Terminal Velocity

by speaks

Summary

The only fate worse than being tortured to death is watching, helpless, while the person you love most takes your place.

Notes

OOOOO BOI this story has been in the works for almost seven months now. Hope you enjoy it cause it cost me an arm and a leg to write. If you're here because of my other VLD fics, hi! :) Special shoutout to @watermelonhiccups on tumblr for supporting me through the writer's block. You are so sweet.

My tumblr is @speakswords if any of you ever have anything to tell me, or ask me, etc. And if you want to get a feel for the vibe of the initial setting, just run a quick google image search for Junji Ito (but trypophobes beware). Major violence warning, but no death, I promise.

See the end of the work for more notes.

Descending into the subterranean cavern was like walking into the mouth of a beast. Darkness
swallowed them like an ancient Lovecraftian horror, wet and dark and reeking of earthy petrichor. The word ‘earthy’ came to mind unbidden and Keith had to sigh at the irony. They were on a dwarf planet called Orna that lurked on an outer arm of a galaxy more than seven billion light years from Earth; this cavern couldn’t have been less ‘earthy’ if it tried.

Hearing Keith’s sigh, Lance huffed dramatically. “Oh, my bad, am I boring you?” Leave it to Lance to joke around in a place like this. Even though Lance was walking directly beside Keith, the sarcastic whisper also came through on Channel 2 on the comm in Keith’s helmet.

Keith had long since grown used to the other paladins’ voices clamoring in his ear on Channel 1, but it was always different when it was Lance, even more so when they were paired up for missions like this. For some unknowable reason Lance insisted on opening a private comm link between them every time, separate from the team’s main channel. Being alone like this, not just physically but also over the radio… it was strangely intimate, especially on stealth missions where they were forced to whisper into their mics instead of speaking to each other outright.

Not for the first time, Keith wondered if Lance did this with the others too when he was paired up with them.

“No,” Keith said, eyes darting after a flash of movement in the dark. It was already gone. Probably just a bug, or some kind of Ornan ground rodent. “It’s just… this place is creepy.”

“Of course it’s creepy,” Lance agreed readily, shoving at a tangle of slimy root until Keith took pity and slashed it out of Lance’s way with his sword. “I’ve been saying that for the last thirty minutes! It’s like a Junji Ito nightmare in here. At this point I’m gonna have to go into a healing pod just to get rid of my goosebumps.”

A short laugh puffed through Keith’s nose as they stepped together through the fresh hole in the roots, over a particularly pungent colony of fluorescent orange mushrooms. He had no idea who Junji Ito was, but after thirty-plus minutes in this place Keith could hazard a guess what the man’s nightmares looked like. The mushrooms came alive with a pulsing psychedelic lightshow as Keith’s wristlight crossed over them, like fish in the deep, and only once they had passed them did the mushrooms slip back into the charcoal sea.

Every step had to be calculated in this environment, where the floors and walls and ceiling were covered in a blanket of thick, trunk-like roots, hung and stretched across bedrock and imperfect crystal. Far above them on the surface was an organism much like a tree, save for the fact that it was ten times taller and wider than the largest trees Earth had to offer. The space and soil between the roots created a patchwork of ‘caverns’ where Lance and Keith and the other paladins were currently sneaking, on a pest control mission for their newest ally. They’d come to this isolated village in response to a distress signal, only to find the Galra scouting ship already on its way out, as if something had scared them off. It had unsettled Team Voltron, to say the least. What had scared off the soldiers whose mantra was “victory or death?”

What was scarier than death?

They didn’t have to wonder long. The villagers were forthcoming with the information that a frightening creature plagued their home in the dead of night: a beastlike empath that emerged from the ground to feed on the civilians’ dread as it terrorized them one by one, picking and choosing random people to kidnap and bring back to its den beneath the forest floor.

Now, a creature that fed on emotion rather than flesh didn’t sound all that scary to Keith. However, the ease with which the Galra scouts had given this village a pass and the way the villagers spoke of the empath all in hushed tones were enough to give Keith pause. Back at the village he and Lance
had shot each other apprehensive looks as Shiro and Allura vowed to exterminate the creature in exchange for the village joining the Coalition and pledging beside them in arms. It seemed an easy deal. After all, they had defeated enemies far greater than some bloodthirsty animal.

But whether they were afraid of it or not, the grave look that had hung on the vice chief’s face as the paladins set out toward the forest was enough to keep them all vigilant through the slimy darkness.

Channel 1—the team channel—lit up then on their comms, accompanied by Hunk’s voice. “Hey so uhhh, Keith? Lance? Either of you wanna trade spots with me? Not that I’m scared. But, I’m getting hella bad vibes from this place and I’ll be honest, I’m not excited to find this guy.”

“You can’t leave, Hunk,” came Shiro’s sure and steady voice, “we need to stick together. It’ll be alright. It’s three against one, and once Keith and Lance find those nests it’ll be a breeze.”

“Like taking candy from a baby,” Pidge joked.

“I dunno,” Lance joked back, “I’ve tried to take candy from you before, Pidge, and it was not as easy as the idiom suggests.”

“Yeah,” Pidge sneered, “you’re damn right it wasn’t— Wait, HEY!” she complained, and Shiro had to shush her gently.

“But seriously, don’t sweat it, Hunk,” Lance interjected. “I’m pretty sure Keith and I are getting close to the nests now. This part of the cavern has been well-travelled.”

“Okay,” he continued, obviously still sweating it but a little placated by Lance’s confidence. “But next time you two have to go after the psycho murderer and I get to go after the not-psycho-murderer inanimate object.”

Lance and Keith shared a brief amused glance, barely visible by the faint blue lightstrips on their armor and the back-glow of their wristlights, which were pointed at the ground. It was true, though, that the other three paladins had taken the harder job by far. When they entered the cavern Lance and Keith had split off to search for the empath’s two nests, as described by the village council, where all of the empath’s energy was stored as he stole it from his victims. Kill one nest and he is weakened, the vice chief had informed them. Kill both and he is powerless. It would have been safer to destroy both nests prior to flushing out the creature, but with the village chief as the most recent of the abductees, time was a dire factor. So Shiro, Hunk, and Pidge had gone after the empath himself — Salasa, the vice chief had hissed with venom, although Keith had come away with the impression that it wasn’t the empath’s name, but in fact an alien curse word. If it was, the translator chip in his ear hadn’t translated it. Whenever that happened, it was because there was no functional equivalent in English. It must have been a pretty specific curse.

With Hunk somewhat mollified, Channel 1 went dormant again. Lance and Keith also lapsed into silence as they continued their trek through the underground labyrinth. It was slow going, not only because of the hanging roots that impeded their progress (which Keith hacked through with his bayard) but also because they were constantly on the hunt for clues as to the empath’s nests. Every so often they came across mushrooms that had clearly been trampled underfoot, and they did their best to follow these ‘footprints.’ They took turn-off after turn-off, sometimes doubling back, sometimes hazarding pure guesses when the trail went cold and breathing sighs of relief whenever it picked up again. They had been traveling in near-silence for almost ten more minutes when Channel 1 flared to life again like a spray of bullets. Lance and Keith both jumped at the noise, looking to each other in panic.

“—outnumbered,” Pidge’s voice rang out, though it was garbled by what sounded like the electric
buzz of her bayard. Hunk was yelling something unintelligible somewhere near her, and although Keith couldn’t understand what he was saying, it was so loud he could have sworn he heard it echoing faintly in the tunnels outside the radio.

“What’s going on?” Keith rushed. “Where are you? Do you need backup?”

“It’s the missing villagers,” Hunk shouted back. “They’ve been zombified or something! We can’t hurt them—”

“Where are you?” Lance repeated. “Send coordinates, we’ll find you.”

“No,” Shiro grunted, and the unmistakable battle sounds continued under his voice. “No, don’t come after us. Find the nests! I don’t think we—”

A loud crash, distant yelling, and then nothing.

“Shiro?” Keith barked. “Shiro!”

“Hunk?” Lance tried, but it was equally as futile. “Pidge? Shit, come on Keith, we gotta find those nests pronto.” Lance grabbed Keith’s wrist and started to run, but was met with immediate resistance when Keith dug his heels into the soil. “What are you doing? Come on!”

“We need to split up,” Keith said he pointed up ahead and then at the turnoff that they’d passed up a dozen meters back. “You go this way, I’ll go that way.”

“What? No, no, Shiro said to stay together!”

“And Shiro just got captured, in case you didn’t hear that!”

Lance growled at him, still defiantly hanging onto his wrist, still trying to pull him. But Keith had his feet planted firmly into the ground. “I heard,” Lance barked, “that’s why we need to stick together.”

“Ugh, we don’t have time for this!” Keith growled and broke Lance’s grip in one swift, decisive movement.

Unfortunately Lance was also quick, and grabbed onto Keith’s other forearm less than a second later, although now he was keeping Keith from sprinting away rather than trying to pull him anywhere. “Why can’t you just trust me!”

“Why can’t you trust me?” Keith shouted back. “Get off! They need our help!”

“We’re not gonna be able to help anyone if we both get captured too.”

The logic of this struck a chord with Keith, but he was already dead set on splitting up, and so it just reverberated right back out of his head again as he finally tore himself from Lance. “I’m taking the risk,” he said.

“You’re impossible,” Lance called after him as he turned to split off down the second passageway. “God! Just, ugh! Be careful, idiot!”

Keith came to a grinding halt in the mouth of the path as something important occurred to him, gritted his teeth, then sprinted back to Lance. As he went he pulled his sheathed Marmora blade off the belt of his flightsuit and then shoved it at Lance’s chest plate with a determined set of his jaw. Without moving an inch, Lance gaped down at it.

“You’ll need something to cut through the roots with,” Keith explained hurriedly when Lance didn’t
take the blade quickly enough. “Just take it!” When Lance still looked shocked and confused, Keith seized Lance’s hand, pressed the handle of the blade into it, and pulled Lance’s fingers closed around it. “Just remember that this blade is pure luxite, Lance. It'll cut your skin on a molecular level, so be careful.” On instinct he opened his mouth to warn Lance not to lose it, but he kept himself from actually saying it. Lance already knew what this knife meant to him. Instead he added, quietly, “And not just with my knife.”

Then he bolted away and vanished into the yawning darkness.

Keith had only been running alone in the dark for about twenty seconds before Channel 2 lit up, carrying Lance’s voice again. But it was quieter now and riddled with layers of emotion, none of them the anger Keith had heard as he split off. “You are a man of mystery, Keith Kogane.”

The panic and tunnel-vision that had driven Keith to separate and try and find both nests faster, to save his friends, kept him from focusing too much on Lance’s tone or what he was saying. So he didn’t reply, opting to let Lance just stew in the argument by himself. He didn’t always have to rise to Lance’s bait. (*Yes you do, a small but defiant voice inside him argued, you know you do.*) But he couldn’t play this game with Lance right now; he was busy scanning the cave for signs of the nest, for anything out of place in this thick, thick darkness.

Unfortunately for Keith, Lance had never taken silence as a cue to let it go, and he wasn’t starting now.

“We were doing so well,” Lance muttered over the comm. “Times like that, I start to think we make some kind of dynamic duo, y’know? But then you go and pull shit like this and we’re back to square one. Back to you not trusting me at all,” he huffed, and Keith could hear the faint sounds of him hacking away at roots with the knife as Keith had been doing for them before with his bayard. “But then. Then. You go and… and turn it all around on me again! And… Ugh. You are so fucking confusing, you know that?”

Ignore him, Keith instructed himself. Ignore him.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you without this knife,” Lance mused on as Keith waded through a trench of mushrooms, though it sounded like he was talking more to himself than to Keith. “I’ve never seen you let anyone touch it before either. Not even Shiro. Hunk tried once and you literally flicked him—which I distinctly remember ‘cause I’m the one who dared him to do it. And now you just… without even…”

Lance sounded lost, and not just in a cavern underground, but inside his own head. It tugged at Keith’s stomach in a physical way. A familiar hook behind his naval, pulling him in the exact wrong direction. Back the way he came.

“It’s things like this that make me feel like maybe you do trust me,” Lance said softly, and the hook sank deeper, its backward serrated edges ensuring that it would never come out again without taking a piece of Keith with it. “But I just don’t… I don’t know, Keith.”

On the other side of the trench, Keith came to an antsy pause at yet another fork, scanning the ground for the path more travelled. There were more mushrooms here than anywhere else in the cave, all aglow as Keith searched the floor for signs of wear and tear where the roots began to give way to rock and crystal and stalagmites and stalactites. He was close, now, he could feel it. “Did you ever stop to think,” Keith huffed in exasperation, a little out of breath from the sprinting through the hanging roots and crystal, a little out of breath from sprinting away from his emotions, “that maybe I feel the exact same way about you?”
Some of the mushrooms on the left appeared trampled. He took off in that direction.

A long moment of silence passed between them as he ran, and that’s when Keith realized how his choice of words may have sounded. By then it was far too late.

“Uh… Lance,” Keith said.

Damn it. Damn it. He opened his mouth to negate the weirdness he had so stupidly introduced to this serious conversation, but nothing came to mind, and after a few stammered syllables Lance’s voice interrupted him again but now in an intense whisper.

“They’re coming,” he said. “I can hear—oh, shit, it sounds like a lot of them. I can’t shoot them! What do I do? Oh, I know—!”

“Run,” Keith ordered. “Run back the way you came.”

“No good. I can hear them that way too, which means you’d better hurry up and find that nest before they find you,” Lance replied. A sudden roar of voices on Channel 2 told Keith that the zombified villagers had seen him. “Also means I’m about to get captured. I think it’s up to you, man.”

“Try to fight them off,” Keith yelled, back to a dead sprint as he spied a black opening far ahead in the cave where it opened up into a larger chamber, where something putridly green glowed in the center of the darkness. Bingo. It was clear Lance was already fighting, because all that came through on Channel 2 now were grunts and swears and random loud noises. But there was only so much he could do without the use of his gun.

“Too—many,” Lance managed. “They’re taking my—”

The line cut out abruptly, leaving Keith in deafening silence as he barreled into the open chamber.

There at the center of the room was a hollowed out crystalline bed, dug into the rocky floor, and from it leaked a sickening silver-green glow. Soon Keith was skidding to a halt where the ground dipped down, taking a knee to get a better look at the creepy egg-sack-looking thing. His lip curled back involuntarily as he poised his sword over it with both hands on the hilt, then drove it straight down. But his sword clanged off, slipping to the side with such force that he had to leap back lest it skewer him in the thigh. The interior of the nest’s translucent skin briefly surged with a hideous radioactive light, viscous and green. Far away in the cavern, a shrill scream sounded out of the dark. The sound shot adrenaline straight into Keith’s bloodstream, triggering the basest, most primitive of human reactions. The urge to freeze. To fight. To flee. That ominous cry was a predator, and Keith knew he was its prey.

Desperation eating at his patience, Keith drew back and struck the nest again, and again and again, but all he got for his efforts were more surges of light from within and more screams in the distance. Closer now, and gaining. Clearly this wasn’t working, but Keith tried one more blow anyway, throwing all his strength into it.

This time the sword buried itself about an inch deep, the impact shuddering through his shoulders and back. Yes!

But when he ripped his sword away the gash still looked like barely a scratch compared to the size of the thing. He growled at it. What the hell was he supposed to do now?

