Sleeping at the Wheel
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Summary

"Shiro: Friend looking for a car share to Austin for Christmas Break. Message me if interested/available.

Lance: I am currently both interested AND available. Tell your ‘friend’ she is welcome to share my ride anytime. Dates?"

College/Roadtrip AU

Or, the one in which Lance and Keith share a car for four road trips. Shenanigans happen, disasters occur, and two boys on the open road slowly fall in love.

Notes

Okay, so this fic started as a small idea that quickly spiralled into a monster idea with lots of content. With the drop of season five, we finally decided to put pen to our ideas, and voila!

Quick few things to bear in mind:
At the beginning of fic, Pidge has been aged up to eighteen like Lance and Hunk (so she can be in college with the bois) while Shiro is twenty-five, and Allura and Keith are nineteen.
See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Lance

‘Friend looking for a car share to Austin for Christmas Break. Message me if interested/available. :(

Bleary eyed from lack of sleep, Lance blinked, registering the words on his Facebook feed. How long had he been staring at the screen in his hand for? He’d lost track of time. It was long past 1am. The status had been posted by Shiro, one hour ago. Shiro, the only one of Lance’s friends good-looking enough to attract attention from the opposite sex. He stared at the status, the word ‘friend’ popping out to him almost as an invitation.

Lance: Whatsupp dawg

– Keep it casual, Lance decided as he typed a message to Shiro.

Lance: I am currently both interested AND available. Tell your ‘friend’ she is welcome to share my ride anytime. Dates?

It only occurred to Lance after hitting ‘send’ that Shiro’s friend may not, in fact, be female as he’d assumed. But then, most of Shiro’s friends seemed to be female so the odds were in his favour. Shiro was a post-grad who’d come to Wisconsin university to complete his Master’s in Robotics and Engineering which was coincidentally the same Major Lance’s best friends Hunk and Pidge were taking. As a post-grad, Shiro had kindly offered to help them out. Lance had just sort of been around for the ride and next thing he knew, they all started hanging out after that. Chill.

Lance’s phone bleeped. It was Shiro.

Shiro: Great, so you’re down? They want to leave on the 14th. It’s a long journey but my friend said they’d be happy to split the price of gas.

Hmm, so not a gold-digger, thought Lance. Not that he had any gold to dig. Not the material kind, anyhow. He forwarded an enthusiastic reply.
Lance: I'm down. 14th is perfect.

That was a lie. His final paper was due in that night. He’d just have to turn it in early. He typed the words, ‘Does she have a name?’ but then thought better of it, deleting them. He’d only end up stalking her on social media and that ruined the enigma.

With only a week to go before the car-share with this mysterious and hopefully beautiful stranger, Lance counted the days and worked his ass off to get his paper handed in early. Needless to say, it wasn’t his best work, but an artiste does not create master-pieces in mere days; especially with romance on the mind.

The day came around, and Lance awoke early to shower and dress properly. First impressions were everything. He drenched himself in Paco Rabanne for Men because he wanted to come across as expensive and manly. This cologne promised both of those things. He hadn’t gotten much use out of his third-maybe-fourth-hand Renault Twingo in quite a while. Campus was fairly small and everything was close by. In the time since he’d arrived at college to now, the car had gathered a decent amount of weather marks and scratches from other badly-parked vehicles, dulling the paint-job to a rather anaemic air-force blue. Maybe Shiro’s friend would find it cute, rather than cheap, if she was the retro-chic kind of gal.

Stomach fluttering with excited nerves, Lance pulled up at the campus gates at 9am. He was about to spend eighteen hours in a car with a person he’d never met. More if you counted the time he’d need for a break. That would surely amount to almost twenty-four hours of time. In the last desperate few minutes before their meeting time, Lance tried to picture every one of Shiro’s attractive friends he’d come across. Secretive, long-lashed eyes, swathes of blonde and chestnut coloured hair smothered his imagination, but nothing coherent. He didn’t remember any of their names; he only recalled being dazzled by the older girls’ flashing beauty, their confidence, their well-travelled tales of lives Lance wished he could be a part of… Shiro had no idea how lucky he was.

“Hey.”

Lance’s fantasies were cut unwelcomingly short by a male voice he didn’t recognise. He looked out of the window, peering over his sunglasses (they were blue and reflective – he thought they might make him look a little more mysterious).

Lance was met with the surly, dark-eyed eyed frown of a boy who looked about his age with hunched shoulders and a – was that a – mullet?
Lance stared. “Caaaan I help you?”

The frown deepened. “Shiro said you were the car guy. Maybe not. This thing looks pretty small.”

Lance gaped at hin. “Huh?”

“Are you the car-share guy?” The guy asked, over-accentuating as though Lance was a deaf foreigner.

Lance felt his mouth drop open. Who the hell was this - ? Why was this mullet-head - ? Where was the lustrously-locked lady he was promised? And who the hell was he to insult Blue, his greatest and only mode of transport?

“Excuse me? I’ll have you know this baby made the journey from Tennessee to Oregon four times in three days.” Said Lance proudly.

The mullet-head’s eyes narrowed. “Um, no it didn’t.” He replied, monotone.

“And how the hell do you know?” Lance scoffed.

“Because it would take over 130 hours to make that trip. There’s only 72 hours in three days. Elementary math.” Mullet-head drawled in his Texan accent. He was not going to drive this arrogant jerk two minutes past the threshold of Campus, let-alone all the way to Texas.

Lance tapped his finger on the wheel.

“Shiro around?” He asked, clipped.

“Over there.” Said Mullet-head, waving vaguely behind Lance’s car.

Lance slammed out of the car and marched down the busy driveway to Shiro, who stood innocently watching by the curb.
“What the hell is going on?” Lance demanded, jabbing his finger at him.

“Good Morning to you too.” Shiro laughed, “So you’ve met Keith.”

Seething: “Keith? I thought you said this friend was a girl?”

Shiro raised his brow. “No, you said he was a girl. I just never bothered to contradict you because I knew the only way you’d go along with this is if you thought there was something in it for you.”

“By something you mean - ?”


Lance felt like he could barely breathe. This was unimaginable. Not to mention, he’d slogged his guts out over a paper he could have done much better at, all for the sake of an arrogant jerk with a mullet.

“I hate you.”

“No you don’t.” Shiro smiled, “Have a safe journey. He’s a nice guy, really. See you after Christmas!”

Shiro didn’t stick around to buffer the wrath of Lance’s furious glare any longer. He was off like a shot, leaving Lance with two options; both equally awful. He either had to tell this Keith to shove off and find a ride elsewhere, or stick it out and bear the journey. If he went with the first, he had no idea what Shiro would say to him. He had no clue who this guy even was to Shiro. If he went with the second… well… it was only 18 hours of his life, right? Twenty-four, if you count the breaks, his brain (un)helpfully provided.

Trying with all his might to suppress the twitch in his eye, Lance approached the surly stranger and plastered on a smile.
“So… are you sure about this? It’s a long ride.”

*Please say no, please say no.*

“Yeah. Let’s go already.”

Lance grit his teeth. This was going to be tough.

**Sleeping at the Wheel**

Aside from the necessary civil formalities exchanged within the first, awkward fifteen minutes of the journey, barely a word had been passed between them that first hour. To fill the silences, Lance found himself quipping every now and again:

When driving by signs for Lake Michigan: *“You know Lake Michigan has the most well-preserved ship wrecks in the world?”*  

When driving by signs for the zoo: *“You know that Amur leopards are extinct in the wild?”*  

When driving by signs: *“I always find Wisconsin sign fonts so… blurry. Know what I mean?”*

If it wasn’t a monotone, “Hmm,” or “Yeah,” it was a carefully aimed sideways glance that told Lance all he needed to know. He learned quickly enough to stop talking out of his ass. But the silence was brutal.

“So… um… you’re a Freshman too, huh?” *He can't avoid direct questions, right?*

“…Yeah.”
Lance sucked in a breath. Tough crowd.

“What’s your major?”

Keith sniffed, rubbing his nose as he replied. “Classics and History.”

“That’s like statues and Latin and stuff, right?”

Keith snorted, arms crossed. “Statues and Latin and stuff. Right. How about you?”

“U-um, Paramedics.” Lance spluttered, taken off-guard by Keith’s sudden reciprocation.

He had been preparing himself for a counter to the obvious snark at Lance’s not-so-eloquent response to Classics until the ‘How about you?’ Lance cursed inwardly. He’d do better to make a point next time. This was no game. He couldn’t be caught off guard by mullet-head. He checked the dashboard. There was plenty of time for well-thought comebacks. Keith sniffed loudly again. The sound was beginning to grate.

“So, how d’you know Shiro?” Lance asked, unwilling to let the conversation drop so easily.

Keith folded his arms in his lap. If his eyes weren’t so focussed on the road, Lance would have turned to see his expression. He gathered from his tone that it was still surly.

“…Martial arts society.” Keith replied simply.

Well that explains his build, Lance thought. He blinked; caught off guard again! Only this time by his own thoughts. He had, he supposed, compared himself to the shorter male. It wasn’t unusual for Lance to eye up his competition (So basically every other guy he met) and with a tinge of bitterness he thought how despite his height, Keith was more muscular than he was. Curse his lanky limbs. Even so, Lance knew he had the charm to compensate. Talking to Keith was like having a conversation with a brick wall. Lance smirked.

“So the Classics guy does martial arts. That’s a weird combination.”
“Well… for a paramedic, you’re not a great driver.” Keith replied easily.

Heat rushed to Lance’s face and he gripped the wheel hard.

“I’m not going to be an ambulance driver!” He fired. “Being a Paramedic has nothing to do with driving! And for the record, I was the only person in my family to pass the test first time!”

He felt Keith’s eyes on him and tore his glare away from the road, risking a glance. The surly boy’s eyebrows were raised marginally and his doe-lashed eyes were wide. He really did have long eyelashes for a dude.

“What?!” Lance snapped.

“I was – um – I was kidding.”

Mortified by his outburst, Lance directed his eyes back to the empty road, hauling in deep breaths.

“I know. Yeah, s – so was I.” He expelled a breath of fake incredulity “Obviously.”

Wow. Convincing. Lance witnessed his dignity crumble into a ball of tumbleweed and fly out of the window to join all of his other embarrassing moments in his very own desert of uncool shit, i.e., the dust bowl that was now apparently his life.

Of course Keith had been joking – anyone with ears would have been able to tell. But apparently Lance didn’t have those. And now mullet-jerk thought he didn’t have a sense of humour either.

It was about three hours in, and Lance was in agony. He needed to pee. Really… really badly. He had been chewing his lip with increasing anxiety over the past half an hour, feeling the pressure in is abdomen become more and more poignant with each press on the accelerator pedal. They had driven past two service stations and Lance had waited – waited in agony – for Keith to say: “Can we stop now?”

It was stupid; the stupidest most illogical thing in the world but every fibre of Lance’s being rejected the idea of being the first to cave. He didn’t want to seem… Weak? It was stupid, he knew it was and his nether regions were practically screaming at him to stop, but… He didn’t want to lose. He’d figured that Keith was playing the same game, silently willing him to give in as both of
them held on desperately. He sneaked a peak at Keith: That was a good poker face. Keith’s stance had remained almost completely unchanged. He shifted every now and again and – sniffed. That sniffing was getting annoying. Really fucking annoying now that Lance thought about it.

_Sniff._

Lance tapped his finger on the wheel. Keith rubbed his nose. The traffic was thickening on the highway. Red lights and flashing orange indicators of other cars were beginning to blur Lance’s vision as he tried helplessly to focus on anything other than how much he needed to pee.

_Sniff._

Lance’s eye twitched.

“Need a tissue?”

Keith started from his trance.

“Huh? No, I – I’m good.” He violently rubbed his nose again and Lance scowled, increasingly irritated.

“Do you want to take a break soon?” Keith asked suddenly. _So that’s your move_, he thought.

The game was real.

Lance tensed. “Why? Do you?” He waited for a response, licking his lips and crossing his legs together as he slowed the car to join the queue of traffic.

Keith shrugged. “I could stretch my legs a little, I guess.”

Game. The _game_. He was playing it all wrong. What kind of endurance tactic is _that_? Lance thought wildly.
“Wait – so – you want to stop?” He had to make sure.

He was ready for the *Check Mate* if – no - *when* Keith conceded. That could only mean he was in more pain than Lance was in. Or that he was weaker. Either way, Lance would win. He pictured the moment he’d whoop with triumph, punching his fist in the air as he watched Keith’s overly sculpted features dissolve into shame.

Keith frowned. “Uh… Yeah. Is that a problem?” He asked pointedly.

Lance gawped at him, mouth ajar. That wasn’t the answer he’d been hoping for. He searched the open, symmetrical features of his reluctant companion for some trace of a lie. But there was none. Keith was deadpan. Oblivious. None the wiser to Lance’s suffering. He refused to believe he’d been playing a one-sided game this whole time and that Keith hadn’t even considered that this was an endurance test.

Lance chewed his lip. “Not. At. All.” He punctuated, seething yet again.

This was no fun. Even less now for the raging pain in his bladder, begging to break free. He groaned out loud. Keith frowned at him.

“You okay?”

“…Traffic. I hate traffic.” Lance whined. It was better than the truth.

Blue was sandwiched in a line of heavy duty four-by-fours and trucks. They were boxed into a gridlock that spanned longer than the River-fucking-Nile. Lance’s kidneys were in serious danger of exploding. All he could think about was how much he needed to pee. It occupied every atom of his existence, every breath he took was a torturous more few seconds of pain. Stillness hurt, but moving was impossible unless he wanted to accidentally let it all out. He didn’t know how he’d held on for an hour, but he could take no more. Keith sitting peacefully next to him glancing at his phone nonchalantly every now and again was *no* help. When the Ranger behind them sounded their horn, causing Lance to leap out of his seat with shock and almost wet himself (a little trickled out), he decided he’d had enough.
“Yo – um…”

“Yeah?”

“I, uh – I have to – look, I’m sorry” –

-“What?”-

-“I really don’t want to do this” –

-“What?! You’re freaking me out.”

Lance paused, his heart hammering. This was a major risk to take. He still knew barely anything about this Keith guy except that he had a mullet and evidently a sinus problem. What if he told other people in college about this? What if he told Shiro about this? And what if Shiro told his beautiful college girlfriends? A stab in his abdomen as he shifted his leg prompted him to speak.

“There’s a bottle in the back… I need you to, um – reach back and get it. I can’t reach from here.” I’m scared of what will happen if I try to move is what he meant.

Keith was scowling at him intently. “Why?” He asked slowly.

“I. Need to. Pee.”

Lance got out in short barely audible gasps as he stared dead ahead. This was it. The last of his soul was about to shred away into nothing. Because he was nothing. He was trash. Goodbye dignity.

Keith exhaled. “Is that it? You could have said. I thought you were going to cry.”

Lance pushed his head against the chair, hardly able to believe what he’d just heard. He’d braced himself to be ripped into with relentless savagery. Keith’s laughing face had become an image of devilish, impending torment in his mind over the last hour. The whimper of distress and relief that
left him was involuntary.

“OhmyGod.”

“Yeah. Exactly like that.” Keith scoffed. “But seriously, we’ve passed two gas stations. You could have gone already.”

“I – I didn’t notice.” Lance lied as Keith rummaged around in the pile of well organised belongings on the backseat. He yanked a plastic bottle free with a grunt. Lance noticed how his bicep tensed as he did so. That wasn’t normal for a regular guy his age. That sort of muscle development required some serious working out. Lance shook his head free of the thought. He hated envy, but in situations like this he couldn’t help himself. Thankfully, he couldn’t experience the irrational jealousy fully. There were more… pressing matters downstairs.

With shaking hands, Lance twisted the lid off the bottle, disgusted with what he was about to

“Could you – um – not look?” He made himself ask because Keith was watching him with a bizarre fascination that made Lance very uncomfortable.

He snickered. “Sure. Just don’t spill it.”

It was at that moment that Lance decided he’d like nothing more than to tip the future contents of this bottle over Keith’s head. Maybe he’d do it right at the end of the journey when he knew he could drive off safely into the distance.

“Oh, sure. I wouldn’t want to contaminate the car with that for the rest of the journey.” Lance spat. Keith muttered something under his breath, but Lance didn’t catch it all. It was something like:

“…still smell better than it does now…”

“What did you say?” Lance demanded, delaying his venture into the bottle. The pain was unbearable but his pride was more important.

Keith turned to him, grimacing. “No offence, man, but it smells weird in here. Like gasoline and
bleach or something. What the hell did you spray in here?” He sniffed loudly. “I didn’t want to say anything before but… Jesus, it’s like… *perfume.*”

With a jolt of dread Lance remembered the *Paco Rabanne* he had smothered over himself that morning.

“I don’t smell anything.” He denied vehemently, knowing that his face must have turned a shade pinker.

Keith gave him a disbelieving look. “You don’t? It’s terrible.” He pulled his t-shirt up over his mouth.

“That’s rude.” Lance accused.

“Says the guy pissing into a bottle.”

*Touché.* Lance could almost hear the gunshots firing in his ears. If comebacks could kill there’d be a chalk outline surrounding his body right now. He reigned in his tongue. A bit.

“Just turn the fuck around.” He hissed, his ego mortally wounded. “Please.” He added for good measure.

Keith masked the barely-there smirk on his irritatingly - Lance searched for a word - *correct* face and faced out of his window.

Turning on the radio so that Keith wouldn’t hear anything, Lance prepared himself for what he was sure would make its way onto the Top Ten list of Worst Moments of his Life.

*’In this video we’re going to be counting down the Top Ten worst Moments of the life of Lance McClain…’* Lance imagined the YouTube woman from WatchMojo narrating this moment ironically. ‘Sure, we’ve all had to go at inappropriate moments, but peeing in a car next to a guy you just met deserves a high spot on our list.’ How high, WatchMojo lady? Lance challenged her. How fucking high? This had to at least be number four. No. Number three.
The fries on Lance’s plate were limp and disappointing; a sad excuse of a meal. Everything was disappointing. *Life* was disappointing. Keith had gone for a – quote on quote – ‘much needed bathroom break’, to which Lance found himself glaring in disgust. He sat at a table by the window of the gas station, sadly prodding his chips as he waited for Keith. All he’d asked for was the opportunity to go on a road trip with a pretty girl and instead he got a… well… an admittedly good-looking dude. Who laughed at him. And made derogatory comments about his manly cologne (it wasn’t a perfume, *dammit*!). Of course, Keith wasn’t a girl so he couldn’t be expected to hone in on the subtleties of the scent. Lance hadn’t liked the smell either when he’d bought it, but the ads promised the girls would. So far it hadn’t exactly worked, but it was only supposed to be a helpful prop to aid Lance’s charm. If any girl knew what he’d just done, they wouldn’t find him particularly charming, that’s for sure, but he was banking on the fact that Keith might not tell anybody.

Keith emerged from the bathroom, his hands in his pockets. “Can I have one?” He asked Lance expectantly.

Lance almost told him to fuck off and buy his own depressing chips, but then he remembered he needed to be on good terms with Keith so that he wouldn’t tell anyone about the incident.

He shrugged. “Sure. Whatever.”

Keith took two and shoved them both unceremoniously into his mouth as he perched on the chair opposite Lance.

“Hey, what’s with that look on your face?” Keith probed, scrutinising him.

“Nothing.” Lance insisted, angling himself away from the object of his angst.

“It’s not a big deal, Lance.”

The use of his name made Lance look up.

“You know, when I’m biking on the road for a long stretch of time sometimes I’ve gotta suck up my pride and take a wild one. I’ve been caught once or twice, too. Now that’s embarrassing.”
Lance gave a humourless laugh. “That’s so lame.”

Keith didn’t deny it. He just shrugged his shoulders and folded his arms.

“You bike?” Lance asked, eager to change the subject.

“Sure. She’s waiting for me at Austin. Once you’ve dropped me off, I’m heading to the garage to go pick her up and ride her home.”

“Wait, you don’t live in Austin?”

Keith hesitated, his expression closing again. That irritated Lance for some reason.

“No. I, err, I don’t.”

“Well, where do you live?”

“Outside of Hondo.” Keith replied shortly.

Lance gaped, forgetting he was chewing on a chip. “You’re going to drive all the way from Austin to Hondo? On a motorbike?”

Keith shrugged. “Sure. Why not? I do it all the time.”

“That’s far, dude.” Lance was genuinely impressed, and also a little jealous again. He’d always wanted to ride a motorbike when he was young. The idea of it scared him too much now.

“That’s far, dude.” Lance was genuinely impressed, and also a little jealous again. He’d always wanted to ride a motorbike when he was young. The idea of it scared him too much now.

“Not that far. This is much farther.” Keith countered coolly. “Speaking of… do you want to swap yet?”

Lance wasn’t ready to let Keith drive Twingo, Blue, his one true love. Not after the mean things he
said about her. The ache in his legs and the strain on his eyes begged him to say yes, but he could hold on a little longer.

“Nah, I’m good for now. I’ll let you know when you can take over.” Control was his once more, Lance relished with satisfaction as they trundled back to the car, which stood out as one of the more bashed up cars in the parking lot. His mother would say it has personality. Lance related to that car more than he cared to admit.

The roads in Missouri were slick with ice, countered with a thin layer of grit laid the night before. It had only just gone five, but the sky had darkened with thick, silver clouds by three, and now there was no light except for the regular floodlights that swiped over the windscreen as the car passed each one. Darkness, light, darkness, light… it was a hypnotising combination. The orange glow lulled Lance into a dreamy trance. His hands were slack on the wheels, and neither of them had spoken for hours. Keith had munched on a bag of jerky he’d had stored in his bag and offered Lance some around four, but he’d refused. The soggy chips from the station hadn’t settled well in his stomach, and all he could think about was his warm bed waiting for him back home. Renting a room for a night wasn’t an option. Lance didn’t have the money for that, and Shiro had assured him that his companion didn’t possess the funds either. At first, the idea of sharing a small intimate space with a stranger (especially when Lance had thought it was a girl) excited him, whether they drove through the night or stopped somewhere to catch a few winks of sleep. Now he was just glad there was no pressure on him to impress. His energy was being sapped, morsel after morsel by the hypnotising lights and the vibrating hum of the engine beneath his feet. Tiny flecks of the first sign of snow dotted the windscreen… it felt like the middle of the night. Lance blinked and each time he did, his eyelids grew heavier and heavier, pulled down by the drowsy moisture gathering in the corners of his eyes.

Suddenly a pair of warm, secure hands was on his. The voice that spoke sounded distant, as though it was from a dream.

“Woah… watch it. You’re swerving. I think it’s time we swap places.”

Lance nodded, agreeing without thought as the warm, firm hands gently guided his. They were pulling over. Keith leant over, unobtrusively nudging Lance out of the way to push the hazard warning lights button.

Lance nearly fell out of the driver’s seat, his legs were so stiff. The cold outside was an unpleasant shock to his fatigued muscles and the hazard warning lights blinked like two great, orange eyes onto the empty white road, reminding Lance of a strange, feline predator. He shook his head. This kind of exhaustion was dangerous. The passenger seat was still warm and easy to settle into. Lance grasped his pre-prepared blanket (he’d sort of been looking forward to laying it over the pretty, nameless girl in his head) and drew it tightly around himself as he curled his legs onto the seat. Then Keith was battling with the gearstick and the keys, disturbing the peace.
“How do you get this piece of junk to do anything?” He muttered furiously under his breath as Blue shuddered and complained jerkily.

“She doesn’t like it when you call her a piece of junk.” Lance provided, frowning sleepily. “Wiggle the gearstick and make sure she doesn’t slip into reverse.”

A pause as Keith tested this out.

“Oh… yeah.”

“Told you.” Lance remarked, satisfied, as the engine hummed steadily. The accelerator wasn’t used to Keith’s heavy feet, and the car shot forward with a disconcerting growl that Lance hadn’t once managed to elicit from her.

He heard Keith tut in frustration when the car didn’t do his bidding. That amused Lance. Keith’s untouchable demeanour was being effortlessly destroyed by an old car.

“You sure you don’t want me to take over again?” Lance offered with a sly scoff as the car stalled for the third time along the same stretch of road.

“No chance.” Keith replied as Lance felt the warmth of oncoming sleep wash over him. “You were practically sleeping at the wheel.”

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**Keith**

When Shiro first told Keith about the possibility of a car share, Keith was busy stretching in the gym. All of the other club members had already fled home, but Keith always stayed to help Sensei put away the gear and stack the mats, so he usually took his time stretching out limbs and muscle. He was sat with his legs out before, arms wrapped around his feet, when Shiro marched over and waved his phone at him.
“Hey bud,” he’d said. “I think I’ve found you a ride home.”

“Huh?” Keith had muttered, glancing up at Shiro through his sweaty hair.

In answer Shiro gestured for Keith to take his phone.

**Lance: Whatsupp dawg**

*I am currently both interested AND available. Tell your ‘friend’ she is welcome to share my ride anytime. Dates?*

A quick scan of the name and Keith scowled, handing it back to Shiro with a little more force than necessary. “No thanks,” he said.

“Aw come on, Keith,” Shiro said. “I mean, Lance is a little obnoxious, but he’s a nice guy.”

“Who spells dawg like that?” Keith demanded, rolling to his feet. “Actually, who the hell says dawg at all?”

“Okay,” Shiro conceded. “He’s a lot obnoxious. But you haven’t got much choice- you can’t stay here for Christmas!”

“No.”

“Keith!”

“I’ll catch another ride.”

“Keith.”

Keith winced, and looked up into Shiro’s stern face.
“I’ll… think about it.”

By the time the end of the semester came, Keith was a zombie. Exams and papers due had turned him into a creature of caffèinated blood streams and endless all-nighters. He was so excited to go home that he’d almost forgot about the oncoming awkwardness of sharing a car with a stranger for twenty-four hours, right up until he rounded the school building and spied a blue Renault Twingo. Inside, Keith could just make out a head of brown hair and a pair of tasteless, reflective shades. He braced himself, and then shuffled over to the battered car.

“Hey.” He said.

The dawg guy- Lance- turned around… and stared at him.

“Caaaan I help you?”

Keith took a deep breath.

That seemed like so long ago now. The world had slipped into darkness and was just beginning to break into day again. Lance was still soundly asleep and with his hands on the wheel, Keith could confidently say that the journey so far had been… interesting, to say the least.

Lance was obviously a talker, and this both pleased Keith and dismayed him. Small talk had never been his forte, so he was more than happy to let Lance jabber on about his odd, random facts, (was he an encyclopædia for useless knowledge?) while offering the occasional grunt or blasé “Really?” before slipping back into silence. But he also knew his lack of contribution to the conversation was pissing Lance off, which was pissing him off. He didn’t have to talk. Not to mention Lance seemed incapable of shutting up.

(He kept telling himself this even as the guilt ate away at him.)

And- by god- this car stank. Like musk and flowers and overpowering herbs. It was making his nose itch.

Also, what was that thing before? At some point Keith noticed Lance going quite red in the face, throwing glances in his direction, which was weird and uncomfortable and why was he doing that?

Not long after came the bottle incident.
Honestly, Keith wasn’t even that bothered by it. He’d done more than one road trip and peed in more than one bottle- but why had Lance made such a big deal about it? They’d passed a ton of pit stops before they hit traffic. Was he trying to prove a point?

*About what?* Keith asked himself. *Having a bigger bladder?*

The idea baffled him.

“Mmmm, stop my phone,” Lance mumbled, cheek pressed against the window.

*Great,* thought Keith. *He even talks in his sleep.*

“Stupid mouse,” he continued, and Keith hazarded a glance at him and saw with disgust that a steady stream of drool was running down the window from his mouth.

“Dude,” he mumbled, shaking his head. “Really?”

As though hearing him, Lance suddenly flung out an arm and pointed it at the windscreen, before wrapping it under his head again. “I said move!” he mumbled.

Rolling his eyes, Keith reached for his earphones and stuck them firmly into his head, determined to get some peace while Lance was unconscious.

After twenty minutes or so, Keith finally began to relax. It was dark out, the stars winked overhead, and the traffic was light. Truth be told, Keith had always preferred driving at night. Sure, it was usually on his bike- wind wrapped around him, gravel flicking at his shins, adrenaline searing through his bloodstream- but this was nice too. The quiet rumble of the sickly engine (Lance really needed to get this thing to a garage soon), the worn seat and steady breaths of his companion. For some reason it almost felt familiar, like he’d done the same thing before and been in the same place countless times, even though just a few hours ago he’d never set eyes on the Twingo before. But maybe there was no such thing as doing something new. Maybe he had seen it before. A memory from the future, perhaps.

*Okay,* Keith thought, cringing at himself. *I’ve been reading waaaaay too much theory about Aristotle paradoxes and the Wheel of Time. Back to planet earth now.*
He shook off the weird feeling and too-complicated thoughts, and reached for Lance’s map, squeezed into the space under the stereo between empty coke cans and sandwich wrappers, and shook it out. Keith was surprised that Lance used a map (or could use a map); he’d expected the gangly boy to use a satnav or GPS, but no. Every now and again Lance would reach out one long arm to grab the map, give it a quick, cursory glance, and then settle back to the wheel. Keith was almost impressed.

“Pass the ketchup,” Lance mumbled, groaning.

Almost.

There was even a highlighted route. Very thorough.

“Not bad McClain,” Keith said, smirking.

Lance gargled something unintelligible about sheep wearing Raybans and, this time, Keith couldn’t help the small chuckle that escaped him. If Lance stayed asleep the entire time, this might not be too bad.

_____  

It was a little before sunrise when Lance finally woke up.

At first, he went very still, as though he were listening for something, and then he let out a massive, over-dramatic groan. It went on for several, annoying minutes.

“Oh man,” he said, voice rough with sleep. “How is it still dark? How long have I slept?”

Keith checked his phone. “Just about twelve hours.”

Another groan of anguish left Lance’s lips. “Are you kidding? TWELVE HOURS?”

God, Keith had almost forgotten how loud Lance was.
“Don’t worry about it. I stopped while you were dead to the world. Ate a sandwich. Caught a wink or two.”

Lance looked at Keith then, bleary eyed and hair sticking up on his right side. He rubbed his eyes, noticed the drool stain and quickly wiped it away, as though Keith hadn’t watched the steady waterfall for the past four hours.

“Grim… it’s so cramped in here.”

Keith inclined his head a fraction in response.

“You sure you’re good by the way, man?” Lance asked around a yawn. “She treating you right?”

Keith lifted an eyebrow. “She?” he echoed.

“Yeah,” answered Lance. “I mean, is she behaving?”

Keith stared at him. Lance stared back.

“Who… are you talking about?” asked Keith, beginning to feel flustered.


“Oh,” said Keith, feeling his ears flush hot. “Yeah. It’s fine.”

“She,” Lance said, absurdly smug for some reason. “You’ll hurt her feelings, man.”

