t matter anymore. He’s dead...though he deserves worse,” Keith says bitterly.

Well, that’s good to hear. Wait, dead?

“Did you...?” Lance starts but Keith interrupts with a short clipped laugh.

“Did I...kill him?” Keith snorts. “No. He got himself killed. In a war zone overseas,” Keith says and looks away, eyes on the other side of the kennels. “Good riddance.”

Keith’s shivering even though the water is still hot. Tries to warm his arms by rubbing them but it doesn’t help. And now his chest feels tight, like it’s slowly constricting on him. Heat starts to prick at his eyes...tears forming.

No. Not today, he tells himself. And not for him. His fingers press into his arms to wrestle control of his emotions back.

“Did he love you too?” Lance asks.

“No,” Keith finally answers with a ragged breath. “I...” Keith’s voice cracks a little and he tries to laugh but it’s strangled. “I...can’t believe I cried for that stupid bastard.”

Keith looks like he’s going to crumble like a house of cards. Lance puts his palms on Keith’s shoulders to find his body trembling, shaking even. His arms are locked together in the iron grip of his hands. Looks like Keith doesn’t even feel it, like all outside sensations are being blocked out. But maybe he can still hear Lance.

“Shhh. It’s okay,” Lance says, his voice calm and soothing.

“Thank god I never said it,” Keith whispers. “The things he’d have done to me if he’d known how weak I was. Sadistic...fuck...If he’d known what he could have taken--”

Just imagining that cruel smile looking down on him steals his voice and makes his entire body change from cold to freezing, chilling him down to his bones. His fingernails dig into his arms but he can’t feel it. Everything is so numb. God, why is it so chilly in here?

“Shh. Stop digging your nails in, Keith,” Lance urges and tries to pry them off with no success. “You’ll cut yourself.”

With that, he releases his arms and Lance takes the opportunity to pull those hands into his own. They grip tight but Keith doesn’t dig in. His knuckles are white from the strain. Those steely eyes are somewhere else. Clouded and distant.
Reminds Lance of earlier after dealing with the zombies but now he recognizes the look. Just like some of the other watchmen Lance had met, the ones who’d done it longer than him. The ones who stood guard at the changes. A flashback of some sort that triggers a physical and emotional response in them but they can’t help but ride out.

No one diagnoses anything other than physical wounds anymore but there’s no denying a PTSD response when he sees it. Whatever it was...Keith was traumatized by it.

Best to de-escalate this.

“I’m sorry, Keith,” Lance tells him and gives his hand a squeeze, hoping he’ll snap out of it. “You don’t have to talk about this.”

“I can’t let that happen again,” Keith mumbles and swallows the lump in his throat.

“It won’t,” Lance promises and rubs his thumbs on Keith’s hands, soothing circles that don’t seem to be reaching him.

“The cuts...they...hurt so much,” Keith whimpers, but he’s just barely managing to keep from crying. He grits his teeth, trying to hold it back. “They hurt but I didn’t care. It made him smile. He didn’t love me--just the things I did for him...I can’t...do that again--”

“Then don’t.”

“--but I know I would...all you’d have to do was ask,” Keith barely breathes out.

Lance shakes his head, aghast at the words he’s hearing.

“That’s what love does to a person. Makes them stupid and weak,” Keith mumbles.

“I’ll never put a blade to you, Keith,” Lance tells him, letting go of his hands and cupping his face close. Keith’s watery eyes overflow and stream down his face. He kisses his forehead and his wet cheeks before looking into his eyes again. Still looks so far away. “I’ll never cut you, okay? Never.”

“Lotor never wanted to get his hands dirty either,” Keith squeezes his eyes shut and bows his head out of Lance’s hands in shame as he begins to sob, his shoulders shaking. “And I w-was...too fucking w-weak to say n-no.”

Lance realizes what he means with a start. All those jagged poorly healed scars...they were from hesitation. Like the person didn’t want to do it. He can almost date them in the order of their appearances. Shallow and uneven until slowly getting deeper, steadier. But no matter what they all have those irregular marks near them.

A sadist wouldn’t hesitate so much which means...Keith didn’t let someone cut him.

He did it to himself.

The thought makes Lance sick to consider but in his heart, he knows it’s true. Poor Keith. He was so in love that he fought through his instincts, every nerve ending firing off pain and telling him to stop, just to impress him. Then he trained himself to get better and better at hurting himself to please him. Perfected his technique over time even. To give his dom what he wanted with less damage.

Physically anyway. Emotionally...it's clear he’s still an open wound.

It burns Lance up to think someone took advantage of Keith like that. Used him. It’s one thing to
pretend someone is a toy, because after all the sexy fun you treat that person like a person afterward. But Lotor--God even his name invokes a feeling of disgust in Lance--he had Keith so tied up in knots that all he had to do was command it and Keith was willing to bleed for him. That’s not love...it’s exploitation. It's abuse.

No wonder Keith tries to keep distance from everyone. It’s why he’s not keen on those romantic gestures or anything to show he might care. He’s been that vulnerable once. Doesn’t want to be taken advantage of by someone again just because he loves them. So he puts up the wall emotionally. If it all stays just physical he can handle it. No attachments to worry about, no nagging weaknesses to get in the way.

No one can exploit your weaknesses if they don’t think you have any.

Lance pets Keith’s head as he takes deep breaths. Almost looks like he’s himself again. All cried out and exhausted in all senses of the word. His breathing is regular now and his hands aren’t clenched tight enough to crack coconuts. The shivering has stopped. His eyes look like they’re focusing too, returning his face to its usual serious tone.

Breakdown finished. Episode over. Crisis averted. Lance swears if Keith even thinks about apologizing--

“Sorry,” he coughs, clearing his throat to compose himself.

“Shut up,” Lance says and pulls him in for a hug. “You don’t have anything to be sorry for."

Lance just holds him for a while. Arms around his shoulders and fingers of his left hand cupping the back of his neck and into his hair. Keith’s arms hang limp at his sides at first but he finds himself moving them. Tentatively they come up and he brings them in to touch Lance’s sides. Then wraps them around his middle and squeezes.

Feels like his whole body gets lighter. A weight lifted from his shoulders. He closes his eyes and sighs into Lance’s neck. This...it feels so nice. Having support. He hopes that this hasn’t put Lance out though. Nothing sets a mood like an emotional breakdown, he thinks sarcastically.

“Didn’t mean to break down like that,” Keith mumbles. “Sor--”

“I said shut up,” Lance repeats. “No more sorries from you. Not about this.”

Keith nods. Feels so awkward in here now. And Lance was expecting a fun conversation. Suppose it still could be if Keith keeps it light. The way Lance would.

“What about yours? I told you mine,” Keith says and after a moment Lance untenses with a chuckle. A good segway apparently because he sits back and tells the story with a sentimental smile.

“I was twelve. Jenny Vasquez. She stole my soccer ball because I wouldn’t let her play with us. I yelled at her to give it back. Told her girls don’t look cute when they play sports. She returned the ball via my face and knocked out two of my teeth,” Lance tells him. “I never fell so hard. I asked her to marry me the next day and every day for a year.”

Keith snorts and Lance laughs.

“What did she say?”

“Never in a million years,” Lance reveals with a laugh. “She married my cousin. They have two kids, one of which I am the Godfather of.”
“Your life is soap opera,” Keith chuckles, covering his mouth.

“Isn’t it though?” Lance laughs and imitates a female voice along with his own. “Lance, I cannot marry you! But why, mi amor?! Because... I am in love... with your brother! Ay! Noooooo! Next time we reveal the identity of the father of María García Ramírez de Arroyo’s baby.”

“Moron,” Keith says, rolling his eyes. “Let’s finish up. I’m ready to head back to our room.”

Lance nods in understanding and lathers up the washcloth with soap. Gets to cleaning in all the nooks and crannies of his own body before doing Keith’s. Sliding the rag over his chest and down to his crotch, fondling as he scrubs. He can turn any activity into an intimate one it seems. Has Keith sighing in all the right tones to get Lance excited.

“All clean,” Lance says as he pulls Keith’s body to his own between his legs. He grabs ahold of Keith’s semi under the water and strokes gently. “You said ‘finish up’ right? Want me to finish you now? Or later?”

“The sound... echoes in here,” Keith reminds him with a sigh as Lance’s other hand joins the first. One pulls and strokes his length as the other squeezes and massages his balls.

“I know,” Lance says, running his teeth over the juncture of his neck and shoulder.

As tempting as it is to cut loose in here, Keith’s not sure he’s quite up to the entire team knowing what they’re up to. He can be quiet but not nearly long enough to get off. That said he lets Lance stroke him a little longer, tilting his head back onto Lance’s shoulder with a relaxed groan before answering with a suggestion of his own.

“Save it for the room,” Keith tells him.

“Got it,” he says, planting a kiss at his shoulder while removing his hand. “Willing to be at my mercy tonight? We can do something we’ll both like.”

“Sure,” Keith nods.

Keith gets out first and retrieves a towel from the cabinet. Throws it to Lance and then grabs another and dries his hair, quickly followed by the rest of him. Lance does the same, towels off his head and shoulders before getting the rest. He changes into scrubs and tells Keith he’ll meet him in the room, gives him another light kiss on his neck before leaving with a wink. A smile forms on Keith’s face as the door closes.

“You hear that, asshole?” Keith smirks, looking up at the ceiling. “Something we’ll like…”

Lotor used to say stuff like that but the tone never matched the sentiment. It was always what he liked more than what Keith liked. Lance sounded like he meant it. How funny that earlier Keith thought they were similar when they couldn’t be more different. Hell, Lance is different from anyone he’s ever been with. He’s changed Keith in small ways that he’s only now noticing.

Before it was about himself. About what Keith could get out of partnerships and whatever distasteful things he was willing to do or put up with to get them. But now, with Lance... No more unpleasant activities. No pushing himself past his comfort level. If it’s not fun for both of them... then it’s not happening. Lance makes sure of that.

Keith sighs and runs his fingers through his hair to get out the tangles. When finished he looks into a cracked mirror on top of a grooming table to give himself a once over.
His wild hair is in need of a good brushing but the bags under his eyes are going away. Thanks to all those restful nights sleep. He looks over his body littered with scars and bite mark bruises. Notes that none of Lance’s bites are near his big scars. Not one. All of them are in bare spots so as not to touch the old marks.

Lance couldn’t have known that the nerves near them are overly sensitive to pain but Keith likes to think it maybe crossed his mind, even in the excitement of their romp. Actually...he’s sure Lance took it into consideration with how deliberately spaced they are. The thought brings another soft smile to his face as he touches one on his pec.

“Moron,” he sighs, maintaining that smile. “You’re too nice to me. I don’t deserve it.”

With that he throws on his scrubs and exits, heading quickly to their room.

*****

The instant the door is shut Lance pins him to it, wrists high about his head and mouth sucking hard on Keith’s neck. Hands grip tight on his wrists as he nibbles and breathes hot on Keith’s pulse. Presses his hardon against Keith’s so he knows how excited he already is. Keith's hardness already matches his and they've barely started.

“Thinking we might not get a chance to do this for the next week,” Lance says to him. “Too busy focusing on gathering supplies to think about playing with my favorite toy.”

Straight to that dirty way of talking. Good. Keith's been looking forward to it.

“True,” Keith agrees and takes in a sharp breath when Lance bites into his shoulder.

“But if you’re really good...don’t do anything reckless...and we find some lube...” Lance hints and nibbles the lobe of his ear before whispering in it. “I might be persuaded to give you a good fucking while we’re out there. Would you like that, slut?”

Lance adjusts his hold to pin his wrists with one hand. The free hand grazes down his jawline before encircling his throat and squeezing gently. Keith’s eyes lid and face flushes. Lance asks again and Keith nods as much as he’s able.

“Of course you would,” Lance says, squeezing again to get a gasp out of Keith. He releases the pressure so that Keith can breathe for a few seconds, then squeezes again with a smirk on his face. “Leave your hands up high. Don’t move them.”

Lance lets go of his wrists and dips his hand into Keith’s scrubs, gripping the waistband and giving it a quick tug down to expose his hard cock. The cold air makes Keith shiver for a second. His cock bobs and twitches each time Lance gives his throat a squeeze. He gives that cock a sweeping caress down the shaft making Keith moan a little only to be silenced by another compression.

“Shh...no noise now or they’ll hear you. Or...is that what you want?” Lance asks. “Want everyone to know what a needy slut you are?”

“No,” Keith breathes.

“Then be quiet,” Lance says sternly as he gives Keith another choking squeeze. “You get too loud and we’ll have to stop...I’m sure you don’t want that either. Yeah, I didn’t think so. Now turn around and put your hands on the wall.”

Keith does as he says as soon as Lance lets go of him. Turns and braces his palms on the cold
Lance runs his hands down his body, patting it and sliding under his shirt to feel around. Pinching his nipples, rolling them between his fingers to make Keith gasp but he keeps quiet enough. Next, his hands run down his back and ass, grabbing handfuls of flesh to squeeze with a sigh. All the while Lance nuzzles into his neck, breathing him in.

“Your body...a shame no one’s taken care of it for you,” Lance says and drags his tongue down Keith’s pulse. “You don’t seem to take care of it either. You’ve been hit by a nail gun, stabbed, there’s even a gunshot wound right...here,” he says and grips the flesh at his side.

“S-Stuff happens,” Keith manages.

“It’s like you don’t care if you get hurt,” Lance sighs and presses his bulging crotch against Keith with a groan.

“Oc-occupational hazard,” Keith tells him, then shudders when Lance wraps his fingers around his cock. Gently strokes Keith into a slow hardness. “World’s not a safe place anymore.”

“How many times have you taken a hit meant for someone else?” Lance asks and when Keith doesn’t answer, he pulls on his hair. Keith just barely manages not to yelp at the sudden tug. “Answer me.”

“I...I don’t know,” Keith gasps out.

“You know every single special tactics formation, how to tie a dozen knots without looking...but you can’t remember how many times you used your body as a shield?” Lance says, his voice serious. “How many?” he asks again.

After a moment of cataloging his injuries over the years, he finds a number. It’s high. Higher than he thought it would be. In the double digits and that was before Incident one. It’s only increased since then. But if he only counts after the infection spread it’s lower. Not by much though.

“T-Twelve,” Keith utters and groans when Lance strokes him with a saliva-slick hand.

And he told Lance not to be a hero before. What a hypocrite.

“And how many times has someone taken a hit for you?”

“I...uh...” Keith wracks his mind but it’s hard to focus with Lance’s hand pumping him like this. “T-Twice.”

“Something sad about that,” Lance muses.

Lance stops stroking, rubbing the shiny tip of precome off of Keith’s cock and licking it off his thumb. He leaves to the other side of the room but Keith stays on the wall. Lance didn’t say he could move.

He returns and pulls Keith’s arms off the wall one at a time and twists them behind his back. Ties them in place with a knot Keith taught him and when finished he uses the binding to direct Keith off the wall. Pushes him to a counter so he has to bend over it. Lance pulls his pants off the rest of the way and tosses them aside before spreading his legs again into a frisk position.

Lances fingers splay onto his ass cheeks and spread him a little before his tongue does a long sweep
over his hole. Keith bites back a noise, pressing his face into the countertop as he strains against his bonds. Lance does it several more times and Keith whines at the hot, wet sensations and the overall feeling of helplessness.

“L-Lance,” he rasps. “A gag...please...I can’t…”

Lance complies with his request. Unties the bandana from his wrist and ties it in place over his mouth.

“You know you can’t tell me to stop if you’re gagged,” Lance tells him. “Can you snap tied up like this?”

Keith shows him he can.

“Once for red, two for yellow, no response green. Sound good?” Lance asks and Keith nods.

With that out of the way, Lance returns to Keith’s ass, rimming and tasting with intermittent bites on the meaty cheeks and thighs. Fingers keeping him spread and open for him to taste at his leisure.

There’s something about the way Keith shakes and shivers when Lance has him. Like Lance is breaking him into pieces one lick at a time. And when he slides a single finger into him? Keith moans andwhimpers as the slick appendage penetrates slow and deep. Curling and pulling, massaging his walls with purpose. His legs shake but they stay in their place.

“That’s a good slut,” Lance says, licking his balls and fingerining him. “Keep them spread for me.”

Keith moans in response and Lance continues his work. After a few minutes of teasing, he stands to look Keith over. To check on his bonds. It’s not that he doesn’t trust Keith to tell him if it hurts, but he’s already shown that he’ll push himself without meaning to. And if his reaction before is any indication, sometimes he might not feel it.

While he inspecting his wrists to make sure there are no rope burns he gets a look at Keith’s flushed face. The bandana is soaked with spit and his brows furrowed high. Eyes clouded with lust. Not much longer and he’ll come all over the counter. He didn’t realize he’d gotten him this fast. Gives him an idea. A naughty idea and the longer he thinks about it the more he likes it.

Lance moves over to Keith’s face. Pulls on Keith’s locks to get him to turn and look up at him. Once Keith’s eyes focus on his Lance speaks.

“I was thinking...I’d finger you until you came,” Lances says with a smirk. “But...now I think I’ll make you wait.”

Keith’s eyes beg, his head shakes no. No, don’t make him wait. Not when he’s this close. He lets out a desperate objectionary whine and tries to sit up off the counter. Lance immediately pins him back down by his neck and he writhes under his hand.

“Don’t give me that,” Lance chuckles, biting his lip with a smirk. He leans down and kisses his neck. “You said it yourself. You like being denied...being made to earn it. Be good on the trip and I’ll let you have it in...three days. Alright?”

Three days? Three days of being forced to wait? It’s so cruel but...he is right. He likes being teased and this is the best way to do it. Even better if Lance does exactly what he’s doing now every day they’re out there. Working him up and telling him no. Making him go to bed horny and needy.

Lance trails a hand down his face and cups his cheek. He asks if that’s alright again and Keith
whines but nods his head. Three days it is, starting with tonight.

Keith then eyes Lance’s tented pants, a question behind his hungry gaze. What about Lance?

“I’ll wait too,” Lance promises but that doesn’t seem like the answer Keith wants. He shakes his head no again with a desperate whimper trying to get words out but they’re garbled. Lance unties the bandana and Keith pants to catch his breath from the phenomenal finger fucking he got earlier.

“What? You don’t want me to wait with you?”

“No, I...use me,” Keith rasps. “T-Take what you w-want...Please…”

Part of being denied works best when his partner still gets off. To make Keith watch or taste what he’s missing out on—it makes him hungrier for it later. More obedient too.

Lance cradles his face in his hand with a smile. Keith noses his palm with desperate breaths, licking his fingers. More begging pleases pant out of him as he rubs his aching cock on the counter to keep that hardon going. And man if him saying please doesn’t hit Lance right in his heart--among other places. Makes him weak in the ways that ropes make Keith crumble. He can’t say no to him.

“I will,” he nods. “But first…”

He runs his splayed fingers through Keith’s hair, combing through and petting before gripping tight eliciting a sharp gasp from Keith.

“Stop rutting against the counter,” Lance commands firmly, face sneering down. “You look like a dog in heat when you do that. Makes you look pathetic. Like you can’t control the animal urge to offer up your pretty ass to the first willing cock you can find.”

Keith face turns red with shame at those words. That’s the kind of derisive tone he loves. Degrading. Mocking. Part of him wants to disobey so that Lance will say something like that again. Another scolding will only make him harder. But if he does he might not get to see Lance get off and he wants that more.

So he nods his assent and stills, but his legs shake as if he’s fighting the urge to start again.

“That’s better. So you want me to use you, huh?” Lance asks and lowers his mouth to Keith’s for eager kisses. Tongue probing deep and coaxing out weak moans from the bound man pinned to the counter. “Can’t say I’m surprised. Needy thing. I guess I have been thinking about a nice big load in your mouth again. You do such a good job on your knees; you’d make a half decent whore.”

Lance yanks him off the counter by the ropes and brings him to the floor in front of the cot. Sits him up before taking a seat on the edge and pulling himself out. Hard and stiff in his hand. Keith starts to lean forward but stops himself, remembering the last time he did so. He swallows and leans back to wait.

“Look at that,” Lance chuckles and strokes his cock. “You can control yourself.”

After a minute Lance beckons him forward with two fingers and a haughty smile. Keith scoots forward carefully, his arms still bound behind him. He doesn’t want to fall face first into the floor, though he’s pretty sure Lance would catch him if he did.

“Good, just a little closer,” Lance tells him and threads fingers through his hair. Gentler this time, to guide him. “I’m sure you’ve done it enough times, slut. Go slow...I like the build up.”

“Yes sir,” Keith breathes over the head of his cock before lapping the salty tip.
Slow he said so Keith just licks at first. Like Lance is a popsicle. Tasting the top in short laves, pressing the head of Lance’s cock against the flat of his tongue and looking up into those blue eyes as they watch him work. They’re lidded and a light flush dusts his cheeks as his fingers massage in Keith’s hair. He’s even starting to breathe a little heavier.

“There’s...so good…” Lance sighs, losing his commanding look in the wake of Keith sliding that cock into his mouth. Lance tilts his head back with a heady moan, his fingers pulling a little at Keith’s hair but releasing their hold before hurting him. Stuttering his little Spanish compliments again behind that hand again.

A moment later Keith starts speeding up a little, going deeper with each bob. Swirls his tongue around and sucks on the glans. Even scrapes his teeth along down the shaft. Doing everything he can to elicit even more Spanish out of Lance. He only seems to do it when he’s over excited and can’t contain himself like when he suddenly goes deep.

“Keith,” Lance gasps when he deepthroats him for longer than a few seconds. “T-Tan bueno...que p-podría llorar.”

So good he could cry. What a thing to say. And now Keith’s in the headspace to finally say something back. Something he thinks will surprise Lance. He pulls off him and laps his tongue down his shaft until he finds the words.

“Lance,” he sighs with a long lick from his base to tip, getting another grateful moan from Lance. “Your ropes hurt?” Lance asks, sitting forward and ready to untie them. When Keith shakes his head he instead combs his fingers through locks so he can look at his face unhindered.

“Te chuparía toda la noche...solo para escuchar tus gemidos,” Keith tells him. “Son tan deliciosos de escuchar como tu polla es a gusto.”

“That so?” Lance chuckles with a grin but then blinks in sudden confusion. “Wait--”

Lance looks dumbfounded for a second. He can’t have possibly heard what he thought he heard. He must have had a language slip up. Keith didn’t say that he loves sucking him. That he’d do it all night just to hear his moans. That they are as delicious as his cock.

Or maybe he did say that but clearly not in Spanish. He was just imagining it...right?

Keith returns to his cock sinking down it and clouding Lance’s mind further with a muffled moan. No...that was definitely...Keith keeps interrupting his thought process as he goes down deep and fast. Lance’s fingers tighten in that dark hair as Keith goes faster but he can’t get it out of his head.

Lance wants to hear it again, has to be sure, so he pulls him off. Keith rasps for breath and struggles to get out of his hold so he can return to that delicious cock that he wants to wrap his lips around. But Lance won’t let him. Not until he knows for certain he wasn’t hearing things.

He manages to hold Keith in place while he strokes his cock slick with his spit. Keith eyes won’t leave that dripping cock.

“D-Di algo d-de nuevo,” Lance pants, asking Keith to say something else. To speak to him. God just one word might be enough to tip him over.

“Dámelo,” Keith begs, a small trail of drool dripping out the corner of his mouth. “P-Por favor.”

Give it to me. Please.
Jesus Christ, Lance can feel a tightening in his gut. And hot warmth expanding. Those words on Keith’s lips—they’re dangerous. He thought he could last another good ten minutes with Keith sucking on him...now he’ll be lucky if he can make it ten more seconds.

“A-Again,” Lance gasps, trying to beat back that rising heat for just a little longer. “Again, Keith.”

“Dámelo,” he whimpers. “Lo quiero, lo necesito—”

*Give it to me. I want it, need it—*

“F-Fuck,” Lance groans and shifts forward, his hand letting go of Keith’s hair to hold his jaw, using his thumb to prop his mouth open.

Lance can hardly breathe as ropes of come erupt from him. His aim isn’t what it should be but then he’s blinded by that orgasm. Only a quarter of it gets in Keith’s mouth, the rest hits his cheek and chin dripping to the floor in fat sticky drops. Doesn’t seem to bother Keith at all as he licks his lips of anything he can reach, swallowing it down.

Lance’s chest heaves as he tries to regain some semblance of brain function to look down at the mess he made of his face. If nothing else, it’s a pretty good looking facial. Porno worthy.


“Sorry,” Lance breathes and reaches for their hand towel. He wipes the remainder from Keith’s face with a sheepish smile. “I couldn’t see.”

“It’s fine,” Keith assures him as he tongues his teeth to catch what little is left. “Untie me.”

Lance stands from the bed and quickly takes a knee behind Keith. He feels fingers unfurling the knots one at a time until it goes slack then he pulls his arms out of the loose loops while Lance gathers the rope up. His shoulder pops once with a grunt and he lets out a sigh before standing up. He’s about to grab his scrubs off the ground when Lance taps him.

“Hold on a sec,” Lance says and gestures for his hands. Keith shows them and Lance turns them over to inspect them. “Looks like you’re all set. Nothing permanent. How’s your back?”

“Sore,” Keith admits but shrugs. “It’ll be fine by morning.”

“Put on your pants and lay on the cot,” Lance tells him. “I’ll give you another little massage before we turn in.”

Sounds good to Keith. It’s nice to get some decent aftercare for once instead of taking care of it himself. He slips on his scrubs and drops onto the cot, flopping over onto his stomach. Lance straddles himself over his lower back to get started.

“Left or right?” Lance asks.

“Left,” Keith sighs and Lance starts squeezing at the tender muscles there.

“When did you learn Spanish?” Lance chuckles.

“My mom made me take it since I was a kid since we lived here in Texas,” Keith answers. “I know some French too. And a little German. Started learning those at the Garrison though so I’m only conversationally fluent.”

“Geez, only conversational? Guess you’re not the best without a reason,” Lance laughs. “Probably
comes in handy with missions abroad.”

“That was the idea,” Keith sighs as Lance squeezes. He pauses before asking, “Want me to use it more often?”

“Only if you want to melt every Latin bone in my body,” Lance tells him and Keith snorts into the pillow to stifle a laugh. “I’m not kidding! Did you see how fast that got me? You’ve found my ultimate weakness.”

“Noted,” Keith smirks.

“Use sparingly to avoid spontaneous combustion in my pants,” Lance jokes as he finishes kneading down his arm. “That feel better?”

It does but he’s not ready to stop yet. Before he hated getting spoiled by Lance like this but now he’s come to look forward to it. After all the garbage and shit relationships he’s had to wade through to get this far, he’s going to enjoy this to the fullest. They do need to get some rest for tomorrow but Keith thinks he can milk this for another ten minutes before they sack out.

“The other one hurts a little,” he says and Lance begins again, this time on the right side.

For the rest of the massage they say nothing. Keith just sighs contentedly and listens as Lance hums. He loses himself in the rhythmic pressing and squeezing of his shoulder and the melody of whatever song is going through Lance’s head. In the years since Incident One, he has never felt so relaxed. So safe.

So loved.

Lance leans down and whispers in his ear, “Time for bed Keith.”

Keith hums some kind of affirmation but gives no indication that he’s going to move at all. Too tired. And he’s so comfortable, why would he?

A blanket’s already been pulled over the two of them. He can feel slender fingers playing with his hair, swooping through and gently scraping his scalp. When that stops, a warm body curls in close to his, an arm already wrapping around to hold him close. Warm lips leave reassuring kisses on the back of his neck as a nose buries itself in his hair with a sigh.

No, he doesn’t need to do a thing but float away into blissful sleep.

“See you in the morning,” Lance whispers, planting a kiss on his cheek. “Dulces sueños…Amor…”

He’s heard that term before. One of endearment. One of love. Something they hadn’t agreed to when they started all this and would have caused him to shove Lance out of the bed if he’d said it a week ago. Probably would have shouted at him too, ending all activities between them.

But as it stands Keith can’t seem to find the motivation to berate him for it. Where the fires of his objections burned now sits nothing but slowly dying embers.

So, instead, he falls asleep with a satisfied smile on his face.

Chapter End Notes
If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment! Don't know what to say?
Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Fair deal?

(Also, if you really like Voltron stuff and want more, check out my other two fics. Tell me what you think of them!)
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Say hello to some (kinda) new faces :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Some people got the real problems

Some people out of luck

Some people think I can solve them

Lord Heavens above

--Rag'n'bone Man, Human

This place is new, Keith thinks. He’s gotten so familiar with his dreams that the moment this one begins he knows its different. One he’s never had before. Which in itself is enough to make him anxious right down to the deepest pit of his stomach. Not knowing is sometimes worse than some of his most horrifying nightmares.

Looks like a lab of some sort, with tables, glass beakers, and bottles of unknown chemicals on the shelves. A few countertops with built-in sinks. Wooden stools to sit on, a couple of them knocked over. A chalkboard with scribbled writing on it. A school classroom, he concludes. Sort of like the ones in the science division back at the Garrison.

Light streams in through the windows from the blood red sunset outside and thus paints the room in crimson and shadows. He jumps when he hears pounding on the door across the way, immediately trying to draw his knife and taking a stance to defend himself. But his Kbar is gone. Where--?

“Don’t worry. I already barricaded it,” a voice groans from the ground and Keith quickly turns to face it. Lance grimace smiles up at him while nursing his leg.

It's bleeding. Profusely. Blood soaking through his jeans and down his leg into his boot. He squeezes the wound to keep pressure on it as he lets out a ragged breath.

“That makes three,” he weakly chuckles. “Three hits taken for you. Haha...I’m honored to join the ranks.”

Keith gets down to his knees and tries to peer at the injury but Lance won’t move his hand. Grips tight when Keith tries to pull his hands free. His face stern but hiding fear behind the eyes. That sinking feeling only fuels his desire to see it more. Less inclined to be nice about it, Keith pries his hands off and rips the hole in his pants so he can see better.

It's a bite. Two of them, deep with flesh torn away and oozing blood. Keith blanches at the sight as he loses all the breath in his lungs.
Not again.

“Sorry,” Lance says with a tight-lipped smile. “It was a while ago...I didn't want you to worry.”

No. Not this time. No one’s taking this one.

“I'll cut it off,” Keith says, no hesitation and begins pulling the saw from his side. “Give me your belt. We’ll tie off your leg at the knee.”

“It's too late,” Lance waves his hand. “Quarter hour ago. And I already feel...warm. You should go.”

Go? Leave him? Lance has to be kidding.

“What? No, I'm-”

“I’m done for but I can hold them off for a while. You can get away through the window,” Lance explains as he gets to his feet, leaning on the window sill for support.

He opens it up and looks down. Two stories but Lance assures him that he can stick the landing if Lance lowers him a few feet first. Plus, looks like there’s a dumpster full of trash. That’ll soften the landing too.

“Come on Keith, they'll break through soon.”

“No,” Keith says shaking his head and taking a step back. His hand pulls through his hair as he tries to control his panic. When's the last time he panicked? “This isn't real. I-- this is a dream. I'm dreaming,” he tries to reassure himself.

The door bows and cracks as the hits continue. In seconds it'll collapse under the strain. Lance grabs him by the shoulders and directs him over to the open window but Keith is pulling against his hold, resisting as much as he can but Lance feels so strong. The resolve in his face unwavering even as Keith shakes his head, eyes welling with tears.

“No,” he says again, his voice shaky. “I--”

“You have to Keith. You have to,” Lance tells him.

The door splinters and the first rotter stumbles it's way in. Lance grips tight as his eyes blow wide with fear, not for himself but for Keith. So many things he wants to say Keith can tell but he settles for a hug and pressing a kiss to Keith’s cheek wet with tears, for the last time he knows.

“I don’t regret it,” Lance whispers in his ear after embracing him close. “Us. This. Know that, okay?”

“No, Lance--”

“Don’t forget me, okay?”

Before Keith can answer, Lance shoves him out the window.

The fall is slow. Too slow, like sinking in water. Even so, he can't reach out for the ledge fast enough, a fear choking his throat as his fingers grasp desperately for purchase on anything.

If he can just grab it--he can stay. He can help. Lance hates being alone. He hates the sounds the corpses make. Keith can’t leave him like this so he tries to reach something, anything to change this nightmare.
God how he tries. Stretching his arm till it aches against the strain. His fingers don’t even graze the sill. Only when he sees the last of Lance’s sad but smiling face looking down on him that Keith is able to shout, to call out for him just as he hits the ground.

*****

Keith jolts awake, shaking his cot. Sits up with a gasp, panting and his face damp with tears. Where’s--?!

Lance is sleeping soundly next to him, his fingers interlocked with Keith’s. It should reassure him but he pulls up the bottom of the blanket to look at Lance’s leg. Nothing. Just the old scar from that childhood shark bite. Thank fucking god.

Keith swallows and takes a shaky breath. With his right hand, he cups his face, wiping away the wet from it and sweeping his hair out of his face, forcing himself to relax.

He hates dreams like that. He used to get them before his mom died. Before Shiro was hurt. Dreams of them getting killed and Keith being helpless to stop it. Always puts him on edge in the worst way. Even now he keeps sneaking looks over at Lance’s leg as if it’s suddenly going to appear bloody and torn. Nothing. Lance’s toes wiggle a little and his legs rub together as if cold so Keith replaces the blanket before he can wake.

He reaches under his pillow for his knife, for some reassurance, only to find it absent.

“Right,” he remembers. It’s still on the roof. He never returned to get it after dinner.

Maybe that’s why he dreamed that. The bite scar on Lance’s leg, plus his lack of weapon and the fact that they’re leaving together today for a five day run...of course he had a nightmare that something bad would happen.

He looks down on Lance who doesn’t have even a modicum of worry on his face as he sleeps. Just holds onto Keith’s hand and breathes softly. He manages to free himself from Lance’s grip and fix the blanket. No reason to wake him up with his worries.

Keith stands from the cot and does a few stretches. His back is feeling much better thanks to that massage. While touching his toes he looks over at Lance again, who hasn’t moved. He gets the idea to bring him some coffee to get him going. He can already smell some being brewed. But first, he needs to get dressed and retrieve his blade.

The knife is where he left it. It’s wet with dew so Keith wipes it on his pants before looking it over. No rust luckily but he probably should sharpen it before they go. If he wants the blade to sink into skull easily then it needs to be sharp. After breakfast. For now he sheathes it and makes his way back down the stairs.

Just as he’s coming down the hall Lance’s door swings open, the occupant shouldering his way into a jacket with a slight panic on his face. He didn’t even change clothes or put shoes on. Just the coat and boxers in his hurry to locate the missing Keith.

The worry melts away into relief when his eyes fall on Keith who gives him a simple wave as he approaches.

“Woke up and you were gone,” Lance chuckles nervously once he gets close. “I thought you left without me, haha.”

“Sorry. I forgot my knife upstairs last night,” Keith tells him, feeling a little guilty. “I was going to
wake you up when I got back.”

“Is anyone else up yet?”

“I smell coffee, so someone’s awake,” Keith guesses.

“Great. I’ll get dressed and we can head out in fifteen,” Lance tells him. “Sound good?”

“Yeah,” Keith nods.

Lance bends down for a kiss and what’s more shocking is that Keith almost meets him. Feels himself lean forward before remembering that they’re exposed in an open hallway. At that thought, Keith shrinks away while taking a step back. Feels bad about it seeing Lance’s brows furrow as he scratches the back of his head while averting his eyes.

“I forgot,” Lance mumbles. “No PDA. Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I…” Keith trails off and shakes his head. “We can later.”

“Right,” Lance nods, a smile returning to his face. “If you’re good, remember?” he adds with a wink.

Keith feels a warmth overtake his cheeks as he recalls the night before. Arms pulled tight behind him as Lance pumped a single finger into him. That tongue unraveling his body into a shaking desperate mess only to have Lance deny him. But then he promised to give him what he really wants in three--no, two more days. But only if he's good.

He tries to frown but a light dusting of pink manages to stay on his cheeks. Keith nods to acknowledge their arrangement and starts to take off for the rec room. Lance catches his hand and pulls him in behind the door to whisper in his ear.

"Rojo se ve bien," he purrs. "Se ve bien en tu cara."

What a flirt. Lance is lucky no one can see them behind the door.

"Cállate," Keith says while rolling his eyes.

"God...I love it when you tell me to 'shut up'," Lance waggles his brow and leans on the doorframe. "Say something else. Makes me weak in the knees."

"Si quieres que debilite tus rodillas, siempre podría romperlas por ti," Keith warns and Lance laughs.

"See, you meant that as a threat but damn if my heart didn’t just skip a beat," Lance sighs in exaggerated fashion.

Keith rolls his eyes again but this time can't help a short puff of laughter at Lance's response. Only Lance would take Keith's threat to break his kneecaps as playful flirting. And he won't stop grinning at Keith either like he's willing to sit there all day to listen to Keith threaten him in Spanish.

Lance leans in again but this time dramatically puckering his lips for a kiss and making loud kissy noises. Keith gives him a shove into the room as he comically whines.

"Tease," Lance pouts with a smile.

"Get dressed," Keith snorts. "We have work to do."

*****
The car is officially ready to go. Extra seats have been removed and all supplies necessary for the trip have been packed away. Food, water, a tarp in case they need to set up their own campsite and need to hide their fire. Keith's pretty sure they won't need it if they can find a halfway decent house to stay in.

Coran brings to them the first aid kit, complete with antiseptic, gauze, adhesive bandages, thread and needle for stitching up gashes. There's a handful of pills in there but they're all generic. Allura has labeled them with their names and what they are used for. Most are for pain but some are antibiotics. It all fits in a container the size of a lunch box and snugly fits under the passenger seat.

Keith's on the receiving end of another lecture from Shiro that he's barely listening to. He's heard it a million times. In fact, he can almost repeat it word for word from every time he left the apartments to search for supplies. No, he's more interested in whatever Lance is talking to his team about.

Mostly the other two are insisting Lance be careful. Not to go anywhere alone. They remind him to stick to the list and not to divert from it for stupid stuff. Pidge is the most vocal about that. Jabbing her sharp fingers into his chest and threatening to kick his corpse all over Texas if he does anything stupid. He's almost offended that she thinks he's the one who's going to be reckless when Keith's clearly the one who jumps into the action without thinking.

"Alright, alright, get off my back," Lance huffs, his arms crossed. "Anything else you want to add to the list? Now's your last chance."

"Not really. Oh! Don't go anywhere yet! Rover will want to say goodbye too," Pidge says and runs inside to find the dog.

While she does that Hunk gestures him to come in close to whisper. Keith wishes he could hear what was said because Lance's eyes go wide as dinner plates. Like he can't believe it.

"Seriously?" Lance gapes.

"Don't go out of your way," Hunk says and scratches his chin, a blush on his cheeks. "If you can't find one--"

But Lance isn't listening. He's already pulled a tiny notebook out of his pocket and scribbling furiously on it with a grin. Keith can't quite read the writing but for the split second he sees it...looks like a list. A short one. A secret one? Lance shoves it back into his coat and slaps his hands down on Hunk's shoulders.

"I'll find it," Lance promises.

"Like I said, don't go out of your way," Hunk insists.

"Is it too late for additional requests?" Allura asks as she approaches Lance.

"Of course not," Lance smiles and waggles his eyes at her. "Anything for you, 'princess'."

Allura rolls her eyes, long given up on trying to make them stop. She bends her lips to Lance's ear, her hand cupping up to hide her words. Lance listens and when she's finished he grasps his chin between his thumb, thoughtful look on his face.

"Think you can find that?" Allura asks, curiously. "If that's too difficult--"

"No, I can look," Lance nods and pulls his notebook again. A quick scribble and it's back into the pocket. "No guarantees though. That's very...specific."
"Yes, of course. I understand. Don't do anything reckless but should you happen to find one--"

"I'll nab it and bring it back," Lance confirms and gives her a familiar gesture. "Scouts honor."

After that, Pidge returns with Rover in hand. She presses the dog to Lance's face to which the animal tries to lick every square inch of skin and hair he can reach. All the while Pidge encourages him with the command 'kisses' over and over as Lance laughs. Keith is drawn out of his staring at them when Shiro pats his shoulder.

"Be safe. And defer to Lance. He's got a good head on his shoulders, so listen to him. Stick close so neither of you gets hurt," Shiro urges but then sighs with concerned. "Maybe we should hold off...until I've recovered more. I could go with you."

"We'll be fine," Keith promises. "Stop worrying. It's just a run."

If only the sinking feeling in his stomach this morning would match his confident tone. Shiro still looks concerned though. As though his assurance isn't quite convincing enough. Keith puts a hand on Shiro's shoulder and squeezes gently to get his attention.

"I'll be fine, Shiro," he says and Shiro makes an attempt to relax. Even tries to smile.

"You better," Shiro chuckles weakly. "Or I'll end up losing the other arm trying to rescue you again."

Keith frowns at him. He wants Shiro to ease up but he's not finding his joking tone particularly funny.

"I'm kidding Keith," Shiro smiles but then returns to concerned parent-mode. "In all seriousness, if it looks like it's heading south, get out and come back. I don't care if there's more to find. Nothing is worth my little brother."

"Shiro," Keith huffs, his cheeks threatening to flush with embarrassment.

"You hear that Lance?" Shiro calls over.

"I heard you," Lance nods with a grin. "Don't let Keith do anything stupid, I got it. Don't worry Captain, I'll make sure he doesn't fight a horde by himself. Even if I have to handcuff us together I will. He's not going anywhere without me nagging him the whole way."

Keith huffs at that but it makes Shiro chuckle.

"Good to hear he's in safe hands," he smiles.

It's time to go. If they want to get a place set up by noon then they need to leave now.

Lance gives everyone a round of hugs that never seems to want to stop. Hunk to Pidge to Coran to Hunk again to Allura and then Shiro and finishing up with another hug to Hunk. Keith did his one hug that matters with Shiro and an arm pat from Matt. So while Lance is getting his--is it the third hug from Pidge?--he clears his throat loudly and Lance finally breaks away from them.

"Later guys," Lance says as he leans from the window. "Hope to see a fence around that garden when we get back. No slacking you hear?"

"Don't insult us, Lance. We'll have the wall done too by then," Pidge claims. "Don't sleep on the job out there."
"No promises," Lance jokes but seeing Shiro's frown has him quickly changing his tune. "I'm-I'm kidding of course! I would never! See you guys in five days, better have a feast ready!"

He pulls himself back into the seat and rolls up the window as the Prius pulls out of the lot, pulling the trailer behind it. Lance turns in his seat and waves at them as they go, only returning his butt to the seat when he can't see them any longer. He clicks his seatbelt in place and unfurls the roadmap onto his lap so they can get started.

It's quieter than he thought it would be, Keith thinks. Since Lance often can't keep his mouth from opening in any other situation he expected non stop chatter from him. Surprisingly not the case. It seems the moment they leave the safety of the clinic Lance's face is much more serious.

They drive at a leisurely pace, about thirty miles per hour so they can easily weave in and out between cars and undead. Lance only hums intermittently as he makes notes on the map. Each time they pass a milemarker with something of interest he jots down a few words. Car pile up, use left shoulder. Large pothole in center. Downed tree, drive over the top on the right side where branches are thinnest.

An hour in and they see an uptake in undead stumbling around on the roads. Keith does his best to avoid hitting most of them even though he feels a deep desire to run over each and every one. Maybe if they were driving a truck, he'd do it. However, he doesn't avoid them if they're crawling, only accelerates a little to effortlessly splatter them on the pavement. Lance doesn't comment on the bumps along the way, just smirks with a 'nice' when Keith nails one.

Keith really expected there to be more talking and he can't believe he's thinking of instigating conversation. He clears his throat before flicking an eye over to Lance.

"What's on the list?" Keith asks.

Without looking up from the map, Lance digs into his pocket for the sheet. Not the notebook Keith saw earlier. He unfurls it and starts to list off the items on it before Keith interrupts.

"I meant...the other one," Keith clarifies.

"Oh, you mean my secret list?" Lance hums and puts the slip back away. "This and that."

"Like what?" he pries.

"What part of 'secret list' are you having trouble with?" Lance smirks and Keith frowns with stifled grumble. "Geez, you that bored? It's got things that are hard to find on it. Special things for the people back at the clinic."

"Like?" Keith asks again, becoming impatient with Lance.

"Like...Hunk wants me to find a ring for Pidge," he grins and Keith's eyes widen in surprise. "Yeah, crazy right?"

"Yeah," Keith nods in agreement.

"I don't know if I'll be able to find one for fingers as tiny as hers," Lance snickers and leans back in his seat.

That's not why Keith finds it crazy. He can't even consider doing such a thing. Promising someone that he'll always be there for them when it's just not realistically possible? It didn't make sense to him before the spread of the infection and it makes even less sense now.
He could die. They could die. Today. Tomorrow. A week from now. Promising forever just seems like lying to yourself and others. All just to feel like things are normal? For a few days, maybe a week? Feels futile, trying to hold on to the old world with things like proposals and marriage.

But Lance would disagree, he knows. Vehemently.

Lance would insist that those things are what makes being alive worth it. Romantic sap. Makes Keith smirk a little. Considering the story he told of how he proposed to a girl every day for a year when he was twelve, it's shocking that Lance doesn't get on one knee every other day for every person he's ever fallen for, Keith included.

"It's about time. They've been together for years now," Lance sighs with a smile before tapping his lip contemplatively. "Shiro's a Captain...he can officiate a ceremony right?"

Keith snorts as he veers to avoid a deadhead.


"He's not a ship captain. And he's not a priest. It wouldn't be legal," Keith says, shaking his head with a snort. "Not that that matters."

"Yeah, I know. But Hunk would want it to feel official though," Lance says as he leans on the window to look out. "I know I would."

Things are quiet for a moment as Lance watches the scenery pass by. There's a small smile on his face as he rubs his knuckles. He lets out a deep sigh and draws on the window, a drawing only he can see.

"Before all this, when I was a kid...I used to imagine getting married one day," Lance smiles fondly out the window. "On a beach back home. Salt breeze. Seagulls cawing. Waves lapping the shore. Music pouring out of a nearby cabana. Warm sand between my toes as I leaned in to kiss my blushing bride."

"Sand between your toes? Where are your shoes in this fantasy?" Keith asks.

"It's the beach!" Lance states, sitting up. "You don't wear fancy shoes to the beach! Everyone knows that!"

Keith snorts out a laugh at his reaction. Lance pouts, slightly annoyed as he sits back with his arms crossed.

"What about you? You ever think about that stuff? When you were a kid?" Lance asks.

"Sure, I--" Keith decides to cut himself off. This isn't a conversation he wants to encourage. "Nevermind."

"No no no! You gotta say! I told you mine!"

"I didn't ask for you to tell me your childhood fantasies," Keith counters with a frown.

"Doesn't matter," Lance waves that argument away. "It's been shared. Keep it fair. Spill."

Keith reluctantly sighs as he takes the next turn down another road.