Shit. Okay, what would the others do if they were here?
Shiro would probably karate chop it to death with his superheated Galra arm, but Keith didn’t have that. Lance and Hunk would probably just shoot it. There was no way this thing could withstand a shot from their powerful bayards. But Lance wasn’t here. Hunk wasn’t here. They were both captured and depending on Keith to rescue them, and Keith did not have a gun. Growling again, he peered over his shoulder as the animal shriek picked up closer than ever. Okay, what about Pidge? Easy, she’d draw her bayard and electrocute the shit out of this thing. But he didn’t have—

Wait.

Hope coursed through him as the idea occurred and took immediate hold, and he almost tripped over himself in his haste to drop his bayard in favor of a different tool. It was Pidge who’d found them first, the electronic lockpicks, surprising even Coran and Allura who’d been totally unaware of their existence. Original Team Voltron secret, Keith supposed. Keith turned his left arm wrist-up and dug his finger into a small crevice on the armor there on the inside of his bicep until it popped up, revealing a tiny black cartridge underneath, no larger than a paperclip. He dug it out. Then he turned it over until he found the tiny button on one flat end of the cylinder. He pressed it. The lockpick snapped out instantly into a long, thin rod, about eight inches long and a centimeter wide. He’d never had to use this before, but he knew Pidge and Hunk had both used theirs on multiple occasions to scramble electronic locks and small plasma shields, and knew from their description that it was some kind of collapsible taser.

The guttural scream picked up again, and this time it sounded like it was coming from just out of sight the way Keith came, setting his hair on end under his flightsuit. Well, now or never. Keith aimed for the shallow gash he’d managed to cut in the nest and drove the lockpick into it, pressing the button on the tip again as he went. Electricity shot down the rod from the base, crackling white with lightning that went straight from the rod into the nest, lighting it up from the inside out, the white electricity drowning the silver-green fluid from within and shattering it into fractured pockets of violent flashing light.

Still Keith held onto the handle, even though it didn’t protect him fully from the shock. Energy coursed up his arms, reverberating in his eardrums. Buzz-a-buzz-a-buzz. It was loud and jarring and painful, but he thought he could hear the nest crying out in pain too as it spasmed about in the final throes of death, so he drove the rod just a little bit deeper.

Then, he was flying.

It happened so suddenly that he thought, as he went hurtling across the chamber and away from the nest, that he’d gone and electrocuted himself. But then he collided with the ground and got a glimpse of his assailant as he rolled and tumbled and finally struck the wall.

Salasa.

The empath was a tall creature, scaly and slender in all the wrong places. He walked on two legs with more joints than necessary, wielded two clawed arms, and then sported a fifth arm (if you could even call that nightmare-tentacle an arm) that grew right out of the top of of his narrow, toothy head. As he turned to Keith and bared his sharp teeth, the fifth arm twisted in its socket, the hand extending toward Keith, the fingers opening to reveal the palm. A fleshy orb seemed to have been embedded in the scales there and Keith froze, halfway to his feet. His bayard was still on the floor by the nest. On the other side of Salasa. Great.

“How dare you,” Salasa hissed, and Keith cursed internally. He’d been starting to hope this thing was a wild animal; an intelligent lifeform would be that much harder to beat without a weapon. “You will regret what you’ve done. You will rue the day you set foot in my den when I’m finished with you, you disgusting mammal.” Oh good, an intelligent lifeform with a superiority complex.
Shifting his stance slowly into something more defensive, Keith raked his eyes over the empath for weak points. There were scales almost everywhere, covering all his vital organs in natural armor. But before Keith could find a chink in the armor, the fleshy orb on the fifth arm suddenly split in half and blinked open wide, revealing an enormous glowing eye, the same color as the recently destroyed nest.

There was no pupil or iris, but Keith knew, somehow, that the orb was looking at him. Looking into him.

While Keith was distracted by it, Salasa lunged.

The fight was brief. Keith dodged but Salasa kept up, and he was at least three feet taller than Keith with more arms and a longer arm span so it was all Keith could do to keep slipping from his grasp. This was bad. He could scarcely keep up the defense, let alone launch an offense. In a split-second opening Keith dove for his dormant bayard but felt two claws close around his ankle and haul him backwards.

No, no no —

He swiped for his bayard but it was already too far. The nest was receding—Salasa was dragging him from the chamber back into the unlit corridor.

Twisting now, Keith fought to break Salasa’s hold. He heaved and kicked but Salasa was strong, and nothing Keith did so much as loosened the claws from his ankle. If anything Salasa’s grip tightened. Panic blossomed in his stomach as it started to settle in that the fight was actually over; without a weapon, Keith was as good as captured. Fuck.

Fuck.

As he dragged Keith through the gnarled roots and stalagmites Salasa monologued at him in hissed tones, and for the first time, Keith regretted allowing Coran to stick that universal translator chip in his ear that first day on Arus. How was he supposed to think up a way out of this when the creature kept going on and on about all the creative ways he was going to murder Keith and his friends? He’d never been good at making plans. If only he’d stuck with Lance.

That thought boomeranged and slammed back into him so hard he almost choked. If only he’d stuck with Lance. Together they might have had a better chance fighting off either Salasa’s goons or Salasa himself. The last conversation they’d had echoed now in his head, disrupting several half-baked escape plans and demanding centerstage. But I just... I don’t know, Keith. The soft and uncertain lilt to Lance’s voice at the end of his speech had woken a single small butterfly in Keith’s stomach, even amidst all the panic and urgency of the situation. That butterfly came back now in full force, spreading its wings and shooting up into Keith’s throat, strangling him, making it hard to breath.

If anyone dies here, it’s my fault.

It took maybe ten minutes for Salasa to drag Keith by the leg all the way from the nest to the central chamber, though to Keith it felt like it was only ten seconds, because he was no closer to an escape
plan. By the time they got there Keith’s body was throbbing from being brutally dragged over rock after rock—his armor and helmet had protected his skin, but even so, it had not been a gentle journey. The moment Salasa entered the central chamber, Keith knew, even before he could see the walls and ceiling change, because a chorus of “Keith!”’s burst out in four different painfully familiar voices. It was hard to properly analyze his surroundings from this prone position, but the chamber was so much bigger than any other he and Lance had stumbled across that he knew it must be the innermost chamber, beneath the very heart of the tree-forest above. The ceiling was wide—maybe a couple dozen feet across, and tall enough that Salasa was able to straighten up to full height instead of hunching over.

As Salasa dragged him further into the room he craned his head around, looking for his friends. They were all kneeling near a far wall, surrounded by at least twenty villagers. As Keith looked the Ornans all stared back, emotionless, their eyes glowing with that sickly silver-green glow. The other paladins were aghast at Keith’s less-than-heroic entrance into the scene; no doubt they’d been counting on him to save them.

No, he could still save them. He hadn’t given up. They’d made it three years now in an intergalactic war; they weren’t going down at the hands of some—some ugly five-armed ground-lizard!

So he vaulted to his feet as Salasa released his leg in the center of the room, gearing up for a second fight. This one was even shorter lived than the first. His fist hadn’t even connected with the empath’s face when he was tackled from behind. The villagers, he thought haltingly, and then there were a dozen of them on him, all at once, clawing and shoving like mindless animals until he was on his back. There were just too many of them. Then Keith was being hauled to his feet. It took five of the villagers to hold him still and four more to get his arms up in order to secure his hands with a common pair of handcuffs to one of the thicker roots hanging from the ceiling in a long parabola. Keith’s eyes caught on a bite mark on the nearest villager’s neck, sinister and ragged as if from a vampire. Once the handcuffs had activated, a string of plasma shooting out and connecting them, the villagers backed off, slinking away into the shadows to reveal Salasa standing behind them, glee and fury fighting for control of his face.

“You must be weak if you had to have your drones tie me up,” Keith said, buying time the only way he had left. Even to him, it sounded hollow. Uselessly he yanked at the cuffs; he could see his lockpick in his mind’s eye still embedded in the ruined nest, so far away and so very out of reach. Like his bayard. Like his knife. It could have shorted out these cuffs if he’d just held onto it when Salasa threw him.

The empath bared his teeth—in a shocking twist they were short and flat, and Keith wondered wildly whether his species were herbivores. Nothing made any damn sense in this universe.

“I can’t understand your primitive garbage language,” Salasa snapped with great offense. “But I dislike your tone. I imagine you think you’ve damaged me somehow, do you? That you’ve weakened me? I wonder if you’ll still think so when I’m eating you alive from the inside out.”

“Wait,” Shiro blurted out from across the room, drawing Keith’s eyes. He’d spoken it in Middletongue (the most widely spoken language across the known universe, a mashed-up creole of Altean, Galran, and several others which Coran had been teaching them for about a year now), clearly with the hope that Salasa would understand it. All the paladins were kneeling in a line, their helmets off, their weapons gone, arms behind their backs and presumably handcuffed. The villagers behind them all held guns. Keith attempted to banish the reminiscent imagery of execution lines from in his mind. This was bad. “Don’t do this,” Shiro begged. Hearing the desperation in his voice smothered the last coals of hope still clinging to life in Keith’s chest. Shiro didn’t have a plan. He barely even spoke Middletongue, and Salasa had given no indication yet that he even understood it.
On instinct Keith turned to Lance, who was always there to take the reins when one of them fell short. But Lance was staring back at him in abject horror. Lance didn’t have a plan either. No one had a plan. “We can work something out,” Shiro was saying, or at least he was trying to, “we have money and supplies. We have——”

“I want nothing from you that I can’t take myself right now,” Salasa finally replied, his eyes never leaving Keith’s face. “It’ll be easy to rebuild the nest you destroyed.” As he spoke, the fifth arm atop his head twisted and bent until it was looming directly in Keith’s face, blinking open to reveal that eerie shining eye. As he realized what was about to happen, as the arm descended toward his neck and Salasa tore his helmet off, Keith tried to twist away. But it was useless. A sharp pain surged near the base of Keith’s neck and when Salasa pulled his hand away, the shining orb was gone. Detached. Sunk into Keith’s skin like a leech.

The creature’s flat teeth made his smile look almost human, and Keith had never hated anyone or anything so much in his entire life as he hated this smile in this moment.

“It won’t take long,” Salasa droned, soaking up Keith’s hatred with pleasure, “I’ll just have to take some dread from you to replenish what you stole — about as much as I’d take from that village in a week.”

“Hey, you’re not taking shit from him!”

Lance’s words would have been more reassuring if he sounded even a little bit confident, rather than terrified. It was less a command and more a plea. But at least his grasp on Middletongue was better than Shiro’s, because Keith’s grasp on it was pretty much nonexistent, which meant he had no leverage left to bargain for his life with, not even words.

“Sure I will,” Salasa said, twisting his long neck to peer over his shoulder at Lance. “It won’t even be hard; there’s a trick, you see. I’ll show you. Come,” he barked at the nearest villager. The woman stumbled forward and Salasa snatched the plasma gun out of her hands before shoving her away again. Without preamble he raised the gun to point it straight at Keith’s forehead.

The other paladins erupted with noise, and over it all rang the loudest voice with a loud, broken “No!” Or maybe Lance’s voice wasn’t the loudest, maybe Keith was just hyper-aware of it since this was the last time he would hear it. Yet despite the pain that shot through his heart when he heard the raw desperation in Lance’s voice, despite his own desperate will to live, Keith stared up past the dark barrel of the gun, straight into Salasa’s eyes. Unflinching. If Salasa thought Keith was going to beg for his life, he was going to be sorely disappointed.

This pissed off the empath greatly.

His eyes narrowed as he pulled the gun away, flexing the fingers on his fifth arm. “So,” he barked at Keith, “the brave little soldier boy isn’t afraid to die, is he? Doesn’t matter.” Abruptly Salasa slithered away, toward the other paladins. “I bet killing one of your friends here will do the trick.”

Keith’s blood ran cold. “No!”

Salasa’s laughter carried across the room, and Keith understood that he was feeding on his fear. “How about the small one?” Salasa said lightly, as though he were selecting fruit at a fruit stand, and pointed the gun at Pidge.

“No, please no,” Keith begged. “She didn’t do anything, please, it was me — ” The more panicked he grew, the hotter the eye on his neck grew; it felt like a molten stone was welding itself to his skin.
The empath watched Keith appraisingly, almost like he was taste testing Keith’s reaction. “Strong candidate,” he said, then slid down the line to Hunk. “But maybe I’ll go with the big one.” The second the barrel of the gun touched the back of his unprotected neck, Hunk closed his eyes and started whispering in Samoan.

“Please,” Keith begged, his voice cracking. He should have seen this coming when the gun came out, should have known what would follow if he refused to play Salasa’s game. “Don’t hurt him, just kill me instead. I’ll play along! I’ll give you what you need!”

Surprise took the place of the sinister pleasure on Salasa’s face, and he flexed the fingers on his fifth arm again—like he was grabbing Keith’s terror and desperation straight out of the stuffy cave air. “Oh my,” he said. “Any one of these deaths would cripple you forever, wouldn’t they? You’d almost think I had a family in my den instead of a military squadron. You came here to kill me, but instead you’ve brought a feast right to my doorstep...” Inquisitively, Salasa moved on, bringing the gun to the back of Shiro’s neck.

Keith tried to quell the panic. He really did. But it was impossible. After everything they’d been through, after having already lost Shiro twice, it was impossible. The dread, when it hit him, hit him like a tidal wave.

The empath’s eyes widened, as did his grin. “Looks like we have a winner.”

“No, no,” Keith rasped, “Shiro no—” Fifth hand flexing at Keith, Salasa clicked back the release, charging the gun with a soft, sinister whine. Keith struggled violently against his restraints, eyes locked with Shiro, who looked frighteningly at peace with what was about to happen.

“It’s okay, Keith,” he said, and his voice was sure and steady. “It’s okay. Remember what I told you when I left for Kerberos.”

The eye burned at Keith’s throat so hot he was sure it would kill him before he had to watch Shiro die. He hoped it would. He could hear Salasa laughing, somewhere beyond all the horror, and Shiro saying love you guys, but Keith might as well have been light years away. The release clicked again, indicating the gun was ready to shoot, and Keith opened his mouth to scream.

But then Salasa lunged to the side and the shot missed, flying wide to sear through a patch of root on the far side of the chamber. Keith had no idea what happened until his searching eyes fell on Lance, who’d been just close enough to Shiro, apparently, to roll on his side and send a kick at the empath. The villagers were already on him again, holding him down, but Salasa didn’t seem to care or notice that part. “Oh for fuck’s sake,” Salasa hissed, mindlessly turning the gun on Lance, “I’m busy over here.”

Keith blanked.

“No, no, not him, NOT HIM —” The whole chamber seemed to shake, but it was really him that was shaking as he fought so hard against the cuffs that the metal frayed through his flightsuit where his armor left it exposed. The gun hadn’t lowered, but it hadn’t fired either, so Keith went on shouting himself hoarse, speaking so fast now that his words bled together in an incomprehensible storm, and when he ran out of English he fell back on Korean. He didn’t even know what was coming out of his mouth anymore, just that he had to get the attention on himself and off of Lance. And it worked. But it was only when he realized that Salasa’s eyes were on him again with sudden renewed interest that Keith shut up. A horrific realization flooded his gut with liquid iron; that in saving Lance he had doubly cursed him. He bit his lip so hard then that he tasted blood. There was no winning this game, was there? They were all going to die here.
Eyes still locked on Keith, fifth hand opened straight at him, Salasa left Shiro and slowly approached Lance, crouching down until the barrel of the gun was resting at his temple.


Lance too had his eyes locked on Keith. He looked more confused by the turn of events than anything else, which made it all the worse. Really? his bright eyes seemed to say. Me?