“Right. Whatever.”
A terse silence settled between them.

“Mind if I put the radio on?” Lance asked after a beat.

Keith shrugged. “I doubt there’s any signal out here.”

Despite this, Lance tried anyway. Of course, Keith was right.

“Never mind,” said Lance. “I got this.”

He then reached into the glove compartment and fished out a gargantuan stack of CDs. It must’ve weighed a ton and was surely bigger than Lance’s head (Physically bigger. Metaphorically? Not so much), but Lance handled it with ease, navigating through the many options with nimble fingers. Despite himself, Keith found himself interested in what song he’d pick.

“This’ll do,” mumbled Lance, humming a tune Keith didn’t recognise. When he jammed the CD into the old player however, Keith recognised it immediately.

“Elvis?” he asked.

“What’s wrong with Elvis?” Lance shot back, humming along to Suspicious Minds.

“I just took you for…” Keith checked himself and stopped.

“T ook me for what?” Lance asked, and Keith could hear the defensiveness creeping into his voice.

Keith bit his lip. “I don’t know,” he said, irritated. “A Shakira sort of guy?”

To Keith surprise, Lance laughed.

“Well,” he said, scratching his head. “I do have Shakira here, but I didn’t think she was sunrise
“appropriate. Anyway,” he said, folding his arms. “There’s nothing wrong with Shakira, she speaks the truth.”

“Oh yeah?” Keith countered, amused. “What truth is that?”

“My hips don’t lie,” Lance said with a wiggle of his eyebrows. Keith rolled his eyes. “And if we’re talking shame game here, you definitely listen to *My Chemical Romance,*”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Keith demanded.

“Dude… you have a mullet. And you’re wearing fingerless gloves. It just screams emo.”

“They’re practical!” Keith exclaimed, unconsciously tightening his hold on the steering wheel.

“Ya huh,” Lance agreed. “So are my toeless shoes.”

“You mean sandals?” Keith drawled.

“Whatever, mullet.”

They steamed silently for a few minutes. Keith counted his breaths, forcing himself to let it lie and move on. He was almost there, but then Lance just had to mutter,

“Bet you *did* listen to My Chemical Romance though.”

And as much as Keith hated it, he couldn’t argue back.

“Oh my god,” Lance exclaimed when it became obvious Keith had no rebottle. “I knew it! Oh man! Did you wear eyeliner too? Did you have the fringe?”

“I’m ignoring you,” Keith informed him.
“Whatever makes you feel better, Mullet.”

Keith’s eyebrow twitched.

In the distance, the world seemed to shed its skin like a snake, slowly revealing a golden layer beneath: yellow land and glistening dew drops, gathered like a cluster of diamonds on the bonnet. The sky was cloudless, endlessly blue, and distant mountains looked like paper silhouettes, purple with distance and haze, while everything close by seemed sharper somehow, more defined under the touch of sunlight. Keith noticed a bracelet hanging from the rear-view mirror—a cheap, plastic thing he hadn’t paid much attention to when he’d first climbed into the car. Now, the beads gleamed like blue pearls.

“Not to sound like an old white lady,” Lance breathed. “But this shit’s breathtaking!”

“Yeah,” answered Keith. “Wait, what?”

“Meme,”

“Oh…” said Keith, still not getting it. He shook his head and focused in the view. “Still, pretty awesome.”

“Yeah,”

For once, they were in complete agreement.

Unfortunately, the track chose that exact moment to end and “YOU AIN’T NUTHIN’ LIKE A HOUND DOG!” blared inside the Twingo, destroying the moment.

Lance jumped forward and hastily switched it to a mellow Johnny Cash song. He looked at Keith with this dumb, sly expression on his face that didn’t make sense until he said, “I guess Elvis just left the building, huh? Huh?”
It was such a bad joke that Keith wanted to throw something at Lance’s head.

“Oh come on!” Lance whined. “That was a good one.”

“Maybe in your brain.”

“Do you ever laugh?” Lance asked, leaning over into Keith’s space to study him. “Seriously. I’m concerned for your health.”

“Get out of my face,” Keith snapped. “And not at stupid jokes.”

Suddenly, Lance frowned. “Are you calling me stupid?”

“No,” Keith grit out. Lance peered at him as though he didn’t believe him. “I’m not, okay? Now get out of my face! I’m driving?”

With exaggerated slowness, Lance leaned back into his seat with his hands raised. “Jeez. Sorry.”

Keith took some deep breaths. Lance muttered under his breath.

_Holy hell. How long do we have left to go? Keith thought, certain there’d be murder before they reached the end of their destination. Think of the money, Keith told himself. Think of the money._

That little mantra got him through an hour of Lance wriggling around in his seat, putting his legs everywhere, tapping the door handle, blowing his nose every five minutes, but then Lance flicked the CDs over and Cascada exploded into song.


“WE’RE THE KIDS IN AMERICA, WHOA O! WE’RE THE KIDS IN AMERICA, WHOA O! EVERYBODY LIVE TO THE MUSIC AROUND!”

At this, Keith finally cracked. “Can you turn it down?” he asked.
“WHAT?” Lance asked over the noise.

“Turn it down!” Keith exclaimed.

“I CAN’T HEAR YOU MAN!”

“TURN IT DOWN!”

“TURN IT UP?” Lance asked.

He was messing with him.

“LANCE. SERIOUSLY, I’M REALLY TIRED.”

“IT’LL KEEP YOU ALERT.”

“JUST KNOCK IT OFF MAN.”

“SORRY, I- ”

Suddenly the car gave a distinctly insidious shudder. They lurched forward and Keith lost his hold on the wheel for a second, before his instincts kicked in and he wrenched it over to the hard shoulder. There was a pop, a splutter, and smoke began to pour out of the engine. The car wheezed to a sickly stop.

The boys held their breath.

“Fuck,” Lance breathed out, at last. “Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuuuuuuuck...”
Keith completely agreed.

“Oh, My, Fuck.” Lance said. “Oh my actual Fuck.”

Quick as a whippet, he was outside the car. Surprised at the other boy’s lightning speed, Keith scrambled to follow him out. The cool air wrapped around him instantly, snaking under his layers to creep into his core, but Keith barely felt it. All of his attention was fixated on the smoking bonnet. With a heave, Lance cracked the hood and a giant cloud of grey ballooned into the air. They both coughed violently and stepped back.

“Oh fuck,” Lance swore, seemingly incapable of saying anything else.

Keith peered into the engine. “It looks like a fault with your spark plugs,” he said. “And your rings are worn. Dude, when was the last time you had this thing checked over?”

“Not that long!” Lance exclaimed. “Like…” he started counting on his fingers. “Maybe eight months ago?”

“Eight months?” Keith repeated. He shook his head. “With a car this old, you’ve gotta take better care of it.”

“Hey, she was just fine until you took over the wheel!”

Keith’s eyes bulged. “Are you blaming me for this?”

With a shrug, Lance folded his arms and looked away.

“I can’t believe this,” Keith said. “How the hell do you figure I’m to blame when you clearly don’t take care of your ride?”

Again, Lance simply shrugged.

“Why are you such a child!!” Keith demanded.
“I was out cold for a while,” Lance argued. “You could have done anything in that time!”

“What, so I sabotaged and stranded myself?”

“Maybe!”

Over the course of this exchange, the pair had gotten closer and closer, until they were shouting into each other’s faces. Now they both stood with their noses a few inches apart, snorting like boars and red faced, both unwilling to break the staring contest. Surprisingly, it was Lance who broke away first, stepping back to shove his hand into his jean pockets. He must be freezing, wearing only a thin T-shirt, but Keith couldn’t care less about his comfort right now. Stupid jerk.

“O-kay,” Lance said, drawing out the word. “Okay. Time out. Do you know engines?”

Keith folded his arms. “Yeah, but unless you’ve got tools we’re stuck.”

Lance nodded to himself. “O-kay,” he repeated. Without a glance at Keith, Lance yanked open the car door and pulled out his map, smacking it against the roof of the Twingo. “There,” he said, jabbing his finger into the map. “There’s a pitstop restaurant thing nearby. It should be about twenty minutes away.”

“Which way?” Keith asked.

Lance pointed down the road.

“Okay,” said Keith, straightening. “I’ll be back in forty then.”

“Hey whoa whoa!” said Lance. “Why do you get to go?”

“What?”
“Why do you get to do the fun job?”

“Lance,” Keith said, dumbfounded because yes, Lance was serious about this. “There isn’t a fun job. We’re stranded!”

“Oh there is too a fun job and you know it!” Lance countered. “I don’t want to stand around twiddling my thumbs waiting for you to come back. I’ll go.”

“It’s your car,”

“And you broke it.”

It took Keith a moment to fully process that they were actually having this ridiculous argument. If he were thinking logically, he would shake his head and step away from this whole fiasco, tell Lance to do whatever he wanted because whether Keith went to the shop or not, it didn’t really matter in the end. But Keith wasn’t thinking logically. He was mad.

“Look,” he huffed. “It’s not my fault your car’s a heap of junk,” Lance opened his mouth to argue but Keith cut him off. “And honestly? I’m so sick of your stupid behaviour. Like, can’t you sit still? Do you have to be so loud? And why are you always trying to pick a fight with me all the damn time? I mean, what is your problem?”

“My problem!” Lance exclaimed. “You’re the one who pretends I don’t exist! What am I supposed to do when you won’t talk to me? I’m bored. Not to mention you scowl at me like, all the time!”

That took the edge off Keith’s anger somewhat. He cast his mind back to the journey so far and thought about his short answers, the long silences, every time Lance attempted to make conversation. It was almost enough to make him feel guilty, but not quite.

“I’m going to the store,” he said instead. “You, are waiting with your car.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”
“Fine,” said Lance. “Rock paper scissors for it.”

“What are you, twelve?”

“Would you rather do a spitting contest?”

Disgusted, Keith held out his hand curled into a fist. Lance mirrored him. They locked eyes.

“One, two, three.”

Rock met scissors.

“Aw come on!” Lance exclaimed, staring down accusingly at his hand. “Really?”

Despite knowing it was incredibly petty, Keith couldn’t help the smirk which spread across his features, unashamed when Lance caught the tail end of his quickly dissolving expression. A spark of hatred lit in his blue eyes.

“Right,” said Keith. “So I’m going to the store. You’re staying with the car.”

“Whatever.”

Without a backwards glance, Keith grabbed the map and stormed off in search of help. He didn’t look back once.

Twenty-Five minutes later, Keith finally stumbled on his destination.
Even though Keith was tired and miserable and still simmering with anger, he didn’t stride right into the store. Instead, he took a full minute to just... stare, because the store was in fact a diner attached to a garage. An odd combination yes, but not uncommon. No, what made Keith stare was that the diner was themed... space themed. In huge, gleaming, orange letters was the name: ‘PLANET CORAN’ and a mechanical rocket was spinning around it in a clunky orbit. There were aliens waving in the windows: the green, boggle-eyed sorts from cheesy alien shows, and somewhere, someone was playing the *Star Wars* theme tune.

It was tacky and tactless and just. Plain. Creepy.

Keith loved it instantly.

Shaking himself, he checked the garage and, finding that it was empty, strode through the doors (which were automatic and slid back with the lightsabre whoosh sound) and peered into the diner. Inside was even funkier. There were planets hanging overhead, all of the tables were named after stars or moons rather than numbered, and there was a ‘Help yourself to Space Juice,” sign next to what Keith hoped was a water cooler. The *Star Wars* theme morphed into *Red Dwarf* overhead.

“Um, hello?” Keith called.

There was a distinctive crash from the depths of this empty diner (seriously, tumbleweed should be rolling through this place) and then the sound of shoes on squeaky floors. From behind the kitchen door, the head of a girl emerged, eyes narrowed as she surveyed the room. When she spotted Keith, her expression lit up like a star.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, hurrying over. She was dressed in some sort of elaborate costume: a white and blue dress fit for royalty and had even donned a pair of pointy prosthetic ears. “I’m terribly sorry, I hope you haven’t been waiting long. That would have been incredibly rude of us.”

“Not at all,” Keith said, picking up a British accent. The girl was tall, dark-skinned and wore her silver hair in a Princess Leia braid. The second hair style, not the iconic buns. Her name tag read Allura.

“I’m just surprised is all,” Allura went on. “We hardly get any customers, so I usually just tinker in the back.” She seemed genuinely delighted to have something to do. “Is it a table for one?”

“Actually,” said Keith, embarrassed under the glare of her enthusiasm. “I’m here because we’ve hit some trouble.”
“Oh?” questioned Allura. “What sort of trouble?”

“Our car broke down a couple of miles back,” Keith explained. “I didn’t see anyone at the garage so…” he left the statement hanging.

“Oh, of course,” Allura said. “Excuse me for one moment and I’ll fetch my Godfather. He runs the garage- and the diner too. But I’m afraid one is more successful then the other. I’ll be right back.”

Keith nodded and let himself lean against the wall while Allura tarried away into the kitchen. Not five minutes later she returned with her Godfather in tow. He was also tall and ginger, with a thick, styled moustache that he twirled while appraising Keith.

“Greetings Earthling,” he said, and it was then that Keith noticed he too was dressed up in a fancy outfit with pointy ears. It must be the uniform here. “I hear you’re having a spot of car trouble?”

“Yes sir,” Keith answered. “We broke down a few miles back.”

“Ah, you’ll be in need of a tow then,” the older man said, knowingly. “Let me guess, oil burning?”

“I think it’s the spark plugs actually,” said Keith.

“Ah, a fellow man of the machine, I see”, the older man said, leaning forward into Keith’s space to look him up and down. “I thought so. I can detect even the faintest whiff of a mechanic in anyone, since I’m the Coranic.”

Keith blinked. “I’m sorry, the what?”

“It’s a silly joke,” Allura chipped in, shaking her head at her Godfather.

“It is neither a joke, nor silly,” her Godfather replied, puffing out his collar. “You see I am a mechanic and my name is Coran. Thus… Coranic!”
Allura winced. Keith just looked confused.

“Anyway,” Coran said with a cough. “We’ll see to a tow. I’m afraid we’ll have to change first, though. I got these outfits from a Peruvian Black Market in the eighties. Fascinating story, really. There we were, in the midst of-”

“We’ll be right back,” Allura said, cutting Coran off. “Come on, Coran.”

“Ah yes, well, another time then,” he mumbled, while Allura dragged him forcibly away. “What did you say your name was again, young Earthling?”

“It’s Keith,” Keith called, but he wasn’t sure they heard him. The Kitchen door swung closed. He scratched his head. “Man,” he mumbled. “Can it get any weirder?

When the three of them pulled up to the deceased Twingo in Coran’s surprisingly nice, vintage car (a 1957 Chevy Bel Air in orange), they found Lance lying on the roof of his car. The shades were back on, and he’d donned a thick, blue jumper in the time they’d been gone. He was listening to music.

“About time,” he said, when Keith got out and knocked on the Twingo. “Where have you-” Lance stopped dead.

His eyes had fallen on Allura, who had ditched the alien outfit and ears for a pair of high-waisted jeans and pink turtleneck. She’d also let her hair down in a long wave of silver. Lance’s pupils dilated.

Keith rolled his eyes.

“You must be Lance,” Allura said, smiling.

“And you must be the angel from my dreams last night,” Lance answered smoothly.
Keith resisted the urge to vomit.

“Excuse me?” Allura said, eyes narrowing.

A dopey grin settled across Lance’s face and he jumped down from the roof, nearly tripping in his hurry, and held out his hand.

“The name’s Lance,” he said, voice pitched ridiculously low.

“Yes,” Allura said, ignoring his hand. “We just established that.”

Despite knowing Allura for all of thirty minutes, Keith decided he liked her right there and then.

Laughing nervously, Lance lowered his hand.

“So!” Coran exclaimed, peering into the Twingo. “This is the problem car, is it? Taken quite a beating, hasn’t she? Oh and I see your suspicions were right, Keith, there is indeed a fault with the spark plugs.”

“The valve might be blocked as well,” Allura added, arms deep in the Twingo. “It could be quite a job.”

“We’ll take her back to the shop.” Coran decided. “You boys can wait in the diner if you want. My Food Goo recipe is a real treat!”

Keith wasn’t sure how much of a ‘treat’ Food Goo could be.

“We’ll fix her up nicely though,” Allura assured him. “Then you’ll be on your way in no time.”

“How about we fix up a date with you and me?” asked Lance, wiggling his eyebrows.
Turning her back, Allura pointedly pretended Lance didn’t exist.

“Right, let’s hook you up,” Coran said, hands on hips. “Allura, grab the pulley.”

Soon, all four of them were busy hooking the Twingo up to the Chevy (Lance flirting the entire time, gag), and securing it firmly in place. Their breaths came out in big puffs of silver, clouding in the cloudless sky, and the touch of metal against Keith’s skin felt like fire. When the job was done, Keith stood for a moment and just took in the scene: the passing cars, the endless stretch of road, and he felt his heart go still. He thought of home, of the empty deserts where there were no cars, the only sound to be heard being the hum and thrum of insects. His eyes slipped shut.

“Is that a Wisconsin jumper?” asked a tentative voice.

Keith looked up to find Allura peering at the hoodie under his jacket. “Oh, yeah,”

“How funny!” Allura exclaimed. “I’m a Sophomore there too.”

“Really?”

Allura nodded. “I’m an engineer major.”

“History and Classics.”

“Oo, I did a class on Homer last year,” Allura enthused. “It was fascinating. Have you taken Professor Sendak’s class on the Classical Hero?”

Before Keith could answer, no, he hadn’t, Lance slid between them and said, “Professor Sendak? The evil guy with the eyepatch?”

Allura laughed, despite herself. “I see he hasn’t changed in this last year then. Is he still as harsh?”
“Are you kidding?” Lance exclaimed. “I took his Hispanic-American Lit class for my English requirement and I’m surprised I’m still alive! That guy’s a real piece of work.”

“I wish I could say you warm up to him,” Allura said. “But, honestly? I’m just glad I passed so I wouldn’t have to walk into that class ever again. He was incredibly hard on students.”

“Bet you still came out with an A though, right?”

“Well,” Allura said, smiling. “I managed it, yes.”

“Well you’re already an A in my heart.”

And the smile was gone. Nice one Lance.

“Come on, Lance,” Keith said, grabbing his arm. “Let’s get in the car. They have to tow us, remember?”

Lance’s dozy expression told him, no, he didn’t remember, he was too busy trying to woo. It was so cringe-worthy Keith wasn’t sure if he wanted to punch Lance or himself. At least if he was unconscious he wouldn’t have to watch this train wreck.

When they climbed into the car, Lance pounced on him almost immediately. “Hey,” he said. “So, I know you saw her first, but mind if I take a shot at Allura? I really think we’ve got something going on.”

“What?” Keith asked.

“Come on man, please?” Lance pleaded, batting his eyelashes. “She was obviously into me, so back off, yeah?”

Obviously Lance was completely delusional, but Keith didn’t say that, instead he simply huffed,

“Whatever man, knock yourself out.”
“Yes! Thanks Keith. You know, you’re not that bad of a mullet.”

With a jerk, the Chevy began to pull the Twingo along. Allura looked behind and gave a thumbs up. Lance waved two enthusiastic thumbs back.

Grumbling, Keith put a glum hand on his chin and frowned out the window, sure that Lance was going to be ten times more insufferable than before. He could only hope that Coran was as good a mechanic as he claimed.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Wynne_Jayne gave me a word that I had to incorporate from Lance's POV...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lance

Things were going well with Allura, Lance had decided. He’d been particularly proud of his A grade comment. She’d glanced away in a way that he could only assume was shy. You know, when girls do that thing where they giggle and bite their lip and look away? Allura didn’t exactly do that but it was close enough. Cracking his knuckles, Lance tried to think up a few more smooth words for later; mechanic related ones would be best: ‘You’re a ride I’d like to tow back to my place’ he cringed inwardly. That was a little too risqué for such early days… and early hours of the morning. He could do something quite clever with oil, he guessed, like… slippery… oil… grease… you can grease my -

“Hey, look!” Keith exclaimed suddenly, tugging on Lance’s sleeve, beckoning him to look out of his side.

“Huh?” Lance grumbled, displeased to be disrupted from his pick-up line musings.

“Wild horses.” Said Keith, his voice low with awe. “We’re getting close to home.”

Something about the way Keith said ‘home’ made Lance linger a little longer on his features, which were not as surly as they’d seemed yesterday. Then he remembered he was supposed to be watching the horses. They really did look cool.

A galloping pack of stallions with caramel coats hoofed across the sands, kicking up clouds of dust in their wake, their white manes billowing behind them in graceful waves.

“If only they could give us a ride back to Austin.” Lance scoffed, masking his wonderment.

Keith snickered. “They’d kick you in the face if you tried to get near them.”
“Not me,” Lance hummed, glancing at the shape of Allura’s silver head he could see through the window, “I’ve got a way with beasts… animals love me.” That was good material. He’d find a way to use that on her later.

“Prob’y cause you are one.” Keith fired back.

Lance scowled. “Alright, Mister Smart-ass. I’m not the one who killed Twingo.”

Keith shot him a scowl. Ah, yes. The surly boy he remembered was back.

“I didn’t kill it,” He snarled, “It is in dire need of service, as Coran pointed out.”

“Not to worry, fair folks. We’ll have her right up and ready in no time!” Coran reassured them as they reached the diner, climbing out of their cars.

They were an odd pair, Lance thought. Coran’s appearance alone was a smack in the face of colour and eccentricity. And then there was Allura; so polite and reserved and… British. Things got even odder when he saw the diner. The Star Trek theme played overhead through tiny speakers, giving the diner a 70’s quality.

“This is the nerdiest place I’ve ever seen.” Said Lance as he stepped through the whooshy sliding doors. “Weird, isn’t it?”

Keith gazed around, despite having been inside before. “Yeah, really um… different.”

“It’s freaky.” Then Lance cleared his throat. “But boy, does this place have some hidden gems.” He gave Allura a wink. She raised a stark, silver brow.

“I’m afraid it may take a while for Coran to set up in the garage so you two can take a seat in here if you like.” She told him coolly, before giving Keith a warm smile.

Lance glared at him. This really wasn’t fair. Keith was making no effort at all but Allura was
hardly giving Lance the time of day. Maybe she was playing hard to get, he thought. Girls did that a lot with him. Actually, girls did that all the time. Girls played so hard to get that they were impossible to get.

“Chill, sister.” Lance drawled, flipping his sunglasses onto his forehead with casual disdain. “We’ve got hours to kill.”

“I was hoping to be in Austin by ten.” Keith added. Uncalled for.

“Just pop yourselves over on Saturn for a moment while we grab you gentlemen a beverage!” Coran called from behind the counter.

“Huh?”


“I know?” Lance lied, because Allura was in earshot. “Keith, buddy. You take me for an idiot sometimes.”

Keith was watching him with trepidation. “Uh, Lance, buddy? We hardly know each other. And you’re not doing a great job of convincing me that you’re not an idiot.”

Just when he’d started to think Keith might be on his side.

Grumbling, Lance sat at Saturn which was pleasantly situated beside a large, bright window. Through the screen of dust in the sky he could make out the shape of the huge hunks of rock in the distance. He rubbed his eyes, thinking of his urban home. Almost there… just this one hiccup, then they’d be well on their way again. The chorus of a song he didn’t know the name or the rest of the lyrics to started playing in his mind: _I’m on my way… aha, aha, aha, I’m on my way…_ And those were the only words he knew; doomed to play in an endless cycle by a disembodied Scottish voice. Where was that song from? He didn’t have much time to think about it, because the next moment, a tumbler filled to the brim with a toxic-looking purple liquid was placed enthusiastically in front of him by the Australian mechanic.

“Space Juice!” Coran announced proudly, “My greatest achievement!”
Lance eyed the drink warily. He glanced up at Keith, who was doing exactly the same.

“Uh… thanks.” Said Keith, bringing the glass hesitantly to his lips.

“Yo, what’s in this?” Lance probed, leaning forward to give the mixture a sniff.

Coran tapped his nose with a wink. “Secret ingredients, I’m afraid. You’d have to work yourself into my close inner circle of friends to get a hint. And even then, I might not give it to ya!”

Allura’s lips were pursed. “It’s an acquired taste.” She told them delicately.

Lance shared a look with Keith, shrugged, and took a gulp.

He almost gagged.

The explosion of fruity fizz that invaded his taste-buds felt like an atomic bomb being detonated in his mouth. Even worse was the sensation of the concoction running down his throat, tickling it with what felt like tiny little spider legs. It felt alive.

“W-wow!” He coughed, bringing his hand to his mouth. “Jesus.”

Keith was still going. Head tipped back, he poured the mixture down his gullet like a man dying of thirst. Lance gaped at him. *The fuck?!*

Finishing, much to Coran’s delight, Keith loudly smacked his lips together.

“Refreshing. Thanks.” He stated with a deadpan look.

Lance shook his head, bemused. “Are you human?!?”

Keith shrugged. Mullet-head was full of surprises. At that very moment, the *Sailor Moon* theme began playing overhead and Lance nearly choked for a different reason.
“I love this show!” He exclaimed.

“For that, you get the drink for free.” Said Coran.

“You were going to charge us? Damn.”

Keith stood. “I’ll pay for it. Not to hurry you, but we really need to get back on the road soon. I won’t give you anything less than what you usually charge, but thank you for your courtesy.”

Taken aback by Keith’s seriousness, Coran’s orange brows shot to his forehead.

“Of course! We’ll hop to it right away.”

Allura nodded. “The garage is next door. Follow me.”

The garage was similarly decorated to the café – nerd memorabilia adorned every inch of the place. There wasn’t a spot of blank wall to be seen. Grease marks scuffed the concrete floor, and there was little in the way of heating. Lance felt the draft pretty quickly. This was exactly the sort of place he didn’t like. He didn’t know what to do with himself as Coran, Keith and Allura gathered around the open hood of his poor Twingo, her insides laid bare. Too aware of how useless he was, he shuffled his feet behind them, arms crossed around his chest as he tried not to touch anything. There were tools everywhere of all shapes and sizes, but they didn’t mean a thing to him. They could be here for hours.

“Can I use your bathroom?” Lance asked.

“Up the stairs, second door to your left.” Allura replied without turning around.

Disheartened, Lance left the garage. Thankfully, the bathroom hadn’t suffered the same fate as the rest of the rooms. Nerd free, the poky landing area was bare and unpainted. Bored, Lance paced the length of the exposed floorboards on the landing. A closed, red door to his left beckoned him. He glanced over his shoulder. A little exploring couldn’t do any harm, surely?

Lance almost hoped it would be locked to quench his curiosity. It wasn’t. The door clicked open at
the tug of a handle.

“What the…?”

It was a closet. But not your run of the mill stuffed-with-jackets-and-shoes kind of closet. This was a costume closet. Lance could see himself react to it from the reflection that stared back at him from the full-length mirror at the end of the room. Complete replicas of the Star-Trek uniforms hung in unbroken rows. There were boots with fake rockets attached: all manner of cloaks, and Darth Vader’s helmet sinisterly stared down at him from a shelf. On the other side of the large, organised closet were glitzy dresses and veils and… corsets?

Lance stared at the lay before him, transfixed. Then, slowly, it transformed into a grin.

“Fuck yes.” He breathed.

Lance had always loved dressing up, ever since he was a kid. Right now, as he flitted from rail to rail, shelf to shelf, he felt like a kid in a candy shop. A candy shop he wasn’t supposed to be in, which made it all the better. First Lance tried on a pair of outrageously mirrored steampunk goggles. They didn’t quite match his jeans and sweater, so he paired them with a flowing, silver cloak. Flipping around in the mirror, Lance spun this way and that.

“Oh, ah,” He mouthed with affected gasps. “Sexy…”

Bored of the cloak and the goggles, he giddily replaced them, and reached for one of the star trek uniforms. He had to take off his sweater for this… but damn, it looked cool.

“I’m givin’ her all she’s got, Captain! Resistance is futile! Khaaaaaaan!”

He felt like a cosplayer, forming his hands into fake blasters, spitting out Star Trek quotes in a hushed whisper should anyone happen to venture up the stairs.

Lance flew from costume to costume, wig to wig, rolling around the floor, hanging seductively off rails in a long, red black widow wig that framed his face surprisingly well, until…

“Hmm…” He surveyed the line of corsets speculatively, brushing the blond, synthetic bangs out of his eyes.
One stood out to him, a perfectly structured number – the ivory bodice embroidered with gold and blue stars, delicate chains hanging evenly where the ribs would be.

Rather than throwing it on as he had every other garment, Lance took his time with the corset, surveying the gold ribbon ties with caution. He’d always wondered how women ever wore these. They looked uncomfortable as heck.

He had to try it.

Lance gingerly picked up the corset with the tips of his fingers. It was heavy. Exhilarated, he stepped into the stiff frame, and began wiggling the stiff piece up his skinny frame. This was more difficult than he’d imagined, and certainly nowhere near as elegant. They made it look easy in those stupid movies. After many minutes of struggling and wrestling and wrenching and repositioning, Lance finally managed to drag the corset above his nipples. He let go, exhaling heavily.

“Jeez…” He sighed, wiping sweat from his forehead. Reaching behind him, Lance fumbled for the ribbon ties and managed to tighten the corset around himself. His arms ached by the end, he was sweating everywhere and the thing chafed like a bitch. He must be crazy. Then he saw his reflection in the mirror.

“HOT FUCKING DAMN, I LOOK GOOD!”

Lance was sure as hell glad he’d shut the door.

Posing like a model in every possible angle he could, Lance admired himself from all angles. Yes. Yes. Yes.

“It’s Britney bitch.” Lance found himself saying, before bursting into suppressing and painful guffaws. God, he made himself laugh.

The bodice of the corset pulled Lance’s usually disappointingly skinny waist into smooth curves, and his bare shoulders glowed (probably from sweat, yes, but the illusion was there). His head was itching. He was swelteringly hot from running around like a mad man. His nipples might fall off from the chafing. This was going to be as much of a bitch to take off as it was to put on. He should have stuck to the Star Trek costumes…
Lance pulled off the blond wig, tossing it onto a shelf above him, and scratched his head furiously. Then stopped. He whipped around staring at the door. He’d heard a noise. Was there a boiler room next door? He didn’t remember seeing anyth…

That sound definitely wasn’t pipes.

There was someone coming up the stairs. He could hear the clunk of feet, making their way up, up… Panicking, he did the only thing he could and switched off the light. Plunged into sudden darkness, Lance became very aware of his own heartbeat. Actually, the corset was so tight that it felt like his heart was trying to escape the cloying confines of fabric more than anything. The feet stopped outside of the door.

Fuck.

Lance dove into the clothes to his right, melting amongst the soft drapes. The door opened, and a strip of light cut into the closet.


Please don’t come over here, please don’t come over here.

Keith began rummaging through the rails.