"It wouldn't be flashy. Or even public," Keith reveals. "I've never liked a lot of noise or parties."
"Shocker," Lance chuckles.

"I'd dream about it. Just me and whoever in a high place outside of the city. A hill or a plateau," Keith starts and lowers his voice to a soft tone. "It's quiet and dark and it feels like...the stars are so close that we could touch them. That all we'd have to do was reach up and--"

Keith pauses for too long as he looks somberly out at the road, lost in a memory. He used to try and find places like that when he was younger. High places where the stars could be touched. Ever since he was a toddler and well into his teens. Used to think that there was one up there specifically meant to represent him. His star.

See there, Keith? That's your dad's star. And this one is mine.

Where's mine?

You have to find it, take hold, and put it with someone else's. Then you're always together, no matter how far.

He swallows and shakes his head, his jaw tight.

"So stupid," Keith mumbles with a frown. "You can't take a star in your hands, doesn't matter how hard you try."

Lance's eyes soften on Keith as he takes in that disillusioned gaze and those fists clenched tight on the wheel.

And it was getting so good. Almost romantic. Lance is suddenly reminded of that night on the bus when Keith sat atop with his eyes on the sky. Sure he's not a kid anymore but...Keith's still looking up at the stars, hoping maybe one day...he can reach them.

Chasing that starlight.

There are a lot of parked cars in the next street. Enough that they need to slow down so they don't hit them. But they can't go too slow or stop. There are still undead wandering about. The last thing they need is one rotter to turn into three to turn into a dozen and they can't get the car moving again. Keith expertly maneuvers between them, even bumping a few to the ground without denting the car.

Lance notices a camper coming up on the next road. It's got more than a few undead pushing up against the side, slamming their fists and pressing their bodies on it. It's rocking a little as they push and before long it'll surely fall over.

Something about it rubs Lance the wrong way. Keith's eyes flick over to it and his mouth forms a tight line, he returns his gaze back to the road and presses a little harder on the accelerator as they pass.

That's when it hits Lance.

"That's--there are people in that RV," Lance says turning in his seat to look back.

"Probably," Keith agrees.

It flips over and even as they drive away, Lance swears he hears a shout.

"We have to help them," Lance says, unclicking his seatbelt but Keith doesn't slow down.

"Why?" Keith asks, eyes straight ahead. "You'd just be putting yourself in unnecessary danger. For
strangers."

Lance gapes in shock. "Are you kidding? Stop the car, Keith."

"No," he answers.

Lance's face furrows into a glare as he resolutely opens the door and makes to step out of a moving vehicle. In a gut reaction, Keith slams the brakes and screeches to a stop. He whirls his head around to face Lance, who's already standing outside the car, reaching into the back for his rifle.

"What are you doing, Lance?!" he asks in a low almost growl. "Get back in the car. They're not our problem."

"No," Lance tells him and checks the ammunition on his gun. Flips off the safety. "I joined the Garrison because I wanted to help people. Save them."

"Did you forget? The Garrison is just a bunch of murderers," Keith reminds him.

He scans their surroundings and luckily the group of deadheads is still very preoccupied with the camper and it's occupants which they can now hear are screaming as the corpses beat on the windows. There's even a dog growling and barking viciously. Maybe they can still get away without drawing attention.

"They are now but back then--It doesn't change why I wanted to be a soldier. I wanted to save people," Lance explains. "Isn't that why you joined too?"

Keith holds his tongue, clenches his jaw so tight into a frown that it's starting to give him a headache. So what if it was? Everything is different now. They can't afford to be heroes anymore...they'll just get themselves killed with nothing to show for it.

That dream of his still lingers too close for him to want to expose Lance to more danger than is necessary. But short of forcing Lance back into the car...Keith can't do anything to stop him if he pushes this and it looks like he's going to.

"The world is shit and I hate it but if someone needs help...I'm going to help them," Lance says and shakes his head. "I'm not going to let a couple of zombies change that about me. No matter what. You can either help me or stay here."

Lance waits a second but when Keith shows no signs of moving he takes off with his rifle, jogging his way down the road. Keith grips tight on the steering wheel with a throaty grumble, looking into the side mirror as Lance gets further and further from the car.

This is a mistake. It always is but...damn it, if Lance isn't right. He wanted to be a hero...like his mom. Like his dad. Like Shiro. All people who got hurt or killed doing the right thing. It's what will happen to Lance if he keeps going at it alone too.

"Damn it!" Keith curses as he slams his fists on the wheel. But he throws on the parking brake and gets out, unsheathing his knife as he runs to join Lance.

Lance is using an overturned car as cover to shoot from. Takes a knee and rests the barrel on the surface to steady his aim before looking through the scope. Eight rotters that he can see, none of which know he's there. Perfect. Keith comes to a stop crouched down next to him, breathing heavily. From exertion or annoyance, he'll never know but he's betting on the latter.

"I knew you'd come," Lance hums with a smirk. "That's what she said."
"Shut up," Keith huffs. "You better have a plan or I'm knocking you out and dragging you back to the car."

"There's eight of them. I can line up a shot or two to take out a few," Lance tells him. "Then we can go in and clean house using the cars in the ditch as cover to get close."

"Fine," Keith nods. "No more than two shots."

The last thing they need is to draw even more rotters out from nearby. Plus they only have so many rounds. Lance nods and readies the first shot. A big one wailing on a window and cracking the glass. He holds his breath, his heart hammering in his chest. Then squeezes the trigger and the kickback nearly knocks him over.

The zombie's head practically explodes and through it he hits another in the shoulder, knocking it from its perch on top of the camper.

"Nailed it," Lance grins.

"Don't celebrate yet," Keith reminds him. "One more and then you follow my lead."

"Got it," Lance nods and lines up the next round.

He waits a total of five seconds before he fires off the second shot. Even better than the first. Two heads in one go. Lance nearly hoots at the good fortune. The bodies drop to the pavement in slumped piles leaving just five more. They can handle that.

Lance follows as Keith approaches down from the ditch, keeping low and hidden.

They haven't heard the dog in a while and the screaming inside the camper has been replaced with whimpering and crying. But they don't have time to focus on that. Keith sneaks up on one unaware rotter and plunges the knife into its skull. It drops and he's already moving on to the next.

One tries to grab for Keith as he's taking out another. Lance rifle butts it in the back of the head making it stumble to the ground where he gives it a swift hard kick. Knocks the entire lower jaw off and it clatters to the ground nearby. While stunned Lance brings the butt down hard on the top of its head, damaging it beyond function. When he turns Keith is just finished dispatching the other rotter.

Two to go.

On the other side of the camper is a blonde man swinging a pipe. It nails the zombie in front of him but the hit isn't quite hard enough. The creature barely stumbles and returns with the same energy.

Lance kicks out the leg of the other and Keith jumps on the opportunity to plummet his weapon into him while he's down. Just as he pulls the blade free the last one grabs hold of the man and rears back it's head to take a bite. Keith throws his knife as hard and as fast as he can and it nails the rotter right in the ear canal, sinking in with a thunk. Its arms go limp and the body drops.

The man seems stunned like he's not sure what he's seeing. But he does see the gun in Lance's hand and swallows nervously. He drops the pipe and raises his hands to show he's now unarmed.

"Please don't shoot us, we'll give you anything you want," he says.

"Rolo--"

"Nyma, stay inside," he interrupts.
"We're not going to shoot you, and we don't want your stuff," Lance assures them and shoulders the weapon to prove it. Keith maintains his hold on his spearpoint knife. "Is anyone hurt?"

"Nyma, are you okay?" he calls into the camper, his hands still raised.

"I'm fine. Just...dislocated my shoulder when it tipped," the woman calls and shuffles around in the camper.

"What about--"

"She's fine too. Unconscious with a nasty cut," Nyma explains. They can hear her moving around trying to find a window to crawl out of. "Where's Beezer?"

"Beezer! Beezer!" he calls a little too loud for Keith's comfort. A big hound dog comes ambling up the ditch, blood on its maw and limping slightly. Rolo goes to his knees and ruffles the dog's neck. "There you are. Good dog."

It's been bitten on its front shoulder. The wound is fresh with a trail of blood dripping down its leg and drenching its paw. Keith nudges Lance and nods at the dog. Lance sees the wound and blanches at the sight. They were too late to save it.

"He won't hurt you, I promise," Rolo insists.

"It's been bitten," Keith says and approaches with his knife drawn. "Should take care of it now."

"No! Don't hurt him," Rolo urges, putting himself between Keith and the dog. "He's been bitten twice before and nothing happened. Please, don't kill him."

Keith and Lance share a look of skepticism. That doesn't seem possible. On many accounts, the both of them have seen animals get bitten. All of them died from the infection though they don't seem to reanimate. No chance of zombie dogs but they can still pass the infection through bites of their own. Hardly seems worth the risk of letting it live.

"Don't lie to us, we're familiar with how the infection works," Keith warns.

"No, no, look. Here," Rolo points to the dog's hindquarters. "That's an old bite. From a year ago. This one too, from four months ago. It's healed. He's immune, I swear."

They both look at one another, not certain they believe him. Chances are he just wants to give his dog a few extra days to live, even if it puts his party at risk.

"Please, he's the only reason we've survived this long. He's saved our lives more times than I can count," Rolo begs. "Don't kill him."

Keith huffs and sheathes his knife finally.

"Whatever, let's go, Lance," Keith waves over his shoulder. "We're done here."

"Wait a second," Lance says holding onto Keith's sleeve to keep him from leaving.

"We only got about twenty minutes before every rotter in a mile radius is on us," Keith says in a low voice and pulls out of his hold. "Make it fast."

"Why are you stopped here?" Lance asks them. "It's not safe on the roads."

The storm a few days ago made it impossible to see. They pulled over with the intention of waiting
for it to pass. At this point the head of the woman Nyma pops out from a window. A pretty blonde with her hair tied back in tails. She looks much like Rolo and it wouldn’t shock either of them to find if they were related. She explains when they tried to get going again the Rv wouldn't start. Battery was done for.

"There's a town three hours walk from here. You could have made it to a house. It's safer than out here," Lance points out.

"Uh...well..." Rolo starts and crying erupts from inside the vehicle.

Nyma climbs out of the camper clutching a child to her chest. She's having quite the time of it with her dislocated shoulder. Rolo comes over and helps her out by taking the little girl. Does his best to calm her by cooing and jostling her gently. The both of them jump down from the overturned RV, Nyma takes a seat on the ground and pulls at her shoulder trying to pop it back in place with no success.

A child would make it difficult to get far without attracting rotters from all over. The little girl is clearly not theirs. There's no resemblance whatsoever. Hispanic or maybe black, they can't tell for certain but it hardly matters. Right now she has a big cut on her forehead and it's bleeding into her eye. Rolo has little success in getting her to be quieter as she's still whimpering and sobbing.

"Can I?" Lance offers out his hands. "I have a lot of nieces and nephews."

"You saved us, I can't imagine you'd do anything to hurt us now," Rolo chuckles and passes the infant over.

Lance jostles her a little onto his hip and smiles that award-winning smile.

"Shhh...it's okay. Estás seguro, chica bonita," he says in a low soothing tone. It does seem to be helping. "Barely a scratch. You're a tough girl I can tell. Want a bandaid? Yeah?"

"Lance, we should go," Keith reiterates. He doesn't like being in one spot where a lot of noise emanates.

"After we fix up this cut," he tells him and turns back to the little girl. "Sound good? Yeah, it does."

"Ugh...fine. I'll get the car," Keith rolls his eyes.

Keith returns moments later, pulling the car up to their camper. He takes the kit out from under the seat and shoves it into Lance's open hand. Within a few minutes, Lance has cleaned and stitched up the cut. More amazing still is that he's able to do so while keeping the child calm. She doesn't cry once even though it must hurt like hell.

The whole while Lance chats with Rolo and Nyma. Where was this conversation when they were leaving? Keith mostly ignores the talking in favor of watching out for more zombies. A hand on his knife the whole time.

"What happened to her parents?" Lance asks as he prepares to pull Nyma's arm out of the socket.

"They died, about a year in. She was only eight months then," Rolo says. "The group we were with said to abandon her."

"We couldn't let that happen. We were friends with them. She's family," Nyma groans as it pops and again when he locks it back in place. "We stole a car and as much supplies as we could before leaving. That was...a year ago."
And what have they been doing for food? They've been clearing old houses mostly. Beezer used to be a hunting dog so sometimes he'll bring them geese or raccoons. Possums too. When that fails they gather wild berries and such. There's a ditch a couple miles up the road that was full of blackberries but they cleared it out of anything ripe. Rolo is about to say something else when Nyma interrupts him shaking her head.

"They saved our lives Nyma," he says.

"What is it?" Keith asks, finally tuning in.

"You can't hear them, cause we soundproofed the cages but..." Rolo smiles. "We have three chickens."

They almost can't believe it.

"Alive?" Lance gapes and the two of them nod. "How'd you manage that?"

"We may or may not have commandeered them recently? As in the last two weeks?" Rolo shrugs sheepishly.

"You stole them," Keith translates with a frown. "From who?"

There's a group holed up in a gated community in a town not far from here. Sounds like where Keith and Lance are headed. Rolo and Nyma tried to gain sanctuary there but they wouldn't take them in with a child. Even threatened to shoot them if they didn't leave.

"So we left," Rolo shrugs again.

"But not before relieving them of some of their supplies," Nyma admits.

"Only enough to get by. And we didn't hurt anyone. Just snuck in at night and took them," Rolo explains. "They fired on us but we made it out."

"This time," Nyma sighs. "I'm so sick of getting shot at."

Keith sees a certain look come over Lance's face. Like a lightbulb going off, a question on his lips. He knows exactly what's running through that head of his and before Lance can utter a word Keith jumps up from his seat, grabbing his arm.

"Lance, can I talk to you? Over here?" Keith says as he's pulling him away.

Once they're out of earshot, Keith shoots them a glance before returning his attention to Lance.

"Don't tell them about the clinic," Keith urges.

"How did--" Lance starts but cancels his question in favor for another. "Why not? They seem like good people."

"Good people who steal what they need and leave. They'll rob us blind and all because you want to make friends," Keith says and Lance looks almost offended.

"That's not why--"

"You can't trust everyone, Lance," Keith tells him. "It's dangerous. Gets people killed."

"Look. They may be thieves but they aren't murders," Lance debates.
"That you know of," Keith counters.

"I can feel it, Keith. They've never killed anyone," he says, gesturing to them. "Do you know how rare that is? To live his long and not kill a soul?"

It's incredibly rare, Keith knows. Lance is a sterling example of this but that's hardly the point. They don't know these people. Keith doesn't know them and the last thing he wants is to send strangers to a place where the most important people in his life sleep.

"I think if they didn't have to scrap to survive each day they wouldn't resort to stealing what they need," Lance tries to suggest and Keith almost laughs with disbelief.

"Are you joking?" Keith shakes his head and brushes his bangs from his face. "That's naive, even for you."

"Keith," Lance frowns, the beginnings of a glare starting.

"No. Listen to yourself," Keith huffs, his volume rising out of frustration. "You don't know them. You don't owe them anything. We've done our good samaritan act for the week. It's a bad idea to help them any further."

"It's not!" Lance argues, his shoulders going rigid.

"Fine, give me one good reason why we should let them join us," Keith says.

"I'll give you several if you're going to be a dick about it," Lance barks back, his face in Keith's. "I'm not stupid, Keith. I'm looking at the big picture."

He never knew that Lance could sound so annoyed while maintaining a calm tone.

Reason one: Beezer. A dog that hasn't been killed by the infection. Sure, as soldiers with no background in science that doesn't seem all that valuable to them but what about Allura. She's a doctor, a scientist. One who's been studying the infection since it started and probably knows more than all of them combined. Doesn't he imagine that maybe she can do something with an animal that's immune to the infection that's killing everyone?

And even if the dog can't be used in that capacity, it is a hunting dog. That can add meat regularly to the menu, which is a hell of a lot better than rats every other day.

One point Lance. Except he keeps going and Keith's starting to feel like he baited a shark. A very attractive and very miffed shark.

Reason two: Chickens. Regardless of their origins, they are a food source and a reliable one that. Lance grew up on a farm, hardly anything has to be done with chickens. Just set them loose in the field and the bugs and stuff they eat is enough to sustain them. If one of those chickens is male? Three weeks and they have more chickens than before. Six months and they have more eggs than they'll know what to do with. Probably won't have to make food runs ever again.

Another valid point. Lance: 2, Keith: 0. But he's not done yet and Keith's starting to wonder how much he's going to have to apologize after this. Apologize for assuming Lance only thinks with his overly trusting little heart and not his head.

"Reason three: Rolo and Nyma themselves," Lance continues, one hand on his hip and the other gesturing. The sharp bitterness in his arguments lessens the further he goes. "If you bothered to listen to anything they said, they have useful skills. Rolo was a general contractor and Nyma went to
nursing school. Great skills for when things and people break down and need fixing. Which happens all the time out here."

Damn, that's another valid idea. While those reasons support their worth...it doesn't prove why they should trust them and Keith says as much.

"Fine," Keith huffs. "They're valuable but they aren't trustworthy. How do you know they won't betray us?"

"Look at them Keith," he gestures, his voice a lot kinder than it was a moment ago. "They took in a baby. Even you know how risky that is."

An extra mouth to feed. One that can't defend itself or contribute to the safety of the whole. She can't provide anything other than extra work and extra danger. Anyone who was just out for themselves would never keep an infant. Keith deflates a little at the sight of the little one bouncing on Nyma's knee.

"That alone tells me they care about more than themselves," Lance says, his voice soft. "They'd do anything for that little girl. And if you promised them a safe place where they don't have to worry about her getting hurt? They'd never turn on us."

Maybe Lance is right, this time. Keith's never been good at reading emotions or motives. That's why it's so hard for him to trust people. Needs actions to prove intentions and the action of saving and protecting a child in such a dangerous world...he supposes that is pretty clear evidence to the type of people Rolo and Nyma are.

"Fine," Keith agrees and Lance perks up with a smile.

"I knew you'd see it my way," he says, hooking an arm around his neck to which Keith frowns and turns his head away. "You just needed all the facts laid out."

"I guess," Keith huffs. "But I do the talking."

Can't have them thinking the group at the clinic are the kind of people who can be hoodwinked. So the approach Rolo and Nyma with Keith out front. Lance rests a hand on his shoulder and gives them a friendly smile.

"We have a place you can stay, if you want," Keith starts.

"Are you serious?" Rolo asks, standing from the ground.

"It's got strong doors, electricity, food and water. Highly trained soldiers who can protect you," Keith explains and he can just see the hope lighting up their eyes. "You'll be safer than on the road and you won't have to keep looking over your shoulder for rotten teeth or ducking bullets every week."

They look to each other but Nyma looks suspicious as she clutches the child close. The girl plays with her hair, tugging it with a giggle.

"What's the catch?" she asks. Likely worried it's contingent on doing something unsavory. Like abandoning the child.

"You add your supplies to the collective whole. Help fix things and contribute to its safety," Keith lays it all out. "Do that and you can stay."

"That's it?"
"All of us? For how long?" Rolo wonders. It must sound like a deal that's too good to be true.

"As long as you want, provided the Captain approves. He's a better judge of character than either of us," Keith frowns.

Rolo looks to Nyma and there's an unspoken conversation between them. Their biggest concern clearly being the child in their care. Rolo comes over and pats the girl's head gently. Nyma rubs her back in soothing circles and nods.

"And Ariana? She'd be taken care of...if something happened to us?" Rolo inquires.

"Of course, Shiro wouldn't let anything happen to her," Lance finally chimes in.

"Then deal. We'll give you everything," Rolo nods eagerly. He takes Keith's hand and shakes it firmly. "It'll be nice to sleep without thinking we'll be killed in the night."

"How will we get there? Our Rv..." Nyma sighs, looking at the toppled vehicle.

"We don't have a lot of time," Keith admits, looking at Lance's watch. Maybe five minutes and they'll see corpses on the horizon, if not sooner.

With the four of them and some rope, they manage to flip the camper back over. Luckily, Hunk and Pidge thought to include jumper cables in the trunk next to the spare tire, jack, and tire iron. Team Punk, always prepared for machines breaking down. Lance will have to remember to thank them when they get back.

Keith's far more familiar with the jumping process than Lance so he hooks up the engines while Lance scribbles out the most basic of maps in his small notebook. The engine comes to life again as their car powers the battery for the camper. And in good time too. There's a small gathering of zombies making their way towards them.

"Lance, the map," Keith gestures for the page. Lance tears it out and passes it to which Keith turns over to jot down a note on the back. "Give this to Captain Shirogane. He'll let you in with this."

It'll explain what happened. Telling him about the dog, the kid, the chickens, everything. And Keith's reservations about it all. Even in his hurry, he writes it in code. Anyone from the Garrison will be able to read it and Shiro will know that he doesn't fully trust this crew. To proceed with caution. And that it's up to Shiro to make the final decision about them. He'll make it clear that they don't tolerate theft and that everyone pulls their weight. He'll keep an eye on them.

He hands it off to Nyma who takes it with a nod and scurries into the camper. The zombies are getting closer and they don't want to stick around for more. Just as Keith is dropping into his seat and Lance is clicking his seat belt, Rolo knocks on the window with a bowl in his hand. It's full of blackberries.

"It's all we can spare right now. We'll pay you back properly later," he says and hands it to them once Keith lowers the window. Lance takes it into his lap with wide, excited eyes. "Thanks. For saving us."

"Not a problem," Lance winks and pops one into his mouth. Tart but sweet.

"You know, we'd almost given up. We never expected someone to help," Rolo says adjusting his beanie and brushing aside his bleached hair before putting it back on.

"That's just who we are. Right, Keith?" Lance grins, elbowing his side. Keith just rolls his eyes with
a huff and puts the car into gear, ready to leave.

"We'll never forget it, heroes. Thanks again," Rolo nods. "Take care."

With that Rolo hurries back into his camper and Keith rolls the window back up. The camper does a three-point turn and heads back down the way Lance and Keith came from, heading towards the clinic. Keith pulls out just as a few undead reach the trailer back, leaving the corpses to reach out futilely as they chase after a quickly receding car. They'll give up before long and forsake them in favor of easier prey.

It's not long into the drive that Lance lets out a deep sigh of relief.

"Thanks, Keith, for helping me save them," Lance turns a little and smiles. "And for trusting me."

"It's not about trust," Keith maintains. "Not with this. You made a valid argument. They're valuable."

"And good people who deserved saving," Lance adds.

"We'll see," Keith shrugs. "Shiro will make sure they don't cause trouble. He can be...very intimidating when he needs to be."

"Either way, I'm glad it worked out," Lance says, relaxing in his chair a hand in the bowl of blackberries.

"It could have easily gone wrong," Keith asserts. "Next time we might not be so lucky."

"Let it go. Eat a blackberry. It's no blueberry but--" Lance starts and takes one from the bowl. "Better than nothing, right?"

There he goes again, being so carefree like the world isn't falling apart around them. The moment the danger is over he's back to being that infuriatingly optimistic beam of sunshine. Sees nothing but the best in any given situation. Keith would find it annoying if not for that heart melting smile on his face as he stretches his hand out with the blackberry between his fingers.

It's all done with and they're none the worse for wear--no point in being sour about it now.

With the resigned sigh of a man begrudgingly accepting his fate, Keith opens his mouth for Lance to drop the offered berry into. He chews and it's better than anything they've had recently. Even better than Coran's strawberries. Perfect balance of tangy sweetness. Blueberries are still better in his opinion though.

"Good right?" Lance asks, then jokes, "Glad you saved them now?"

"Yeah, I guess," Keith frowns but eyes the bowl. He definitely wants more even though that means he'll have a purple tongue for the rest of the day.

Lance seems to read his mind and extends another to him with a grin. Every mile marker or so Lance offers him more so he doesn't have to take his hands off the wheel or his eyes off the road. No words between them, only the mutual enjoyment of their newly acquired berries as Keith drives and Lance scans over their map.

They're behind schedule but, in Lance's opinion, they're better for it.

Chapter End Notes
If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment! Don't know what to say?
Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Fair deal?

(Also, if you really like Voltron stuff and want more, check out my other two fics. Tell me what you think of them!)
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Strap in guys, this one is a long one. I only did two edit days on this so if I missed anything, apologies. I'm very rushed right now.
This is the last you'll get for a good while. I'm heading to Animazement this weekend and I'm going to be knackered afterward. And for the following week. Hope you enjoy.
Be sure to leave a comment or rec this fic out to someone you love.

HannaLu is back at it again with another AMAZING piece of art inspired by this chapter! Check out the link in the End Notes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I don't quite know
How to say
How I feel
Those three words
Are said too much
They're not enough

Snow patrol, Chasing cars

Finding a place to hole up is easier than either of them thought it would be. The world is full of abandoned houses now but usually they have a number of undead moseying around the yards and streets, looking for their next meal. About three miles from the town Keith stops the car and the both of them look down a side street with interest.

Setting up on the main road is a terrible idea. Any house this close to a major travel path will be swarming with corpses and danger. But their map does reveal a small out of the way culdesac about a mile down this offshoot. It’ll be safer than trying to find a closer spot to the town so they turn off and keep going until they get to the end.

Four houses, or at least there might have been at one time. One of the houses has been burned down, probably sometime last year. Doesn’t look intentional and Keith wouldn’t be surprised if it had just been struck by lightning. Another looks like it was under construction but never finished. The other two houses look to be in decent shape, one of which has more intact windows than the other.

“That one,” Lance points at the nicer of the two. “It’s got a second floor window for lookout.”

Keith’s got no objections to that. Even looks like there’s a garage too but they’ll have to get inside to unlock it. He pulls up the driveway and puts it into park. Before getting out he eyes the surroundings for movement but catches nothing. Looks pretty vacant but he’s learned not to trust appearances.

They step out and look around a bit more while pulling their weapons from their hips. Keith motions
for Lance to follow him up the porch. Tugging the door shows it’s locked. He really doesn’t want to break a window or bust it off its hinges. The more secure it is the better.

“Let’s try the back,” Keith says quietly.

After a quick climb over a chain link fence the two of them are at the back door. It doesn’t look nearly as sturdy as the front, in fact the screen door’s been ripped off. And the lock’s been busted. Not a good sign.

Lance tugs on Keith’s sleeve and gestures him to hold a moment. He picks up a bottle from the ground and pushes the door open with it, just in case there’s a trap. Lance nearly lost a finger that way once. It slowly creaks open to reveal an empty kitchen on the other side. Looks vacant and Keith makes a move to head inside.

Lance grabs his sleeve again and shakes his head. Signals him to listen. He then tosses the bottle through the kitchen and it clunks to the ground in the doorway of the adjoining room.

“Moron, what if there’s a person inside? You just gave away our position,” Keith whispers.

“If there was a living person, they’d have barricaded the door for safety. It wasn’t,” Lance says. “But a deadhead—”

Lance goes quiet when he hears a thumping inside. Something up on the second floor. Lance levels a prideful smirk at Keith. A deadhead would investigate the noise and announce its presence while they lie in wait. Clever.

They wait a moment but the thumping doesn’t seem to want to get closer. It’s still coming from the same spot. Lance frowns with a sigh before leaning in to peek at the kitchen.

“It’s stuck on something,” Keith guesses.

“Looks like it, but it’s the only noise from in here. So there’s just the one,” Lance says.

“Clear the rooms downstairs before going up?”

“Doesn’t sound like he’s going anywhere,” Lance shrugs. “Lead the way.”

Supplies gathering will come later, first they need to secure the base. The two of them move room to room looking for any signs of life...or unlife as the case may be. The bedrooms and bathrooms on the bottom floor are empty of danger. Closets too because you never know if someone human is hiding in one and waiting for the chance to strike.

The thumping hasn’t stopped, nor has it moved from its spot. Once they get upstairs they see why. The groaning and gurgling creature is pinned under a heavy bookshelf in the study. There’s an actual dead body in the corner but it’s far more decomposed and clearly no threat, a letter opener protruding from it’s head.

The poor slob under the case must have tangled with the other zombie while he was trying to loot the place. Killed his attacker but got bit and crashed into the case. What rotten luck. Keith takes a knee and simply presses his blade into the pinned zombie. It goes slack and the house is dead quiet.

“Looks like that’s it,” Lance says.

“We should clear the other rooms still,” Keith insists as he stands.
They stalk from room to room but find no other bodies, moving or otherwise. Once that’s done they each take a corpse from the study and drag it out to the back yard. No way they’re letting those stinking bodies stay in the house they’ll be sleeping in for the next couple of days. They’re dropped at the edge of the yard right next to the fence before returning inside to assess the building.

“I’ll set up the perimeter cans around the backyard,” Lance announces. There’s a fence which should keep out roters but if anything gets over they'll need additional warning. Can’t be too careful.

“I’ll barricade the front door and secure the windows on the bottom floor,” Keith nods as he finally sheathes his weapon.

They get to work. It’s going to take a little bit but they should finish around one-ish. Later than they wanted but there’s nothing for it.

While Keith latches the shutters on the windows, Lance strings up the cans in choice places for people to try and sneak in. He keeps his ears open for any shuffling heading in their direction but it’s starting to look like this spot is pretty out of the way for too many undead.

Good.

By the time Lance finishes he heads inside to check on Keith’s progress. He’s already pushed a bookshelf against the front door and currently moving a loveseat to join it. Means Lance has to climb over it if he wants to reach the stairs to lookout but it should be fine. Looks like he tipped over a dining table and pressed it flush with the windows in there too.

“Looks good,” Lance says when Keith finishes with the loveseat. “Gotta find a way to secure the back door at night though.”

“There’s dining chairs,” Keith gestures.

They can shove one under the handle and push something heavy in front of it, just in case. He thinks there’s a trunk somewhere in one of the rooms that might be heavy enough to do the job. For now they just do the first part so they can search the house for supplies without worry.

Keith starts in the garage. Double garage and it’s empty. Whoever lived here booked it out before the real stuff started. There’s a pamphlet on the ground that confirms this. One of the ones printed and spread early during Incident One encouraging people to get down to Dallas Fort Worth airport to get out of the country. Looks like this family might have gotten lucky.

Did they make it out of the states? Or were they one of many who ended up razed in the bombings in the city? Even if they did make it out, is the rest of the world in the same boat?

Keith shakes his head of the thoughts. Doesn’t matter, he reminds himself. Either way, they’re not here now and that means they have room to pull the car in. The trailer too. He messes with the lock on it and raises the door to get started.

****

Lance hears the car start and guesses that Keith’s backing it in. Good. Means he can get started on their list.

The first place he checks is the kitchen. The cupboards have been cleared out of anything edible, leaving only things like cooking oil, toothpicks, plates and bowls. No food but someone neglected to take the spice rack. None of the herb bottles are full so they won’t last long but it’s better than nothing and Hunk will definitely appreciate it. He pulls them down onto the counter before
continuing his search.

When he checks the bottom cupboards he finds a couple of pots and pans. More good stuff for Hunk. He stacks them like nesting dolls so they won’t take up too much room, then dumps the spices inside with a slide of his hand. Lance checks off the pots and spices with a smile and leaves them on the counter to grab later once Keith’s got the car inside.

Moving on.

****

Keith wipes his forehead after closing the garage door again. The trailer sits unhitched on one side, turned out so it’s ready to be hitched back up at a moment’s notice. The car backed in and ready to go for when they try the city in a day or two.

He heads back inside to inform Lance when he hears him in a nearby room. Keith leans on the door frame for a minute to cool off from the heat outside. He unscrews his water and takes a deep drink and watches Lance rummage through dresser drawers for clothes. Clean ones preferably that he sorts into two piles, useful and not.

He’s already started folding the clothes military style, tucking them up into tight rolls before stuffing them into an empty pillow case. Best way to conserve space and take as much as they can with them.

“It’ll be nice to have a change of clothes for once,” Lance comments as he pulls another shirt from the drawer.

“The car and trailer are in the garage whenever you want to transfer stuff,” Keith informs him.

“Cool,” Lance nods and perks up with hum. “Ooo! Niiiiice!”

Lance has found a pair of lacy lingerie hidden away in the bottom of the drawer. Black with red edging. He waggles his eyes at them and checks the size. Then a disappointed pout forms on his face.

“Damn. Won’t fit anyone at the clinic. Even Pidge has B cups,” he sighs as he throws it over his shoulder. “Sorry Hunk.”

“Find anything made of silk?” Keith asks.

“Why?” Lance wonders with a raised brow and gives Keith a suggestive wink. “Want to put on a show for me?”

“To make bandages with,” Keith frowns. “Silk resists bacteria and mold.”

“Oh right,” Lance realizes and scans the room. “Well, probably not in here. This is a teenager’s room. Doubt they have silk anything. I’ll check the master bedroom next after this. You want to check the bathrooms?”

Keith nods and pushes off the frame to head down the hall.

He checks for the basic amenities first. Toilet paper, towels, soap, shampoo. Finds almost a dozen intact rolls of toilet paper still in their saran wrap. The bottles of shampoo and soap are half empty but he’s not about to leave them here. Any amount is a good amount. There’s a couple hair brushes and hair ties too but he doesn’t think they need them. Luxury items are bottom of the list so they can wait.
It's surprising this stuff hasn’t already been cleared out. Maybe that’s what the dead guy upstairs was attempting to do before he met his end. Whatever the case, Keith gathers up the important stuff into a travel shower caddy he finds under the sink.

He hears Lance walk by and looks over his shoulder to see he’s got two pillow cases full of clothes he’s taking into the garage. When he returns he passes by the bathroom and heads straight to the master bedroom like he said he would. Lance then lets out a short laugh.

“Man! Check out this room, Keith!” he says right before making a big oomph sound that Keith guesses is him jumping onto the bed. It’s followed by a lot of coughing as he unsettles all the dust in the room.

Keith puts down the caddy and enters to the room to find Lance flopped out on the four post bed laughing with interspersed coughing. It’s a nice bedroom. Dark wood dressers and a flatscreen on the wall. It’s cracked but it probably had a nice picture before that. There’s a vanity on the other side of the room with a big mirror and makeup accoutrements. There’s even an adjoining bathroom.

“This is the biggest bed I’ve ever seen! California King!” Lance chuckles and rolls on it. “I know where I’m sleeping tonight.”

“Glad you’re having fun,” Keith says with a hint of sarcasm.

“Don’t act like you’re not excited to sprawl out on a comfy bed,” Lance sasses and hops off. “Gotta get some air in here though. I think I swallowed a dusty bunny.”

Keith’s already latched the shutters on the outside so opening the windows doesn’t help much. Lance sticks his knife through the space between the shutters and undoes the hook to open it the rest of the way. They’ll leave it open for an hour or so before latching it again. Should make it easier to breathe in there, especially if Lance gives the covers a beating neat the open window.

“We should leave this open at night. The window, not the shutters,” Lance clarifies. “We’ll be able to hear if something is dicking around out back.”

With the light filling the room Keith takes in details he missed before. Bedside tables with drawers, also made of a dark wood to match the dressers and vanity. There’s a basket of clearly fake fruit atop one, as well as an ostentatious lamp. Several framed photographs of family on the walls on various boats along with a black and white painting of an old ship.

Feels off.

“What’s up? You’re making a face,” Lance says.

“That painting,” Keith points. “There’s probably a gun safe behind it.”

“Oh yeah?” Lance asks his eyes wide as he approaches it. “Why do you think that?”

Well, it's Texas for starters but that's not the biggest reason. The doesn’t fit with the other ones. They’re all family oriented with smiling faces and bright colors. That one is a warship. The USS Texas, a dreadnought. It doesn’t match the theme. Makes sense to hide the weapon of the house behind something plain and impersonal. Something that isn’t associated with family and good memories.

“Just check,” Keith huffs and Lance pulls down the painting.

“Holy shit, you’re right. There is a safe,” Lance hums, impressed. “It’s locked. Key’s probably with
the owners. Shame.”

Keith scans the room again. A place within reach or a step from the bed but not conspicuous. Shouldn’t be hard to find or access. Like...Keith crosses the room and dumps out a basket of wax fruit. Something metal clatters to the wood floors. He picks it up and tosses it to Lance.

“Nice,” Lance grins and inserts the key. “You’re a wizard.”

“Not really. Doesn’t make sense not to have it nearby in case of emergencies,” Keith shrugs.

There’s a handgun inside and Lance whistles as he pulls it out to inspect. Unloaded and it’s looks untouched for much longer than two years. Likely bought for home defense but never got any use. Probably could use a cleaning anyway. There’s a full case of bullets in there as well. Fifty rounds.

This is an amazing find.

They ignore the documents inside as they hardly matter anymore. Birth certificates, social security cards, bank statements and tax documents. Even the wad of emergency cash inside is worthless now, so much so that Lance hardly spares it a glance as he pulls out the box of bullets.

“Beretta. M9. Needs a cleaning,” Lance sighs as he takes a seat at the vanity. He’s already pulling the gun apart into pieces to inspect it. “Bet that stuff’s in the garage somewhere. Or in the closet.”

“You can clean it later,” Keith tells him. “We need to check upstairs still. And we should hit the other house too--before nightfall.”

“Right,” Lance nods and leaves the gun there. “Let’s go.”

Lance takes one hallway while Keith takes the other. It’s strange to be all alone like this but not constantly in view of one another. With that nightmare he had, Keith expected to feel more nervous letting Lance go off on his own. Maybe it’s because they cleared the house already and it feels safe enough. He’ll be on full alert again once they actually hit the town.

Keith’s room is plastered with posters of cartoon characters. There’s a big computer at a desk with dozens upon dozens of video games stacked up high on shelves. Comic books spill out of the book shelves and from under the bed. Not a thing they can use and Keith finds himself skipping it over to check the study where they found the dead body.

Nothing much in there either. A couple of interesting books here and there but covered in rotten viscera. Worthless. He hopes that Lance is having better luck on the other side. When he goes to check Lance is rifling through the closet with a focused pout before huffing and looking under the bed.

“What are you looking for?” Keith asks.

“The BB gun,” Lance says.

“What?”

Lance points to the squirrel trophy on the wall that Keith hadn’t noticed. Honestly he thought it was a plush at first glance. But there is a wooden base under it with a plate that reads ‘Jackie’s first hunt’.

“He killed it with something and had it stuffed,” Lance says. “Had to be with something smaller than the gun we found. Ah! Found it! Behind the shoes.”
Lance pulls it out from under the bed. A pump action BB rifle covered in flower stickers and permanent marker hearts. In swoopy cursive is the name Jacklyn Moore.

“I amend my assumption. ‘She’ killed it with something,” Lance chuckles and pulls a little carton of metal BBs out with it.

It won’t be great for self defense, he admits. Useless against undead but they can use it to shoot crows that get too close to the garden. Maybe even kill a prairie dog or two for dinner sometime. Another decent find and they’ve only been out here one day.

“Find anything good in your room?” Lance asks as he shoulders the little rifle.


“Hmm...computer or console?”

“I didn’t see a TV,” Keith shakes his head and shrugs

“Then you definitely missed something,” Lance smirks and Keith rolls his eyes, like he’s not sure he believes Lance. “Time for me to work my magic.”

Lance signals him to follow and enters the room. He takes a seat at the desk and hums a little as he puts a hand on the mouse. His other hand wanders touching things on the desk, fingers wiggling and brushing things until he reaches a drawer on the left side.

“This one,” he says and opens it. Keith peers in and is surprised at the contents.

Multiple personal sized bags of chips, all unopened. Half a dozen cans of mellow yellow. Snack packs of varying cookies. Three candy bars that are probably past their date but edible. Sealed cheese and crackers. Not a healthy thing inside but food is energy. Can’t get too picky about what you put into your body anymore.

“Told you,” Lance smirks and pulls the items out. “Gamers need fuel and they hate leaving their seat to get it. Source--Pidge.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Keith admits. He was never much for video games in general.

“Oh!” Lance beams as he pulls a game case down from a shelf. “Killbot Phantasm! We’re taking this.”

“If we have room for it,” Keith reminds him. “Essentials come first.”

“It’s one disc, we’ll have room,” Lance rolls his eyes. He looks over it again with a grin.

Pidge is going to shit a brick, he thinks. If he’s remembering right, it’s one of her favorites. Oh, who is he kidding? It’s one of his favorites too. Even if she doesn’t want it, he’ll take it himself. Just having it in his line of sight back at the clinic is going to boost his spirits with nostalgia. Maybe she can get it running on that piece of crap laptop. They can have a weekly game night where everyone sits around and takes turns getting roasted by a dragon.

But that’s for another time. For now, they need to focus on the task at hand.

They spend the next two hours scouring through all the rooms. This time they don’t skip a single drawer and anything of value or anything on the list gets packed away on the trailer in the garage. They barely fill up even half of the trailer. Between trips Lance eats a granola bar for lunch and
Keith finishes off the rest of the blackberries, saving their good food for dinner.

The neighboring house doesn’t give them much that they don’t already have. More pots and pans which Lance just leaves. No point in getting more of those. Plenty more clothes but they’re set on those too. Keith finds some paper towels and a few first aid items. Mostly just bandaids and antibacterial cream. There’s a car in the garage that Lance siphons a good amount of gas out of into a petrol can.

Other than those things, it’s pretty bare.

Lance sits up on the second floor once they return and looks through his scope at the area. Far off there’s a house in a field. Looks like a little country home and from what he can see it’s in good condition. They can hoof it out there and check it before the sun goes down since they still have plenty of time. Keith nods, thinking it’s a good idea but that leaves them with a small problem. It’ll leave their stuff unprotected.

The back door can close but they have no way to lock it from the outside. No keys and the bolt is busted anyway so it wouldn’t matter. The most they can do is make the house as inconvenient to navigate as possible to the point of making the house not worth the trouble. So Keith sets up some tripwires around home base in various places but mostly in the kitchen near the back door. One done, they head out.

It’s quite the walk but they make it over without running into anything, not even wildlife. Nice little plantation style home with a big ole porch and rocking chairs. Shutters clatter a little bit in the stiff breeze and one of the chairs creaks as they go by. No signs of broken windows or bloodstains but the two of them stay on high alert.

The door is wide open so they used the same tactic as before. Keith throws in a flower pot that smashes into million pieces with a crash. No movement whatsoever this time so they head in to scavenge.

They clear all the rooms regardless of how certain they are that they’re alone, which eventually leads Lance into the basement for a morbid sight. Eight dead bodies of varying sizes and shapes. A family. None of them move when the stairs squeak as he descends. Makes sense when he gets closer. They’ve been here for a long time in this cold dry basement, so much so that their bodies almost look mummified.

Lance finds a tipped over container of farmer’s pesticide and it brings a sad frown to Lance’s face. They killed themselves, the whole family, rather than face the horrors outside. It’s...incredibly depressing, on top of that it makes him feel ill.

“I'll search the basement,” Keith offers as he reaches the bottom.

“Okay,” Lance swallows as he looks once more at what was once a child. No, three children. Not any bigger than Ariana. No bigger than his little cousins. It’s sickening and he’s glad Keith is going to take over this room. “Thanks,” he manages to exhale as he goes back.

Keith hears him ascend. A moment later the sound of Lance dry heaving upstairs echoes through the house. He’s trying his hardest not to lose any of the food he’s eaten for the day and it sounds like he manages it but not without biting back a sob or two. He has Keith’s sympathies as he looks through the shelves.

When Lance gets himself under control again he makes a beeline for the kitchen drawers. Anything to take his mind off of that ghastly sight downstairs.
Junk drawer has a number of batteries he pockets. Never know when the lamps will need replacements. Strike anywhere matches, yes please. A whole roll of duct tape, excellent. Emergency candles, thank you very much. He shoves it all into his backpack before looking elsewhere.

Master bedroom. Searches the drawers for anything silk like Keith suggested before. Finds two nightgowns that will make plenty of bandage strips, hopefully them being pink isn’t a problem. He pulls open a side table drawer and blinks with surprise.

Very pleased surprise.

*****

Keith shifts the bag on his shoulders after zipping it up, the glass jars inside clinking around. He hit the motherload down here food wise. This family was big on preserves and canning it seems and with how nice and cold it is in this basement, everything looks like it’s in good condition.

A dozen jars of peaches, pears, applesauce. The others are simply rows and rows of pickles and what Keith’s guessing are turnips. They may have to make a second trip tomorrow to get the rest. It’s been sitting here this long so he’s not worried about anyone taking it.

He makes his way up the stairs and looks out the front door. Suns starting to dip. They should get back soon. Eat dinner and get to bed early. Out here, getting sleep when you can find it is just the best option. Lance comes down the hall, his bag just as full as Keith’s.

“There’s more food down there,” Keith says. “But it’s getting late. We’ll get it tomorrow.”

“Cool. I found some good stuff too,” Lance smiles. “I’ll mark off the list when we get back.”

Lance follows behind Keith the whole way back and carefully mirrors him once they reach all his tripwires. They won’t be taking them down anytime soon just for the extra security. Once inside they shut the door and hook the chair under the handle.

The both of them organize the loot from their bags into boxes in the garage. Lance pulls out a number of things from his bag including paper towels, rubbing alcohol, batteries, tape and more. They go into their respective boxes as Keith carefully wraps the glass jars of fruit in shirts before putting them away. Don’t want to hit a bump on the way back and lose good food.

Lance finds the gun cleaning kit in the garage, just like he thought, and takes it back into the living room. He wants that gun clean before their next outing. It’s a lot lighter than carrying around a rifle all day and they’ve got a hell of a lot more ammo for it. He’s a pretty good shot, no matter what gun he uses, so why not take the smaller one.

While he cleans the Beretta, Keith slices up pieces of cucumbers for dinner. He leaves them on a plate with a handful of olives next to the cleaning solution that Lance keeps picking up and putting down. Takes a seat next to him to eat his own meager plate of food. On occasion Lance pops a few slices into his mouth, grimacing when he pops in an olive.

“Fucking gross,” Lance gags a little but returns to the gun.

“Suck it up,” Keith huffs. “We don’t exactly have many options.”

“What about those peaches you found?” Lance asks.

“We should eat stuff with the shorter shelf life first,” Keith says but then lets out a resigned sigh after he looks at Lance’s dejected face. Damn those puppy eyes. “Maybe we can eat half a jar for
breakfast.”

“Nice,” Lance grins.

Lance takes a break from cleaning. Wipes his hands on his pants and forces himself into finishing the olives on his plate.

Keith picks up from where he left off on the gun, sliding the parts back together and loading the clip with bullets. He resinserts the magazine with a firm push until it clicks in place. Disengages the safety to load a round into the chamber before engaging the safety again.

“All set,” Keith says, slipping it into the holster on the table.

“Thanks,” Lance nods and leans back on the sofa, his hand fiddling in his pocket.

He tugs the pack of gum out and chews on a piece to get that horrid flavor out of his mouth. Offers one to Keith who just waves it off to look around the room, pensive look on his face.

Is there anything else they need to do before turning in? The perimeter is secure. They searched everywhere in every room. Anything they found is put away and organized, ready for tomorrow. They’ve eaten. All that’s left is--

“Want to head to bed soon?” Lance asks.