Tears burned in Keith’s eyes. Of course it’s you, he wanted to shout, it’s always been you, you oblivious idiot. But his feelings alone were already as good as a death sentence; the last thing Salasa needed to hear was a verbal confirmation.

It was enough without one, anyway. “The pretty one it is, then,” Salasa grinned, and shoved away the villagers that were holding Lance down to seize him by the back of his collar and haul him to his feet. “Save the others for later,” he said. “This one will be more than enough.” The villagers immediately started dragging the other three from the chamber. Shiro, Hunk, and Pidge went kicking and fighting all the way, and so did Lance as Salasa dragged him to the center of the room, then threw him down at Keith’s feet. With his hands cuffed behind his back Lance had no balance, had no option but to buckle hard onto his knees. “Oh this is too rich,” Salasa was laughing, “too good to be true. I can’t even remember the last time I got to feed off a pair of dying lovers!”

Lance’s head snapped up.

His eyes were blown open wide, his bangs were plastered to his forehead, and his face and armor were covered in all sorts of scratches and grime. He was the picture of devastation… And yet, Keith couldn’t help but think that he looked terribly beautiful right now. A wave of unimaginable regret washed over him as he met Lance’s gaze.

Salasa took immediate notice of it.

“Wait,” he laughed, “he doesn’t know?” Salasa’s hand continued to flex as he laid Keith’s heart bare to a gobsmacked, blown-away Lance. “My mistake. You’re not lovers at all, are you? How sad. It’s unrequited.”

Lance’s face hardened. “Keith,” he began, but the next word was cut off as the side of the gun connected loudly with his head, sending him sprawling to the floor on his side.

The empath kicked him onto his stomach, ignoring Keith and the stream of pleas pouring from his mouth. “Let’s see,” he hissed. “You mammals always have your organs concentrated all in one place. So easy to find. Here, I’m assuming,” and on the word here he placed a clawed foot on Lance’s lower back where the armor opened up into the more flexible flightsuit and pressed, dragging a sharp gasp out of Lance’s throat.

Keith bit his tongue, but it didn’t matter. He had no control whatsoever over his emotions, and Salasa was reading him as easily as a picture book.

“That would be a yes,” Salasa gathered. Lance had almost gotten one leg under him by now. But it buckled as Salasa climbed over him, like a giant salamander. “Interesting choice to leave your weakest point covered by the least amount of armor. I’ll have to peel away this plating if I want to have any real fun before you bleed to death…” He seized Lance’s left wrist then, pulling it away from Lance’s back far enough for Lance to bite back a hiss at the stress to his shoulders. Poking at the complicated clasps that held the plating on the armor to the flightsuit fabric beneath it held Salasa’s attention for no more than a few seconds. Huffing in annoyance, he stopped pulling and squeezed instead. Keith’s blind prayers that the material would hold up were useless. Salasa was
eight feet of streamlined reptilian muscle. When the empath squeezed, the armor on Lance’s forearm splintered with a swift series of cracks and he inhaled sharply; a ragged choking sound even worse than the cracks.

Lance tried to say Keith’s name again, but broke off with another strangled gasp as Salasa twisted the wrist in his hand with ruthless fervor. If the bones weren’t already broken underneath the crushed plating, they were now.

“You’d think there was some kind of max,” Salasa mused, “some kind of terminal velocity. When a fragile thing bleeds too much, it dies, yes? Yes. And yet, there is no such cap on emotional suffering…”

Keith’s face was wet. Whether he was sweating from the futile exertion of trying to escape and the blinding heat of the leech on his neck, or simply crying, was anyone’s guess. He couldn’t even breathe, let alone think. Not with Lance looking at him like that—like he still expected Keith to save him.

Even with his face pressed into the roots below, Lance had one eye locked on Keith. “Keith,” he tried again, “I— gah.”

Salasa had twisted the broken wrist again, and this time blood seeped out where his claws were digging into the flight suit, dripping down the fractured white armor like some macabre post-modern splatter art. The sight of blood accelerated Keith’s panic even more. (It surprised him that there was any room left there to grow. Maybe the empath was right about the terminal velocity of suffering.) Because there were so many important arteries there, and who knew which ones had just been ruptured? He had to— had to—

He screamed and raged and tore at his cuffs, but all he succeeded in doing was breaking the skin on his own wrist. He could feel blood trickling down into the crook of his elbow inside his flightsuit.

Salasa was back to staring at Keith, wriggling his fifth arm thoughtfully. “His wrist is that important?” the creature said in disbelief, and Keith wanted to tear his throat out with his teeth. “Really?” He eyed the blood seeping down Lance’s arm—a concerning amount—and huffed. “Mammals. You’re all are so frail. Better hurry this up then, I guess.”

“Keith,” Lance tried again, “Keith listen. I’m—”

“If you don’t shut up with that annoying language I’ll tear this arm straight off,” Salasa hissed. Even with the translator chip in his ear, Keith could hear the natural guttural tones of Salasa’s own native tongue underneath it all, revving in the chamber like a wood chipper. “Wait, what’s this?” Salasa’s tone grew even sharper. “I thought I told those idiots to disarm you.”

Keith had no idea what the empath was talking about until he was slipping his claw between the armor on Lance’s back and the exhaust ports for his jetpack, and pulling out none other than Keith’s knife.

A look of utter despair descended on Lance’s face then, and Keith felt it resonate all the way down in his bones. That would have been a great hail mary—if he’d actually gotten the opportunity to use it.

“Sneaky little shit,” Salasa hissed. He unsheathed the knife in one quick motion, and Keith resumed his frantic struggling. “I should have just shot you when you kicked me.” With that he brought the blade down straight into Lance’s back, halfway up to the hilt. Lance screamed.
Keith was straight up vomiting words, now. He knew that he was, on some level, but he had no idea what it was that he was saying or whether it was English or Korean or some bastardization of the two. Stop, please, don’t. I’ll fucking kill you, every iteration of those phrases that he was capable of, spilling out as he watched blood well up around the blade he’d had since the day he was born, the blade he’d clung to like family when he had no family left. Now, it was taking from him the one he had found. Full fucking circle.

“Keith stop,” Lance barked, snapping Keith out of his blind rage, “you’ll break your wrists! Stop!”

Only then did Keith realize exactly how hard he’d been pulling on the cuffs. He’d been practically hanging from them in his attempt to break them or rip the root they were hooked around from the cave ceiling that it was attached to. The absurdity of Lance’s request when his own wrist was already broken to pieces was overwhelming, but Lance seemed to realize this, and somehow, even with a knife in his back, he was the calm one. The rational one. He hit Keith with a level gaze that, despite everything, somehow managed to calm Keith. Just a bit. Just enough for him to remember that oh yeah, I need my wrists to not be broken if we want to escape.

The calm moment passed when Salasa looked directly at Keith and twisted the blade.

Who was he kidding? They weren’t getting out of here alive.

The apologies started to spill from the cracks in his heart as the knife twisted, and Keith couldn’t stop them any more than he could stop Salasa from hurting Lance. “I’m sorry,” he breathed, “I’m sorry, Lance, I wish it wasn’t you, I’m so sorry, this is all my fault—”

Lance was gasping throughout the teary monologue, and only when Salasa ripped the knife out in annoyance did Keith realize that Lance wasn’t just crying out in pain but was trying to talk. Was still trying to tell him something. Without warning Salasa launched upright and kicked Lance hard in the chest to roll him over, earning a sharp gasp and ending another sentence before it had even begun.

“Do you ever shut up?” Salasa bellowed, and reached down to seize Lance by the chest plate and haul him high enough into the air so he could glare at him eye to eye. “I should cut your tongue out next. What could you possibly have to say that’s worth losing your tongue over, you little rat?”

As long as Keith had known him, he had never seen Lance look as furious or determined or full of fire as he did in this moment. It radiated off him so strongly that for a brief instant in time, Keith actually felt like everything would be okay.

“I said,” Lance roared, in flawless Middletongue of course, god dammit Lance, “it’s not unrequited, you stupid motherfucker!”

Then he spit in the empath’s face and Keith flatlined—both at Lance’s words and his actions. Lance was as good as dead now. What the fuck? Why did he say that? Why did he say that? Why the hell did he do that? The empath was raising his hackles like he very much intended to strike the fatal blow.

But then, a wicked smile crossed his face. He released Lance, who promptly crumpled to his knees on the ground, and Keith didn’t even have time to wonder what the hell Salasa was up to before the empath had already slithered over to Keith to un cuff him from the hanging root. Keith lunged for Salasa the instant the plasma string disappeared from between the cuffs, but the empath raised the gun—Keith hadn’t even seen him pick it back up—and flicked back the release, stopping Keith dead in his tracks. But he didn’t shoot.

What was this? Why had Keith been released? As fodder for some fresh sadistic trick?
Salasa waved his fingers at Keith in a little shoo-ing motion. “Well? Go on,” he needled, and even though everything in Keith’s body screamed that this was a ruse, that the second he turned his back on the empath he would receive a fatal shot to the back of the head, Keith turned without a moment’s hesitation and dove for Lance.

He was unsteady on his feet but he made it in two strides and fell shakily to his knees, grabbing at Lance the way drowning children grab at lifeguards. The second Keith touched him—shoulders, neck, then face—Lance whimpered, presumably in pain. But his eyes disagreed. They lit up with an intensity Keith had never seen there before, not in all their time together. Everything about him shone. His warm brown skin, his flyaway hair, each layer of blue in his beautiful eyes, like ripples of water that danced in the dim lights from the outer ring all the way to the center, sapphire gem to Terran sky to palest glacial blue. The color of quintessence itself. Keith breathed that color instead of air, because he knew this was the last taste of it he’d ever get. The last time he’d ever get to touch the man he loved.

The man who loved him back.

Even now Keith could scarcely believe he’d heard that right. And yet Lance’s eyes repeated the words loudly and insistently as he leaned in half a centimeter, powering through the wince of pain that accompanied the motion, and pressed his forehead to Keith’s, never wavering in his gaze except once to blink. Even then he did it quickly, like he couldn’t stand to close his eyes.

Keith didn’t know why Salasa was allowing them this moment of reprieve. There could be any number of cruel twists waiting to unfold. But whatever lay in store for them, this embrace tasted bitterly like goodbye; and so Keith choked on it, his tongue rejecting it, a thousand words fighting for use of his vocal chords. All of them lost when Lance spoke first.

“Kiss me,” he whispered. Handed it over in one breath like a coveted little secret; a note passed in class while the teacher wasn’t looking.

Keith’s eyebrows drew together in pain even as his heart hit the gas pedal. This was really goodbye, then, wasn’t it?

“I can’t move,” Lance insisted, and there was a new note of urgency in his tone that shattered the rest of Keith’s heart in one blow. “It has to be you, Keith, kiss me.”

So he did.

The instant their lips touched Lance was pushing his tongue forcefully into Keith’s mouth, and Keith didn’t even have time to be shocked by the taste of blood or the poorly timed Frenching before he was consumed by the fact that Lance was pushing an actual object into Keith’s mouth with it.

Holy shit, Lance was giving him something.

Lance was giving him something!!!

No sooner had he realized this than Keith was being dragged away by the hair. He barely managed to keep himself from crying out, and accidentally bit down on the hard object Lance had pushed into his mouth as Salasa laughed and dragged him back to the place he’d been chained. Keith caught Lance’s eye, desperately trying to read him, to figure out what the fuck was going on. Anxiety and hope and fear battled on Lance’s face, his eyes wide and his jaw clenched with determination. Did you get it? he seemed to be saying. Do you understand?

Keith did not understand. Not even a little.
As Salasa reactivated the plasma cuffs, Keith fought to tune out his sickening monologue about the dynamic balance between fear and hope. He didn’t care why Salasa had let them have their moment anymore or whatever the hell it meant in relation to the empath’s powers. All he cared about was this tiny metal something in his mouth. He turned it over and over with his tongue, fighting the urge to close his eyes to try and envision it.

The mystery went on pause when Salasa picked up the luxite blade from the floor again, a fresh gleam in his eye as he pushed Lance back to the floor. “Keith,” Lance fretted, when he looked up and saw the desperate confusion etched onto every molecule in Keith’s body. He never thought he’d miss Lance’s absurd hand signals so much. He’d lay down his life for even a single sign right now. A clue, a gesture, anything. But of course Lance couldn’t give a clue because Salasa would catch on, and there would vanish their absolute last chance at survival.

Leaning in close and shoving Lance’s face to the floor again, Salasa glared. “Keith, Keith, Keith.” He tasted the word, the consonants and vowels of English fitting in his alien mouth like a cube through a circular hole. “Disgusting, primitive language. But you sure love that word. I wonder if you’ll love it so much when it’s carved into your skin?”

“How?” Lance fretted again, and Keith fretted a thousand times harder. He wasn’t sure Lance could afford to start losing blood at a higher rate than he already was and still survive, even if they escaped right this instant. The metal object sat in his mouth like a Chekhov’s gun, begging to be fired, burning a hole straight through the center of his mind. He squeezed his eyes shut as the tip of the blade made contact with the back of Lance’s neck where the flightsuit ended and naked skin began. Lance made a strangled choking sound but didn’t scream. Almost like he was trying to let Keith focus.

So focus, then.

The thing in his mouth was small. Smaller than a flash drive but bigger than a safety pin, and rounded on the sides. It tasted a little like blood and a lot like metal, and probably would have been cold if it hadn’t been living in Lance’s mouth for god knows how long. He didn’t know what the fuck he was supposed to do with it. Lance had always been the one with the plan, not Keith. Never Keith. He squeezed his eyes shut even tighter when Lance finally gave in to the urge to cry out, but of course it did nothing to shut out the sound. So what would Lance’s plan have been? he wondered wildly. He’d been handcuffed ever since being captured, so he would have had to have put this thing in his mouth before that happened. Like a movie playing out, he could see Lance surreptitiously tucking this thing into his cheek right before the villagers ambushed him, always thinking ahead like the strategist he was. But what could he have had with him that—oh. OH.

FUCKING OH.

So quickly that he almost activated it inward on accident (which would have speared him through the back of the throat, so thankfully he didn’t), Keith found the button on the tip of cartridge with with his tongue and flipped it around so that it was facing outward. Working it between his teeth, he angled it up at the string of plasma connecting his cuffs. He gave one look at Salasa, making sure he wasn’t looking, and Lance saw him then. Saw the lockpick in his teeth.

Hope flashed in Lance’s eyes, and he took a deep breath and unleashed a string of Spanish curses so loud and vitriolic that it covered up the sound of the electric current when Keith activated the lockpick and shorted out his cuffs.

Tempering his movements as he snuck up behind Salasa was probably the hardest thing Keith had ever done in his life.
He wanted nothing more than to sprint forward and choke him to death with his bare hands. But he only had one shot at this and his only weapon was this tiny rod. Luckily (definitely lucky, a voice in his brain that sounded a lot like Lance argued back) the sight of a knife sliding across the back of Lance’s neck was one of the most terrifying things he’d ever seen, and was enough to cover the tentative thrill of hope writhing in his veins and shield his advance from Salasa’s emotional vision. His hand clenched around the lockpick so hard his couldn’t feel his fingers.

It happened; a root moved under his foot a little too loudly, and Salasa wheeled around.

Without hesitation Keith lunged the last two steps and plunged the lockpick into the palm of Salasa’s fifth hand, the space where the eye used to be. The responding pain on his own hand was so instant and severe and hot that he almost passed out cold right then and there. But he didn’t. He gritted his teeth and gave the lockpick one last twist as Salasa screamed, then writhed away from Keith like a snake from the sun. He tripped over Lance and fell to the cavern floor, not seeing or not caring as Keith coldly—deliberately—picked up the knife he’d dropped, transformed it with a flash of icy light into the Marmoran sword, and stepped over Lance to drive it straight into Salasa’s neck.