“Cape, cape, cape.” He was muttering over and over again.

There were capes all around him. Lance was in the capes. IN THE CAPES. He was going to die. Doom came in the form of Keith’s hands finding the capes, and then, finding him.

“What the” - ? Keith started as his hands stopped against Lance’s corseted chest. Lance cleared his throat, causing Keith to jump backwards in fright.
“WHAT THE FU” – ?

Lance breached the capes, holding up his hands.

“Dude, it’s me!”

Keith straightened up, coal-black eyes taking in the entirety of Lance’s appearance.

“You scared the shit outta me.” He accused, gasping.

“Sorry.” Said Lance, sheepish, standing there in the corset.

Keith blinked. “Um… what are you doing?”

Lance was struggling to work his tongue. Correction. He was struggling to breathe.

“I was just messin’ around, y’know…? I was bored. Bored and stuff.” He tried to laugh. It sounded like a dying cat. It didn’t help that his voice broke halfway through the sentence.

Keith nodded very, very slowly. “Cool. Well, um, don’t scare me like that. Coran wants his silver cloak – says he can’t change the spark plug without it.”

Relying entirely on his peripheral vision because his eyes were stuck in place with blind panic, Lance reached beside him and pulled the silver piece of fabric off the rail, knowing exactly where it was because he had put it there himself ten minutes ago, and extended it to Keith.

“There you go.”

“…Thanks.”

Lance hadn’t felt anything like this since his cousin had walked in on him jerking off when he was
thirteen. This was worse. At least it was normal to jerk off. This definitely did not look normal. The silence that followed was churning Lance’s insides like a dough-mixer. He wondered if throwing up at Keith’s feet would worsen the situation. At least it would distract Keith from what he was wearing. But then he’d just be ‘vomiting teen boy in a corset’ and he wasn’t sure he wanted anyone to associate him with that.

“Well…” Said Keith, “I’ll, uh, see you downstairs.”

“Sure. Bye.”

…I’m on my way… aha, aha, aha, I’m on my way…

Maybe he stood there for a full five minutes. It was hard to know, but he did know one thing. It was Shrek. He’d heard the song in Shrek. Tragic.

The WatchMojo lady was becoming an interesting narrator to his thoughts, and now she’d been called upon twice in the space of 24 hours to dramatize another one of Lance’s Top Ten Worst Moments.

*Being walked in on cross-dressing is certainly an effective way of making a first impression, but in the case of Lance McClain, it’s also a devastating one.*

Lance’s ribs felt bruised with the pressure of the steel-boned corset, but not as bruised as his future reputation. If Keith blabbed about this in college, Lance was doomed. Or at least, the little repute he’d manage to salvage amongst his friends was. If Keith spread this story around, (which Lance had to admit, it would be difficult not to) everyone would think he was a secret gay drag queen! Not that there was anything wrong with that, it was just not… him. He was Lance. Lady-killer Lance. Ya Boi, Lance. Lance, the funny guy at parties who absolutely *must* and *will* hit on the prettiest girl there, only to get rejected but dab it off in his cool shades. Lance. He was just Lance.

Padding out the time as much as he could, Lance slowly untied the lace at the base of his spine. He let out a long, low sigh as the corset came loose, slipping down his slim frame like he was shedding a shell. Lance didn’t get the urge to cry very often, but he had it now. Which sucked. He hated crying. Crying from embarrassment wasn’t something he’d done before, but he was becoming tragically familiar with the impulse to lately. He never usually had much reason to cry. Only when he thought of his late grandma for too long and how she used to make him delicious authentic Cuban food (his mother hadn’t quite replicated the recipes perfectly). Yeah, those thoughts made him cry. But most of the time he was good. Chill.

Pidge often told him he was too chill. ‘It’s not right’, she’d say.
‘Maybe you’re secretly a psychopath and you’re slowly plotting our demise’ Hunk would reply. He missed them right now.

They’d probably find the entire thing hilarious. Keith hadn’t laughed at him as he’d expected. His face had been completely devoid of expression, which was horrible. What the fuck did that mean? A thought struck him: Did he even notice?! Keith was pretty weird himself. He’d hardly batted an eyelid at the bottle incident. Heck, he’d even admitted to doing it himself. Maybe Keith was the kind of guy who had a whole collection of corsets in his closet that he wore regularly. Maybe Keith was the kind of guy who went to Karaoke bars and blasted his lungs out to Prince. The idea made Lance scoff aloud. Probably not. Keith drove a motorbike and had a mullet. He didn’t seem the type. He’d probably just been too freaked out to say anything. Lance tried to put himself in Keith’s shoes. If the guy he’d been car-sharing with had jumped out of a railing of sparkly capes dressed in an elaborate corset, he’d probably be pretty freaked out too.

Lance decided he’d explain everything. He’d say that he stumbled across the corset, sent a snapchat of it to Hunk, and that Hunk had dared him to do it… yeah. That worked. Plus, he could totally imagine that happening for real. Grinning at his slyness in the mirror, Lance pulled his sweater back on and placed the corset back where he’d found it. Other than the dishevelled ribbon cascading down the sides, it looked just as it had, and Lance couldn’t resist giving it one, last, longing admire before he closed the door behind him. Damn, he’d looked good.

Each step down the stairs brought Lance back to reality. His body felt strangely light. His sweater was too loose.

Donned in the silver cloak Lance had swished around in, Coran was brandishing a spanner in the air.

“Six days! Six days and he’s still got it!”

“Six days?” Lance repeated from the garage doorway. They all turned to look at him. Keith turned away first. Wow. The feeling of wanting to die hadn’t gone away yet.

“We haven’t had a customer for six days.” Allura explained. “Some people get a bit… put off.”

“I can’t imagine why.” Said Coran seriously. “The Geek Diner reviewed us as having ‘exemplary customer service’!”
“Yes, Coran.” Allura humoured him, “And we are grateful for that, but not everyone shares the same tastes.”

Lance ventured closer to them. “My tastes are very specific.” He said to Allura in a low-pitched voice that sounded sexy in his head.

Keith coughed in response. Lance’s stomach became bottomless.

“How did you find being in the closet?” Asked Coran.

“Excuse me?”

“The closet! Did you like it?”
“Oh – oh, yeah. Very cool. I like the costumes.”

He sent Keith a piercing glare. What did you say? Keith shook his head in response, eyes wide with innocence. So he hadn’t told Coran and Allura about… that. Lance scowled anyway.

“I was quite the actor once,” Coran began, waving his spanner in the air like a conductor’s baton, “I used to tour my own one man show. Me and the boys, that is.”

“His pet geckos.” Allura chimed in.

“Nice!” Lance laughed, pushing away his fading panic, “Why’d you quit?”

“Because I received a calling!” Coran pointed his spanner at Lance, “And I knew at once that if it was not fulfilled, I would die a discontent man.”

“Err…” Lance stammered.
“The Space Juice, my friend. A perfect blend of divine ingredients came to me in a dream, accompanied by a sensational taste that I knew I had to recreate. It took me exactly eight months to kick-start my project. Of course, I couldn’t have done it without Allura.”

“I handled marketing and publicity.” Said Allura, smiling fondly at Coran, “Sadly the drink didn’t take off too well here in the US, but it’s very popular in Japan which is how we were able to open this place.”

Lance was genuinely impressed. “That’s actually really neat.”

Keith was leaning against the side of the car, his arms folded, staring moodily into thin air. Lance frowned at him. Was he even listening?

That was when Lance remembered that Keith had been at the wheel for twelve hours while he’d slept. A squirm of guilt twanged in his abdomen – well, what was left of it after the corset experience, at least. He hadn’t meant to sleep for that long. He wondered what Keith had done in that time. Had he listened to more of his music? Had he recited curses over Lance’s unconscious body, condemning him to a life of humiliation? Had he watched him while he’d slept? Lance shivered at the thought. Keith’s eyes were ringed with dark circles. He decided to let him sleep when they got to the car. There were only a couple of hours left in the journey after their stop here, but it was better than nothing. He had a whole motorbike ride ahead of him. Lance got to go straight home, back to his comfy bed, surrounded by his loud, hyper family. It was curious to think of Keith surrounded by his own family, conversing with them and recounting what he’d surely come to think of as a hellish journey.

“Yeah, the dude peed in a bottle right next to me and then dressed in an Australian man’s corset at a space themed diner.” That was bound to be an interesting conversation. If Lance wasn’t the subject of it, he’d laugh. If Lance was being told the same story about someone else’s life, he’d think the guy he was talking about was a fucking moron. In other words, Lance was a fucking moron.

“I’m a fucking moron.”

“What was that?”

“Oh – the music – could you put some more on?”

Quick save.
As it happened, fixing Blue didn’t take that much longer. This time, Lance was content to watch as Coran, Allura and Keith spoke the language of mechanics. It was distracting, really. He was trying extremely hard to think about anything else except what had just happened.

When the time came to test the car out, Lance practically leapt out of his seat.

“I’ll drive.” He said, “God knows what this one might do to it again. Amarite?” He jabbed his thumb in Keith’s direction.

A judder. A shake, and then… the smooth purr of an engine.

“She lives! It’s a miracle!” Lance yelled from the driver’s seat.

“Excellent!” Said Coran.

When Coran told them how much the maintenance cost, Lance wanted to die.

“We’ll split it.” Said Keith.

“Um, no?” Lance argued.

Keith looked at him, frowning, “You’ve been going on this whole time about how it was my fault. The least I can do is take responsibility. Or at least half of it.”

This guy… fuck.

“But it’s my car!” Said Lance, throwing his hands in the air.

“And I was driving it!” Keith raged. “You’re right! I fucked it up! So please allow me to pay for half?”
Lance opened and closed his mouth pathetically. He was furious.

“This is fucking stupid.” He seethed. “You’re such a… a….”

“Yes?” Keith challenged.

“A martyr!” Lance fired.

“I don’t know what that means!”

Coran laid a hand on both of their shoulders, “Come on, boys.” He said like a disapproving father. “We can settle this very easily.”

They waited.

“Rock paper scissors?” Keith suggested in Lance’s direction.

_Smug mullet._ Lance scowled.

“I was going to suggest paying in instalments, but whatever tickles your fancy.” Said Coran.

“I just don’t see why” -

-“I don’t care. Let him pay for it if he wants to so badly.” Keith interrupted shortly, turning heel and striding back to the car.

That pissed Lance off. He snarled. “Ugh! Stupid mullet-head.”

“I take it you two argue often.” Said Allura awkwardly.
“I met him yesterday. Barely know the guy.” Lance got out, glaring at Keith through the windscreen.

Allura was surprised. “Oh! You seem like you know each other very well.”

“Believe me, it feels like it’s been a lot longer.”

Lance made the payment with his card, now wishing he’d accepted Keith’s first offer of paying half. But he’d fucked that up too. Now he was broke and humiliated. He was well on his way to becoming genuine tragedy. There ought to be a Greek style play about him, he thought. Study that in your Classics class, Keith, he thought bitterly. Homer didn’t have anything on him.

After exchanging civil and genuinely thoughtful goodbyes with Coran and Allura (the latter whom they promised they’d say hello to in college if they bumped into each other), Lance drove them back onto the road in strained, awkward silence. Hours ago, they’d been marvelling out of these windows at the wild horses galloping across the dust. Now there was so much left unsaid between them that Lance didn’t know where to start, or if he could. He only knew that he’d royally fucked up.

*I’m on my way… aha, aha, aha, I’m on my way…*

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**Keith**

The next leg of the journey was so unbearably uncomfortable that Keith thought he might actually implode. Like, BOOM, and no more awkwardness. No more tense silence and one-word answers to reluctant questions.

“Can I turn the heater up?”

“Yeah.”
“Could you pass me that water bottle?”

“Sure.”

“Mind if I put the radio on?”

A shrug.

It was horrendous. Keith hadn’t felt this nauseous with nerves and unvented anger since the day he moved high schools. From the look on Lance’s face, the other boy felt much the same way, but for some reason neither of them could breach the quiet. It felt like caving in at this point. Like losing. So Keith rubbed his tired eyes and shrugged out of his jacket, his sweater, and balled it up under his head as a pillow. Then, with a last, stubborn glance at Lance, Keith closed his eyes and willed himself to sleep.

_____

Sunlight skittered across Keith’s face when he woke up. Clouds obscured most of the sky now, allowing only flashes of yellow, and the car was colder for it. The tips of Keith’s toes felt numb so he flexed them, glancing blearily at his watch.

Twenty-three minutes had gone by.

*Are you kidding me?* He thought, angrily rubbing a hand over his face. Not sleeping wasn’t anything new to Keith, insomnia was an ever-present antagonist in his life, but he’d figured that after twelve hours of driving none stop and all of the drama with the car breaking down, he’d be exhausted enough to sleep for a solid three hours at least.

But no dice, apparently.

A growl of exasperation rattled up his throat.
“Hey man,” Lance said. Shoot, Keith had almost forgotten about him. He sounded nervous. “You okay?”

“Fine,” Keith snapped. It sounded harsh to his own ears. “I’m fine,” he repeated, making an effort to soften his voice. The last thing he wanted was to give Lance another reason to start some stupid argument. “Just clearing my throat.”

“Uh huh,” Lance said, disbelievingly.

The silence was back and it was deafening.

A million possible conversation starters flashed through Keith’s head, but each and every one withered on his tongue, tasting unpleasant or silly or just… wrong. That was Keith’s problem: he always said the wrong thing, so it was easier to say nothing at all. But that attitude didn’t work in situations like this, as proven over the course of the journey. Honestly, Keith felt like a huge jerk. He kept thinking about what Lance said, about being moody and sullen, and he was right, wasn’t he? Lance was by no means a saint, but he’d tried at the beginning to inch Keith out of his tight shell and draw him into conversation, only to be met with a towering, iron wall. Was it any wonder he’d gotten fed up with Keith?

Glancing at Lance out of the corner of his eye, Keith knew the answer. He’d told Shiro this would happen, but Shiro had way too much faith in what he called Keith’s ‘inner potential’, which was cheesy even for Shiro. But… well, in some small way, Keith had hoped his friend was right, that he’d find a way to tear down his usual walls, even just a fraction, and not fuck up so hard. Yeah, great job Keith. A+ for you.

It occurred to Keith that he was just staring at Lance now in a dazed sort of way, watching him watch the road. His hair had curled from the cold weather, and fell in tiny, soft waves against his forehead, fluttering under the blow of the heater. He was still wearing that same blue sweater, which softened the sharp, lanky angles of his body and Keith saw now that there was a white pattern on the sleeves. It was such a stark contrast to the bare skin and tight frame he’d glimpsed in the costume closet. He remembered Lance’s face- first horrified and flustered before melting into something like defiance. Stubbornness. The blue of the bodice had been a perfect match for his eyes…

“Er… Keith?”

Keith looked up. “Hm?”
Lance was scowling at him. “Are you trying to pick a fight or what?”

“What?”

“Dude, you’re totally glaring at me!”

The top of Keith’s ears seared pink. “I’m not,” he mumbled, gruffly. “I just zoned out.”

“You know,” Lance said, sniffing. “You can go back to sleep if you want. I’ve got this.”

“Thanks.”

Keith stared out the window instead.

“You can’t sleep, can you?” Lance concluded after a few quiet minutes.

Keith was surprised that he sounded neither obnoxious nor scrappy. Instead it came out like a genuinely concerned question. It took him a moment to process this and answer, “No, I can’t.”

“Is it the car?” Lance asked. “My mom can never sleep in cars.”

“I think it’s just generally,” Keith answered. “I’m not a great sleeper.”

“Now that’s something I can’t relate to,” Lance said, shaking his head and humming. “I freaking love sleep.”

Keith’s lips twisted up. “Yeah, I got that when you drooled for most of the way here.”

Now Lance’s face burst into red. “You weren’t supposed to see that.”
“I get the feeling I wasn’t supposed to see a lot of things this past day,” he’d meant it as a joke, but it came out heavy and leaded and sat between them like a metal weight. Nice one Keith, he thought, watching Lance’s hands tighten on the wheel. Nice one.


“Lance,” Keith interrupted. In his head, he saw Shiro, heard him telling him to try, and took a deep breath. “I - I’m sorry.”

The following silence was stunned.

“What?” Lance asked, at last. His mouth was hanging open.

Keith stumbled haltingly on. “For being moody. And quiet. I, er, I’m not great with people. And I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable.”

He stared straight ahead the entire time, refusing to look at Lance for fear of what he might find there. A sneer? Rejection? He’d had plenty of that in his life.

“You… make me… feel uncomfortable?” Lance repeated, voice a high squeal.

Keith frowned. Was he rubbing it in? “Yes.”

Suddenly Lance burst out laughing. It was such the opposite reaction of what Keith expected that he forgot all about his insecurities and whirled around to find Lance clutching at his stomach, tears running down his face. The Twingo veered to the left.

“Watch the road!” Keith shouted, reaching out to steady the vehicle. For some reason this made Lance laugh harder. “DUDE. Why are you laughing?”

“Because,” Lance squeaked. His cleared his throat and brushed away some of the tears. “Oh man, I think I might puke. Because, I’ve peed in a bottle in front of you, you caught me in a freaking
Keen and I made you uncomfortable?” he burst out laughing again. “Dude!”

Keith blinked several times, finally catching up. “Oh. Well when you put it like that…” he glanced at Lance, who couldn’t take it and burst into another fit of giggles. It was contagious, and Keith couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped him. Then the laugh. Then the louder laugh. Soon the pair of them were bawling their eyes out, swishing left and right on the road but not caring in the least.

“Oh my god,” Lance breathed at last. “Jesus… That was so funny.”

Keith nodded, clutching at his sore belly.

“It’s good to know you can actually laugh though,” Lance added, smirking at Keith. “I was beginning to think you weren’t human.”

Keith smirked back. “What, like a robot?”

“Terminator style. It was gonna be all, ‘Hasta La vista baby!’ and then you’d sprout rockets for feet and shoot off on your mission to destroy humanity.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Keith said, and Lance’s face fell. “ Humanity’s way too small, we want to conquer the whole universe.”

Realising that Keith was playing along, Lance’s face broke into a delighted grin and Keith mentally high-fived himself for saying something right. Maybe he could do this whole social thing after all.

“I should have known,” Lance said. “Coran was probably your alien creator and I only just escaped with my life. No wonder you could drink that space juice.”

“I actually thought it was nice,” Keith commented.

“Seriously? But it tasted like feet! Do you enjoy the taste of feet?”
“Maybe. I’ve never tasted feet, have you?”

Lance thought about this with pursed lips. “Touché,” he said, grinning. “But it was still rank,” he snuck a peek at Keith then, and rubbed his nose. “And er, I’m sorry too, for all of that junk with the bottle and yelling at you at the garage. I know you were only trying to help me out and I acted like a complete douchebag. And er,” he rubbed his nose again. “About the thing in the costume closet, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone about that. I was only messing around and I’m- I’m sorry if I freaked you out. I swear I’m not into anything… freaky.”

“Oh,” said Keith blinking. Was he worried Keith was judging him? The idea made Keith want to scoff. If anything, Keith was judging himself over his reaction to seeing Lance in a corset. It had done something confusing to his stomach. “Dude, don’t sweat it. Like you said, we were just waiting around. And besides, cosplay isn’t freaky.”


Keith’s face felt warm. “ Doesn’t everybody?”

“Oh,” Lance exclaimed, “Did you just say cosplay? You know cosplay?”

Keith’s face felt warm. “ Doesn’t everybody?”

“Only weeb and nerds,” Lance answered, but it sounded excited rather than insulting. “I thought you’d be too cool for that.”

“Too cool?” Keith echoed. “Are you calling me cool?”

“Well,” Lance said, affronted and wanting to backpedal. “You know- you’ve got that - the hair and the- the… thing.”

“The thing?” Keith repeated, grinning.

“Shut up man, you know what I mean. You’ve got that too-good-for-you look down.”

Ouch. Is that what it looked like? “Gee, thanks.”

“What? Oh no I didn’t mean, I mean I did but- ah shoot,” said Lance, and another chuckle slipped through his mouth. “We’re not good at this, are we?”
“The worst,” Keith agreed. “Sort of a match made in hell, wasn’t it?”

“I blame Shiro. That guy always thinks he knows best but sometimes, and I love that manly man to death, but sometimes he doesn’t know jack shit.”

Keith snorted. “That might be the first thing you’ve said that I really, really agree with.”

“That Shiro’s wrong, or that we’re an awful match?”

“Both,”

They grinned at each other. Then Lance’s brow crinkled with concern.

“You know,” Lance said. “If you wanna stop somewhere and try to sleep, I won’t mind. It sometimes helps my mom if we’re stationary.”

Keith thought about it. “I don’t know. I kinda wanna get home as soon as we can. Maybe in an hour or two. I’m good for now.”

“You really wanna get home huh? Something happening with your folks?”

Something inside Keith went very still then. It was a feeling he was used to- one he’d felt over and over again and would probably feel over and over again forever. It wasn’t sadness anymore, but a cool calm, a motionlessness which settled in his stomach and spread outwards. More than anything, Keith worried that the topic of his family would make other people feel uncomfortable, so he tended to avoid it whenever possible.

“Something like that,” he answered.

“Christmas can be a bitch like that,” Lance went on with a nod, unaware of how Keith was keeping completely still, almost holding his breath. “My sister comes home for the holidays and brings all the kids, so there’s literally not a moment’s peace. Their favourite game is donkey ride, and guess
who’s the donkey?”

“You?” Keith asked, relaxing inch by inch.

“Exactly,” Lance said. “I swear last time Kat nearly dislocated my spine. Andie thought it was hilarious.”

Keith finally let out the breath. “Sounds like fun,”

“Did you not hear the part about my near-death experience?”

Keith rolled his eyes. “Are you always this dramatic?”

“There’s nothing dramatic about it,” Lance countered. “It’s literally life and death, I’m telling you!”

“Uh huh,” Keith said around a yawn. God, he was tired. “Whatever you say, Lance.”

Lance started prattling on about something then, but Keith was having a hard time following his thread. Instead he leant his head against the window and stared out the windscreen, watching the road meld into a line of blurry grey, eyelids drooping. It was almost like being read a story at bedtime, tucked up in duvets and falling asleep to the steady, rhythmic thrum of another person’s voice. He kept expecting Lance to scold him for not paying attention, but it never came, he just kept going, oblivious. He must really love the sound of his own voice. Or maybe…

Maybe Keith heard him murmur “Goodnight Keith,” at some point. But then again, maybe not.

_____

When Keith came to, they weren’t moving anymore. Instead, they were in a parking lot next to a gas station and a Starbucks, the latter packed despite being in the middle of nowhere. Unfolding himself from his stiff position cramped against the door, Keith yawned, scratched his head, and noticed that the driver’s seat was empty. Lance was nowhere to be seen.
Keith thought about calling him, but then realised he didn’t have the other boy’s number. Had he
been gone for long? Was this just a pit stop or would Keith be waiting for hours? Before Keith
could think himself into a mild, annoyed panic, he noticed a note on the seat and, picking it up,
found a scribbled message that read,

Gone to get coffee, back in five.
-Ya Boi Lance.

Keith scoffed. The handwriting was terrible, like a five-year-old’s in a rush. It was a miracle Keith
could actually read it.

“Coffee, huh?” he mused out loud. It sounded nice, but Starbucks was way too expensive for
Keith’s current budget. He was going to have to be careful with money until he rang Roy and asked
for some work over the break. Roy knew Keith was good with machines, better than most of his
hired goons, so Keith was confident he wouldn’t have to worry for too long. It was just in-between
college and work that Keith struggled most of the time- between scholarship grants and actual pay
checks. Shiro and his mom always offered to help out of course, but Keith never took it, assuring
them that he was fine with the college grants. He’d already taken enough from them.

Stretching off the stiffness and thoughts, Keith glanced at his watch and was surprised to find he
slept those allusive three hours after all. No wonder he felt so good. Maybe Lance’s chattiness was
good for something after all. Maybe he wasn’t too bad.

He swivelled around to find his water bottle but stopped dead when he saw it empty under Lance’s
seat.

Okay, maybe he was that bad.

“Seriously?” Keith asked the empty water bottle. “He drank it all?”

Huffing Keith remembered Lance pulling a water bottle out of his glove compartment earlier, and
resolved that it was compensation, not stealing since Lance had struck first. So he yanked open the
door and shuffled through its contents for a water bottle. There wasn’t any, just a bunch of car stuff,
some bills (including the bill from Coran, Keith saw with a sharp eye. Yikes, $400), a letter from
Ohio. There were polaroids too. Actual polaroids, the freaking hipster.

Unthinkingly, Keith began to flick through them. Most were of a large, extended family: messing
around at a beach, barbecues and birthdays. There was a kid with brown hair and a gap in his teeth in one of them; it took Keith a while to realise he was looking at a kid version of Lance, holding a toy lightsabre in one hand and cocking his other into a gun pointed at the camera. There were more recent pictures as well: Lance in an apron with another guy Keith vaguely recognised from college, and a young girl giving the camera (and presumably Lance) the finger. There was a shot of all three of them outside the UTA Planetarium. Lance was wearing a pair of alien antennae in that one. Keith snickered.

Carefully, putting them back in order, Keith replaced the photographs and turned to the radio. He wasn’t hopeful that there’d be signal, but it was something to do. He’d just managed to tap into some weird channel where two women called Olya and Pam were talking about movement in clown theatre, when Lance knocked on the window sill. He grinned at Keith’s little jump of surprise, before climbing into the car. He was carrying two paper cups heaped with cream and syrup.

*A little excessive for one person,* Keith thought.

“Sorry if you’ve been waiting long. For the middle of nowhere, that Starbucks sure is jumping,” he turned to Keith and held out one of the cups. “Here.”

Keith stared at the cup.

Lance stared at him.

“Um, dude?”

“Oh,” said Keith, comprehending that, yes, the drink was for him. “Thanks. How much do I owe you?”

Lance waved his hand. “Don’t worry about it.”

“But-”

“I drank all of your water,” Lance said. “So we’re even, right?”
Knowing the prices of Starbucks coffee, Keith highly doubted that. He was about to argue again, but before he could Lance continued,

“And, you know, I hate drinking coffee by myself. So…”

With a start, Keith realised it was an apology. An apology coffee. The idea made him feel uncomfortable (any sort of charity did) but instead of arguing further, Keith took a closer look at Lance- noticing the way he was staring at his shoes, eyes lowered, lips pressed together, cheeks dusted pink. Shiro’s voice drifted into his head,

“It’s not always charity Keith.”

Hesitantly, he took a sip of the caramel covered drink. Keith blinked. Wow. This was freakin’ good.

“Holy shit,” he breathed.

Lance grinned. “Pretty good, huh?” he asked, smug.

“What is this?” Keith asked, taking another gulp of the warm, sugary drink. It was way too sweet, like, diabetes sweet, but on a cold day like this, after hours of travel, it was just the hot sugar rush Keith needed.

“A Horchata Frappuccino,” Lance said, extremely pleased with himself.

“A what?” Keith asked. He was pretty sure he’d never heard of that before. Was it a new special? “Is that a thing?”


“You work at Starbucks? I’ve never seen you in there.”

“I work in the city,” Lance explained. “The campus one is, like, the holy grail. You have to slay a
dragon before they even consider you.”

“That’s good to know,” Keith says with chuckle, while Lance took one long, obnoxious sip of his own drink. It looked different to Keith’s. “What’s yours?”

“Caramel Snickerdoodle Macchiato,” Lance answered.

“That sounds gross,”

“It is,” Lance assured him, taking another long, gulp.

Keith let out an amused breath. “Well, thanks, Lance.” It felt weird to say that. But… it also didn’t.

“You’re welcome Keith,” It seemed like Lance was experiencing much the same mixed emotions about this new dynamic.

Did it mean they didn’t hate each other anymore? Keith wasn’t usually one to bring things up, but his hatred of grey areas outweighed that. Which is why it didn’t surprise him to find himself asking, “So is this a… truce?”

“A truce, huh?” Lance said around his straw, trying the words out. He smiled. “Yeah. Sounds good. Truce.”

“Want me to take over driving?” Keith asked. “I feel pretty rested.”

“Nah,” Lance said with a shrug. “You’ve done most of the driving this journey, man. And we’re nearly home anyway.”

“We are?” Keith asked.

In answer, Lance pointed to the map. They were a lot closer than Keith first thought. A couple of hours away, in fact.
“Oh, cool.”

The engine ignited when Lance twisted his key, putting the Twingo in gear and guiding her out of the parking lot. They passed a family on vacation, bundled up in thick coats holding ice cream and squealing delightedly at swarm of geese overhead. Keith craned his neck to get a better look at the flock, pulling the window down so he could hear the raucous shrieks as they speared through the sky in what appeared to be thousands. Lance whistled.

Soon, they were back on the road. Now that they weren’t talking, the weird clown channel caught Lance’s attention. He snorted.

“The hell you listening to?”

Keith shrugged. “It was all I could find.”

“Go through my CDs,” Lance said. “Pick something. Anything. It’s gotta be better than this crap.”

Keith couldn’t agree more. Goodbye Pam and Olya. He picked up Lance’s hoard and began flicking through his extensive collection; it seemed like Lance had everything from the Beatles to Kanye. Most of them were labelled according to mood, rather than artist, with titles like: CHILL. Or READY TO FUCK SHIT UP. One that made Keith laugh was, IF YOU WANT TO DIE. But there were a few CDs with single artists on there too, even a sneaky Fall Out Boy section, but Keith skipped over this, fearing it would only add to the emo image Lance seemed to attach to him. Not that he was wrong, but still. It was the principle. Instead, Keith found himself thumbing through the CDs until he stumbled upon a particular band.

“Oh, don’t mind that,” Lance said at once. He’d obviously been watching Keith flick through his stack. “They’re just this weird British band, you can-”

“You like Wild Beasts?” Keith interrupted.

Lance faltered. “You know Wild Beasts?”

“Dude, I love this band,”
“No shit, really?”

Keith nodded, perhaps a little too enthusiastically.

“Nobody knows Wild Beasts,” Lance said, almost to himself. “Pidge always says they’re too morose.”

“She obviously hasn’t listened to Alpha Female then,”

“Right?!?” Lance exclaimed. “And Lion’s Share is just a classic.”

“Dude, don’t even get me started,” he laughed, looking down at the titles. “Their early stuff is so weird though.”

“I know right? Like, their first Album is so strange but I also, like, low-key love it?”

“That so?” Keith picked out a CD. Soon the lyrics for The Devil’s Crayon were blaring from Lance’s speakers, and Lance, of course, knew every word. He was so into it that he didn’t even seem to care that he was off key in a lot of places and making the weirdest faces. In fact, he was so ridiculous that Keith began to hum along too. Then he was singing the chorus. Hearing Keith joining in, Lance sent him a wide grin and sang louder, bobbing along to the music and, worst still, dabbing on appropriate notes. Keith lost it; he started laughing hard, tears pricking his eyes as Lance’s stupid moves grew more confident, more elaborate, more terrible. When Alpha Female came on, however, they were both in it. Lance turned up the volume to max and, after starting off low and intense, they were both shouting their lungs out.