“Yeah, that way we’re rested by first light,” Keith nods. “We can save the batteries on the lantern longer that way.”

Lance chuckles, “That’s not why I asked.”

Lance leans over and cups Keith’s jaw, rubbing his thumb on his lip.

All day without a real touch and this has Keith’s skin burning. Warm fingertips feel like fire licking his face and it instantly brings heat to his stomach. And this close he can smell that hot cinnamon on Lance’s breath. Has him leaning forward seeking that flavor on his own tongue.

He thinks Lance is leaning in to kiss him but his lips just barely brush Keith’s. Teasing. Something Lance loves doing to him.

“Come to bed with me?” Lance mumbles, “We can...relax for a bit.”

“Relax?” Keith breathes back.

“I brought your ropes,” Lance lets him know. “Stashed them under the bed already.”

The way he’s been all day, he wasn’t sure if Lance was interested. Thought maybe he’d be put out by their argument earlier, despite seeming alright.

If Lance says it’s all good, then it is.

“You know, there are posts on the bed...bet they’re great for securing a certain naughty someone,” Lance hints, nibbling on his pulse. He slides his tongue against his neck, hot and wet making Keith releases a breath. “Want me to play with you?”

It’ll be the first time they’re officially alone. He can finally let himself go. He’s still wary about being overly noisy since they don’t want to draw undead to the house but...it is pretty secure. Keith made sure of that. Nothing can break in without them hearing it.
And God if he isn’t horny as fuck from their romp the night before.

Feels like Lance can tell because he leans forward and presses a thumb to Keith’s lips and plies his mouth open to accept the appendage. Keith eyes lid as Lance slides the pad of his thumb along Keith’s tongue. Lance keeps his mouth open in his hand while the palm of his other hand runs up Keith’s thigh. Gives his swelling crotch a squeeze and since Keith can’t close his mouth he erupts with a sigh.

“What a good sound,” Lance says, biting his lip a little.

Keith wraps his lips around the thumb with lidded eyes, sucking and swirling his tongue with a grateful hum. He can’t wait to have something bigger than a finger in his mouth again and it shows. He’s already salivating at the thought. Lance removes it, dripping with spit and wipes the slobber on Keith’s chin. Keith’s eyes are already dark with lust, his mouth parted and breathing slow.

“What do you say, you sloppy thing?” Lance asks.

“Yes...play with me,” Keith whispers. “Please.”

“I’ll meet you in the bedroom,” Lance says as he stands from the couch. “I want to double check all the windows and doors again. Wash my hands and stuff. You should too. Then you can...play with yourself a little if you want while you wait.”

Keith nods and stands to head that way with purpose, no waiting. It’s a straight shot but something catches his eye in a room he passes making him stop. It’s that ridiculous lacy underwear from earlier. Lance is more partial to lace than leather, that romantic sap.

He doesn’t think Pidge meant it literally but now all he can think about is the way Lance’s eyes waggled at the garment when it was in his hands. The way he jokingly asked if Keith would put on a show for him. He could have been kidding. Or...maybe it's something that would actually excite him. How would Lance react to seeing Keith sprawled out on the bed in lace and begging to be touched?

Keith’s done it on more than one occasion before and enjoyed it greatly. He finds lingerie uncomfortable to wear but it always enhanced that feeling of scrutiny he enjoys. Dos Santos used to humiliate him if he wore it under his clothes before meeting with him after dark. Made fun of him when his cock strained to stay contained in the panties. Called him a trashy whore or a desperate slut for wearing it. Said he deserved to be punished for trying to tempt him with it.

Lance...to hear Lance do the same, even if there’s only a small chance he’ll just laugh at Keith for wearing them--he snatches clothes up from the room floor and takes them with him to the bedroom, closing the door behind him to change.

One way to find out.

*****

Everything is set. Lance made sure all the doors and windows are good. Secured the back door further by putting a heavy ottoman in front of the chair propping the door closed. Really quick he washes his hands with a little water from the bottles before heading back to the bedroom.

God he’s excited. Can’t stop grinning as he strides down the hall towards the bedroom. He scoops up his backpack from the floor as he passes. There’s a weight to it with the items he neglected to remove from the smaller pocket. With all he found at the other house...tonight won’t be the only
night Keith will writhe under his fingers. They’ll have enough for months.

He’s not prepared for what he sees when the door opens. His feet still at the threshold. His eyes blow wide. The bag slowly drops from his hand to the floor. In shock he just stares, jaw slack and breath stolen.

Lance had almost expected Keith to be laying on the bed. Maybe stroking himself out of his pants or maybe naked--it doesn’t matter--and keeping himself hard for Lance. Maybe the rope lead twisted around his neck, ready to be yanked around like a disobedient dog in need of training. Those are the things he expected but this…

Keith’s leaning against the bedpost, arms crossed and blushing face turned to the side with a frown. His hair is pulled up off his neck to keep it from getting tangled into the rope lead. Not unlike that first night with the ropes but with one difference. Lance tries to swallow but finds his mouth is dry.

“Oh...boy…” he exhales.

The lace bra from earlier, the one with the cup size too small for any of the women in their group--Keith’s wearing them with the matching panties. A black bra with red accents cradling his chest and cupping his crotch. His cock strains to stay in the underwear with the semi he’s sporting. Are those...where did he find black thigh highs? And jesus...Keith’s wearing his gloves on top of it all.

Lance’s face erupts with heat and he can’t hear anything except his heart thundering in his ears. He brings a hand to his mouth as he tries to come up with words to explain why he’s just standing there staring.

“Keith...this is…” he barely chuckles, still unable to tear his eyes away from lace hugging his body.

“If you don’t like it, just say so,” Keith huffs, his face red with embarrassment. He turns to return to the bathroom. “I’ll take it off.”

“What?” Lance blinks and then realizes Keith misunderstood his amusement. “No,” he objects and hurriedly crosses the room.

He snatches the end of Keith’s lead and gives it a pull to stop him. It tightens and with a tug brings that body back in close. With his other hand, he tilts Keith’s jaw up to have him look him in the eyes. Keith’s chin rests between his thumb and forefinger as Lance looks lewdly over his body.

“No...you’ll leave it on. All night. Understand?” Lance says and Keith nods with a swallow. “I think...I like seeing you like this. Hands behind you.”

Keith does as he says, clasping his hands behind his back and thrusting out his chest a little in the process. Lance runs a hand down his body starting at his collarbone. Fingers brush the strap and ghost over the lace of one cup before sliding smoothly down his stomach. He caresses and squeezes Keith’s hardon outside the garment eliciting a sigh from him. It won’t be long before the panties can’t contain him.

Lance continues to rub that cock as the other hand cups the back of Keith’s neck. He nuzzles into his shoulder and nibbles on the bra strap with a heady sigh but then grins with it between his teeth.

“Oh yeah, I think...I like this a lot,” Lance chuckles again. “Why did you put this on for me?”

Keith lags in the answer, captivated by the feeling of Lance’s fingers slowly rising again. They’re rubbing his nipple over the bra. Rolling it and the fabric between his fingers. His nipples have always been sensitive but with this soft fabric...it feels even better, especially with Lance’s mouth on his
neck. A sudden hard pinch makes his eyes fly open with a gasp.

“I asked you a question,” Lance reminds him a little more sternly. “Why did you wear this slut?”

“I...I thought you’d like it…” Keith breathes, nipple firmly pressed between Lance’s fingers. “And I was hoping…”

“Hoping?”

“I hoped you’d make fun of me…” he admits. “...for liking it too.”

“Oh, you want me to humiliate you?” Lance asks with sly smile, leaning in to whisper in his ear. “Want me to treat you like a cheap whore? You’re certainly dressed enough like one.”

Lance has to feel the heat in his cheeks when he says that. Has to hear the way his breath catches as he mouths his pulse again. Lance twists his fingers around Keith’s little ponytail and yanks back to expose his neck with a gasp.

“Well?” Lance asks.

Keith doesn’t wait to answer this time, he immediately nods.

“Then act like one. How about...you start with a lap dance?” Lance suggests. “If you’re any good...I’ll think about paying for you.”

Lance lets him go with a bit of a shove and snaps his finger at the vanity chair before pointing to wear he wants it with another snap. Just hearing that sound sends a shiver down Keith’s spine. He can’t remember the last time someone snapped at him like some servant. Like a dog.

Keith brings the chair over to the spot post haste. Lance takes a seat and leans leisurely back to watch Keith as he approaches. He circles the chair slowly, being sure to sway to keep Lance’s eye. He needn’t have bothered, Lance hasn’t been able to stop looking since he came in.

He faces Lance, puts his hands on the back of the chair and leans in, just barely rubbing his cheek on Lance’s neck. His fingers slide into Lance’s coat at the collar, pressing down and slowly sliding it off his shoulders. Lance moves forward a little so he can remove it. He takes the coat and just when he thinks Keith’s about to hang it up, he instead slips it on.

Lance’s tongue darts out to lick his bottom lip at the sight. Keith wearing his coat and lingerie and swaying closer to him. It’s...Lance shifts in his chair, spreading his legs a little to show off the bulge pressing against his jeans. Keith takes notice and stops his incredibly tempting dance to put his hands on Lance’s legs, leaning in once again for more swaggering movements.

“Come here,” Lance says, his voice husky.

Keith climbs into his lap, hands on his neck and hardon grinding against him. Brings a sigh to both their lips and the dance continues. Lance raises his hands to cup his rear to assist in the rocking of those hips and to feel those supple cheeks splayed between his fingers. To bring him in even closer with a pleased groan.

“That’s a good girl--whoops. Would you rather I said boy?” Lance corrects himself.

“You can call me whatever you want,” Keith says, breathy against his lips.

“Then maybe...I should give you a nice stripper name for the rest of the night,” Lance muses.
Lance raises a hand and pulls the hair tie from his head, making the wild black hair fall in thick strands. His fingers comb through it gently, petting and rubbing his scalp. When he grips tight Keith’s eyes roll back as they close and he lets out a delicious sigh, biting into his lips as he continues to grind against Lance.

God he loves that look. Brings a wide grin to Lance’s face right before he releases his hair to pull the lead instead. Resolutely tugs it so that Keith’s face is pulled to his. Puts his neck in prime sucking distance. He denies Keith a kiss and instead presses his hungry mouth to neck, holding him there by the lead and sucking hard on his pulse. Keith lets out a barely contained sigh when he finally removes his lips with a pop.

“No, think I’ll just stick with ‘slut’,” Lance breathes on the dark hickey. “Toys don’t need names. Isn’t that right?”

“R-Right,” Keith agrees with a nod.

“Your cock is so hard right now. It’s almost out of your panties,” Lance purrs, nosing Keith’s chin so that he’ll sit up a little. He wants to see his eyes. They’re already lidded and glazed with desire. “You think you’re going to get fucked, don’t you?”

“...am I?” Keith asks, his voice more hopeful than he meant it to sound. The grin on Lance’s face make his cock twitch.

“You’d have to earn it. Hmm...but how to do that,” Lance hums thoughtfully. “Could make you blow me but...you make more noise when I play with your sweet ass,” he grins and gives the cheeks a rough squeeze. “You sound so needy...yeah, I want to hear you beg for it.”

Keith loves that kind of talk. More of that delightful teasing that Lance is great at? And begging? He’s on board already, in fact he’s ready to start now if it’ll move them to the bed faster.

“Want a nice big cock inside you?” Lance asks as he rocks up to press his bulge against Keith’s ass.

Keith swallows and nods, not trusting his voice not to crack. Lance gives the rope a hard yank, bringing his face within millimeters of his own. The lightning in his eyes has Keith’s stomach flipping with excitement.

“You’ll be doing more than nodding when I’m done with you, pretty slut,” Lance promises, his voice stern and commanding. “Now get on the bed and on your knees, where you belong.”

Keith does his best not to look like he’s too eager for it, manages to keep himself from throwing the jacket off and scrambling to obey. Instead he slides off of Lance and lets the jacket fall from his shoulders before catching it in his hands to hand it back to him with a submissive bow of his head. Lance takes it and Keith crosses the room and onto the bed, on his knees like he was bade.

It’s not long before he feels Lance crawling up behind him.

“Close your eyes,” Lance tells him.

Keith does so just as the bandana obscures his vision. Carefully, Lance ties it behind his head, being sure not to catch hair in the knot.

“Hands in front of you, wrists together,” he hears as Lance gets off the bed.

Slowly Lance latches his wrists together in a double column. Keith wriggles his hands a little but finds they’re secure. Not to tight but tight enough that he’s not pulling out of them anytime soon.
He's getting better at this.

Lance loops a rope through the wrist ties and pulls Keith across the bed. He loses his balance for a second until Lance ties off the length nice and high on one of the posts.

Feels like a prime position for taking lashings, on his knees with arms outstretched above him. He couldn’t bring his ass all the way down to sit on the bed even if he wanted to. Has to stay up on his knees. Exposed and vulnerable backside facing Lance who hums with approval.

“Perfect,” Lance whispers. “Can you get loose?”

Keith shakes his head.

“If it starts to ache too much say something,” Lance tells him and Keith nods, ready to get this thing started.

He positions himself behind Keith, body flush with body. At some point Lance must have removed his shirt because all Keith can feel against his back is hot skin. Lance unfurls the rope around his neck and tosses it aside before sinking his teeth into his nape. Keith lets out a sharp gasp and shivers.

“Does it feel better when you can’t see?” Lance wonders, not really expecting an answer.

“It...does,” Keith utters and sighs when Lance bites again at his shoulder.

“Good,” Lance whispers in his ear. “Then you’ll wear that all night too.”

Lance curls his hands around Keith’s front, palming his pecs and slowly sliding down. Relishes in the feel of that lace under his fingertips before he caresses his stomach. A hand perches at his hip while the other cups his stiff cock over the panties. Keith swallows and rocks his hip a little to meet him but Lance grabs hold firmly--on his cock and head of hair.

“Stop,” Lance tells him. “What did I tell you about that? I swear...you’re worse than a dog in heat.”

“S-Sorry,” Keith says. “I...just--”

“You just can’t wait a damn minute to get that satisfaction can you?” Lance scolds, Keith’s face heating up. “So impatient. Maybe I’ll just stop touching you there until you can learn to control yourself.”

Lance removes his hands from Keith and even backs away from his body, taking his warmth with him. It makes Keith try to lean back a little, chasing that heat but the ropes hold him in place with a creak. Where did--There’s a weight still on the bed so he didn’t go far, in fact, feels like he’s still right behind him.

Fingers slide into the waistband of the lacy panties he’s wearing, going side to side before a thumb hooks into the part going down his cheeks, pressing it aside. Lance lets out an appreciative sigh at the sight of his supple ass with its healing bite bruises. He bends his face to Keith’s back, nosing his way down his spine.

“I could stare at you all night, you know,” Lance sighs and kisses down until he’s almost laying flat on the bed, his face inches from Keith’s ass cheeks. “But...as fun as that is for me I should probably do something for you.”

Lance leans in and gives Keith a soft bite, sucks on the flesh to leave fresh marks on his skin. Keith is sure to keep still since he doesn’t want Lance to stop again but he does allow himself some quiet
sighs as he nibbles.

That’s when Lance slathers his tongue up the crease of Keith’s cheeks eliciting a much louder noise he can’t bite back. Almost a name but he resists letting it pass his lips. The sound of him trying to hold it in makes Lance grin. So he does it again but this time takes Keith’s ass in his hands, spreads him and dives in enthusiastically with his whirling tongue.

“F-Fuck, Lance!” Keith gasps finally.

About time. Lance has been trying to get some decent words out of him.

“Love that sound. More,” he purrs and laps at his hole. Keith just moans and gasps in response but it’s still much too quiet for Lance’s tastes. Time to move to something better that’ll make Keith even louder. “Don’t move.”

Lance leaves the bed to retrieve his items while Keith regains his composure. He tosses a few things onto the mattress but Keith has no way of determining what they are. However, he does hear the audible click of a cap popping open. He’d know that sound anywhere and it brings a smoldering heat to his belly.

Lube.

“This’ll be much nicer than spit, I can promise that,” Lance says when he gets back on the bed behind Keith. Lays down again at prime viewing height. “Spread your legs a little more slut. I know you can. Yeah, there you go.”

Lance presses aside those panties again and presses a single finger against Keith’s asshole. No penetration, just teasing circles all around with slick lube on it. Keith bites his lip and holds his breath, waiting for it, waiting for that appendage to push inside him. He tries to rock back onto it but the rope keeps him from any attempt.

Lance was prepared for this. Keith has to just take what he’s given and it makes him let out a subdued groan. A mix of annoyance and need at having to wait.

“Would you like more?” Lance asks, feigning innocence.

“Yes,” Keith gasps out, nodding.

“How about this? If you can guess which finger is teasing your asshole--I’ll put it in,” Lance grins against his stockings. “Get it wrong though and I’ll just leave you here for hmmm...five minutes? Without touching you at all. I’ll just lay back and edge myself while I wait.”

“That’s--” Keith starts but has to bite back his words with a cry when Lance sinks his teeth into his thigh.

“No arguments. Take it or leave it,” Lance says, licking the recent bite. “Otherwise, you’ll have to just... wait as I take my sweet time riling you up.”

Wait? At the same agonizing pace he set that first night he sucked Keith off? It took Lance half an hour before he finally put his mouth on Keith and even then he waited another ten minutes to do more than lick. Keith’s not sure if he wants to wait that long for a single finger, let alone how long it’ll take for more than that.

It’s worth the gamble of being wrong. Plus, Lance loves a good game so it’ll be fun for him too. Keith nods in agreement.
“Sorry, I didn’t catch that,” Lance hums and nibbles on the stockings, pulling them down a little with his mouth.

“I’ll...guess,” Keith says.

Lance renews his rubbing and teasing. Sliding that finger up the crease of his ass and down again, circling that puckered hole for a few seconds before retreating away. All the while Lance distracts his mind with kisses at his thighs and slathering his tongue on bared skin.

Is it...the index? The middle? Feels too big to be a pinky. Keith licks his lips, thinking he’s ready to guess.

“M-Middle finger,” he stammers.

“You sure?”

“I...y-yes--aaaH!” Keith moans and pulls at his restraints as Lance slides the finger in without much warning.

God there certainly is a difference in using lube. It’d been so long he’d forgotten how slick and smooth it felt to have something pumping into him without friction. Lance massages in slow and deep while Keith tugs at his ropes, tensing his shoulder muscles in his attempts to get closer. He shivers and gasps when he feels Lance press in fully to his last knuckle.

“G-God--”

“It went in so easily,” Lance interrupts with a chuckle. “Guess you really wanted it. Such a slut.”

Lance continues to massage his insides, slow and purposeful. Curling fingers to rub his walls and make his body shake. He notices Keith’s straining to stay in his undergarments and does him a small favor by lowering them just enough to free his flushed cock. Even gives it a few gentle strokes that have Keith whining again but true to form he doesn’t thrust in his hold like before.

“You’re doing so good,” Lance praises and strokes him a few more times. “What do we say, slut?”

“Th-Thank you,” Keith stammers. When Lance presses in at that bundle of nerves he cries out with a desperate shout.

“Again. Louder,” Lance says, biting his lip with a smile as he continues to rub his prostate and stroke his cock.

“Thank you, s-sir!” he gasps, his mouth agape as he pants.

“That’s it...Want more than that?”

“Y-Yes, please,” Keith begs.

Lance takes the finger out and Keith whines at the loss. He thought Lance was just going to add another but...He’s going to make him guess again, isn’t he?

“Get it right and you’ll get two,” Lance tells him as he slathers more lube on his fingers. “Wrong and...no fingers at all. For five minutes.”

Lance teases him again. Slipping and sliding. And damn it, he’s distracting Keith again but this time he’s doing it by sliding a hand under the bra to toy with his nipples. Pinching and rolling as he chuckles. He can almost see that smarmy smile even while blindfolded. The sooner he guesses the
sooner he’ll put those fingers back inside him.

“In-Index,” Keith rasps.

“You sure?” Lance whispers, breathing hot on his neck.

“Y-Yes,” Keith answers.

With a disappointed sigh, Lance’s fingers disappear and so does the warmth at his side. Keith groans in equal parts annoyance and anguish. Wrong! Damn it! Now he’s got to wait five--wait, what is…?

Something is sliding into him but it’s not a finger. Slender and smooth. And cold. Plastic. Before Keith can ask what it is there’s a click. He instantly arches, crying out as it begins vibrating deep inside him.

It’s a little bullet vibrator! Where did he find that?!

“Did I forget to mention that I found a buttload, pun intended, of toys at that second house?” Lance says all too innocently. “I figured we could spare a battery for a bit, just for you.”

“But I th-thought I g-guessed w-wrong!” Keith pants as his body shudders outside of his control.

“You did. But I just said no fingers,” Lance tells him and lays out on the bed “Think I’ll just let you sit there for a bit while I stroke myself.”

“L-Lance...f-fuck...it's...god...” he gasps, drool starting to drip from his mouth. “I-I...”

“Five minutes,” Lance reminds him. “And remember, you’re not allowed to come. Not until tomorrow.”

He leaves it and Keith can’t keep a single sound inside. It all comes spilling out of his panting mouth. Whines, whimpers, and damn near sobs. His body won’t stop shivering and shaking. When a vibration gets to be too much he arches or bucks his hips in an attempt to adjust where it’s hitting but not to much avail. He’s even starting to sweat in his attempts to keep from tipping over the edge.

Lance watches with fascination. He can’t believe how much better Keith looks like this. Before he was so in control of his noises, only surprise made him more vocal. Now he’s getting louder with those desperate whines the longer he suffers through the stimulation.

How much longer can he last?

More than once Keith rasps out Lance’s name. He can’t tell if it’s deliberate or wholly out of his control the words he forms. Whether its an attempt to get Lance to free him from this delicious torture sooner or not isn’t the point, just hearing him calling for him has Lance breathing just a bit heavier while looking at him. He cocks his head to the side and sees that Keith’s dripping a steady stream of precome down his shaft and soaking into the panties at his base. Some even makes it to the bed in sticky drops.

Lance finally sits up and nuzzles into Keith’s sweating neck, listening to him pant. One palm splayed against his back as the fingers of the other roll those nipples through the bra again making Keith mewl in his hold.

“You’re dripping all over the bed. What a mess you are,” Lance says with a dark chuckle. “Want me to take it out?”
“Y-Yes” Keith answers quick without hesitation.

“It’s only been three minutes though,” Lance hums.

“L-Lance, p-p-please,” he begs.

He can’t say no to that desperate tone.

Lance turns off the vibrator and slowly pulls it out by the wire connecting it to the controls. Keith can finally breathe again. He doesn’t get much time to compose himself before two slick fingers press into his sensitive hole, curling in and massaging thoroughly. His walls clench on Lance as he lets out a ragged moan.

“Can’t believe you’ve lasted this long,” Lance says, kissing the small of his back.

“Th-this is...n-nothing,” Keith stammers.

Lance smirks. That’s some attitude for someone tied up and at the mercy of Lance’s scissoring fingers. Or maybe he’s trying to bait Lance into giving him more than just a little tease. Either way he’s impressed with Keith’s daring while so vulnerable.

“Then I better up the ante,” Lance chuckles mischievously.

A third finger presses in and Keith lets out a keening cry as they pump, stretching him open. So full. Feels so fucking full but there’s something he wants more than just fingers. That cock that Keith’s daydreamed about since he saw it in the kennels. And now they finally have all they need for him to get it.

Keith knows it’s back there, hard and ready for his prepped asshole. Lance has been stroking it since he pressed that vibrator into him if those heady sighs were any indication. Lance has to want it as bad as he does. Keith pulls at his restraints but goes nowhere. It’s frustrating in the best way.

That cock is so close and yet so far from him.

“M-More,” Keith begs. “Please...give me m-more.”

“I dunno if you deserve it,” Lance says. “You were such a jerk to Rolo and Nyma. Rude to me too, or did you forget?”

“I’m--”

“Should probably punish you somehow,” Lance muses and starts to slow his rigorous pumping. “Maybe stop for a bit--”

“N-No, please!” Keith interrupts to beg. “I’m s-sorry. Don’t s-stop!”

“Don’t want me to stop?” Lance asks playfully and returns to a leisurely pace. “But then--how will you learn to be nicer to people?”

“Please,” he pleads as he pants. “I’m sorry. Please...I...n-need it.”

“Need it, huh?” Lance hums.

Lance removes his fingers and before Keith can whine about it he rubs the shaft of his cock along the cleft of Keith’s ass cheeks. Sliding and pressing with a roll of his hips. This renews the desperate moans coming out of Keith and invigorates him into trying to rut against him again. He pants and
gasps and pulls on his creaking ropes to rub even just a little bit onto Lance with the smallest of success.

Keith feels a hand reach around, fingers slick with lube, to grab his rigid cock sticky with precome. The hand strokes firmly and Keith shakes with an almost sob. The pressure from that hand on him and the hard cock sliding against his asshole at Lance’s classic teasing pace is breaking him apart.

“Poor thing, you’re shaking,” Lance whispers into his neck, his tone mocking. “Pretty slut needs a cock, huh?” Lance asks scooting back and away from Keith’s body.

“Y-Yes,” Keith nods and he hears the tell-tale click of the lube container again. The slick sounds of Lance lubing up with his hand has Keith’s heart racing and his stomach flipping with anticipation.

“Then you’ll get one.”

What goes inside him is most certainly a thick cock but it’s not Lance’s. Something firm and pliable but decidedly synthetic. A dildo. It’s not what he was expecting but he can’t say he doesn’t enjoy it from the way he cries out when it fills him initially. Even more so when Lance slowly fucks it up into him, continuing to drag out low pleased moans from his throat.

God it feels so nice. It’s not a hot cock but it’s almost as good. He begs through raspy words for Lance to go faster. Over and over, he pleads. Lance doesn’t oblige but does pull the dildo out nearly completely before slamming it back in with hard smacking thrusts, bringing out the loudest noises from Keith yet. With this angle and speed--it feels like he’s really being fucked right now.

“Look at you,” Lance chastizes him. “Fake dick. Real. You don’t care what it is as long as you’re getting fucked with it. What a whore.”

“Lance!” Keith pants, his shoulders tense as he pulls on the ropes. He doesn’t want him to stop, fucking him with that toy or criticizing him. He’s been doing so well with it all night.

“You’re a desperate piece of ass. So fucking thirsty that you’d take it from anyone,” Lance adds as he slows his pace again.

“N-No, that’s not--” Keith tries to deny but Lance interrupts him.

“Rolo looked at your ass twice. Mine too,” Lance mutters into his ear. “Probably thought he could pay us back for saving them with his cock.”

Is that true? Keith hadn’t noticed but then, Lance never misses much of anything.

“Maybe I should gift you to him for a night or two,” Lance chuckles into his neck. “I’ve always liked watching and being watched. I could let him fuck you senseless. Then take my turn when he was finished with you.”

“L-Lance,” Keith moans.

The idea is tantalizing and Jesus, there’s a hand on his dick again, stroking in tandem with the cock pressing inside him. It’s almost like Lance wants to make him come despite their arrangement. Keith holds back but it’s starting to become difficult and almost painful. Each breath that comes out of him now is strained and raspy.

“So many fun options when there’s multiple people,” Lance continues, amused tone. “Could tie you up on a bed with that vibrator inside you. We can take turns sucking you or fucking your perfect mouth. Unloading inside over and over.”
“F-Fuck...Lance, I’m--” Keith rasps and in response Lance slows his pace so he doesn’t tip over. Lance doesn’t stop talking though.

“Or we could go at the same time. Make a nice eiffel tower of you,” Lance chuckles. He lets go of Keith’s cock so he can lean in to whisper again. “Wouldn’t matter which end I took, would it? As long as someone fucks you, you could care less right? Slut?”

“N-No,” Keith denies again with a gasp. “It--It m-matters…”

“It does?” Lance asks, sounding pleasantly surprised. “Where should I be then?” he purrs into his ear.

“My ass…” he rasps.

“Try again, slut,” Lance says, speeding up the dildo thrusts. “Be specific.”

Keith licks his dry lips and takes a deep breath, trying to focus and steady his voice. Hard to do with that slick cock slamming directly into his prostate time and time again. If Lance doesn’t stop soon, he won’t be able to hold back. Best to get his words out while he still has them.

“Your c-cock in my ass,” Keith groans. “Just...yours. F-Fucking me...h-hard...and f-fast...until my legs give out. Until I...can’t b-breathe...without m-m-moaning. F-Finishing inside...m-me and...rimming m-me until...I c-c-come.”

“Mmmm,” Lance sighs against his neck. “That sounds...fucking delicious, Keith.”

It’s the first time Lance has said his name since they started and it ripples a feeling throughout his whole body. Fills him with a certain warmth, a swelling in his chest. Hearing Lance say his name so close to him, right in his ear, breathy and hungry makes his breath catch. Like all he wants is to abandon this game and do that very suggestion right this instant. He’s going to come if he doesn’t--

“L-Lance,” he whimpers high and weak.

Lance recognizes that sound for what it usually precedes and slips the dildo out of Keith before he can finish.

Keith’s chest heaves with heavy breaths, trying to calm himself. His muscles clench and unclench as his body shivers with residual stimulation that has yet to fully leave him. He can feel lube dripping from his hole and down his thigh. Sweat slipping down his neck and back to rest at his hips, hips that are still hitching and rocking, chasing that feeling of being filled.

“La...Lan…ce...” Keith pants. He almost doesn’t recognise his own voice. Broken and ragged.

“One more day, pretty thing,” Lance tells him, nose nuzzling into his neck and fingers combing through his hair. “You can make it can’t you?”

“I...” Keith swallows. “Of course, I...can.”

“Good,” Lance says, kissing his neck. “Let me get you down.”

Lance reaches up and pulls at the knots until Keith’s free.

His body nearly collapses onto the bed. His legs and arms ache from the position and desperately want to stay lowered. They stubbornly protest being lifted which is fine with Keith. As horny as he is he doesn’t think he’ll be about to hold himself up for more than a minute or two before crumpling
into a heap. But he does pull the bandana off his head so he can see again.

After tossing the ropes aside, Lance lowers himself to the bed and leans on his side, a hand propping up his face to take in Keith’s still trembling body. There’s still a bright flush on his cheeks and a haze in his eyes as he turns his head to look at Lance. Deep in those eyes...desire bubbling in it’s depths, like magma itching to burst free. And that fire is focused wholly on Lance’s exposed and still very much hard cock peeking out of his boxers.

“Can I have it?” Keith asks, his voice a low whisper. He keeps his head down low.

“Hmm? Have what?” Lance says, feigning ignorance as he strokes his cock in Keith’s full view.

“You know what I want,” Keith answers, trying to sound annoyed but the last of those words cracks as it leaves his lips. Still desperate and needy but trying to hide it.

“Oh it’s want now? Before it was need…” Lance chuckles but his eyes go soft as he reaches out and cups Keith’s flushed cheek, turning his face up and rubbing his thumb gently over his wet lips. “You can have anything you want from me, Keith.”

The look of relief on that face lifts Lance’s heart. He must have thought he’d get nothing from Lance tonight. Keith shakily crawls over and collapses unceremoniously between his legs. Puts his hands on Lance’s hips before lowering watering lips onto cock making Lance tilt his head back with a sigh.

Keith makes pleased hums as he slides and sucks loudly, grateful that he’s getting to at least taste cock. Lance looks down, a hand cradling that face while the other combs through thick hair. He caresses gently and says his sweet compliments between his sighs. No rough yanks, no more insults. Just calm petting as Keith settles between his legs, hips flat to the bed as he leisurely sucks Lance.

“What Keith,” Lance sighs, his breath starting to shallow. “Do you want to swallow it?”

“Yes, please,” Keith breathes hot on his cock before sinking back down.

“You don’t...ah...have to...say please every time,” Lance pants as his pleasure mounts.

“¿No te gusta escucharme decirlo?,” Keith says when he returns, licking his lips. “Por favor Lance, Dámelo. Quiero saborearte. Por favor.”

“F-Fuck, Keith,” Lance groans as his hand tightens in black curls, pushing him back down. He throws his head back onto a pillow as his body shudders, unloading into that hungry mouth with a hiss. He has to take calming breaths before adding, “you’re so bad...doing that to me.”

Keith snorts. That’s rich, coming from the guy who’s been torturing him all night. A little begging in Spanish is tame payback all things considered.

“I could have lasted another ten minutes,” Lance boasts before sitting up. He beckons Keith closer. “Come here. I want to kiss you.”

Keith tries to do as he’s asked but his body still aches so he staggers. Lance’s hands cup under his pits and pull him up the rest of the way so he his body rests atop Lance’s. Lance threads his fingers through Keith’s hair, pulling his face down and eagerly capturing his lips. And Keith presses back with wet salty kisses, getting so worked up that Lance can feel his hardness pressing against him.

“Relax. You still have to wait until tomorrow,” Lance chuckles and kisses his neck when Keith groans at the reminder.
Lance’s hand roams down Keith’s back and unsnaps the bra with an expert flick of his fingers. Something he’s learned to do in the dark from years of repeated practice. Keith takes a relieved breath instantly as Lance pulls the garment off.

“Thanks,” Keith says. “It was starting to get uncomfortable.”

“I don’t know how women do it,” Lance shakes his head and tosses it aside to slide the panties off Keith. They’re soaked and it makes Lance smile. “Cute though. Would it be weird to ask you to wear it again sometime?”

“I can pack it in my bag to take back,” Keith nods, managing to sit up to slide the stockings off.

“Awesome,” Lance says.

He passes Keith his boxers which he tugs on with minimal effort before collapsing back on top of Lance with a tired sigh. It makes Lance laugh a little and he pats his back. Poor guy is exhausted.

“Let’s get some sleep,” Lance tells him. “We have a lot of work to do tomorrow.”

Keith just gives him an assenting mumble before burying his face into Lance’s torso. He barely got to feel Lance’s body of his own accord and being able to do so now he can’t stop breathing him in. Feeling his warmth, the steady rise and fall of his chest. He doesn’t want to sleep yet but he can only fight it for so long, especially with Lance’s fingers playing with his hair.

“Anything still sore? Do you need a massage?” Lance asks a moment later but gets no response. “Keith?”

It’s too late. He’s passed out on Lance’s stomach. Lance snorts, shaking his head in disbelief. Didn’t even have the energy to crawl over to his own fluffy pillow on this nice big bed.

Lance gives him a little tug, trying to pull him up his body again so he can flop him over to the other side of the bed but only manages to do the first part. Keith’s head makes to his chest, right over his heart, but before he can roll him Keith lets out an annoyed groan.

“Stop...moving,” he grumbles and turns his face the other direction, letting out a tired sigh.

Guess they’re sleeping like this then. Lance has no complaints. The only reason he was trying to move him in the first place was because he thought Keith would be more comfortable on the mattress and not a body. So he pulls the blanket from under them carefully and drapes it over the both of them before returning to his head scratches and humming.

Oh Keith…

Lance wishes things were different. If Incident One never happened...what would have unfolded between them? Nothing? Lance shakes his head at that. Something would have happened, he’s sure of it. He’s always been a firm believer in destiny.

He likes to imagine that they’d be put on a team together for some mission. They’d argue back and forth all the time. Insulting each other while simultaneously complimenting their skills. Lance, the idiot who’s surprisingly a fantastic shot. Thanks for saving me moron. Keith the jerk who can put his amazing skills where his bad attitude is. You’re welcome you dick.

But eventually, they’d have nothing bad to say...only good things they admired about one another. A steady friendship where they relied on each other. Watched each other’s backs. Admiration growing into affection.
Who would break first?

Lance would...he’d have come clean first. No doubt about it. Keith would be hesitant but Lance would win him over with jokes and smiles. Then maybe they’d have gone on a date or two. Had some kinky sex that turned into something more regular. Into a growing fondness--like now. Then one of them would beg the other to be theirs. And everything would end happily ever after with a sunset kiss. He could hold Keith forever without fear of tomorrow. They’d provide for each other and make each other happy.

Lance sighs with a sad smile.

It can’t be like that now. Nothing is promised or permanent anymore.

No beach weddings for Lance with sand between his toes. No mariachi music as they dance the night away. No high quiet place for Keith where he can look at the night sky with his one and only. A place where he can reach up and--

With that thought, Lance frees a hand from the covers and stretches his arm over into the drawer next to the bed. He rummages around in there until his fingers find what he’s looking for. A pen. Ever so carefully so he won’t wake the Keith, he pulls Keith’s hand out from under the covers and turns the palm up. He draws something with thick lines before closing Keith fingers around it with a smile.

It’s temporary like everything else in this hellscape but...he hopes Keith likes it just the same. It’s really all he can give him.

He drops the pen back into the drawer and turns off the battery lamp with a click. Nothing but the sounds of crickets outside as he wraps his arms around Keith’s shoulders to hold him tight. Putting one more kiss to his mess of hair before leaning back into the pillow and falling asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr Artist HannaLu has returned with even more AMAZING fanart!

Please go check it out and maybe give them a follow!

Did you like the chapter? Give it a kudos! Did you REALLY like it? Leave a comment or rec it to a friend!

Don't know what to say? Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit and I'm no exception.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Sounds fair, am I right?

(Also, if you really like Voltron stuff and want more, check out my other two fics. Tell me what you think of them!)
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

This chapter took a while to write but I hope you like it. ;) Show your love with comments.

Also, wanted to let you all know my Klance Hogwarts AU has begun as well! Go check it out!

EDIT: I found a few GLARING mistakes and corrected them. I'm so sorry about that guys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun goes down
The stars come out
And all that counts
Is here and now

The Wanted, Glad You Came

The first thing Keith does as he wakes is breathe deep.

The heady scent of Lance’s body fills his nostrils making him sigh. He buries his nose into flesh and breathes it in again, making his whole body shiver as he exhales. Without his permission, his tongue darts out for a lick of flesh, dragging between pecs and savoring the salt from yesterday’s sweat.

Delicious.

Lance tastes so good Keith draws his tongue across his chest again with a sigh. He wants to do it a dozen more times but holds back, clenching his jaw so he doesn’t let his tongue back out like the hungry deviant he is. Awake five seconds and he’s already hard.

God, it’s been three days, right? Can’t they just do it right now? First thing in the morning? Holding off for this long is killing him but somehow he knows Lance will make him wait until later. Make him work for it. Keith’ll beg for it by night’s end if not earlier than that, he just knows it.

But even as he thinks about all the fun positions Lance will likely put him through, an equally appealing sentiment crosses his mind...

Warm arms are loosely wrapped around Keith's shoulders, slender fingers cupping his neck and delved into his hair. Like Lance had fallen asleep petting his wild locks. Soft breaths raise Keith up for a moment before lowering him again, like a boat drifting in the tide. Riding on the waves of Lance's life force. It feels so relaxing, so genuinely comforting, he wishes he could go back to sleep. Just nap on top of Lance for the entire day, doing nothing at all. It would feel just as right as jumping
his bones.

Too bad they have work to do.

He sits up and cracks his neck side to side before pulling himself from Lance's hold. He thinks that it'll wake Lance but it doesn't. He just continues snoozing away, hair a mess and slightly drooling through his parted mouth. Keith smiles down on him, holding in a snort. How can something so mundane look so endearing?

Keith tosses the blanket back on top of the sleeping man, willing to give him a few minutes more of peaceful dreaming. It's the least he can do while he wakes himself up and gets dressed.

His pants and shirt are still on the floor of the bathroom in a pile from when he tossed them in his excitement last night. Normally, he'd have taken the time to fold them. He's always been one to keep things organized and tidy. But last night...he wanted to make sure he was standing ready for Lance to see when he walked in so he threw them down without a second thought to pull on the lingerie.

And it was well worth the rush.

Keith chuckles at the memory as he picks up his jeans. Lance nearly dropped his jaw into the floor at the sight of him. Like his brain shorted out. Keith’s finding that he likes that look on Lance’s face and looks forward to more of it. Should he wear the underwear again tonight? Or just nothing at all?

Hmm...going commando today doesn’t seem like a bad idea.

He tugs on his shirt and tries combing his tangles out with his fingers before grabbing for the brush on the sink. Pulls it through his messy hair and holds it at the back in preparation to tie it up. His hand reaches into his pocket for a hair tie and when he pulls it out something blue on his palm catches his attention.

What is...?

When he sees it he drops the elastic to the ground. His other hand releases the hair in slowly falling waves so he can grasp his wrist instead. He brings it closer to his face and all he can do is stare at it as his breath shallows.

“It’s...but that’s...” Keith mutters, not certain what to say.

Five fine connected points, the border thick and blue without a single crossing line. There are several small lines between each sharp point streaking out to the edges of his palm. All of it the size of a silver dollar. The ink is slightly smudged but the image is clear.

A sparkling star. Lance got him a star.

There’s not a doubt in his mind that Lance put it there while he slept. Why would--? Right, Keith remembers. He told Lance that story in the car. It was just to alleviate some boredom and humor Lance with a story of his childhood. He didn’t think Lance would--It makes Keith’s chest ache as he closes his fingers gently around it.

“Stupid,” Keith tries to mumble but his lip trembles. “What a moron.”

Why...why does he want to cry? Already his eyes are welling up with tears. He grits his teeth to hold back any noise as he sniffs pathetically. With the back of his arm, he wipes his face before the waterworks can truly start, scolding himself inwardly all the while.
He opens his hand to look at it again and shakes his head. Apprehension and fondness struggle against one another in his heart at the sight of the blue star.

How could Lance do this to him? Make him feel so weak…and make him want things—want him. Feels almost cruel though he knows that’s not Lance’s intention. He just...he just wanted to be nice. Wanted to give Keith something special. Something worth keeping.

This is...it’s...so dangerous. Doesn’t Lance know that?

He should wash it away, Keith tells himself. Yes, wash it all off and then pretend it never happened. He grabs the water bottle from the sink and uncaps it. He looks resolutely at the water and then the star again.

It should only take a second. Just scrub it off to keep Lance’s imprint from seeping in any further, literally and figuratively. He thinks this and yet...his hand shakes with hesitation. Tries to tip it but he can’t. Why can’t he bring himself to pour the water from the bottle onto his palm?

Lance rolls over in the bed with a sigh, the movement startling Keith into dropping the bottle into the sink. It bounces around, splatters and pours from the lip but the sound didn’t wake Lance. He just continues to slumber in the big comfy bed.

Keith scrambles to pick it back up so valuable water isn’t wasted. They’ll need it for later. Yes, that’s why he couldn’t—shouldn’t—use it to wash his hand off. They might need something to drink later. Conserve it. That’s the responsible thing to do. It’s definitely not because he wants to keep the star.

That’s just...silly.

He snatches his gloves off the floor of the bedroom and slips them on. Covers the mark perfectly. He pulls on his socks and shoes before approaching the bed to finally wake Lance.

“Time to get up,” Keith says giving his shoulder a gentle shake. “It’s morning.”

The sleeping man merely rolls with a mumble.

“Lance,” Keith says a little louder but he still gets no response. Awake but being stubborn. Clearly, Lance needs incentive. He leans in with a smirk. “Man, those peaches look great...think I’ll eat them all.”

Finally, Lance responds with a groan.

“Nooooooo...shaaaaaaare...” he mumbles, muffled by the pillow he’s buried in. He rolls just enough for his voice to be heard “I want peaches.”

“Then get up,” Keith huffs and pulls the blanket off him. Lance curls up tight with an objectionary noise. “Get up or no peaches.”

“Fine,” he begrudgingly groans. He yawns and sits up slowly, no urgency in his movements.

“And you were a soldier?” Keith asks, shaking his head in disbelief. He passes Lance his shirt which he takes with another yawn. “How did you ever make it in the Garrison?”

“I didn’t. I had to run so many laps,” Lance recalls, slowly pulling on the shirt. Backwards. He takes it off, turns it, and puts it back on with a sniff. “Iverson that dick. Ran me ragged--”

“I’m not any nicer,” Keith interrupts him, throwing Lance’s pants across the room and into his face
before heading for the door. “Move it. We’re burning daylight.”

“Alright, alright,” Lance sighs in understanding as Keith leaves the room. “Such a drill sergeant,” he says but there’s no resentment in his tone. Just a fond chuckle as he pulls on his pants.

Keith walks down the hall to gather his things so they can get started, eyeing his gloved palm with a smile.

*****

They make the trip back out to the house in the field to pick up what’s left of the canned and jarred food. Another bag full for Keith and half a bag for Lance. After dropping it all off back at the home base, they look over their map again. Trying to figure out exactly where they are and what direction they’ll find more houses.

Before, Keith was opposed to using the car for anything too close. That way they could save on gas. But with the bit Lance siphoned out of the car in the nearby house he feels they can spare it. It’s safer to have a car to retreat to if things get dicey. Lance agrees and so pours what’s left of the gas into the tank for the neighborhood sweep down the road a mile.

It’s not as dead as their own little culdesac. Er, well, it’s a little more undead than theirs was. Walking corpses trudge their ways across lawns and streets, ever searching for their next meal. Some are just standing and staring at swaying trees while others drop to crawl after rodents under cars. Luckily Keith had a mind to stop at the beginning of the street and have Lance scout the landscape using their scope.

“Oof, like...fourteen,” he says, not pleased. “Make that seventeen. Or more. That’s a lot of teeth, man.”

“That’s not that bad,” Keith shrugs and gestures for the rifle so he can see too. “I’ve killed that many without back-up before.”

“Really? Would’ve taken half of Echo to do something like that,” Lance whistles. “Alpha...you guys really are in a league of your own.”

“You sound scared,” Keith smirks, a bit of teasing in his tone.

Lance snorts as he takes back the rifle. “Me? Scared? And ruin the cool image you have of me?” Lance grins. Keith snorts at that with a roll of his eyes.

They look out onto the street, noting aloud the route they should take to avoid being seen for as long as possible. Keep low and quiet, if nothing else Lance can use the handgun on his hip in an emergency. They’ve got plenty of bullets for it after all.

“But use it only as a last resort,” Keith tells him. Because nothing draws a crowd of unwanted visitors like a gunshot.

“I know,” Lance nods, checking the cartridge and popping it back in. Safety off. “Let’s do this.”

They start clearing the entire street even though it’ll take them the better part of half an hour.

Out of the dozen or so deadheads, Lance takes down several of his own by using diversionary tactics. Tossing rocks and such at windows and mailboxes to bring zombies exactly where he wants them. Then he follows Keith’s example. Grab, shank, drop, and then slip back into the shadow of a nearby car or shrubbery. It's impressive but no one has time for compliments.
Keith’s two steps ahead of him at all times. For every one Lance gets, Keith gets two.

They don’t split up per say but there is enough distance between them to make Lance nervous. Keith keeps moving before he’s ready, gesturing for him to follow. He does trail after him but a little ways behind Keith as he has to keep an eye on his hiding places, timing his jumps from spot to spot so that they can go without being seen for as long as they can.