The empath was writhing so hard that Keith missed, but since the sword went through his face instead, Keith didn’t really give a fuck.

The instantaneousness of the empath’s death was surreal. An eerie quiet took the place of his screams as the sword sunk into his skull with a squelch, and stuck. A creeping stillness filled the chamber.

Given the leisure, Keith would have pulled his blade out and driven it back in fifty more times—would have cleaved the body into a hundred pieces and thrown them into a hundred different suns. But as it was he turned away the instant Salasa slumped over, and fell to his knees beside Lance for the second time that day. His hand trembled over the crimson sheen on the back of Lance’s neck, where the flight suit had been torn to tatters.

“S’okay,” Lance was saying, and all the pain he’d been trying not to be in seemed to catch up with him all at once. “S’okay, Keith, that one’s shallow. S’okay...”

And what the fuck, because it was not okay. In absolutely no way was this even the slightest bit okay. But it was true, this one was shallow, so Keith gave up on trying to get a look at Lance’s neck and turned his attention to his wrist instead since it had been bleeding the longest. He pulled Lance’s bicep away from his back gently and pressed a small button on the inside of his armor—one that activated a rarely used tourniquet feature in the flightsuit seam at his elbow. Fuck, he should have done that before when Salasa released him.

The adrenaline was making absolute mush of his brain, so when Keith found his voice box what he said (more like sobbed) was, “Have I ever told you you’re a goddamn genius?” When Lance grinned at that it fucking broke him. “I’m sorry,” he cried. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

“Sorry fr’what?” Lance slurred. He was trying to turn toward Keith but he couldn’t roll even an inch onto his side for all his wounds. “For having emotions? Tha’stupid.”

Alarmed by the rate at which Lance seemed to be losing control of his speech, Keith pushed his bangs back so he could peer into his eyes. Despite the fact that Keith was hovering inches away, Lance’s pupils seemed to search for him, working hard and glazing over. No no no—“Stay with me,” Keith barked, loudly enough to jerk Lance to attention. “I’m gonna get you out of here, okay? Fuck...” He only had to glance at the wound on Lance’s lower back to know there was nothing he could do for it here, not without supplies. Still, his fingers ghosted over it helplessly before he turned behind him to wrench the taser from Salasa’s corpse so he could use it on Lance’s cuffs. Even though Keith held his splintered wrist still as he did it, Lance couldn’t help but whimper at the
movement. “I’m gonna pick you up now, Lance, but first I’ll have to get you upright.” He couldn’t roll him onto his back, and there was no way he could get up on his own. There was only one option.

Without further warning, Keith hooked his arms under Lance’s armpits and hauled him backward into a sitting position. The sound Lance made when he did it would stick with Keith for the rest of his life. It was pure agony.

“Okay,” Keith lied, “good, okay, now I’m gonna pick you up, so just—”

“No,” Lance said, somehow decisive even as he slurred it, pushing Keith’s arm away from his shoulders with his uninjured hand. “Go free the others Keith.”

Keith spluttered and gaped. “What the fuck? I’m not leaving you here.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“No.”

Lance lifted his head tiredly to peer at Keith through his bangs. “Yes, Keith. You have to. They could be in trouble... and besides.” His irises slid to the left, falling on Keith’s neck. Keith tried to look down but froze when Lance reached up with his good hand and closed it around Salasa’s eye—Keith had forgotten it was even there—and tugged it off. The thing gave no resistance, but the instant it let go a surge of pain radiated outward from the bite so suddenly that Keith almost lost his balance. It squealed and bled silver as Lance cinched his fist closed, never taking his eyes from Keith’s face. “You look like death,” he said quietly. “You can’t carry me.”

Keith knew he was right. Lance was always right. The others still needed to be saved, Lance was bleeding out, and the prospect of Lance dying in his arms as he tried to get out of this hellhole without any help made his throat close up and his heart threaten to stop beating. But it still didn’t make this choice any easier. Keith growled in frustration as he made up his mind, and seized Lance by the back of the head as he locked their foreheads together.

“Don’t. Fucking. Die,” he commanded, as if simply saying it would make it so, then he grabbed Lance’s good hand and brought it to the wound on his lower back. Lance yelped and flinched so hard that Keith saw sparks where the bridges of their noses struck, but he charged on, pressing Lance’s hand forcefully to his wound. “I know it hurts,” he said, “but keep applying pressure. I’ll come back for you.”

With that he rose, ripping his sword out of Salasa’s face as he went. Just to be sure (and because fuck him) Keith brought the sword down one more time and completely severed the lizard’s head from his neck.

“Ha. Double tap,” Lance laughed weakly, and Keith gave him what he hoped was a reassuring thumbs up as he sprinted toward the exit, already shouting for their friends before he even got into the passageway.

“Shiro!” His voice was raw and his throat ached like it never had before, but he raised his voice even more when he heard a faint response echo through the tunnel. “Shiro! Where are you? Hunk! Pidge! Where are you?! Keep making noise, I’m coming to get you!”

He had no idea what they were saying, but he followed their shouts down the long tunnel, off to the right, and then into a small dug-out room. The instant Keith saw their colors in the dimly lit recess he flew into action, tackling the nearest villager straight to the ground and raising his sword to drive it
into his chest. He only paused when Shiro’s voice finally registered in his brain as actual words. “Stop!” Shiro was shouting, “Keith, stop, I think they’re coming to! Don’t hurt them!”

Looking down, Keith belatedly registered the fact that the villager he’d tackled wasn’t fighting back at all. He merely looked confused. Distraught. Switching gears, Keith launched off of him and dove instead for Hunk—the nearest of the three paladins—and clicked his lockpick out to short-circuit Hunk’s cuffs. With that done he pushed the handle of the lockpick into Hunk’s newly freed hands and turned to leave without freeing the others, leaving it up to Hunk. He had to get back to Lance.

When he turned back at the exit to bark directions, he realized they were staring at him in undisguised horror, raking their eyes over the blood stains on his armor, their faces gaunt, their jaws hanging open aghast.

“He’s still alive,” Keith blurted desperately, “come on, come on, someone follow me now!”

And with that he left them, sprinting back through the passageway toward Lance.

When he arrived back in the central chamber, Lance was slumped over on his side. “Lance?” he shouted, tripping over roots in his haste through the room to drop down to his knees. His skin was clammy and his eyes flickered open to land on Keith as Keith gently tried to prop him up again. Luckily Hunk was right behind him. It hurt, but Keith gritted his teeth and let Hunk pull Lance from him, cradling him to his broad chest as he rose.

Lance furrowed his eyebrows at Hunk as Keith clumsily attempted to arrange Lance’s broken arm in the least painful way. “¿Marco?” he whispered, his voice rich with emotion. “¿Eres tu? ¿Qué estás haciendo aquí...?”

Keith was so focused on Lance that he totally missed out on whatever his translator chip made of the mumbled Spanish, and looked to Hunk in confusion.

Hunk’s lip was quivering. “It’s just me, Lance, sorry.” With that he met Keith’s gaze, lowering his voice to a murmur. “I look like his older brother.”

“Sorry, sorry, why’s er’one keep saying that?” Lance slurred. “Shuddup, Hunk, maybe Marco looks like you. Y’ever think of that?”

“I don’t know what that means,” Hunk said, but somehow Lance had gotten him to smile, and Keith knew he’d done it on purpose when he shot Keith a smug grin afterwards. Somewhere around the next bend Pidge and Shiro fell in beside them, crowding Hunk to get a look at Lance and see for themselves that he was still alive and kicking.

And boy was he kicking. The guy would not shut up even as he lay dying. The second he realized Shiro was now present, Lance rolled his head to hit him with that dangerous look he donned whenever he was about to blurt something particularly controversial and provocative. “Haha,” he slurried in a vaguely sing-song way, “Keewith loves me the mo-oost.”

It was amazing that even with the direness of the situation, Lance still managed to make Keith feel like a five year old getting his hair pulled on the playground.

Hunk saved the day, though, with a teary frown. “We all love you the most, buddy.”
On the surface above the caverns, Shiro took one look at Keith’s face and spared him the trouble of deciding what to do from here. “Keith, you’re in no condition to fly. Hunk, you’ll fly both of them back. Pidge, you and I will flank Yellow in case of trouble. We’ll come back afterward to recover Keith’s bayard and sort out this… this mess,” Shiro sighed. “You can come back for Red later, too,” he added as Keith followed Hunk into Yellow’s yawning jaw, and maybe Keith should’ve been a little more worried about leaving Red behind on this godforsaken planet, but there was a low, comforting rumble pushing at the back of his mind that told him she’d be okay. Just for awhile, he thought in her direction, and was met by a prodding curiosity about what had transpired below. Keith sealed his mind off from her sharply. He couldn’t deal with it yet. Any of it.

In the cockpit, Keith clumsily activated the secondary seating behind the pilot’s chair. He paused over the second switch as well, debating whether it was safe to put Lance in his own seat or not, but Hunk saved him the bother by swatting his hand away. “Nuh-uh, no, you’re holding him. Sit down.”

“Okay,” he said numbly, and accepted the borderline-unconscious Lance into his arms.

The take-off was the hardest. For a moment Keith was certain Lance was going to throw up, but as they exited the stratosphere and the turbulence eased up so did Lance’s grip on Keith’s arm and the pained scrunch in his eyebrows. “This is familiar,” he joked as soon as he’d regained control of his voice, “you cradling me in your arms.” He said it quietly enough so that Hunk probably couldn’t hear. If he did, he had the good grace to pretend he didn’t anyway.

Keith flushed at the older-than-their-friendship jab. “Thought you didn’t remember that,” he jabbed back. Anything to keep Lance talking.

“I don’t,” Lance sighed. “Kinda wish I did now, though.”

The lump in Keith’s throat grew thicker and heavier, threatening to choke him. “Well you didn’t hit your head this time around, so maybe you’ll remember this one.”

As the castle came into view through the haze of atmosphere, Hunk let out a loud sigh of relief. “We’re almost home Lance, hold on, okay?”

Lance didn’t seem to hear him. He was still looking at Keith with the softest of looks coated in a film of determination, his fingers still digging into Keith’s arm. “God I hope so,” he whispered.

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The trip from the hangar to the medbay passed in a heated blur.

Blood welled up continuously in Lance’s mouth, distorting his words as he rambled in Spanish about his family, about his friends, about Keith, about how much everything hurt, about how much he was gonna throw up if Hunk didn’t put him down right now.

“Throw up on me if you have to, buddy. We’re almost there,” Hunk soothed.

And no one gave Keith any shit at all for the way he hovered at Hunk’s elbow keeping Lance’s neck
and arm steady the whole way.

Keith had never been more grateful to see the inside one of those pods. Coran had run ahead and readied it as soon as Shiro radioed back to explain, so Hunk was able to hurry straight over to the open, waiting chamber and set Lance carefully inside without even bothering to try and remove his armor first. Everyone huddled around as the chamber sealed itself with a hiss and the glass fogged over, obscuring Lance from view before he’d even finished relinquishing his consciousness to cryogenic sleep.

A thick silence fell on the medbay as the hissing sound faded from the farthest corners of the room. Maybe Keith should have felt relief now. But all he felt was empty. He was empty in the deepest, most visceral sense, like all the life had drained from him and he would never get it back again. He didn’t realize everyone was staring at him until someone touched his arm and he flinched violently away.

Shiro stepped between him and the pod then, blinking down with undisguised concern. “Your wrists are bleeding, Keith. Let me see them.” He reached for Keith’s arm again but Keith stumbled backwards, nearly knocking over Pidge in his haste to get away.

“It’s nothing,” he argued, unable to voice why the prospect of being touched right now made him want to scream and thrash.

“It’s not nothing,” Shiro insisted. “You’re injured. That bite on your neck isn’t nothing. You need a pod too—”

“I don’t need a pod,” Keith insisted right back, his voice cracking as he continued to back up. A healing pod sounded even worse than being touched—that small, confined space might as well have been a coffin and he wouldn’t go into one. He wouldn’t. It was getting hard to breathe, and he hated the way everyone was staring at him now, like he was some kind of rabbit stuck in a bear trap. His back struck a metal table and he jumped in surprise, rattling its contents. “I don’t need— back up, Shiro, I’m serious, don’t fucking touch me!”

Shiro froze, holding his arms up in surrender. “Woah. Calm down, Keith.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down!” Keith broke, pointing at Shiro, who was now beginning to blur as Keith lost control of not only his temper but all his other emotions as well. “I’m not going to calm down! How can I calm down when that—that fucking thing—and—and he just—” Here he lost his train of thought and turned around to blindly swipe at whatever tools were still rattling on the tabletop, distracting him. They were too fucking loud. But they were even louder when they went clattering to the floor, causing Coran and Allura to stop walking toward him as well.

“Keith,” Hunk attempted quietly, “it’s okay, just let us help you.”

“It’s not okay!” Keith screamed at him, throwing the table itself too because nothing was ever going to be okay again, how dare they suggest that it would be. He didn’t mean to actually hit Hunk with the table, but Hunk had to dodge or else it would have. It went shockingly far for how dead tired Keith felt. Two of its legs went flying in different directions as it struck the wall, and that’s when two arms closed around him from behind, locking under his armpits and around the back of his head in a vice-grip. It completed Keith’s ascent into full-on panic. He kicked and flailed, dimly noting the arms restraining him, for all their slenderness so deceptively powerful. “Allura, get off,” he rasped, “let me go! Let me go, let me go—”

“Coran, sedate him,” she was saying, her voice strained, “he’s going to hurt someone on accident.”
“Don’t you fucking touch me with that!” Keith kicked even harder as he saw Coran pulling a syringe from a drawer beneath the nearby countertop. “Get off me!”

“Coran,” Shiro intoned, sharply enough that Coran stopped in his tracks. “Stop, it’s okay. It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay,” Keith sobbed, “it’s not okay, why do you keep saying that? Stop fucking saying that.”

“Keith, look at me.”

“No.” Maybe he sounded like a two year old. Maybe he didn’t give a flying fuck. Maybe he couldn’t breathe or think and he wanted to exit this nightmare via the airlock, and would have tried if Allura hadn’t been restraining him. “If you let him touch me with that needle I’m never speaking to you ever again. I won't go into a goddamn pod, Takashi, I can't.”

Shiro’s eyebrows drew together; he looked truly hurt this time but it still wasn’t enough to get through to Keith. “We’re not going to sedate you, Keith. I promise. Allura? Can you let him go please?”

Allura’s grip on Keith weakened, but she whispered in his ear before releasing him completely. “Throw something at one of my paladins again and I’ll have you back in a headlock before it hits the wall.”

The threat fell on deaf ears, though. Keith stumbled away from her and the rest of them the second he was free, grabbing onto the nearest table for purchase and falling to his knees when it rolled on its rickety legs, right out from under his hand. As soon as he hit the ground he heard them move toward him again, so he launched back to his feet, stumbling even farther away, toward the opposite wall where a few chairs sat around a table. A makeshift lounge that the paladins had put together during Lance’s pod-stint on Arus, which had remained a permanent fixture ever since.

“Keith, you need a healing pod too,” Pidge repeated loudly, as if he didn’t hear that bullshit the first time. “Look at you! Look at him, Shiro, you’re seriously not gonna make him go into a pod?”