“I WILL NOT HOLD YOU BACK I WILL NOT HOLD YOU BACK!”

“ALPHA FEMALE I’LL BE RIGHT BEHIND YOU!”

“ALPHA FEMALE. FEMALE ALPHA!”
By the time the CD ended, they’d screamed to at least two albums worth of songs. Keith’s throat was sore, and Lance was sweating a little, but they didn’t care. That was cathartic as hell.

“Man, I love those guys,” Lance said, breathlessly.

“I’m surprised you didn’t have Albatross on there,” Keith commented.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. It’s probably my favourite.”

“It is a great song,” Lance acknowledged. “I might add it to the collection when I get home.”

Keith nodded, before picking out some a CD labelled, LAST STRETCH. It was almost too on the nose when Country Road began to play, but that, Keith thought, was probably the point. Lance was a machine of memes and irony, he was learning. It was a weird sense of humour that Keith didn’t always get, but he was beginning to appreciate it.

“So…” Lance said. “When did you find Wild Beasts?”

“Sometime last year, I guess. I didn’t have much to do besides work at the garage, so I listened around. Wanderlust was the first song I heard.”

“What about school?” Lance asked, confused.

“Oh,” Keith said, because he always forgot this part. “I, er, took a year out.”

“Wait, you mean you’re nineteen?”

“Twenty, actually.”
This news seemed to trouble Lance for some reason. “I’m nowhere near,” he mumbled. He shook his head. “So why’d you take a year out?”

Keith shifted uncomfortably. “Well, I’d planned on joining the Air Force, actually.”

“You wanted to be a pilot?!” Lance squeaked.

“Yeah. Even joined up. But it didn’t matter in the end- I washed out.”

“Why?"

Keith coughed. “Disciplinary issues.”

“Dude, that is bad ass,”

Keith frowned. “Getting kicked out of the air force is bad ass?”

“I mean,” Lance said, backtracking again. “The wanting to be a pilot bit. As a kid, my choice of super power was always flying. It’d be so much easier to get to Taco Bell.”

Keith snorted. “Great use of super powers there,” he commented.

“Well duh, I can’t save the world on an empty stomach, dropout.”

Keith punched Lance in the side. It was a soft punch, but Lance still yelped like Keith had burned him.

“What was that for?!” he squealed.

“Eyes on the road, McClain,” Keith said, smirking. “We don’t want another incident stopping us from getting home.”
They were so close now. The quiet sounds of the desert were calling to Keith now. He missed the smell of his shack, the creak of the door, the way his sheets felt around his bare feet. He supposed Lance was just excited to get home as he was. Probably more. From the look of the photos, he had a big family. The thought sent Keith’s lips curling into a wistful smile.

“So, what was the disciplinary issue?” Lance asked, slyly.

“I… don’t really wanna say,” Keith answered, cringing.

“Aw! Come on! Tell me.”

“Lance.”

“What was it?”

“I don’t-”

“Did you punch someone? An officer? A general?”

“Really? Can’t you-”

“Did you steal a plane?”

“… are you serious?”

Lance shrugged, grinning. “I don’t know, man. It could have been anything. If you tell me-”
“Why were you in a corset?”


“Good.”

“…”

“Was it aliens?”

Now Keith couldn’t help but laugh. After he told Lance no, it wasn’t aliens, they then somehow got into a discussion about a documentary Keith had watched last year when he had nothing else to do. It was mostly about crop circles and, in Keith’s defence, it was really convincing. Lance chewed him out for that, saying, “Oh my god, you’re one of those weird conspiracists!” which Keith denied. But Lance wouldn’t hear it. They went around in circle arguing about this for some time, before moving onto the topic of college. But not the polite sort of conversation strangers make waiting for lectures to start in the halls, the sort where they bitched about impossible professors and annoying group projects, bemoaning the cafeteria’s disappointing chocolate pudding and spilling dirt on fellow classmates. Well, Lance spilled most of the dirt, but Keith was interested to listen. He hadn’t known so much drama went on at college. In return, he told Lance about the Martial Arts class: the rivalries and matches they’d played so far. One particular story about Shiro scaring the freshmen by punching a hole through one of the pads had Lance laughing out loud.

They didn’t notice when the CD repeated itself for a third and fourth time, too busy swapping stories, trying to outdo one another in how outrageous they could make their tales. They didn’t notice when the sign for Austin went by, and the endless stretch of nothingness morphed into houses and skyscrapers, shops and civilisation. They didn’t notice until Lance pulled up to the spot they’d agreed to part ways at, about ten minutes’ walk from the garage where Keith’s bike was locked up.

So, it came as a shock to them when they pulled up to a stop at the curve. Lance trailed off a sentence about some girl in his physics class and they stared a head, a bit dazed.

“Well, er,” said Lance, scratching his head. “I guess we’re here.”

“Looks like it,” Keith agreed. He climbed out to get his backpack from the trunk and was surprised
when Lance followed him out. They stood awkwardly on the curb, staring at each other but unsure of what to do now.

“So,”

“Yeah.”

Lance held out his hand. “Thanks for sharing the trip home, I guess. It was, er, interesting.”

Smiling lopsidedly, Keith grasped Lance’s hand and shook it firmly, ignoring the bolt of electricity which sped up his arm. “Yeah. Definitely that.”

“Have a good Christmas, man,” Lance said. They’d stopped shaking hands at this point but had yet to withdraw. Keith tried not to think about that too hard. “And I’ll see you around campus, maybe?”

“Sure.”

“Cool.”

They stared a moment longer.

“Right, so,” said Lance, withdrawing his hand with a nervous laugh. He shoved it in his jeans’ pocket. “Better get going. Family to see, yanno?”

“Sure. Ah, wait!” said Keith, reaching for the door handle. “I forgot something.”

He was in and out of the Twingo in one swift move. There.

Gripping the straps of his backpack, Keith straightened. “Well, see you Lance.”
“You too Keith,”

Keith turned to go.

“Oh! And, Keith?”

He paused.

Lance scuffed his shoes on the pavement. “If er, you’re in the same sitch next year, we could always do this again?”

Something warm spread throughout Keith’s stomach. He cleared his throat. “Yeah, I think I’d like that.”

Lance smiled.

Then, having nothing left to say, Keith turned on his heel and marched away. At the corner, he turned back around and found that Lance hadn’t left yet, so he raised his hand in farewell. Lance did the same.

_Doofus_, Keith thought, heading for the garage. Still, for some reason, he couldn’t stop grinning.

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**Lance**

When Keith had disappeared around the corner, Lance climbed back into Blue and sighed. In the corner of his eye, he saw something white and, curious, turned to find a white envelope on the passenger seat. Inside, was a check for $200 and a note that read,
Don’t forget Albatross.

-Keith.

Chapter End Notes

The word was corset.

We hope you enjoyed this chapter! We love to hear what you liked/would like to see more of so please feel free to leave us a comment! ^_^ xx
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little shorter, but we decided it worked better because of the different format! We'd love to hear what you think and we hope you enjoy it ^_^

Lance

February 12th

Hey Abuelita,

This semester is really hard. It’s not like I regret going to college or anything, but I really underestimated all the work I have to do. It’s only Freshman year though, right? It’ll be cool. Remember when I told you about that road trip I had before Christmas break, and there was that moody guy, Keith with the mullet? I saw him again today for the first time since then. Okay, well I didn’t actually see him. I saw his jacket in the cafeteria though, hung on the back of a chair. I’m sure it was his. I was just sitting there with Hunk and Pidge and next minute – boom! Flashback. All because of that jacket. Then when we were leaving, I looked back and saw some guy with black hair sitting there and I’m sure it was him. I didn’t really get time to have a proper look. He had his back turned and I think he was reading something, so I didn’t want him to see me and feel like he should say something. Should I have gone over and said something? I feel like that might be a little weird. I mean, it’s not like we’re pals or anything, but I feel like I should thank him for the money thing. You’d totally shout at me, but I haven’t cashed in that cheque yet. It’s just sitting there on my desk. I know he said he’d pay half, and I’m super pleased he did but… Idk. Did I just say idk in a diary? Is it wrong to physically write text speak? Idk. Maybe. Idk. Talking about it defeats the purpose of the abbreviation, I suppose. I miss you a lot lately abuelita. February in Wisconsin sucks. It’s cold as shit outside. Sorry. I mean, it’s cold as hell. Is that okay to say? Eh. You were chill af, so idm. See what I did there? I can’t stop listening to the song Albatross since the road trip as well. I forgot how beautiful it is. Okay, I’m gonna tap out, it’s 1am and I have a report to write.

Love you, Abuelita.

April 1st

Yo Abuelita,

I’m in a pretty good mood. I did my first major test this morning and it was ace! I actually studied for nearly a whole week before it, you’d be proud of me for that. Also, a girl in my class invited me to her party which is like so rare? Also also, I saw mullet-guy again. For reals this time. I was in the Library a couple days ago (I know, miracle) and I realised the dude at the end of the row from me was Keith! He looked really depressed. Surprise surprise. He was studying so I didn’t say hi, but I don’t think he saw me anyway so it doesn’t matter. I asked Shiro about his Martial Arts team
and apparently things aren’t going well with training for competitions, so maybe that’s why he looked so bummed out. I don’t really know how that stuff works out. I told him I might go and watch one of the competitions in the summer and he was really happy about that. I’ve never seen a Martial Arts competition before so… new experiences, I guess? Also, I don’t think I told you about this, but after Christmas Break when Shiro asked me how the road trip with Keith was, I couldn’t bring myself to tell him what went down. I was just like, it was okay. It was so weird. I had planned to roast the guy, but then I thought about how he likes Wild Beasts and he gave me that cheque and the note and, idk, it just doesn’t seem like he’s a bad guy? I was actually thinking, I know it’s fricking months away, but what if we made it a thing? The road trip, I mean. It was nice not driving alone. And cheaper! I guess I’ll see how I feel closer to the time. Heck, we might never talk again. I wouldn’t be surprised. He probably thinks I’m a major freak after last time. I was thinking about that too. I haven’t told Pidge and Hunk about it yet. Do you think they’d laugh at me? I know what you would have said: “Lance McClain, what on earth were you thinking, boy?” Then you’d smack me with a slipper and laugh and pull me into one of those really painful hugs. I miss those hugs. No one else cracks my bones quite the same way. Anyway, I’m gonna hit the hay. It’s not even 11pm but I’m exhausted.

Night, Abuelita. Love you.

May 29th

Abuelita,

I went to a party last night. Keith was there. He left real soon after I got there, so we never got to speak, but he definitely saw me. He was holding a drink and some other guy was talking to him. The last thing I saw was him leaving. The party was awful. Abuelita, I’m so confused. I love you.

June 9th

ABUELITA!

WHY AM I SUCH A MESS?! I DIDN’T KNOW MY LAST EXAM IS IN A WEEK. I THOUGHT I HAD AT LEAST TWO MORE WEEKS! I’M GOING TO DIE! Is ‘was having a bad hair day’ a valid excuse for not turning up to an exam? Because that’s all I can think of right now! To my credit, it’s true. I haven’t had it cut for weeks and I’ve been pulling at it from stress all day. Oh, and that isn’t the worst thing that’s happened. There’s a rumour going around about me and that party I went to. 1. It’s not true! 2. I can’t remember enough to contradict them because I was so pissed… sorry, Abuelita. It’s all for personal growth. And I won’t be getting that drunk again, I promise. Ugh. I hate my life. I don’t even want to repeat the things said about me in here. I want to forget about it all. I want to go home. Not Texas home – Home, home. Cuba. I miss it. I know we had to move, but still. I saw Shiro in the quad with Keith today. I think they’d just had training because they were dressed in their ninja uniforms or whatever they’re called. Keith was laughing. Like, actually smiling. Freaky. I nearly went over to say hi because Shiro was there but then I had this thought that was just: what if Keith heard about the rumour? He must have. He was at that party. He left super early but someone must have told him. I honestly want to bury myself in a hole. What is life? Why are we here? Who knows? Who cares? College is a social construct. I don’t need an education. I don’t need a job. I could roam free around the world, exploring culture and becoming at peace with my inner self. Or I could become a YouTuber. Reckon I could do that?
Wait. I need money for all of those things. Except maybe YouTube but let’s be real, what the hell would I do anyway? I don’t have any special talents except failing at life. Hunk called me melodramatic when I threw my textbook out the window. I went and got it back straight away, and then regretted it. There’s no such thing as a happy middle-ground in my life. It’s just ups and downs, ups and downs, like a freaking roller-coaster. I’d quite like to go on a roller-coaster right now. It would be great if I fell out. I’m going to die in a ditch screaming along to the lyrics of Supermassive Black Hole. Because that’s what my life is.

I’m gonna go study. I miss you and your delicious food.

July 25th

Hi Abuelita,

You know, things have been going okay, haven’t they? I told you I finally got my life together and unpacked my room ready for summer vacation? My last exam was like, a month ago so I’ve had plenty of time to just chill, relax, start reading for next term... yeah. Great. UNTIL THIS MORNING. I’m so embarrassed. I’m so embarrassed that actual tears of humiliation filled my eyes. I saw Keith. And then I embarrassed myself. Again. It’s been like six months and I was thinking, ‘oh, look, an opportunity to redeem myself’ and then I screwed up. I don’t even want to relive what I did, it’s so humiliating. In the end, I didn’t get to say anything to him. I just ran away. That’s right. I RAN AWAY. Is this why I don’t have a girlfriend yet? Does our family have some kind of curse that skips a generation that you never told me about?

At this point in my life, I’d be thankful for something like that because then it would mean I’m not just a total mess on my own.

I should do something to make myself feel better. Maybe I’ll listen to Albatross again. It’s been a while.

September 20th

Abuelita,

Sophomore year is HARD. We’ve already been tested twice over the past two weeks. What is up with that?! This course is run by a dictator, I’m telling you! I spotted Allura, the girl from the garage today. She was in the library. I was just going in to return a book and there she was! Jeez, she is gorgeous. Like, seriously stunning. I honestly did not know what to do with myself when I saw her so I just stood there like a complete idiot for ages trying to think of what to say, but then
she saw me. I don’t think she recognised me at first. I couldn’t tell if she was pleased or not. I went over and said hi and we chatted for a bit, then she told me she had to go and meet someone. Too bad. I bet I could have thought of something really cool to say if there had been enough time. But no. I’m not as smooth lately. It’s all the stress. Is this what girls feel like on their periods? I’m beginning to sympathise.

Sorry today’s is a short one. Just wanted to give you a little update! Later. Love you.

October 31st

Yooooo, it’s Halloween! Crazy boi Lance is back in full form. I’m loving my costume. I decided to go as a personification of the 90s. Pidge and Hunk died laughing when they saw the outfit, and I’ve got to say, I’m quite proud. I’m wearing a neon-green bucket hat that is definitely too huge for my head, a shell suit with a Hard Rock Café t-shirt underneath, Bell-bottomed acid-washed ripped jeans that I cut myself into shin-length shorts and a pair of fringed, suede shoes. Don’t even get me started on the hemp bracelets and the peace necklaces I’ve got hanging off me. Tonight is going to be a riot. I’m going to another party. I can’t help thinking about the last party I went to, though. It was so bad. I hope tonight is different. I wonder if Keith will be there. I haven’t seen him once since the beginning of this semester. I wonder if he’s dropped out here too. Nah. Surely not. I’ve sort of made it into this game. The ‘Find the mullet’ game, as I have dubbed it. You’d be surprised at how few guys these days have one. Still, I can’t imagine Keith without it. He’d look weird. I don’t know his last name, so I haven’t been able to find him on Facebook or Instagram or anything. I looked through Shiro’s list of friends to try and find him, but there was no sign there either. Who is this guy? Did I dream him up? Seriously, what the hell? I can’t have thought. Allura mentioned him when I spoke to her in the library that one time. She said they’d actually talked. That’s weird. He’ll talk to her, a girl he met once and only spent a few hours with, but not me? Makes sense, I guess. Allura is fiiiiine. Anyway, I’d better start drinking or there’ll be nothing left by the time Hunk turns up. That man can take his drinks.

Later! Love you, Abuelita.

November 13th

In about a month, I’ll be going home for Christmas. A year sure flies by fast, huh? They’re worried about blizzards this winter. Missouri is set to be quite bad. I’ve been waiting for Shiro to ask me about whether mullet-head needs a lift back this year too. Still nothing. It was only a week before he made that status last year, so I guess I should wait until then. Unless he’s found someone else…? Maybe I’ll tell Shiro to let Keith know that I’d be happy to car-share again. Would that be weird?

I have so much work to do. Night Abuelita!
December 8th

Maybe I should message Keith. I found him on Facebook, but I didn’t add him. Turns out he was on Shiro’s friends list, I just missed his name the first couple times I was scrolling through it. Shiro has a lot of Facebook friends. Should I? Hmm. I don’t know. It might make me sound desperate. I’m gonna go and read a book or listen to Cascada or something. I’ll write tomorrow. Love you.

December 9th

Abuelita.

I did it. I sent it. Just now. It said: Hey, dude. Not sure if you remember me, but I was wondering if you could do with a ride this year? Let me know. Lance.

DOES THAT SOUND WEIRD?! It sounds kind of needy, doesn’t it? Oh well. There it is. No taking that back now. Fml. Idk.

I love you, Abuelita. Later.

______________________________

Keith

Not long after Keith pulled up to his shack, finally at ease now that he had his hands on his bike again, his phone pinged with a Facebook message. Well, five to be exact.

Shiro: You alright bud?

How’s the trip?

Don’t forget to check the gas.

Mom says hi, by the way.

Let me now when you’re home, kay?

Keith: I’m home.

Trip was fine.
Shiro’s reply was almost instant.

**Shiro:** Did it go okay? Did you and Lance get on alright?

**Keith:** Sorta.

**Shiro:** What does that mean?

**Keith:** It means it was fine.

**Shiro:** You sure you’re okay?

**Keith:** YES. Shiro. I’m ok.

**Shiro:** You know, you can still come here for vacation. Mom was bummed that you weren’t coming. You know you’re welcome Keith.

**Keith:** I know, Shiro. But

*Keith is typing*

*I need some space.*

**Shiro:** I get it. Just don’t overwork yourself too much, okay? And make sure you eat enough.

**Keith:** You sound like such an old man.
Shiro: I am an old man.

Keith: Dude, you’re twenty-five.

Shiro: Wait till you get to that age. Then you’ll see what I mean.

Keith: Well I’m gonna hit the sack. I’m pretty tired.

Shiro: Yeah, of course. I’ll speak to you soon, okay? And if you change your mind I can always come get you. Night bro xx

Keith: Night.

10th January

Shiro: Are you coming tonight?

Keith: Nah.

Shiro: Keith, you can’t sit hauled up in your room all year.

Keith: I don’t.

Shiro: Lessons don’t count.

Neither does training.

Keith: I hate parties.

Shiro: It isn’t a party. We’re just going out for dinner.
Keith: I have food in.

Shiro: Keith, we have to bond as a team. You’re a part of this team. Act like it.

Keith: Fine.

Shiro: Great. I’ll meet you at seven.

1 hour Later.

Shiro: Keith, where did you go?

Keith: Nowhere. I’m just getting some air.

Shiro: Okay. Cool.

*Shiro is typing*

Is it because Lance was at the bar?


Shiro: You sure? Because you’ve been cagey about that trip. You never want to talk about it.

Keith: What’s there to talk about? We drove across a few states. End of story.

Shiro: Uh huh.
*Shiro is typing*

He’s coming over to talk.

**Keith:** So?

*Keith is typing*

Shiro?

**Shiro:** He asked after you. Told me to tell you thanks for the note. Know what he’s talking about?

**Keith:** Yeah, I think so.

**Shiro:** We’re going to talk about this.

**Keith:** There’s literally nothing to talk about.

**Shiro:** He also said he hoped you and your mullet had a good Christmas. I wasn’t sure if he was joking or not…

**Keith:** He was.

**Shiro:** So you two joke?

**Keith:** We don’t anything. Seriously man, can we just drop this?

**Shiro:** Okay. He’s gone by the way, if you plan on joining us anytime soon.

**Keith:** *Keith is typing*

I’ll be there in five.
16th March

Shiro: I know you’re taking this hard, but you can’t be mad at the team Keith.

Keith: I’m not.

Shiro: Really? Cause sensei said you stormed out of training this morning.

Keith: Look, Kenny was getting on my nerves okay? He doesn’t take anything seriously.

Shiro: He’s immature.

Keith: Which is why he shouldn’t be on the main team! If he hadn’t thrown that match we would have made it through the preliminaries!

Shiro: Maybe, maybe not. But walking out isn’t going to help. You’ve got a lot of experience Keith, you should use it to help people out. Going off on your own isn’t the answer. Think about it, okay?

Keith: Fine. I’ll think about it. But he’s still a douche.

Shiro: I can’t argue with that.

1st April

Keith: Hey

*Keith is typing*
so you know you talked to Lance that one time?

Shiro: Which time, you know I speak to him a lot. It’s called social interaction.

Keith: The time at the bar.

Shiro: Yeah?

Keith: Did he mention

*Keith is typing*

I don’t know. Never mind.

Shiro: No go on. I’m listening.

Keith: Did he mention, like

*Keith is typing*

not liking me?

Shiro: No… why?

Keith: I don’t know. I saw him in the library today. It looked like he was gonna say something to me, but then he just left.

Shiro: Maybe he didn’t see you.

Keith: Yeah. Maybe.

Shiro: You should just say hi, you know. Lance is a nice guy.
Keith: Yeah. I guess. How’s the paper going, btw?

Shiro: It’s going. Not sure where at this point. Wanna grab some breakfast after training tomorrow morning?

Keith: Sure. I’m craving eggs.

Shiro: Alright bud. Josie’s it is.

June 10th

Allura: Hi Keith, it's Allura, from the Space Diner? I didn’t know you were friends with Shirohe’s a TA for one of our classes. Hope you’re doing okay.

Keith: I remember. Is it the Civil Engineering Degrees class?

Allura: Yes! It’s super hard. I miss being a freshman sometimes :(  
  *Allura is typing*  
   Btw where you at that party in block E last night?

Keith: Yeah. I didn’t stay long though.

Allura: So you didn’t see the drama that went down?

Keith: No. Those things always get so stupid.

Allura: Never mind then.
Oh and I was thinking too, do you want to meet for coffee sometime?

**Keith:** Sure.

*Keith is typing*

As friends right?

**Allura:** Duh.

**Keith:** Cool. I’m free this Thursday.

*Keith is typing*

How about Starbucks? The one in the city I mean. Campus gets so crowded.

**Allura:** Sounds like a plan xx

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**July 25**

**Keith:** The weirdest thing just happened.

**Allura:** What?

**Keith:** I was walking down near the Science Building when Lance came walking by. He spotted me, and I think he was gonna say hi. But then he fell flat on his face. Like, WHAM. His nose was bleeding, and I went to help him but then he just, like, ran away? Not even backed away, or walked away, like full on sprinted away from me.

**Allura:** HAHAHAHAHAAHAHAHAHA

**Keith:** It’s not funny. Does he hate me?
**Allura:** He was probably just embarrassed.

**Keith:** But it was so dramatic.

**Allura:** Yeah, but it’s Lance. You should have seen the fuss he kicked up when Matt started teasing him about kissing Lotor.

**Keith:** Wait, what?

**Allura:** Don’t you know?

**Keith:** Know what?

**Allura:** It was at that party. Oh wait, you left early didn’t you?

**Keith:** Lance kissed Lotor? The lacrosse guy?

**Allura:** Maybe. No one’s really sure. Lance got really drunk and pretended to pole dance around one of the table legs (which was honestly hilarious) but then spilled his drink all over Lotor. They were talking really closely for a bit and then disappeared. Then Matt came back screaming that he’d seen them making out, but you know Matt. He was probably making it up.

**Keith:** Yeah. Probably.

*Keith is typing*

Do you think they made out?

**Allura:** Keith interested in drama? Now this makes a change.

And, honestly? Lance was being really flirty with him, but he was being flirty with everyone.

Everything, even. I’m sure the table leg suffered the most. Besides, I hate assuming things about
Keith: Yeah, you’re right.

Allura: Do you think I should wear the pink or blue dress to Shiro’s class?

Keith: How the hell would I know? I thought we established that, no matter how hard you try, I’m not gay best friend material.

Allura: As just a friend then?

Keith: Blue.

---

August 1st

Shiro: Mom wants to know if you want pasta or curry for dinner.

Keith: Curry.

Shiro: Cool. Where are you, btw?

Keith: In the park. Just listening to music.

Shiro: What music?

Keith: Albatross.
October 31st

Allura: *Attachment: 1 image:*

Keith: Omg, is that Lance?

Allura: Yep. He didn’t see me, but a friend asked him what his costume was, want to guess?

Keith: I honestly have no idea.

Allura: Personification of the 90s.

Keith: Wtf?

Allura: The big guy in the picture went as the eighties and the girl went as the noughties. Honestly, it was pretty genius.

Keith: What did you go as?

Allura: Do you even need to ask?

Keith: Space alien?

Allura: Coran hand-stitched it. Some of his best work.

Keith: Hey, does Coran make corsets too?

Allura: What?
Keith: Never mind.

November 21

Shiro: You coping with class okay?

Keith: Just about. I think I’m running a serious risk of addiction to caffeine though.

Shiro: Hazard of being a student. Could you do me a favour btw?

Keith: Sure.

Shiro: I was wondering if I could read you my speech.

Keith: The one about environmentally friendly engines?

Shiro: That’s the one.

Keith: Sure. Wanna meet up tonight?

Shiro: Tomorrow’s probably better. I want to run through it by myself a few times before then. This whole thing has me nervous.

Keith: You? Nervous?

Shiro: I have a prosthetic arm, Keith, but I’m not a machine.
Keith: I always pictured you more as a Robocop.

Shiro: Very funny.

*Shiro is typing*

Have you thought anymore about Christmas?

Keith: Yeah.

Shiro: Well?

Keith: I can’t Shiro. It’s not you, and it’s not Auntie either. I

*Keith is typing*

I feel so odd at your place during Christmas. It doesn’t feel right.

Shiro: It’s not just my place, Keith, you know that. And maybe if you gave it a go, it wouldn’t feel so weird.

Keith: I’m not ready. I know it sounds stupid, but it would feel like I was leaving Dad behind.

Shiro: I get it. I can always come with you.

Keith: Nah. You’ve got the whole family coming over from Japan. You can’t leave Auntie by herself.

*Keith is typing*

Maybe I’ll come up for a visit after Christmas, just before the semester starts?

Shiro: Yeah, that’d honestly be great bro. I don’t like you being by yourself.
Keith: I have Red. And the lizards.

Shiro: A motorcycle does not count as valid company. Neither do cold blooded creatures.

Keith: They’re better than people.

I better go. This essay isn’t going to write itself.

Shiro: Remember to sleep.


Shiro: Night Keith xx

December 7TH

Shiro: Have you texted Lance yet?

Keith: What?

Shiro: About the car share. I told you, didn’t I? That he mentioned he’d be happy to do it again.

Keith: Oh. Yeah. Not yet.

Shiro: Why not?

Keith: No reason. Just been busy.

Shiro: It’s not a big deal Keith. Just message him on Facebook.
Keith: I know! I’ve just been busy.

Shiro: Yeah, well, you’re running out of time.

Keith: I don’t know. It’s just embarrassing.

Shiro: Why?

Keith: We haven’t spoken for a year. And I feel like he doesn’t like me much.

Shiro: Bro, that’s not true. He’s literally told me the opposite before.

Keith: He has?

Shiro: Yeah. He always asks after you. And I know for a fact you go to the Starbucks in the city now.

Keith: So?

Shiro: So, I know Lance works there. You must talk to him then.

Keith: I don’t.

Shiro: What, so you just skulk around in the store avoiding him?

Keith: No.
Shiro: That’s weird Keith.

Keith: I don’t!

Shiro: What do you do then?

Keith: *Keith is typing*

*Keith is typing*

Shiro: Just talk to him. I promise you, he wouldn’t mind.

Keith: K.

Shiro: I feel like you’re not listening to me.

???

Keith?

December 8th

Shiro: Have you texted Keith yet?

—

Allura: Shiro asked me to ask you if you’ve texted Lance yet?

—
Shiro: Bro?

I’ll come over to your dorm I swear.

Keith: *Keith is typing*

I’m getting there.

December 9th

Lance: Hey, dude. Not sure if you remember me, but I was wondering if you could do with a ride this year? Let me know. Lance.

Keith: *Keith is typing*

20 minutes later

Keith: *Keith is typing*

45 minutes later

Keith: *Keith is typing*

2 hours later

Keith: Cool. Same time and place?

Lance: Yeah dwag.

*dawg*
See you there, aight?

*Keith:* Cool.

For some reason, Keith tapped out two kisses on the end of that message, before immediately deleting them. He was probably just picking up the habit from Shiro.

Probably.
Lance lingered outside the college gates, leant against his trusty blue Twingo, engine purring ready to go. He was twenty minutes early. Shades down, he scaled the area, searching for any sign of a mullet. Cars stacked with belongings and people and laughing faces breezed past him. There were parents filling in to pick up their hungover sons and daughters. A loose Labrador bounded down the driveway, tongue flapping, as he claimed his freedom from the trunk of the four-by-four he’d escaped. That was cute and all, but still no mullet. Lance sighed. How long had he been stood here? Three minutes. Three measly minutes. Maybe leaning outside the car like this looked a little pretentious. He climbed inside. It was cosy and warm and his stuff was piled neatly in the back. Just like last time. Everything was just like last time. Except this time he’d skipped out on the Pacco Rabane. That was probably for the best.

Jeez… why was he so nervous? He knew why. The last time he’d got close to having an interaction with Keith that wasn’t via internet, he’d fallen smack bang on his ass and bolted. Not to mention, he had a million questions running through his head.

“Did you hear about that rumour?” “Are you and Allura really close or something?” “What’s going on with Shiro?” “Did you tell anyone about the corset thing?”

He might have a hernia at this rate.

Exhaling hard, Lance decided to put on some music. Of course, his first thought was Albatross, but at the first beat he switched the song. That was a little cheesy, wasn’t it? They hadn’t spoken for a year, and in that time Keith could have changed a lot. Lance was sure he had. Of course he still memed out and made terrible puns and hit on girls but all of that felt less important right now. Stress and exhaustion had shaped the priorities in his immediate future. Maybe it was the same for Keith. He squeezed the note in his jeans pocket, trying not to ruin the paper with his clammy hands. He’d held it so much: taken it in and out of his draw, folded it, held it up to the light, studied the neat, bold letters so many times that he was surprised it hadn’t ripped to shreds. He’d been careful with it too, though. Lance had been puzzling over this note for so long that the words on it had become meaningless. Not that they’d meant anything in the first place. It was so simple, so short: Don’t forget Albatross. As if he ever would. As if he ever could.