Keith gestures for him to stop. Wide eyes and shaking head suggest he not move so Lance's holds position. A good thing too because if he’d rushed from that spot he’d have run directly into a group of three rotters shuffling their way over. The both of them hold their breath and stay stock still as they pass.

The first two make it past quickly enough, dragging their feet and swinging their arms like ragdolls. The third limps on a broken foot, skin cracked and splitting open. It’s caked with rotten blood as it walks on the actual ankle instead of the soul of its foot. Makes it hard for it to keep up with the others. So hard that it trips and falls flat right next to Lance’s hiding place.

“Shi--” Lance breathes but bites his lips in to silence himself.

He could try to reach out and finish it off now but then he’d expose himself to the other ones out there. Their element of surprise would be gone. But if he stays quiet maybe it won’t notice him. It’ll get up and keep moving, giving them its back. Perfect for a stealth strike.

It gurgles and sputters trying to push itself up. Hands reach out to grab anything for stability but it can’t straighten out it’s arm. It’s also broken. It falls again and makes another noise akin to a frustrated groan. It’s loud enough and almost human enough that both Lance and Keith grimace at the sound.

The other two zombies turn around to investigate and immediately spot them both. With an alert moan, they stagger quickly towards them.

Their cover is blown, no point in staying quiet now.

“Kill it!” Keith shouts as he jumps from the safety of his shrub, to head off the other two.

Lance pounces from the overturned car and sinks his blade into the floundering zombie. It goes slack but now the undead on the other side of the car have seen them too. He tumbles to his feet and scans his surroundings.

Anything within ten feet? No. Twenty feet? The two that Keith’s leading around in the hopes that one will trip and make his job easier. Then the three heading their way from the other side of the street. He makes a move to join Keith but only takes one step.

“I got these!” Keith tells him. “Lead the others down that way! Then double back! I’ll take them out!”

“Got it!” Lance nods and whistles for the others quickly making their way towards them. “This way assholes. C’mon. That’s right. This way.”

These are the only ones left, on the street anyway. Who knows what’s inside each house. All they got to do is take care of these ones. A problem for Lance since he’s never had to take on multiples on his own with a melee weapon. And he’s not nearly as nimble as Keith when it comes to close combat.

He takes them down a couple of houses, keeping their attention with plenty of noise and movement.
Can’t allow them to lose sight of him or they’ll get confused but man he hates sticking close. He keeps checking his back even though he’s sure they cleared the earlier parts of the street.

All clear. When he looks back he has one less than he started with.

That panics him for a second, thinking it turned around to go for Keith but then he spots it again. It’s stuck on the shrapnel of a car. Impaled it’s own torso on twisted metal in such a way that it can’t pull free. Well, it could if it tried to go literally any other direction but all it can think to do to reach Lance is try to walk blindly forward.

Deadly but dumb as bricks. Perfect.

Two are much easier to take care of than three. He lets them get closer and one swings out for him with a bloody hand. He misses and Lance gives it a rough shove into the picket fence nearby. The momentum sends it tumbling over the other side with a gurgle.

Fantastic. Even if it gets up it’ll take a while to get back over the fence with its shitty motor skills. With it otherwise occupied Lance will have a much easier time dispatching the last one following him. Hell, he won’t even have to double back to have Keith take care of it for him.

It lunges and he dodges while trying to kick out its leg. Miss. So he tries again and this time it falters and Lance takes his offered chance. Pins it to the ground before sinking in the blade. It goes still against the asphalt. Dead.

“‘Yes!” he smirks.

The one behind the fence reaches for Lance, leaning over the jagged pickets. It’s own undoing as the further it tries to reach the more the sharp points dig into its guts, spilling the rotten innards all down the previously white planks. Disgusting but now it’s stuck.

Lance waits for its arms to lower after a swipe before grabbing the top of its head, pushing it down and then stabbing hard into it’s skull. It goes limp, impaled on the pickets.

The last one is still caught on the car and it’ll be taken out now without trouble now that he’s got no other distractions. Easy peasy. Once it’s down Lance jogs his way back in Keith’s direction. Needs to get back to help him in case he needs--but Keith’s sprinting his way towards Lance too with an urgent look on his face.

When he sees that Lance isn’t hurt and there’s no trail of corpses following him, he slows. Relief evident.

“You got them? All three?” he asks when he comes to a stop, looking behind Lance.

“Yup,” Lance nods, chest puffed with pride. “Looks like you got yours too.”

“Then the streets are clear,” Keith nods with a sigh. He wipes off his knife before holstering it. “Five minute break to catch our breath and then we start canvassing houses.”

Eight houses to check. Eight houses to clear of undead and search for supplies. So they get right on it.

The first couple are empty of corpses which makes scavenging easier. A shame there isn’t much to find. Feels like it’s been picked over for food already. Most of the cabinets are bare. Not a single can of bad veggies or anything. Not very promising.
They find some toiletries though. Paper towels, toothpaste, fresh unopened toothbrushes. Some deodorant and soap too. They raid the medicine cabinets of anything valuable but most of it is over the counter stuff with the exception of some heavy duty allergy medications. They take it all.

Keith’s searching closets and drawers for anything valuable but gets distracted. Lance keeps stealing glances at him with a smile on his face. Not a suggestive one, it’s almost soft. Fond. He knows because he’s been stealing glances back.

“What?” Keith huffs when it happens a fourth time.

“Nothing.” Lance says, returning to his own search for things. “Just thinking.”

“What?”

“You seem different today,” Lance shrugs. “Can’t put my finger on it though.”

“Focus,” Keith huffs and strides for the next room. “I’m the same as always.”

Lance seriously doubts it but says nothing. He only chuckles at Keith’s attempt to hide his blush from him by going into another room. Yes, there’s something different about Keith today. Seems softer than usual, his frowns and stern face not so harsh. Then there was that worried look on his face earlier as the sprinted down the street to find him. And the subsequent relief to find him uninjured.

Lance finishes his work in the living room and explores the hallway, peeking into each room to look for Keith. He eventually finds him in the closet of the master bedroom. Looks like he started pulling clothes from the hangers, checking tags for silk clothing and tossing the good stuff into one pile and the garbage in the other.

Right now though, he’s just standing there lost in thought, a shirt clutched tight in his hands.

“Hey,” Lance calls out and he jumps. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” he says, shaking his head and returning to the shirt. He tosses it aside and grabs the next one.

“You sure?” Lance asks. He reaches out and places a hand on Keith’s shoulder.

“I’m fine,” he reiterates, shrugging the hand off him. Keith’s cheeks are flushed and rosy. “I’m just...horny is all.”

“Ahh, is that why you keep looking over at me?” Lance asks, a grin spreading. “And here I thought you were still worried about me.”

“Still? That assumes I was worried in the first place,” Keith huffs avoiding Lance’s eyes.

Lance steps into the closet and when Keith tries to back up his back hits the wall. He’s only a few inches taller than Keith but Lance seems to tower over him. He braces a forearm against the wall next to Keith’s face and leans in.

“So you weren’t scared, not even a little bit, that I might be in danger?” Lance inquires and Keith swallows. “You didn’t run over with that worried look on your face, thinking I didn’t double back fast enough? You didn’t think to yourself-- something went wrong ?”

“No,” Keith denies even though his heart thunders. Those are almost the exact words racing through his mind. “I didn’t--”
Lance brushes his hand against his cheek and it stops the words in his throat. Fingers cup that warm cheek and Keith has to repress a sigh.

“Then...that wasn’t relief on your face when you saw I was okay?” Lance whispers.

Lance barely ghosts his lips over Keith’s, it’s not even a kiss but it still has him sighing. Damn, he’s so desperate for any physical contact thanks to these last few days. Just this has warmth coiling in his stomach. And Lance’s breath has hints of cinnamon still on it, doing its job in making this even more tempting.

“It wasn’t,” Keith says but it’s breathless.

Lance turns his head with a disappointed frown.

“I see,” he sighs and turns around. He sighs while scratching the back of his head. “My mistake. I’ll load up the supplies then.”

Lance exits the closet, going back to his work in the other rooms.

Keith lingers, back still pressed against the wall and taking slow breaths. Guilt starts twisting in his guts, right where his excitement was just a second ago. He swallows, trying to clear the knot from his throat before sinking to the ground amongst the piles of clothes.

He pulls his glove off and looks at the star sitting there again. He thumbs it gently, sad look on his face. Still just as blue and beautiful as this morning even if it’s a little smudged from his sweating hands.

Lance didn’t make a mistake. Keith knows this but he’s too stubborn to say it aloud. He’s afraid of what it will mean for them. How everything will change by acknowledging it. It means placing those hopes and dreams for a future in someone else’s hands but...

Keith cares. More than cares.

He slips the glove back on and grabs the handful of silk shirts and nightgowns, stuffing them into his bag. Tells himself to just focus on the task at hand, nothing else. When he enters the living room Lance is lifting a box full of amenities. He gives Keith a glance with half a smile, no real energy behind it, before taking the box outside to put in the car.

It’s in this quiet fashion that they clear another two houses, one of which has a number of undead inside. They’re trapped in a bedroom so Lance just props a chair up to the door and they resign themselves to not searching it. Sounds like a lot and they agree it’s not worth the trouble of letting them out to check inside.

Noon arrives faster than expected. They’re in the middle of searching house number five when they stop to eat.

They have water, granola and the other half of the jar of peaches they ate this morning. Might as well eat them since they opened them, Lance said before they left. Lance retrieves the snacks and water bottles from his bag, placing Keith’s share on the coffee table before taking a seat to eat.

Keith finishes his granola in silence, looking over on occasion at Lance. He doesn’t look bothered but ever since the closet, Lance hasn’t been nearly as talkative.

“Sorry,” Keith says suddenly.
Lance blinks, stops chewing and swallows what’s in his mouth. He pokes at the peaches in the jar with his fork, tongue out in concentration.

“For what?” Lance asks, keeping things light.

“I’m not...good at this ,” Keith tells him, his hand gesturing between them. “Emotions. Feelings. I’m used to… I’m not comfortable with it so I just...don’t.”

“I know,” Lance nods, pulling a fresh slice out and into his mouth. He chews and swallows before putting the jar down on the table near Keith’s water bottle.

“Earlier--”

“I didn’t mean to put you on the spot earlier,” Lance interrupts. He sighs and leans back, resting his head on the couch back to look up at the still ceiling fan. “Just jumped to conclusions. I thought I saw... nothing I guess.”

Keith frowns with guilt as he picks at peaches, his appetite gone.

The way Lance said nothing...it sounded so defeated. Nothing. If Keith felt nothing then it wouldn’t hurt to see that look on Lance’s face. That crestfallen frown of disappointment at thinking someone--Keith--doesn’t care about him. It pains him to see it, especially when he knows that it’s not true.

“It...wasn’t nothing ,” Keith says and Lance tilts his head in surprise to look at him.

“It wasn’t?” Lance says and Keith shakes his head. A small smile starts to form. “So something is there?”

“Yeah,” Keith says, looking away. “Something.”

Lance smirks and scoots over on the couch, closer and closer to the loveseat at the end that Keith’s sitting in. He gestures him to lean closer with a single finger like he has a secret to tell. Keith raises a suspicious brow but leans over to those lips. Lance places his hand on Keith’s neck to pull him even closer for the message.

“Think I’ll ever see it again?” Lance asks him, nibbling on his lobe. “This something ?”

“Maybe,” Keith answers and Lance sticks his tongue into his ear eliciting a sigh.

“You’re such a brat, you know that?” Lance purrs and tugs on his ear with his teeth again.

“Who me?” Keith smirks and attempts to pull his face away. Lance doesn’t let him, holds him at the neck and slathers a wet sloppy kiss against his pulse. “Lance…” he sighs no longer trying to pull away.

“I wanted to kiss you in that closet,” Lance tells him. “Seven minutes in heaven, like high school. Just close the door and go to town. But you--”

“We can spare seven minutes here, I guess,” Keith says, failing to hold back the desire in his tone.

“You guess?” Lance chuckles but then whispers against Keith’s lips. “Scoot over then.”

He moves over. Lance slides into the loveseat, hands on Keith’s neck and pulling him into a series of warm wet kisses. Twisting his fingers into loops in Keith’s hair, playing with it as he tastes him.

Keith reciprocates. He keeps pressing forward as if he can’t get far enough into Lance’s mouth to
savor the sweet peaches still on his tongue. Teeth bite at lips and clack to together more than once in his fervor. Then Keith’s hand starts to trail down to Lance’s chest, lower toward his slacks. Maybe they can--

“AgH!” Keith cries out when he’s pulled back by his hair, forcing him away from Lance’s mouth. Another hand grips tight on his wrist, forcibly removing it from Lance’s buttons.

“Who said you could have that?” Lance asks, with a haughty smirk.

“No one,” Keith answers with a swallow.

“Should have known you’d try something like this. Still so impatient. Know what I saw this morning?” Lance leans in to whisper. “Your boxers on the floor in the bathroom. You’re not wearing anything are you?”

Lance really doesn’t miss anything. Keith doesn’t answer. It’s his hope that by doing so Lance will make him show him. His hopes are answered when Lance nods his head down at Keith’s crotch.

“Let me see,” Lance commands, hand still grasped tight on his hair. “Right now. Unzip.”

Lance releases his hold on the wrist and Keith does what he’s told without delay. Keith’s hands work open his pants as a Lance’s tongue works open his mouth again. He fumbles a bit, getting lost in that twisting tongue and nibbling teeth but he manages to unbutton his jeans. Then pull down the zipper. When he finally finishes his stiff cock springs out for all to see.

“Look at that...no underwear,” Lance smirks, nuzzling into his neck. “And stiff as a board. A little horny are we?”

“More than a little,” Keith admits. His mouth hangs open, breathing heavy between kisses.

“I can tell,” Lance chuckles.

Lance slips his tongue into Keith’s mouth again, plying him open to massage inside. Keith feels warm all over. His face, his neck, his chest, everything is bubbling with heat. It only intensifies when Lance reaches down to grab ahold of him firmly at the base. He gasps as the stroking begins and Lance sucks in the sound like it’s air.

“Mmm...I love your cock,” Lance purrs. “So thick and it’s always so easy to get it dripping. Ah, see? There it goes.”

“Lance,” Keith pants. “Can I--”

“No no no,” Lance coos into his neck. “Not until tonight. I don't care how much you beg.”

Keith groans with need and frustration. He was right about Lance making him wait.

“But man...it is tempting to slide into your lap,” Lance admits with a sigh, thumbing the slick tip of Keith’s cock. “You ever top? I haven’t bottomed in years.”

“I don’t...dominate in bed,” Keith gasps out as Lance strokes him harder.

“You wouldn’t have to,” Lance tells him. He leans in and whispers. “You’d still be my pretty little sub. I’d just...tie you down. Gag and ride you until I’m satisfied. I’d be your cowboy and you my obedient mount thrusting up whenever I told you to.”

Keith likes the image that evokes a little too much. He likes it more than any scenario Lance has
suggested during their romps thus far. Yes, tied down with his arms above him, the bandana clenched between his teeth, and Lance dropping himself over and over onto his dick with that cocky smile on his face. Riding him hard into orgasm. He can even see Lance seriously wearing a cowboy hat all the while.

But the image isn't what has Keith feeling weak in the knees.

*My pretty little sub.*

There’s something about the way Lance takes ownership over him with a simple sentence. It’s possessive and yet...so gentle the way he says it. Makes Keith want him even more. Does Lance know the power he holds over him? With just a glance, with just a few words he’s defenseless. His walls start to slip. Lance is breaking him, killing him softly, and Keith is letting him do it when in the past he’d have fought back tooth and nail.

“Think that’s something we could try sometime? Maybe when we get back? ” Lance suggests with a grin. “Out in the barn?”

“Y-Yes,” Keith nods, his cheeks flushing redder as he comes back to himself. “I’ll...I’ll do it.”

“Really? Sweet,” Lance says, a pleased look on his face. “But for now, I’ll let you go. Don’t want to make a mess of you too soon. Want to save it for later.”

Lance releases his hold of him and Keith bites his lip, trying not to whine with disappointment. God, he wants more and he wants it now. He was so close to using Spanish to weaken Lance’s resolve but something tells him it wouldn’t work. Lance is serious about making him wait and the way he acts as they empty the last of the houses proves it further.

They do their work. Kill anything stinking of decomp and shuffling around in the homes. Secure the doors in each one before they start rummaging through everything. It feels all serious again except on occasion Lance will scoot behind him to reach something. It’s never necessary and his crotch always grazes Keith’s ass just slow enough to be intentional.

It’s driving Keith insane.

“Oops,” Lance says as he passes. “Just trying to get by,” he says without an ounce of sincerity as he squeezes by yet again.

Keith says nothing but nibbles his bottom lip while looking at the ceiling to calm himself. He keeps getting his hopes up that maybe--just maybe--that all this build up will lead to something when they get to the final house. That Lance has a little bottle of lube on him. That he’s working Keith up so that when they are finally finished for the day they can get started.

On an old couch. A dusty kitchen counter. Hell, he’s willing to take it on his knees with his face pressed into the filthy fucking floor at this point if Lance will stop teasing him like this but it never goes further than these fleeting touches and bumps. Lance sometimes puts a hand on Keith’s hip and he thinks *finally* but all Lance does is gently direct him aside so he can reach up into a high cabinet or atop a fridge.

Keith maintains a calm facade for most of these touches but growls with annoyance once after suffering the fourth one. Lance just shoots him a puckish look. Like he knows what he’s doing and enjoys the little faces he keeps making at each turn.

Does he want Keith to crack? Because he’s getting dangerously close to breaking.
“Suns already starting to go down,” Lance comments as they’re loading up the car from the final house. “The day went by so fast.”

“Speak for yourself,” Keith grumbles under his breath. Today’s felt three times as long as any day in his life.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing,” Keith huffs and closes the trunk door. “We got a good haul. Let’s get back.”

It’s a good thing they decided to use the car. Without it, they’d have had to walk back and forth to their base, unloading one backpack at a time. They would have been lucky to empty two houses by the end of the day. This speeds things up considerably. They might even be able to take a whole day off before returning...how nice would that be?

Lance makes a move to drive them back but Keith slides into the driver's seat before he can. And don’t think Lance doesn’t notice how fast the drive back is in comparison to their driving out there. Keith takes his turns sharp and accelerates back up to speed quickly. Could be his natural impatience or...he's in a hurry to return to base so they can unload the supplies, organize them, eat dinner and, of course, ‘turn in’ for bed.

Makes Lance smile as he takes Keith in during the drive back. Back straight, jaw tight. Steely eyes focused on the road, a gloved hand on the wheel with the other on the stick shift. Oh, right. His hand.

Lance suddenly recalls the star he drew and wonders if it’s still there. Keith never mentioned it and he hasn’t taken his gloves off all day. He reaches over and places his hand on top of Keith’s making him flinch in surprise. Keith’s eyes dart over at him but return to the road in the split second it takes for his cheeks to flush.

“Sorry,” Lance says. “You mind if I put my hand here?”

“No,” Keith says. “As long as you don’t interfere with my shifting gears.”

Lance squeezes his hand gently with a smile. He leans back in his seat and hums to himself as his thumb rubs in slow circles over Keith’s pinky finger. Keith’s rigid hold on the stick shift relaxes a little. In fact, his whole body seems to lose some of that harsh edge after a few minutes of song and rubbing.

It’s a shame, Lance thinks, that Keith never got to do anything like this before when the world was still whole. Just hold hands without worrying about someone seeing. A kiss on the cheek or a hug in a hallway. No dates out in the open. He even denied himself fond glances.

Keith’s told him on multiple occasion he didn’t care about those things but...He looks over at Keith now. He’s got the smallest of smiles on his face. His thumb twitches a little like he wants to rub it on Lance’s pinky finger.

Like Keith said, something is there...and it’s growing.

Lance wants to give him more. Anything and everything Keith could want in this horrible world. He deserves more for all the bullshit he's been through. More than just mind-blowing sex that leaves him breathless and satisfied. He deserves passionate kisses. Gentle holds in the night. Sweet affirmations of love. A million stars, dreams, and hope for days to come.

After the car shifts into park in the driveway, Keith tries to remove his hand from the shifter but
Lance clutches his fingers between his own, not relinquishing his hold yet. Keith looks down and back up, confusion apparent. With his other hand, Lance unsnaps the black glove and pulls it off. Immediately, Keith’s clutches his fist tightly closed.

“What are you--”

“Nothing,” Lance tells him, raising his hand. He kisses Keith’s scarred knuckles. “You have cute hands, you know that?”

“Wha-?” Keith blinks, his hand unclenching.

His hands have never in their existence ever been described as ‘cute’. Deadly, calloused, strong, lethal weapons, yes. But never cute.

Lance’s fingers brush along the underside of his hand, right over the star he knows in his heart is still etched into skin. He doesn’t turn over the hand to confirm though. He simply plants another kiss on his knuckles before opening the passenger door. Keith just stares as he raises the garage door and gestures him in. The car pulls in and Keith puts it into park.

“I’m gonna start a fire out back, so we can cook soup,” Lance says. “No cold dinner tonight. I need real food. You got supply round up?”

Keith nods, confusion still evident on his face.

“Good,” Lance smiles. “I’ll come to get you when it’s done.”

With that Lance gives him a pat on the shoulder heads over to the trailer. As Keith closes the garage door Lance rummages through the supplies real quick grabbing a handful of stuff for dinner and promptly leaving Keith in the garage on his own.

That was...weird, he settles on. Keith tries not to think about it too much though. Lance is always a little weird.

Keith gets to work on rearranging the stock onto the trailer. Putting things together and wrapping anything delicate in layers of towel or shirts before shoving them into boxes. They didn’t find much in the area of food but since they did find more in terms of toiletries he goes out of his way to make sure it’s all in the same containers. All toothpaste together. All soaps and shampoos. Everything.

While they were out, Lance found a cute little sewing kit that’ll be great for fixing up clothing tears. Coran will love it he’d say aloud when they found it, then he pulled out his secret list and checked something off. Lance stowed the notebook away again when Keith tried to eye it. Couldn’t catch any of the words but there were still plenty of things on it. Keith stuffs the sewing kit under the seat with the first aid since it’s small enough to fit.

It’s nearly half an hour when he finally finishes loading up and tying down all the new stuff. The trailer is nearly two thirds full now. And they still have yet to go into the actual town. With the luck they’ve been having, he hopes they’ll have room for everything they find. Keith’s glad Pidge and Hunk tore out those back seats to provide them with a little extra storage. Otherwise, they might be cutting the trip short for lack of space.

And he’s definitely not ready for this vacation of sorts to end.

Keith dusts off his hands on his pants before he heads inside. The house is quiet which is a little strange. Lance can’t keep silent if he has the option not to. How many times today did he just start humming or singing while searching houses? Not that Keith is complaining, Lance’s voice is--
doesn’t matter. What matters is the house is too quiet.


“I’m upstairs,” Lance answers. “Don’t come up though, stay down there!”

“I thought you were cooking?” Keith asks as he hears Lance striding down the upstairs hall.

“Finished that forever ago,” Lance says as he comes down the stairs.

“Then what are you doing? Where’s the--”

“Shush!” Lance hushes him as he makes it to the landing. “You done with everything? Good. Come here and close your eyes.”

“Lance,” Keith frowns and crosses his arms.

“You want to eat right? Just trust me on this,” Lance insists and stretches out a hand.

Keith rolls his eyes but takes Lance’s offered hand to assist in climbing over the loveseat that barricades the front door and partially blocks the stairs. Lance clears his throat with a stern look on his face. He’s waiting for Keith to close his before they move.

With another resigned sigh Keith does so and allows Lance to guide him up the stairs.

“This is some romantic thing you cooked up, isn’t it?” Keith guesses as they ascend.


“I guess,” Keith shrugs but he smiles a little. It’s funny how easy this sentimental stuff brings out the excitement in Lance’s voice. He’d hate to dampen his spirits. “What did you do?”

“You’ll see,” Lance whispers in his ear as he turns them down the hall. “I think you’ll like it. Even if it’s not your thing.”

Keith can smell the soup before they even enter the room. Cream of mushroom. And through his closed eyes he catches flickers of light as well. A breeze blows in through an open window along with the sound of gently ruffled curtains.

“Alright, open. What do you think?” Lance asks, big grin on his face.

There’s a big thick blanket laid out on the floor with several assorted pillows. Two steaming bowls of soup with crackers on the side and two lit candles between them. There’s even a narrow green bottle on the blanket next to two champagne glasses. The open window gives them fresh air, the sound of crickets, and a view of the night sky.

A romantic post-apocalyptic picnic under the stars.

“When did you find wine?” Keith asks as Lance grabs his hand, pulling him to the spread.

“House number seven,” Lance says as they take a seat. “Cabinet above the fridge. Didn’t you see me take it? I was standing right beside you.”

“Uh...no. I didn’t,” he admits looking away. It was probably when he was trying to calm himself down after one of Lance’s ‘accidental’ grazes.
“I thought it might be nice if we got the chance to really relax,” Lance says as he pops the cork on the wine. He pours it into the two glasses and hands one off to Keith. “À votre santé,” he says with a wink as he clinks their glasses together.

Keith raises a brow and sips from the glass. Dry white wine. A Chardonnay. Still very good.

“I didn’t know you spoke French,” Keith comments.

“You just heard literally all of it,” Lance admits and they both snort out a laugh. “You never said what you thought,” he reminds him gesturing to the setup.

It’s not as bad as Keith thought it would be. It’s stereotypically romantic beyond all measure and normally he’d have booked it out of the room. The sight of something like this would have set off all his ‘get out’ alarms. But Lance pulled him in and he didn’t feel his body object at all.

He wants to be here.

“It’s nice,” Keith admits and looks out the window at the stars. “Has a great view.”

Somehow Lance knew he’d like that.

They eat in relative silence. The two of them scan the stars as they eat, enjoying the fresh air and twinkling lights. Eventually, Keith looks back at Lance to find him staring fondly at him as he refills his glass. Keith flushes and looks away as he takes the glass back, taking large sips of wine.

“You really get off on stuff like this, huh?” Keith says into his drink.

“I do,” Lance says with a smile. “I think you secretly like it.”

“Shut up,” Keith huffs but there’s no bite to it. It only makes his face warmer.

Their dinner is long finished and now they’re just drinking the wine. Lance stacks the dishes they used and puts them aside. He picks up the candles and puts them out of the way on the sill. Then he sits back on the blanket closer to Keith, topping off their glasses with the last of the wine. Barely fills it halfway for the both of them.

“What do you want to drink to?” Lance asks. “Last glass, you have to cheers something.”

“To...the end of the world, I guess,” Keith shrugs.

“Haha. Morbid,” Lance snorts and gestures his glass to Keith’s. “How about...to a memorable night?”

“Sure,” Keith smirks and clinks the glasses together before downing the last gulp.

Keith passes his empty glass to Lance, who takes them and puts them aside. Lance then leans in close, raising a hand to cup on Keith’s cheek. He looks over Keith’s pale face, illuminated by the flickering candles. His soft gaze comes to a stop at Keith’s eyes and searches their depths. There’s a spark of something in them. It only reconfirms exactly how he wants to do this.

He presses his lips to Keith’s. Soft, slow kisses that taste of wine. It’s exquisite and Lance finds himself sighing into each kiss. Keith presses back, parting his mouth and eager for Lance to taste more. Lance’s hands wander, sliding down his cheek and neck to shoulder. Squeezing as they travel. When he gets down to the hem of Keith’s shirt he tugs at it. Lance only stops his fervent kisses when he pulls the shirt over Keith’s head.
“Keith,” he pants with longing. "I want you."

“Then take me,” Keith sighs.

His hands try to find Keith’s without looking which he eventually locates gripped tight on Lance’s waistband. Lance takes his hands and pulls them off. He peels those gloves off and tosses them to the other side of the room. He kisses his wrist. Down his forearm. His elbow. His biceps. Tasting, nibbling, and breathing in as he goes.

“Lay down,” Lance says while mouthing his collarbone. “On the blanket.”

Keith does so and in seconds Lance is straddled over him. Lance pulls his own shirt off and tosses it with his dog tags. He doesn’t want anything getting between him and Keith. His hands pin Keith’s arms down as he dives tongue-first back into Keith’s mouth, sucking and biting his lips.

“Lance,” Keith sighs. “You're not...going to tie me up?”

“No,” Lance tells him, shaking his head. “Not this time.”

No, tonight Keith won’t be his toy. He won’t be some plaything for him to use to his satisfaction. Not a slut to be humiliated or teased. Keith is more than just a warm body for Lance to lose himself in now. He can pretend sometimes if that’s what Keith wants but...

Tonight, Keith is his lover.

Even if that’s not how Keith sees them, it is how Lance wants to treat this. Maybe it’s that romantic side of him but...he wants this first time to be tender and special. Physical but passionate. He wants to remember it without ropes or harsh words. Nothing but moans of desire and rippling waves of pleasure between them.

“I won’t tie you down,” Lance repeats against Keith’s chest as he pulls the belt from his pants. Keith sits up just as Lance sucks a dark mark into his pec. Lance then looks up at Keith and adds, “But I can still tell you what to do--if you want?”

Keith nods with lidded eyes. He watches as the belt of knives drops off to the side. They land next to Lance’s dog tags. Next, he moves on to his pants. Lance pulls them from his body and throws them across the room, knocking over the empty wine bottle. It doesn’t break but clinks as it falls over. He slips off Keith’s socks, dropping them to the floor.

Finally, Keith is bared to him. Nothing to cover any of his muscles or scars. He’s still up on his elbows so he could watch as Lance undressed him, taking shallow breaths in anticipation of what’s to come. Lance pecks kisses up his calf to his inner thigh.

“Lift your hips,” Lance suggests as he grabs a thick fluffy pillow.

Keith does so and Lance places a pillow under him. Now that he’s propped up for comfort they can really begin.

No senseless teasing to work Keith into hardness. No games. It's not necessary after these past several days of denial. Already Keith’s sporting a cock stiff enough to lift an engine block so he clearly doesn’t need Lance to get him warmed up.

So Lance goes straight to popping the cap on the lube from his jacket pocket and slathering it on his fingers.
A single slick finger has Keith biting back gasps as Lance works him open. His legs falling apart with each push. So slow and purposeful, like Lance is trying to find the locations of the most sensitive spots inside, all while mouthing and kissing on Keith’s pecs.

“Touch me,” Lance whispers against his heart. “Skin, hair, anywhere. I want to feel your hands on me.”

Keith threads the fingers of one hand into Lance’s short hair and gently tugs until Lance brings his face closer for more panting kisses. Can’t use both or he won’t be able to keep sitting up. He likes being able to look down and see what Lance is doing to him. After a moment they break from the kisses to breathe.

“More,” Keith exhales.

“Anything you want,” Lance answers and slips another finger into Keith.

“Ah!” Keith’s head snaps back with a moan. “L-Lance,” he sighs.

Lance pumps those fingers in faster and it has Keith breathing heavier. Little whines try to crawl their way up the back of his throat. His legs fall open even more and he starts rocking at little to meet those propelling fingers. Precome starts to pearl at the tip of his cock and Keith bites back another shaky moan.

“At any point, you can come,” Lance tells him, nosing his neck. “You don’t need to ask. Just do it.”

Keith nods his understanding but then asks, “Are you...you’re going to fuck me this time, right?”

“I am,” Lance promises and he swears he hears Keith whimper with excitement. “Now lay down. Touch yourself a little. As fast or slow as you’d like.”

Keith lays back, his head sinking into a pillow. He does as Lance tells him, wraps his hand around his cock and strokes slowly, letting out hissing sighs. Lance repositions himself. Seats himself between Keith's quickly spreading legs to finger him better.

Lance whispers little words of praise against the thigh he’s holding at the knee. Tells Keith that he’s doing so good. That’s it, relax. He scissors his fingers to open him up further and praises him every time he can’t hold in a moan. Says he sounds so good like this. Don’t hold them back. He loves hearing him gasp when he pushes in deeper.

“Ready for the next one?” Lance asks and Keith eagerly nods.

When he presses in this time Keith can’t hold back the obscene moan in him. Lance is so good at this, he could come without a cock at all. Panting, he sits back up on his elbow to watch as Lance thrusts fingers into him. Slick and dripping with lube. Then he presses in deep rubbing that bundle of nerves that has him quivering.

“L-Lance, I--”

“You can come if you want,” Lance reminds him but Keith fervently shakes his head.

“No, not...not yet,” he gasps. “Not until...you’re inside me.”

“Tan terco,” Lance smiles. “Then stop stroking for a bit. I’ll be stretching you for a good while.”

Lance massages his fingers into Keith more, studying that beautiful face contorting in pleasure as he
spreads him open. He loves the way his cheeks flush, the redness fanning out down his neck. Keith’s trying hard to stay sitting up to watch Lance work but the stimulation is taking its toll. That and all of Lance’s little Spanish compliments are starting to get to him. Finds his arms going weak when Lance praises him. Finds himself licking his lips while staring at the bulge in his partner’s pants.

He can’t wait any longer. He wants Lance and wants him now.

“Lance, I’m...open enough...” Keith manages between whines. "P-Please..."

“I’ll give it to you,” Lance tells him, grazing teeth on his thigh. “Just tell me what you want.”

There’s so much emotion in that declaration. It’s clear it’s more than just what they’re doing right now. It extends beyond this. And Lance is doing nothing to hide his feelings on it as his eyes meet Keith’s. He’s baring himself to Keith, eyes hopeful and looking as vulnerable as Keith does when bound in ropes.

Keith bites his lip inward for a moment, trying to calm his thundering heart but he can’t. Blood rushes through his ears so loud that he can’t hear. Lance waits patiently for a response, his eyes soft on Keith’s.

Why does this make him so nervous? He’s had sex dozens of times, maybe even hundreds of times. He’s never had trouble saying what he needs. Granted, he’s usually tied down and begging for it without a shred of shame. But now he’s being asked what he wants and that makes it feel different from every time before.

You can have anything you want from me, Keith.

Keith swallows and locks eyes with Lance, ready to answer.


Lance lets out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. A gentle smile forms on his face as he nods in understanding.

“Entonces soy tuyo,” he whispers so quietly that Keith almost doesn’t hear him. “Then I’m yours.

He plants another kiss on Keith’s thigh as he takes his fingers out. Lance peels off the rest of his clothes until he’s just as naked. He lubes up his hard cock before positioning himself over Keith who watches him line up with barely contained anticipation.

Lance pushes in one inch at a time, pressing his face to Keith’s chest and letting out a ragged breath the deeper he goes. Keith’s just as vocal, a low moan dragging out of him as he’s filled. His hands instinctively grab for Lance’s shoulders and dig in to anchor him.

“Oh god...Keith,” Lance pants into his neck. He rolls his hips, rocking slowly into him and Keith unleashes another moan. “You...feel amazing.”

“You can--ahh! Mhhm!!” Keith whines when Lance bites his neck and rocks into him again. “You can...get in...deeper if I’m...on my knees.”

“No,” Lance says, his head tilting back. “I want to see your face--” he declares and does a single hard thrust that makes Keith cry out again. “--as I fuck your perfect body.”
The compliments don’t stop there as Lance starts a regular rhythm. The flow is slow and purposeful at first, his cock dragging against Keith’s walls to elicit every kind of sigh, gasp, and moan out of the man under him. He can’t get enough of the noises he makes, unbridled sounds of ecstasy as Lance sucks on his neck and fucks into him.

“God...Keith. I could...I could spend all night inside you,” Lance moans into his neck. “But I’d rather make you come.”

Keith likes it rough--so that's what he'll give him.

Lance sits back and holds tight to Keith’s hips for leverage before propelling hard and fast into him. Keith cries out with each thrust, his hands clenching tight into the blanket under them. He loves the feeling of those fingers digging in to pin him in place, those eyes raking over his body to watch every reaction. Sweat beading on Lance’s forehead, neck, and chest as he works. Those rigorous, smacking thrusts have Keith letting out high pitched whines as he looks up at Lance who is biting his lip and watching him through lidded eyes.

“F-Fuck...Lance! Ah! Lance!!” Keith sobs and gasps for air. He’s practically drooling as he cries out.

His voice is starting to give with all the moaning he’s been doing all night and this only wears it out more. God, he doesn’t fucking care if he never speaks again. He could go mute after all this and he'd accept it as long as Lance doesn't stop what he’s doing to him.

“I can’t believe you’ve lasted this long,” Lance pants and leans forward to whisper. “But you look close now.”

Keith’s cock is dripping so much it’s a stream at this point. Each thrust has sticky drops flinging onto Keith and Lance’s stomach. He doesn’t dare touch himself. If Keith strokes his cock even a little he’ll erupt and he rather Lance’s cock finish him off than anything else. So, he reaches out for Lance’s neck pulling him close for desperate hungry kisses.

“I-I-I am,” Keith stammers, his lip trembling. “I’m...close...faster and--”

Something catches Lance’s eye. The blue star, smudged but still very much there in Keith’s sweating palm. He grabs it. Take’s Keith’s star hand in his own while threading their fingers together. He does the same with the other hand too and pins them high above Keith’s head eliciting a surprised gasp.

“Faster huh?” Lance rasps. He gives Keith what he wants, faster thrusts while breathing hard into his neck. His teeth graze but resist biting him as he pounds hard into him. “I want to make you come so hard, you see stars for a week.”

“L-Lance,” Keith moans, his breath hitching in short gasps. His legs wrap tight around Lance, hips rolling to meet those thrusts “F-Fuck I’m--!”

“That’s it, come for me, Keith,” Lance gasps back, his voice just as desperate. “Please. I want to hear you.”

“La-aahhhh-nce!” he shouts, his head thrown back on the pillow.

Keith’s whole body arches as Lance nails his prostate hard and in quick succession. His vision whites out when he releases with a shaking cry, shooting days worth of come in thick spurts all over his stomach. Some of it even reaches his chest. Even after he finishes, Keith can’t stop his heavy panting, just breathing Lance’s name over and over each time he exhales.
He looks beautiful like this. Slick with sweat. Hair sticking to his cheek and neck. Flushed everywhere there is skin. Eyes clouded over while riding the high from his orgasm. And his fingers are still threaded with Lance’s and not letting go.

Lance slows his thrusting, drags slowly in and out of Keith at the last of his come drips down his length. Keith whimpers at the stimulation, his hands squeezing tight on Lance’s at each slow thrust.

“You look so good. In or out?” Lance asks, with slow rolls of his hips. “How do you want me?”

“I...I...” Keith tries to speak but the words won’t form. He’s still too far gone. His vision is still spinning, his hips still hitching. And fuck, those little sensations won’t stop as long as Lance is still sliding in and out of him.

“I’ll do out this time,” Lance chuckles when he can't answer. “This is messy enough with having to clean me out of you.”

Keith manages a weak nod, not willing to argue even if he wanted to be filled. Lance hunches back over him, giving a few deep thrusts at a medium pace. Has them both grunting and Keith letting out residual moans like ecstatic aftershocks.

It doesn’t take long for Lance to reach his apex and he pulls out. He releases his hold on one of Keith’s hands and strokes out his orgasm on top of Keith. He gasps and moans Keith’s name as he climaxes, his come joining the rest of Keith's sticky fluids. Once finished they both take calming breaths in order to return to earth.

Before anything else Lance lowers his lips to Keith’s, giving him a soft open-mouthed kiss.

“Don’t move, just relax,” Lance whispers into him as he kisses. “I’ll clean you up.”

“I can do it myself,” Keith tells him but he doesn’t look like he’s going anywhere.

“I know you can,” Lance smiles. “But let me this time.”

“Fine,” Keith sighs and tilts his head back, sinking into the comfortable pillow.

“You, uh,” Lance snorts out a chuckle. “You gotta let go of my hand.”

Keith frowns, his face red with embarrassment when he sees that Lance is right. He’s still holding tight onto that hand. He clears his throat, averts his eyes, and relaxes his grip with a huff while Lance chuckles a little more.

Lance sits back to reach for a strategically placed towel. Just as he stretches out his hand to grab it he stops and looks at his palm. He snorts and lets out a round soft laughter which has Keith sitting up, his brow raised in curiosity.

“What is it?”

“Look,” Lance snickers more. He turns his hand and shows it to Keith. The blue mark on Keith’s palm has transferred a faint copy onto Lance’s. “It’s ’cause your hands sweat so much.”

Lance doesn’t know how he expected Keith to react but this was not it.

Keith's face changes from that frown to mute surprise, like he just realized what Lance said. He slowly looks from Lance’s hand to his own, brows furrowed and eyes shining. They start to squeeze shut and Lance thinks Keith’s about to cry when he lets out a little snort. It grows into a chuckle.
before he’s suddenly laughing. That teeth flashing laugh that makes Lance's heart do cartwheels. Keith flops back onto the pillows and directs his laugh to the ceiling now, wiping the tears from his face with his star hand.

He can't believe this...he gave Lance a star.

“You okay?” Lance asks, bringing a towel over. He swipes it over Keith’s stomach. “I don’t think anyone’s ever laughed after I fucked them. Not sure if I should be worried that I’m losing my touch.”

“Yeah, no...I’m...I’m fine,” Keith chuckles and sighs. “It was...you were great.”

“Good to hear,” Lance smiles and snorts out a laugh. “There’s blue on your face. Here don’t move.”

Lance takes a clean corner of the towel and licks it. Then rubs the blue smear until it’s gone. All cleaned up. Keith pulls on his jeans while Lance just slips his boxers and dog tags back on. Lance catches Keith staring at his hand again with that contemplative look, so he scoots in to sit next to him and looks it over.

“It’s almost gone,” he comments. All the activity of the day has practically rubbed it away.

“Yeah,” Keith sighs. His eyes soften on it.

“Want me to redraw it?” Lance asks, sensing it’s important.

“What? No,” he shakes his head. “I mean, it’ll just smudge again. No point.”

“I can draw it somewhere else,” Lance suggests, digging the blue pen out of his jacket. He waggles the pen, spinning it between his fingers. “I don’t mind.”

Keith does like looking at it. The star does make him feel better. He gives Lance half a smile before nodding.

“Sure.”

“Where?” Lance asks as he uncaps the pen.

“I don’t care,” Keith shrugs. “Wherever.”

Lance takes his hand with a smile and begins drawing. Same lines over the old ones, on the palm just like before. Keith rolls his eyes but maintains that half smile. He does like holding a star but...

“Moron. It’ll smudge again,” he tells him.

“Then I’ll redraw it tomorrow,” Lance says and blows gently on his palm so the ink will dry faster. He looks up, soft eyes meeting with Keith’s. “I’ll do it any time you ask.”

Lance’s words have Keith’s breath catching. Makes his body feel weak from his head to his toes.

Like everything Lance does, the declaration is purposeful in its construction. Not some accidental turn of phrase. He didn’t say ‘forever’ as he knows that’s not something Keith wants to hear. It would just upset him. Keith couldn’t believe something like that. Instead, it’s for as long as Keith asks for it. For as long as they last. It’s the closest to a promise that Lance can give him in the new world.

Keith swallows the knot in his throat as he looks at the fresh star. Crisp, bright, and perfect again.
Lance gave him a star to take hold of, long before he asked for one. Before he knew Keith needed or wanted one. He completed half of a childhood dream without knowing it. To take a star in his hands. Now there’s only the other half of that dream...and he could finish it right now if he can find the courage to speak and act.

“Do you...have a red pen? In your jacket?” Keith asks, his voice low.

“I’ve got a red Sharpie,” Lance nods. “Will that work?”

Keith nods. Lance passes it to him and he uncaps the marker.

Lance watches, expecting Keith to fill in the star with color. He doesn’t. Keith grabs Lance’s hand and yanks it over to himself. His face is pulled into a nervous frown as he does the fastest of scribbles. Just as quickly, Keith shoves the hand back into Lance’s lap.

It’s a solid red star.

“There,” Keith huffs, his cheeks rosy as he looks away. “I’ve got yours and you’ve got mine.”

“There’s some kind of deeper meaning here that I’m missing, isn’t there?” Lance asks with a suggestive grin.

“Maybe,” Keith answers as he stands. He picks up his clothes and starts for the door. “Let’s turn in. I’m not sleeping on the floor up here. Not when there’s a bed downstairs.”

Lance is in agreement. He blows out the candles on the sill before taking them down and closing the window. He grabs only his clothes from the floor. No reason to clean up the rest. It’s all extra stuff they don’t need anyway.

He does, however, do a quick perimeter check once he makes it to the ground floor. All the windows and doors. Even flashes a light into the backyard but only spots a lizard slinking over the fence. Once everything’s secure he heads back to the bedroom.

Normally, Keith would already be passed out under the covers. He’s never had issues with falling asleep or going to bed without a word to Lance. Not tonight. While he is under the covers, he’s sitting up and awake. Like he’s been waiting for Lance.

Lance dumps his clothes into a pile on the ground and slips into his side of the bed. Only then does Keith shimmy his way down into the covers and give his back to Lance. Scooting an inch at a time until Lance drapes an arm over him. He pulls him in and buries his face into Keith’s hair with a sigh. Feels like he’s floating on a cloud. This night was more than he hoped it would be. He feels closer to Keith than he’s ever been. And Keith...it feels like he’s more open than before. Like maybe he’d accept Lance’s feelings if he blurted them out. Maybe.

“Sweet dreams, Keith,” he whispers into his neck instead of pouring his big dumb romantic heart out.

“Night, Lance,” Keith says back. “We’ll hit the town tomorrow. So no singing. Just go to sleep.”

“Alright,” Lance yawns. “Still such a...drill sergeant...”

Lance snuggles in close and lets out a tired sigh. Within minutes he falls into the regular rhythm of sleep. The soft rise and fall of his chest against Keith’s back. His thumb rubbing circles into his partner's hip despite his dreaming. The warmth of his slow breaths falling like warm ocean waves on
bland neck.

Keith doesn’t fall asleep immediately. Once he knows Lance is out he rolls out of his hold. He reaches over for the lamp turning it on to the dimmest setting. Just enough that he can look over Lance without the light waking him.

Lance McClain.

The man he punched in the nose not long ago, who then promised to shoot him if Keith threatened his friends again. The same person who offered him blueberry pop tarts on top of a bus, just so he’d feel better. Then slapped not long after for getting fresh with him and despite that gave Keith his shoulder to cry on when in the midst of sinking into despair.

Lance, who lied to his team about the Garrison to protect them from the truth. Then accepted the scorn and pain that came with coming clean. A good soldier who sees only the good in people and wants to help anyone in need. Without a single thought about the danger he puts himself in and with no guarantee of compensation for his efforts.

The hopeless romantic who believes in love in a world long dead. Who made their first time together passionate and intimate. Who did, and continues to do, everything to make Keith feel loved and special without pushing his beliefs on him. Who kissed him throughout the night and said he’d be there...for as long as Keith wants him.

Keith reaches out and pets slowly through short brown hair. He traces fingers over the little scars on Lance’s chin, brushing them over the small one on his brow. Lance doesn’t move, even when he ghosts his fingers over his cheek.