“We’re not going to force Keith to do anything,” Shiro answered calmly, and Keith felt a wave of overwhelming gratitude. But it was still just a blip compared to the horror and guilt that was already consuming him. “If he doesn't want to heal that way, then we can't make him. It's not life threatening so he can do what he likes. I think we should all just give him some space, actually.”

Yes. Space. Good. Thank you.

The sane and rational part of him wanted to verbalize this, but hadn’t gotten control of his lungs yet, let alone his vocal chords. So he simply threw himself into one of the chairs at the table. The one with its back to the wall.

He couldn’t even look at everyone as they filed out. Instead he kept his eyes on his shaking hands, trying desperately to think about nothing, but unable to keep the sound of Lance’s screams from filling his head and echoing back the darkest corners his mind. That is, until a shuffling noise reeled him back into reality.

He glanced over. Saw a pair of small white-green boots. Looked up into a pair of gaunt green eyes. Everyone else was gone now except her, and there was something wrong with her.

Keith’s mouth actually fell open in surprise when he realized Pidge was crying. He’d never seen her cry before—didn’t even know she was capable of it. So shocked was he that he couldn’t even react as she bent over and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pulling him into an awkward side-hug
made even more awkward by the chair and their clunky armor. Right when he was almost ready to return the hug she pulled away, wiping at her eyes and frowning at him shakily, in the way people do when they’re trying not to cry any harder than they already are. “I’m glad you both made it,” she managed. “You scared us all shitless, you know?”

Keith couldn’t say anything. Now he was thinking about the look in Pidge’s eye when Salasa tossed up the coin on her chance at life. How she’d looked more like a child in that moment than a soldier.

“And take off your stupid armor,” she announced, shaking off the funk as she settled down into the chair beside him to strip down to her flightsuit, dropping her own armor on the tabletop piece by piece. “We’re gonna be here for awhile, so we might as well get comfortable, right?”

... Right, Keith thought, and after a moment of detached surprise he followed her lead.

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Pidge stayed with him for the first two hours.

She was quiet throughout, which was remarkable for her, and even more remarkable was that she didn’t fidget much at all. Where normally she couldn’t be seen sitting still in a chair without fussing over one the wiring of one gadget or another, today she did, save for the one leg bouncing in place with endless energy. Keith was as grateful for her silence as he was for her presence. Where Shiro always knew what Keith wanted, somehow Pidge knew what he needed.

Only when Hunk came back did she speak again. “Hi guys,” he said from the doorway, waiting for a response before entering the medbay. Keith didn’t look away from the pod, though; he couldn’t. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew he owed Hunk a huge apology. But he didn’t think he could have found his voice right now if he tried, let alone moved.

“Hey Hunk,” Pidge offered in his stead. “Status report?”

“We’ve removed all the villagers from the cavern,” he said, and judging by his voice he was still lingering in the doorway. “A lot of them haven’t woken up yet, but Allura and Coran say they probably just need time. Some of them were down there for months. We recovered Keith’s bayard too—Shiro put it in his room. Oh, and Shiro and Allura and Coran and I all tried to fly Red back,” he added, “but she wasn’t having it. We were wondering if you’d give it a try next, Pidge.”

The metal chair legs scraped against the floor as Pidge stood and stretched. “Sure thing,” she said. “Trade off?”

“Oh,” Hunk blurted. “I don’t know—”

“Come on, Hunk,” she said practically, “Keith’s not gonna bite your head off. He’s sorry for throwing a table at you. Right, Keith?” When Keith didn’t answer right away, she leaned both hands on the other end of the round table and got between Keith and the healing pod across the room, blocking it from view. “Right, Keith?”

Keith blinked at her, and then very belatedly looked over at Hunk. He was still hovering in the doorway, tapping his finger tips together and looking rather unsure whether he was allowed into the
room at all. Guilt squeezed at Keith’s heart. He opened his mouth to apologize, but when nothing came out he closed it again and simply nodded.

“See?” Pidge said with a shrug. “Look, he brought you food too. So play nice, okay?”

She was right. There was a plastic box tucked under Hunk’s right arm, one of the bright orange ones from the third floor kitchen. Keith stared at it in disbelief as Pidge ruffled his hair affectionately and then headed for the door, tugging Hunk down by the collar to whisper something in his ear before shutting the door behind her. Keith didn’t have time to wonder what she’d said before Hunk was taking her empty chair.

“Hungry?” he prodded.

Keith shook his head, still ashamed of the way he’d reacted to Hunk earlier and unable to look him in the eye. But his stomach had other plans, and when Hunk popped the lid open to release the spicy scent of leftover Olkarian stew it growled loudly. Fuck.

“Uh-huh,” Hunk deadpanned. “I’ll be straight with you, Keith. I brought this for you, but you can only have it if you let me have a look at your wrists and your neck.”

Honestly, whether he was hungry or not didn’t have any bearing over his life right now. Keith didn’t think he could eat anything tonight. Or ever again, maybe. But... he did feel bad for the way he’d treated Hunk, and everyone else for that matter, so he nodded again and raised his hands palm-up in surrender.

At Pidge’s insistence he’d removed not only his armor plating but also the gloves of his flightsuit. Peeling the fabric away from the bleeding circles around his wrists where the cuffs had rubbed the skin straight off had been agonizing, and he didn’t want to think about what it’d have been like if he’d waited until now instead when the blood had begun drying to try and peel them off.

Hunk took one look at Keith’s wrists and swore first in Samoan, then in English, then in Altean, and then in English again. “Are you sure you won’t go into a pod?” he pleaded. “Just for an hour, even? Okay fine,” he relented immediately under the weight of Keith’s glare. “It’s fine, I get it. Just had to ask one last time in case you changed your mind. I brought supplies. I’m just gonna clean them and wrap them for you, is that okay?”

Keith nodded again, then gritted his teeth and bore the procedure in silence.

It turned out there wasn’t much Hunk could do for the bite mark save for spreading a bit of salve onto it that stung like a bitch and burned in a way that made him feel like he was back in that godforsaken cavern. He waited until Hunk wasn’t looking and then surreptitiously wiped most of it off with his discarded flight gloves, ignoring the sting of the tough fabric on broken skin.

Hunk had just given up trying to goad him into eating the soup when the door slid open again, revealing both Pidge and Shiro this time. Hunk jumped up as they neared the table and offered Shiro his chair, communicating something with a silent look that Keith wasn’t paying close enough attention to catch. He wasn’t paying close attention to anything, actually, so when he realized that the three of them were now sitting around the table and facing him, staring at him, it came as something of a shock.

Wait, what was this? Keith fidgeted in place as the weight of their stares descended on him full force. What did they want from him? Were they going to finally address the elephant in the room? The fact that Keith had almost gotten Lance killed? The fact that Keith was in love with him? The fact that Keith being in love with him was the very thing that had almost gotten him killed? Just how much of
what had transpired down in the caverns did they understand anyway? What did they—

“Pidge brought Red back for you,” Shiro began, and Keith’s mouth fell open. Not only was that not what he was expecting to hear, but he hadn’t believed that was going to work anyway. He’d expected to have to go back down there for Red himself.

Pidge looked equally surprised, but somewhat smug about it. “I know, right? I couldn’t believe she let me pilot her either. It was wild. I mean, she practically kicked me out once we were back at the castle, but still. Guess that means you love me second best, huh?” she joked, quirking one eyebrow at him playfully. “Oh wait, sorry, third best after Shiro.”

She was still grinning, but her words slammed into Keith with the weight of a freight train.

“Pidge!” Hunk hissed, whacking her arm and shooting an alarmed glance at Keith, who was crumpling onto the table again like paper in a fire.

“She’s joking, Keith,” Shiro soothed.

“I was just trying to lighten the mood,” Pidge said weakly, a little self-horrified. “I didn’t mean that at all. I’m sorry… shit…”

But Keith had his head in his hands now, and for a long, tense minute it seemed everyone was as lost for words and he was.

“Keith,” Shiro finally said, breaking the silence with gentle practicality. “I know you don’t want to talk about this, and I completely understand. But we—Hunk and Pidge and I—we were talking, and we wanted you to know that we don’t feel…” As Shiro trailed off Keith couldn’t help peering through his fingers at him. He was frowning and looking to Hunk and Pidge for help.

Shiro not knowing what to say to Keith? Up was straight-up down now.

“This is so weird to even verbalize,” Hunk jumped in, “and none of us know how to do it sensitively so I’m just gonna blurt it out. None of us think you love us any less just cause that jerk-off picked Lance, okay?”

“Yeah,” Pidge agreed readily. “Yeah, exactly, that would be so dumb.”

Shiro rested a hand on Keith’s shoulder, and tightened his grip comfortingly when Keith didn’t flinch or yell or throw any tables. “‘Dumb’ is not the word I would’ve used, but they’re right. And… and you have to know that none of us would ever blame you for what happened either.”

Keith shrugged away from Shiro’s touch then, from the pointed way he emphasized the word ‘none.’ Maybe the three of them didn’t blame him. But who were they to speak for Lance? Did they even realize the full scope of the Salasa’s reasoning for choosing him? Did they know Keith was in love?

“Oh, who was he even kidding. Three friendly faces peered at him across the tabletop with curiosity, sadness, and pity pity pity, and Keith knew it was absurd to even bother entertaining the alternative.

Of course they knew.

It was blindingly fucking obvious.
Those words would haunt Keith over the next few days, the vast majority of which he spent in that chair, taking everyone’s worried prodding in stony silence and only eating and drinking when Allura threatened to have Coran hook him up to an IV while he was sleeping. He was almost never alone. No one had ever camped out to this extent outside the healing pods, but no one said a word to him about it beyond insisting he take care of himself—eat, drink, change clothes and shower at least once a day. They kept him company. He started to think they had some kind of Keith-watch shift system worked out between the five of them actually, which he didn’t know how to feel about but was somewhat grateful for, especially when Pidge and Hunk came back the first night with three sleeping bags and played music from Pidge’s laptop until Keith passed out sometime around midnight CT.

They brought him things to do as well. Books from the castle library, his own comm, even paper and drawing pens which Keith didn’t know Shiro knew he owned. He didn’t have the heart to glare at Shiro for going in his room to get them, let alone the heart to actually use them, or any of these other things for that matter.

It was the afternoon of the second day that he overheard Shiro saying to Allura outside in the corridor, “I’ve never seen him wait like this for anything in his life. I’m really worried about him, Allura…”

The thing is, Keith didn’t feel like he was waiting for anything. He felt like the world had stalled and he was stuck in the pilot’s seat, spiraling, and the only person who could right the plane had been forcibly ejected because of Keith’s error. The endless minutes while Lance lay sleeping, Keith spent tasting his blood on his tongue again. Hearing his screams. Feeling the cold sweat from Lance’s forehead on his fingers as if there were no temporal separation at all between then and now, between this and that, between there and here and waking up covered in his own cold sweat on his second night in the medbay, thrashing in his sleeping bag and hyperventilating until something heavy came to hold him down, until he finally registered Hunk’s face above him.

And sometimes, when he was weakest, he heard Lance roaring it’s not unrequited.

Maybe it was selfish to linger on those words when Keith’s feelings were the reason Lance had nearly been killed in the first place. When he should really just be grateful Lance survived and never wish for anything more ever again. But he couldn’t help the way those words haunted him, those three magic words, and the naked truth in Lance’s eyes right before he passed over the lockpick. That was love. Lance loved him.

But the knowledge didn’t ease his heartbreak. It couldn’t possibly, because how could love transcend this nightmare?

After he woke up thrashing that second night, Hunk stayed awake with him as long as he could. But soon Keith was alone and Hunk and Pidge were snoring, so he left the sleeping bag between them to move closer to the healing pod. To move closer to Lance.

Even through all the layers of metal and machinery and glass, the outermost layer of glass was cold against Keith’s cheek. Countless times he’d imagined what it might be like to tell Lance how he felt, or (even more indulgently) to find out Lance felt the same, and never once in his naiveté did he
imagine this. That he might find out Lance loved him and yet give anything to go back to the way things were before.

He thought about what Salasa had said about the terminal velocity of suffering, and he wondered if he had reached it. He wondered when he was going to slam into the ground.

It was about three hours after Keith woke up on the medbay floor on the third morning, slumped against the pod, that Lance was released from cryo-regeneration.

Keith knew it was happening because Coran had been giving him updates once every three hours since Lance first went in, and the fact was driven home since everyone had gathered in the medbay all at once for the first time in three days. But Keith never could have been prepared for the panic that gripped him when the pod door hissed open.

For the first time in days Keith came to life, stumbling backwards past Allura and booking it toward the exit. Pidge caught his arm and pulled him back before he’d opened the door. “Where the hell are you going?!”

Keith tried to duck around her, hoping to escape before Lance actually regained consciousness. He’d done a lot of thinking over the last few days, and he was almost certain that he was the last person Lance would want to see when he woke up.

“Whatver you’re thinking is stupid,” she said, “also definitely wrong.” With that she crossed her arms and leaned on the lockpad so Keith couldn’t get at it without manhandling her.

Goddammit, Pidge. He bared his teeth at her, hating the way she thought she could read his mind.

Angrily, he turned away from her—

—just in time to see Lance stumbling out of the healing pod, and Hunk and Allura each taking an arm to steady him. Lance had barely been awake for a second when he was already searching the room with his eyes, almost in a panic until he found Keith over by the door. The relief that washed over him then was tangible. “Where ya goin’?” he joked, as if he didn’t believe for a second that Keith was actually about to walk through that door. So much for ‘last person he’d want to see.’

Keith broke immediately. “Nowhere,” he answered, his voice somewhat scratchy from days of disuse, and was crossing the room before he’d really had time to tell his legs what to do.

Lance pushed off from Allura and Hunk to close the last few feet, wrapping Keith up in a wobbly, half-strength hug that steadily tightened as Lance’s limbs continued to thaw. Keith thawed too,

melting into the embrace with a desperation that probably should have embarrassed him. But it didn’t. In fact he might never have let go again if Lance hadn’t been the one to suddenly shove Keith to arms length in order to give him a swift onceover with his eyes. Keith shifted uncomfortably, hoping that his messy hair was covering the as-of-yet unhealed bite mark on his neck. He was not up for the ‘pod or no pod’ fight again right now, especially not with Lance. He wasn’t sure he’d win that. “You look like shit, man,” Lance decided, and Keith breathed out a small puff of relief as Lance rounded on the rest of their friends, raising one unimpressed eyebrow. “Why haven’t any of you mother hens done anything about this?”
“Believe me,” Shiro defended, “we tried.”

Everyone else took that as their cue to rush in and borrow Lance from Keith, taking their turns hugging him until Shiro put on his sternest voice and demanded that Lance sit down or else.

“Okay dad,” Lance joked, but he listened and went to sit down at the table against the wall, in the very chair Keith had lived in for the last three days. “Jeez, I’m fine. Stop fretting over me,” Lance complained, batting like a cat at Allura, who was frowning and fussing over the splinters of armor on his forearm that had been pushing out by the healing process. You’d never have guessed the armor was once white there if you hadn’t already known. “It’s Keith you gotta worry about. I mean, seriously, I leave him alone with you guys for—wait. How, uh… How long was I in for?”

Next to Lance’s chair, Keith fidgeted in place, crossing his arms tightly over his chest. “Three days,” he said when no one else had the guts.

Lance’s face fell. “…Oh,” he said. “Oh, jeez, that’s a long time, huh?”

*Longest one yet* went unsaid, because everyone already knew it and no one had the heart to point it out. It had been a long, long time since Keith felt this uncomfortable in his own skin.

Pidge shattered the silence with a lipsmack popping noise and a bored hum, before throwing in a casual, “So what now?”