A new song came on: Dust in the Wind by Kansas. He let it play out, despite it being totally the wrong season. This was more of a summer song.

“Hey.”
The jolt that punched Lance in the stomach at that was not normal. He glanced out of the window with feigned surprise.

“Oh, hey man.”

Keith was wearing the same jacket. The same mullet. The same expression. Lance blinked, feeling as though he’d travelled in time.

“You’re early.” Keith observed.

“So are you. By fifteen minutes.”

The slight incline in Keith’s posture was enough of an answer.

Pause.

“Do you wanna get in?”

“Oh. Sure.”

Lance couldn’t describe the atmosphere sandwiched between them. It was almost as if by acknowledging the fact that they were both early, they’d acknowledged a mutual sense of… something. Lance couldn’t put his finger on it. He was just glad to know that Keith wanted to be here after all, and he didn’t (as he’d feared) think Lance was a total freak. Whatever it was, the silence that proceeded it felt natural. Like they were settling into a new pattern.

“So I didn’t scare you off, huh?” Lance mused with a side-eyed smirk as they drove through the college gates.

Keith shrugged. “It was either this or walk back.”

“Ouch.” Lance placed a hand on his chest. “I forgot how brutally honest you are.”
A faint smile ghosted across Keith’s features. Lance was pleased he caught it before turning his eyes back to the road.

“I forgot how cramped this car is. I hope you got her serviced this time.”

*Her.* Lance grinned.

“If I didn’t?”

“We’re turning back and I’m staying in Wisconsin for Christmas. Screw that. I ain’t taking any risks.”

Lance let out a long, low whistle. “Well, if you did that you could miss out on something amazing. The next eighteen hours are full of unfulfilled possibility.”


This continued for some time. The tight ball in Lance’s stomach slowly unwound itself each time Keith spoke. *He doesn’t hate me. We’re having an actual conversation. He doesn’t think I’m weird…* Okay. Maybe Keith did think Lance was weird. But not weird in the way he’d been afraid of. The questions that had been circling in his mind slowly dissipated. They didn’t really matter anymore.

“It’s funny,” Said Lance after a long silence, “I hardly saw you at all this year.”

Keith frowned. “Hmm. Guess not. Although there was that one time…”

*Oh no,* Lance thought. *Oh no.*

“Maybe you don’t remember.”
“Because I was too drunk.”

“Go on?”

“… You… Like… Fell over…”

Lance breathed a sigh of relief, then immediately sucked it back in again. *OH NO.* He laughed. Aggressively so. He sounded insane.

“Oh, yeah. I – um” – He literally had no excuse. “I was in a hurry. Sorry.”

*Why couldn’t he just say that it was humiliating?!*

Keith shrugged, arms folded, frown indented deep into his forehead. He’d get wrinkles early if he carried on like that, Lance wanted to tell him.

“Looked like you hurt yourself pretty bad, that’s all.”

Lance shook his head vigorously. “Nah, it wasn’t bad. I’m just a huge klutz.”

Keith snorted. “You don’t say. You’d fail so bad in Martial Arts.”

“… Excuse me?”

He kept his eyes on the road and his hands tight on the wheel. Yeah. Keith was pretty brutal.

“I’m just saying,” Said Keith, toneless, “You’d definitely fail. Like… balance is key.”

*Don’t get angry. Don’t get angry.*
“I have balance.” Said Lance, keeping his voice steady. He was mature. He was cool.

“Not to mention focus.” Keith continued, oblivious. “Focus is integral. Take now for example: you’re swerving all over the place and we haven’t even hit the freeway yet. Some people just haven’t got it.”

Lance bit his lip. Chewed it, more like. It was so hard not to retaliate. He told himself that Keith was only messing around, and forced himself not to look at his face, which he guessed was as blank and serious as always. Keith’s voice said it all. He believed it. Lance didn’t like that. He knew he hadn’t exactly done much to prove himself as the disciplined sort, but still…

“With a course like mine, dedication is everything. I’m pretty tired most of the time so all my energy goes into that. Sorry if you think I’m… swerving.” He exaggerated the word.

“Oh, really? I can take over earlier this time if you’re tired. I don’t mind.” Said Keith.

Lance felt his eyes narrow of their own accord. “Do I seem tired?” He pushed out.

“A little.” Keith replied honestly.

“I’m not!” Lance exploded, hitting his hands on the wheel.

“But you just said” -

“I know what I said!”

It was impossible to win. Keith was too fucking honest. It was too difficult for Lance to explain why he was offended, even more to justify it, so he seethed in silence, trying his best not to swerve. Did he really swerve? He’d never noticed before. Blue wasn’t exactly the smoothest of vehicles, so he wouldn’t be surprised if she jeered to the left a little now and again, but for Keith to mention it so casually like that – And blame Lance for it no less! He felt slightly bad for Keith, who kept glancing in his direction with bemused eyes, but he made no effort to apologise. Lance had a sudden flashback to Keith insulting him at the garage last year, and for a brief moment he relived that blaze of irritation he’d experienced. Then he felt the note in his pocket. It was as though the words were burning against his skin, reminding him. There was a reason he’d held onto that note. He was being stupid, and he knew it. His bruised pride was getting in the way again.
“Sorry, man.” Lance breathed after too long. Maybe an hour had gone by like this. He wasn’t sure. He’d been too stuck in his own head.

Keith picked at a loose thread on his jacket, eyes downcast.

“It’s cool.” He replied without looking at Lance.

Lance glared at him (half-glared; he had to keep his eyes ahead for most of the glare, which made it look a lot less intimidating than it should have).

“It’s clearly not. What’s up?”

Keith sighed. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Uh, yes it does? Spit it out, Keith!”

Keith folded his arms. “I should have known you wouldn’t want me to drive the car. That was stupid of me to say that, sorry.”

Lance took a full moment to process this. “Huh?”

“Y’know…” Keith started, his tone wistfully sad, “After last time.”

“Last time?” Lance had no idea what he was talking about.

“Yeah! Last time! When I broke your car?” Now Keith sounded annoyed.

“Oooooooh! I wasn’t even thinking about that! Good point now you mention it but – Keith, no. That’s not why I got mad!”
Keith frowned, tilting his head to the side. “It isn’t?” Lance had a sudden mental image of a puppy. He blinked free of it, perplexed by the strangeness of his own brain for a second.

“No! It was because you were making it out like I’m weak or something!” Lance flared, laughing at the ridiculousness of their argument.

The puppy look was still there. “Was I? How?”

“When you said I needed balance and focus and I was swervy and blah, blah – I just thought – ah, dude this is so dumb. Honestly, let’s just drop it.”

Keith waited, turning his gaze inward as he presumably tried to remember everything that he’d said.

“Oh.” He breathed slowly after a couple seconds. “Oh, right.”

The mystifying absurdity of their argument descended like a tonne of bricks. This was awkward, Lance thought as he passed a sign that read ICE AHEAD. The CD had ended during their argument, and now he couldn’t pick the right moment to start it up again. Was it too early to play: **IF YOU WANT TO DIE**? The low growl of the engine accompanied their silence and Lance could feel waves of tension rolling off Keith in hot waves. Suddenly:

“I don’t think you’re weak.”

Lance laughed. “It doesn’t matter, man. Honestly.”

“No.” Said Keith seriously. “It does. I really don’t think you’re weak. I think you’re a little lame, sure, but you definitely have strengths.”

“Huh. Really? Like what?”

His immediate thought was: *Let’s see what mullet-head thinks of me.* But then like… he really wanted to know. Actually, his hands were getting slick with anticipation on the wheel. This had the potential to get really deep, and he wasn’t sure how ready he was to get deep with Keith.
“You seem to be able to talk to anyone.” Keith said, “I don’t get how you do that.”

Lance laughed. “That’s not really a strength. That’s just me. I like talking to people, y’know? Joking around and stuff. It’s what I do.”

“Not everyone can do that.”

“Sure, but I can’t fight. I can’t defend myself. I can’t do anything cool.”

“Fighting isn’t cool.” Keith said quietly, “It’s an art.”

“I’ve never heard a roundhouse kick described as art before.” Lance couldn’t disguise his disbelief. “Besides, you don’t strike me as the kind of guy who’d…” He struggled, “who’d go out of their way to hurt people.”

Keith thought about that. Lance could see every cog working on his face as he took in the weight of his words.

“It’s not about hurting people.” He said finally, speaking slowly.

“No?” Lance probed.

“No. I mean, look at Shiro.”

“Jeez, I’d never wanna get in a fight with Shiro.” Lance admitted. “I’d be flattened.”

“Sure, his physique is intimidating, but Shiro would never hurt anyone unless he had no choice. He’s an excellent fighter, maybe even the best on the team, but he’d never initiate a real fight.”

Keith liked Shiro a lot, huh, Lance thought. He remembered the time he’d seen them hanging out, and how easily Keith had been laughing. The smile had come to him so naturally, his hair falling
over his dark eyes in a carefree way. It had been sort of dazzling. Lance shook his head. Dazzling? *Keith?*

“I see your point.” Lance agreed, his mind elsewhere. He looked at the road. “Deep shit.”

“Deep? Hardly.”

“Deep for me.” Said Lance. “Woah, it’s way too early. I don’t switch my brain on until about three pm.”

“What time do you sleep?”

“Anywhere between eleven and two. Depends.”

“That’s eleven hours of awake time at the most. Pathetic.”

Lance was ready to fire back, but Keith was smirking. The changes in his voice were almost too subtle for Lance to tell when he was joking or genuinely trying to insult him, but he was beginning to recognise the miniscule difference.

“Yeah? Once I warm up, I could beat you in a fight any day. All that Martial Arts ain’t got nothing on me.”

“Please. You’d be on the floor in less than a second against me.”

“Wanna bet?”

“…Are you kidding?”

Lance dragged his focus away from the road. Keith’s eyebrows were so far up his head, they’d disappeared into his mullet. Did he think he was being serious?
“Yes. I’m kidding.” Lance enunciated. “I have no doubt you could put me on the floor in less than a second.” He muttered.

He felt Keith’s eyes on him a moment longer before they turned back to the road. During their conversation, the windows had become blurred with condensation. Outside the skies were dark silver, the clouds ready to burst as they hauled themselves over the land. The warning signs were everywhere. They’d have to drive more slowly. Once or twice Lance had felt Twingo’s fragile wheels skid a little on the road beneath them. More careful… he kept telling himself. Be more careful.

A couple of hours later, when they stopped at a gas station for food, it had started to snow. Trainers were not appropriate snow weather, Lance decided as his toes got soaked with freezing water. A surprising amount had fallen in such a short space of time.

“Hopefully this will stop soon.” He said through chattering teeth as they tramped through the car-park, “Visibility is gonna be a bitch.”

“Want me to take over? I have above average vision.”

Keith wasn’t even boasting, just stating it as fact. That was the weird part.

“Uh, nah. I’m good thanks.”

The gas station was packed with travellers. Maybe choosing to leave on the same day as everyone else had been a bad idea. With more traffic on the roads, the chances of an accident were drastically higher; especially in this weather.

Shivering with the sudden change in temperature as a blast of hot air washed over them in the doorway, Lance and Keith struggled to find somewhere to sit. Eventually they looked at each other, shrugging.

“Floor?”

“Floor.”
They found a narrow spot outside a café, and settled their backs against the wall, side by side, their backpacks resting on their knees. As floors went, it was pretty comfortable. Keith’s shoulder fitted against his snuggly. Lance’s long legs spanned past Keith’s feet and he tapped his heels together as he sighed, leaning his head against the wall.

“Man, this reminds me of camping with my family.” Lance exhaled, closing his eyes.

“What?”

“Yeah, except this is so much more chill, believe me. Picture this exact situation but there are ten of us, five of them little kids… well, I guess we aren’t so little anymore, but you get the picture.”

“Hmm, sounds nice.” Keith hummed.

Lance made a sound of incredulity. “Nice? It was a nightmare. I don’t know how my parents dealt with us so well sometimes. They put up with so much shit, ha ha. You get me?”

Keith’s eyes were unfocused, fixed onto a point far in the distance. Lance frowned.

“What?”

Keith made a small movement, biting his bottom lip and blinking back into reality.

“Yeah. I’m gonna get some food. Save the spot, kay?”

“Sure. Okay.”

Lance filled Keith’s empty spot with his backpack, keeping his hand there to reiterate – THIS SPOT IS TAKEN. A couple of cruisers looming past eyed Lance and the empty spot with vulture eyes. Lance scowled back, determined to defend Keith’s spot to the end. It was games like this that kept him entertained on long trips. He’d done the same thing as a kid. Whenever the screeching and shouting and general chaos of his family got too overwhelming, he drew in on himself, creating small structures to play elements of his life by. Lance’s face hurt. He’d been smiling a lot. He was doing it now. This felt so… right. At this moment, there was no where he’d rather be.
Weird.

A screech to his right interrupted his blissful bubble. Short lived, he thought bitterly, until he saw what was happening.

A young woman had flopped onto the floor a little ways along the wall, hair splayed over her face as she shook violently. Another woman, a red head, crouched above her, shaking her shoulders.

“Jackie! Jackie wake up! Oh my god, someone help!”

Lance was by their side in a flash. His mind instantly switched gears.

“How long has she been out?” He demanded.

The red head was crying, not listening. “Oh my god, Jackieee!” She whined, sniffing.

“Hey, snap out of it! How long?”

The red head finally noticed him. “I don’t know! She just started shaking and then she blacked out!”

“Keep her on her side.” Lance instructed.

He pushed the woman’s hair off her face. She was younger than he’d first thought. He’d mistaken the blonde streaks in her hair for grey. The girl’s eyes flickered, her tongue was swollen, protruding from her mouth slightly.

“Do you know if she has any allergies?” Lance asked, keeping his hand steady on the unconscious woman’s wrist. Her pulse was fast – erratic.

“Uh… Horses, I think.”
Clearly it wasn’t that.

He almost told her to ring an ambulance, but there was someone beside them already doing it. Lance was filtering out the background noise, counting the seconds. It had been thirty-five so far, roughly… He gently tugged the skin beneath the girl’s eye.

“Lance? Lance, what’s going on?” Keith’s voice in his ear was comforting, but he didn’t have time.

“Can you keep an eye on her pulse?” Lance asked Keith.

Keith stared back at him with wild eyes. “Lance, what happened?” He was scared.

“She’ll be okay. I just need you to help me out.”

Keith nodded, fumbling at the girl’s wrist. “Where – how” –

Lance took Keith’s hand and guided him to the right place. “Right there. Can you feel it?”

Keith was quiet. He nodded. “Yeah… I – I think so.”

He let go of his hand. “Good. Let me know if it changes.”

“Will she be okay? Are you a doctor? Is she going to die?” The red head was asking. Lance barely glanced up at her.

“I’m not a doctor. I’m training to be a paramedic, so I can’t be sure, but… does your friend have anaemia?”

The red head’s brown eyes widened, and her mouth formed a small ‘o’.
“Yeah! That’s what it is! She was feeling dizzy this morning and said it was probably her anaemia… I couldn’t remember what it was called. We’re travelling and she forgot her tablets.”

Lance breathed a sigh of relief. He’d been right. “She’ll be okay. Don’t worry. The ambulance will be here soon. Keith, how’s that pulse?”

“Good… steady,” Keith replied. Thank you, Lance thanked him with a look.

The girl, Jackie, regained consciousness minutes before the ambulance arrived. Lance held her hand because she panicked, and told her she’d be okay. She was confused, disorientated, and didn’t remember much. The real paramedics who showed up were so impressed with Lance’s ability to act so fast that they told him to get the university to phone the hospital and tell them what happened – it could get him valuable work experience. Obviously, there wasn’t much time to chat so Lance didn’t get much of a chance to thank them, but he was dazed afterwards, and hyper aware of Keith watching him.

“How did you know it was anaemia?” He asked him, his voice hushed.

“The inside of her eyes were too red. And her tongue was swollen.” Lance explained blankly as they stood in the queue for hot dogs.

Keith nodded slowly. “You okay, dude?”

Lance thought about that. He doubled over, clutching his abdomen. “Ugh, I feel weird. That was weird. What just happened? I feel sick.”

Keith smiled. “Delayed reaction much? You might have just saved a girl’s life.”

Lance shook his head. “She would have been fine.”

“Still,” Keith argued, “She would have been so scared without someone there. Heck, I was scared.”

Lance glanced up from his crouched position, wincing. “Really? I’ve never had to do anything like that in real life before.”
Keith pressed a hand to his shoulder. “Dude, that was cool. And…”


“She was totally into you.” Keith said slyly.

Lance straightened. Blinked. “Into me? She was having a seizure!”

Keith rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. “Okay, but when she was awake she couldn’t take her eyes off you. And that hand holding? Smooth moves there, man.”

His heart should have soared. He should have jumped for joy. He should have flipped on his shades and dabbed mid jump. But for some reason, he felt… flat.

“Oh.” Said Lance, “I didn’t notice.”

Keith raised a brow. “Are you serious? Who are you?” He sniggered, shaking his head. “You can’t fool me, Lance. C’mon, we’re at the front of the queue.”

His hot dog tasted like nothing. Maybe he was still in shock. Maybe it was a shit hot dog. Lance couldn’t understand why he wasn’t happy. He’d just put all his training into practice for the first time in his life. This was his future. His passion. And he was good at it. He had proof. He had witnesses. But he couldn’t shake this horrible feeling. Did Keith really see him that way? Did he really believe that all he wanted was to hit on girls, even if they were unconscious at his feet? What did that say about him? Lance wasn’t angry at Keith, not in the least. He just felt like a jerk. He was a jerk. A massive jerk. All evidence from the past year stood against him. This time last year, he’d been telling Keith to back off from Allura so he could have a shot, and now those two were friends. Did they talk about that? Probably. Jeez.

A thick blanket of white, fluffy snow adorned the land. Trudging back to the car through it wasn’t too fun, and Keith was side-eyeing Lance through the flurry of snow-flakes that clogged his ridiculously long eyelashes.

“You okay to drive?”
“Yes, oh my god.” Lance replied irritably.

Keith shoved his hands in his pockets. “…Okay.”

The roads were hell. The sky was hell. He couldn’t see anything. Even with the windscreen wipers on full blast, the snow fell too thick, too fast. It was useless. As they drove along the freeway, a flashing sign above them warned:

ROAD AHEAD CLOSED – ACCIDENT AHEAD – ROAD AHEAD CLOSED

Lance tutted.

“We’re gonna have to go the long way.” He muttered under his breath, cursing as he made a sharp left into a Junction.

“Don’t get lost.” Said Keith, keeping his voice low.

“I have my map. I have my wits. We’ll be fine.”

They weren’t fine.

The city roads led to town roads. The town roads let to country roads. Which led to lanes. Winding, sign-less lanes amidst the endless span of white that surrounded them. It was impossible to see any cars coming for them until they came dangerously close, bright lights flashing like eyes in the white gloom. Keith gripped the edges of his seat hard as Lance whirled through the lanes as though he was in the Formula 1.

“Shit, fuck, fuck!” Lance swore as another car brushed past, inches from disaster.

“Lance, stop.” Keith said, trying to stay calm as he feared for his life.
“If we stop now we’ll be off schedule!” Lance fired.

“So? Better late than never, right?”

“What are you saying? Don’t you trust me or something?”

“No, it’s not – Lance eyes on the” – 

-“I planned this trip so we’d have enough fuel, enough time,” – 

-“Lance”- 

-“everything is just right, so we can” – 

-“LANCE, EYES ON THE ROAD!”

Lance swerved, but too late. A sharp bend in the lane sent them jeering to the right. In Lance’s head, it felt a lot more dramatic than it actually was. The car sped off the road and straight downwards into what was probably a field below. It was impossible to tell, because everything was covered in snow. The car came to a dead halt, stuck.

They sat there, mouths open in pure horror as they stared at the dead-end white ahead of them.

“I’m not dead, am I?” Lance whispered, hands gripping the wheel so hard that he’d lost the circulation in his hands.

Keith slowly turned towards him, eyes ablaze. “If we don’t get out of here, you will be in a minute.”

Lance stared at him.
“Because I’m going to kill you.”

“Yeah, I – I got that.”

Lance wiggled the key. The engine was still alive, thank god, but the wheels were stuck in a rut. He could feel it, feel Blue sink slowly deeper as he desperately tried to drive forward. Then backwards. Then not at all.

“We’re stuck, aren’t we?” Keith asked slowly.

“Uh huh.”

“Nope.”

The silence was unpleasant, to say the least. Unspent, Keith’s rage heated the space around them, which was just as well because Lance couldn’t keep the engine running forever. They’d run out of gas.

Keith clapped his hands together hard suddenly, making Lance jump.

“Right. You stay here. I’ll try and push her up.”

“Push - ? Keith, what?”

Keith was already shoving his way through the snow, out of the car, battling against the blizzard that flew into his eyes.

“Keith!” Lance called, as Keith positioned himself at the bonnet.
“Just reverse when I give you the signal!” Keith yelled. His voice was nearly lost to the howling wind.

Lance shook his head. This was ridiculous. The incline up to the lane was too high; he’d never be able to reverse up that far. Or that steep. It didn’t matter. Keith had to get his anger out one way or another. Deciding to humour Keith for the sake of his own sanity, Lance put the car into reverse as Keith put his thumb up. He had to squint to see that. Keith pushed with every muscle in his body, and Twingo made a disturbing noise as Lance desperately tried to reverse her up the incline, but it was no use. She barely moved two inches. Keith wasn’t giving up.

“Stupid mullet, just give up already.” Lance hissed, hearing Keith grunt as he angled the full weight and strength of his body into the car.

After a few minutes, Lance was beginning to worry. It was deathly cold out there, and Keith was only wearing his ridiculously cropped jacket. He was being relentlessly lashed by tiny icicles and the car wasn’t moving. Lance cut out the engine, and stomped out of the car.

“Keith, stop!” He called.

With a final growl of exertion, Keith pushed himself away from the car, sweating, his chest heaving.

“Get in the car.” Lance ordered.

Keith’s face screwed up in anger instantaneously.

“Don’t argue with me!” Lance barked before Keith could say a thing. “If we’re going to be stuck here, we have to plan, okay? We have to ride out the blizzard. We can do it. Help me get some blankets out the back.”

Keith glowered at him fiercely. If looks could kill…

“Tch.” Was his only response, before he marched around the back of the car and threw open the trunk.
He stood stationary, his arms holding it open for a few moments, his expression full of disdain.

“You have a lava lamp in here but no food? What the fuck? Who brings their fucking lava lamp home for Christmas?”

He was raging, Lance got that, but he was freezing his ass off out here.

“Just grab the blankets and get in the car, Keith.” He sighed, exasperated. “Unless you want pneumonia.”

Snatching Lance’s favourite blue blanket from under a pile of DVDs, Keith stormed back to the front, grumbling. So fucking petty – he’d picked up one for himself but not for Lance, he thought, picking up the other blanket.

Keith was wrapped in Lance’s blanket like a burrito, facing out the window with a pout.

“I have Cheetos.” Said Lance sheepishly, reaching into the glove compartment, “Want one?”

Keith was silent. A silent burrito with a mullet.

“No thank you, Lance. That’s very kind of you, Lance.” Lance mocked. That still didn’t stir a reaction.

Sighing heavily, Lance did the only thing he could, and restarted the engine so that he could turn on the CD player. With cold fingers, he fiddled with the dial until he found the right track, and the speakers started playing Albatross.

Keith

The tips of Keith’s fingers were sore with cold. His lungs felt full of snow and his bones were
aching from the exertion of trying to push a car back onto the road in the middle of a snow storm with nothing but his muscles and rage.

Okay, even Keith could admit that had been a stupid idea. But he couldn’t help it. The red-hot scorch of his anger had been threatening to explode, mainly in the direction of the idiot who had gotten them stuck in this mess to begin with. He couldn’t believe Lance! It had been painfully obvious that the guy was driving too fast, too recklessly, caught up in whatever stupid thought-cycle he’d gotten himself stuck in. It was so weird. One minute he’d been fine and the next he’d turned into a lunatic with a death wish.

Some small part of Keith wondered, worried, if maybe it was his fault. Was it something he’d done? Said? But Keith batted that thought away, clinging onto his outrage. Anger was an emotion Keith could deal with, it was safe, black and white, and meant Keith could stare moodily out the window and pretend Lance didn’t exist.

But then *Albatross* came on.

The first thought that whizzed through Keith’s suddenly confused mind was, *He actually remembered.* The second was, *What’s he up to?*

Lance cleared his throat. “So,” he said. Keith turned his head to send him a death glare. Lance gulped. “So, I’m an idiot and this might be my fault.”

Keith raised his eyebrow.

“Okay, it’s totally my fault and I’m a complete moron. I, um,” he stumbled, took a breath, and the next sentence came out so quickly that Keith had a hard time making out the words. “I was just really pissed off for no reason and no it wasn’t you, I wish it was you cause then I’d have someone to blame for being stupid, but no it’s just my broken brain, cause like, the thing is I was really nervous about this trip to be honest and I think I keep overthinking things and- and I’m really sorry Keith.”

His eyes were wide throughout this tirade, round and puppy like. Between that and the song, Keith felt his heart melt just a little bit. For the first time in a while, the anger just seemed to… evaporate. There was one thing Keith valued more than anything, and that was honesty. He could see it in Lance’s eyes, in the way his mouth was a thin, worried line, expression open. He forgave Lance completely in that instant.
Also, he couldn’t help but zone in on Lance’s admission. *He’s nervous too?* The idea made Keith bizarrely, inexplicably happy.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” Lance echoed, wildly. “What does that mean?”

“It means okay. Apology accepted,” he retrieved his cell phone from his pocket. Thankfully there was still signal. “We better call a tow.”

Lance just gaped at him.

“What?” asked Keith.

“I mean, that’s it?” Lance demanded.

“What else would there be?” Keith questioned.

“I thought you’d yell at me!” Lance exclaimed. “Or chew me out or- or something!”

“That’s over now,” Keith said. “We have to focus on getting out of this.”

“But you were so angry!”

“Well… now I’m not.”

Lance laughed at him then- a nervous, disbelievingly sort of laugh. Water droplets hung from his drying hair, now a flurry of curls, and fell with the carefree movement. Keith felt his stomach tighten at the way Lance’s nose scrunched up when his laughed. “Dude,” he wheezed. “You’re such a weirdo.”
Keith frowned. “Excuse me?”

“I mean- how do you just flip a switch like that? When I’m angry, I sit on it for hours- maybe days! And like, especially in a situation like this. And you’re just like, whatever?”

“Well,” said Keith, shuffling uncomfortably. “You said sorry. And meant it. So… that’s that, isn’t it?”

“You know how I said you were too honest before?” Lance asked, suddenly.

Keith nodded.

“Ignore me. Never change. Stay just the way you are.”

“Honest?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because,” said Lance, rubbing his nose and grinning. “I’ve decided I like it.”

Keith cheeks blazed. “Er, um, I’m gonna call the tow,” he said, reaching for the door handle. He dialled the number. “Be right back.”

“In the snow?!” Lance demanded, shaking his head. “No way dude, just stay in the car.”

“But-”

“You’re not one of those strange people who can’t be on the phone around other people are you?” Lance teased. When Keith pulled the door handle Lance shot across his lap to stop him. “Dude! I
said don’t! It's freezing!”

“Lance- let go!”

“You let go!”

They glared at each other, perhaps a width apart. Up close, Keith could make out a few freckles on Lance’s cheekbones, the way his ears stuck out. Somewhere in the glaring match, Keith realised that Lance’s knee was pressed against his thigh, that their chests were in danger of brushing against each other with every rise. He wondered if he was making a stupid face. What was Lance thinking? Okay, Keith knew what he was thinking: he was just angry that Keith was being stubborn about something stupid (which yes, Keith knew it was stupid) but he also thought he saw something else flicker across Lance’s features. Something…

“What’s your emergency?” asked his cell phone.

The moment broke like a belly flop on water: Lance withdrew with a snap, and Keith put the phone to his ear. Neither of them looked at each other.

“Hi, yeah, we’ve broken down and…” he explained the situation as simply as he could, nodding when the woman spoke despite her not being able to see him, and humming answers where appropriate. Miraculously, Lance knew exactly where they were on the map, pointing to it when Keith mouthed the question at him. Honestly, that caught Keith off guard. He’d been sure that Lance had gotten himself lost in his weird episode, but it seemed even in the midst of a snow storm he’d been keeping an eye on their location. He leaned into Keith’s space to show him and whispered the road name, which did weird things to Keith’s brain. He felt frazzled, heart beating a mile a minute, and he had to ask the woman to repeat herself a few times. Beside him, Lance cracked open the bag of Cheetos. “Yeah, thanks a lot. Okay.” He put the phone down.

“Well?” Lance asked.

“It’s going to take an hour.”

“AN HOUR?!”

“Shit Lance!” Keith exclaimed. “Do you have to be so loud?”
Lance ignored him and demanded, “What did she say?”

“She said with the snow and all it’ll be an hour at least.”

“AT LEAST?”

“Can you stop doing that?” Keith demanded, rubbing his temples. It was like having a six-year-old in the car sometimes. “It’ll be fine. The heater still works, and we’ve got blankets. It’ll be cool.”

“I guess,” Lance agreed uncertainly. He dug into the bag of Cheetos and took a whole hand full- a hand full- before shoving them all into his mouth. It was disgusting. “Want some?” he asked, holding the bag out for Keith, mouth dusted orange.

In answer Keith took the same amount of Cheetos and pointedly ate them one at a time. Lance didn’t seem to notice. “Wow, it’s really piling up out there,” Lance commented.

“Sure is,” Keith agreed.

It was turning into a winter wonderland outside- the kind Keith had always seen on Christmas holiday cards, where red-cheeked blonde kids grinned at red-cheeked blonde parents, the wholesome all-American family. The windscreen was filling up, despite the wipers, and the door mirrors were beginning to freeze with a pattern of silver.

Between them, the CD puttered to a halt.

“Wanna choose something?” Lance asked around another mouthful of Cheetos.

“Sure,” Keith said. He flicked through the collection and picked out a CD that was titled BORED SHITLESS. A female singer Keith didn’t recognise warbled to life.

“Goldfrapp, nice,” commented Lance.
“I’ve never heard of her,” Keith said.

“She’s really good,”

“Oh. Cool.”

“Yeah. Cool.”

They let the conversation drop awkwardly.