That memory of his mom resurfaces again. Ten years old and sitting on the roof of the shack. She drinks a beer while Keith sips a bottle of cream soda. They cuddle close and she points to the heavenly bodies above.

*See there, Keith? That's your dad's star. And this one is mine.*

*Where's mine?*

*You have to find it, take hold, and put it with someone else's. Then you're always together, no matter how far.*

When he was little he took that literally and it just depressed him since it sounded so impossible. It isn’t until now that he thinks about how silly that is. Because of course, one can’t take a real star out of the sky and rearrange it to be next to another. It’s just one of those romantic metaphors that his mom hoped he understood. Back then he didn’t...but he does now.

His star was never a star and it was never in the sky. He had it the whole time...just needed to find it. Then join it with someone else’s.

Keith takes Lance’s hand and gently presses the stars, the symbols of their hearts, together with a smile. A single happy tear breaks through the barricade and slips down his cheek when Lance squeezes his hand in his sleep.

“Mom...I found it,” he whispers, his voice cracking. “I found my star.”

And now he’s never going to let it go.
Did you like the chapter? Give it a kudos! Did you REALLY like it? Leave a comment or rec it to a friend!

Don't know what to say? Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit and I'm no exception.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Sounds fair, am I right?

(Also, if you really like Voltron stuff and want more, check out my other two fics. Tell me what you think of them!)
Chapter Notes

Chapter is a little shorter than my usual! It's a bit rushed because I'll be gone for a week starting Thursday and I wanted to leave something for you! I'm going to Universal AND the Wizarding World of Harry Potter over the weekend for my mom's birthday!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What will we do when we get old?

Will we walk down the same road?

Will you be there by my side

Standing strong as the waves roll over?

Major Lazer, Lean On

When Lance wakes he finds himself entirely too warm like he’s been encompassed by several blankets. Hot as a sauna. Hell, he’s practically sweating through the sheets. Opening his eyes shows why.

It’s Keith.

He’s pressed himself into Lance’s body and twisted their limbs together so that there’s barely any space between them. Hands clutch Lance’s and hold them between their chests. Keith’s face is tilted down, his lips brushing Lance’s knuckles. A strange but endearing sight to see as Keith’s never taken the initiative to hold him before.

So serene. It almost feels like a crime to wake him up.

Maybe just a minute more.

Lance manages to pull one hand out of Keith’s hold without waking him and immediately sets to work petting dark hair. Combing through it and tucking it away behind Keith’s ear. He threads his fingers through the strands at his nape and massages his neck. Keith only sighs and shifts closer, if that’s even possible, pressing his face into Lance’s neck.

“Don’t...stop...” Keith mumbles.

“Are you awake or sleep talking?” Lance whispers. “Keith?”

Keith’s mouth parts and a tongue slips out to lick his pulse. Lance lets out a content hum as Keith sucks hard on his neck. Feels like he’s asleep as there’s no direction to his attentions. He just absently kisses and mouths the area with a sigh.

Lance just lets him go to town, knowing he’ll probably wake on his own.
“My…” Keith breathes soft. “My…star…”

Lance flushes with mild surprise at that. Is Keith talking about him?

No one’s ever called him anything like that before. And he certainly didn’t expect something so…sentimental to come out of Keith’s mouth. Maybe last night meant more to Keith than he let on. Lance chest floods with a different kind of warmth. He smiles fondly down on him and caresses Keith’s cheek, gently rubbing his thumb in circles.

“Young star, huh?” Lance chuckles to himself. He plants a light kiss on his forehead. “I can get behind that… mi astro brillante .”

No reaction. Keith just continues to nuzzle and hold him. Lance returns to petting him, whispering a song all the while. Minutes later Keith finally stirs, his eyes slowly blink open to find Lance’s looking down on him with a warm smile.

“Morning,” Lance says. “How do you feel?”

“Fine,” Keith tells him and sits up. “What time is it?” he yawns.

Keith’s fingers are still entwined with Lance’s. He’d think it was an unconscious decision except Keith squeezes them with his eyes turned down on them. Fully aware, even though he just woke up.

“Early,” Lance answers. “Did you want to hit the town today?”

“Yeah,” Keith nods. Lance senses a ‘but’ incoming but it doesn’t arrive. Instead, Keith lets go of him and throws his legs out over the side of the bed. “We should eat. Get dressed.”

“Or…” Lance says, wrapping an arm around Keith’s middle and tugging him to fall back onto the bed with no resistance. “We can veg out for ten more minutes.”

“Lance--”

“Shh,” Lance hushes. “Five minutes then.”

“One,” Keith argues.

“Four. Four minutes of…mattress meditation,” Lance says, burying his face into Keith’s neck for soft kisses.

“Three,” Keith offers with a reluctant sigh. “Three minutes and then we head to town.”

“Hmmm...Three minutes. Do you know what I could do in that time?” Lance says suggestively. Keith can almost feel that waggling brows against him.

“No much,” Keith smirks.

“Well, I could do a lot more if you’d agreed to ten,” Lance tells him and Keith snorts. “What you don’t believe me?”

No, he definitely believes it. But if they started something now ten minutes would turn to twenty and then to an hour. Then they’d never want to leave the house. Can’t have that so Keith puts his foot down.

Work first. Pleasure later.
Lance groans, calling him a party pooper before finally releasing him so they can get dressed. With all the clothes they’ve found for once they can wear something fresh. Band tees all around with clean socks and underwear. So nice. Lance almost cries when he puts fresh deodorant on.

“I feel like a human being again,” Lance sighs and throws the stick of Old Spice to Keith.

Keith catches it and nods, “Same.”

“Let’s get some breakfast, pack something for lunch and get to town,” Lance says, going over his checklist. “Sound like a plan?”

“Yeah,” Keith answers from the bathroom and he pulls his hair back.

When Keith finishes he turns to find Lance leaning on the doorway. Arms crossed, watching him with this soft look on his face. He nods his head to Keith’s hand and winks.

“Need me to redraw anything?” he asks.

“No,” Keith tells him, showing the barely smudged star. “It’ll last until tonight. You can draw it then.”

“Before or after I bend you over the kitchen counter?” Lance grins lewdly.

Keith snorts and pushes past him through the door.

“Guess you’ll have to wait and see,” Keith smirks. “Come on. We have work to do.”

*****

A strange feeling washes over both of them as they approach the town’s edge. They stop the car just in front of the welcome sign.

“Welcome to the town of Rule, stop on by to our welcome center at the Tex Mex cafe at 704 13th street,” Lance reads. “What a name for a town. Rule.”

“Something is off,” Keith says, eyes narrowed.

“Yeah...it’s a town but where are all the rotters?” Lance questions. “Normally there’d be a few we could see from the perimeter but,” Lance takes out the scope and looks ahead. “I don’t see shit.”

It could be that someone came through and cleared it. From what Keith remembers from local history classes, this town wasn’t that big to begin with. Maybe six hundred people tops. And it's been two years since everything went down. A really dedicated team of people could definitely clear it in that time.

Didn’t Rolo and Nyma say there was a group living out of here? In a gated community called Summer Springs?

“What do you want to do?” Lance asks, dropping the scope to look at him. “I don’t like how this smells.”

“Me neither,” Keith agrees. “Where’s the cafe at?”

They check their own map and see that it’s barely a block or two over. There they can pick up a local map with better details. Maybe get a better location of gated community so they can avoid it. Then it’ll be easy to search the outer perimeter and other buildings for stuff without going anywhere
near them or drawing unwanted attention.

They came to scavenge so that’s what they’ll do and then they’ll get the hell out of there. Keith drives them in and down a side street. All the while they look around for any sign of undead. Nothing. Putting the car into park and stepping out does little to relieve them.

The cafe is deserted just as they expected. It’s so quiet. Not a sound inside other than their own breathing and footsteps. Even the clocks are dead.

On the wall is a pamphlet shelf. It’s under a banner that says Welcome to Rule in red, white, and blue. Very patriotic looking. Keith takes a brochure and flips it open.

Local places to eat. Churches. Schools. City Hall. The Post Office. Convenience stores and more. Ah, and a much clearer address for Summer Springs. Pretty far from here. Now they can avoid any trouble as they creep through buildings. Lance joins him and grabs one for himself to look over.

“Hmm...they don’t have any clinics or hospitals?” Lance wonders aloud.

“There’s a small clinic near the old open-air market,” Keith says pointing to the tiny dot on the map. “Next to their windmill.”

Lance frowns but then suddenly brightens up.

“Ah! A retirement home,” Lance taps. “Bet there’s medicine there.”

“It’s on the outside edge,” Keith sighs. “Chances are it’s been cleared of all the good stuff by whoever killed all the walkers out here.”

“Won’t hurt to check,” Lance nods, folding up the pamphlet and tucking it into his back pocket.

“Shouldn’t waste our t--”

“We gotta hit it,” Lance insists. “Trust me, Keith. It won’t be a waste of time.”

Well, with the way the town is set up, they’ll come across it sooner or later. Might as well. Lance passes his pen over to Keith who devises a new route based on the local map. If they’re methodical about it they can get a good portion of the town done today. But for now, they give the diner a search.

All the cabinets and drawers are bare other than some rather plain looking silverware. Even the salt shakers are empty. When they find next to nothing they get moving, fanning out from the diner to the nearby buildings.

They stick to the outer edges of the town and keep an eye open for people. Thing is, they don’t see any. Living or dead. The place is a literal ghost town. And every house they go into is just as empty, of items and occupants.

Eventually, they make it to the retirement home, but it's as deserted as everything else. Every walker there has been taken out long before they ever arrived. Rotted away where they fell. Makes searching easier but that sense of disquiet still washes over them as they search each body.

All of them were taken out within two blows to the head, melee and ranged shots. Not bullet wounds though. Entry wounds are larger than the exits. Arrows, which means crossbows. Quiet hunters. And anyone that kills this many zombies is no one to fuck with. With that on his mind, not seeing anyone makes Keith extremely uneasy.
They’re either very good at hiding or they’ve moved on. Neither makes him feel good about this. If they’re hiding then they might not see them before they get too close. Dangerous. If everyone is gone then there’s nothing left to scavenge. Means they wasted resources in getting here. Both are bad avenues of thought to go down but he’d prefer the latter to the former.

Doesn’t seem to bring Lance down at all though.

Lance searches every room and every corpse he comes across with gusto. It becomes readily apparent that he’s not interested in finding medicine after the first few rooms. Leaves all the drawer searches to Keith as he checks bodies.

He clearly has reasons for being here that don’t include finding pills or medical supplies. Is it Hunk’s silly ring that he’s looking for? No, he’s not checking ring fingers. Any resident room with a Veterans plaque outside it gets him especially excited but Keith can’t figure out why. So much so that he’ll skip ahead without Keith into the next room to search.

Then Lance hoots with excitement.

After being in utter silence for nearing two hours now it echoes throughout the building. Scares the shit out of Keith, making his skin crawl. He runs in from the other room, serious look on his face. Just because the town seems empty doesn’t mean either of them should be yelling across the building.

“What’s your problem?” Keith whispers urgently. “You want someone to hear us?”

“Sorry I’m just--I didn’t think I’d find one!” Lance chuckles, giddy with glee as he clutches something to his chest. “Allura is going to lose it! Shiro too!”

“What? Shiro?” Keith asks as he approaches.

In Lance’s hand is an arm. Not a fleshy one but one made of plastic and metal. A prosthetic. It’s absolutely filthy. Needs a good cleaning, probably an oiling for the joints too. But...all the pieces look like they’re there.

“It’s one of those electric powered ones,” Lance says, looking around the room and sighs with disappointment. “Charger is fucked. Rats probably. Hunk and Pidge can finagle a workaround though, I’m sure.”

Keith blinks with disbelief at what this means--Shiro can have an arm again. That’s what Allura asked for. It’s got to be weighing on him if she picked up on it and asked Lance to look for one. Even if it’s not as great at his original...he knows Shiro would be thrilled to feel normal again. Maybe even give off a real smile for once instead of those ones masking his pain.

“It’s designed with a socket in mind,” Keith tells him. “Shiro doesn’t have one of those.”

“But with a few adjustments here and there, courtesy of Team Punk, we can make it functional,” Lance smiles and shoves it into his bag. “Maybe set it up with straps and harnesses if secondary surgery isn’t possible to implant a socket.”

Lance went out of his way to search this place. Not for himself but for Shiro, a guy he only saw as his idol a couple weeks ago. Keith would have bypassed it all together, never would have even thought to look. Lance didn’t have to do any of this but he did anyway.

“Thanks, Lance,” Keith says softly.
“What for?” Lance asks as he checks off his secret list.

“For sticking your neck out for other people,” Keith explains. “It’s--”

“I know, I know. It’s stupid. Dumb. Going to get me killed yada yada yada,” Lance chuckles.

Keith can’t get the words out to agree with him. Normally it would have been so easy to jump on that bandwagon. To snort and elbow Lance with an ‘exactly’. To tell Lance he better shape up and toughen that outer shell or else; he’ll be the one with a bullet in his back or rotter teeth in his arm.

But he can’t find it in him. He just stares at Lance’s shoulders as he rummages through a desk.

“There anything on your list for yourself?” Keith asks.

“There is,” Lance nods. “I won’t find it. Not in this part of Texas.”

“What is it? Or are you not allowed to tell me?”

Lance dips his hand into his jacket. Pulls out and extends the small notebook backward over his shoulder. Keith’s hesitant to take it. Looks at it like it’s an ancient artifact he shouldn’t be touching with his bare hands. Lance shakes it a little and Keith finally takes it. Carefully he opens it and scans the pages of things the other’s asked for.

Shiro-- Prosthetic right arm (any kind you can find. At Allura's request)
Allura-- Tea (At Coran's request)
Hunk--wedding ring for Pidge (any kind of setting. No gold. Allergic.)
Pidge--board games (several)--Dog toys (small)
Coran-- sewing materials/yarn and crochet hooks

Next is Lance's. It's only a single word.

“Sand?” Keith raises a brow.

“Beach sand,” Lance elaborates. “With shells. I used to have a mason jar of it back at the Garrison. Went missing a year in. Not sure why, I mean, who steals sand?”

“Some kind of prank,” Keith guesses.

“Maybe,” Lance shrugs and they hit the next room. “Never got it back. It was from the beach near my childhood home in Cuba.”

It's on every previous page too. Each time Lance starts a new list, 'sand' is added at the very bottom. It looks like it goes back over a year ago. This long and he never stopped looking for some.

Keith flips back to the most recent page and finds his name is nowhere...probably because he didn’t ask for anything. Not that there’s anything he particularly wants. Most of his focus has always been on necessities the past several years anyway. Not luxuries. Keith closes the notebook and hands it back to him.

“Why put it on the list if you know you’ll never find it?” Keith asks.

“It’s nice to have a goal. Something to hope for,” Lance tells him. “Otherwise--”

“--you’re just waiting to die,” Keith finishes for him with a sigh.
Lance takes his hand and squeezes it making Keith look up to his smiling face. He rubs his thumb along Keith’s knuckles with a happy hum.

“Finishing my sentences? Better be careful,” Lance says, leaning in to whisper. “Someone’s gonna think we’re together,” he winks and puckers his lips while making comical kissing noises.

Who? The old mummified corpses they keep tripping over?

Keith snorts and gives Lance a shove with his shoulder. He doesn’t let go of his hand though, holds it as they walk down the hall. They only separate when it comes time to search and whenever they move on to the next room their hands seem to find each other without missing a beat.

*****

They finally run into a moving rotter when they go further into the town. It surprises them at first, enough to inadvertently hit the brakes and stare in shock. Keith gets out on his side while Lance keeps it occupied by tapping on the car window.

“So there are some here,” Lance says. “It’s not cleared after all.”

“Guess not,” Keith shrugs after pulling his knife out of its skull.

It still doesn’t explain why there aren’t many on the outskirts. The zombies wander if there’s nothing to catch their attention. There’s no reason there shouldn’t have been a few here and there when they first arrived. And this one was intent on heading deeper into town when they came across it.

Searching the buildings becomes a lot tenser with the knowledge that they aren’t really alone anymore. Some places have just one corpse, or two tops, shuffling along the street or stuck inside. Easy to dispatch but their presence in itself is strange too.

Just one? There’s never just one in a town. There should be groupings of them. If they all were all cleared then where are the piles and piles of corpses. It’s...weird. And neither can come up with a reason why it’s like this.

Nothing they can do about it. Just means they have to keep on their toes again.

Around lunchtime they hole up in an abandoned craft store to eat. Yarn abounds so Lance stuffs some into his bag for Coran before they bar the door. They head up through the loft upstairs to the roof. So they can get a good look at the surrounding buildings while they take turns munching away on some pickles and potato chips. Lance uses the scope he detached from the rifle to check the streets.

“You know what I’m looking forward to most when we get back?” Lance asks as he chews his gum.

“The barn?” Keith guesses with a smirk and Lance snorts out a laugh. Lowers the scope to turn and look at Keith.

“Well, yeah. But think for a minute that I don’t make all decisions with my dick,” Lance snorts. “What else might I be excited about?”

“Hmmmm...food probably,” Keith shrugs and chews.

“Ding ding ding!” Lance exclaims hands gesturing wildly. “Eggs! Sweet sweet delicious eggs! Boiled eggs, scrambled eggs, fried eggs! And then maybe in half a year--chicken! Can you imagine? Meat that didn’t come out of a can!”
Keith snorts quietly to himself. Lance would be thinking about those chickens. He’s assuming much thinking Rolo and Nyma will be there. There’s always the chance those two decided to rough it on their own instead of trusting a bunch of strangers. But that enthusiasm is catching.

When Keith looks up from his water bottle Lance is staring at him again with that dopey look.

“What?” Keith frowns.

“Aww, you ruined it,” Lance pouts. “You were smiling.”

Keith huffs and rolls his eyes. Only Lance would think he looks good when he smiles.

“Where should we hit next?” Lance asks as he resumes his scanning of the streets. “Keith!” he says with shock and lowers the scope.

“What is it?” he asks, hurriedly getting up and crossing the roof to join him.

“I thought I saw a person,” Lance says, handing over the scope and pointing. “Just one. Going down that street there. Pawnee.”

“You sure?”

“Too fast and coordinated for a deadhead,” Lance assures him. “Had to be.”

Whoever was there, they aren’t there now. Gone. Lance says he looked unarmed from what he could see. No gun at least. Small and fast. Could have even been a kid. Or it’s a scout Keith suggests, his eyes stern as he hands the scope back to Lance.

If he really did see someone then they need to be extra cautious now.

Signs of other people in town isn’t good, especially with the knowledge that they fired on Rolo and Nyma. They didn’t come after Lance and Keith this time but that doesn’t mean they won’t later if they aren’t careful. Don’t want them thinking Lance and him came to rob their camp so they’ll avoid the street the kid went down for now. Maybe even avoid connecting streets just to be safe so they don’t tempt fate in any way.

Normally, if Keith were on his own, he wouldn’t worry so much. He’s good at slipping into hidden places and making himself disappear. No one sneaks up on him. But with two people it’s harder to hide. Harder to keep from being seen. Best to avoid conflict if at all possible.

After a quick review of the map, they chart out a different route. It’ll keep them on the west side of town and away from the east where Summer Springs is. Maybe try the open air market which is close to the center of town but other than that they shouldn’t push it. Don’t go stepping on other people’s territory and they won’t have a reason to fight.

That’s the hope anyway.

*****

Things are beginning to change now as they go deeper into town. Beginning to change and become more like what they’re used to finding. Undead show up with more frequency. Groups of three to four shuffling around together looking for a meal. So now they have to start looking around corners with caution and taking those carefully calculated steps.

Working together they clear another few houses. These ones seem to have more stuff left behind
even though the rooms are in disarray. A rush job. Likely done in the early years when people were looting and rioting. No one’s had a chance to come back. Good news for them, means the further in the more there is left behind.

Keith’s searching through drawers when he finds something. A jewelry box. Lance is busy with the bathroom, collecting bandaids and whatever else so he opens it and peruses the contents.

Necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and--rings! A dozen different ones! Keith rummages through them checking the sizes and types. A Pidge sized one might fit on his pinky finger, so he tries them on. Small. Too small. Made of gold. No dice. Ah!

“Lance,” he calls out and Lance comes running.

“What’s wrong?” he asks urgently.

“Look,” Keith turns and shows him. “Silver and small.”

Lance only blinks with perplexed confusion.

“For Hunk? Remember?” he says, taking it off and putting it into Lance’s hand.

“Oh right!” Lance snaps, a grin on his face as he looks that the ring. It’s pretty. “Geez,” he blushes. “I can’t believe it. When we get back--Hunk’s gonna cry, I just know it.”

Hell, Lance is ready to cry on Hunk’s behalf right now. His two best friends are gonna be married. Lance is more thrilled than he can express but getting too loud out here could paint them into a corner. A corner with corpses blocking every exit. So for now he pockets the ring and smiles at Keith.

“Thanks, for keeping an eye out,” Lance tells him. He leans in and pecks a kiss to Keith’s cheek.

“Sure,” Keith shrugs, a tinge of pink on his face.

Lance crosses off Hunk’s ring from the list. That leaves just the one thing left on his special list but for all intents and purposes, he’s done. Now they just have their typical list to finish up. The biggest thing on there is medicine and ammo.

“We should try the clinic three blocks over,” Lance says as they close the door of the most recent house. Lance takes out his Sharpie and draws a symbol on it to remind them it’s been searched.

“Then call it a day,” Keith says checking Lance’s watch. “It’ll be getting dark in about...two hours.”

“Sounds good to me,” Lance nods.

“This is the best time for hunting rotters,” Keith informs him. “They don’t catch slow movement as well during dusk and twilight. So as long as there aren’t too many and we’re quiet...we’re invisible.”

“Good to know,” Lance grins as they stalk down the street, checking corners as they go.

Keith kills them if they get close to any but most don’t notice them until its too late. They sink in their blades and move on. The closer they get to the town center, where the open market used to be the more shambling corpses they find. When they turn on to Union Avenue they both halt in their tracks, breath stolen.

Hundreds...Down the incline of the street, at the very bottom of the hill are hundreds of them. All conglomerating around the windmill at the base. Keith pulls Lance back behind the corner as they
take in a breath.

“Jesus...Christ!” Lance whispers. “That’s--Keith, that’s more than I’ve ever seen in one place.”

Keith nods. It’s not the most he’s ever seen but it’s still daunting.

“What I’ve got in this handgun, plus back up. That...it won’t even make a dent,” Lance tells him.

“I know,” Keith nods.

They peek around the corner and take in the landscape again.

It’s clever, the windmill set up. From here they can see cans and shining CDs hanging being twirled around from the blades. Making all sorts of noise and reflections of light. Must have been done early into the events cause no one’s getting near it now.

No wonder the place seems so deserted--they’re all drawn here. Makes the town safe, except for here. There are stores upon stores down there that no one’s been able to reach in years they guess. Which means all the buildings here are probably loaded with stuff.

Including the clinic.

The clinic is only halfway down the street but...that’s still a good twenty, maybe thirty deadheads to get through without anyone seeing them. It’s risky but, Keith could probably do it without being spotted. Though that means leaving Lance on his own and that doesn’t sit well with him. If there were...maybe fifteen less then he’d feel okay about them both going for it.

“We can’t get in there,” Keith decides. “We should forget it and turn back.”

Lance looks up and down the street another time before a small smile appears on his face. Then a grin.

“What?”

“I have an idea but you’re going to think it’s nuts,” Lance chuckles.

*****

“This is insane,” Keith tells him.

“I told you it was,” Lance reminds him as they jumpstart the black truck back by their own car. “Ah! It’s on!”

The tank in this truck is almost empty so if they’re going to do this they need to do it fast. Keith follows alongside the truck on foot as they inch it down the street, making as little noise as possible. They get to the windmill street and turn the car. So far so good, none of the corpses notice the creeping truck.

“If it doesn’t work, we can always run back to the car and book it out of here,” Lance whispers out the window.

“If this works I’ll eat my socks,” Keith states.

They put the hotwired vehicle into park at the top of the hill. Lance straightens the wheel and lodges it in place with the tire jack. Emergency brake on for a moment. He exits the car, keeping an eye on the zombies down the way. Still good.
“Alright, your turn,” Lance says, standing aside.

Keith gets at the wires under the steering wheel, fingers combing through and pulling cut cables. Someone had hot-wired it before which made it easy to take but now he’s gotta find--

“This looks like the right one,” Keith mumbles and takes a deep breath. “The minute I connect them--”

“Hit the emergency brake and we push it, then hide behind that civic,” Lance reiterates. “Momentum will handle the rest.”

Keith readies the band-aid in his hand to secure the wires together. Gotta makes sure it holds long enough for this to work.

“Once it’s got their attention we run into the store and snatch up everything that isn’t nailed down,” Lance nods. “How long do you think the alarm will last?”

“Fifteen minutes,” Keith answers. “Maybe twenty before the battery’s had it.”

“Then let’s do it before they see us and its all for nothing,” Lance says and starts for the back so he can push. “Oh, wait wait!” he whispers and turns around.

Lance takes the knife off of Keith’s hip, the small spearpoint. The one for people. With wide eyes, Keith watches as Lance cuts his hand with it. He winces a little but smears the blood on the window and side of the car. He explains since their sight is compromised the rotters might stick around the smell of fresh blood. Buy them a little extra time.

A good idea but Keith reminds himself that when this is done, they need to clean it. Getting an infection out here is no joke. Once Lance is finished painting a swipe of blood on the car, he ties Keith’s bandana around his palm. Then nods and gets into position behind the car.

Here goes nothing.

Keith connects the wires, taping them together as the shrill noise of the alarm starts up. Lance readies to push just as Keith slams down the parking brake. Together they push, keeping their cores tight as they drive hard with their legs until the incline takes the strain off them. It's starting to go down on its own!

Keeping low they slink behind the civic and both watch the result through the windows.

It rolls, picking up speed but staying on course. The alarm blares and does exactly what it’s supposed to. It catches the attention of every rotter it goes by. Right as it passes the clinic it hits two zombies but keeps going straight for the windmill at the bottom of the hill.

“It’s working, Keith,” Lance can’t help but smile. “It’s working!”

“Shhhhh, I can see that, Lance,” Keith urges him.

The sound and movement is more than enough to draw the remainder standing around the pharmacy storefront. The noise is too tempting for them to resist. And the smell! Even though it goes by so fast, more than a few perk up and give chase with enthusiasm.

It finally crashes headlong into the horde at the base of the windmill. There are so many gathered there that the bodies slow it to a stop like molasses. Never even gets close to the actual windmill. The alarm continues to draw those eager for the meal they think they smell all over the car. They groan
and lick the blood from the vehicle, beating their fists on the glass thinking there’s a nice human center.

“They’re distracted, let’s go,” Keith urges.

They stay low and not too fast so as to take full advantage of the dusk light. It’s unlocked. The two of them slip inside, knives drawn and ready for any occupants inside. Empty of corpses but the shelves! Their eyes light up as they stare with awe.

There’s stuff everywhere. It’s barely been touched. Some things have been knocked off the shelves but it’s a veritable smorgasbord of pill bottles, bandages, ointment, and more. The retirement home had syringes and a couple of half empty aspirin bottles but this--Lance nudges Keith’s shoulder.

“First to fill their bag with the best stuff wins,” he grins.

Keith smirks at that and they take off scooping things into their packs. They got fifteen minutes, maybe twenty so they make it fast. Barely looking at labels before tossing them inside.

“I got fentanyl,” Lance claims. “Top that.”

“Oxycodone and hydrocodone,” Keith counters with a prideful smirk. “You’re not going to win.”

“Diazepam. Zolpidem. Clonazepam,” Lance lists off as he pockets them. “We’ll be set for years.”


Lance whistles at that. “Shit, now I’m definitely going to lose. Huh, think we’ll need blood thinners?”

“Who knows?” Keith shrugs. “Just take it.”

“Ooo! Flintstones!” Lance grins. “Here you go, Ariana. So you grow up big and strong.”

They grab anything and everything from cold pills to painkillers. Vitamins to sleeping pills. Bandaids to paper stitches and liquid adhesive. Home remedies too, including Chamomile tea and little bottles of witch hazel. Everything they need and everything they don’t. By the time the alarm dies out they’re already up the hill and on the way back to their car. Packs full to the brim and triumphant smiles on their faces.

Once they get there Keith pops the trunk and they dump it all into boxes. Lance grabs a bottle of disinfectant and gauze.

“Look at this haul,” Lance chuckles as he unties the bandana. “Doesn’t it make you want to cry?”

“It’s great,” Keith agrees. “This whole trip was more than worth it.”

“They’re gonna throw us a party when we get back,” Lance grins. “That makes literally everything on the lists.”

Not everything, Keith thinks.

Lance didn’t say anything while they were in the pharmacy, so he must not have seen it. Too distracted by their pill collection competition. After all, they had more important things on their mind. And a ticking clock. No time to dawdle if they both wanted to get out of there without undead noticing. But Keith saw it.
Next to the sunglasses kiosk. Besides the magazines. A bunch of tacky keychains on a turning display. Little glass bottles with colored sand art in them. It’s not beach sand but...it’s the closest they’ll ever find in Texas.

It’s not fair. That everyone gets everything on their lists...but not Lance?

“We should do one more sweep of the clinic,” Keith suggests.

He’s pretty sure he can discreetly sneak one this time while Lance is busy checking behind the counter. Then he can present it to him later as a surprise. Lance loves that kind of mushy romantic crap. It’ll be nice to see that stunned little blush on Lance’s face again, just like the time he smiled first in the hall.

“Forget it. The alarm’s worn off,” Lance waves off as he ties the gauze around his cut hand. “The deadheads will be heading back if they aren’t there already. They’ll see us for sure.”

Damn...he’s...right. They’ll swarm the door when they see them and then they’ll be stuck in a building with no escape. Keith clenches his jaw as his foot taps impatiently.

“Was there...something we missed?” Lance asks, eyes glancing down at his feet.

“No,” Keith denies but huffs. “I...maybe. Yeah.”

“Is it important?” Lance tilts his head.

To Keith it is. He nods.

“You want to run and get it?” Lance asks and Keith blinks back at him. “I’m not a fan of it but...you’ll be seen if I go with you.”

“I’m not leaving you here by yourself,” Keith tells him.

“Haha, I didn’t say I would wait here,” Lance snorts and grabs his rifle from the back seat. “I’ll cover you from the corner. That way you stay safe, I’m not drawing attention, and you won’t be spotted. And you can take your time.”

He doesn’t much like that either. But it’s just across the street. And it should only take him a minute or two to get inside then back out again. Those little glass bottles full of sand hang there in the forefront of his mind, taunting. They’re right there. So close.

Keith is biting at his lip contemplatively when Lance puts a hand on his shoulder, waking him.

“You said it was important right?” Lance asks with a smile. “Trust me, I got you covered. Someone I know told me I’m a great shot.”

Keith raises a hand, the one with the star underneath the glove, and places it on top of Lance’s, squeezing gently. He’s never done anything frivolous or unnecessary since the end began. And especially not for someone else but--

Yes, he wants to do this. For Lance.

“It’s important,” Keith tells him,

“Then let’s do it. Last run of the day,” Lance nods and waggles a suggestive brow. “Then I take you home and give you a real run for your money.”
Keith snorts at that with a nod. He’s looking forward to that. They close the trunk and head back to the corner as Lance screws the scope back onto the gun.

Lance takes his position at the edge and draws the gun up, focusing on the storefront. So far only two have made it back, the others are still very much invested in the car. Probably too lost in the dim light to make much of anything. With a nod to say he’s ready, Keith slips across the street.

Using the cars as cover he gets to the alley closest to the clinic. He waits and stabs one zombie who gets to close. Lets the body drop without revealing his hiding place. Then waits again. Another stab and the other is down right on top of it.

All clear. So Keith gives him a thumbs up and enters the pharmacy, closing the door quietly behind him.

Lance lets out a relieved breath just as a sudden sharp pain strikes him in the back of the head. His vision flashes white for a second as his knees buckle and body crumples. The gun clatters to the ground as he himself hits the concrete. Everything’s blurred now as his vision swims. His head throbs and aches from the blow.

What happened? Why are his fingers numb?

“Is this the right one?” says a gruff voice.

“Yes, Travis said he was tan and tall,” another says

“Grab him. Put him in the van,” the gruff one says. Someone grabs his feet and starts dragging him.

“K...Kei…” Lance slurs as he reaches out.

Why won’t his voice work? And now...his hearing is starting to go. His vision growing darker. Lance’s fingers grope for something to grab onto but the strength in them is gone.

“We’ll g...our answers bac...t camp...urry up.”

“What ab... the other guy?” asks the younger voice.

“Hide...the alley. When he co...s back to...kill him,” he orders, “...drive...heir car an...the drugs back to camp...”

Keith. He’s in danger. Lance has to do something. He has to warn him.

He tries to utter something, anything but nothing comes out. Fingers still won't grip. His vision finally blurs completely just as his limp body is tossed into a van, doors closing within seconds.

And then everything goes dark.

Chapter End Notes

Did you like the chapter? Give it a kudos! Did you REALLY like it? Leave a comment or rec it to a friend!
Don't know what to say? Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit and I'm no exception.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

Sounds fair, am I right?
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Scream your love and hate in the comments <3 Love you guys

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Let hope burn in your eyes
And we’ll love
And we’ll hope
And we’ll die

--Muse, Stockholm Syndrome

Once the door to the pharmacy closes Keith makes a beeline for the sand bottle keychain display.

This shouldn’t take more than a second, he tells himself. Then he and Lance can head back to the house for dinner and a night of well-deserved rest. Well, after they have some fun he thinks with a smirk. All he has to do is just grab--oh. His hand stills just as he’s about to take a random one off the rack.

The bottles, they have names inscribed on the outside. He wasn’t close enough to notice that before. Maybe he could--Lance did say to take his time. His fingers rifle through the bottles as he searches through the names.

Lacey. Lamarr. Lana. Lance!

“Yes!”

He pulls it off the display and turns it over in his hands. Blues, purples, and pinks. It’s not the typical color for a beach and it doesn’t have any seashells but Lance seems the type to appreciate sentiment over accuracy. Chances are no matter what color it is Lance’ll probably cry and then throw it on a chain to wear around his neck. That is after Keith blushes up a storm and stammers over his words because he’s never given anyone a gift before...not like this.

That’s when an even better idea strikes Keith. His fingers go back to carding the bottles as he begins a new search. Would they also have...Kaden. Kalen. Ken. Keaton. Keith!

He grins and takes it off the rack, dangling in front of his eyes. Yellow, orange, and pink sand. Keith can have one and Lance can have the other. Or Lance can just have both, Keith doesn’t care. He looks softly on them both with a smile on his face.

Lance is such a sap, he’s definitely going to love these.

“Alright,” he hums as he puts them in separate pockets. Don’t want them to break since they are glass.

Keith gives the room one more look over, just in case there really was something else they missed.
Gives the total of three aisles a once-over while grabbing a few bottles here and there. Lance will think it suspicious if he comes back with nothing. It's pretty bare now thanks to them but he does manage to find a thing of aspirin they skipped over and a bottle of lice shampoo because you never know.

Other than that, it looks like they got all the good stuff. It's easily been ten minutes and that's time enough, so he turns to leave. That's when his eyes fall on a wall hook behind the counter. There's a wide-brimmed hat on it, made of what looks like tanned leather and another fun idea that brings a smirk to his face.

If Lance is going to be a cowboy when they get back then he better dress the part. He vaults the counter and snatches it off the wall to inspect it. A little dusty but Keith pats it off and deeply inhales. Smells like real leather. Nice. He always liked that smell.

With that, he's ready to leave. He jumps back over and slowly opens the door to look down the street. Great. It's clear. He keeps low and uses the cars for cover but when he gets to the corner he finds it vacant. No sign of Lance anywhere.

Odd. Where did he go?

Keith doesn't like the apprehensive feeling stirring in his gut but he also doesn't want to overreact. Could be nothing. And calling out for him will bring a gaggle of corpses down on them both when they meet up.

That's when he notices a few drops of blood on the ground. Keith kneels and touches them finding it fresh. Did Lance's cut open back up? Maybe he went back to the car to treat it?

That doesn't sound like Lance but...he feels a new sense of urgency and takes to his feet in a hurry.

As he jogs back he sees the car a block over. Even from this distance, he'd be able to see his sniper standing there re-bandaging a wound. That's when a cold sinking feeling really starts to settle in. It gets worse the closer he gets. Then he sees it on the ground in front of the driver's seat door.

The bandana. Keith's bandana.

But it was tied to Lance's wrist. Keith rushes to it, kneeling and picking it up with a worried frown. He'd never take it off without reason and that puts Keith on edge. Something's definitely not right.

There are more drops of blood on the sidewalk but in a smear. Maybe it's...a sign? A warning? Was Lance dragged from--

Keith hears a creak from the alley and looks up. His eyes barely have time to focus on the crossbow aimed at him before the bolt is fired.

Instinctively, he raises a hand to protect his face. The right move. Keith cries out through clenched teeth as the bolt penetrates through the glove and flesh before getting lodged between the bones of his hand. Searing pain radiates down his arm but at least it's not in his eye.

Shot. Someone shot him!

He grits his teeth in anguish and clutches his bloody shaking hand. God, it hurts but he's more pissed than anything else. Where's the---he glares down the alley to locate the shooter finding a man hiding half behind a dumpster. He looks absolutely shocked that Keith was able to intercept it fast enough. He's so stunned that it takes him a second before he tries hurriedly to reload to try again.
Keith doesn’t give him the opportunity for a second shot.

Arrow still in hand, he takes to his feet and runs headlong down the alley, right at him like a bull. Slams into him shoulder first, knocking him to the ground with a grunt. He jumps on top of him but the shooter struggles. Kicks and punches. He’s not going down without a fight.

Keith pins down an arm with his knee and lands a blow on his face with a hard crack. It disorients the shooter long enough for Keith to pull the crossbow from his hand and toss it down the alley out of reach. Then another strike right to the eye, knocking him flat to the concrete.

An opening.

Within a second of that Keith’s pulls his spearpoint knife, fast as lightning, and presses the flat of it to his attacker’s neck. He stops struggling then, just breathes heavy with wide eyes.

Keith can see now that he’s just a teenager. A scared one.

Good. That’ll make this easy.

“Scream and I’ll hamstring you and leave you for the roters,” Keith threatens, his voice a dark growl. “Understand?”

The kid just barely nods so his neck doesn’t get cut in the process.

“I’ve killed a lot of monsters today and I don’t have a problem with adding you to the pile,” Keith says, jaw clenched as he tries to ignore the throbbing pain in his hand. “So you’re going to answer my questions without fucking around. Got it?”

He nods again.

“Where is my partner? The man who was with me.”

“They...they took him,” he barely whispers.

Took. Not killed. Thank god for small favors.

“Why?”

“Tra...Travis thinks he’s with the guys who took our stuff,” he swallows. “They want information. Their location.”

Why would they think–doesn’t matter. So they took Lance to find out where Rolo and Nyma are. Damn it, Keith knew they’d be trouble one way or another. Now they’ve gotten dragged into their crap by association.

Information means interrogation. And Lance...he won’t tell them anything. He’s ridiculously loyal like that, even to people he hardly knows. Probably backtalk them the whole time. As much as Lance’s jokes make Keith smile he has a feeling these kidnappers won’t appreciate Lance’s brand of humor.


“Y-Yeah,” the guy answers. “If...if he doesn’t talk...they’ll probably kill him.”

“You better hope they don’t,” Keith growls low and rumbling. “How long will it take you to get there?”
“What?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself,” Keith warns and presses the blade down just hard enough to cut a thin line. A bead of blood starts to drip from his neck.

“I-It would take me twenty minutes if I run,” he stammers frantically.

“Then you have twenty-one minutes to get there and tell them to release him,” Keith explains.

“They won’t lis-—”

“They better listen. Because if he dies…” Keith swallows and strengthens his steely glare. “If he dies or if they refuse, there won’t be walls high enough or doors thick enough to protect you or anyone else in your camp from what I will do to them.”

“You...You wouldn’t—”

“I could always kill you now, then they won’t get any warning,” Keith threatens. “Every man, woman, and child will be dead by morning and they’ll never see or hear me coming. That’s a promise.”

The guy’s eyes blow wide with fear as he realizes this isn’t some act or a bluff. That knife pressing closer to his jugular isn’t an idle threat. This guy has an arrow through his hand but he’s not even flinching as his eyes shoot ice into his veins. It’s obvious he’s done this before without an ounce of hesitation.

This offer is a courtesy most don’t get.

“I’ll g-go,” he says. “I’ll tell them.”

“Smart move,” Keith says but his face doesn’t change.

Keith slides the blade carefully down the kid’s chest and slips it into the quiver strap. With a jerk he cuts through it like it’s made of tissue paper, making the kid flinch with a whimper. Keith leans forward, sharp point to his throat again.

“Don’t bother picking up your weapon,” Keith tells him, tone still menacing. “It’s mine now.”

The kid nods, not eager to disagree with him.

“Twenty-one minutes,” Keith reminds him.

He gets off him and the teen scrambles to his feet with a terrified yelp. He then takes off down the street, properly motivated by Keith to go as fast as he can. Once he’s out of sight and earshot Keith sheathes his blade with a sigh. Then looks at his bleeding arrow wound.

Aluminum bolts. No breaking that. He’ll have to get it out the old-fashioned way. Thank god the point is removable so he twists it off. With a grunt he yanks it the rest of the way out, tearing flesh and biting back a pained groan. The blood flows anew but at least it’s out.

He scoops up the quiver and the crossbow, tossing them into the back before dropping into the driver’s seat. Both hands grip the steering wheel, one dripping blood down onto his jeans and the floorboard. He hardly notices it. Takes a deep breath in and out as he wills his hands not to tremble. Trying to calm himself.

Within seconds he beats the wheel, trying to stifle his rapid breathing but it’s not working.
They took him! Took Lance! All because he went back for that stupid keychain! They could--what if they--!

Keith butts his head against the wheel, trying his hardest to remember his training. He can be mad at himself later. And no panicking. Right now Lance needs him. Right now he has to think.

“Stay calm. Assess...the situation,” he tells himself, taking slow breaths as he squeezes the wheel. “Focus. On. The. Facts.”

Lance has been taken. Probably in a car. They’ve only had him for...ten minutes at most. He’s likely still alive. Keith has to be prepared for the best and worst case scenarios. Has to have plans for each one.

Best case...Keith’s threat is enough to convince them to let him go. Second best case, Lance tells them what they want to know but he doubts that one. Exposing Rolo and Nyma would expose their team at the clinic too. He’d never do that.

Third best case, Keith’s threat is not enough and they keep Lance for interrogation purposes. In that event, Keith can infiltrate. Find Lance, secure him, and escape, killing any who get in their way. Worst case, Lance is--Keith swallows and clears his throat.

Worst case, they kill Lance. If that...if that happens...

Keith sits up and glares through the windshield, eyes smoldering with fire. His back goes stiff and his hands tighten further on the wheel, so much that his knuckles go white. If they kill Lance, he’ll make good on his threats and then some.

Rotters kill slowly and painfully...No reason Keith can’t extend the exact same courtesy but with his knife. Before he does anything though, he needs to prepare himself.

He reaches under the passenger seat for the first aid kit. It’ll only take minutes to get there by car so he has time enough to treat this. He won’t be at a hundred percent physically but every little bit will increase his chances for a successful mission.

Starts cleaning his hand and wrapping it up all the while taking calm breaths to beat back the fear slowly creeping up his throat.

“He’s awake,” says a woman.

“A generator?” says an old man.

Fucking hell, who’s the asshole who hit him? What did they use? A goddamn brick?

“Make sure,” says an old man.

A hand perches on his face, lifting his eyelid open before flashing a light into it. Lance lets out another pained noise as he flinches away. God, why is his mouth so dry? Tries to lick his lips only to find fabric barring the way. Gagged. When did they--is this why he couldn’t say anything earlier?

“He’s still disoriented,” says a woman. “You hit him too hard.”
“I didn’t want him waking before we got a chance to tie him up,” says the first voice again.

Tied up? Lance pulls at his arms and legs but finds them stuck. He’s in a chair. Legs tied to the chair legs and arms twisted behind him. Wrists latched together and secured to the chair back. Someone in this room knows his stuff. No amount of wiggling is going free him.

Kidnapped.

A splash of water in his face wakes him further. More alert but the pain in his head throbs when he shakes the drops off. The room’s starting to come into focus now, the bright light above him making him squint.

Three individuals but one in particular peers in on him. Typical old potbelly southerner with plaid flannel and a walking stick. Excellent posture though. Retired military. His glasses have a crack in them and his dark receding hairline is peppered with silver.

There’s a woman leaning against the wall. Dark skin with flowing black hair and serious eyes. She has her hands in her white lab coat pockets. A doctor or nurse maybe. She’s clearly the one who flashed a light in his eyes.

The old man snaps at another in the room and Lance’s gaze moves to follow. A young man with short red hair. Tall, thick bodied, and well muscled. He’s got a large forehead with eyebrows that nearly touch. He circles around and pulls the gag from Lance’s mouth.

Who are these people? What do they want?

“Answer our questions and ya might git to walk outta ‘ere,” says the old man.

Lance turns his head and looks around the room, scanning the corners and the door. Looks like a shed. There’s a bright light swinging from the ceiling, probably powered by the generator outside. Must be the Summer Springs camp.

He doesn’t see Keith anywhere and that worries him a little.

“Don’t bother lookin’ for ‘im,” says the old man. “Yer friend is dead.”

The way he says it feels...wrong. There’s not enough conviction in it. Uncertainty.

“Doubt it,” Lance finally speaks, wincing at the sound of his own voice. God, it’s so loud.

“When Gary gets back he’ll confirm it,” the young man says. “He’s our best hunter. Never misses.”

Just one guy? After Keith? Lance almost snorts at the absurdity.

It’ll take more than that. Three or more guys might take down Keith and even then he’d take two of them down with him. A single guy is no threat to Keith. For a second he was actually worried.

That means...Keith’s probably on his way right now. He’d never just abandon him here. All Lance needs to do is stall until he gets here. Good thing he’s good at playing dumb and running his mouth for extended periods of time. Could even say it’s his specialty.

“Sorry, my calendar’s booked...maybe we could reschedule?” Lance says, smarmy look on his face. "How’s...’never’ sound?”

“No one is comin’ to save ya,” says the old man. “So it’d behoove ya to answer our questions if ya wanna git outta ‘ere.”
“Where did your little friends go?” asks the young redhead.

“Who?” Lance asks and receives a stinging backhanded smack.

He clenches his jaw before turning up the corners to a smile. That wasn’t so bad. Pidge hits harder than that.

“Sorry, still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He smacks Lance again. That one was a little harder. Then the big guy circles him.