“That is a good question,” Allura sighed. For someone so driven and put-together, she sounded very lost.

“Well I don’t know about you guys,” Hunk said brightly, saving the day as usual, “but I am beat. Emotionally, physically, you name it. So maybe we can just have a chill day. You know,” he explained when Coran and Allura made those ‘lost in translation’ faces they often made at English slang. “Movies, snacks, pillow forts. *No missions*,” he added after a second of deliberation, with great emphasis this time. “Chill day.”

“That’s a fine idea,” Allura tried to say, but trailed off when Lance cut in.

“Actually, uh…” He tapped his finger on his leg—the arm that had so recently been splintered into pieces. “Maybe later? If it’s okay I think I want to be alone for a little while. Reflect on my mortality, contemplate the meaning of existence, become emo, you know how it is.”

“He’s joking,” Hunk assured Allura, who looked rather scandalized. “It means he’s feeling better but wants some time to process.”

“Thank you for the translation,” Shiro grinned, though it seemed a little strained to Keith. “That’s understandable, Lance. You can come meet us in the rec room whenever you’re feeling up to it.”

With that everyone began to shuffle out. The thought of leaving right now made Keith feel like throwing up, but no way in hell was he going to force his presence on Lance when Lance obviously wanted to be—

Keith stopped in his tracks when something held him back; a hooked finger through a belt loop on his hip.

“Keith, are you—” Hunk trailed off mid-sentence as he looked over his shoulder from the doorway at Keith, his eyes falling to Lance’s hand. “Oh, okay cool, I’ll see you guys later then.”

“Sorry,” Lance mumbled when it was just the two of them left in the room. “I just don’t feel up to all
the questions and staring right now. But.. I don’t think I could stand it if you left, though,” he added in a hurried mumble. “Is this okay?”

“And... yeah,” Keith replied, albeit a little hoarsely.

His answer seemed to ease the strained hunch to Lance’s shoulders a bit. Lance rose to his feet then, stretching his arms out high before dropping them behind his head and hitting Keith with a calculated look that made his stomach do a backflip. “Well you don’t have to look so terrified,” he sighed. “We don’t have to talk about what happened yet if you don’t want to. Any of it,” he added pointedly, then sighed again and dropped his arms—drooping over so much he appeared a few inches shorter than before. “We can wait. I just wanna, like, rest. Can we do that?”

Lance could have asked him for a star right now and Keith would have found some way to bottle one. But, “Yeah,” was all he managed to say aloud. “We can do that.”


Five minutes later they were coming up the corridor on their shared floor of the east tower of the castle. Lance’s door came up first and he entered the code without even looking. The door slid open and he made to go inside, but then turned around in the doorway and leaned against the jamb, eyeing Keith warily, who took a single step backward. Because he was being kicked out right? Lance wanted to go swimming so he needed to change and get cleaned up first, so Keith needed to leave. He needed to go to his own room to change. But he couldn’t seem to move his feet any farther than one step backward, and likewise Lance didn’t seem inclined to go any farther into his room than the doorway.

A mess of emotions fought for control of Lance’s face, until an uncharacteristic vulnerability won out. With deeply furrowed eyebrows Lance hugged his stomach. “Okay, I’ll say it. I'll say it. It doesn’t feel that long ago for me, Keith. The cryosleep isn’t like regular sleep at all. So it feels like we just got back from Orna like twenty minutes ago. I just...” He hugged himself tighter, his temple coming to rest on the wall. “I don’t want you to go. Is it weird if I ask you to stay with me while I go wash off? Maybe that’s weird...”

“It’s not weird,” Keith blurted. Thank god Lance came out and said what Keith been thinking but too scared to say. “It’s not. I, uh... I don’t wanna be separated right now either.”

Relief washed over Lance so fast. “Oh, thank god. Okay. Okay, um, I’ll grab my stuff, then we can stop by your room for yours, and stop by the bathroom together before heading to the pool? I don’t really wanna take a full shower y’know but I do need to get all this blood off before we go into the pool or else Allura’s gonna lose her shit.” He gestured casually to his midsection, where dried blood had been lingering on his skin and torn flightsuit for days as the wounds stitched themselves closed underneath. “Shampoo my hair maybe,” he added as they entered his room together, touching the hair at the base of his neck that had congealed into crimson-black clumps.

Averting his eyes from the sight, Keith tried and failed to swallow the lump in his throat. Maybe he’d feel better once all that blood was washing away down the bathroom drain.
He knew it was hopeless once he was standing in the bathroom with a soapy towel in hand, trying to help Lance wash away the blood caked onto his back and neck. It was surreal, seeing all this blood and yet no open wounds. Like finding oceanic fossils in a desert.

Lance had started off doing it himself but it took less than a minute for Keith to offer his help, after watching him straining around in the mirror trying to get at that hard to reach spot on his lower back. Grainless blackish-pink water circled the drain in the sink and the hum of the tap filled the room. He’d left it running; the white noise was a helpful distraction as the scar from Keith’s luxite blade slowly revealed itself under all the old blood on Lance’s lower back, a slash of angry tan on a sea of brown already marred by a few other scars, and the bubbly burn from Arus. This new one was wide and twisting and ugly, and Keith bit his lip so hard it started to bleed when Lance softly requested the towel so he could get his stomach real quick, where the blade had come out the other side.

But it was when he handed the towel back so Keith could get his neck that Keith truly lost it.

It only took a few cursory swipes for the pattern to become legible. Keith had skipped well over half of the Middletongue creole lessons that Coran had insisted upon over this last year, arguing that his physical training was far more important, and that he never did any of the talking during negotiations anyway. But he knew enough. He knew how to read and write it, and the very first thing Coran had showed them each was how to write were their names. The language utilized a phonetic alphabet much like many Terrans ones, where each symbol represented a consonant or vowel sound. Keith hadn’t quite finished wiping the blood off Lance’s neck yet, but when he recognized the alien letters there he found that he could no longer feel his arms. The towel slipped from his hands to the tile and he brought his hand back up to Lance’s neck, shakily, his fingers ghosting over the three symbols that had been carved there with such malice. The jagged ‘k’ sound with three strikes through it, the spiraling ‘ee,’ and the aborted ‘th.’ It was supposed to be a long straight line with an arrow at the top and a circle around the tail-end, but the circle trailed off the to right. Damaged. Unfinished.

His breath hitched as Lance turned around slowly, pulling Keith’s hand from his neck as he went. The softest look was painted on his face. Keith wanted to scream. Why the fuck was he still looking at him like that after what had happened to him? After whose name had been carved into his neck?

Lance didn’t let go of his hand right away, running his thumb across Keith’s knuckles for a long moment before releasing him. He grabbed a mirror from the countertop and then stood with his back to the wall-mirror above the sink, angling the handheld one until he could see the backside of his neck in it. “Hmm,” he hummed at length, “it’s not so bad.”

Not so bad? Not so bad?

Seriously?

“Come on man, stop looking at me like that,” Lance chided, whacking Keith lightly on the shoulder with the mirror as Keith gaped at him in utter disbelief. “There are worse things to have carved on my neck. Like, what if he wrote ‘dweeb’ or something? Can you imagine?”

“How can you possibly joke about this?” Keith breathed. Lance’s reaction was unfathomable when Keith felt like he was slipping farther and farther into the depths of that cavern. Like the universe itself had tilted askew and would never sit right again on its axis. Like everything was wrong.
“I’m not joking,” Lance said back, and the playful coloring had faded from his voice now. “I’m telling you, I am okay with having your name on my body. Is that so hard to believe? It’s…” He trailed off when Keith wasn’t convinced, growing unsure of himself. “When I see it I’ll think of you, not him. Get it?” He tapped his finger on the scar the way a Shiro sometimes tapped his on his temple when he’d thought of a particularly brilliant plan that he knew full well was brilliant. “Look here.” Lance glanced into the mirror again, trailing his fingertip down to the tail end of the ‘th’ letter, where the knife-work had ended rather abruptly. “This is when you saved the day.”

But Keith only shook his head, numbly picking up the towel from the floor so he could finish cleaning the scar off. “You’re the one who saved us, Lance.”

They lapsed into silence after that and spoke no more of Orna. Or anything at all. But it wasn’t an uncomfortable silence—it was more that Keith had no damn idea what he could possibly say, or should say, and Lance seemed content with the quiet that had fallen over them.

The pool room was arguably the most disorienting room in the whole castle. Even after Coran’s explanation, he didn’t totally understand how the gravity worked in here, and despite Lance’s constant insistence that ‘I understand it perfectly’ he was pretty sure Lance didn’t understand it any more than he did. But they knew what switch to flip now which allowed them to walk up the side of the curving wall and all the way around to the ceiling where the Altean pool surface sparkled with a lattice of soft, cerulean light. To this day Keith still fell prey to vertigo when he got the pool’s edge and looked up at the ‘ceiling’ which was now the ground floor where they had entered. But it dulled when Lance let out a victorious whoop and jumped into the pool with a splash so big that it escaped the gravitational field, sending little droplets falling all the way to the ceiling. ...Floor. Whatever.

While Lance swam, Keith sat at the edge between the shallow and deep end, with his calves dipped in the water and nothing more. He couldn’t go all the way in without taking off his gloves and revealing the gauze underneath and the fact that he’d refused a pod, and he simply didn’t have the wherewithal to fight with Lance right now. Anyway, Lance didn’t mind Keith sitting out. He didn’t prod him or provoke him or do anything else that he normally would have done to goad Keith into participating in his games. He just swam. Backstroke laps at first, then butterflies, and then he gave up organized exercising in favor of simply floating around, sometimes diving down deep before coming up to float on his back again, eyes on the towering windows where the brilliant indigo nebula lay splattered outside, and millions of stars beyond. And Keith simply watched. He didn't mean to stare, he just couldn't help it. It was surreal watching Lance enjoy himself so thoroughly after watching him be tortured nearly to death. Like slipping from a nightmare straight into another dream without ever waking in-between.

It was almost an hour of this before Lance gave up pretending that he didn’t know Keith was watching him. “Enjoying the show?” he joked from the far end of the pool, pushing his wet bangs away from his eyes with one hand and striking a winning, toothy grin.

But Keith didn’t have the energy to quip back, or defend himself. He didn’t have the energy for anything, really. “It’s better than the one I got on Orna,” he mumbled.
The smirk fell right off Lance’s face. He dove back under water, becoming a brownish blur for a few moments until he surfaced again right in front of Keith, where he could stand with his head above the water. Keith desperately tried not to stare at the scar curving around from the backside of his neck. He felt like he was walking on cracked ice, farther and farther out into the sea, the shoreline receding as the ice grew thinner. He was so close to falling through.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” Lance said, brushing the wet hair away from his face again. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

Keith’s heart sank as his imagination ran away with him, but he managed to nod anyway.

Taking the cue, Lance edged a little closer. “I’ve been wondering about that thing Shiro said down in the cavern. Before I… you know. He said ‘remember what I told you before the Kerberos mission.’ What was it that he told you back then?”

That took Keith by surprise. This question was relatively easy compared to the plethora of questions Lance could have asked him instead, so he found himself spilling the answer freely. “He said… ‘Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future. Concentrate the mind on the present moment.’”


Keith almost laughed at the sinfully cute reaction. Almost.

“He was just trying to tell me not to wallow while he was gone. And he didn’t make that up, by the way. Buddha said it first.”

“Shiro’s Buddhist?” Lance said, edging even closer. “Actually, you know what, I’m not that surprised. That explains a lot about him.”

The closer Lance got, the harder it was to look away from the scar on his neck. Keith didn’t realize he was outright staring, though, until Lance’s hand came to rest directly on top of the letters, shielding them from view. He met Lance’s eyes again then, just in time for Lance to finish closing the gap between them.

Peering up from the water like a lost, lonely dog, Lance rested his cheek directly on Keith’s knee. “You wanna go upstairs?” he asked softly.

Keith nodded silently again, biting the inside of his own cheek hard enough to taste blood. He didn’t trust himself to speak anymore without shattering.

They were almost back to their floor when he finally did. (Shatter, that is.)

It happened when Lance sighed and said, “I really wish you’d stop looked at me like that. I know you must feel guilty about the way things went down, Keith, but… I’m glad it was me, okay? Better me than anyone else.”

In the middle of the corridor Keith stopped cold in his tracks, shaking, ready to scream himself
hoarse at Lance for saying such a thing. He opened his mouth to let it all fly. But nothing came out.

Weird… He stumbled forward anyway, glaring at Lance accusatively. Pointing. But his arm went too far and he jabbed Lance in the sternum, who stumbled backward in surprise. Keith didn’t stop trying. He couldn’t stop until he had to told Lance why that was so dead-fucking-wrong, what he just said. Had to.. to say something. Anything. What was he trying to say again..? Keith’s vision went spotty and he stumbled too, falling at Lance, no longer able to feel his legs, or his arms, or any part of his body.

Suddenly he was on the floor, on his back, and Lance’s terrified face was looming over his, mouth moving, wow he was really close now, but Keith couldn’t hear his voice over the roaring static in his ears. He was floating in sensory deprivation a thousand miles away as Lance scooped him up into his arms and began to run with him back the way they’d come. Might as well have been in space, watching it happen through a telescope.

It felt like days that the uniform lights in the corridor passed them by, one by one, and it was easy to let himself grow hypnotized by them. As each light receded Keith felt his world darken.

The pattern broke only once an eon as Lance turned a corner, and by the time they turned the last one and went through an open door into a room that felt larger than a galaxy Keith was a thousand years old, withering away as Lance laid him down on a table, as other faces appeared above him. Crowding him. Touching him, poking him, speaking to him. He tried to tell them, I can’t hear you. I can’t feel that. I’m pretty sure I’m dying. But nobody understood.

Lance.

Lance will understand.

Throughout this eternity Lance was the only constant, the only thing that never moved out of Keith’s limited and grainy scope of vision. Keith locked eyes with him and tried to tell him without any words, I’m dying. I’m dying Lance, and I’m sorry, and I love you, and goodbye.

And Lance must have understood, because he moved a little closer and brought his hand to Keith’s face to brush his hair from his eyes. Keith still couldn’t feel it, but the static in his ears faded in response by a few blessed decibels. Breathing out the remainder of his worldly troubles, Keith closed his eyes and walked calmly into oblivion.

But instead of death, it was life that his feet eventually carried him back to. It was Lance’s voice that eventually overtook the static. “...still can’t believe you guys didn’t make him go into a pod. I’m so pissed off about that. Did you even look at him? You should have seen what that sick fuck was doing to him when—”

“Lance,” Pidge needled. “Lance, stop, I think he can hear us.”

Lance turned to Keith sharply, who was now able to move his neck for the first time in what felt years, and was using that newfound ability to look around the room in utter bewilderment. “Why am I in the medbay?” He couldn’t for the life of him remember how he got here, or what had happened.
“Um, maybe because you collapsed and scared the shit out of me!” Lance fumed, and Keith felt a furious blush coming on as he realized that he was half naked —

Oh. Wait, that’s right. Swimming. They’d gone swimming and Lance’s hair wasn’t even dry yet, which means it couldn’t have been an hour since then. Keith gingerly sat up. Then he inspected his arm, where someone had attached a little meter to his bicep with an elastic cord, the screen not unlike a circular temperature gauge, the measurements of which stretched from deepest red all the way to violet and touched every color of the rainbow on the way. The needle was on orange, borderline red. Very low. Even with no clue what this was measuring, it was obvious that the readout wasn’t good.

A quick look around told him the other paladins were all wearing matching devices. What...?