Keith tried to concentrate on the song, but his mind was everywhere. Besides, if he was being honest, he wasn’t sure he was enjoying the music much. It was a bit too techy for his tastes. Lance was tapping his foot along to it though, happily stuffing his face the entire time, so he was probably enjoying it. Best not to say anything then, right? Keith didn’t want to be annoying. Or say something wrong again. Yeah, best to just let the moment stretch.

Instead, Keith got out his phone and sent Shiro a quick message: *Got stuck in the snow. Tow truck on it’s way. Don’t worry though. Everything’s good.*

Shiro replied three minutes later with a worried (despite Keith’s assurances) text: *Are you okay? Anyone hurt?*

For once Keith was almost grateful for Shiro’s overprotectiveness, as he spent the next ten to fifteen minutes explaining the situation, reiterating that no, they weren’t dead, and Shiro did not need to drive all the way down here to get them. Really, how Shiro even thought that was physically possible was beyond Keith. This guy was supposed to be a post-grad in engineering too. After that he sent Allura a quick update, asking her how work in the diner was going and junk like that. She didn’t answer, so Keith figured she was busy and went to put his phone away. When he looked up, he caught Lance’s gaze skittering elsewhere. Odd. Was he reading his messages?

Keith shook his head. *Probably imagined it,* he thought.

Seconds ticked into minutes. The Goldfrapp CD ended and Lance stuck another one in. Same artist, much to Keith’s dismay. Still, he didn’t say anything. They messed with their phones until
the data ran out, finished off the Cheetos, drew patterns on the frosted windows. After half an hour, just when Keith was considering taking a nap, Lance suddenly exploded,

“OH MY GOD. I CANNOT TAKE IT I’M SO BOOOOORED.”

Keith winced at the volume. “The truck should be here soon,” he said.

“Yeah, in half an hour, at the earliest,” Lance whined. “Let’s be real, with snow this bad it’s gonna be longer.”

“Well what do you want me to do about it?” Keith snapped. Did he have to be such a brat?

“I don’t know,” Lance answered, irritable. “I’m just bored to death, man. We’ve gotta do something.”

“Like what?”

Lance pondered it a while, and then snapped his fingers. “Let’s play twenty questions.”

“Twenty questions?” Keith parroted. He hadn’t played that since he was a kid. He shrugged. “Alright. Do you want to go first?”

Lance sprang up with renewed energy, a grin splitting his face. “Sure!” he exclaimed. He crossed his ridiculously long legs under him (an impossible feat of physics Keith couldn’t wrap his head around) and stuck his tongue out in concentration. “Okay. What annoys you the most? And don’t say me.”


“Yes, it is,” Lance retorted.

“No, it isn’t.”
“Well how do you play, mullet?” Lance demanded.

“Well both think of something, like an object or a film, and then you have twenty questions to figure out what it is.”

“That’s not twenty questions,” Lance argued.

“Yes, it is.”

“Isn’t.”

Keith was beginning to wonder how Lance managed to continually draw Keith into these childish arguments. It was like a weird super power.

“Well, it doesn’t matter,” Lance said. “We’re playing my version. And in my version,” he coughed. “The right version, we both have twenty questions to ask each other about anything. And you have to answer.”

“Fine,” Keith huffed, seeing that Lance was not going to budge. And it was better than doing nothing. “What was your question again?”

“What annoys you the most?” asked Lance.

Keith thought about it. Unbidden, his mind flew to Kenny from Martial Arts. “People being late,” he answered, a bite to the edge of his voice.

Lance watched his face, amused. “There was a lot of venom in that. Anyone in particular in mind?”

“Just some douche from the club,” Keith answered. “He’s always holding people up- turning up late or hung over. But like, all the time. He was late to our first club match. We nearly had to throw it but the referee gave us some extra time. Then the guy just breezes in and is like, ‘Oh hi guys, what’s up?’”
“Wow,” agreed Lance. “He does sound like a douche.”

“Right?” Keith huffed. “Shiro’s way too easy on him.”

“He’s the team captain, isn’t he?”

Keith nodded, chest puffing out a little with pride. “He’s the most accomplished team member in ten years. He won twelve tournaments in his first year.”

“Whoa. Remind me never to piss the guy off,” Lance said with a chuckle. The moment ran into quiet, before Lance nudged Keith’s arm. “Your turn.”

Immediately Keith’s mind went blank. What was he supposed to ask? Rational thought seemed to sprout wings and take flight from his brain. Scrambling, he found himself asking, “Er, what’s your, um…” his eyes went wide. “Favourite colour?”

Lance gave him a deadpan look. “Favourite colour, really? You can ask me any question in the world and you go with favourite colour?”

Keith felt his cheeks warm. Sticking his chin out stubbornly, he nodded.

Lance scratched his head. “Well, it’s pretty obvious with all my stuff, but blue.”

“Cool.” Keith felt painfully stupid, though he wasn’t going to let it show. Of course it’s blue, he thought, berating himself. It’s obvious to anyone that it’d be blue. Why did you ask him that? But instead of voicing any of this, he masked his expression and said, calmly “Your go.”

“Hmmm,” said Lance, dramatically stroking his chin. “Let’s see,” he grinned suddenly. “Do you like Goldfrapp?”

That one caught Keith off guard. He floundered. Lance’s grin grew. “Um,” said Keith. “…no.”
“I knew it!” Lance said. “Dude, it was written all over your face! Why didn’t you say anything?”

Keith shrugged. “You seemed to be enjoying it,”

Now Lance seemed caught off guard. “Oh. Well. You didn’t have to do that. Next time just say, okay?” he leant forward and ejected the CD, reaching for the huge stack. With nimble fingers, he plucked out another and slipped it into the Twingo. Immediately, Fall Out Boy’s *Phoenix* came to life. Keith loved this song. “Let me guess,” Lance said, smiling knowingly. “This is more your speed, huh?”

Keith nodded, expecting Lance to poke fun at him for being an emo, but instead Lance started humming along to the tune. His eyes cut to Keith. “Your turn.”

A small smile played at the edges of Keith’s lips. “Why did you run away that time?” he asked. Lance froze, but Keith drove on. “When you fell over, I mean.”

“Oh,” Lance said, laughing nervously. “I um- didn’t I already say?”

“You said you were in a hurry,” said Keith, slowly. “But that wasn’t true, was it?”

Lance bit his lip. “You know what it’s like living the bachelor’s life on campus, man! Lots to do, lots to…” he puttered off. Keith waited. “Okay. Honestly, I was going to say hi but then, I mean, *dude*, I fell flat on my face. I was mortified. All I could think was, like, run away, you know?”

A knot loosened itself in Keith gut. “Right,” he breathed a laugh. “Cool. That makes me feel better.”

“Huh?” Lance questioned.

Keith’s smile was shy. “I thought you ran away because you didn’t like me.” He said with a shrug.

“Whaaaaat?” exclaimed Lance, drawing out the word cartoonish-ly long. “You thought I- wait, you thought I didn’t like you?”
“You seemed pretty hurt,” Keith explained. “But then you just ran away. I thought maybe you didn’t want me to help you.”

“Not at all!” Lance argued. He said it so quickly it came out in a high-pitched squeal. He coughed and lowered his voice. “Dude. I was honestly just wanted to get out of there and bury myself in a hole. Literally, I think I limped all the way back to the dorm and then whined to Hunk about it for two hours. He had to bake me a whole tray of cookies before I shut up. I mean—”

_Hunk_, Keith thought, while Lance rambled on. _Was that the guy next to Lance in the Halloween picture?_ He’d store up a question to figure that out.

“Sorry if I gave you the wrong idea,” Lance continued. “I honestly didn’t mean to give you that impression.”

Keith waved his hand. “Don’t sweat it,” he said. “I was probably just being overly-sensitive. Allura said it was because you were embarrassed, and I was just reading too much into it.” At some point during this explanation, Lance’s eyes had narrowed a fraction. Like he was annoyed. Annoyed at what? Was Keith doing it again? Reading too much into things? Probably. He tried a smile. “Your go.”

“Are you and Allura going out?” Lance blurted.

Keith’s face felt scorched. “What?”

Now Lance’s face was red too. “I’ve seen you on campus a few times together- and she mentioned you when I spoke to her, so I was wondering if you’re… you know.”

“No,” Keith snapped. The idea made him feel slightly ill. “Not at all. We’re just friends. She knows Shiro, so we hung out a few times but- Christ, just no.”

Lance’s entire body seemed to relax at that. _Oh right_, Keith thought. _He has a crush on her, doesn’t he?_ The idea blackened his mood. _Was he worried I was competition? What was he doing to do, tell me to back off again?_ He bit the inside of his lip, annoyed at the idea.
“She’s got a massive crush on Shiro, actually,” Keith said, surprising himself. Was he… was he being petty?

“That so?” Lance asked, nonchalantly. He seemed wrapped up in his own thoughts.

*Trying to play it cool, is he?* Keith thought, with an internal snort. “Yeah, since first year. I think Shiro likes her too.”

He didn’t mention that Shiro didn’t want to do anything about it because of his position as a TA. He really was being petty wasn’t he? What was wrong with him.

“They’d be a good match, actually,” Lance said, thoughtfully. He seemed completely unaffected by Keith’s remarks. It was pissing Keith off.

“Yeah, they would,” he muttered, moodily.

“Your question, right?”

Keith didn’t miss a beat. “Why’d you lie about not noticing that woman flirting with you- the one who fainted?”

Now Lance’s expression darkened. “I didn’t lie,” he said.

“You have to answer honestly, remember Lance?”

“I am answering honestly!” Lance shouted. “Why do you think that I’m so low as to flirt with an unconscious woman? What kind of jerk do you think I am?”

Oh. Keith suddenly realised how it might have sounded when he first brought the matter up with Lance now. Oh god… that wasn’t what he meant. Was that why Lance got so angry? Maybe the position they were in, stuck on the side of the road, maybe it was Keith’s fault after all.

“Oh yeah?!” Lance demanded, crossing his arm. “Well it sure sounded like it.”

Keith bit his lip harder. He’d meant it as a compliment. He’d meant to boost Lance’s ego a little, make him feel good about himself because, in that moment, Keith had thought he deserved it. So he jumped on one of the only things he knew about Lance- the flirting- and tried to use it to… what? He wasn’t even sure himself. “I guess I was just… impressed. I mean, you were so cool during all of that, and all I could do was just stand there so I…” he stopped, frustrated with his inability to say what he felt. “I meant it as a good thing, Lance,” he said, wearily. “I’m sorry if I made you feel bad.”

“Hey,” Said Lance, finally noticing Keith’s expression. He dropped his folded arms and turned to him. “You alright dude?” He sounded so sincere that Keith’s annoyance disappeared altogether and was replaced by a strange, warm feeling. God, what was with him?

“Fine,” said Keith, sighing. “Just a bit tired… and sorry. Again.?”

“It’s alright,” said Lance. “I think we’re both just awesome at giving each other the wrong impression about things.”

Keith snorted. “You’re not wrong there. My turn?”

“Yep,” said Lance, bracing himself.

But Keith was done asking personal questions about relationships or deep feelings. Instead he simply asked, “Where’d you grow up?”

The question surprised Lance, but almost immediately his eyes clouded over with something dreamy and his body sagged into the chair. He still had his legs cross, and he was clutching his ankles like a little kid. It was dangerous how adorable Keith found this.

“I mean, most of my life we’ve lived in Austin, but when I was little we lived in Trinidad. I don’t remember much about it, really, only a really vivid year. I was probably six at the time. Mum and dad spent the entire time moving us over to America- sorting out visas and stuff, so me and my sisters stayed with my Grandma. She lived in Baracoa, which is one of the less tourist-y places in Cuba. The streets are all wonky, and the sand fleas are so bad if you get caught at dusk,” he chuckled. “One time I fell asleep after dinner (I used to swim until I was a prune) and when I woke
up I thought I was being eaten. Abuelita made me sit in a bath of this nasty smelling stuff for an hour and yelled at me the entire time. She was doubly made because I’d lost my flipflops too. Man, that tiny lady could scream…” he paused, completely somewhere else. He seemed so invested in the story that even Keith felt like the snow had disappeared, replaced by sandy beaches and dusty streets. “We used to visit a lot, but when my grandma passed away we went less and less. Still,” said Lance, closing his eyes. “It’s one of the most beautiful places on earth, I swear.”

“It sounds amazing,” Keith commented.

“Yeah,” agreed Lance, opening his eyes. His smile was dazed, as though he were adjusting to reality. “It is,” he shook himself, and laughy Lance was back. “And the babes are unbelievable.”

Keith snorted.

“What about you?” Lance asked, eyes twinkling. “Come on, tit for tat. Where’d you grow up, mullet?”

“The desert,” Keith answered, with a shrug. “I’ve never really been out of it.”

“You spent your whole life in the desert?” Lance asked, disbelievingly. “Are your family outlaws or something?”

Keith’s lips curled upward. “Nah. My old man never broke a law in his life… though, I guess when I was really small, we’d go see my Gran in Oregon. It snowed there too, in the winter. Really badly. But I don’t remember much- only snatches.”

“Oh, Oregon’s great for snow,” Lance said. “We went on a trip to Portland during a Christmas once and sledged the entire time. Great for snowmen too.”

Keith could count the number of times he’d seen snow like this on one hand. He imagined Lance as that gap-toothed boy he’d spied in his photo, speeding down snowy hills and wrapping scarfs around haphazard snowmen. He grinned. “I don’t think I’ve ever build a snowman before,” Keith commented.

“What?!” The question was thunderous. Lance’s face was a comical picture of shock and angry disbelief. Keith didn’t know whether to laugh or not. “You’ve never built a snowman?!” Lance
demanded.

Keith shrugged. “Not that I can remember.”

“Get out of the car.”

“What?”

“Get out of the car. Now.” Ordered Lance, undoing Keith’s seat belt for him and pushing him towards the door.

“Alright, alright!” Keith said, throwing his hands up. “Okay! Lance, quit pushing me!”

Grumbling, Keith stumbled out into the cold, quickly followed by Lance. God, it was freezing. What sort of half-brained scheme was he cooking anyway.

“Listen here, Keith ‘Mullet’ Kogane,” proclaimed Lance, spreading his arms wide. “We, are going to build you your first snowman?”

Keith gave him a look. “Seriously?” he reached for the car door again. “I’m going back inside.”

“Aw come on, Keith,” Lance whined. “It’ll be fun!”

“I’m freezing my ass off, Lance. Let’s just.”

Suddenly, a clob of snow struck Keith on the back of head. Incredulous, Keith stared at Lance, who was whistling and trying to look nonchalant. Did he just-

“What’s the matter Keith?” Lance asked. “You scared?”

Slowly, Keith bent down to scoop up a handful of snow. “You wish.”
The next twenty minutes went by in a flurry chafed hands and working lungs, of snowballs exchanged and smack talk thrown. Lance’s main tactic seemed to be hiding behind the Twingo, but Keith soon put a stop to this by charging full pelt, driving him back, until his lost his footing and fell on his ass. Lance laughed so hard at him that tears began running down his face, but Keith quickly got his revenge: lashing out a hand to grab his ankle and pulling him down too. The snow was so thick that it didn’t hurt, but the look of surprise on Lance’s face had Keith belly-laughing for ages. He didn’t notice the way Lance’s eyes softened at this.

They called a truce then, and Lance insisted on building a snowman. They bickered the entire time about it: “Its butt’s too big.”

“Is that supposed to be head?”

“No, Lance, we’re not giving it a mullet.”

Until, at last, it was done. It was a lumpy monstrosity of a snowman, and because they didn’t have carrots or any stones nearby, they used the last bag of Cheetos to give it a face.

“It’s so ugly,” Keith said.

“I’m gonna call him Chez,” Lance decided.

“Chez?”

“Do you have a better name?” Lance demanded.

Keith just shook his head. Lance nudged him. Keith nudged him back.

“Shall we get back in the car?” Keith asked, noticing the way Lance was shivering.

“Sure,” said Lance. “If you’re cold, that is.”
“A little,”

“Cool.”

They stamped back to the car, making trails, but before Keith could open the front door, Lance said, tentatively, “Hey, if we move the stuff to the front we can pile the blankets and stuff in the back… it’ll be warmer…”


They hauled their luggage and junk to the front seat and bundled their blankets in the back, cramming a couple of Lance’s pillows in as well. It was a squeeze, especially with Lance’s long limbs, but they managed to fit in. It was close though- Keith’s shoulder was smushed up against Lance’s and their thighs brushed whenever Lance fidgeted which he did a lot. It was weird, but now more than any other time, Keith realised how tall Lance was. His head was mere hairs away from the ceiling, whereas Keith’s was no where near, and his legs were so. Freaking. Long. It was almost unfair.

“I think the heater’s gone off,” he said, shivering.

“Hmm,” Keith agreed, distracted by the way Lance’s throat bobbed.

“You wanna listen to some more music?”

“Sure.”

“Some Goldfrapp, yeah?” Lance asked with a grin.

Keith gave him a look.

“Just joking, just joking,” chuckled Lance. He leaned over and put some Elvis on. Then leaned back and settled into the seat. Despite the lack of a heater, it was… snug. Cozy even. “I think it’s your turn, by the way?” Lance said.
“Hm?”

“Twenty questions.”

“Oh yeah,” said Keith catching up. He thought about it. Lance’s thigh brushed his again. “Um… why’d you pick paramedics.”

“Oh, good one,” said Lance, thinking about it. “Well. Remember I said we stayed with my Grandma a lot? Well she had a fall one time. My sister called the ambulance and she was fine and all, talking the entire time and telling us not to make a deal out of it, but we were still pretty scared. When the ambulance finally came though, this really nice lady sat us all down and talked us through it. She wasn’t patronising at all, and she made us all feel better about it. I guess… I guess I always thought about that whenever a teacher asked me what I wanted to do. So I did it.”

Keith nodded.

“My turn,” said Lance. “Let’s see… what was your favourite vacation?”

Keith didn’t even need to think about that. It was a hiking holiday he and his dad took when he was maybe thirteen years old. They bused all the way to Alaska (which Keith had complained about the entire time), before setting out into the woods. It had been so incredibly quiet, so incredibly still. The stars seemed brighter and clearer than any Keith had ever seen, or would see since, stretching out endlessly all around them. But more than that, Keith remembered the way his dad looked around at the scenery, so utterly content, at home with every silver sigh and breath. His dad always seemed to melt into the environment somehow. He was like a chameleon in that respect- just at home in the cold of Alaska as the heat of the desert.

Keith smiled. “This one time, dad took me all the way to Alaska. We didn’t fly, though, we took a shit tonne of buses instead.”


“It did,” Keith agreed. “But it was so worth it. It was the most beautiful place I’d ever seen. My dad used to love stuff like that.”
“Sounds like he was a great guy.”

Keith paused, realising Lance had slipped into past tense. Because he’d been using past tense. Immediately a flood of worries slipped into Keith’s thoughts. Would he pity him? Would he be awkward about it? Would things be weird now? But when Keith hazarded a glance at Lance’s face, all he found was a soft, warm expression.

Something hot curled in Keith’s stomach.

Lance coughed. “So, er, your go, right?”

Keith bit his lip. He knew what he wanted to ask but… should he? It wasn’t like Keith to double guess himself, but something about this whole situation was throwing him off. It’d be okay, wouldn’t it? Swallowing, Keith decided to just go for it.

“Oh, he said. “Is it true that you kissed Lotor?”

Lance’s face fell.

Then the pickup truck arrived.
Okay guys, this is the last chapter that we're uploading in a row! From here on in, the chapters will arrive once every week (and most of them won't be as short as this one, this is a little one). We've really enjoyed the past few days since Season 5 and we're choosing to upload them every week A) To give us more time (we also have work to do lol) And B) To make this fic last longer than a couple of weeks! Thanks again for the lovely feedback and we hope you enjoy ^_^ xx

Lance

Every nerve in Lance’s body tensed. His insides froze and his breath quickened in his chest. The music pumped in the background: a song he didn’t recognise. His senses tuned. Of course he recognised it. It was Street Spirit by Radiohead. The lyrics: I can feel death, can see its beady eyes, really resonated right now. That was the last question he’d wanted to hear. From anyone. Ever. He hated how desperate he must look. He could feel the strain in his brow. The way his mouth hung slightly open with shock. He hated it, but he literally, physically couldn’t move.

Keith’s eyes scorched him, their cool black imploring an answer, the snub tip of his nose tinged pink from their snowball fight, mullet all mussed up around his face. His lips were still moist from the question as he chewed his bottom lip, waiting, waiting...

Why? Lance wanted to ask. Why did you ruin this?

The foreign engine of the tow truck rumbled in the background, a ticking clock to the time he had left to say something. Anything. Lance felt like his lungs had collapsed. His tongue was a dead weight in his mouth.

Keith finally dropped his gaze, and Lance felt like a thick chain had just been pulled from his shoulders.

“Sorry, I’- Keith began.

“No.” Lance hurried. “I didn’t know that you… heard about it.”
Keith breathed a humourless laugh, one hand in his hair. “Allura.” He said simply.

“Right.” Lance couldn’t smile anymore. He shifted, pulling away from Keith as he glanced out the window. “Truck’s here.”

“Yeah.”

“We should signal them. Can’t see shit in this blizzard.”

_I’ll explain later. I will._ Lance tried to tell him with a look, but Keith was staring at his feet, chewing his lip furiously. Lance hated himself for saying nothing. Now Keith was going to worry about this until they had a chance to speak privately again which could be… ages. It could be never. Maybe they should drop it. Lance sure as hell knew he didn’t want to talk about it. He’d hardly thought about it since it had happened. It remained a bitter, broken memory, lodged in his brain like a thorn. Keith had been the only person in his life (he thought) who didn’t know about that. Now it was like he was… tainted or something. Keith had secretly been judging him this entire time about it and he’d carried on, blissfully unaware. _Fuck._ Maybe Keith was homophobic. It wasn’t impossible. He lived in the desert, in the heart of Texas. God’s country. Lance was just a sinner, then. A hedonistic Satan worshipper…

Maybe he was jumping to conclusions. Keith hadn’t seemed angry. He hadn’t _demanded_ the question from Lance, it was just… intense. Lance replayed the way it had sounded.

_Is it true that you kissed Lotor?_

Where the fuck did he start with that?

Was it true?

Lance didn’t know himself.

Yes, there had been kissing. But had _he_ kissed _Lotor_?

He really didn’t know.

He only knew that it was a mistake.
The truck’s headlights blared. They had seconds before…

Fuck it.

Lance turned back to Keith, grabbing his shoulder. Maybe a little aggressively, he thought, but it didn’t matter. He had Keith’s attention. All of it.

“Listen, Keith? I’m sorta pissed you asked me that. But I’m not angry with you. I - I don’t what you to think that. I’m pissed because… I don’t know how to answer. Yeah, like, \textit{we kissed} – but it didn’t \textit{mean} anything. I regret it more than anything I’ve ever done, because… well, it’s freaking Lotor. He’s a jerk. I don’t know what happened but I don’t want you to think I go around kissing random guys.”

“I never thought” –

“Even if you didn’t, I want you to know that it was a mistake. A \textit{huge, freaking mistake.”}

Lance didn’t know why he was so determined for Keith to know it didn’t mean anything. He only knew that it was important right now. And he didn’t want the next hour to be awkward as heck because he hadn’t explained himself properly. He knew Keith well enough now to realise that’s exactly what would happen. And then they’d argue, and Lance would hate himself, and hate that Keith was upset, then hate himself some more. Self-hate was getting a little tiring. Maybe his outburst had been spontaneous and illogical but… it was a relief to get it out.

A shadow of doubt flickered across Keith’s features before settling, gratefully.

“Maybe I crossed the line a little there.” Said Keith, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly.

Lance rolled his eyes. “Maybe a little. But… it’s cool. As long as you get it.”

Keith nodded, smiling. “I get it. Lotor’s a dick. You were drunk.”

“Hella drunk!” Lance agreed.
His heartbeat was settling somewhat. Confronting Keith about it now had definitely been the right decision. The light-hearted bounce in Lance’s chest was getting lighter, and smiling felt easy again. His hand was still on Keith’s shoulder. Weird. Keith hadn’t made any attempt to move away, but even so… His hand was getting warm. Keith would notice how nervous-sweaty he was getting. He withdrew it.

A sharp knock on the window sent them both reeling.

“Hey! Didn’t you two lovebirds call for an emergency?”

Oh god. Lance felt his face flush instantly. He couldn’t even look at Keith. A year ago that wouldn’t have been awkward. They would have looked at each other with disdain and laughed it off. Now it was… Lance shivered. He didn’t want to think about it.

“Jeez!” He exclaimed, overly loud. He pushed the door open and was met with the unpleasant, red face of a middle-aged man. “Okay, okay. Sorry, didn’t see you.” He lied.

The man blinked. “Huh. Thought you were a chick.”

“Wha” - !

Lance stared, mouth agape, as Keith silently laughed behind him, trying (and failing) to stifle the giggles with his fist.

Lance punched him gently on the shoulder. “Shuttup! They can’t see in this weather. I could have been anyone!” He raged, as the man tramped through the snow to retrieve the tools.

“He” – cackle – “Thought you were a” – cackle – “girl.”

Despite himself, Lance was grinning. Keith’s laugh was contagious.

“I swear to god,” He said, sniggering, “if you tell anyone about this” –
“Oh, I’m telling everyone about this.”

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

“You’re right… I hate that.”

“You’ve still got me… something deep in Lance’s abdomen flickered. His flush still hadn’t disappeared. It never would at this rate.

“Yeah,” He laughed, “I may as well bury myself in the snow right now.”

Keith scoffed, shaking his head. “You realise this is the second time we’ve been towed?”

Lance put his head in his hands. “Don’t remind me… I guess we’re even now.”

Keith thought about that. “Yeah. Guess we are.”

_Burning_ by the Wild Beasts came on. Fucking timing, man. Lance inwardly congratulated his past self for putting the CD in when he did. They both simultaneously looked at the radio, as though the singer himself would pop out and serenade them.

“I love this one.” Keith said softly.

There it was again. That flicker deep in his stomach. Maybe he was getting sick.
“Hmm… me too.” Lance agreed, unable to think of anything witty to say. There wasn’t really any need for anything witty at this moment. Lance’s stomach had turned to ice cream. Mushy. Cold. A sickly sweet feeling that clogged him up and warmed him to a hundred degrees. How could he be cold and hot at the same time? A fever was looking likely. Damn.

A clink at the back of the car interrupted them. The tow was being attached. *Can’t you just wait a couple minutes…?* Lance wanted to tell them. He yanked the key, cutting out the music.

Keith sighed.

“Okay, boys.” The annoying truck man poked his head around the back. “Time for you to move out.”

Outside was a horrifyingly cold wake up from their blissfully blanketed car den. Lance’s jeans were still wet through from their snow fight. *The note.* The panic hit him in a flash. He dug his hand in his pocket, feeling for the paper. He exhaled, relieved. It was dry. Miraculously. The snow hadn’t drenched that far. His hand curled around it as he looked at Keith who was shivering, wrapping his jacket around himself tighter. Lance felt bad. His coat was much warmer. It had a fur hood. Keith’s didn’t have a fur hood. It was cropped. Only Keith could pull that off, Lance thought wryly.

Lance was soon distracted by the disturbing occurrence of his poor, battered Blue being dragged up a hill, back to the ground, her tires being lugged through the churn of mud and snow with utter brutality. Maybe he was exaggerating a little. His horror must have shown on his face though because Keith gave him a pitying look.

“We’ll be on the road soon.”

Lance’s face twisted. “Yeah… think she’ll work?”

“If she doesn’t you can sue?” Keith encouraged, giving him an awkward thumbs up.

Lance had a really weird urge to sling his arm around Keith’s shoulders. He didn’t.

“Heh. True.”
By the time they’d managed to haul the car onto the road, her air-force blue paint job was flecked with unflattering spats of upturned mud.

“We’re gonna have to go through a car wash.” Lance sighed. What a day.

Keith pulled his arms around himself. “Are you sure? Do we have to?”

Lance frowned. “She’s filthy! Yes!”

Keith stared straight ahead. “Okay.”

Lance shook his head. Maybe he was used to not giving a fuck about these things, but it was important to Lance. He liked Blue to look her best at all times. That was his secret nickname for the car. He’d had to stop himself from saying it out loud a few times in front of Keith. Lance was as sappy as the next person but even he knew it sounded cringey out loud. Only his mom knew that’s what he called her, because she’d called her that too.

After that, it was smooth sailing. Annoying truck guy who’d mistaken Lance for a girl warned them to take it slow. Lance gave him a sour look. *He knew that now.* Thankfully Keith didn’t pipe up with a jibe right then and there, but he sensed there’d be more to come later. Then they asked to see Lance’s license which was embarrassing because he tried desperately to hide the picture from Keith, who caught a glance and gave Lance a crooked smile and commented, “Nice hair.”

*Said the pot to the kettle.*

“I was fifteen.” He grumbled, “They took the picture from my passport.”

Keith snickered.

Lance hit him on the shoulder again.

He was losing count of the amount of times they’d had conversations like this. And Lance couldn’t
quite place what it was he felt about them. He didn’t talk like this to Pidge or Hunk. Not even Shiro who he didn’t see as much. Keith was the only person he was like this with. He had a sneaking suspicion that if he acted the same way around Hunk, he’d get a weird look and a low, “Dude. What the fuck?” That didn’t change the fact that this felt right.

So, they argued sometimes. Keith didn’t like Goldfrapp. That was forgivable. If Lance was being truly honest with himself, he liked the fact that Keith wasn’t obsessed with all the same things as he was. It gave them room to bicker which… yeah. It was fun.

Once they got back on the road, Lance drove at a snail’s pace. It was infuriating Keith, he could tell by the way he’d started clicking his tongue and tapping his fingers on the dashboard, but he didn’t protest. Because they had to be safe this time.

“Your go.” Said Keith all of a sudden, much later. They’d been listening to music (MK Ultra by Muse was on right now. Lance fucking loved this one. It was anarchistic as heck) and zoning out, trying not to think about how much longer was still left. Lance couldn’t tell if he wanted this journey to last longer or end soon.

“Huh?”

“Twenty Questions.”

“We’re still playing that?”

Keith shrugged. “What else are we gonna do?”

“Good point.” Lance hummed. “Let me think… If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?”

“Scotland.” Keith replied straight away. There hadn’t even been a beat.

Lance gaped, bewildered. “Scotland?! You serious?”

Keith nodded. “Yeah.”

Keith laughed. Sounded like he hadn’t noticed…

“I’m not surprised you’d say that, but… I don’t know. Weather doesn’t really bother me much. Have you ever been to Inverness?”

Where? “No… have you?”

“No, but I want to.” Said Keith, his voice wistful. “I’ve seen pictures. My dad went once when he was a kid. He always said it was one of the most beautiful places he’d ever seen. Lonely, but wild.”

“You just described most of Texas.”