“The two thieves. Where did they go?” he asks. "We know you know."

“Why would I know anything about some thieves?” Lance shrugs. He then winks at the latin looking woman. “Oye la balleza, how about you loosen this rope? Promise I’ll be a good boy.”

She ignores him, unimpressed with his attempts at flirting. The old man steps in the way, blocking her from his view. Lance frowns and begrudgingly returns his attention to the young man who, in his humble opinion, is far less attractive to look at.

“One of our scouts followed you through the town. He heard you talking,” he says. “You said something about eggs and chickens.”

Crap. He...did say that. So that’s why they grabbed him. Damn, him and his big mouth.

So this really is about Rolo and Nyma. Well, hell if he’s giving them up. These assholes wouldn’t grant them asylum because of an infant. Fuck that. If there’s anything Lance is proud of it’s his moral compass. And his ability to be a troll.

Lance gives them an understanding nod, like he’s going to help.

“Oh, those guys. The ones with the kid? And a dog?” Lance hints and they all share a look.

“Where are they?”

Lance gives them a cheeky shrug.

“Gee, I dunno, gramps. We barely spoke to them. Maybe they went to California. I hear it’s great this time of year,” Lance grins.

He expected another smack but this time he gets a solid punch in the jaw, making him cry out with surprise. The metallic taste in his mouth confirms that he bit his tongue during the hit. No more mister nice slaps it seems. Lance swallows down spit thick with blood and nods.

That’s fine. It’s cool. Lance has taken punches way harder than that before.

“Sorry, my bad,” Lance amends. “They went to Hawaii. The surfing there is choice,” he jokes.

The redhead has lost his patience. He yanks Lance back by his hair and then nails him hard in the gut, knocking the wind from him.

Okay, he can admit, that one actually hurt a little. Lance gasps, coughs and chokes, trying his hardest to pull air back in. It takes a few seconds but he manages it.

Just a few more minutes, he tells himself. Keith’s coming.
“We want the thieves. We need our supplies and chickens,” the old man reiterates.

“Sorry. The only chicken I know is the one who sucker-punched me,” Lance says then turns his head to face the young man. Blood drips from his mouth but a mocking smile sits on his face. “I’d think it was the pretty nurse but she looks like she’d tear my heart out while looking me in the eye. You on the other hand...” Lance insinuates at his cowardice with a mocking laugh and the guy socks him another one in the gut.

He hits Lance twice more for good measure. One in the face and the other a solid strike in the leg just above his knee. Neither hit gets anything more than an initial gasp of pain.

“He’s funny,” says the woman, deadpan look on her face. “Too bad he has no self-preservation instincts.”

“Kinda hard...to...self preserve...when my hands...are tied,” Lance pants. “Sure you don’t want to tap in, la belleza? At least then I’d have a pretty face to look at.”

His jaw is starting to swell. And all this swallowed blood is making him nauseous. That or it’s the concussion this guy probably gave him. Everything swims a little as he tries to focus.

Just a little longer.

“You could always give up the information,” she offers instead. “Then we’ll...send you on your way.”

Yeah right. With a bullet in his back for his trouble.

“What? And lose our time together?” Lance jokes. “We just met and I’m starting to fall for that grim spinster frown. What a connection. Love at first scowl. It’ll make a great story to tell our kids.”

“God in Heaven, hit ‘im again Aubry,” the old man says with a sigh.

He clearly can’t stand the incessant chattering. Lance will take his little victories where he can find them.

“How many times?”

“Until he begs for you to stop,” he shakes his head and takes a seat in another chair. “Or he dies. Whichever comes first.”

That’s when Aubry grins and stops pulling his punches.

Jesus. Lance wouldn’t have insulted him so much if he’d known he was holding back.

These hits connect like a hammer to a nail. Like a fucking anvil. Knocking the air out of him and making him retch with each hit. Thank god the big gorilla takes a ten-second break between strikes to give Lance the chance to cry Uncle. He doesn’t but man he relishes in those ten-second intervals to breathe and calm himself.

He can do this. Just like a wrestling match...where he takes all the punches...and can’t defend himself...and there’s no ref to call a timeout. Yeah. No biggie.

Those fists land punishing blows on his shoulders, his thighs, and gut more often than not. Aubry’s avoiding hitting Lance’s head so that he’ll stay conscious longer. For better reactions from Lance.

The sadist.
Lance stays strong. He keeps telling himself he can do this. That he only needs to hold out a little longer. He even manages to keep most of his pained noises to himself, only giving them an occasional groan or panting gasp when he can’t help it.

Then the punches stop for longer than usual. Lance allows himself a moment to sigh with relief. Thinks maybe they’re taking a break. That is until he feels fingers wrap around his own. Gripping tight. His eyes blow wide as Aubry wrenches his finger back until it breaks with a snap.

Lance can’t not scream this time. His eyes well with tears as he howls in agony. Each breath is a sob mixed with a whine.

“Feel like talking now?” Aubry asks.

Lance clenches his jaw so tight his head is starting to ache again. Tears stream now beyond his control. Shooting pains travel up from his hand and arm to his brain in shockwaves. In sparks of white-hot lightning. He can only hope that his head will hurt bad enough that he won’t feel it when this asshole breaks the next finger.

“I don’t know anything.” Lance grumbles through clenched teeth but he doubts that answer will satisfy them.

He still feels it. The burning pain. On the second finger and the third. And he still screams just as loud with each crack, the third one finally makes the woman flinch.

“Stop with the fingers Aubry,” the woman says. “His screaming is giving me a headache.”

“Fine,” Aubry huffs.

He returns to hitting him and Lance never thought he’d be grateful to be getting punched again. The tears even stop. His fingers throb and pulse and if he tries to move them a croak of pain escapes him.

Lance keeps telling himself just another minute. Count to sixty and Keith will be a minute closer. It’s the only thing keeping him from passing out. He wants to see Keith bust down that door and throttle these guys. That thought makes him smile for a brief moment before the pain returns.

The latest strike slams hard into Lance’s chest and he cries out as he feels a pop. A crunch that radiates pain through his ribs.

“F-Fuck…” Lance rasps instead of crying like he wants to. Broken, he knows it.

Ten seconds before the next blow and Aubry is aiming for the same spot. He’ll...break everything with this next hit. Lance’s panic starts to set in. He can’t take another one like that.

Eight.

He’s already having trouble getting air in without sharp pains. He won’t be able to breathe after the next one because his chest is going to implode under that ape’s fist. He’s going to die if something doesn’t change.

Six.

It would stop if he gave in. Told them what they want to know. But then...No! He can’t do that! He’d rather die than betray the clinic’s location to these guys. This is the only thing he can do to protect his team. He has to do this for them.
Three.

“Keith...I’m sorry,” he barely breathes out. “This...is my fault.”

Two.

Lance pinches his eyes shut, closes his hand around his red star despite the pain it causes and readies himself for the end.

One--

Someone beats on the door postponing the strike. Unrelenting slams of fist shake the door on its hinges. If they hit any harder the whole shed is going to come down on top of them.

“Keith?” Lance rasps, hoping against hope.

“Stop! Stop whatever you’re doing! Just stop!” a frantic young voice begs. “He better not be dead Aubry! Unlock the damn door!”

That’s not...that’s not Keith. It sounds like a kid. Who--ah, hell, Lance doesn’t care who it is. All he cares about is how the interruption stalls his beating. Buys him a little time to breathe even though it hurts to do so. That plus his swimming vision, he’s not sure how much longer he can stay conscious.

Would they hit an unconscious guy? God, Lance hopes not.

“He didn’t want to miss out,” Aubry snorts. “What a freak. Get the door, Imelda.”

The woman unlocks it and immediately the young man rams it open the rest of the way nearly knocking her over. Lance looks behind him and even with his blurry vision he can see darkness fast approaching. Sunset. Almost dark. Feels like he’s been here for hours.

Then he sees the teenager breathing like he just ran the hundred-meter dash in ten seconds. The kid’s eyes fall on Lance with horror and he goes sheet white. He rushes over and starts tugging at the ropes frantically.

“Four minutes to spare,” he pants and pats Lance’s cheek when he starts to faint. “Say something man, you’re alive, right? Can you walk?”

“Gary? What’s wrong wit ya?”

“Where’s your crossbow?” Aubry asks, grabbing the kid by the shoulder and shoving him off Lance.

“That Asian guy, he has it,” Gary answers and without hesitation returns to the knots.

“Idiot, you missed? And you dropped your weapon?” Aubry pushes him off again. “Stop that!”

“No, I didn’t miss and I didn’t drop it! He took it, you caveman! Move!” Gary yells and elbows Aubry hard in the stomach to push past him. “That...monster is coming here if we don’t let this guy go.”

“So?” he scoffs. “He’s just one dude.”

Lance has never felt so relieved. Keith. He scared the piss out of this kid instead of killing him. And it very well saved his life. If he hadn’t interrupted--there’d be a cave in where his chest used to be. That makes him so fucking happy. Fuck, he’s not even scared anymore. In fact, he’s elated beyond measure. It hurts but Lance can’t help but chuckle. Then that chuckle turns into a weak laugh as he
wheezes.

“You all pissed off...the wrong person,” Lance rasps with a chuckle.

“What are you going to do? You’re half dead,” Aubry snorts.

Aubry kicks over the chair and Lance crashes to the floor with a cry. The way he lands pins his arm to the floor with the weight of the chair. It’s gonna bruise but Lance just adds it to the list. Gary stoops to the floor and urges Aubry to stop again as he continues to untie Lance.

“Not me you idiot,” Lance coughs, wincing in pain. “The guy who took your buddy’s crossbow? He’s a one-man SWAT team. Cross him...and you won’t...make it through the night.”

“Please,” the woman rolls her eyes.

“Is he bluffin’ Gary?” the old man finally asks, a little worry on his face. He seems to trust the kid’s judgment.

“I don’t think so,” Gary says, lip trembling as he palms his neck. There’s a cut there that’s only recently stopped bleeding. “He was ready to...I’ve never seen eyes like that. Never been so scared. Said he’d kill everyone in here if we don’t hand his partner over or if he dies.”

Normally, Keith threatening death upon others would put him out but knowing it was to guarantee Lance’s safety offsets that a bit. Claiming he’d kill an entire camp is going a little far but...if it works he’s not going to complain.

“Sounds like I’m not worth keeping or killing,” Lance hints as the ropes start going slack.

“If it’s true, then you’re really not,” Imelda sighs. “Especially in regards to the former.”

“Ouch...and we were getting along so well Imelda,” Lance tries to wink but it just hurts his head. “I was going to ask you to dinner.”

“You’re not listening to this piece of shit, are you?” Aubry asks incredulously and gives Lance’s leg another kick to shut him up. He yelps and pulls in to avoid the next one but thankfully someone gets in the way.

“Stop!” Gary pleads and lowers his voice. “We can’t--we can’t afford an attack on this place. You know that! And we only have--two more minutes before that guy’s deadline!”

“He’s right,” the old man agrees. “We ‘ave too many non-combatants ta risk this. And wit the missin’ supplies...If all he wants is ‘im--”

“It is,” Gary assures him.

“Then boot him out,” Imelda suggests.

She makes several additional points when Aubry tries to argue. The thieves are long gone. Lance either knows nothing or refuses to break, either way he isn’t going to talk. And as entertaining as it is to watch Aubrey pound Lance into cookie dough, it’s not worth getting their entire camp slaughtered by some special ops psycho on the off chance this isn’t a bluff.

It ends with her saying they should cut their losses. Those chickens and all the other supplies they took are gone. They’ll have to make do with intense rationing until the next hatching. Gary agrees with her and the three of them look to the old man for confirmation.
The old man sighs, hand on his head contemplatively. They hadn’t counted on Lance and Keith being dangerous combatants. Thought they were like any other survivors. A miscalculation they don’t want to end up regretting.

Once The old guy comes to a decision he sighs. Snaps at Gary to pick up the battered Lance and then thumbs the door.

“Throw him out,” he says.

Gary lifts Lance to his feet but he can’t put all his weight on his left side. Pretty sure it’s sprained from that last kick. Everything hurts. His face, his fingers. And every breath he takes is a new adventure in shooting pains through his chest. He’ll probably be tasting blood for a week.

But he’s alive.

“How do we know they won’t just come back with their own people and wipe us out anyway?” Aubry points out. “For revenge.”

The redhead is probably regretting some of those hits now, thinking Lance will sick Keith on them.

“I swear--you let me go and you’ll never see us again,” Lance tells him. His chuckle gets cut off with a hiss of pain. “But if you don’t let me go...well, you’ll also never see us again but for a different reason.”

*****

Keith’s parked at the corner outside the Summer Springs gated community sign. There are two people on top of the wall standing watch. Crossbows. No guns. At this distance they can’t hit him with any bolts but they definitely noticed him pull up. Keith saw them call down from their perches on the wall to someone on the ground while pointing at him.

He checks his watch. They have one more minute. Then he’ll drive off and park somewhere out of sight. Sneak through buildings once the sun is gone. And then infiltrate into their camp.

Impatient, he checks his watch again. Thirty more seconds. If they don’t--

The gate suddenly opens and out of them comes a limping form.

“Lance,” Keith whispers as he watches him walk.

Lance is hunched over and clutching his side. He’s got his rifle on his back but it doesn’t look like he has the strength to use it. No one fires on him as he walks, no one even aims. They just...let him go. As soon as he clears the threshold the gate closes again behind him. No one follows.

The going is slow but the closer he gets the more damage is revealed making Keith’s blood boil. The smallest of limping steps indicating a sprained ankle. His mouth is swollen with blood trickling out of it. Covered in bruises. Every new injury cataloged is another degree hotter Keith feels.

Lance is shooting him a smile but it’s a mask, even Keith can see that. To hide the agony of each slow step and breath he takes.

Keith starts the car once he’s close. Leans over and opens the passenger door, taking the things Lance hands him and haphazardly tossing them in the back. Then Lance himself slides into the seat with a groan.
Keith can’t believe his eyes. Feels like days since he’s seen him, he looks so different. Like a mugging victim. His jaw is puffy as well as his eye. Blood on his chin and shirt. Every breath has him clutching his chest. The fingers on his hand are purple and taped together as a small courtesy from Lance’s host.

All Keith wants to do is hold him but he’s afraid it’ll make the injuries worse.

“Great timing,” Lance jokes and shifts slightly to get comfortable. “To the estate Jeeves.”

“All right.”

“It’s actually not as bad as it looks,” Lance swears as he tries to get his seatbelt. He can’t pull it so Keith has to get it for him. “Thanks. Anyway, it’s already stopped bleeding.”

But what about the rest of him? Keith can’t stop himself. He tentatively lifts Lance’s shirt to expose multiple swelling bruises on his stomach. Looks like there are more even higher. Lance weakly pulls it back down with his uninjured hand.

“It’s fine Keith. I don’t--I don’t think they got anything important but...we should go. We overstayed our welcome,” Lance hisses out a painful sigh.

“I should break their kneecaps,” Keith says, teeth almost bared like an animal. “And everything else.”

His hands grip tight on the steering wheel and gearshift as he imagines ramming the gate with the car. Then running over any bystander he can. Turning them into bloody speed bumps for making Lance into a punching bag.

God, Keith hates each and every one of them. But more than anything...he hates himself for letting this happen. This is his fault. How will Lance ever forgive--a hand pats gently on Keith’s.

“No more threatening people. Save the flirting for me,” Lance says with a weak smile.

“All right.”

“Let’s just...let’s go, Keith,” Lance whispers. It’s easier on his chest. “I’m tired and...really really ready to go home.”

Yeah, home sounds great to Keith. It’s earlier than they planned but then they didn’t anticipate getting attacked by another camp. So he shifts the car into drive and pulls out of the street, gladly putting Summer Springs behind them.

Before completely leaving the town, Keith pulls over and rummages through the supplies. He hands Lance painkillers and water to get it down. Lance manages it without too much trouble but it’ll still take a bit for it to kick in. Until then he’ll just have to deal.

Keith doesn’t want to freak out but...Lance doesn’t sound great. Sure he looks like roadkill but it’s the way his chest heaves and wheezes that has him worried. And that looks like fresh blood in his mouth that he keeps swallowing down.

“That...Neanderthal broke a rib,” Lance admits as they drive. “God...this hurts.”

Keith’s struck by a sudden horrible thought. What if his lung was punctured by a bone fragment? What if all this wheezing is the precursor to something worse? And that blood in his mouth each time he coughs...is it internal bleeding? Both are life-threatening within hours he’s pretty sure.
They have medications but hardly any tools. And Keith’s no surgeon. What if Lance stops breathing? Or starts drowning in his own blood? Only Allura would know what to do and how to do it without killing Lance.

Will they have time to make it back?

“We’re going straight back to the clinic,” Keith decides while shifting gears.

“No, we have to go back to the house first. Hitch up the trailer,” Lance protests with a whisper.

“You need a doc--”

“Big picture Keith,” Lance interrupts and takes a few slow breaths before continuing. “It’s why we came out here. Just do it. I’ll be fine.”

It is why they made this trip in the first place. If Keith leaves now they won’t have enough gas to come back out and collect their haul, let alone make the trip back again. He hates it but nods his head. They’ll just have to make it as fast as possible.

Keith pulls into the cul de sac and backs into the driveway, all the way to the garage door.

“Stay here, don’t move,” Keith insists. Don’t want him agitating any of his injuries any further.

“Aye aye, Lieutenant,” Lance nods with a smile. “Sorry, I know you hate that...Really, I’m fine Keith...Don’t worry.”

That does little to relax him, especially with the breathy pauses he’s taking between words now. Keith makes his move to hitch up the trailer. Hard to do on his own but he’s motivated by his fear to get it done and quickly. Any boxes in the garage that wouldn’t fit in the trailer get shoved into the backseat without ceremony.

When Keith comes back he opens Lance’s door to check on him, worried eyes taking him in. Still breathing. A ragged wheeze with each inhalation that brings a wince to Lance’s swollen features.

“It’s not so bad...if I breathe...shallow,” Lance tells him. “Wish Allura...was here.”

“Me too,” Keith nods but then his eyes go wide. “Wait a minute.”

He digs under Lance’s seat for the booklet. The one the good doctor gave him. Maybe there’s something in there. Something to buy them some time for the several hour drive. With a flashlight in mouth, Keith quickly scans the pages.

*Internal bleeding:*

_Caused by broken blood vessels inside the body. Depending on severity the patient could perish in as little as 3-6 hours. Less serious bleeds will repair themselves with clotting medications. Keep the patient calm and immobile as much as possible. Keep hydrated. Severe bleeds must be repaired by trained personnel to close blood vessels._

Three to six hours? And trained personnel for surgery. Means the clock is ticking and they can’t wait around. Not that Keith was going to do that anyway. What about a collapsed lung?

*Collapsed lung:*

_Life-threatening. A hole in the lungs (via trauma or spontaneous collapse) releases air into the chest cavity and begins crushing the lungs, making them unable to take in air. If the patient cannot breathe_
at all or begins coughing out but not in, treatment is needed immediately.

1. Remove the plunger from a wide needle syringe.
2. Disinfect the needle to avoid possible infection.
3. Locate space where air is building up and crushing lung.
   (a) Spontaneous collapse must be located via sound or patient’s indication but also has the highest chance of re-inflating on its own under careful watch without interference.
   (b) Traumatic collapse can be located via sight of injury and will likely not re-inflate on its own.
4. Insert needle between ribs, deep enough to remove excess air but not so deep that you puncture the lung.
5. Leave the inserted needle in until lung repairs the hole and the patient can breathe on their own.

A syringe. They found a bunch back at the retirement home. Keith rushes to the trunk and grabs one from the boxes. And then some alcohol to clean it with. They don’t need to do anything right this instant since Lance seems to be breathing alright and they need to hit the road now. But if it gets any worse, if Lance stops being able to talk...better to have it ready than not.

“We’re gonna get moving,” Keith tells him as he adjusts the seat to lay Lance down. “But I’ll pull over if you stop breathing, got it?”

“Appreciate it...doc,” Lance sighs. “Can’t wait...to see...the bill on this one.”

Keith closes the door and drops into his seat. Then they start the drive home.

*****

Keith hates driving at night.

Their car happens to have working lights, though that’s a double-edged sword now. Rotters in the distance start crowding the road when they see light but without it, he’ll miss his turn-offs. Slows them down a little but Keith makes up for it by speeding on the longer stretches without a corpse in sight. The map is spread out over Lance’s lap with his hands holding it down smooth as he tries to take slow calm breaths.

“How do you feel?” Keith asks. “Lance?”

“Hurts...” he rasps. “But other...than that...I’m peachy.”

Not even an hour in Lance starts coughing between breaths. Tries swallowing down blood so that Keith won’t worry. Even wipes his mouth on occasion to hide it but with his sleeve covered in slick red Keith can’t help but notice.

Then those little pulls of air aren’t enough. Lance tries taking in bigger breaths but he can’t do it without sharp pains and groaning. And then he can’t do it hardly at all. That’s more than enough reason to stop.

Keith slams the brakes and kills the headlights. Grabs for the syringe. He pulls out the plunger and tosses it to the floorboards.

“Kei...th...I ca...can’t...” Lance wheezes, clutching his chest.

“Hold on, Lance,” Keith says as he douses the needle in alcohol.
Lance doesn’t answer. He’s focusing on not asphyxiating.

Keith pulls Lance’s shirt up to reveal a massive purple bruise over his chest. That’s the spot. He feels the ribs, counting down to the right area before spacing his fingers around the third and fourth ribs. He’s going to have to press it in slow so he doesn’t go too far.

“Sorry Lance,” Keith tells him before pressing it in.

Lance flinches at the pain but within seconds air begins to hiss out of the syringe. Lance takes in a slow deep breath.

“Fuck...that’s...fantastic,” Lance pants. “Christ...I should have...just...had you do that...before we left.”

“I need to keep driving so either hold it in place so you can keep breathing,” Keith tells him. “Or take it out. If you take it out I’ll have to do it again when needed.”

“Take it out,” Lance tells him. “I don’t...I don’t have the energy...to hold it in place.”

Keith removes the syringe and puts it aside, ready for use again if they need it. He smoothes a bandage over the insertion point before lowering the shirt again. Then he puts the car back into drive to take off down the road again.

For the next half hour, he looks over every few minutes to check his passenger’s status. Keith finds Lance’s eyes lidded and unfocused. Shallow breaths with a slight wheeze to them but he’s not struggling for air anymore. He thought relieving the pressure would improve his color but Lance still looks pallid. Almost drained. And though there’s sweat on his brow he shivers in his seat.

“Cold in here,” Lance stammers. “Can you...uh...kill the A/C?”

It’s not on. Lance should know it doesn’t work. Allura’s book said delirium is a symptom of internal bleeding. That’s more worrying than the collapsed lung.

“Keith? Did you...hear me?” he asks.

“Yeah, just a sec,” Keith nods.

He reaches behind the seat, eyes on the road, as he pulls a blanket to the front. He throws it on Lance, straightening it out as much as he can to cover him. Then he punches the accelerator, even more motivated to get there sooner.

“Hold on Lance,” Keith swallows, down his nerves. “We’re almost home.”

“Take your time,” he says as he closes his eyes with a sigh. “I’m just...a little tired. My head...ugh...”

Keith doesn’t blame him. With all the injuries he has, a concussion has to number among them. Keith can’t remember if that means he shouldn’t sleep. Not everything is like it was on TV. Regardless, Keith’s hit by the sudden fear of Lance falling asleep and not waking up.

“Don’t go to sleep,” Keith says, patting his leg. “Stay awake, Lance. No sleeping.”

“Can I...want to close my eyes,” Lance whispers. “My head...it’s killing me.”

“You can close them, just don’t sleep,” Keith says softly, in case his volume is making it worse. “Sing something. Or hum. Anything.”
Lance chuckles a little but cuts himself off with a wince. He’s still smiling though.

“Can’t get enough of that singing, huh? Alright...Faaar away...this ship is taking us faaaaar away,” Lance shivers under the blanket. “Staaarlight...I’m chasing that staaarlight.”

“Good, good. Keep going Lance,” Keith encourages, rubbing his knee gently.

Lance tries but the words are jumbled or slurred. Some of the lyrics are wrong altogether but Keith doesn’t comment on it. As long as Lance stays awake he doesn’t care what he says. When Keith checks his forehead with the back of his hand he finds the skin wet and clammy.

Ten more minutes. Ten more minutes and they’ll be back.

“Man...it’s really dark,” Lance comments looking out the window. “Cloudy. Can’t even...see the stars.”

It’s one of the clearest night’s Keith’s ever seen. Not a cloud in sight. Perfect for stargazing.

“Yeah,” Keith agrees, just to keep him talking but it only increases his worry.

Lance stretches out his injured hand and puts it on top of Keith’s resting on the stick shift. He can’t grip thanks to his broken fingers but his thumb rubs on Keith’s pinky. He’s looking at Keith but not. Facing in the right direction but the focus is off.

“I’m...gonna close my eyes for a bit,” Lance says. “That cool?”

“Ohkay,” Keith nods. “But don’t stop talking.”

“Sure. Course. Uh...did I ever tell you...why Pidge is the Green Goblin?” he mumbles.

“No, you never did,” Keith says, trying to smile.

“It’s a funny story...she hates it,” Lance whispers.

“Tell--”

Keith cuts himself off when Lance’s hand slips off and falls slack to his side. Lance’s eyes are closed and body limp. Panic surges through his veins and Keith hits the brakes again, skidding to a stop. Climbs over to Lance’s seat to look over his sickly looking face.

“Lance? Lance!” Keith calls and pats his non-swollen cheek. “Lance wake up!”

No reaction. He’s out but from the slight rasp in his breath, it’s clear that he’s still alive. Still breathing. That brings Keith a little comfort but not nearly enough. He drops back into the driver’s seat and slams his foot on the accelerator. Doesn’t even bother with the seat belt.

Two miles. Two minutes or less. As long as Lance doesn’t stop breathing--

Keith skids into the lot in record time, almost scraping a familiar camper as he passes.

The clinic looks different. A thick wooden fenced off section that wasn’t there before. And then there’s a wall made of bricks surrounding the entrance. It has a gate too. A double door pulled from somewhere inside the building and re-purposed into a security gate.

Not a single light on in the place. Everyone’s asleep.
Keith pulls all the way up to the gate and jumps out of the car without turning it off. If he pulled any harder on Lance’s door it would’ve come off the hinges. He scoops an arm under Lance’s back and legs before hoisting his ragdoll of a body out. Those lanky arms hang limp at his side and his breathing—it’s barely there at all.

“Shiro! Allura!” he calls out, his voice strangled with panic.

He rams the door with his shoulder. Locked from the inside.

Carrying Lance he goes to the driver’s seat and slams his foot on the horn. He’s beyond caring if the noise draws every zombie in the next five-mile radius. With any luck, they’ll be inside before that matters.

He goes back to the door and kicks it. Makes as much noise as he can to wake everyone up and drown out his own fear. Kick after kick. Shoulder slam. No matter what he’s not going to stop. But then the clinic doors open.

“That sounds like—”


“Yes! Open up, it’s Lance...he needs...he needs help,” he calls through the gate.

Coran and her unlatch all of the gate and pull it open with a hard yank. Barely opens enough for them to squeeze through and Keith scrapes his face on the door to get them in sooner. The two doctors look on the two of them with confused shock.

“W-What happened?” she stammers as Coran pushes the door shut again. He latches it as Keith speaks.

There’s too much to explain how this happened so he goes with the quick a dirty version.

“He was attacked. Earlier, he had a collapsed lung,” Keith says, heading inside as she holds the door. “I took care of it but...I think he’s bleeding internally. Help him.”

“Get a gurney Coran, then set up the OR,” Allura tells him. “And wake Nyma. I might need help.”

Allura puts her hand to Lance’s neck, her eyes scanning as she counts heartbeats.

“His pulse is...very fast,” she says then explains. “It’s trying to pump blood to the body but there isn’t enough. So it’s working harder, too hard. This way.”

They meet Coran in the hall as he’s bringing the gurney. Keith lays him out on it as Allura starts checking his injuries. Raising his shirt and cataloging the damage with a horrified expression on her face.

“Goodness gracious,” she awes, aghast at the sight. “He’s...There is internal bleeding. Probably in several blood vessels.”

“Can you--”

“I need to get him into surgery immediately before he leaks any more blood into his body,” she says.

All the commotion wakes someone at the end of the hall. It’s Hunk, who’s eyes blow wide when he realizes who’s on the gurney.
“Lance?!” Hunk calls and runs down the hall. “What happened to him?” he asks.

“There’s no time,” Allura tells him. “We must hurry.”

She strips the jacket and shirt from Lance’s body. Then the dog tags. She shoves them all into the nearest person’s hands, which happen to be Keith’s. Just then Coran shows up with a portable EKG machine, clamping a piece of plastic onto Lance’s finger. It comes to life, blipping out a heartbeat. It’s incredibly fast.

“I’ve got the rest of this under control,” she says and waves them to move out of the way.

Hunk moves but Keith doesn’t. His feet are rooted to the spot, staring at the EKG. It’s now hitting him that Lance is in very real danger. That he could--no. Not Lance.

“He’s gonna be okay, right?” Keith asks, clutching the dog tags tight in one hand.

“I don’t know,” she says but then insists. “Please, Keith, you’re in the way. Hunk, move him or I’ll run him over.”

Hunk gently guides Keith out of their way so they can push the gurney down the hall unobstructed. They watch it go until it disappears around a corner. The hall isn’t quiet for long.

“I’m gonna go wake up Pidge,” Hunk says calmly, despite the insane amount of worry on his face. It looks like he’s already crying. “She’ll want to know what’s going on.”

Keith doesn’t answer. He nods numbly and starts power walking towards the ORs. There’s nothing he can do to help but...he can’t shake this need to stay close. Because the last time he left Lance alone--

He finds the room on the first go and enters with trepidation. It’s deathly silent inside with the only light coming from the operating room on the other side. It feels like a whole nother realm separated from reality with a single pane of plexiglass. Bright and crisp on one side, dark and dull on the other.

Keith steps to the window and looks on as the others work.

It feels...unreal. Like watching a movie. Lance lays out on the gurney, pale and lifeless as Allura hooks him up to plasma. To prevent any further drop in his blood pressure. To make it easier on his heart. Coran cleans the surgical instruments while Nyma puts on her gloves.

That’s when Hunk enters and Keith turns to look. No Pidge.

“Pidge doesn’t want to see,” Hunk says. “Says...she’s scared.”

Keith nods in understanding and turns back to the glass as Allura cuts into Lance’s chest. Thankfully she’s blocking their view as she goes. But it doesn’t stop them from seeing her bloodstained gloves as Nyma hands her the tools she needs.

“What happened?” Hunk asks as he stands next to Keith. He keeps his eyes off the surgery and focused on the frame of the window.

Keith could explain that it was a series of things. That they got unlucky. That some people are cruel and crueler still with the new world order. He could say they weren’t careful enough or that sometimes these things happen. That no matter how good things can get...there’s always someone out there ready to ruin it all for their own selfish reasons.
“I shouldn’t have...it’s my fault,” Keith barely manages to push past his teeth. “I’m sorry. I...just...I was gone for...a few minutes...I didn’t think--”

“I’m sure it’s not your fault,” Hunk says softly, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“It is,” Keith shakes his hand from him. “I...f-fuck,” he stammers as he paces. “No one...no one else has his blood type! What if he--”

“He’ll be okay,” Hunk assures him but Keith doesn’t hear it.

“I don’t...I don’t feel--”

Keith almost retches and Hunk guides him to a chair. He sits and Hunk tells him to put his head between his legs and take slow breaths. His big hand rubs Keith’s back in small circles to try and calm him. It’s so reminiscent of Lance that he almost feels better for a moment.

“It’s gonna be alright,” Hunk says. Even that sounds like Lance.

“You don’t know that,” Keith answers, fighting back a sob.

“I know but...that’s what Lance would say right now,” Hunk explains, voice somber despite the sad smile on his face. “I’m gonna stay with Pidge. Right outside the door. If anything changes...you’ll come get us right?”

Keith nods and Hunk leaves the room.

Quiet and alone again. Keith stands up again when he’s stable enough to. Goes to the window and flicks the switch on the intercom. He wants to hear what they’re saying. Needs to hear Lance’s heartbeat as they work. But he’s not sure he can watch for extended periods so he sits back down, face in his hands as he fights his emotions for control over his body.

It’s going to be fine, he tells himself. He’s in good hands now. Lance will be fine. Over and over he says it while pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes to stop himself from crying. Eventually, he grips them together in front of him, squeezing to remain calm.

All seems to be going well at first. Allura says something about finding several bleeds. Sounds like she’ll be able to fix this and Keith’s tense shoulders ease a little, his clasped hands relaxing. Finally some good news. Keith stands from the chair to head to the door so he can tell the others. His hand is on the handle when it happens.

The EKG machine goes from it’s fast but rhythmic beeping to one prolonged flat sound.

Keith’s eyes go wide, his pupils become pinpricks as his breath is stolen from him.

“No,” he chokes out.

That sound is easily the worst sound he’s ever heard in his life. Worse than the scraping of metal against bone when he cut off his mother’s arm. Worse than Matt’s sobs as he pulled the nails one by one from his eye. Worse than Shiro’s screams as they held him down for surgery. He’ll never get this sound of his head for the rest of his living days.

Lance is flatlining. He’s dying.

I’ve never killed a person. Isn’t that funny?
I’m lucky you were there.

I think we could work well together.

He whips around and runs back, slamming into the glass to look inside. The monitor just shows the waveform as a single line. No mountains or valleys. Inside, Nyma is readying the paddles to shock him.

“Lance!” Keith shouts and beats on the glass. He presses his face to it, jaw clenched and teeth bared before slamming his fist again getting a blood smear on the window from his injured hand. “Don’t you dare! Get up you asshole!”

Better enjoy me while I’m here.

They say rain reminds you of better times.

You want me to sing to you, Keith?

Lance can’t do this to him. Make him fall in love with those stupid jokes and that shameless flirting. Tease him with kisses and smiles and singing. He can’t give him all the things he didn’t know he needed, didn’t know he wanted, only to take them away. Only to leave him here.

No. He wouldn't do that. Not Lance. Not to Keith. No, he’ll be fine.

“Clear!” Allura shouts and Lance’s body jolts under the burst of electricity.

No response.

If Keith was scared before now he’s petrified. Ice pumps through his veins and everything goes cold. The room freezes around him, so much so that he’s having a hard time getting air in and out. He tries to clench his hands but his fingers are numb. And now his toes too. That's when a dark thought drifts into his mind.

What if this is really it? Everything Lance ever amounted to ends with him on this gurney? No more smiles. No more jokes. No more kisses.

No more hopes.

You worry too much.

You ever want to talk, I’m here.

You’ve found my ultimate weakness.

“No...He...You can’t go!” Keith says, slamming his fist on the glass again. “Stay here...Please...I-I’ll…”

He’ll do anything. Just make this stop.

“Clear!” Allura announces again.

Nothing.

Each attempt pounds a stake further into Keith’s chest as he looks on with horror and anguish, unable to do anything as Lance’s body jumps at the pulses but doesn’t stir. He’s still not breathing. There's no soft smile or weak chuckle. No ‘just kidding’ or ‘gotcha’. Nothing but the unmoving
body of Lance McClain.

You can have anything you want from me.

Keith sinks to his knees, fists scraping and weakly pounding the walls as he hunches over with sobs. He presses the crown of his head to the wall as the tears pour forth in rivers. He stammers out as many apologies as he can to anyone who’s listening. Thinks maybe if he’s sorry enough God, Buddha, or whoever won’t take him away.

Think I’ll ever see it again? This something?

He pulls off his glove and whimpers at the sight of the smudged blue star underneath. His star. Keith clutches it to his heart with another wailing sob. What if this is the last time he sees it?

How about...to a memorable night?

They...they only had one night. A single night where they were finally on the same wavelength. It’s not enough. They’re supposed to get more than this! It’s not enough!

“It's not...D-Don’t...don’t take him,” Keith begs, his face nothing but wet. “I j-just...I just found him.”

The flatline echoes, louder and louder like a siren ringing in his ears. He tries to cover them but it doesn’t help in blocking it out. That’s when that horrible nightmare comes back. About to be overwhelmed by undead. Danger closing in. Lance embracing him one last time, ready to die. His trembling voice is in Keith’s ear as clear as if he were standing right next to him.

Don’t forget me, okay?

Keith can’t breathe. There’s no air in the room. All the warmth is gone and it'll never come back.

This is just like when his mother died. That was his fault too, he laments. Only this time he can’t even hold the person he loves most as he begs for forgiveness. As he pleads for them to stay. As he urges them not to leave him here. All alone.

Again.

“Clear!” Allura shouts and Nyma shocks the body again.

Beep----Beep----Beep----Beep----

Keith finally pulls in a choking breath. Sucks in the air too quickly like he’s never tasted anything so sweet making himself gag and retch. That sound! It’s--! He pants for air but pulls himself weakly to his feet to look into the glass with disbelieving eyes.

Valleys and mountains. A heartbeat. Lance has a heartbeat again.

The team in the OR hurries to finish the job. Allura says something about them not being so lucky if that happens a second time.

They remove the shards of bone from Lance’s lung and stitch him up. She cauterizes any other bleeds with an electric instrument she presses to the vessels. When it’s all finished she closes him up without another hiccup in his heart rate.

The whole time Allura speaks with Nyma about procedures for after surgery. Keith doesn’t hear any of their conversations. He just stares at Lance and the slow rise and fall of his chest as he breathes. It
isn’t until Allura knocks on the glass before he blinks awake.

“All clear, debriefing in five minutes,” she says with a tired sigh, then turns to Coran. “Put him in a recovery room. Next to Captain Shirogane.”

Keith only leaves the room once Lance has been wheeled out of it by Coran.

Hunk and Pidge are sitting on the ground right across from the door. Hunk holds Pidge close, rocking her in his arms and petting her hair. She’s holding onto Rover, her tears licked away by the little dog in her grasp as they fall. When they see Keith they both look up with worried expectation.

“Lance?” she asks, voice cracking.

“He’s okay. Surgery’s over,” Keith tells them and they both let out sighs and tears of relief. “Allura’s going to debrief in a few.”

They go together in silence. Waiting outside the OR door with worried anticipation. Then Allura steps out while pulling off her gloves. She doesn’t look worry-free at all and still maintains a serious look on her face as she explains.

He’s lost a lot of blood but luckily Rolo is the same blood type and more than willing to donate a pint to Lance. He’ll have to be on blood thinners for a while. And it’ll probably be at least two weeks before he’s allowed to get out of bed thanks to those broken ribs and ankle. Coran’s going to set his fingers once he’s set up in his room.

He’ll live is the central message. Of course, she’ll post someone to watch over him for the next day just to keep an eye on him. But all in all, he should officially be out of the woods in terms of immediate threats.

“I’m not going to sugar coat this,” she says with a sigh. “I honestly don’t think he will recover fully. He’s at risk for spontaneous lung collapse now...means he shouldn’t be running for at least a couple months. And after that, not for prolonged periods.”

“His lungs are damaged?” Pidge asks.

“Yes, significantly,” she nods and avoids their eyes. “I’ve done all I can for now. Keith if you found any medications, namely analgesics, please retrieve them from your vehicle. He’s...going to be in a great deal of pain when he wakes.”

“Yeah, we found--”

“Keith, your hand,” Hunk says, his tone worried. “It’s bleeding.”

Keith looks down at it and sees that he’s right. Fresh blood has soaked through the gauze and now drips freely from his palm. Before he hardly felt anything. Even when he was beating his fist on the glass he was numb to any pain. But now with the knowledge that Lance will live that ache slowly starts flowing back in. It twinges and throbs as he wiggles his fingers.

“Hunk, will you and Pidge get the drugs?” Allura asks.

“I can get the--” Keith starts to object.

“We got it,” the two of them say in unison. Allura hands them the keys to the doors and they take off down the hall, happy to be of use instead of standing around worrying.
“Keith, come with me,” she says. “I’ll take a look at your hand.”

Allura leads them to the rec room and it feels like eons since he’s been here. It’s got more chairs in the room now. And children’s toys strewn about the floor. Matt’s cot is in the corner but it’s empty. Likely helping Pidge and Hunk with drug retrieval.

She gestures him to the table and Keith takes a seat while she pulls down medical supplies from a cabinet. No words as she unwraps the bloodied bandages from his hand. There’s a grimace as she looks at the injury but goes about cleaning out the wound without questions.

Thank god. Keith really doesn’t feel like talking.

The tech trio brings in box after box full of medicine bottles. Leaving them against the wall. Once they’ve brought in several they start separating the drugs by type. Pain relief. Sleep Aids. Vitamins. Etc.

Allura tells them to find three specific medications, one a blood thinner, one an antibiotic, and the last a pain medication. Once found she has them deliver the bottles to Nyma with instructions on the dosage before she returns to the final wrapping of gauze around his hand.

“There,” she says. “That should hold. We’ll worry about the rest of the supplies tomorrow.”

Matt looks like he has questions for Keith. He definitely wants to talk, to see if Keith’s alright. If he gets the chance Keith will never get out of here. The last thing he wants to do is chat about everything that happened.

Matt steps closer to start conversation but Allura interrupts.

“You look exhausted Keith,” she says with a soft smile. “Long stressful drive like that...you probably want to head to bed.”

Keith nods and stands from the table. Matt just gives him a sympathetic shoulder pat, telling him he’ll see him in the morning. Keith only half-heartedly returns the pat with a forced smile before exiting the rec room.

He doesn’t go towards his or Lance’s room. Doesn’t think he could handle that right now. Sleeping alone and worrying if Lance will be okay all night without him? No, he just...can’t. Instead, he turns and heads for the recovery rooms.

Shiro’s room and Lance’s right next to it. Now there are two people he cares deeply about in hospital beds with injuries. Injuries that he caused, he thinks glumly. Without a moment's hesitation he walks over and knocks to see if anyone is inside watching over Lance. The door opens to the tall form of Nyma.

“Oh you,” she nods. “Keith, right?”

“Is he stable?” he asks.

“Yeah, for now,” she answers.

“Good,” he says as he pushes his way in through the door and ignoring her indignant ‘hey!’

“Still just as charming as ever,” she huffs.

Keith ignores her until he’s standing over Lance. It’s the same set up as Shiro’s room. A cot with
several thin pallets for cushioning. He’s tucked in with a couple of blankets to warm his body back up. One arm is outside the covers with an IV in at the juncture of his elbow. Blood drips into him from a bag on a stand, courtesy of a quick donation from Rolo.

Lance is still a little pale but the sweat on his brow is gone. His breathing is labored but regular. Better than he looked an hour ago.

Keith takes a seat next to the cot and reaches over to Lance’s hand to gently turn it over. Three broken fingers with splints but there on his palm is the red Sharpie star. Still there. Keith carefully puts that cold hand between both of his to warm it up.

“I’m staying here,” Keith announces as if she’d try to stop him. In his opinion there literally is nothing that’s going to pull him from this room. “Until he wakes,” he adds.

“Might be a while then,” she tells him. “His injuries are...really bad. You know it’s a miracle he isn’t dead, right?”

Keith clenches his jaw at the reminder he didn’t need. He nods in favor of not glaring at her.

“Then you know his body needs lots of healing,” she says. “He might sleep for days.”

“Then that’s how long I’ll be here,” he pointedly snaps back with a frown.

“Alright, alright,” she sighs and takes a seat in her own chair with her clipboard of stats. “No need to get testy. Just telling you like it is. Stay as long as you want, no skin off my back.”

And so Keith makes himself comfortable. Scoots his chair closer still to the bed and hunches over Lance’s hand while watching over him. Slow weak breaths and a steady heart rate. No reactions to Keith’s hand holding onto him at the wrist so as not to bump his fingers, thumb rubbing gently on his pulse.

Lance hates sleeping alone. He’d be so put out to wake up without Keith there. Might even freak out and pull his stitches. Can’t have that. So he’ll stay awake all night just to make sure Lance is okay. Days, weeks, however long it takes--Keith won’t go anywhere.

He’s not about to abandon Lance a second time.

Chapter End Notes

Did you like the chapter? Give it a kudos! Did you REALLY like it? Leave a comment or rec it to a friend!

Don’t know what to say? Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit and I’m no exception.

Also, if you really like Voltron stuff and want more, check out my other fics. Tell me what you think of them! If I’m stagnating on one maybe YOU can be the one to inspire me to keep writing!
Chapter Notes

Going on a little bit of a hiatus after this chapter. My brain needs a zombie break. But don't worry. I'll have more for you guys when I return from vacation land. Send your love in the comment box below. Ta mates.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Won't admit what I already know
I've never been the best at letting go
I don't wanna spend the night alone

Alessia Cara, Zedd, Stay

Keith doesn’t sleep the first night at all.

Even as Coran comes to relieve Nyma around 2AM he still sits there watching the EKG monitor. Waiting for a fluctuation that doesn’t come, thankfully. The older man says a few worlds of bolstering encouragement, that he’s sure Lance will be fine so there’s no need for concern. Keith just barely nods to acknowledge him but elects to ignore the subtle hint that Keith should leave to get some rest. Keith couldn’t sleep if he tried. He’s too wired with worry.

Allura comes to change places with Coran right when the sun comes up. She eyes Keith and then Coran with slight disapproval. The message is clear. He shouldn’t be there. Coran just gives her a shrug and a sympathetic glance at Keith.

Who’s gonna tell the soldier with the shortest temper and bags under his steely eyes to leave a room?

She takes over for Coran and checks Lance’s vitals while Keith keeps an eye on the sleeping man’s face. The swelling’s gone down a little. He’s starting to look like himself again.

“You are aware that he’s stable?” she asks, not certain he knows.

“Yeah,” Keith nods, his face a mix of somber, serious, and tired.

“Shiro’s been asking about you,” she says, clicking her pen and scribbling down numbers. “You should see him. Let him know you’re alright.”

“Later,” Keith says.

“Have you eaten?” she asks but he doesn’t answer. “You should eat. Hunk’s made fried tomatoes.”

“I’m not hungry,” he finally says.

“Alright, subtly is clearly not working,” she sighs, exasperated. “Get out. I need to change his bandages, the sheets, administer more pain medications, and put in a new IV. You will just be in the
Keith doesn’t move at first. Allura thinks she’s going to have to get someone big or maybe two someone’s to drag him out but then he stands. His eyes look over Lance and the red star in his upturned palm.

“How long? Before you’re done with all that?” he asks.

“Ten minutes,” Allura sighs.

“I’ll be back in ten minutes,” Keith tells her and turns to leave.

“Keith…” she calls out and he stops. “I understand that you’re concerned. It is very noble to stand by your friend’s side so that he’s not alone but you mustn’t neglect your body’s own needs. Eat, drink, and sleep for a few hours. Hunk and Pidge can take over for an hour or so so you can get some rest.”