“I’m so sorry, Keith,” Shiro said, moving forward to stand next to Lance and Keith. “I thought it was just your wrists and the bite. If I knew you were seriously injured I would’ve made sure you went into a pod.”

“But I wasn’t,” Keith said. Because he wasn’t. It was just the cuff-marks and the bite. What was going on?

“Allura!” Lance complained, turning to her with dramatic flair and stepping aside to let her closer to Keith.

Allura took over then, sitting down in the chair closest to Keith’s spot on the tabletop. “It’s my fault,” she sighed. “I should have made the connections. That… creature,” she settled on icily, “fed not just on emotions, as the villagers believed, but on quintessence itself. I’m sure of it now.”

Tilting his arm, Keith eyed the meter there again. He knew that every living thing had some measure of quintessence, but he’d never understood exactly how it all worked. It was a complex branch of science, and he was pretty sure even the hyper-advanced Alteans hadn’t fully understood it any more than humans fully understood quantum physics. The natural force was simply beyond the comprehension of most sentient beings.

“Now that I’ve checked,” she went on, “all five of your levels are lower than they should be. That’s to be expected after any emotionally taxing event. It’s normal. Yours, though... Your level is, um… How should I say this?”

“It’s fucking tanked!” Lance barked, and Allura glared at him before turning back to Keith.

“It’s not something a healing pod would have fixed anyway,” she said, patting Shiro on the arm. “Quintessence is not something you can simply inject into a living being as simply a blood transfusion. It must be regenerated on its own.”

“Still. You should have told us there was something wrong,” Shiro insisted. He looked beside himself with the turn of events; in fact he looked close to tears, which for Shiro was unheard of. It twisted Keith’s insides.

“I didn’t know,” he said honestly. He hated being the one to put that look on Shiro’s face. The last few days scrolled through his head in quick succession—the heartache, the emptiness, the exhaustion, the feeling that he had strayed beyond the event horizon of a black hole. Hindsight was a bitch. But then again, who could blame him for not realizing? “Honestly, I thought I was feeling the expected amount of shittiness for having just watched someone I love get tortured half to death.”

Lance’s sudden peal of laughter tore right through the tension in the room, and soon Pidge was laughing too. Keith couldn’t help but crack a smile at their reaction to his low-effort joke.
While Allura came over with that scandalized expression again Hunk simply shook his head. “You guys have really morbid senses of humor, you know that?”

At least the tension between the seven of them had abated somewhat. Keith shrugged noncommittally. “So how long till it regenerates?”

“Normally,” Allura said, “for levels this low it could take weeks. But,” she added pointedly, “Lance here has informed us that we left one of the two nests intact down in the caverns. That would explain why not all of the affected villagers—’zombies,’ as you call them—have yet recovered, and why you yourself are still afflicted.”

“Pidge and Hunk and I are going back down to find and destroy it,” Shiro said. “That should do the trick.”

“So, should we have him on bedrest?” Lance asked Coran and Allura as the others took their leave of the medbay. Keith was standing now, and though he was a little iffy on his feet he didn’t feel like he was going to pass out again. Not right this second anyway. But it didn’t stop Lance from hovering one inch away from him with his hand resting on the small of his back just in case.

“Not at all,” Coran explained from the other side of Allura, where he was putting all kinds of equipment back into their respective drawers beneath the counter lining the wall. “It’s not a healing process that rest will accelerate, so there’s no need to confine him to his room. Just try not to get him too worked up, and don’t do anything too physically strenuous, okey dokey?”

“Got it,” Lance said, flashing Coran an ‘okay’ hand sign. “No fighting and no triathlons.”

Coran hit them with a fatherly look (there was no other word for it) that made Keith’s face burn. “Actually, I meant more along the lines of—”

“Coran!” Allura exclaimed, leaping out of her chair to grab him by the ear and cut him off before he could finish the sentence.

“Oookay,” Lance said, his face also burning, and promptly beelined toward the exit. “C’mon Keith, let’s go get dressed, yeah? It’s like Hoth in this medbay, I swear to quiznack. Where’s a Tauntaun when you need one, am I right...”

Allura was overcome with the giggles as Keith followed the still-rambling Lance out the door.

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“Where are we going?”

They’d taken over a dozen turns and two separate elevators after getting dressed, and Keith finally admitted to himself that he had no idea where Lance was taking him. The ship was so huge that even after two and a half years living here Keith still hadn’t been unearthed all its secrets, and still sometimes got lost if he wasn’t paying close enough attention to where he was going, or if all the lights were out for the night cycle and he didn’t bring a light with him. Right now he was very much lost.
Or, he would be, if Lance hadn’t been the one leading the way to some predetermined destination. “To do something fun and distracting until they kill that thing and make you better.”

They didn’t stop until they’d traveled all the way to the penultimate floor of the west tower. Keith almost thought they were going all the way to the top floor, to the viewing deck there, and so he spent the whole elevator ride through the tower thinking they were on their way to stargaze together. Which… yeah, that sounded nice. But then Lance stopped the ride one floor from the top, and flashed Keith an excited grin before skipping out through the opening doors.

This was decidedly not the west tower observation deck. This room was even bigger, actually. The ceiling was vaulted and faraway, and the room was separated into risers that rippled out from the center of the room. On each level there sat all manner of odd shapes, ranging from fruit-size to elephant-size, the smaller ones sitting on various elegant tables and shelves and the larger ones standing on their own closer to the center of the room. Every single one of them was covered with a draped cloth, turning the room into one giant mystery that had Keith’s interest piqued so high he almost forgot how awful he felt. He even forgot about Lance for a second, and headed straight for the nearest of the compelling shapes.

The table it sat on was intriguing enough on its own. It was easy, sometimes, to forget that this place they lived in was a castle. Seeing starstreaks out the windows and starmaps on the bridge, it was simpler to just think of it as a ship. But then Keith wandered into rooms like this. Rooms where there was wooden furniture instead of chrome, where the furniture was painted and carved and there were oil paintings on the walls, and where a gem-encrusted chandelier hung down from the center of the room, reflecting the blue lights that lined the edges of the room by the thousands. Rainbow shards of refracted light danced across the sheet as Keith reached up to pull it off.

The freshly uncovered object rattled on the tabletop before settling again. It was loopy and silver and tubular, larger at one end than the other, and rested on a stand made solely for the purpose of holding it. Huh. This looked familiar.

“That’s nothing,” Lance called, and Keith looked up to see him standing a dozen feet away near a shelf. “Look at these ones!” He ripped off the sheet in one swift movement, revealing a shelf chock-full of other objects that were similar in size but strikingly different in shape and color.

“What is this place?”

“It’s kinda creepy right?” Lance chuckled, leaving the shelf to move farther into the room, ascending the risers in just a few bounds. “Like an attic out of a horror movie or something.”

“No, it’s cool,” Keith said, and pulled another sheet as he followed Lance up the risers, revealing a chunky wooden monstrosity with some sort of leather stretched over each end. It also looked familiar, actually. In fact, they all did. Even though they were alien they struck a nostalgic chord that went back really far—all the way back to Earth. “Are these instruments?” he wondered suddenly.

On the topmost riser, in the center of the room, the largest shape of all lay hidden beneath a sheet embroidered with a fractal pattern which radiated out from the center. It must have taken years to weave. Leaning on it like he owned the place, Lance beamed down at Keith. “Yeah, they totally are. You wouldn’t believe how many of these Coran can actually play,” he laughed, and Keith had a minor flashback of Coran whipping out that tubular instrument by the door at a celebration or two (or three). It sounded like a flute masquerading as a trumpet. Keith had always just accepted it as one more quirk of Coran’s; he never thought there was a whole room in the castle filled with instruments like that. He’d never even taken the time to consider what other kinds of instruments they played on Altea before it was destroyed by the Galra.
When he looked around the room again at the dusty sheets and decaying paintings, something dark and icy began to settle in his stomach. He ran one finger along the percussion instrument, eyeing the dust that came away on his finger.

“Dude, stop.”

Pausing the downward spiral was a physical process, and it took him a full ten seconds to do it. But he tried to play it off. “Stop what?” he said, as casually as he could.

“Getting worked up. I can see the gears turning in your head at like Mach 3. Just… don’t think about it too much right now, okay? Or you’ll, you know. Just… just come up here. Please,” he added at the last minute when Keith narrowed his eyes at being told what to do.

With a deep breath, Keith pushed all thoughts of lost civilizations to the back of his head and went to meet Lance at the central platform. This instrument sat dead center in the room, setting it apart from the others by not only size but height as well, and since it was right beneath the chandelier it caught the brunt of its reflections too, so when Lance whipped off the sheet it was a sparkly and magnanimous reveal.

The closest familiar thing Keith could relate it to was a pipe organ. It was a lot more complicated than that (the pipes were all twisted up with each other and it had so many rows of keys it made Keith’s head spin), but then, it was Altean. So that was to be expected. Tossing the sheet behind him, Lance sat at the bench, peered at Keith mischievously through his eyelashes, and struck a full two-handed chord.

Keith gaped. “You can play this?”

His grin turned even slier. “Sort of,” he hummed, pretending at humility even as he walked up a scale and struck another chord, very obviously showing off. This man was a walking contradiction. God help him, Keith was smitten anyway. Lance laughed outright when he saw the look on Keith’s face, and then pointed to a book resting on a stand above the rows of keys. “Coran showed me how their sheet music works. I took piano lessons as a kid and this thing’s really not all that different, once you get used to it, it just has a few extra octaves. Convergent evolution, I guess. You wanna learn how to play something?”

“Yeah, alright,” Keith said, and edged himself onto the bench beside Lance.

Without wasting any time Lance launched into an impromptu piano lesson. This finger goes here, play this key this many times, then this one, and while you do that I’ll do this…

“Heart and Soul,” Keith deadpanned once he finally placed the ridiculous melody in his memory, remembering the way stray students would tap this out on the only piano at the Garrison, how he had seemed to hear it every single time he passed the auditorium. That first chord Lance struck had sounded like, like jazz or something. Something beautiful. This was whimsical nonsense in comparison to that. “Seriously?” he chuckled.

“Hey, don’t you dare knock Heart and Soul,” Lance defended haughtily, “it’s a classic, and it’s the perfect duet for a noob like you. Now lemme show you the next…” He trailed off as Keith fumbled his way through the next measure from memory.

“Like that?” Keith said.

Lance looked torn between pride and rage. “..Yeah. Yeah, exactly like that. And then—” He grabbed Keith’s wrist to move his hand to a higher octave, but released it immediately when Keith
sucked in sharp breath and flinched. Lance sighed, “Keith,” and Keith squeezed his eyes shut, steeling himself for yet another admonishing for not immediately going into a healing pod for his stupid wrists. But it didn’t come. “You really shouldn’t be wearing these things until your wrists have finished healing.”

Keith shrank away automatically when Lance reached for his hand again, but Lance took it gently, avoiding his wrist this time, and set about pulling his gloves off one by one. As he worked Keith’s eyes slid up from Lance’s hand to his forearm, to the splatter of scars where Salasa had shattered his armor and the pieces had embedded themselves in his arm. It was impossible to tell which scars were from the armor and which were clawmarks. There were just too many. Only three days ago that arm had been so broken Keith had feared the blood loss from that wound alone would kill him, and now he was just… just playing piano with it like nothing had happened, like it had never been broken, like he hadn’t almost died, like Keith hadn’t almost gotten him killed.

When Lance was done he shoved Keith’s gloves into his jacket pocket. He turned back to the piano like he was ready to play again, but then on second thought he reached back across the bench and took Keith’s hand, staying mindful of the gauze as he threaded their fingers together loosely. Concern tugged his eyebrows down into a deep canyon. “Are you okay?”

Keith had to stare at him for that. The honest curiosity on his face, the genuine concern, it just floored him. How was this all so backwards? “No,” he finally broke. “No, Lance, I’m not okay. Are you?”

“Hmm.” Still clinging onto Keith’s hand, Lance returned his other one to the keys, picking up a new song. Maybe it wasn’t a song at all. Just a medley of notes that barely belonged. “To tell you the truth? No. Not really.”

“But… Then how are you so…so…”

Frustrated and speechless, Keith gestured at him wildly.

Lance plunked out a few more chords, missing a half-step this time and hitting a wrong key that turned the whole chord into a grating accident. He frowned up at the pipes that had emitted the offending sound, as if they’d acted on their own accord. “I’ve always been like this, I guess. It’s easier to cope if I just detach myself from what happened, y’know? It helps that I’ve already healed.” Here he gave up playing to look at his arm, turning it over to look at the ugly criss-cross of scars on the underside. “Back on Earth it would’ve taken me months to come back from that. Years, from the stomach wound, if I’d even survived... But out here I’m fine,” he said, brightening suddenly, “and it’s easier to pretend it never happened. It’s easier to move forward.”

“But it did happen.”

The bench creaked as Lance slowly turned toward him. There was a mess of emotions on his face, each scarier than the last, because this was the closest Keith had physically been to Lance since that moment in the cavern when they sort-of-kissed. And Lance was giving him that look again. That look, like he would move a planet with his bare hands if Keith needed him to.

“I know,” Lance hummed, leaning in closer by a fraction of an inch. “Keith… Look, I know I said we didn’t have to talk about it yet, but I can’t keep my mouth shut anymore. Is it okay if I say something? You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want, you can just listen.” Keith had scarcely had time to nod before Lance was continuing, more amped up than Keith had seen him in a long time. “I’m in love with you too,” he blurted. “I know I already made it obvious in the cavern but I needed to say it again, outright. God that feels good… Listen, I know I freaked you out earlier when I said I was glad it was me, but I, I didn’t mean it like that, okay? I just… How do I say this.” Pausing to run his free hand through his hair, he shifted to sit on one folded leg so he was completely
facing Keith. “If I hadn’t kicked the empath—if you hadn’t reacted so strongly when he turned the
gun on me—he would have shot Shiro in the head. And who knows who else after that? Hunk
maybe, or Pidge, or me, or you. But it happened the way it did and we all survived. So yeah,” he
said decisively, “I’m glad it was me. I’m glad I did what I did and I’m glad the whole thing
happened.”

Keith must have been looking at Lance like he’d lost his mind because Lance grew a little defensive.
“Mean yeah,” he relented, “it sucked. It sucked. But, we saved a whole village from the worst fate
imaginable and we all came out alive, and I found out you care about me, like, way more than I
thought you did. Which is—is just” he searched for words, face burning, “—wow. So yeah. Fight
me. I’m glad it happened. Because if it hadn’t then I wouldn’t be sitting here with you, right now,
asking if I can kiss you again.”

Keith’s hammering heart slammed the brakes, and he cocked his head in confusion. “But you didn’t
—” And then his brain caught up with his heart; registered the way Lance was looking at him now.
Wide-eyed and expectantly. “—Oh.”

“But like… for real this time,” Lance whispered hopefully.

Something shifted deep in Keith’s chest as he drank in the soft expression on Lance’s face. Feeling
light for the first time in days, almost like someone had shorted out the artificial gravity again, Keith
slowly pulled his hand out of Lance’s and moved it to his face. He held it there for a long moment,
getting used to the feel of it. Warm skin, Lance’s skin, getting warmer all the while as his cheeks
flushed and his breath quickened too. Here in this moment, Keith felt almost absurd for the thoughts
that had circled him like carrion while Lance lay sleeping in the pod; the certainty that whatever love
Lance felt for him could never survive this hardship. Not only did Lance love him, but Lance
still loved him.