“Lonely and wild in a different way. I… don’t know how to describe it.” Keith shook his head. “It’s just a stupid dream.”

“Scotland, huh?” Lance repeated, shaking his head with incredulity. “You really never fail to surprise me.” He didn’t get a chance to see Keith’s expression. He had to swerve onto an adjoining back road. The map said they were getting close to a Freeway. It was also getting really dark. Lance wasn’t sure how much longer he could drive for until Keith would have to take over.

“How about you?” Keith asked.

“You’re supposed to ask a different question.”

“I’ll do that in a minute. I just want to know.”

The idea of Keith wanting to know stuff about Lance felt unreal, like it shouldn’t be true, and it did something weird to his stomach. He’d have to see a doctor when he got home. Maybe he should warn Keith that he might be ill. That had been happening a lot today.
“Cuba. It’s a no brainer.”

“I thought you might say that. You miss your grandma, huh – sorry, I guess I should say abuelita?”

How could he just say it like that? Lance thought. Not a whole lot of people knew about her, but the few who did never brought her up. They were probably too afraid to upset him, which he got, but this was… refreshing. Lance nodded.

“Yeah, I miss her a lot.”

Maybe now would be a good time to… he didn’t want to say the wrong thing, but somehow he knew he wouldn’t.

“I guess it’s the same for you.” Lance said slowly.

Keith’s gaze snapped to him instantly. “You mean…?”

Lance shrugged. “I – I guessed there was something about you and your dad, the way you were talking about him earlier… you don’t mind talking about this, right?”

Keith redirected his eyes back to the road. “No. The opposite, actually. The only person I can talk about it with is Shiro.”

A pang shot through Lance’s gut. He’d forgotten all about Shiro. He was the reason Lance and Keith were having this conversation right now.

“Yeah, no one really talks about stuff like that do they?”

Keith’s eyes flashed. “No they don’t!” He flared, “As soon as you bring up something like that everyone gets all awkward and uncomfortable, like you’re waving a bag of - of dog shit in their face or something!”

Pause.
Lance exploded into raucous laughter, tears filling his eyes. “Fuck, Keith! Warn me before you say something like that!” He was gasping for breath.

Keith was watching him, a sheepish smile locked on his features. “Was that a little strong?”

“No, it was perfect.” Lance gasped, wiping tears from his eyes. “I couldn’t have put it better myself.”

A bubble of laughter escaped Keith. Lance wanted to hear more. It was like a burst of unexpected joy each time it happened. It wasn’t as though Keith never laughed, it just felt genuine every time which, for Lance, was… rare.

“You know, I don’t think it’s bad what you did. Everyone does crazy shit.”

Lance’s hands stiffened around the wheel. He let the silence play out. But Keith’s statement sat between them, persistent. He’d guessed that conversation wasn’t over. To be fair, he’d be the same way in Keith’s position.

“You don’t?” He asked. His voice was steady. He was calm. He took in a discrete lungful of air.

“Not at all.” Said Keith thoughtfully.

“Sure, but I’ll bet you’ve never got so astronomically drunk that you’ve pole danced and made out with some random dude.”

_Oops. Did Keith know about the pole dancing? And then, why isn’t he saying anything?_

“Wait – you have?!” Lance screeched, his voice breaking.

Keith rolled his eyes. “No, I haven’t pole danced.”

“But” –
“All I’m saying is, I could tell you were stressing about it.” Said Keith breathlessly, “I don’t think you should. It’s normal. You’ll probably do it again someday.”

Lance snorted. “Not with stupid Lotor.”

“No, but it could happen with a guy.” Keith muttered.

Lance frowned. Why was he so hung up about this? Was he trying to make him say he was gay or something? Then again, he had continuously played pretty gay music. Not to mention, Keith had seen him in a corset. Yeah. Keith definitely thought he was gay.

“Maybe. Maybe not. I don’t think it matters.” Lance said shortly. “I can’t believe Allura told you about that… I thought you were the one person who didn’t know.”

Keith smirked. “Dude, just know that I’m still the one person who’s never going to judge you for it. Not that anyone else is.”

“Of course they are!” Lance snapped. “I made out with Lotor! Are you hearing me? Lotor!”

“Yes, I got it!” Said Keith, holding up his hands as though Lance was brandishing a sword at him. “So it’s not the fact that it was a guy that it’s bothering you?”

Lance’s heart was smashing against his ribcage like a drum-stick. He was sweating all over. He’d always hated that he was a nervous sweater. It made everything so obvious.

“No… I – I don’t think so. Look, Keith, if you’re trying to dig up dirt to tell Allura, you can stop now. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but this is a little awkward.”

Keith nodded in a business-like fashion. “Okay. I’m done. I won’t say anything to Allura, don’t worry… which reminds me. I was thinking, why don’t we stop off at the diner tomorrow? We could say hi to Coran then, too.”
The abrupt change in conversation was welcoming, and Lance relaxed a little, but he still kept his eyes dead ahead on the road.

“Yeah, sure. I don’t see why not.” He was aware that he still sounded curt, and it was making Keith on edge, so he tried his best to smile. “I’ve missed that nerd cave.”

They stopped at an Italian diner for food.

“This is a little fancy.” Said Keith uncertainly as they took a table in the deserted restaurant.

“Don’t worry,” Lance reassured. “It’s really cheap. A few years ago this place only got a one star hygiene rating so they had to bring the prices down.”

Keith looked horrified.

“It’s safe! I’ve eaten here plenty of times. I’m pretty sure there aren’t cockroaches in the lasagne anymore.”

Keith opened his mouth.

“Kidding!” Lance said hurriedly. At least, he thought he was kidding. He wasn’t so sure.

Keith got a pizza. (Pepperoni, no mushrooms) and Lance got spaghetti (extra tomatoes).

“Somebody touch’a my spaghetti!” Lance yelled as the waiter set the food down in front of him, who gave Lance a concerned side-eye.

Keith froze, knife hovering over his pizza, watching Lance with a dead pan expression.
“Wha’?” Asked Lance, stuffing his face.

“What the hell was that?”

“Shomebody touch’a my shpaget!” Lance repeated. It didn’t quite sound the same with his mouth full of the stuff. He swallowed hard. “The meme?”

Keith pinched the bridge of his nose, shutting his eyes. “I’m actually disgusted.”

Lance guffawed. “Know your memes, man. Know your memes.”

“No, thank you.” Said Keith, cutting up his pizza.

Lance rolled his eyes. “You’re such a buzzkill.”

“You’re such a…”

“Yes?”

“Millenial.”

Lance raised a brow. “Of all the things I was expecting you to say, that was not it.”

Keith shook his head, offering Lance another of those unashamedly pleasant lop-sided smiles.

“You’re honestly the biggest idiot I’ve ever met.”

Lance stared at him. After a moment or two (or three), he realised he was supposed to act offended. It was too late now. He’d missed his chance. Oh well.
They swapped places without asking. This time, Keith hopped into the driver’s seat and Lance gratefully settled next to him, wrapping himself in the blanket he found on the floor. With a jolt, he realised it was the same one Keith had been wrapped in.

After a while: “You’re not sleeping?”

“Not yet.” Said Lance, “It doesn’t seem fair.”

Keith scoffed. “You think I can’t handle driving on my own a little while?”

“I don’t know, you might get lonely.”

He lives alone, Lance’s inner voice told him, he’s used to it. All the more reason to stay awake. Clearly Keith was thinking the same thing, because all he did was shake his head a little and say,

“Shut up.”

He wasn’t just giving him permission, Lance realised. Keith wanted him to go to sleep, and would feel bad if he didn’t. Adhering to Keith’s warped sense of duty, Lance laid his head against the window and shut his eyes, allowing the soft acoustics of Ed Sheeran’s Perfect to lull him into unconsciousness. It was the only version he’d ever liked. Change the lyrics from ‘she’ to ‘he’ and you’ve hit the nail on the head, he thought in his final moments before sleep. And then… shut up, brain.

Lance slept for three hours before waking up. When he did, it was to the distressing discovery that he was alone in the car. They were parked by a convenience store which gave Lance some comfort, but he was still worried. The keys were gone. Keith must have taken them with him. Smart, he thought, but also – COME BACK SOON. Thankfully, Lance didn’t have to wait long. Through the condensation of the window, he made out Keith’s hunching frame, hands in pockets, stalking towards him. He wasn’t sure why he did it, but as the door opened, Lance shut his eyes and pretended to be asleep. He heard some rustling. Keith had bought a packet of something. And he’d brought the cold in with him. Chills exuded from his body, prickling Lance’s skin. When the rustling stopped, Lance expected the engine to start running straight away. When it didn’t, he opened his eyes. Barely. Just enough to make out Keith, leaning with his elbows on the wheel, resting his chin in his hands as he gazed out of the windscreen. What was he thinking about? He was so still. So lost in his own mind. It was mesmerising to watch. Keith angled his head towards Lance, and he shut his eyes tight again, sucking in a long, sleepy breath to make it seem more convincing.
Keith sighed. Long and low.

“I miss you.” He whispered. And then, even quieter, “Thank you.”

*I miss you. Thank you.*

Lance couldn’t shake the feeling that those statements were addressed to two different people. It was obvious who he missed, surely. His dad. But what about his mom? Lance knew nothing about her. Keith hadn’t mentioned her once. Did he still have his mom? Where was she? And who was he thanking? Lance had the plunging sensation of wanting it to be him, though lord knew what Keith would ever thank *him* for.

Lance waited for as long as he could bear before stretching, yawning obnoxiously loudly, and smacking his lips together.

“Man, I needed that.” He sighed, rubbing his eyes.

Keith smirked, the streetlamps casting shadows on his face against the orange glare. There was no snow on the roads here. They’d driven past the blizzard. Were they in Iowa yet?

“You talked in your sleep again.”

Lance grimaced. “Hit me with it. I hope it wasn’t anything *too* incriminating.”

“Hmm… let me try to remember. Oh, yeah. You said something like: *No! Don’t make me eat them!”*

Lance expelled a short breath of laughter. “Oh, yeah. I know what that was.”

Keith waited.
“I have these reoccurring dreams that I’m being chased by giant, fifty foot gummy bears.”

Keith blinked. “Of course you do. Go on?”

“And the only way I can get rid of them is by eating them.”

Keith let out a snort, then a cackle. “Okay, that’s fucking funny.”

Lance pouted. “How dare you! It’s terrifying! Have you ever had to eat your way through an army of fifty foot gummy bears? I don’t think so!”

Keith shook his head. There were dark circles around his eyes.

“Hey, Keith?”

“Hmm?”

“Let me take over for a while.”

A furrow formed between his brows. “No, it’s cool. You don’t have to do that.”

“Dude. C’mon.” Lance glared at him until he got the message. “Thanks for letting me sleep, but I’d be a lot more comfortable if you got some too.”

Keith shrugged. “Your funeral.”

Once Lance was in the driver’s seat again, his hands moulded around the warm wheel, exactly where Keith’s had been. Pleased with himself as Keith tucked his feet onto the seat, Lance said:

“Next time we’ll have to try and get a motel or something. This system is exhausting.”
Keith turned, slowly. “Next time?”

Fuck. “Uh, I mean” – Lance blushed furiously. “If you want… I was just thinking…”

Keith smiled. “I’m glad you said that. We should make this a thing. It works.”

Lance felt truly sick. Why was he so nervous all of a sudden?

“You think you can cope with me for this long again?” It was only half a joke. He needed to hear the answer.

“I’ve coped twice so far, haven’t I? Besides… I’m having fun.”

He needed to hear it.

“Me too.”

Soon, Keith fell asleep. Whether he was just feigning because the silence had dragged to immeasurable lengths, the weight of their conversation hanging between them, it didn’t matter. Lance felt he needed this time to drive alone, Keith’s bundled form breathing in tandem with the purr of the engine beside him. It was like the service station again, in this moment, there was nowhere else he could think of that he’d rather be.

Keith was a silent sleeper. He didn’t move once until sunrise. A couple times, Lance was worried he’d fallen into a coma. When he awoke, it was so quiet that Lance barely noticed. He blinked into consciousness, each limb twitching into action one at a time.

“Morning, sleepyhead.” Lance greeted him. Then cringed. Don’t say that again. He told himself.

Keith grunted in response. His face was a picture. His frown had extended into the reaches of thoroughly pissed off. His hair was flattened against his forehead and his bottom lip protruded into a pout.
Keith was not a morning person.

“We’re nearly at the diner, so we can grab some breakfast. As long as they’re not planet pancakes or something…”

“Hmm.”

“Want anything?”

“No.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Lance got the message. Keith liked to be left alone after he’d woken up.

He didn’t speak until they got to diner. They pulled up in the dust alongside it. The flashback that hit Lance in that moment washed over him so strongly, he felt like he’d travelled in time.

“Jeez, this is weird…” He muttered. The whooshing lightsabre effect that accompanied the sliding doors made him laugh out loud. He’d forgotten about that.

“Hello? Anyone home?” He called, voice echoing around the empty diner enthusiastically.

The silver head that poked around the door to greet them blinked, bemused.

“It’s you!” Allura exclaimed, her face breaking into a smile as she saw Keith. “And you.” She said, a little less enthusiastically when her bright eyes found Lance.

Coran joined moments later, pulling them into ridiculously enthusiastic hugs. That was when Lance
decided he really liked Coran. He was crazy.

“You two haven’t killed each other yet?” He greeted them with a wink. “Or the car?”

Lance scratched his head, and exchanged a knowing look with the now-less-grumpy Keith.

“There was an… incident.”

The story of Lance hurtling into a field in the middle of a blizzard had Allura and Coran roaring with laughter. At first, Lance had been paranoid that Allura might bring up the story of the party at college, but she didn’t breach the subject once. In fact, she seemed to be warming to him. She chatted enthusiastically to Keith as Coran made them pickled eggs on toast. It wasn’t the most appealing culinary option that Lance had ever been presented with, but he took it nonetheless. They weren’t inedible. Bad, yes. Inedible, no. Keith enjoyed them.

Coran launched into a tale of a group of men who had visited the diner about a month ago, claiming to be desert pirates who had invented hovercraft with sails, before going into in-depth detail about the mechanical impossibility of such machines. Sleep deprived and overwhelmed (also a little queasy from the eggs), Lance pretended to listen with undivided enthusiasm, before making their excuses to leave. He could sense that Keith needed to get out. The morning was slipping away. This time, when Lance said he’d see Allura in college, he meant it. She didn’t seem completely put-off by the idea either, especially when he mentioned Shiro. Her eyes lit up and she fiddled self-consciously with her hair. Keith hadn’t been lying about that, then.

Once on the road again, Lance realised they only had a couple of hours left. The first glided by almost without him noticing. With civilisation on the skyline, Lance felt the need to say something. He cleared his throat.

“Keith?”

“Hmm?”

Keith had been fading between the states of sleep and wakefulness all this time. He was completely out of it.

“Will I see you in college?”
Keith sucked in a breath, straightening up to give Lance his full attention.

“Sure.” He replied.

“I mean like…”

“I know what you mean.” Said Keith easily. “Shiro said you want to watch one of our matches.”

Lance started. “He did? Yeah… I meant to this summer but I guess it just slipped my mind.”

“You should.” Said Keith, toneless. “That would be cool.”

Lance fought to stay nonchalant. “Okay. I will.”

When they pulled up outside the garage where Keith kept his motorcycle, they sat still for a moment. It was just like last time, except this time there was more; sat between them like an extra person, the atmosphere made itself known.

“Well, I’ll get going then.” Keith said finally, moving to leave, hauling his backpack with him.

“Yeah. Ride safe, you must be exhausted.” Lance knew Keith was exhausted.

“Nah, I’ll be good. It’s not too long. You must be pretty tired too.”

As if on cue, Lance yawned. He tapped the wheel. “I’m pretty sure Blue is more tired than I am. She needs some juice.”

Keith tilted his head to one side, a smile spreading over his worn features like a ray of sunlight.

“Blue?”
Dammit. Lance waved him off. “Oh, right. It’s just this weird nickname I have. Sorry if it’s a little... y’know.”

Keith’s eyes were wide. He laughed. “No, it’s not that… it’s…”

“Yeah?”

“I call my bike Red.”

Lance stared at Keith, unsure whether he was serious or not. Keith gazed back, his long-lashed eyes alive with light.

“See you in college, Lance. Happy Christmas.”

“…Happy Christmas.”

Keith retreated from the car, and Lance almost whipped back to the wheel, ready to speed out – but Keith turned back in the nick of time for a final wave. A real ray of sunshine splayed across his expression, illuminating his smile with all the essence of a star. Stunned by the sheer beauty of it, Lance hesitantly brought up his hand to wave back, his own smile lingering pathetically on his features in comparison. Then Keith disappeared around a corner, backpack slung carelessly over one shoulder.

Maybe, just maybe, there was the smallest, tiniest possibility that Lance, lady-killer Lance, had a crush on Keith Kogane.

Staring past reality into a new void of inevitable doom as the reluctant realisation hit, Lance smacked his head against the steering wheel.

“Fuck.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Just a quick reminder that we've aged Pidge up in this fic!! This was one of our favourite chapters to write. Especially Wynne_Jayne: She freaking loves it. You'll see why. ;) ENJOY! xx

Keith

New Year came and went like a hurricane.

Keith spent it with Shiro and his mom, keeping his promise to visit before the start of the next semester. Technically speaking, the Shirogane household was Keith’s home too now, but it felt weird to call it that. It felt weird to be there at that time of year too. Akane, Shiro’s mom, was delighted when she opened the door to find Keith’s bashful face, springing a fierce hug on him and ushering him inside to feed him within an inch of his life. She clucked over the length of his hair, demanded to know about college, and made him assure her a hundred times that he was okay with money. Meanwhile, when Shiro spotted him the kitchen he grasped him by the shoulder with a pleased smile, before dragging him into a good-natured headlock. The Shirogane grandparents found them like that, locked in mortal combat, and Mr Shirogane senior shouted at Keith to, “Show ‘em who’s boss son!” Mrs Shirogane senior tutted at him for that, but when Keith finally managed to wiggle out of Shiro’s hold and pounce on him, he was pretty sure she made a pleased power fist. After that they were bombarded with lots of Shiroganes- all over from Hokkaido-talking away in rapid Japanese.

It was weird… but it was also nice.

Not long after that, Semester two began. After saying their goodbyes, exchanging hugs, and juggling two huge freezer bags with about a million meals packaged in Tupperware boxes, Keith and Shiro set off for Wisconsin. It was refreshing to drive there, rather than take the bus, and Shiro was good company. A few times, Keith caught his thoughts drifting to a different road trip: one with another person in the driver’s seat and an obnoxious laugh filling the car, but Keith shook his head whenever the picture came into mind. Thinking about it made Keith blush and he didn’t want Shiro to notice.

Lots of hours later, they arrived at campus and went their separate ways in search of their dorms, a
promise of grabbing dinner later hanging between them. Keith scanned the car park as he went, unconsciously looking for a battered Twingo, for Blue, and by extension her grinning owner. The words Will I see you in college? reverberated around Keith’s head.

“Don’t be stupid,” he muttered, striding angrily through the crowds of people. Parents and students took one look at his face and rushed out of his way. “It’s the first day Keith, calm down.”

So he made himself forget about the promise. Instead, he put his clothes away, organised his stuff, met Shiro for dinner and went to bed. The next day was much the same. The day after he met up with Allura at the library and then classes started. The days seem to just tick by, filled with the busy mundane, and the words, Will I see you in college? seemed to get quieter and quieter. Bigger and bigger. More than once, Keith found himself lying on his bed late at night, thumb hovering over Lance’s picture on Messenger. A few times he tapped out a quick message:

Keith: Hey man.

Keith: What’s up?

Keith: Do you wanna maybe grab a coffee sometime?

But he deleted them every one, shutting off his laptop with an angry huff and turning over to go to sleep. It wasn’t as if Lance was texting him either. It wasn’t all on Keith.

Still, he thought, stomach turning, clutching his pillow to his chest. The idea of kissing guys doesn’t freak him out.

Honestly, when Lance finally let that slip in the car, Keith felt like he took off. Like, gravity just suddenly disappeared and he was left floating, suspended in air. Lance had been cagey about the entire thing, and he didn’t explicitly say that he was gay or anything, but Keith was pretty sure it was an admission that Lance liked guys in that way. Or maybe he was just hoping. Was he hoping? Why was it so important that Lance liked guys anyway?

Okay, Keith knew the answer to that question. After all… this crush (yes, Keith could admit it was a crush now that there was a chance, no matter how small, that Lance wasn’t straight) wasn’t anything new. He would rather die than admit it, but Keith had spotted Lance way before Shiro posted that road trip status. The first time Keith saw Lance, he’d been on a run pretty early in the morning. He hadn’t slept well that night, and he was anxious about going to the Martial Arts club
and meeting all of the other members, so he’d slipped his sneakers on at the first sign of light and
gone for a relaxed jog through the greener parts of campus. There wasn’t a destination in his mind.
Rather he just let his feet carry him forward through the unfamiliar surroundings, earphones
blasting, heart thumping, enjoying the last remnants of summer heat. Then he’d come across a little
park with a picnic area, some benches, and there, sat by himself at the crack of dawn, was a dude
in a grey hoodie, pyjama bottoms, and a pair of fuzzy lion slippers. The sight had brought a smile
to Keith’s lips, but when he looked at the face under the grey hood, it was a solemn expression
which greeted him. Thoughtful, even.

And the dude, Keith remembered thinking, was seriously hot.

It was a strange reaction. Keith didn’t usually go around thinking about people like that. But one
look at Lance’s face had been like a punch to the gut. It wasn’t even as if Lance was a supermodel
or anything: he was lanky and long and dorky-looking in a cute way. But it hit Keith hard. He ran
home so fast that he was doubled over at the end of his run.

About a month later, Keith spotted Lance during lunch in the main cafeteria, dressed in a freshly-
bought college sweater and talking animatedly with a girl about half his size. Shiro (being the ever
attentive, annoying older brother type) noticed Keith staring.

“Why not talk to him?” he asked.

“And say what?” Keith demanded irritably.

“I don’t know, hi? He’s nice.”

“You know him?”

“Sure, the girl he’s with- that’s Pidge. You know, the prodigy in the Mechanics class I help out
with?”

“The genius?”

“Yeah. The guy in the sweater’s called Lance.”
“Oh,” said Keith, taking a nonchalant bite of his suddenly tasteless sandwich. Shiro didn’t buy it for a second. “So how’s the new roommate?”

That night, Keith ashamedly took to Shiro’s friend list on Facebook and stalked Lance for maybe an entire hour. Much like he wanted to do now. Oh fuck it. No would know, and Keith wasn’t going to get any sleep tonight. Flinging the covers back, Keith reached for his phone, not bothering to turn the lights on, and went straight to Lance’s profile. There were few pictures, lots of memes, but actual little content in terms of character, so Keith clicked on the link to Lance’s Instagram instead, relieved when it wasn’t private.

His account was one entire shitpost as far as Keith could tell: there were tons of pictures of him dabbing in public places, crouching next to edgy graffiti in those stupid, reflective shades, a weird black and white picture of him and that Hunk guy in lion onesies, both toasting a bottle of beer with deadpan expressions, and another of Lance and Pidge on a beach, making gangster signs. There was also a snapshot of them in their Halloween costumes from last year- Lance looking particularly wasted with a beaming, dopey grin all over his face.

Keith hovered over this one for a while, amused, before moving on.

One particular picture caught Keith’s eye. It was fairly recent and uncharacteristically unironic. It was a simple shot of some horses in a dusty, yellow field, landscape lit with a fading sun and dusted pink. It wasn’t the actual picture which interested Keith so much as the location, Austin. If Keith was right… and yeah the date matched up… then Lance had taken that picture on their first road trip.

_Huh_, thought Keith, cheeks warming. Why did that make him feel so… happy? It was a strange feeling, but seeing their journey like this, seeing actual, physical proof that he and Lance had this Christmas thing going on between them… well, it made it real. It made it seem like something Lance wanted to acknowledge.

Stupidly giddy, Keith flicked the screen down to read the caption: _Open road and good company. Hello again Austin._

_Good company._

Was he talking about the horses? Or was he talking about Keith?
The idea made Keith’s stomach flipflop. Groaning, he threw his phone away from him and curled the sheets around him until he was a tightly knotted ball. He breathed in hard, trying to shake off the jitters, to go to *sleep* goddammit. That would be the smart thing to do. Instead, Keith poked his head outside his cocoon of blankets and reached for the phone again. The screen was still lit with the horse picture.

*Open road and good company. Hello again Austin.*

Keith knew he had the dumbest smile on his face. But it was dark, and he was alone, and Lance had maybe just called him good company. For what seemed an age, Keith stared at the picture, at the caption, scrolling through Lance’s other pictures but ultimately coming to rest on it again and again. Eventually, Keith told himself to stop being sad and pulled up messenger. The little button was green on Lance’s profile. He was active then. Right.

Licking his lips, Keith’s thumbs hovered over the keys. Slowly, he typed out:

**Keith:** *Hi Lance. Hope your Christmas was good. Was wondering if you want to meet up or…*

Growling, Keith hit the back key. Then he plugged his phone in, slammed it resolutely on his bedside table, and forced his eyes shut. It was two hours later, heart finally beating normally, that Keith was able to drop off, the image of wild horses playing behind his eyelids.

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The next morning, Keith woke to find that he’d somehow turned himself around in the middle of the night so that his feet were at his headboard. Strange, Keith was usually a dead sleeper. Was he dreaming about something? He couldn’t remember.

Stretching, Keith ran a hand through his hair (which was spiked up like a fucking anime protagonist’s) and glared at the sunlight streaming through his window. He hoped it was early, so he could go back to bed and get some more sleep, but one look at clock told him that, no, Keith needed to get out of bed and grab breakfast. Luckily, he didn’t have to rush this morning since there was no club, he could even grab a hot shower beforehand if he wanted to.

With a yawn, Keith felt around his bed side table for his phone, sure he’d find a text from Shiro, but when his brain finally caught with his eyes Keith nearly fell off the bed because LANCE HAD TEXTED HIM. It was there, in blue and white: a message from Lance. Keith nearly choked on his
own spit.

**Lance:** Hey dude! It’s Lance, how was your Christmas and all? Did you decorate a cactus?

Every cell in Keith’s body suddenly stood to alert. His mouth dried, and the palms of his hands slicked with sweat, pupils dilating. He felt drunk. *Calm down Keith*, he scolded himself, even as the reality sunk in and a huge, dopey smile spread across his face. *Don’t overreact. It’s just a text. He’s just being polite.* But no matter how hard Keith tried to rationalise the situation, the most prominent thought in his head was simply, *He actually texted me.* Despite playing it cool, Keith supposed he’d been worried that Lance would go on about his life and Keith would go with his, that they wouldn’t interact until Lance needed a driving buddy again because that’s all they were, wasn’t it? They weren’t even really friends.

But this changed things. This meant that Lance maybe *wanted* to be friends. Or else just felt obligated to ask after him, pitying the poor orphan. Keith shook that dangerous thought away.

Beaming, Keith checked what time Lance sent the text (3:16am?) and carefully typed out a reply. It took him several attempts until he was happy with the result:

**Keith:** Tinsel does not look good on a cactus. It was cool. Did you have fun with your family?

Thumb hovering over send, Keith felt like his heart was going to burst. He reread it for the hundredth time, chided himself for being pathetic, before hitting the button. The message shifted up and turned blue. Keith felt like he was going to be sick.

“Shower,” he muttered, grabbing a towel and ducking into the hall. At least with the steam, no one would notice Keith’s flushed cheeks.

Half an hour later Keith shuffled back into the room, hair wet and pushed back with a headband, having almost forgotten about the texting Lance situation. He tried not to look at his phone while he made his bed and put his stuff away, but it was like putting cake before a starving man. Eventually Keith couldn’t wait anymore and dove for it. There was another message. Three, actually.

**Lance:** You know nothing of cactus fashion, mullet. And it was totally awesome, tbh. Like, busy as hell but in a good sort of way.
My dad baked Buñuelos, which are kinda like donuts I guess. We haven’t had any in years.

How’s class going?

The dopey smile was back on Keith’s face.

**Keith:** That sounds nice. And class is good except for Revision of Greek Myths. Sendak made us turn in an essay in the first week.

To Keith’s surprise (and joy) Lance started typing right away.

**Lance:** WUT? What a douchebag! He’s the guy with the eyepatch you and Allura were talking about, right?

**Keith:** Yep. He hates teaching.

**Lance:** Why be a teacher then?

**Keith:** I honestly have no idea.

**Lance:** How do these people even get hired? Last semester I had this one woman who lost at least a dozen exams.

**Keith:** You’re kidding?

**Lance:** Nope. Luckily it wasn’t mine. But then again, I was probably her favourite student. What can I say, it must be the good looks.

**Keith:** Yeah, in your dreams.
Lance: Hey!

Keith grinned, then glanced at his clock. Shit.

Keith: I better go. Early class.

Lance: Oh sure. Me too tbf. Ttyl.

That gave Keith pause. What did ttyl mean? Text speak wasn’t Keith’s strongest suit— he’d never had any reason to text anyone outside of Shiro and Allura, since Akane always called and Keith didn’t have any other friends. Should he google it?

An alarm on his phone which told him he was late suddenly went off.

“Ah shit,” Keith cursed, grabbing his bag and jacket before sprinting out the door. “I’ll figure it out later.”

_____

In the end, Allura told him what it meant.

“Ttyl?” she echoed, sat cross legged on a beanbag in the library. She’d done her hair in a dozen braids today. It looked cute. “It means talk to you later.”

“Oh,” said Keith, pleased.

Allura’s eyes narrowed. “Why? Who are you texting?”

“No one,” Keith answered, too quickly.
When Allura went to get a cup of coffee, however, Keith’s phone pinged with another message.

*Lance: OMG. I HATE COLLEGE.*

Keith’s chest puffed up, pleased Lance had actually kept his word, and typed out a reply.

*Keith: What did you do?*

*Lance: I didn’t do anything! It’s the system! And I resent that implication, mullet.*

Keith snickered.

When Allura finally drifted back to their spot, she found Keith curled over his phone, smiling like a moron and completely unaware of his surroundings. Her eyes narrowed further.

_____ 

The next few weeks went by much like that, like *normal*, except now Keith and Lance actually talked. Most days, if not every day, in little snatches of conversation or updates. Lance sent a lot of memes too, most of which Keith didn’t get but Lance seemed to enjoy explaining. A few of them actually made Keith laugh- like the cartoon about the spaghetti. That seemed to be one of Lance’s favourites as he quoted it about four times before Keith finally admitted he had no idea what he was talking about.

*Lance: No wonder you looked so confused at the restaurant!*

*Keith: The Italian?*

*Lance: YES.*

*Keith: I just thought you were being random.*
Lance: *What century were you born in, mullet, seriously*!?