The room goes silent as Allura waits for a favorable response from Keith. Nothing but the EKG machine’s beeps steadily fill the air. It seems like he’s considering her words for a moment but Keith clears his throat and puts his hand on the doorknob.

“I’ll be back in ten minutes,” he repeats and exits the room.

The halls are empty when he leaves. There’s sound coming from the rec room down the hall. The rest of the team talking and readying themselves to bring in the rest of the supplies from the trailer and car. Sounds lighthearted, like there isn’t any worry in there at all.

Probably not the case with how upset Pidge and Hunk were last night but they’re putting up a happy front. Keith wishes he could do the same but...he can’t. Probably a good enough reason not to visit with them. If he goes in there the conversation will stop. They’ll all stare and then...the questions. They’ll all want to know what really happened and he doesn’t want to talk about it. Not right now.

He blames himself enough...he doesn’t need their blame too.

So he heads in the opposite direction towards the kennels. He hasn’t gone to the bathroom in hours and his face could use a wash. Then it’ll be back to Lance’s room.

It’s quiet in there and he utilizes the designated drain for a little relief. When done he moves to the sink so he can wash up. A quick look in the mirror makes it all the more obvious what a trainwreck he looks like. No wonder Allura told him to get some rest.

Dark circles from lack of sleep and smudges of alley gunk still on his face from the previous day. Hair a mess in every direction but he has no inclination to fix it. And Lance would be appalled to see the state his skin’s in.

They’ve stocked up a couple of bottles in the kennels for easy handwashing access so Keith uses one. Hard to do with one hand but he splashes his face a couple of times and wipes away the muck with a towel. The benefits are questionable. He still looks like the living dead when he looks up, just cleaner. Maybe some sleep isn’t a bad idea but...he can’t. Not yet. Not until Lance--

God, Lance.

He can’t get his body out of his mind. Mangled and bruised. Broken in so many places. Healing but irreparably damaged.

“All for a stupid keychain,” he berates his reflection, fist pounding the sink edge.
Why? Why did he do this? Not just the keychain but all of it.

He knew that it was dangerous to care. To give a shit. About anyone! The world isn’t as kind as it used to be. He knew karma would take a big fucking dump on it all if he tried to take too much. Hoped too much. But Lance--

Lance made it feel so easy. Made it feel right. Even when every instinct in Keith kept fighting a connection, a real connection, it still felt so good to give in to him. Lance made him weak...destroyed his guard...made him soft in a world that he needs to be strong in.

And now all he can think about is how much it’ll hurt to lose him.

Dammit how can it be worth this agony--

...nowadays things are taken much more often...but we still get given things...

And...I think it's worth it...

At Shiro’s words, the guilt twists and pulls at his gut, so much so that it physically pains him. Keith clutches at his stomach and sinks to the floor while trying to hold back a sob. He fails and he spends his ten minutes on his hands and knees, fist beating the ground and face pressed into the tiles of the kennel floor as tears once again stream down his face.

Because despite the painful road they took to get here and the likely outcome of a tragic end for the both of them--he’s so god damn grateful for what he got and the chance to keep it just a little longer. If anyone, human or corpse, tried to take this from him now he’d fight to his last breath to protect it.

*****

Keith returns exactly when he said he would. Allura’s just putting a new IV bag up to keep Lance’s fluids stable when he closes the door. She doesn’t say anything when he comes in. She doesn’t even try to dissuade him from staying. Just mentions that the others are going to visit as soon as they finish unloading the trailer and car.

Makes him wonder if Lance might wake soon. If he hears his friends.

Keith rummages through Lance’s jacket pockets and pulls out the photograph of the McClain family, propping it up on the counter across the way. It’s where Lance would want it, he’s sure. Keith also takes out the Big Red gum from the other pocket and puts it under Lance’s pillow. Maybe the smell will carry and give him good dreams.

Every little bit right?

With that he drops back into his seat, holding the jacket and shirt in his lap. His fingers fidgeting with the zipper and buttons. Flattening out creases in it and brushing over the dried blood on the sleeves. He sees the spot where his Garrison patch used to be and he remembers. Keith pulls the bandana from his own pocket and stares at it.

It’s not rational but he’s mad at it. Because a small part of him had this superstitious belief that as long as he was wearing it, nothing bad could happen to Lance. But Lance took it off with the last of his energy in an attempt to warn Keith. To protect him instead. Keith rolls it and under the curious watch of Allura he ties it back in place on Lance’s wrist.

“He...lost it in the struggle,” Keith explains avoiding her eyes.
That’s when Coran comes in with a new inventory list for her to look over. All the stuff Lance and them found on their trip. While she goes over it Coran turns to Keith.

“We put your backpacks in your rooms. Did you want me to wash those?” Coran asks, pointing at the jacket and shirt. “So that it’s clean for when he wakes?”

Lance would probably appreciate that and Keith doesn’t need the sight of blood as a constant reminder of what happened. Keith nods but before he hands it off he subtly takes the dog tags out of the pocket, clutching them in his palm. He needs something, anything, to hold tight to since he can’t do the same with Lance’s hand without hurting him.

Coran takes the clothing and the checked off inventory list before making his exit.

“Did you eat?” Allura asks.

“Yeah,” Keith tells her. A lie but he’s not sure he could keep anything down anyway. Not with the way his stomach’s been churning. He did drink some water though which has to count for something.

“Good,” she nods.

“Is he...going to need round the clock attention?” Keith asks as he looks at the beeping machine and then the IV drip.

“Not for much longer,” she says then explains. “If there are problems they usually arise within hours after surgery. Missed blood vessels. Loose sutures. Post OP infections. But I am very good at my job and it’s unlikely those will become an issue. Still, it behooves us to be cautious. By lunch, he should be out of the woods.”

He must look relieved because Allura smiles softly at him. She stands and gives him a gentle pat on the shoulder.

“You’re a good friend,” she says and hands him the clipboard. “I’m going to get my med kit from the rec room, to change your bandages. Should just take a minute. Can you keep an eye on him until I return?”

There are plenty of supplies in the cupboards of the recovery rooms. There’s literally no reason for her to leave to get any more. She knows this. And so does Keith. But they say nothing more as he takes the clipboard with a nod.

With that, she leaves, closing the door quietly behind her. It’s not long after she’s gone that he gets up from the chair. He puts the clipboard down on it and takes to his knees by the cot.

Carefully he takes Lance’s hand and clasps it between his own gently. Still a little cold. He raises it and breathes warm puffs of air onto Lance’s knuckles, just barely brushing his lips against them. With a ragged sigh, Keith presses his forehead to the back of Lance’s hand. It’s comforting to feel his skin on his again.

This is love, isn't it? Not like before. Before he was a naive puppy ready to follow blindly. Gave up his fledgling heart to a monster only to have it returned, carved into pieces. Told himself that that would never happen again. That he'd be more careful next time. Sewed himself back together and even built a makeshift wall to protect himself.

And Lance...instead of crashing through that wall or climbing his way over he took down a couple of loose bricks and stuck his hand through. Dropping small bits of himself for Keith to leave or take
as he pleased.

He planted himself in Keith’s heart and waited for something to grow. Cultivated that love with those warm caresses and passionate kisses. With respect and consideration. With that suggestive grin and those dumb jokes that he catered to make Keith snort. Kept doing those little things until eventually, Keith tore down the wall himself, brick by brick.

“You...moron...” Keith mumbles weakly and swallows the lump in his throat. “You did this to me.”

Keith actually misses the compliments. Those sweet things that used to annoy the ever loving shit out of him but grew to tolerate then even enjoy. Misses those blue eyes taking him in before unleashing some ridiculously sappy comment. A comment that makes Keith blush with a frown and Lance laughing in response.

And now Keith can’t move--won’t move--from this spot until he sees that smile. He doesn’t care how long it takes or who sees him. He’s not going anywhere.

“I hate this--this--love bullshit,” Keith mutters but he doesn’t mean it. Not even a little bit. “I’m fucking...useless now. Thanks a lot.”

No response from Lance. He just sleeps and breathes.

Keith puts Lance’s hand back down carefully. He leans over towards Lance’s sleeping face, reaching out and cradling his unswollen cheek. He rubs his thumb under his eye as he hovers there looking at him. He lowers his face to Lance’s and presses his lips to forehead with a sigh.

“Rest up. I’m here. I’ll always be here,” he whispers with trembling lips.

Then he says words he hasn’t said since the world fell.

“I...I promise.”

*****

Team Punk visit as Allura re-bandages Keith’s hand.

They just nod when they come in and surround Lance’s bed. Pidge is light enough to sit on the cot without it creaking under the strain. Hunk just stands behind her with a hand on her shoulder.

They talk to Lance as if he’s awake to hear them. Stories from the Garrison days. Lighthearted tales of them running about and causing trouble. It brings a soft smile to everyone’s face, including Keith. It’s nice to hear about a time when their worst fears were having to do laps.

They don’t ask Keith any questions about what happened. Keith’s not sure he’d have answered if they did. No they just stick to positive stories and conversations. The kind of thing Lance would have done if it were anyone else in that bed.

It’s hours before they finish with their tales. When they’re done it’s nearly time to start cooking lunch. Pidge gets up and gently ruffles Lance’s hair.

“Get well soon, Lance,” she says quietly. “We need our sniper back.”

“Yeah, as soon as you’re up an about I’ll make that hedgehog goulash you like so much,” Hunk chuckles.

They move to leave and Hunk turns to invite Keith along but pauses. Keith’s already reached out
and put his hand on top of Lance’s. Before he can say something Pidge is pushing Hunk out the
door, exclaiming how she wants to help with cooking lunch. No time to waste. Move, move, move!

Allura chuckles at their exchange but stretches her arms high. It’s about time she makes her rounds to
Shiro next. They finally have some decent painkillers for him thanks to their trip and it’s been doing
wonders for his own sleep and physical therapy. She gives Keith a nod as she stands.

“I’ll bring you a plate when lunch is finished,” she says. “Since I have a feeling...you’ll still be here.”

“I...yeah,” Keith admits with a nod.

Allura gives him an understanding smile and takes her leave. She returns an hour later with food—a
boiled egg, and some greens. When she knocks she gets no response. She then enters to quite the
tender sight.

Keith’s sitting on the floor beside the bed. He must have intended to just hold Lance’s hand but it
looks like he nodded off. His face rests on the mattress with Lance’s hand perched against his cheek
and his gently atop it.

She leaves the plate of food on the chair and quietly makes her exit one again, leaving them quite
alone.

*****

It’s pleasantly warm, like a beach at high noon. He can hear the slow rush of waves lapping against
the shore. Far off music plays out of a cabana. The air smells like tanning lotion and cocktails. When
he opens his eyes he sees nothing but sand, ocean, and palm trees swaying in the summer breeze.

This is his dream. The one he’s had since childhood. Or almost. It’s...like the aftermath that dream.

The party is over. The guests have left. He’s laying on a beach blanket, body tired and legs sore from
dancing all day. A trail of dress clothes litters the beach all the way to where he’s laying. Must have
had a fun night, he guess.

He looks down with a smile to find he’s wearing nothing but a swimsuit and a dozen hickeys. His
toes wiggle with sand between them. What a great feeling. It’s so warm and comforting that he kicks
back, digs his feet into the hot beach, and closes his eyes. He’d like nothing more than to fall asleep
here in the sun.

Feels like...going home.

“...Lance...”

Lance furrows a brow. Did someone...who’s there…?

He opens his eyes again but no one’s next to him. With a wince, he sits up to look further down the
shore. Nothing on the beach itself. It hurts to turn his head too much but there, in the shallows, stands
a figure. The sun is setting behind them making it impossible to see who it is.

If this is anything like his other dreams...it’s supposed to be his intended beckoning him to come
swim--among other things. He cranes his neck trying to find an angle that will reveal their face but--
Ugh, he just wants to take a nap.

“ Lance wake up! ” the voice yells but it feels like it’s miles and miles away. Sounds familiar but...
He tries to obey. He leans forward but pain sparks from his chest and he starts coughing. Violently. Can barely get a good breath in and when he does his lungs burn. He brings a hand to cover his mouth and expels a small spray of blood onto it. Lance looks on his palm with mortified confusion.

Blood...why is that familiar? And why does he feel dizzy? Maybe he really should lay back down--

“Lance!” he hears coming from the person in the ocean. A man.

It’s still too bright for him to see the guy. He raises a hand to lessen the glare but it hardly helps. Dark hair, maybe? The blood drips from his hand and he looks at it perplexed. It almost looks like…

“A star?” Lance rasps as blood oozes from his mouth. A wave of dizziness strikes him and he tries to crumble into the nice warm sand.

“Don’t you dare!” they yell. They sound closer now. It’s a man’s voice. “Get up you asshole!”

What a dick. Lance chuckles out more blood. Fine...he’ll get up. Even if it’s just to hit this guy for calling him an asshole. Can’t let anyone get away with that kind of rudeness. Even in a dream.

Even though everything hurts and the hot sandy beach is enticing as hell, Lance brings himself to his feet. His ankle...it hurts. Feels sprained but he limps forward into the freezing cold water. Feels like ice traveling up his legs. And the sharp pains in his chest have increased tenfold, forcing him to hold his side with a groan. Ugh, his head, why does it feel like it’s splitting?

He stumbles through the shallows, splashing and sloshing as he gets closer and closer to the man. Feels like each step takes forever. Like there are weights under those frozen waves slowing him down. The distance...it’s so far. It would be...so much easier to just...let himself sink into the water and let the tide take him back to the beach.

But there’s a hand extending out to him. Reaching. Even as the water gets deeper and Lance struggles against the waves, he feels a strong desire to grab it. He reaches out. Bruised and broken fingers grasping desperately but he doesn't know why.

In the palm is a blue star and like a lightning strike, it all comes back at once.

“Keith!” he gasps with sudden recollection.

The obfuscated face is finally revealed to him as the light falls on him. His stormy grey eyes light up at the sight of Lance. Hair damp from the sloshing waves and a bright smile on his face. That rare treat only he gets to see.

"Keith!" he shouts, panic choking his voice.

Fear seeps into his entire body, as cold as the water surrounding him, at the thought of losing sight of Keith in the ocean's thrashing waves. Lance kicks and scoops and swims as hard as he can through every white-hot pain wracking his body. He's so close! If he can just--

In another desperate shout, Lance slaps his hand into Keith’s outstretched one and gripping tight. Keith pulls and their bodies crash together as their arms encircle one another in an embrace. Neither of them makes a move to swim, they just fall into each other as they sink into the swells of the ocean.

Water rises around them but they aren’t drowning. Neither of them struggles for breath. Lance wouldn't care if they did because it's Keith and he's here and he's warm and Lance is never letting go. The water even feels warmer just by virtue of Keith's presence.
Instead of drowning they just suspend there, surrounded by bubbles and colorful fish. It gets darker and darker but it's comforting in a way. It's just him and Keith and that's all he needs. Lance squeezes tighter so that he doesn't lose hold.

“... Rest up …”

Keith’s voice is fading again. It sounds far away even though he's right here. The water is so dark its black now. The tiny fish disappear and in their place are sparkling stars. Constellations. Moons. Planets. All of it swirling around them like a whirlwind. And looking down...they might land on top of a mountain before long.

The body in Lance's hold goes translucent and Lance's heart hiccups with fear again.

“Keith!” Lance says into his neck. "You're-Don't go!"

“... I’m here…I’ll always be here …”

Lance pulls back from his hug to look at him. He can see galaxies behind him through his smiling face. Stars in his eyes. Like he's made of the universe.

Hell, he is the universe to Lance.

He grasps Keith’s face in his hands before pressing a kiss to his lips, desperate to keep contact--any contact--with him. Keith kisses back just as passionately. His hand cups Lance’s cheek as he leans in to whisper in his ear.

God, Lance’s heart aches at the sound of him.

“... I promise …”

*****

Lance’s eyes flutter slowly open. His body...it feels weird. Like everything is numb but tingling at the same time. Fuck, he’s so sleepy, it’s taking everything to keep his eyes open let alone trying to get them to focus. It’s so blurry.

He tries lifting his head but barely manages an inch. It’s enough to look down the bed.

There’s a body sleeping in his lap. After he comes into focus Lance recognizes the form as Keith's. Looks like was kneeling on the floor and leaning over the bed but then drifted off. Lance’s bandaged hand is propped up on his cheek with Keith’s hand on top of it. His cheeks are damp.

Lance wants to say something. Wants to say he’s sorry for making Keith worry. That the last thing he ever wants to do is make him cry. That’s it’s alright now and he’s fine, so no more tears, you know? But then he feels a wave of fatigue hit him.

All he manages to do is barely move his thumb across a tear stain before falling back asleep.

*****

Night again. It’s officially been twenty-four hours since the surgery. Keith’s only left the room if he’s had to. Bathroom breaks and grabbing an extra blanket from his room. Skipped dinner entirely much to Allura’s disapproval. He’s always back in Lance’s room within minutes of leaving. Every time.

Sometimes he sits in the chair, occasionally leaning over and brushing Lance’s bangs aside. Other times he’s on his knees and huddled over Lance’s hand, practically praying for him to wake up
already. He’s dozed off twice now doing that. Only for about half an hour before waking again with frightened start thanks to his horrible nightmare.

It’ll all start well enough but then it devolves into that awful sound. He’ll swear that the EKG machine starts hiccuping it’s beeps into a long steady tone but when he bolts awake, eyes blown wide in fear, he finds nothing is amiss. Nothing at all. Ends up taking him minutes to calm himself so he doesn’t spiral into a panic attack.

Pidge visits a second time without Hunk after dinner. Brought Keith some strawberries and a bottle of water. Says he needs to eat and drink something, even if it’s just a few bites. He tries to but can’t get much down before his stomach hurts.

“I told the others to leave you alone for a while,” Pidge tells him as she leans on the counter. “I didn’t say anything about you and Lance…”

He wouldn’t care if she did at this point. Thinks he stopped caring what the others thought somewhere between carrying Lance’s half dead body into the clinic and when he nearly bit Nyma’s head off last night.

“…but I think they’re starting to figure it out,” Pidge says and takes her glasses off. She wipes them with her hoodie as she continues. “Hunk and the doctors anyway. Matt’s thick as hell, the newbies just think you’re an ass, and Shiro’s in the dark.”

Matts not thick. It’s an act he’s perfected over the years to take the heat off Keith when people start asking personal questions about him. Pretends he doesn’t know anything about any of Keith’s personal matters going so far as to look completely oblivious to any signs one might point out.

Who? Keith? Seen after hours with who? No way he’s just helping out a good friend or doing makeup paperwork. Or he’s giving them combat training pointers. You guys are just seeing things and jumping to conclusions.

Good ole Matt. Keith smiles and it feels like it’s been weeks since that’s happened.

Pidge opens her mouth to say something else when there’s a knock at the door. She throws her glasses back on, pushes off the counter and opens it.

“Oh, hey Shiro,” Pidge gives half a smile. “Come to check on Lance?”

“Yes. Got permission for a small walkabout from the Princess,” he answers with a soft smile of his own as he enters. “She told me what happened in surgery. How is he?”

“Stable,” Pidge answers. “But he won’t be signing autographs for a while.”

“He hasn’t woken up yet?” Shiro wonders as he stands next to Keith. When he looks down he sees Keith’s hand is resting on Lance’s wrist, right on top of a bandana he recognizes from its previous owners.

“No,” Pidge tells him. “Nyma says that’s pretty normal. He’s on a lot of painkillers and he’s exhausted. His body needs to repair a lot of damage and it does that best when sleeping.”

“He seems like a tough kid,” Shiro nods with a smile. “He’ll pull through.”

Pidge nods with a soft smile at that. A few minutes of awkward silence later Shiro turns to Pidge scratching the back of his head with a timid smile.
“Pidge, would you mind getting me a fresh water bottle? And some Excedrin?” he chuckles. “No rush but my head’s killing me.”

Luckily, she recognizes a polite kicking out when she sees it. “Yeah, sure,” she says and takes her leave.

Shiro drags the chair from the other side and puts it next to Keith’s. He turns it to the side so he doesn’t have to worry about bumping his stump on Keith or his chair. This way he looks head-on at Keith’s profile. The profile he’s keeping turned down towards the floor to avoid Shiro’s gaze.

“How you holding up, Keith?” Shiro asks, his voice low. “The doctors say you’re not sleeping?”

“I...bad dreams, is all,” Keith admits. “The usual ones,” he adds but it’s not convincing.

He doesn’t care if Shiro believes him. He doesn’t need to know that all Keith hears when he goes to sleep is the piercing tone of a flatline. Or that when he does drift off it that sound wakes him with a start. That he spends the next ten minutes doing breathing exercises and reminding himself that it’s over so he doesn’t hyperventilate.

“And your hand?” Shiro nods at the bandaged injury.

“Crossbow bolt,” Keith says, keeping his focus on the floor.

“Doctor says you haven’t been taking medicine for the pain,” Shiro says.

“No,” Keith shakes his head. “It doesn’t hurt.”

“Keith,” Shiro frowns, well aware that he’s lying.

Shiro could always read him. Ever since he was a kid. And he hates lying to Shiro. Makes it look like he doesn’t trust him when it couldn’t be further from the truth. But Shiro always gives Keith a chance to try again since his first instinct is always to pull in, to protect himself. Even if that means lying.

“Want to tell me the truth?” Shiro asks, sympathetic.

The truth? There are so many truths he’s yet to tell Shiro but...yes. He wants to be honest. He doesn’t want to lie to the one person who’s supported him throughout his life.

Already his throat is knotting up at the prospect. He takes his hand off of Lance’s wrist in favor of squeezing the bedding between his fingers so he can get his words out.

“Y-Yeah,” Keith swallows with a nod. “It hurts. A lot. I just...I need to stay awake. Hard to sleep if I’m in pain.”

“That’s certainly true,” Shiro sighs in agreement, as he knows that firsthand. “Is there a reason you need to stay awake?”

“I--” Keith starts but stops.

His heart is pulsing in his ears, so loud that he can’t even hear the EKG anymore. There’s a tremble in his hand that he stills by squeezing tight on the blankets. His chest goes tight and his breath short. Shiro puts a hand on his shoulder and gives him a reassuring squeeze letting the sound and air back into the room.

“I need to be the first one he sees,” Keith blurs and then takes a shaky breath. Shiro says nothing,
just waits for him to compose himself for the next sentence. “We’re...more than friends, Shiro. I--”

Keith can’t say it. No, the first time he says that...it needs to be to Lance and only Lance. Tears begin to well up but he looks up at the ceiling. His technique for beating back his emotions but it’s not working as well as it used to.

“You love him, huh?” Shiro asks with a soft smile.

Keith feels his lip tremble as he looks back at Lance. Weak, strong, naive, funny, annoying, beautiful Lance. He feels himself nod and the dam breaks.

He crumples forward into his hands and starts to sob into the heels of his palms. Keith wipes the fat tears pouring from his face onto his bandages and then his sleeves. He tries to get actual words out but nothing forms, only random vowels. It’s making it hard for him to get in air so he hiccups and whimpers.

Luckily, Shiro knows exactly what he needs.


“I-I’m s-sorry...I’m s-so sor-sorry!” Keith apologizes into Shiro’s chest. “I sh-should have t-told you...I-!”

“It’s okay Keith, really,” Shiro promises and cups the back of his head as he pants and sobs, trying to catch his breath.

“I was...I was so s-scared to tell you. To t-tell anyone.” Keith whimpers. “And ashamed! I di-didn’t...want you to...look at m-me different. Like I was... wrong. And Mom. I n-never...I never even told Mom and n-now it’s too...it’s too late-!”

“Shh, it’s alright,” Shiro shushes and Keith just breathes out weak sobs.

“I didn’t--I don’t want it to be too late,” Keith stammers. “To s-say something...to you. To h-him. I’m sorry. I’m s-sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for Keith,” Shiro assures him. “And I understand...better than you know.”

For the longest time, Shiro just lets Keith lean on him. Pets his head like his mom used to do when he scraped his knees. When he fell off his bike and bloodied up his chin. When he lost a softball game. Every time Keith was feeling down, hurt or alone, she’d comb her fingers through his hair and kiss his head.

Why did he ever think Shiro would push him away?

Before all Keith could focus on was the worst case scenario because that’s what he was trained for. Be prepared for the worst and the worst thought in the world was that his idol, his brother, would reject the real Keith. And he was trained that if a risk isn’t worth it...you simply don’t take it. But now--

Now it feels so good to let this out. To finally loosen all the tight wires and shake the heavy chains weighing him down. As scared as he was now he feels light. Unburdened.

Is this how Lance feels all the time?
“Keith, I’m so proud of you,” says Shiro, sitting back to look at Keith’s red and puffy face. “Nothing would ever change that. And I think...No, I know your mom would be proud too.”

“Th...Thanks, Shiro,” Keith nods, sniffling and rubbing his eyes.

“You look like you did after that fight with Marcus Stottlemeyer,” Shiro chuckles and he tries to fix Keith’s hair. “Ninth grade. You can home with a busted lip and bloody knuckles. Soaked with tears. You were so upset.”

Keith could almost laugh. If only Shiro knew how loaded that observation was. That was his first chance to tell Shiro years ago and he bottled it away.

He told them Marcus insulted his father when in reality he called him a faggot in front of his friends. And that was after they made out in the locker room. Used and thrown to the wolves. His first real rejection which ended up sending his first crush to the hospital with sixteen stitches, two broken teeth, and a concussion.

Another story for another time.

“I know you’re worried about him,” Shiro says, nodding his head at Lance. “But you need to sleep.”

“Shiro--”

“This is not a debate, Keith,” Shiro says seriously. “When Pidge comes back take the pills. That’s an order, from your captain and brother. I don’t want you burning out and making yourself sick. You’re only human, Keith.”

Keith stops trying to argue with him. He’s already been feeling the effects of sleep deprivation. His coordination has been off. Each time he goes to the bathroom he bumps into door frames and knocks bottles over that he thought were farther than they were.

And his head is buzzing and hazy. He’s missed the fact that people have come in and out to check on Lance and his medications until they were closing the door to leave. To top it all off, his emotions are everywhere, caught between scared, angry, and relieved within minutes of each other.

Probably why this conversation was more stressful than it needed to be.

“You think he’s going to fault you for getting some sleep?” Shiro asks, ruffling his hair.

_Your body...a shame no one’s taken care of it for you. You don’t seem to take care of it either._

Keith’s eyes soften and lid at the memory. If anything Lance would be upset with him if he keeps this up.

_You don’t have to exceed your limits with me._

“No, he...I’ll take them,” Keith agrees to it. “But I’m not leaving.”

“Wasn’t about to make you,” Shiro assures him.

Pidge returns five minutes later, gauging the time for her arrival perfectly. Keith’s calmer and Shiro readies himself to leave but only after Keith takes the pills. He takes them and drinks down half the bottle while he’s at it.

Keith needs to make another quick run to the bathroom before the meds take effect. Pidge promises they’ll wait there for him to come back. So that if Lance wakes before he returns they can keep him
“Change your clothes while you’re at it,” Pidge comments with a smirk. “Not to be rude dude, but you smell a little. Like the back alley of a Chinese restaurant had an abomination baby with the week-old remains of a fish market.”

“It’s not that bad,” Shiro insists but gives a tight-lipped smile. “But...maybe take some time to wash up a little.”

Keith flushes with a frown and leaves. Once in the hallway he subtly sniffs his jacket to find it does kinda reek. He hadn’t realized. Probably from that fight with the kid. He’d hate for that to be the first thing Lance notices upon waking.

He picks up a change of clothes. Some scrubs for now until the stuff they found gets washed. Gives himself a quick wipe down with some cold water and soap in the kennels. Even washes his hair a little. For the first time in two days, he feels cleaner.

By the time he’s finished, the pain in his hand has dulled significantly letting him know the meds are working. Which means the sleep aid included won’t be far behind.

He’s ready to pass out when he makes it back to Lance’s room. Pidge is still there but Shiro’s left. Something seems different about the room and it takes Keith a second to put it all together.

The bed’s been pushed to the wall. The EKG machine is gone, taken away since Lance isn’t in danger any longer. The IV in Lance’s arm has been removed as well and Lance himself has been scooted closer to the wall. There’s just barely room enough for someone to squeeze onto the cot with him if they were so inclined.

Keith’s very inclined but hesitates.

“It should hold the both of you without any trouble, just don’t move too much,” Pidge tells him, waking him from his staring. “Allura says as long as you don’t lay on top of him...he should be fine.”

“I...” Keith swallows. He doesn’t know what to say.

“Figured it’s more comfortable than sleeping on the floor or in the chair,” she says with a soft smile. “He shouldn’t need more meds until morning so no one will bugging you guys either.”

Keith head bows contritely. “Thanks...for this,” he says.

“Has Lance poisoned you into liking hugs yet?” she asks with a smirk.

He snorts and gives a pathetic shrug with a small nod. That’s all Pidge needs to hear. She crosses the room and gives him a squeeze around his middle with her little arms. It’s nice. Like being compressed by a tiny octopus that isn’t quite strong enough to actually hurt anyone. Very cathartic.

He can see why Lance likes getting hugs from her.

“You’re welcome,” Pidge says but then her voice wavers. “Take care of him, okay?”

She’s crying.

Keith’s never needed to comfort someone like this before. He tentatively raises a hand and pats her head the way Shiro had with him earlier. It seems to help. She lets him go and steps back, quickly wiping her face under her glasses and clearing her throat. Trying to pretend she wasn’t just crying.
“He’s...my favorite idiot,” Pidge explains and clears her throat a second time as she avoids his eyes. “They don’t make morons like him anymore. So I’d appreciate it if you don’t break him.”

“Right,” Keith nods with a weak smile.


“Night.”

Once the door closes Keith turns to look at Lance. He sits on the chair and unlaces his boots to kick them off. His gloves too. Just him and his scrubs when he carefully lowers himself into the cot with Lance.

Since Lance is laying flat on his back the only way they’ll both fit is if Keith lays on his side. Not a problem for him. It’s a hundred times more comfortable than the chair and he can feel Lance’s warmth--that’s worth any amount of future soreness in his joints. Keith gently shimmies an arm under Lance’s neck so that he can get in close enough to rest his face against his shoulder.

Lance’s hand has been moved to his chest and Keith curls his hand in with his. He wishes the little blue star was still on his palm but with washing up and all the hand-wringing he’s been doing all day it’s long gone.

But that’s alright. Thanks to Allura and the others, he has time to ask Lance to draw it again. They have time for a lot of things thanks to them. He’ll never be able to pay them all back for this.

Keith presses a kiss to Lance’s shoulder and lets his eyes drift closed just as sleep overtakes him.

*****

Keith’s eyes blink open to sun streaming through the window. Morning. He managed to sleep through the entire night. Not a single nightmare. And it feels like Lance hasn’t moved an inch. Keith lets out a deep sigh at that. He misses the way he’d wake with Lance’s arms wrapped around--

“Sigh any harder and I’ll think you like me,” says a raspy voice next to him.

Keith’s eyes go wide. Is he dreaming? He bolts up to look down at a very tired but smiling Lance. It’s not a dream. He’s awake.

“Morning,” Lance whispers.

“Lance!”

“Not so loud,” he implores. “I...my head kinda hurts.”

“Sorry...How long have you been awake?” Keith whispers, looking him over.

“I don’t...maybe twenty minutes?” Lance attempts a shrug. “Allura came in. She was gonna stick me with a needle but I told her no. That stuff feels a little too good and I didn’t want to fall asleep again. Not yet.”

Keith just stares in wonder. Despite all the damage Lance is awake and alert and looking right at him with soft eyes. He raises a brow at Keith and his mouth curls up at the corner for a smirk.

“Wanna make out?” he jokes with a wink. He tries digging an elbow into the mattress to sit up and winces at the pain that shoots up his side.
“Lance! Don’t!” Keith insists in a panic. If he pulls his stitches trying to move too soon--

“Agh! My chest! What the hell…” Lance groans. “Feels like I was stabbed.”

“You were stabbed,” Keith reminds him. “I stabbed you. With a syringe.”

“Ouch,” Lance chuckles and winces a little. “You know, actually, that does sound familiar. It’s all coming back.”

Keith never thought he could feel lighter than air. Seeing Lance awake and speaking is more relieving than he ever thought it would be. Lance tries to sit up again against Keith’s protest. He can’t manage it without help so Keith carefully assists since he won’t stop trying. Props him up with the pillow so he can look around the room.

Once situated, Lance pats his chest gently, puffing his cheeks as he feels the wound under his bandages.

“Feels like...stitches,” Lance says, wincing with a puzzled frown. “Did...someone cut me open?”

“You had internal bleeding,” Keith explains. “Allura did surgery.”

“Shit...really?” Lance blinks. “That explains why I feel like gutted fish.”

Keith doesn’t know what else to say. He doesn’t want to talk. He just wants to fall into Lance. Wants those arms wrapped around him. Wants to kiss those chapped lips. Lance gives him a fond smile and tilts his head.

“My breath is probably terrible but I was serious about the kiss,” Lance chuckles. “I think it would hel-—”

Keith doesn’t wait for him to finish that sentence. Just rushes in, cups his face, and presses his lips to Lance’s. Their eyes lid as Keith mouths and unleashes days worth of kisses on to him. Passionate, desperate things that have the both of them sighing. Lance tries to talk, to speak through the pauses, but he can’t get much through.

“Kei-Keith...can you...slow...Keith...let me...breathe? Maybe?” Lance manages to get out and Keith finally stops. Lance raises a brow with a smile. “Glad to see you too. Are you...wearing my dog tags?” he asks.

“I--” Keith stammers with embarrassment. He’d forgotten he’d thrown them on last night after cleaning up. He hurriedly pulls them off his neck and thrusts them out to Lance with a frown. “I just...It was for safekeeping.”

“Why don’t you hold onto them?” Lance chuckles at that flushed face.

“No, that’s--”

“I’ve got your bandana, you can keep my tags,” Lance insists and lets out a sigh that for once doesn’t sound like he’s breathing through a straw. “Besides, chances are, I’ll die long before you do anyway. That way you can hang them up when I’m gone,” he jokes.

Keith’s face goes solemn as his fingers tighten around the tags. “Don’t...say things like that,” Keith mumbles.

“But it’s true,” Lance shrugs at him with a smile. “Didn’t you say so yourself?”
He did but that doesn’t mean he wants it to be true. God, he’d give anything take it all back. Every cynical, hurtful thing he ever said to Lance about being naive and hopeful. Every rude comment. Every angry frown. Every time he shoved Lance away, literally and figuratively, because he didn’t want to indulge in too much familiarity.

In their place Keith wants to say stupid stuff to Lance. Things like--you’re never going to die, Lance. That he’ll keep him safe. That they’ll keep each other safe. No one will hurt them. Nothing will get in their way. It’s all going to work out for them.

They’ll be the ones that get a happy ending.

“Keith? Are you okay?” Lance asks, his face suddenly furrowed with worry. “Keith?”

Keith’s clenched his jaw closed to try to stifle the first sob in his throat. That fist tightens on the dog tags so hard that the metal digs into his aching palm. His eyes squeeze shut but that doesn’t prevent the new flood of tears gushing their way out. He doesn’t even bother trying to wipe them away.

“Kei--”

“I-I don’t...” Keith murmurs but his voice trembles into a whimper against his will. “I don’t w-want anything to h-happen to you, Lance,” he cries as his shoulders start to shake.

“Oh, Keith,” Lance sighs, trying to keep his smile. “What are you crying for? Me?”

It’s hard work because his arm feels heavy, like it’s made of lead, but Lance lifts it. He reaches out and caresses his palm against Keith’s arm. It’s shivering. His fingers are splinted into stiff little sticks but he rubs his thumb on Keith’s forearm trying to get his attention.

“Look,” Lance whispers. “Look at me. I’m fine.”

“You were gone...and I...I couldn’t do anything!” Keith says through gritted teeth.

“You came to save me. And you got us here, didn’t you?” Lance assures him. “That’s something.”

Keith smacks the mattress with his fist.“That isn't--that's not what I meant, Lance!” he growls but his voice loses it’s anger and melts into a whimper again. “You...died.”

“I wha--?”

“For four minutes...thirty two s-seconds. Y-You were dead and I-I-I...I stopped breathing,” Keith says and clutches the shirt at his heart. “M-My chest...I c-couldn’t! Everything was c-c-cold. And all I could hear was the...that sound!”

He’s spiraling again. Eyes wide and body shivering.

“Keith,” Lance calls to him, voice soft and calm.

“I s-still...I still hear it. The flatline. When I fall asleep. It--!” Keith tries but chokes on the words. He’s starting to hyperventilate at the memory. He can’t get the air in.

“Keith, come here. Closer, closer,” Lance gestures him over with all the strength he can muster.

Lance guides Keith to wrap his arms around his neck and cry there. Keith presses his wet face into him and sobs quietly. Lance pets and strokes thick dark hair as Keith pulls in ragged breaths at his neck.
He hadn’t realized how serious it had been. Died? He’d died? The last thing Lance really remembers is singing in the car. Where was the tunnel? With the light at the end? And where were the pearly ga-

Lance remembers the beach. Keith calling out to him. Pulling him back and making him stay.

Keith’s the reason he’s still here. Saved him from Summer Springs. Fixed his collapsed lung. Brought him back from the edge. He’s been here, crying and having nightmares this whole time. Fretting over whether Lance would ever wake again.

And he’s sitting here joking about dying.

“I didn’t know,” Lance whispers into Keith’s hair. “I’m sorry, Keith.”

“It’s my fault,” Keith whimpers. “I--”

“No, no, no,” Lance quickly interrupts. “It’s not. My big mouth put a target on my back. They never would have—If I’d shut it we’d have been fine. So no more talk of fault okay?”

Lance continues to pet Keith’s head and kiss his crown. He hums little bits of song to him. Keith’s emotions slowly level out. Almost sounds like Keith’s fallen back to sleep but he lets out a deep sigh.

“Lie to me, Lance,” he says.

Lie?

“Tell me that this’ll never happen again. I...I can’t--”

“It’ll never happen again,” Lance tells him with another kiss to his head.

“Say you won’t die doing something stupid,” Keith adds.

“I won’t die doing something stupid,” Lance promises as Keith adjusts look him in the face.

“Nothing but good things from here on,” Keith says, hopeful look on his face.

“Yep, nothing but the good stuff,” Lance manages to smile at him. “Good?”

“Yeah, good,” Keith nods with a pathetic smile of his own.

“Now,” Lance starts and pulls on his neck to nuzzle Keith’s cheek. “No more lies. I want some truths.”

Lance pulls Keith in to kiss the wet off his cheeks. Nuzzles and kisses his chin and neck. Then his dry lips press to Keith’s soft ones, mouthing and humming into his kisses. Keith presses forward eagerly tasting back, tongue seeking Lance’s. Lance chuckles before he gets too far and bumps Keith’s forehead with his own.


Keith blinks. That’s what he wants to know? Lance can’t not be a goof, can he? Keith snorts, glad that some things never change. Makes it feel like it’ll always be this way no matter what.

“Yeah,” Keith nods. “I do like it.”

“And am I funny?” Lance asks with a silly worried pout. “I have to know, I’m very insecure.”
“Yeah, you really are,” Keith answers with a smirk.

“Awww,” Lance sighs but then frowns with a narrow glare when he realizes the double meaning. “Wait a minute...you suck! And I’d know!”

Keith lets out a small laugh at that and it brings Lance’s smile back.

“You’re ridiculous,” Keith says but there’s no bite. No cynicism.

“I know,” Lance chuckles. “Okay, one more question and you gotta tell me the truth.”

Keith rolls his eyes in preparation for yet another silly question that Lance obviously knows the answer to. Feels good to be smiling again and with Lance being playful it’s so much easier not to worry. To feel good and safe. Lance gestures him to come close so he can whisper what is no doubt going to be a dirty question.

“When you dream lately...and you see that high quiet place where you can reach the stars…” Lance sighs. “…am I there? Holding your hand?”

Keith’s heart flutters and his face warms as Lance squeezes his hand and, for a moment, everything falls away. The walls, the floor, the bed--everything. He’s on top of a mountain. On top of a rock formation in the center of the desert. As high as possible. There’s nothing but space, swirling galaxies, and the infinite cosmos stretched before him. He could never see the person next to him before. They were nothing but a shadow every time. But when he looks now--Lance with sparkling stars shining in his perfect blue eyes. And a red star clasped onto his own blue one. And like a flash, he’s back in the recovery room with Lance waiting in anticipation for an answer.

All Keith can do is nod.

“What a relief,” Lance sighs. “That’ll make this next part way less awkward.”

Next part?

“I haven’t exactly been subtle but...” Lance says, clearing his throat with a nervous cough. He’s blushing with a crooked smile as he looks up. “I love you, Keith.”

Keith’s heart thunders in his chest. His toes are tingling. Warmth spreading through every inch of his body. He’s been told this before but never has he felt like this.

“Probably already knew that,” Lance chuckles pathetically. “I just...wanted to say it out loud.”

Before it was too late, is the underlying message

“Lance…”

“I think you feel the same way,” Lance hints. “You’re just not...keen on saying it. Which is fine, really it is. I get it if you’re scared to--”

He doesn’t get any further than that. Keith grabs him by the face and silences him with kisses. Nice and deep ones this time. Fingers delving into Lance’s hair to tilt him back and get his tongue in deeper. Sucking every little sigh and weak moan out of Lance until he finally has to protest.

“Mmmf...nm...Keif…!” Lance says as he tries to keep up. “kn...can...dt...breev…”
Keith releases his lips once they’ve been kissed practically raw.

“I’m not scared,” Keith insists and presses his forehead to Lance’s as he takes a deep breath. The only thing he’s scared of now is not getting a chance to say this. “...I love you, too,” he whispers.

Lance looks positively shocked. Not that Keith loves him, he already figured that much, but at the fact he admitted it. He hadn’t thought Keith would ever say such a thing. Not with his ‘getting close to people is a mistake’ attitude. Not with how well he guards all of this emotions and thoughts. And now he’s staring Lance down, a worried look on his face as he waits for some kind of response from Lance.

“Yeah?” is all Lance manages, a grin spreading.

“Yeah,” Keith nods and returns his lips to where he really wants them.

This time Lance is far more alert and able to return the kisses. Keith’s practically crawling over him. Keith’s hands touch his hair, his face, his neck, everything. Lance is trying his best to pull him in for a hug and return every kiss with a fervent one of his own.

They both remember too late that Lance is still badly injured. Keith’s hand just barely presses into his side and Lance grunts in pain.

“Agh! Ow! Son of a--”

“Sorry!” Keith immediately apologizes and unstraddles him.

“Enough kisses for now. Message received. You love me,” Lance groans with a wince.

They both snort a little at how casually he says it. It’s true after all.

“You know, I just noticed this but...” Lance starts and grins. “...you look terrible.”

“Look who’s talking,” Keith retorts with a gesture to the cot.

“When’s the last time you ate?” Lance asks and Keith shrugs. “Well, I’m starving. Ugh...and could definitely use a shot of something. My chest...ahh...actually...hurts a lot. Guess your face made me forget all about it.”

Lance waggles his eyes and gives him a big Cheshire smile to go with his shameless flirting. Keith rolls his eyes but the smirk stays in place. It really does feel like the worst is over.

“I’ll get Allura,” Keith nods and stands from the bed. “Don’t move too much.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” Lance puffs his cheeks and lets out a slow breath. “Hey, Keith.”

Keith stops and puts a hand on the doorknob. Turns his head with a, “yeah?”

“Thanks...for bringing me back,” Lance says, fond look in his eyes. Another one of those comments fraught with more meanings than one

“Had to...still need to trounce you in Poker,” Keith shrugs with half a smile. He then bows his head, his face softer now. “You’re welcome, Lance...anytime.”

As he walks down the hall he takes the sweetest breath of relief. In his heart, Lance has nothing to thank him for. If anyone has saved anyone else’s life...it’s Lance that’s rescued Keith.
Before all this, Keith was just as dead as the roters he slaughtered. Shuffling around, detached from the emotions that keep normal people going. More than willing to numb himself to those dying around him to avoid pain. Ready to just survive until his inevitable end.

But thanks to Lance everything is different. He doesn’t want to hide who he is anymore. Doesn’t want to dismiss and look down on the feelings of others. No more simply existing in this hell on Earth.

For the first time in a long time... Keith is ready to *live*.

Chapter End Notes

If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment! Don't know what to say?
Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

Also, your comments and ideas help inspire additional chapters. The littlest thing can inspire a huge writing spell. So don't silence yourself, let your thoughts be heard. You feed writers ideas, they feed you romantic fluff and smut.

(Also, if you really like Voltron stuff and want more, check out my other two fics. Tell me what you think of them!)
Chapter Notes

I know I've been gone SO LONG you thought I was DEAD. But here I am! Reanimated and updating this fic! A nice update for you and just in time for the new year. Leave your love and frustrations in the comments. *finger guns*

Also, I don't know when I'll update this again. I literally had to force myself to do at least a paragraph at a time to get this finished. My brain is so full of ideas it's hard to focus them sometimes. But if you waited this long for this update, I'm sure you can manage to do it again *wink*

I counted the stars tonight.

Oh how they shine so bright.

I gather them all.

So we perfectly align.

Pentatonix, Standing By

Lance’s recovery is slow and arduous, for everyone involved but especially for Keith. He can’t stand seeing Lance laying in bed constantly and most of that time is spent sleeping. He eats with some regularity but not long after finishing a meal he begins nodding off. Tries to keep conversation with whoever happens to be visiting, most often Keith, but before long he drifts mid-sentence back into dreams.

It worried Keith the first few times it happened. It’s far too reminiscent of that conversation in the car when he was ready and willing to tell a story but suddenly stopped. Instills a little jerk of fear that Keith has trouble tamping down but after a few times he grows used to it. Lance wakes, talks for a bit, eats, and then inevitably falls to sleep. Keith just fixes the blanket and goes about his business depending on the time of day.

In the mornings now, Keith will leave for a couple hours as soon as Lance falls asleep again. Goes hunting with one the new recruits. He almost expected Rolo to come with him to do this but turns out he has a weak stomach for killing animals. Not surprising considering his reaction to them wanting to kill Beezer but Keith also gets the distinct feeling he doesn’t want to be alone with Keith. So Nyma volunteers in his place.

Nyma has no objections when it comes to ending an animal’s life. She’s very…”Keith” about it. It’s us or them she voices and she’d rather kill a coyote and eat it than get eaten in return. It’s not the first time she’s had to hunt for her group and it won’t be the last.

Those hunting excursions with her are quiet, for which Keith is grateful. No prying questions. No pointless conversations. She travels with him when checking snares and if anything is still squirming
when they arrive she’s just as quick to finish off the animal as Keith is. The only talking that ever happened between them during the first time out there was when she killed a prairie dog caught in a wire.

“Better to kill it quickly,” she’d said. “No point in letting it suffer.”

Keith made no comment then other than to nod in agreement.