“Are you trying to kill me?” Lance breathed, and Keith responded with a short puff of laughter.
There was no tension left between them. No nerves, no anxiety, no wondering. Just anticipation.

When Keith kissed him it was hesitant, and cautious, and the exact opposite of what it was in the
caverns. His lips were warm and he smelled like juniberry shampoo and chlorine, and as Lance’s
thumb brushed along his cheekbone Keith felt something long-dormant unfolding inside him—or
maybe it was something brand new, like a budding flower opening toward the sun for the very first
time.

Whatever it was, it burned.

When Lance pulled back, grinning absently, Keith seized him by the collar of his jacket and kissed
him again. Harder, wilder, haphazardly, freely, tilting his head until they fit together like two
rhyming words in a song, chasing that burn, chasing Lance, chasing the feeling of being alive. It was
certainly real this time. A soft ‘ng’ noise escaped Lance as Keith licked into his mouth without
much warning, and it was so fucking different than the first time, because this time Keith was the one
who was passing over a key.

Almost like he could read Keith’s mind Lance’s other hand found its way to the back of Keith’s
head, holding him close, slowing the kiss down to something a little less frantic and a lot more soft.
And damn if didn’t kill him. His heart tripped in pace as he leaned into the hand on his cheek,
chasing that feeling too because it was all so overwhelming and it was so hard to focus on this many
wonderful things at once. He was so caught up in leaning into Lance’s hand that he didn’t realize he
was slipping off the back of the narrow bench until it was much too late.

All he saw were Lance’s eyes going wide as a very different kind of butterflies filled his stomach and
his own eyes shot open in surprise. Then he was in freefall and Lance was shrieking—oh shit, he still had a vice grip on Lance’s jacket so he was taking him down too—and he hit the ground, flipping right over the edge of the highest riser onto the second.

He was still groaning on his back when Lance’s face peeked over the edge from the first riser where he’d come to land. “Holy shit dude, are you okay?”

Keith took one look at the horror on Lance’s face and snapped.

He burst into a fit of laughter so deep and long it started to ache in his abs after a minute, and tears welled in his eyes as he clutched his stomach and fought to breathe. Lance laughed too, but not as hard and after a moment he simply laid his cheek on his arm and watched Keith fondly from above. It took an embarrassingly long time to stop laughing, and by then Lance was half hiding his face behind his bicep.

“Ugh, you can’t look at me like that,” Keith complained when he was able to breathe again. It wasn’t fair. What little of Lance’s lovestruck face was showing burned a warm crimson-brown, and the rainbow reflections from the chandelier danced in his hair and out across the one shoulder Keith could see from here, and god, he was so beautiful. What did Keith do to deserve this? “I don’t think my heart can take it.”

“I can’t help it,” Lance whined. “You’re just so cute and I’m so happy. Three days ago I thought we were goners for sure. I thought that was the only time I was ever gonna get to kiss you.”

Lance smashed his cheek even further into his arm as Keith pushed himself up into a sitting position, so he was looking down at Lance where he lay at the edge of the topmost step. “Me too,” he hummed, to all of the above, “and I have to say, the second kiss was infinitely better than the first.” Blushing darker than ever, Lance rolled onto his back as Keith leaned over him, his eyes wide and dazed as Keith smiled down at him dangerously, feeling more alive than he’d felt in days. Than he’d felt ever, maybe. “The third one, though…” he mumbled, the pad of his thumb ghosting at Lance’s lower lip, “now that one’s where it’s really gonna get good…”

“Oh my god,” Lance whimpered, and Keith had just replaced his thumb with his lips when a beeping sound filled the room.

Keith froze.

“Dammit.”

His annoyance was not reflected on Lance’s face, however. Lance sat up with all the excitement of a dog let loose in a park to pull his comm from his jacket pocket and look over the newly received message. “Hunk says they’re back!” he announced. “That means they must’ve killed the nest already! Dang, that was fast. I’m impressed. And kind of annoyed, after how long we spent looking for that stupid thing.” Tucking the comm away, he grabbed Keith’s arm and turned his bicep over to inspect the meter there. A grin split across his face. “Nice. Your meter totally went up! Yellow-green, aww yeah. Allura said mid-green was healthy for us humans, and low-blue for Galra, so that means you’re on your way back to normal. Awesome.”

“I do feel better,” Keith admitted, although he’d been more than willing to attribute that to the fact that his tongue had been in Lance’s mouth less than a minute ago.

But if Lance noticed how eager Keith was to go back to doing that, he didn’t make any mention of it as he rolled to his feet. “We should go greet them and let them know it worked. Everyone was really worried about you.”
Keith caught up to him at the entrance, surprising Lance by taking him firmly by the hand. “Fine,” he said, “but just so you know, we’re not done here.”

“As if,” Lance retorted. “We’ll never be done. I’ve been waiting to get my hands on you for like three years, you oblivious dumbass.”

“Wha— Are you kidding me? You’re the oblivious one!” Keith screeched, and although they fought about it all the way to the ship’s bridge, it was the first ever fight that they held hands all the way through.

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When they entered the bridge Lance pranced right to the center of the room, toward their friends where they stood huddling by the main control panel. “You guys ROCK!” he crowed. “Knew I could count on you, best team ever, round of applause, etcetera, etcetera… Why are you guys looking at me like that?”

Everyone shuffled on their feet, guilt plainly written across their faces, especially when they looked at Keith who had entered the room with a lot less vigor and was only just now reaching the group. “Actually,” Shiro spoke up, “we weren’t able to find the second nest. That’s why we came back; to enlist Allura and Coran’s help. It turns out the villagers collapsed the caverns after we left.”

“They were superstitious about it,” Hunk explained, misinterpreting the baffled glance that Keith and Lance shared as Shiro’s words soaked in, “and I don’t blame them, after everything that happened.”

“It’s almost impossible to walk through there now,” Pidge said. “It'll take a lot longer than we’d hoped to find the stupid thing.”

“But— But Keith’s meter went up,” Lance said, pointing at it with helpless confusion. He looked at the meter on his own arm then, and the confusion increased twofold. “Mine too!”

Allura pushed past Shiro to take Keith by the arm and turn it over, tucking her hair behind her ear absentmindedly as she leaned in to inspect the meter. Astonishment slowly overtook her skepticism. “Fascinating,” she breathed. “It’s nearly back in the green again! It shouldn’t have gone up this much on its own in so short a time. I don’t understand. How did it go up so fast without the nest being destroyed?”

Keith shrank away from her inquisitive gaze. “Don’t look at me,” he defended, “I’m pretty sure I understand this quintessence stuff the least out of all of us.”

That answer wasn’t good enough for Allura. “Well, what were you two doing when you noticed the meter go up?” she pressed.

The bottom of Keith’s stomach dropped out as it hit him.

Oh .

He looked at Lance in sudden, all-at-once comprehension, and found Lance staring back at him with equal parts surprise and mortification. They swiftly averted their eyes from each other, but it wasn’t
quite swiftly enough because a thick silence followed. A very, very thick silence.

As usual, Pidge was the one who shattered it without so much as a care in the world for Lance or Keith’s dignity. “Oh my god,” she giggled. “Oh my god, they’re blushing, Hunk. Hunk.”

“Yeah, I see it,” Hunk said.

“How, they’re blushing,” she said again anyway (repeatedly slapping him on the arm all the while), “is this a thing? Is this a thing now? Am I allowed to make fun of them now?”

“Pidge,” Shiro scolded half-heartedly, “don’t put them on the spot.” But if anything he looked even more amused by the situation than she was. Keith glared at him, trying to convey the words ‘I have no brother’ with only his eyes. It had no effect on Shiro’s shit-eating grin.

“They put themselves on the spot!” Pidge screeched, gesturing at the two of them wildly. Keith had his arms crossed though and was now facing the nearest blank wall because oh my god. “Look at them! They’re doing all the work!”

Keith dropped his face into one hand as Allura slid into his field of vision, once again trying to stifle a giggle to maintain a professional gameface (and once again failing). “Please boys,” she said, as regally as she could manage, “try to ignore them. I know it’s embarrassing but it’s actually quite important that I know what you were doing that caused your meters to rise ahead of schedule. For science and—”

“For science!” Pidge hollered.

“Yeah,” Hunk joined in, “give us the play by play for science!”

“Okay, you know what,” Lance seethed, embarrassment reeking from every syllable, “you guys are worse than my siblings! We don’t have to take this. I swear…” He fell to muttering as he stomped toward the exit.

When Keith removed his face from his hands Lance was halfway to the door, and one fleeting look at the others was enough to decide, oh screw it. They’ve known for days. So Keith jogged after Lance, catching up with him right before he got to the door and slipping one hand into his, flipping the bird over his shoulder with the other.

A chorus of “WOO”s followed them out into the hall, not stopping even when the door hissed closed behind them.

“That went well, I think,” Keith said, and Lance pressed one hand firmly over his eyes.

“Well you’re sure in a good mood now,” he huffed. “Ughhh.. they’re never gonna let us live this down, are they?”

“They’re never gonna let you live it down,” Keith corrected. “It was your rivalry. Will you stop staring at this thing,” he burst suddenly, startling Lance, who’d been surreptitiously staring at his meter for the last few seconds. A wave of self-consciousness overtook him and he reached up to take it off. He probably didn’t need it anymore now that he was out of the danger zone, and it made him feel overexposed.

“Wait!” Lance said hurriedly. When Keith gaped at him in confusion, fingers still poised on the buckle of the meter’s arm-strap, Lance reasoned, “Just till you’re back to normal.” Keith squinted his eyes. “Okay,” Lance broke, “fine, you got me, I just… I spent so long wondering, agonizing over how you felt about me, and now there’s physical proof that you care about me as much as I care
about you. Sue me for liking it. Besides,” he added, with a coy tilt of his head, “I wanna see if I can make it go up a little more.”

Gobsmacked, Keith stopped walking, which meant Lance had to stop walking too since they were pretty much permanently attached at the hand. He looked a little floored at the severity of Keith’s reaction.

“Wow, note to self,” he muttered, “he is susceptible to terrible pick-up lines apparently, kinda wish I’d known that sooner.”

But it wasn’t the pick-up line that had stopped Keith in his tracks. It was the thing before that. It reminded him what Lance had said in the instrument hall right before they kissed. *I found out you care about me, like, way more than I thought you did.*

Fuck.

Maybe Keith was the oblivious one after all.

“Lance,” he said, and Lance seemed to sense the sudden shift in mood because he moved in closer, abandoning their retreat from the bridge for whatever Keith wanted to say. “I’m sorry you had to find out like that. How I felt about you,” he clarified when Lance looked confused. “From that creature. It shouldn’t have come to that. I should’ve fessed up a long time ago.”

“It’s okay,” Lance started to say, but Keith shook his head.

“God, everyone really needs to stop saying that!” he huffed. “It’s *not okay.* But… But it’s okay that it’s not okay. Shit, I’m not making any sense. I just can’t believe we almost died and I hadn’t told you how much you meant to me. I love you, Lance. For… for pretty much as long as I’ve known you, actually. I feel like such an idiot, I was so convinced you’d never feel that way about me, you have no idea how *blindsided* I was when you said—”

Lance interrupted his rambling with a kiss.

Forgetting the rest of his speech, Keith melted into it, throwing his arms around Lance’s neck. Lance responded by taking him by the hips and twisting them in place, pressing him to the wall. A groan escaped him as his back connected with it, and it turned strangled as Lance leaned one arm on the wall next to Keith’s head and then left his mouth to kiss his way down Keith’s neck, all the way to the half-healed bite mark, where he pressed his lips as lightly as humanly possible.

“Get a room!” Pidge yelled from down the hall.

They both snapped to attention, retorting in tandem, “*You* get a room!”

In the bridge doorway at the end of the hall, all five of their friends were peeking out in various states of laughter and exasperation and happiness. Hunk cackled at their simultaneous answer so hard that he tripped through the doorway and had to catch himself on Shiro.

“Ugh,” Lance groaned, and looped his arm around Keith’s waist before fleeing toward the elevator.

“We are seriously never going to hear the end of this.”

Once they were safe in the elevator and out of sight, he relaxed, and released Keith to poke at his meter again while Keith pressed the button. “Your quintometer went up another few notches,” he bragged. You’re officially broaching green there, mullet. You’re welcome.”

Keith whacked his hand away. “Yours went up too,” he pointed out. “And it went up *again* in the
hallway just now. You’re welcome.”

Twisting his arm to look at his own meter again, Lance’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Damn, you’re right. Hmm… Bet I can make yours go up more, though.”

What could he say? Keith had never been one to back down from a challenge.

“You’re on,” he shot back, but his determination wavered a bit as the elevator came to a stop. Lance looked over as the doors opened up, and Keith could tell he was baffled by what floor Keith had taken them to.

“But first,” he sighed, “I was thinking that I might spend an hour or two in one of the pods.” It was hard to admit, and even harder to work up the motivation to force himself to step out of the elevator and walk into the medbay, but he knew he’d put it off too long already. His wrists were getting infected and his neck was going to scar like a bitch if he didn’t bite the bullet and just get it over with. Might as well do it while he was still riding the peak of this feelgood quintessence come-up.

“Just for a few hours. And then, can we maybe take the others up on the chill day offer?”

Lance gaped at him. “You want to do all that? Like, voluntarily?”

“Yeah,” Keith nodded. His head was so much clearer now than it had been in the days following the events in the cavern, and even though he knew now that it was at least partially attributable to his shot quintessence level, he still felt guilty about the way he’d treated everyone. “I sort of.. owe them all an apology,” he sighed. A belated apology was better than no apology. “I was bit of an asshole while you were asleep.”

“You? An asshole? I’d never have guessed it,” Lance joked, and Keith pinched him hard. “Oi! Just get in the pod already then, will you?” he complained. “I hate it, but you’re right, so just get it over with. The sooner you go in the sooner I can kiss you again.”

“Hm. Do not dwell on the past,” Keith quoted as he led the way into the medbay, “do not dream of the future. Concentrate the mind on the present moment.”

Lance pouted as Keith typed in the sequence that brought a pod rising out of the ground and went to stand in front of it. “What are you telling me, Keith?”

The door hissed open, and Keith blinked up at Lance shyly. I’m telling you to kiss me whenever you damn well feel like it.

But he didn’t say it. He simply stepped into the pod—

—only to be met by Lance clambering in after him.

“Wh- what are you doing?” he spluttered, and Lance had barely tucked all his limbs in before the glass door hissed shut, sealing them in together.

“What’s it l-look like?” Lance said, his teeth clacking together as the pod filled with gaseous anesthesia and the air grew cold and dark. “I’m c-concentrating on the present m-m-moment.” Time slowed to a crawl. Keith felt himself slipping under, but not quickly enough to miss Lance’s next words, and the feeling of warm breath on his neck. “This scar is m-mine n-now, okay?” Lance whispered. “Just like mine is y-yours.”

“O-kay,” Keith whispered back, curling into him as they drifted toward sleep, toward health, toward a future together that they’d never take for granted. Okay.
And you know what?

It was.

End Notes

Alternate ending: “O-k-kay,” Keith whispered back, curling into him as they drifted toward sleep, to be woken later that evening by a very amused Pidge who would throw her arms up as they groggily returned to the land of the living and say: ”That is not what I meant by ‘get a room,’ you guys.” (lmao)

Hope you enjoyed the ride. You readers make the blood, sweat, and tears of writing stories of this magnitude mean something. So thanks for reading! I'm posting TWO fics today (I know, after months and months of nothing haha) so check out the other one too if you have a chance. It's a small black paladin Lance story called Diplomacy. xoxo

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!