Each day they return from their snare runs and resets so that Hunk can take care of cleaning meat and such. After that they head out again to check the neighboring areas for more game, starting with the small patches of forest at the edges of the pastures. Rolo’s told them to be on the lookout for bigger game like peccaries and deer since he’s working on building a smoker at Shiro’s request. Best to have a way to cure meats so they can have a larger stockpile of food for rough days.

They don’t find anything bigger than a couple of migrating geese. Keith misses with the crossbow often, too impatient to wait for a good shot. Luckily there’s no wasted ammo when it comes to that. Nyma nails a quail with the bb gun every once in a while. Doesn’t rub in her accomplishment with anything more than a nod and a smile to which Keith is glad.

The only smug smirk he can stand is Lance’s.

Before noon they return with any bounty they happen to find and get some lunch. It’s nice being able to eat more than scraps for a change. With the garden, the chickens, and what they get in their daily hunts, everyone is eating better than they have since Incident One. Allura’s even taken a few of the blackberries the newbies brought back to try and start some vines. Maybe in a year they’ll even have reliable fruit sources.

Things are finally looking up.

Keith’s surprised at how few questions there are for him throughout the first week. No one asks him about the trip. Not even Shiro. He’s not sure if it’s some unspoken agreement or if Pidge told them not to bother asking. Either way, no one brings up what happened.

Only Matt pulls him aside for a second to check up on him. Is he feeling okay? Yeah, he’s fine. Is his hand healing up alright? It is. If he ever wants to talk he knows he can come see him in the rec room, right? Yes, he knows.

Rolo sometimes shoots a few guilty looks his way. Like he blames himself for the predicament they found themselves in. Even looks like he wants to apologize but isn’t sure where to start or who to start with.

Keith can sympathize. Sometimes...it’s hard to find the words when you’ve never had cause to use them.

Difficulty finding words doesn’t extend to Lance. Every time he wakes up and sees Keith there his eyes light up. Clears his throat with a ‘hey there, come here often?’ followed by a devious ‘would you like to?’ He then has to be reminded that he’s in a delicate state but it doesn’t dampen that smile. Lance just sighs and his eyes go soft.


No matter how many times Lance says it or what language he says it in, the declaration of love brings a hot flush to Keith’s cheeks. Makes Lance snort out a laugh when he mumbles it back just barely loud enough to hear, still unused to the words on his lips. But it’s clear Lance likes hearing it as much as he likes saying it. So Keith says it often as he can in the hopes it’ll speed Lance’s
recovery.

It’s still strange to Keith, this kind of interaction, but it’s growing on him quicker than he thought it would.

Around noon someone usually brings lunch to them. Allura often brings the meal since she needs to check all of Lance’s vitals and ask about any unusual symptoms.

She doesn’t stick around for long though. No, she just wags a finger at Lance, telling him to stop shifting in his bed if he wants those stitches taken out next week. She wags and equally fervent finger in Keith’s face telling him he needs to eat more or he’s going to end up in a hospital bed of his own. And she’ll be more than happy to force him into one if necessary. Then she leaves and a moment later the both of them snort out a laugh at how motherly she is.

“Almost like being home again,” Lance would say while fondly looking at the picture on the counter.

For the first week, the doctors insist that Hunk make Lance soups and stews, things with plenty of liquids to replenish fluids on top of being easy to digest. But because he’s so weak Lance can’t feed himself without making a mess. People take turns helping him out depending on the time of day and Lance hams it up the whole time.

Today is no exception as Keith feeds him his lunch.

“This is super romantic,” Lance hints as he takes a mouthful of soup.

“Shut up,” Keith huffs with a roll of his eyes. He takes a spoonful himself and swallows before scooping a new one for Lance. “Keep up that mushy crap and you’ll be eating this spoon.”

“Hey, tone down the flirting,” Lance jokes. “Or you’ll just make it that much harder.”

Keith has to put the bowl and spoon down on his lap for a second so he doesn’t spill as he closes his eyes and snorts out subdued laughter. Trying to recover and Lance is ever still the flirt. Keith shoves another spoonful into his mouth while shaking his head.

“Incorrigible.”

“I mean it,” Lance insists but Keith’s already pressing more food in. “I...If I wasn’t hurt--gulp--I’d jump you now.”

Keith believes him. Sometimes he wakes in the mornings to find Lance running his fingers through his hair, nuzzling and eagerly kissing at his neck. If he’s sure Keith’s awake he does so more in earnest. Breathy with hot needy sighs that damn near tempt Keith into starting something they know they can’t finish. They always stop when Lance winces in pain.

Tonight when they bed down for the evening it happens again. Lance nuzzles right behind Keith’s ear, tongue darting out lightly to drag along his lobe. Keith leans into it, biting his lip with a sigh when Lance starts in on sucking his pulse.

“Turn around,” Lance demands with a whisper. “Kiss me.”

Keith loves when his voice gets low like that. He carefully rolls, taking care not to agitate Lance’s injuries. He then presses their parted mouths together to oblige him with several heated kisses, full of tongue and teeth.
Lance eagerly kisses back, the fingers on his good hand cupping around Keith’s neck and pulling him closer. Keith thinks for a second that he must be feeling better to attempt that. It’s only been a week yet he’s sitting up and panting hungrily into their kisses. But then Lance bites back a sharp gasp and stops.

“Lance?” Keith whispers worriedly.

“Sorry,” Lance groans with annoyance. “I’m fine. I wanna do more but—”

They can’t do anything further than makeout and god Lance hates it like nothing else. Always this sharp pain in his chest when he gets to breathing too hard. Even if his stitches were completely healed he couldn’t do much. His body is too heavy and weak. Just being awake for an hour exhausts him—sex would probably kill him at this stage in his recovery.

“I know,” Keith sighs in understanding before curling back into his body to hold him.

Keith’s in much the same boat. Mostly by choice. He’s horny like one wouldn’t believe but he’s not willing to take business into his own hands. He’d much rather get off with Lance’s involvement than without and currently it’s impossible. It won’t be possible for another week or so—at the very least. Could be even longer but he’s not opposed to waiting.

“You know you could always get off on your own,” Lance reminds him.

Keith just shrugs and shakes his head to show his disinterest in that suggestion.

“I don’t mind just watching and telling you what to do,” Lance says suggestively, grazing his teeth against Keith’s neck making him sigh. “Please? I’m going crazy in this room,” he whispers urgently.

“Maybe,” Keith relents with a mute gasp as Lance bites softly on his pulse. “Tomorrow.”


“Depends on how rested you are,” Keith tells him.

Lance begrudgingly nods, catching the subtle hint that he should go back to sleep.

Hell, he’ll sleep the entire day away if that’s what it takes to get to see Keith naked again. To see him flushed and panting, rocking on his own fingers right in front of him. Getting off at Lance’s behest. Gives him quite the hard-on just thinking about it but he does manage to close his eyes, take a deep breath, and force himself to fall asleep.

*****

When Keith wakes Lance is soundly asleep. He brushes Lance’s bangs aside and gently touches his face. Almost all the bruises are gone. In another week they’ll disappear entirely and Lance can get his stitches out. Allura says he can even start walking to the bathroom with help then but only a couple times a day. To rebuild strength but not overwork it into making his ankle worse.

He presses a kiss to his temple. Lance hums but he doesn’t wake. Now’s a good time to check if the traps caught anything in the night. So he dresses quietly so he doesn’t rouse Lance further. Every minute asleep is good for his recovery.

He presses a kiss to his temple. Lance hums but he doesn’t wake. Now’s a good time to check if the traps caught anything in the night. So he dresses quietly so he doesn’t rouse Lance further. Every minute asleep is good for his recovery.

The second he’s outside the door, he runs into Rolo in the hall just a few steps from Lance’s door. He averts his gaze with a frown but finally opens his mouth to speak to Keith for the first time since
“Look, I uh...I’m sorry about what happened to your friend,” Rolo starts. He pulls off his beanie and squeezes it in his hands as he gets the rest out. “We...we needed supplies if we were going to survive. I didn’t think it would--no one was supposed to get hurt.”

Keith’s well aware that it was never their intention for anyone to suffer. Circumstances just ended up stacked against them.

Rolo’s party needed food so they stole it rather than kill for it, which is admirable in it’s own way. Most wouldn’t be so kind. But there was no way they could know the Summer Springs group would come to the assumption that Lance knew them. No way they could know they would take their revenge out on an innocent.

“He could have...he should have just ratted us out,” Rolo says. “It’s not like he owed us any favors.”

“Lance wouldn’t expose the clinic to the danger,” Keith tells him. “Besides...he’s not the kind to ignore those in need. He’s...hopeless like that.”


“No kidding,” Keith huffs, shaking his head. Finally, Keith’s eyes meet Rolo’s. “Thanks. For giving him blood.”

“It’s the least I could do for him,” Rolo says. “You guys saved us. Led us here. The doctors gave us all check-ups. Your captain allowed us to stay. Even promised Ariana a safe place to grow up in case anything ever happens to us. And I had the first full night of sleep since this whole disaster started,” he almost laughs. “I don’t think we’ll ever be done paying you all back for this.”

It’s easy to see how grateful Rolo is. Lance was right about the two of them. They were thieves out of necessity but now...they don’t need to steal. Strangers turned valuable allies and perhaps one day, even friends.

“Just pull your weight and you won’t have anything to worry about,” Keith reminds him.

“Aye aye, sir,” Rolo laughs, a bit more at ease after their conversation. “Look forward to working with you all,” he adds.

Rolo extends a hand for Keith to shake. Keith takes it with a firm nod and then excuses himself. Needs to visit the rec room for a cup of watered down coffee before heading out to check the snares.

When he gets there he’s surprised to see Shiro in there. He’s with Matt and Hunk, the three of them at the table and surrounding the prosthetic arm Lance brought back. Hunk is measuring it and checking it against Shiro’s functioning arm to see if they’re relatively the same length. If they’re not he can adjust it, no biggie.

Matt thinks he might be able to scrounge together enough wires and such to get it charged up again. He’s also looking at the connecting point and commenting on whether or not they can build a socket for Shiro. If they can he’s going to have to have secondary surgery for it. It’ll be painful but...they have plenty of drugs now. It could be a matter of months and Shiro will have a functioning arm again.

Nyma is in the corner with Ariana, playing with her to keep her occupied while the adults talk. Reading some of the construction books out to her even though they make no sense to a two-year-old whatsoever. All she has to do is say it in a sing-songy voice and the child is fooled. Instant
amusement.

Pidge is likely keeping a lookout on the roof but...it’s odd that Allura’s not here. He’d think since she’s going to be the one who’ll have to surgically attach the socket she’d want to be a part of this conversation. And it looks like Coran’s not here either.

“Where are the doctors?” Keith asks as he visits the coffee pot and pours himself a cup.


“Blood?”

“From Beezer,” Matt answers. “Rolo said the dog had been bitten several times with no ill effects. So they’re looking into the claim that he’s immune.”

“He is immune,” Nyma chimes in. Seems like the third or so time she’s had to say this with the slight annoyance in her tone.

“Doesn’t matter,” Hunk says. “She wants to look at the blood. See if it’ll help with her cure idea.”

Keith scoffs with a roll of his eyes. “You don’t actually think she’ll come up with one do you?” he asks.

“Maybe. Who knows?” Hunk shrugs. “Can’t hurt to hope, right?”

What a Lance thing to say.

“I’m heading out to check the snares,” Keith announces after draining his cup. “Any takers?”

“Me,” Nyma says as she picks up the little girl. “Matt, would you be a doll and watch Ariana for me? Pretty please?” she asks, batting her eyes.

“Y-Yeah, sure! Of course!” Matt flushes and takes the little girl into his arms. “We’ll have a great time, right Ariana?”

The girl squeals and takes a screwdriver from the table, smacking it on the surface while chanting ‘fix’ over and over.

“Thanks, Matt, you’re the sweetest,” she says and Matt nearly swoons with a dopey smile on his face.

She grabs her things and together they walk in silence to the front door. Hunk joins them so he can latch the gate behind them for safety reasons. Keith calls up to Pidge who signals that the way is clear. They exit with their weapons and Hunk closes the gate behind them, locking it and going back inside. Pidge’ll call him back on the walky when she sees them heading back.

Another uneventful snare search. Two have been triggered but caught nothing. Keith resets them as Nyma keeps watch.

“Want to check the woods?” she asks.

They could use a little more meat. He’s wanted to ask Hunk about making Lance that hedgehog goulash he’s always raving about. There’s something he’s been wanting to do for Lance but he wants to set the mood. The way Lance would if he wanted to make a romantic gesture. And what he wants to do is very romantic. So, Keith nods as he fixes up the snare and the head towards the forest edge with her.
Rolo and Nyma have been settling in with them faster than he thought. Nyma is quick to adjust to a team setting. He remembers her saying something about being a part of a group before so maybe she’s just falling into her role from before they were exiled with a child. Hunting food and taking care of minor injuries.

He hasn’t seen much of Rolo around but he’s heard from the others that he’s made plenty of repairs around the clinic already. Fixed windows, unjammed old locks, reinforced doors in the event of emergencies. Hunk says he’s getting around to building them a smoker so they can cure meats. It’ll make surviving during lulls in available prey or poor harvests that much easier.

Before they know it they’ll have their own little fully functioning community.

Maybe he was too cynical before, thinking they could only live a year out here without Garrison help. That they’d all die starving, weak, and without a roof over their heads. When Keith imagined a future it was bleak, steeped in death and pain and blood.

But now, for the first time in years...he’s feeling optimistic. Hopeful. They could live out here for several years. High protective walls. Gardens full of food. Plenty of equipment for jarring and canning for the offseason thanks to their supply run. Weapons they can hunt with without wasting ammo.

Safe. As safe as it’ll ever get out here.

When they return with a dead rabbit they hand it off to Hunk. Nyma returns to her role as caretaker for Ariana, taking her from Matt with a thank you and a sweet kiss to his cheek. The techy nearly short circuits, spending the next several minutes stuttering and repeating his aborted sentences with crimson cheeks.

Keith goes to check on Lance. Still asleep with no sign of waking any time soon. So in the meantime, he goes up to the roof. He can take over for Pidge long enough that she can get a snack. They trade off and he takes his place up on the hunter’s blind with the binoculars.

With the new wall, they have very little to worry about anymore. A good nine to ten feet surrounding the entrance and a path down to the gardens. Two separate doors, one made to be heavy and easy to reinforce to keep rotters and more out. That’s the one to access the parking lot. The other is just as strong but smaller for a single person to get in an out to the garden.

Speaking of, the garden is looking great. The new wooden perimeter fence on it, all but hides it from the road. Can’t see into it from anywhere except the hunter’s blind. They even put up posts to support the fence walls in the event that anything manages to get through the pasture fence and push on it. Shouldn’t be an issue though since cars have been moved in front of the pasture fence too. That’s a lot of obstacle for a deadhead and, usually, they get taken care of long before they get over the cars.

Allura and Coran replanted all their big crops down in the garden already. Up on the roof is the start of another small garden with the seeds Lance got them. Nothing but the beginnings of sprouts now but with time they’ll have even more food. And then they’ll get transplanted down into the garden with the rest.

The chickens have a little wired off path to wander during the day. Eating pests and bugs. The fat little fluffballs have taken to Pidge and obey her when she shoos them into cat carriers at night. Once gathered they’re brought inside to sleep then released again once the sun is up. Eventually they’ll have to make a coop but for now it suffices.
At the moment, Rolo’s down in the garden working with Hunk. On the smoker they talked about. In a few days, they’ll have it finalized. Everyone’s hoping Nyma and Keith will shoot them a deer when it’s ready. So they can test it out for some good old-fashioned venison jerky. The thought makes Keith’s mouth water and it reminds him of Lance.

*Can you imagine? Meat that didn’t come from a can?*

Keith smiles at the memory of Lance’s beaming, excited face. He stays up there for another hour before Shiro comes to relieve him. The former captain’s been wanting to contribute more to the group. He can’t do any heavy lifting or actual physical work yet but a lookout needn’t do anything but sit. Perfect job to make someone start to feel useful again.

“How’s he doing?” Shiro asks Keith as he comes down from the blind.

“You could check on him yourself,” Keith says once at the bottom. He hands over the binoculars and Shiro hooks the strap around his neck.

“But you get to talk to him. He tells you what he won’t tell Allura,” Shiro says. “She’s been a little worried because he won’t admit to any pain even though it’s clearly there.”

“He doesn’t like the painkillers,” Keith explains. “Make him nauseous. And he’d rather have pain than someone cleaning up his vomit.”

“Hmm,” Shiro nods. “Other than that?”

“He’s restless. He wants to get out of the room,” Keith says, his arms crossed. “Not that he’d get far without falling on his face.”

“I know the feeling,” Shiro chuckles. “And you?”

“How are you?” Shiro asks, nodding at his hand.

The injury from the crossbow has been healing. Slowly. It’s only been a week since he got it but it’s down to a dull ache. And with painkillers at night he hardly notices it at all. In another week or two it’ll be fine.

“Healing,” Keith says. “I’ll be at a hundred again soon.”

“Alpha--,” Shiro starts.

“--Only the best,” Keith finishes with a smirk. “Radio in when you get tired, Shiro. Pidge will take over again.”

Keith steps across the roof, his hands in his pockets. He comes to a stop at the door and fidgets with the contents of his pockets. Shiro notices and waits a few seconds before inquiring.

“Something wrong, Keith?”

“No...but I...” Keith swallows then turns. “I have a question.”

*****

Lance wakes to find Allura standing over him, her fingers at his wrist. There’s a bowl of soup on the chair, still steaming.
“You’re awake,” she smiles. “How are you feeling?”

“Good,” Lance admits. “Did you...give me those painkillers again?” he asks, in preparation for denying the meal. He doesn’t want to eat it if she’s already given him a shot. That’ll guarantee him throwing it up.

“Yes but I lowered the dosage,” she says. “Keith says it's been making you nauseous. Could have just told me instead of pretending you were fine.”

“Didn’t want to be any trouble,” Lance shrugs. “Is that breakfast?”

“Lunch,” she tells him. “You slept through the morning. Want me to get Keith?”

“What’s he doing?” Lance wonders.

“His scheduled time of watching Ariana,” she chuckles.

Everyone takes turns watching over the young girl. Once Lance is better he’ll help too. Matt lets her play with the tools. Nyma reads to her. Pidge has tried to train her like Rover with marginal success. Ariana knows how to sit when told but not as good as Rover. Allura plays with her in the garden and Hunk holds her while he cooks.

As for Keith’s contribution...he has Ariana sit on his back while does his pushups. She likes to sit on his feet too while he does sit-ups. Holds his leg as he does pull-ups. And lastly hangs onto his neck as he goes for a run. Her favorite is the run so he usually saves it for last as it has her squealing the whole time. Tuckers her out by the time he gives her to the next person.

Lance can’t wait to be well enough to see that.

“Want me to go relieve him so you can have your paramour here to feed you?” Allura winks.

Everyone knows at this point though Allura is the only one who seems to poke fun at them about it. Her and Pidge. Everyone else just leaves it alone, worried it'll get back to Keith and the grumpy man will throttle them for their jests.

“No, he needs a break from taking care of me,” Lance shakes his head. “Seeing me like this makes him feel guilty.”

“Then I’ll help you. You’ll need all you can eat to get your strength back,” she smiles and takes a seat with the bowl.

While she feeds him, she talks about her research in the labs with Coran. Fascinating stuff that he can’t understand half of. He only assumes it’s fascinating from the look on Allura’s thrilled face. Something about lymphocytes producing antibodies and a high memory cell response. He doesn’t get it but he does nod to show he's listening at least.

“What this means for us, well, is hard to say,” she shrugs and brings him another slurp of soup. “The animal clearly survived a bite but I’m not sure how. When the virus takes hold of a human, the body ramps up the heat with a fever to try and kill the virus. But then it ends up too hot and killing the patient instead--”

“I uh, don’t need a visual,” Lance chuckles. “Seen that enough.”

“Point is, I don’t think the fever helps as it should. The body can’t get hot enough to kill the virus without killing the host. I’ve tested the heat resistance on a sample of the virus before--its just not
“possible,” Allura sighs. “And the body can’t produce antigens fast enough to fight the infection. It would need more time. Time it doesn’t have because the body is, for lack of a better word, frying itself before it gets the chance.”

“Can’t you use those uh, antigen things, from Rover? To make a weak form of the virus?” Lance asks. “Isn’t that how vaccines work? So the body can learn to fight it?”

“Haha, yes that’s how it works but...no. I would need a human who has survived a bite since animal antibodies aren’t the same as human ones,” she says. “The key is finding a human who has survived one. Or finding a way to help someone survive a bite. Maybe then I could extract the antibodies and create a vaccine.”

“Sounds like you’ve got your work cut out for you,” Lance smiles and waves off the last of the soup. He’s not particularly hungry anymore. Talking about the virus and turning brings up unpleasant memories. And he hates thinking about the possibility of one of them getting bitten. Bitten and with nothing they can do to stop it. Makes his stomach turn.

“I’m getting a little tired,” Lance says. “Can you get Keith? I want to talk to him a little before I fall asleep again.”

“Of course,” Allura smiles. “I’ll leave the rest of the soup, in case you change your mind.”

Allura takes her leave. The room and hallway are quiet for only a few moments before he hears familiar footsteps. Hard steps with a bit of urgency in them. So different from when he’s out hunting rotters. The door opens and Keith peers his head in.

“Hey there,” Lance smiles from his bed. “Sorry I missed you this morning. Guess I was tired.”

“No need to say you’re sorry,” Keith smirks. “Someone wanted to see you.”

“?”

Keith creaks open the door a bit and little Ariana stomps her way inside with a little smile. Keith must have carried her here because he didn’t hear her steps at all. She’s got a handful of colorful band-aids clutched in her little hands.

“How’s it going?” Keith asks, nodding at the half-eaten bowl. “You didn’t eat much.”

“Lost my appetite. But now that you’re here, I’m hungry all over again,” Lance winks suggestively.

“I’ll bet,” Keith snorts.

“All better!” Ariana exclaims after pasting a forth band-aid on Lance’s cheek.

“Yes, all better! Thank you Doctor Ariana!” Lance grins at her.
“Go now,” Ariana says tugging on his arm to try and pull him off the bed. “Play.”

“Lo siento chica,” Lance shakes his head with a chuckle. “It’s Uncle Lance’s naptime so no play. Do you need to go nap too?”

Ariana gives him a frown to rival all frowns. She knows the word and naptime is not something she wants to do, clearly. She shakes her head resolutely making her little black curls bounce emphatically. The sight makes both men chuckle a little.

“No,” she says sternly while pointing at him.

“She’s been using that a lot lately,” Keith admits. “Mostly in regards to being told what to do.”

“Hmm, wonder who she picked that up from?” Lance jokes.

“Not me,” Keith asserts.


“Nap. No,” she repeats in a tone very similar to Pidge’s and the both of them laugh.

“She’s just like my cousin. Couldn’t tell her anything either. Oh I know,” Lance snaps and levels a smile at the girl. “Do you like music, Ariana? Want me to hum you a song before you go play more?”

Ariana has a considering look. As considering a look as a two-year-old can have. After a moment she nods with a smile. Yes, a song sounds like fun and she does want to go play more. So Lance gestures her closer and she sits in the crook of his arm.

“Watch a master work,” Lance winks.

He hums a lively little tune. Something playful and latin that has the girl bouncing a little. He throws in a few phrases in Spanish that have her clapping a little with a giggle. But the next tune is a little slower by a smidge. It has Ariana swaying her head from side to side with a smile but by now Keith sees what he’s doing.

The song after that one gets even slower and Ariana’s eyes start to droop. She’s trying valiantly to stay awake. The final tune is the slowest and she starts to nestle into Lance’s shoulder. Her tiny fingers holding his scrub shirt. Before Lance even finishes she’s gone, her little body rising and falling with soft breaths as she sleeps.

“Told you...” Lance yawns. “I’m...amazing...”

“Sure are,” Keith nods with a smirk.

Keith thinks to take her while she’s asleep and hand her off to Hunk but...Lance is drifting off too. His head tilting to lean on hers before he lets out a deep sigh. The two of them look entirely too comfortable to bother either of them. Maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to have Ariana take her nap time with Lance from now on so he doesn’t feel so lonely.

Keith wonders...Does she remind Lance of home? Of the family he left behind? And does Lance remind Ariana of anyone she lost? Does she even remember her parents? Or are they a thought so distant that she can’t connect herself to them any longer?

Doesn’t matter. All that matters is the little smiles on their faces now as they sleep. All that matters is
With a soft look, Keith fixes up the blanket on the two of them and settles back into the chair. He reaches over and takes Lance’s leftover soup, eating it quietly so it doesn’t go to waste, all the while watching over the slumbering duo.

*****

Nyma comes and retrieves Ariana after two hours. Just scoops her up and thanks Keith for making her take a nap. He says it was all Lance’s doing and she hums that maybe they should put Lance into the schedule for nap time since he had such an easy time of it. Keith can’t say he disagrees so he’ll discuss it with Lance when he wakes next.

“He’s looking better,” Nyma admits, bouncing little Ariana on her hip.

“Yeah,” Keith nods while looking over him.

“The other day, Hunk caught him trying to get out the bed. To start walking,” she says.

That sounds like Lance. Being so cooped up doesn’t sit well with him. Probably going a little stir crazy.

“He’s lucky it wasn’t the Doctor who caught him. She’d have reamed him, I think,” Nyma smirks. “He’s at least another week off from trying that shit. And another three from trying it alone.”

He should probably talk to Lance about that. If he gets up and moves around too soon he’ll just make his injuries worse. Then he’ll have to stay in bed even longer. Keith doesn’t want that at all. Maybe he should grab the playing cards from the rec room. A little Gin to help keep him from getting too bored in here.

Nyma thanks him again and slips out with Ariana, leaving Keith to the room by himself. Finally. Keith carefully scoots Lance over a little so as not to wake him or agitate his wounds, then crawls into the cot. He won’t stay long, as he has to go check the snares again before nightfall, but a moment next to Lance’s warm body is sorely needed. Keith drapes his arm over Lance’s stomach and inhales deeply at neck with a content sigh.

Smells good. Yesterday he got a sponge bath from Allura. Keith would have done it himself but he wasn’t sure he could trust himself to behave. And he’s not sure Lance could behave either. Stitches would definitely get pulled and no one would be a happy camper.

Keith plants a few kisses at his jawline. Light ones that he hopes won’t rouse Lance from his sleep. No dice.

“Hmm...mmm...” Lance mumbles and tilts his head onto Keith’s. “Lobe...you...” he slurs.

“I...love you too,” Keith whispers quietly. “Sleep.”

“Mmm...don stop...more kisses,” Lance sighs.

“Later,” Keith insists. “I’ll be back after dinner.”

“Okay...we’ll do...somthin later?” Lance asks, yawning again and nosing Keith’s hair. “Naughty?”

“We’ll see,” Keith snorts at Lance’s good memory, even in the midst of painkillers fogging his head and slurring his words. “Now sleep.”
He doesn’t have to be told again. Lance drifts away, his nose buried in Keith’s hair as he returns to sleep. Keith stays for another fifteen minutes, hand rubbing gently on Lance’s chest. He feels the bandages and thinks about the stitches underneath.

One more week and they can come out but that doesn’t mean Lance can go running about, even if his ankle wasn’t horribly sprained. Allura says he’ll be allowed to do very short walks with assistance by then. Lance is looking forward to it. He’s sick and tired of using a bedpan and having others clean up after him, even though no one begrudges him for it.

Lance doesn’t want to be burden on anyone for longer than needed.


With that he glides his fingers through Lance’s hair once more before extracting himself from the bed and returning to his duties.

****

Hunk brought Lance his dinner tonight. Keith would do it every time but he understands that Lance’s friends want to spend time with him too. He’s not the only one with a soft spot for their team sniper.

When Keith finishes his dinner he joins Pidge at a table for a little game of connect-four, one of the board games he and Lance found on their excursion. It’s simple, it’s quick, and it’s easy to walk away from when Hunk returns with his plate, mostly cleared of its contents.

“How’d it go?” Pidge asks as she drops a black disc into a slot.

“He didn’t eat much but more than usual,” Hunk shrugs. “He’s a little out of it. Allura prescribed him a new painkiller. Don’t know how much longer he’ll be awake for.”

Then he should go now.

Keith excuses himself with a simple nod. He doesn’t need anything more than that for the others to know where he’s going. Pidge gives him a knowing smirk but no one else comments on it. Shiro shoots a ‘good luck’ thumbs up his way and Keith wishes he wouldn’t. If one needs good luck, then that means there’s the possibility of failure.

And he really doesn’t like thinking about failing. Anything or anyone.

Keith strides down the quiet halls, his steps echoing off the walls. His fingers tighten nervously around the object in his pocket. He gives the door a gentle knock as a warning before opening and entering.

Lance is laying out comfortably on the cot, one hand stretched above him against the wall and the other on his stomach. Eyes closed with a content look on his face, like he’s lounging on a hot beach. He thought after sleeping all day that Lance might have more energy but...maybe it’s still too soon. And with the new painkiller he might need time to adjust again.

Keith thinks to give him a little time and space, maybe go play a round of poker with Shiro before returning to sleep for the night.

“Where y’ going?” Lance mumbles groggily, his eyes lidded and tired.

Sometimes the painkillers do that to him. Make him slur a little and unfocus his gaze. Keith’s not a
fan as it reminds him of the car ride back again. Like Lance is going to pass out and never wake up. Just the thought sends an icy cold shiver down his back.

The dazedness doesn’t last too long. Lance sits up and wipes at his eyes, blinking them a little and making him more alert. He clears his throat and smiles weakly.

“Not leaving already are you? Not that I mind the view,” Lance winks.

“I thought maybe you’d like more sleep,” Keith shrugs. “You’ve been out of it all day.”

“Just trying to keep my strength up for you,” Lance says and pats the bed. “Wanna make out?” he asks hopefully.

“Sure,” Keith says but when he takes a seat on the bed he bites his lip nervously.

“What’s wrong?” Lance asks. “Keith, you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Keith says and swallows down his nerves. “I uh...have something. For you.”

“Like food or something? Cause I’m not hun--”

“No, a...it’s a gift,” Keith interrupts and a look of surprise graces Lance’s features.

Lance blinks wide, his curiosity more than piqued. He digs an elbow into the cot with a wince and with a little help from Keith manages to sit up with his back to the wall to support him. For all the good it does. Lance abandons the support to lean forward with interest.

“A present? For me? From you?” Lance asks, his smile growing more incredulous as he goes. “We should label this day as Incident Four, it’s so monumental,” he jokes.

“Shut up...do you want it or not?” Keith huffs with a frown.

“Want it?” Lance grins and Keith’s heart stutters at that spark in his eyes. “Are you kidding? I’m not going back to sleep until I see it!”

Lance fidgets in his spot on the bed with barely concealable anticipation. He can’t remember the last time anyone got him something. At least three or more birthdays ago. He hasn’t been this excited since--well, since Keith gave him the pack of Big Red. It makes him wonder...what could Keith have brought him?

Something they found on their run but he failed to notice Keith pick up? Or something he made? Oh if it turns out the gift is Keith wearing that rope harness under his clothes again...Lance just might faint but he certainly won’t complain. He might even make another attempt at climbing out of the bed to press Keith to a wall--sprained ankle and broken ribs be damned.

But Keith doesn’t start removing his shirt and he doesn’t leave the room to retrieve this mysterious present. No, he just shifts anxiously on the bed for a moment while his hand delves into his pocket. It looks as though Keith has the object in his grasp but the look on his face shows hesitance. Hesitance and a slight nervous flush on his frowning face as if he’s worried that Lance will hate the gift.

“Give me your hand,” Keith mumbles, gesturing for it with his free hand.

Lance gives it to him, palm up with a curious look on his face. Keith pulls the item and puts it into his hand. A box, tied with what looks like a shoestring knotted into an intricate bow. It actually looks like a legitimate gift.
“Shiro says...presents should come wrapped so...” Keith huffs with that tinge of pink growing. He clears his throat and averts his gaze before adding, “Hope you like it.”

“What is it?” Lance asks as he unties the bow. As intricate as it looks it doesn’t require much to unfurl. Good, since his fingers still aren’t exactly up to the task.

“It’s the real reason I wanted to go back to the pharmacy,” Keith admits, his head bowing a little. He pulls and tugs at his fingers in nervousness. “Not sure it was worth it...considering my going back for it ended with you getting--”

“Stop,” Lance scolds as he pauses in his unwrapping. “I already told you that wasn’t your fault. Now shut up about--”

Lance stops talking as his gaze falls on the contents of the box. His eyes widen and his jaw drops in disbelief. He blinks, mute at the sight of the objects he pulls out. His fingers lace through the rings of the keychains and pulls the two bottles up to dangle in front of his face before he rolls his wrist to lay them flat on his palm. Lance’s breathing is so quiet one would think he wasn’t breathing at all.

Keith’s heart drops into his stomach when he sees tears roll down those tanned cheeks, cutting little rivers into his face. Lance is crying. He always knew this was a possibility with how sentimental Lance is but he wasn’t prepared for it. Seeing Lance cry for any reason makes his chest hurt, more so when he feels like he’s the source of misfortune.

“Lance--I didn’t--” Keith stammers as he tries to explain.

“What?” Lance blinks as he looks up at Keith. He recognizes the guilt in Keith’s eyes and is quick to reassure. “Oh! Oh no, no. Keith, it’s fine! I’m fine!” he promises as he chuckles and wipes his face with the back of his hand.

“Then...you like it?” Keith asks hopefully, some measure of relief returning to his face.

“This--” Lance gestures to the bottles in his hand. “--is easily the coolest thing I’ve see in years. I...ha...look at that. Has my name on it. Yours too,” he smiles fondly. “This--” he sniffs and wipes his face again. “Oh man, I don’t...I don’t know what I’m crying for. This is awesome. More than worth almost dying for.”

“Lance,” Keith frowns, unamused.

“Come here,” Lance says, beckoning him closer for a hug. Keith scoots and allows himself to be drawn in for as strong as a hug that Lance can muster which is pretty strong for someone who was almost dead a week ago.

“So I did good, I guess,” Keith guesses with a smirk as he hugs Lance back, warmth filling his chest.

“You did perfect. More than perfect,” Lance whispers into Keith’s neck, his voice overcome with emotion but fighting the desire to cry again. He pulls back and wipes his eyes again before leveling a smile at Keith. “Do I keep them both? Or is one for you?”

“They’re yours,” Keith nods. “Do whatever you want with them.”

“Can you hand me my notebook?” Lance asks, nodding at his jacket on the chair.

Keith grabs it and pulls it out, tossing it onto the bed with Lance’s pen. With the most gleeful look on his face, Lance flips through the pages to the most recent list and crosses of ‘sand’. He beams at the page and lets out a content sigh.
“Now I need a new impossible item for my list,” Lance starts and then chuckles. “But knowing you, you’d find it out in that wasteland out there without trouble at all.”

“Don’t add a cowboy hat,” Keith tells him and Lance grins incredulously. “I uh...found one for you. For when you’re...better.”

“Nice,” Lance waggles his brow and puts the sand bottles on the crate next to the cot.

He then walks his fingers across Keith’s shoulders and into his hair. Slides those digits through thick strands and pulls Keith closer. Lance bumps his nose against Keith’s with a chuckle before pressing their lips together. Several soft kisses later and Lance is whispering in his ear.

“You said maybe we’d do something tonight” Lance reminds him. “And my bag is here...has everything we need.”

“But you’re still—”

“Shhh,” Lance hushes him. “Don’t worry about me, you’ll be doing all the work. Now, be good and lock the door.”

When Keith doesn’t immediately move Lance flexes his fingers tight into his hair, pressing his nose into Keith’s rapidly rising pulse as he sighs. Oh, he’s missed this and Lance’s grip does seem stronger than usual. All that sleep today has given him more than enough energy. He may not be able to get out of the bed but he can still assert some authority.

“Don’t make me repeat myself, cadet,” Lance threatens and electric warmth shoots down Keith’s spine.

“Yes...sir,” Keith breathes and Lance lets his hair go.

Keith rises from the cot and locks the door. Not that they really need to. This late at night no one else will come visiting but making him turn the bolt--the click sends a shiver down his back and the atmosphere in the room changes. The air is charged and heat prickles at the back of his neck. Keith returns to the cot and Lance eyes him up and down.

“Unbutton your pants, nice and slow,” Lance tells him and Keith does so. “Good. Lower them. Further. That’s it.”

Keith’s hands feel hot. Just as hot as his face. It’s been over a week since they attempted anything even close to this. Lance tried reaching into his pants once a few days ago but had to stop the minute he tried shifting in the bed, biting back a cry of pain and forcing himself to stop. He’d looked so weak and defeated then but now…Lance’s eyes are a fire raking over Keith’s body.

“Pants and underwear to your ankles and kneel,” Lance commands and Keith does so. “What a nice kneel...You miss being on your knees for me? Answer.”

“Yes,” Keith breathes out with a nod. Part of him wants to grab his exposed cock and start stroking the semi into full hardness but he keeps his hands to himself.

“Grab the lube, front pocket, and get yourself nice and slick,” Lance instructs, licking his lips while Keith does as he’s told. “Good, now take a finger and slide it into that pretty ass of yours. Just one though. My slut has to earn more than that.”

*My slut.* God does Keith love when he says that. Makes his stomach do flips and warms his face.
He wants to shed his jacket and shirt but Lance didn’t say he could. He’s got to follow all these instructions with his pants at his ankles and no other state of undress. Almost feels humiliating to play with himself like this, like he couldn’t be bothered to wait to disrobe and went straight to trying to satisfying himself.

Keith bends his hand back and slides a single finger between his cheeks before curling it inside with a shivering sigh. It’s been so long since he’s touched himself. He pumps the finger slowly, taking shallow breaths as his eyes find Lance’s watching him as he works.

“Good boy,” Lance praises and Keith has to swallow back a noise in his throat.

He’s never cared for praise until Lance. Now it makes him weak in the knees just as much as being insulted does. It’s a different feeling but just as potent. The humiliation makes him feel small and needy but the praise...the praise makes him feel eager and high. His cock twitches, getting a bit harder under Lance’s watchful eyes as he continues to finger himself for Lance.

“Another. Put another in,” a flushed Lance commands, his good hand palming over his own slowly building hard-on.

Keith does as he’s told, pulls his single finger out and presses two back in with a low sound in his throat. One of several masked moans as he stretches himself.

“That’s a good slut,” Lance praises. “So good.”

“L-Lance,” Keith gasps out, his breath getting heavier now.

“Doing so good for me,” Lance sighs, his cheeks flushing as his eyes fall onto Keith’s so far untouched cock twitching between his legs. “Can’t wait to be the one doing that to you again. Making you fall apart under me. Weak and desperate for my touch.”

Keith lets out another weak noise listening to that.

“Stay on your knees but come closer,” Lance points to the spot. “Press that pretty face into the mattress for me to see up close.”

Keith leans forward, scooting closer to the cot all while his fingers continue to slide in and out of his ass. He lays a cheek on the mattress and looks up at Lance as he breathes in little gasps. Lance twists his fingers into Keith’s hair at the roots and flexes them nice and tight eliciting another weak noise from Keith. His eyes flutter open and hone in on Lance’s hard-on raising a bump in the blanket. Subconsciously his mouth parts and his tongue wets his lips.

“Want to suck on something? Hungry little slut?” Lance asks and Keith nods.

Lance removes his hold on Keith’s hair and plunges those fingers into Keith’s panting mouth. Keith lets out a grateful sigh as his lips wrap around fingers, tongue lapping at the tips, and sucking hard as his eyes lid.

“Leave your mouth open,” Lance says, biting onto his lip. “I love seeing you drool like the cock hungry mess you are.”

“L-Lanc--” he tries but gets cut off as Lance pins his tongue down with his thumb.

“No one said you could talk,” Lance reminds him. “Now add another finger slut. You know you want to.”
Keith obeys. He presses a third finger in with a moan he can’t hold back this time. Pants and drools into the mattress as he slowly fingers himself.

“Fuck...you look so good. Before you know it...it’ll be my cock inside you again, filling you up to dripping,” Lance says, his voice breathy.

Keith mewls at that and massages deeper but avoids his prostate. He’ll come instantly if he touches there right now. His spit is trailing down his chin thanks to Lance propping his mouth open. Means every single little noise he makes can’t be held back behind his lips.

“Your other hand--put it on your cock but don’t stroke. Not yet,” Lance instructs.

That is so much harder than it sounds. Instinct has him gripping tight on his swelling (and now dripping) cock but it takes all he has not to start pulling. He wants to be good and obedient. For his Lance.

“You’ve been so well behaved. Is there something you want?” Lance says and lets Keith's mouth go.

“Y-Yes,” Keith gasps. “C-Can I use the dildo?”

“Mmmm,” Lance bites in on his lip, his eyes closed at the delicious image. “You want to fuck onto a nice cock, huh? Going to pretend you’re riding on me?”


“Permission granted,” Lance tells him and jerks his head in the direction of his bag. “But you come right back here...I want to see your face.”

Keith removes his fingers with a moan and clambers over to the bag. Unzips and searches for the dildo Lance used on him back at their hideout. He finds it easily. Big, thick, and solid black. There’s a suction cup at the bottom. It won’t be as good as Lance but...

He lubes it up and suctions it to the linoleum floor right next to Lance’s cot. Perfect spot to be nice and close to Lance as he fucks himself on it. He climbs over and lines himself up before sliding slowly down on it with a ragged moan. So good. So full. If he closes his eyes--he’s pressing down onto Lance and with the way Lance lets out a groan, it’s not hard to imagine it’s actually happening.

“Oh...oh Keith...God, I wish...that were me,” Lance swallows as sits up and leans in. He winces a little but ignores the pain so he can lay a wet hungry kiss onto his lips. “I want you come like this...thinking about me inside you, begging me to fill you up,” Lance tells him. “Now you ride hard and fast. Rock onto it like the desperate needy fucking slut we both know you are.”

With a great moan, Keith rolls his hips and pumps his cock vigorously. Thinks about riding Lance with his hands on his hips to guide him into going faster, dropping harder. That cock thrusting up as Keith writhes with his hands tied behind him, unable to do anything but let Lance fuck up into him. When he imagines Lance unloading inside him Keith’s moaning transforms into a whine.

“I-L-Lance...f-fuck…” he gasps.

“I’m watching you...you’re doing so good,” Lance praises, fingers grasping tight handfuls of hair. He’s breathing in his scent with a heady sigh. “I want to fuck you so bad, Keith,” he rasps, voice full of longing.

Keith whimpered as his hand pumps and his hips rock to reach deeper. Lance keeps going, whispering in his ear.
“I want to...pull you into the bed and pound you into the mattress. Knees to your chest. Hands bound behind you. Want to fuck you so hard that the cot breaks when you come,” Lance says, his fingers petting through his hair.

“God...L-Lance...I...”

“And after I finished inside you I’d lick you clean,” Lance sighs. “Mmmm, you always taste so good, Keith. My Keith. My... star.”

That does it. Keith can’t stop himself. Those words out of Lance’s mouth ramp every sensation up tenfold and Keith lets out a choked cry as he releases, splattering the floor with come. His body shakes as Lance holds his face, absorbing that look on Keith’s face as he whimpers. He kisses at his sweating forehead, his hot cheeks, and the drool slicked corners of his mouth as Keith breathes heavy from the chemical rush.

“Ah...S-Sorry,” Keith apologizes. “Hah...I couldn’t--”

“Looks like I found your ultimate weakness,” Lance winks and Keith lets out a weak pathetic huff of laughter with a quick nod.

Lance badly wants to get off too but too much heavy breathing could spell disaster for him. That little display already has him a little lightheaded, his chest a little tight. And that was just from watching. If he asked Keith to blow him now, he’s not sure it would end well for either of them.

There’s always next time.

“That’s a good boy,” Lance praises Keith gently petting his hair and the praise elicits another weak sigh from Keith as he presses his face into Lance’s thigh for more heavy breaths. “Is there any on your hands?”

“Ah...hah...a...little. Yeah,” Keith swallows, trying to compose himself.

“Give it here,” Lance gestures and Keith drops his hand into his. Lance licks his salty fingers while smiling, sucking digits into his mouth with a content sigh. “You did so good, Keith,” he says when finished and lays another wet open mouth kiss on Keith’s lips. “And look, I didn’t collapse a lung.”

“This time,” Keith points out.

“Give me another week,” Lance promises. “I’ll be ready for something more by then.”

“We’ll see about that,” Keith snorts and begins cleaning up.

Once he’s swiped the floor of the mess, Keith tucks away their toys and lube into the bag. He’ll clean the dildo tomorrow during his wash time. It’s not like he has the energy to do it right now anyway. No, he’d much rather just crawl into bed with Lance and go to sleep.

So Keith changes into scrubs to ready for bed. Lance moves over on the cot to allow for him to lay down and curl into Lance’s body. The moment he’s down and comfortable, Lance’s fingers comb through and pet Keith’s wild locks, smoothing them back and away from his face. Keith relaxes into the touch with an exhausted sigh.

“Feel better?” Lance asks, pressing a kiss to his forehead.

“Much.” Keith sighs, his eyes closed and soon he’ll be drifting away on the floaty feeling of satisfaction. “Sorry you couldn’t--”
“It’s fine, I can wait,” Lance assures him. “Kinda have to.”

“I’ll give you a blowjob in a week,” Keith says, arching into those scratching fingers with a groan.

“Won’t say no to that but I want a bath first. A real one,” Lance clarifies. He’s tired of this sponge bullshit and the last thing he wants is Keith putting Lance’s dick in his mouth without fully washing up first.


“Night,” Lance smiles, his eyes fondly looking over Keith’s face. He leans in and whispers quietly into his ear. “Dulces sueños mi astro brillante.”

Keith’s heart still hiccups when he hears that. Despite his efforts to look asleep, his face betrays him with a vibrant flush. Lance chuckles and kisses his cheek before resting his head against Keith’s.

Lance slips into dreams faster than Keith even though initially he was ready to pass out. He blames those sweet nothings in his ear which have ramped up his heart again. It should feel embarrassing to have some kind of pet name but...Keith instead feels deliriously happy. A bright star. Lance’s shining star.

He clutches himself closer to Lance and whispers back quieter than a mouse.

“I love you...my star...”

Lance is long asleep so maybe Keith’s just imagining it but...he swears at his words Lance’s mouth curls a little into a smile and his arms hold him a little closer.

Chapter End Notes

If you like the chapter, give it a kudos! If you really like it, leave a comment! Don't know what to say?
Tell me your favorite part. Or your favorite line. Leave nothing but hearts. Or just smash the keyboard with your face. Anything to show you appreciate the work will do. Writers love that shit.

IMPORTANT NOTE: I am periodically still on tumblr. Rangoatemybabynsfw. And my Twitter is https://twitter.com/RangoAte but I still don't know how to use it much. Haha, I'm old.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!