Then he’d sent the video, and Keith had to admit that it was funny. Strangely though, Keith was fairly sure he recognised the cartoon; when he was younger he and his dad would watch old reruns of black and white cartoons on a Saturday morning and Keith still did sometimes, if he was feeling nostalgic. There was something familiar about this goldilocks retelling, but Keith couldn’t quite put his finger on it, on the memory of watching it. In response Keith sent Lance a link to a video called Ugoki-ko-ri-no-tatehiki, which was an old Japanese cartoon from 1933 he’d found when he was fifteen and seriously bored. Ten minutes later, Lance replied:

Lance: *WTF DID I JUST WATCH*?!

Keith: A cartoon.

Lance: *No shit Keith BUT WHAT THE FUCK*?!

*Lance is typing*

You’re into strange anime, aren’t you? Don’t lie to me!

Keith: You like Sailor Moon.

Lance: No I don’t. Who said that?

Keith: You. At Coran’s diner.

Lance: Oh yeah... but Sailor Moon isn’t weird! It’s a staple of childhood. I bet you’re into weird tentacle

shit.

Keith: Usually I’d deny that, but have you ever heard of Devilman Crybaby?
**Lance:** I KNEW IT!

**Keith:** It’s really good. I recommend it.

**Lance:** You’ll never seduce me into weird anime.

A week later, Keith was planning an essay on the importance of the Roman Senate and didn’t notice his phone lighting up with about a dozen messages. It was only once he’d finished the outline, leant back in his chair to stretch, and checked the time that he saw the string of capital letters across his phone. Puzzled he picked it up.

**Lance:** This club scene is freaky, man.

*What is up with Ryo? And is this what Japanese rap actually sounds like? Cool :))*

*Holy shit okay, the fight scenes are cool.*

*WTF?!*

*IS THE BROTHER-?*

*OMG HE IS.*

*THIS IS TOO SAD.*

*PROCTECT MIKO. SHE’S MY FAV.*

*MIKI!!!!*

*WAIT*

*WHAT*

*IS THAT THE END?!*

*IS THAT IT?!*

*MULLET ANSWER ME*

*I’M AN EMOTIONAL WRECK RIGHT NOW AND IT’S ALL YOUR FAULT.*

*OH MY GOOOOOOOD.*

Keith blinked. He’d actually watched Devilman? The idea made Keith chuckle.
Keith: I didn’t think you’d react so much.

Lance’s reply was instant.

Lance: Are you kidding?! That was so traumatic.

Keith: It was good though, wasn’t it?

Lance: I mean yeah. but

*Lance is typing*

Like

*Lance is typing*

Emotions.

Keith: I nearly teared up at the end.

Lance: Nearly?! I’m literally sprawled out on the floor having an existential crisis. Hunk had to go bake a cake to calm down. Pretty sure our neighbours think we’re crazy.

Keith: Hunk?

Lance: My roommate.

Keith: Did he like it?

Lance: Hunk’s kinda sensitive, but I think so? He hasn’t stopped crying yet. This cake’s gonna be hella

salty from all the freakin tears.
Keith: Well, I’m glad you watched it. It’s probably best watching it with someone else. I watched it alone

at three in the morning and freaked myself out.

Lance: You weirdo.

Keith: Thanks.

Lance: I couldn’t do that.

Keith: It wasn’t fun. I told Shiro about it but he hasn’t watched it yet.

Lance: Shiro likes anime?!

Keith: I mean, the good stuff?

Lance: So no Naruto.

Keith: For someone who doesn’t like anime, you sure know a lot about it.

Lance: Shut up, weeb. My sister’s into it.

*Lance is typing*

God. I feel so empty now. I haven’t watched anything that good in a while.

*Lance is typing*

Ever seen Existenz?

Keith: No.

Lance: It’s a really awesome movie, actually. I watched it with my sis when I was way too young to
I think you’d like it, if you like mind fuck films. Pretty sure all of my freaky dreams are because of

that movie.

Keith: I’ll give it a go, then.

Lance: Cool.

*Lance is typing*

What you up to, btw?

Keith: Essay. It’s on Roman politics, which is my least favourite topic.

Better get back to it, actually.

Lance: Oh, cool. I better go make sure Hunk’s hasn’t dribbled snot into the cake mix. He’s such an ugly

crier.

*Lance is typing*

Night Keith.

Keith: Night Lance.

The next month was so busy that Keith could barely keep up with work. Sendak was a complete bastard, Keith had decided. An evil, sadistic bastard. The guy seemed to get a hard on from assigning paper after paper, essay after essay— an incredible amount of work even the smartest kids in class had trouble keeping up with—and if you got behind the dude called you into his office to chew you out. Keith had seen at least two students leave crying after those sessions. Well, Keith wasn’t going to lose to the crazy fuck. So he stuck his head down, hit the books, and completed every bit of work Sendak threw at him. Admittedly, Keith probably wouldn’t have coped without Allura (who had taken his class) but Keith didn’t let that stop the smug smile which graced his face whenever Keith turned in a paper, watching Sendak’s eyebrow twitch with anger. He started calling on Keith more in class after that, but Keith was prepared, he was going to ace Sendak’s
class with flying colours even if it killed him. Shiro called him crazy.

“Determined,” Keith corrected him. They were in the gym, cooling down after a practise tournament. Keith had nearly won too, if only he hadn’t lost his footing in that last match against Shiro. But, then again, it was Shiro. Keith had a loooong way to go before he could throw Shiro. “And shouldn’t you be happy that I’m applying myself?”

“Sure,” agreed Shiro, taking a sip of water. “But don’t lock yourself away with books for the entire year. Have fun too.”

“You’re such an old man,”

“So you keep saying. Still can’t beat this old man though, can you?”

Keith elbowed him playfully in the side. Before sensei called them back in for some pad work, Keith’s phone went off. Smiling, he plucked it out of his bag.

*Lance: Dude. Have you tried the cafeteria’s new breakfast burrito?*

*K Keith*: No?

*Lance: DON’T. IT TASTE’S LIKE FEET.*

*K Keith*: I thought we established that feet could taste nice, since we haven’t tried them.

*Lance: You remember the stupidest things. And fine it tastes like BAD EGGS AND FREAKIN GARBAGE.*

*K Keith*: I’ll make sure to give it a miss.

“Is that Allura?” Shiro asked, peering over Keith’s shoulder.
Keith snatched his phone away. “No,”

“Who is it then?”

“No one. A friend. Why does it matter?”

Shiro levelled a look at Keith. “Because you don’t have friends Keith.”

“Well,” said Keith, feeling his nose glow red. “You’re always telling me to get out more. Maybe I have.”

“Mmmm hmmm,” said Shiro disbelievingly, crossing his arms.

Thankfully, at that moment, Sensei called them back in and Shiro didn’t have any more time to grill him. During the rest of session, Keith made sure to partner up with anyone except Shiro, and when their time was up he bolted out of the gym before his friend could corner him.

On the way to class, Keith told Lance about a book he was reading.

Finally, Sendak gave them a break.

It was nearly the end of February and he’d been called away all week for staff meetings, so Keith and his classmates enjoyed some well-earned rest. Someone on the class group chat suggested bowling, but Keith gave it a miss. He wanted to chill and sleep in his room more than anything else, soak up some alone time, which is why, come Friday night, Keith was holed up in his room in PJs with a huge bowl of pasta on his lap. The distant sound of drunk people stumbling into the night filtered dimly through Keith’s window, the glass frosted white around the edges in stark contrast to the black sky.

Keith pulled his laptop onto the bed, ready to scroll through Netflix, when he remembered Lance’s
suggestion. Curious, Keith rented Existenz and leant back against his wall, letting himself sink into the covers and movie.

A couple hours later, Keith snatched his phone up.

**Keith:** Okay. What the actual hell?

**Lance:** What?

**Keith:** This movie is nuts.

**Lance:** Ooooohhh! Did you watch Existenz?

**Keith:** Yeah.

**Lance:** Isn’t it weird?!

**Keith:** I’m not sure if I liked it.

**Lance:** Same! The first time I watched it I fucking hated it. But the second time I was like, okay, I appreciate this. I don’t know if I like it, but I’m glad I experienced it.

**Keith:** I’m going to watch it again.

**Lance:** What, right now?

**Keith:** Yeah.

**Lance:** Are you serious?
A couple of hours later again, Keith sat back from the credits, having been hunched over his laptop so closely that his eyes hurt.

**Keith:** Okay. I’ve decided I love it.

**Lance:** Did you SERIOUSLY watch it again?

**Keith:** Yes. And I love it.

**Lance:** You freak!

**Keith:** Call me whatever you want. I freaking love this film. I might watch it again.

**Lance:** You’re joking right?

*Lance is typing*

Keith

*Lance is typing*

KEITH??????????

To everyone’s annoyance, Sendak was back the next week and was in full force. In fact, he seemed to want to make up for lost time by announcing a quiz due Wednesday. It might have been Keith’s angry imagination, but he was pretty sure Sendak smirked nastily at him when he passed out the handouts. Keith resolved there and then to score a 100, which meant Keith had to meet up with Allura ASAP. Lucky for him, she was free that afternoon and they decided to meet at a sandwich bar in the city for lunch. It was a new, hipster sort of place with a lot of bare wood, exposed brick, and shinning fairy lights strung across the ceiling and crammed into decorative glass jars and tea pots. Very Allura.
She took a few snaps for her Instagram account, complaining when Keith wouldn’t pose with her, and then ordered a vegan cheese sandwich and caramel coconut Frappuccino. Keith got a black coffee.

“You’re so boring,” Allura criticised him.

Keith shrugged.

“You’re invited to Daisy’s party, by the way,” she informed him. “It’s on Saturday.”

“Who?”

“The girl I introduced you to at Elizabeth’s party. The one who kept feeling your bicep. I’m pretty sure she knows Lance too.”

Keith attention snapped up at the mention of Lance’s name. “Oh. Cool. I’ll think about it.”

“So,” she said, reaching into her backpack and pulling out a folder filled to bursting. It was organised with an army of file dividers, sticky notes, and a handwritten context page. When it came to school, Allura was deadly serious. “If I remember right, around this time you’re doing about the fall of Rome, right?”

“Right,” agreed Keith. He was staring at Allura’s drink, mind slipping to the sweet coffee concoction Lance had bought him on their road-trip.

“Okay,” said Allura, flipping expertly to the precise location of her neat notes on the subject. “Let’s start here then…”

After two hours of teaching, Keith felt like his brain was going to burst. Even Allura seemed wiped out, voice hoarse from talking for too long and mouth stretching into a yawn every five minutes. Keith suggested they call it quits.
“Good idea,” Allura agreed. She stretched, revealing a bit of midriff. She was dressed up today: her eyeshadow was pink and sparkly, she’d curled her hair, and those jeans seemed new.

“Seeing Shiro tonight?” Keith asked.

Allura’s face burst into a blush. “N-no!”

Keith raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, okay,” Allura admitted. “There’s an extra lecture on World Development and I was going anyway, but then I found out Shiro was going too so…” she slurped the remnants of her drink, ears still tinged pink. It was cute. And Keith knew for a fact Shiro would be pleased to see her.

“World Development, huh?” Keith said. “That’s a bit different from your usual techy stuff.”

“I’m thinking of switching majors to International Relations,” Allura admitted, shyness forgotten. “I’ve been talking to Professor Kolivan about it. He says I have a talent for communication.”

“You do,” Keith agreed. “I think you’d make an awesome world leader.”

Now Allura blushed for entirely different reason, clearly pleased. “Thank you.”

With nothing else to do, the pair scraped back their chairs and headed for the door. It was freezing today, so they both donned hats and scarfs, Allura slipping on a pair of white mittens while Keith stuck with his usual fingerless gloves. His hair had grown so much that he had to sweep it out of his face to put his hat on. Sensei was threatening him with a hair net if he didn’t get it cut. Or at least a man bun. Could he get away with a man bun? Maybe Allura would know.

“Do you think…” Keith began, but then the question died on his tongue. They were across the street from a Starbucks. The Starbucks. The one Keith had passed so much last year that he knew what time some of the regulars ducked in and out. The one Keith had never plucked up the courage to actually enter. But now, right here, through the window, Keith saw Lance at the till. Lance, serving coffee. Lance, in an apron. Lance in real life. Keith felt his heart skip a beat.
“Do I think what?” Allura asked.

But Keith didn’t hear her. Instead, his feet started moving across the street. Faster. Until he was jogging. The cold bit into his cheeks and the wind nearly took his beanie, but he didn’t stop. The impulse to just go over, to talk to Lance in real life was so strong that Keith’s rational brain wasn’t working. He had one foot inside the door, yanking on the handle, when reality caught up with him.

This was Lance. In real life.

They’d been talking for over a month, about anything and everything, and they’d talked in real life before but… what would happen now? How should Keith act? How would Lance act? The idea made Keith’s stomach drop.

Just at that moment, Lance looked up from the line of customers and his eyes locked with Keith’s. Just for a moment, an instant, before Keith put his head down, turned around, and fled all the way back across the street where Allura was waiting, hands on hips.

“What the hell was that?!” she demanded.

Keith’s face was practically purple. He felt short of breath.

“Keith?” Allura asked, concern creeping into her voice.

“Allura…” Keith said. He looked up at her. Panicked. “I’ve, I’ve-”

“What?”

Keith swallowed. “I’ve got a crush on Lance,” he admitted in a rush. “And I have no idea what to do.”

Later that night, he and Allura were tucked up in her room: it was plush, all whites and pinks, with
a selection of green plants decorated with crystals and fairy lights strung across the window and
to the bedpost. Her roommate wasn’t in, so Keith and Allura had the place to themselves. It took a while,
but Keith finally finished explaining the situation.

“Well,” she breathed. “I can’t say I’m surprised.”

“You’re not?” Keith asked.

“The last time you came into the diner, it felt like something had changed,” Allura said, nodding.
“Even Coran commented on it. The way you both kept looking at each other.”

“Both?”

Allura stared at him. “Well, yes. I’d wager you’re not the only one affected.”

Keith gaped at her.

“Oh come on Keith, you guys have been talking for ages.”

“Yeah, but, it was probably just as friends.”

Allura’s expression clearly told Keith not to be stupid.

“And he might not be gay,” Keith added.

“He kissed Lotor,”

“That doesn’t mean he’s gay,”

“So he’s bisexual then,” Allura said, shaking his head. “The point is he’s interested in you.”
Keith felt like he might faint. “But how do I know that?” he whispered.

Allura thought about it, then snapped her fingers. “I know!” she exclaimed. “Ask if he’s going to Daisy’s party. If he’s not, invite him. That’s neutral territory, and I’ll be there to feel him out too.”

Keith nodded. That sounded like a good idea.

“Great!” said Allura clapping her hands. “Text him then.”

“Now?!”

“Yes now, I want to be here when you do it.”

Okay, Keith was actually going to be sick. Under Allura’s watchful eyes, Keith pulled out his phone and clicked on Lance’s profile picture. With exaggerated slowness, Keith typed out a message.

**Keith: Hey Lance. I was wondering, are you going to Daisy’s party?**

“Does that sound okay?” he asked, holding his phone out to Allura. In answer, she hit the send button. “ALLURA!” He screamed.

“It sounded fine, Keith,” Allura said with a sigh. “Don’t worry. You sounded perfectly normal.”

Despite her assurances, Keith’s heart was thudding a mile a minute in his chest. *Oh fuck,* he kept thinking. *Fuck, fuck, fuck…*

“He’s typing!” Allura cried, suddenly.

Keith pulled his phone back so quickly he nearly smacked it into his face.
**Lance:** Oh, hey dude! Yeah I’m going. Are you?

“He’s going,” Keith whispered, unsure whether to be pleased or terrified.

Allura fist pumped the air.

**Keith:** Yeah. I’m going.

**Lance:** Oh sweet. I didn’t know you knew Daisy.

**Keith:** Friend of a friend.

**Lance:** Wicked. Pidge and Hunk are coming too. He says hi by the way. He’s been playing tetris like a mad man for three days straight now. His scores are insane.

**Keith:** Hahaha, sounds like a party.

**Lance:** We live it up BIG here dude.

*Lance is typing*

I’m actually really glad you asked about the party. I was going to ask you, since I didn’t get to speak to you at the party last year.

**Keith:** Parties aren’t usually my thing.

**Lance:** That doesn’t surprise me.

*Lance is typing*

Hey Keith?
Keith’s entire body tensed.

*Lance is typing*

Lance: *It’ll be really good to see you.*

Warmth flooded through Keith’s entire body. He swallowed thickly, aware of Allura’s watchful eyes, but Keith ignored her. Slowly, hesitantly, he typed out a reply.

Keith: *Yeah. It’ll be good to see you too, Lance xx*

Lance

Was it a mistake? It had to be a mistake, right? The two xx’s next to Lance’s name stood stark white in the blue bubble that encapsulated Keith’s message. Lance stared. He blinked. He stared some more.

*It’ll be good to see you too, Lance xx*

He screamed.

Hunk burst into his bedroom, frying pan dripping with oil in one hand, fingers caked in batter in the other.

“What? What is it? Did you see The Last Jedi again? I told you to stop watching that movie, man, it kills you.”

“No! It’s not that. But thanks a bunch for mentioning it, that’s a whole load of other stress I really
didn’t need.” Lance complained, wrapped in his bed covers.

Hunk frowned. “Then what is it?”

Lance scowled. “Are you making pancakes?”

“When am I not? Gah! Stop sidestepping me. Just answer the question.”

Lance sighed, melting into his bed. “I don’t… I dunno.”

Hunk shook his head, fingers on his free hand splayed – not like he had much choice, but it added to the effect. He waited, brows so high up his forehead they were disappearing into his headband.

“You don’t - you dunno?” Hunk echoed, mimicking Lance with a little voice. “When you do, gimme a call okay?”

“HUNK WAIT!” Lance cried, leaning off the bed like Tom Hanks craning off of his raft in Cast Away when Wilson disappears. “I… have a question.”

“Yes?” Hunk probed, getting impatient.

Lance crossed his legs, picking at his sheets. He cleared his throat. “What do you do when you like someone but you know you shouldn’t because you can’t, like, it would be weird and different and” –

“Woah, woah! Slow down. Are you trying to tell me you’ve got a crush on someone?”

Lance paused. He panicked. “No…” Yes.

“Then why am I here? May I continue my culinary venture uninterrupted?”
“Give me five minutes… I’ll join you in the kitchen soon.”

Hunk’s expression softened. “I’ll make extra.”

“Thanks, bud.”

For five full entire minutes, Lance stared at that text. He stared at it so much that his eyes blurred and teared up. Until he’d texted Keith, the crumpled, stained note in his bedside drawer had been the only physical evidence of his and Keith’s interaction. Sure, he had his Instagram photos too, but none of those had Keith in them. There was another photo, but Lance hadn’t uploaded it. He hadn’t known Keith well enough and it would have seemed… well. He didn’t know. Swiping the message from Keith away (reluctantly), Lance opened his camera roll. Scrolling past the multitude of derpy selfies, he finally found the reel from December. Most of them were landscape shots, the horses, the sand, the snow… and then the only picture he’d really managed to get of Keith. To him, the only picture that really mattered.

Keith, kneeling ankle deep in snow, his perky nose glowing scarlet from the cold as he piled handfuls of the stuff onto the snowman that was beginning to take shape. Chez. Their stupid, shitty snowman. Keith’s first ever stupid shitty snowman. Lance laughed through his nose, grinning like an idiot. The photo was a little blurry; Lance had been shivering from cold when he’d taken it, but this was a good shot. He’d snapped Keith without a frown – not quite smiling but somewhere close enough. Keith’s expression was soft, caught at a three-quarter angle, jet-black hair mussed around his eyes, flecked with tiny white flakes. Lance had lost count of the amount of times he’d lain awake in the dead of night, staring at this picture.

That’s exactly what he’d been doing when he decided to message Keith. The overwhelming urge to see Keith, heck even just to speak to him, hit him out of nowhere. Okay, not out of nowhere. He’d been working himself up to that point all night. First the note. Then the picture. Then he’d got caught up in a delirious web of flashbacks and memories and hearing Keith’s voice in his head, “See you in college, Lance” – he thought he might go mad. So he’d messaged Keith. Past three in the fucking morning. Lance hadn’t truly realised what he’d done until he woke up the next day, reeling with panic. Of course the result had been worth it. They’d been talking for over a month now, but Lance wasn’t sure that had done anything good for his growing obsession, no matter how much he was enjoying talking to Keith.

More times than he’d care to admit, Lance had strongly considered asking Keith out for a coffee or something (that sounded so gay in his head… wait, it was gay, he had to remind himself), even typing out the message only to delete it again, but he didn’t want to bother Keith. By the sounds of it, he was a busy guy. He had his training and his essays… Not to mention, that Sendak dude he kept mentioning sounded like a fucking tyrant. Lance was slowly concocting a plan to release feral rats into the professor’s office. He’d only seen Keith in real life once so far and it was… weird. Had that been him? It had looked like him. Then again, Lance had been tired from working all day
– he could have been hallucinating Keith for all he knew.

“Lance! Pancakes are ready!”

Hunk was like Lance’s pseudo, less feminine mom. He looked at the yellow polka dot oven-gloves protruding from Hunk’s arms. Okay, maybe not that much less feminine. A stack of classic, golden pancakes, cooked to perfection and drizzled with maple syrup was placed in front of Lance. His mouth watered.

“Marry me?”

“We talked about this,” Hunk sighed, “Only if we’re both single by the time we’re forty.”

“Stingy…” Lance muttered, hacking away at the delicious pile before him.

“Dude, what’s got you so worked up?” asked Hunk, sitting opposite him. The oven gloves were a real look. It made Lance feel a little better about opening up.

“I’ve been talking to… someone.”

“Mmm?”

“And… I’m not saying I like them in that way yet.” He could lie for now, right?

“But you totally do, go on.” Hunk wasn’t missing a trick.

“I don’t know what to do about it.” Lance conceded, shrugging.

Hunk leant back. “Then don’t do anything.”

Lance threw his hands up in the air. “Did you hear me? What’s that gonna do?”
Hunk rolled his eyes. “Lance. If you don’t know what to do about it, then don’t do anything – if you act too fast you’ll end up doing something stupid.”

Lance narrowed his eyes. He hated Hunk’s straight-forward logic sometimes. “But I – I want to.”

“What do you want to do?”

_Kiss him, run my hands through his stupid mullet, hold him so close for so long that I physically embody his scent_ – “I dunno.”

Hunk flailed his arms. “Then what are you asking me for?! You’re so difficult.”

Lance’s shoulders slumped and he prodded holes into the fluffy pancakes moodily, watching the trails of steam rise.

“It’s easy for you to say, Hunk. You have Shay.”

Hunk folded his arms. “No, Lance. I don’t _have_ Shay. She went to college all the way over in Colorado, remember? I hardly see her.”

“No, but you know where you are with her. You’re stable. You love each other. That’s… most people don’t have that.”

“I know.” Said Hunk levelly. He sighed, and breathed a laugh. “I hardly ever get to see you so… _flustered_. It’s entertaining.”

Lance flicked a crumb at him. “Go ahead. Laugh at my pain.”

“You must really like this person.”

Lance shrugged. “I shouldn’t get my hopes up. I don’t think they like me back.”
“Why not?”

Lance threw his fork down. “Because it’s me, Hunk. When do people ever like me back?”

Hunk grimaced. “The cheesy pick-up lines don’t help.”

“I didn’t use cheesy pick-up lines on them. Or any pick-up lines if we’re getting specific.” Lance retorted dryly.

Hunk blinked. “Wow. This is serious, huh?”

Lance enveloped his head in his arms, wailing. “Don’t say that! You’ll give me false hope!”

“I didn’t say anyth” –

“Stop it, Hunk! You’re encouraging me! Ughhhhhhhhh… I hate this. I hate everything. I hate my dumbass feelings. Why can’t I just switch them off?”

“Because you’re not Pidge.” Hunk laughed.

“True. That girl probably programmed herself not to get caught up in shit like this.”

They shared an amused moment of silence. It was a running joke; they weren’t just being hard on Pidge. It was common knowledge on their course that the girl was not only the best in her class, but a well-known prodigy. Pidge was going places, and she didn’t care who knew it.

“So… have you been seeing this girl? Actively? In the real world, I mean.” Said Hunk, nodding at Lance’s phone which he was continuously locking and unlocking without even realising.

This girl. Shit. “Uh… a couple times.” It wasn’t a lie. “We were put in a position where we had to talk to each other. I didn’t like them at all at first. They’re really not usually my type.” He laughed inwardly. That was one way of putting it.
“Why don’t you ask to meet up?”

“I don’t have to…” Said Lance, scratching his head. “They’re… ahem… going to Daisy’s party.”

Hunk slammed his palms down on the table, sending pancake crumbs flying.

“She is?! Fuck! Who is it? What does she look like? Is she cool? Is she” - ?

“HUNK! Shutup! Stop freaking out, Jeez…”

Hunk closed his lips like an obedient dog, and pressed his palms together, watching Lance expectedly. Lance stared at the table awkwardly.

“I… can’t tell you who it is.”

Hunk’s face fell. “Wha…? Why not? I won’t say anything! I won’t tell anyone!”

“I know, I know.” Said Lance quickly, “I’m not ready yet, that’s all. I still don’t – I’m not sure how I feel, I can’t”-

Hunk stood. “Say no more. Understood. We’re gonna make you look fly for that party.”

Lance loved his best friend sometimes.

In the days leading up to Daisy’s party, Lance struggled to choose an outfit.

“You should go full, glitzy tux.” Pidge suggested one lunch time.

“Do I look like Elton John?”
Hunk thought about this. “You could pull it off.”

“Yes, I could.” Said Lance, “That doesn’t mean I should.”

On the night of the party, Lance settled on black jeans and a simple blue shirt he’d worn for his nephew’s christening two years ago.

“Blue.” Pidge tutted, crossing her arms, “Always blue.”

Frowning in the small mirror attached to his door, Lance spun around. “Something’s missing…”

“Your dignity?” Hunk suggested.

“Your brain? Oh, I forgot. You never had one.”

It wasn’t even a sick burn, but Hunk and Pidge high fived anyway. Evil little cretins. His phone bleeped from his bed. A Facebook message. His heart pounded, then sank. It was from Allura, of all people.

Allura: Lance, have you seen Keith??? Is he with you???

Why would Keith be with him? Surely Allura knew that they hadn’t seen each other since the road-trip.

Lance: No? Is everything okay?

He was panicking now. “Guys… I’m – I’m not sure I’m gonna go.”

Both Hunk and Pidge whipped around from pulling stupid faces in the mirror.
“What?!” They said in unison.

Lance sunk onto the bed, staring at his phone, breathing heavily. Where was Keith? Why did Allura think he was with him? What was happening? Had something happened to him?

“I’m…” Lance didn’t finish his sentence.

*Allura is typing*

**Allura:** *Never mind. Found him.*

Lance heaved a long, relieved sigh. “Okay. False alarm. I’m going.”

“Someone is messing with Lance’s controls.” Hunk muttered, shaking his head. “It’s you, isn’t it?” He rounded on Pidge. “You’ve hacked his brain to mess with us.”

“No, Lance just can’t make up his mind. As usual. What time is it? When do we have to leave? Matt said he’s getting there for eight… we should leave right after that. I hope Daisy doesn’t try to make out with me again.”

“Or me.” Hunk agreed. “But I’m sure Lance wouldn’t mind.”

Lance wasn’t listening. He was glaring at his phone intently.

“Huh. Usually that would provoke some kind of reaction.” Hunk observed. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah.” Lance murmured. His phone bleeped again. This time it was a message from Keith.

**Keith:** *Hey, man. Sorry about Allura’s cryptic message. Everything is fine.*

No xx’s this time. Then again, Lance hadn’t replied to his last message yet. He’d freaked out so hard that he hadn’t known what to respond with. What should he put? He couldn’t ignore it. Hell, he didn’t want to ignore it. He just didn’t want to come across wrong. He settled with:
Lance: It’s okay! Where did you run off to?? She sounded pretty worried. Hope you’re okay. X

That wasn’t too much, right? One X was just, like… brotherly love. Ew. He definitely did not see Keith in a brotherly kind of way.

*Keith is typing*

Lance waited.

*Keith is typing*

“Uh, Lance? There are real people, right here, standing in your room.” Pidge poked him on the shoulder. He shrugged her off.

“Yeah. One of them is eating your secret stash of Cheetos. Hope you don’t mind.” Said Hunk, prising open a packet loudly.

“Guys, just…”

Keith: It’s cool. I just freaked out a little and went for a run. Allura thought I went MIA. Don’t worry about me, I’m good. X

Lance: Why’d you freak out?? What weird anime tentacle shit was it this time?!

Keith: Ha, no it’s not that. I just had a thought

*Keith is typing*

I really don’t like parties.

Lance: So you ran away?
Keith: No, I went for a run. Different thing.

Lance: Sure. ;)

Maybe he was patronising Keith a little. Stomach actually imploding, he wrote:

Lance: But seriously, dude, if you wanna talk just give me a call. Here 24/7 haha. You don’t have to be nervous about the party. You’re actually a really likeable person. See you later. Xx

Lance threw his phone. It hit the wall and skidded under the bed. He decided not to look at it for a while.

Pidge raised her eyebrows. “Well, that was dramatic.”

Lance frowned. “No, it wasn’t, I was just texting.”

Hunk laughed, mouth full of Cheetos. “Just texting? Lemme show you how that looked.”

He settled on the bed next to Lance in a hunched over position, breathing heavily, staring at his hand.

“What should I - ? Oh, god. What do I say, what do I… I know! Fuck. No. I won’t put that…”

Hunk whispered frantically in a whiny voice. He turned slowly and gave Lance a sceptical look. “Sure. Not dramatic at all.”

“I didn’t do that!” Lance flared.

“As a witness, I can attest. Yes. Yes, you did.” Said Pidge tonelessly, folding her arms.

Lance had been so caught up in his text messages with Keith that he hadn’t noticed – Pidge had made a real effort for this party. She was wearing a sparkly green crop top with loose-fitting silk
black trousers that complimented her small frame. Her make-up was pretty rad too.


“I’m not going to mention how insulted I am that you sound so surprised, but thank you. More importantly: what the hell just happened?”

Lance dropped his head, waving them off. “Leave it. We need to get to the party.”

Pidge nearly retorted, but Hunk shook his head, drawing a finger across his throat as if to say, *don’t push it.* Lance pretended not to see.

Lance shoved his phone in his pocket, turning it to silent. He didn’t see what Keith had replied with. *If* he had replied. He also finally figured out what was missing: hair gel. Hunk grabbed some of his and applied a sparse amount to his lanky, brown locks, giving them some life. When Lance looked in the mirror he decided… cool. Not corset cool, but cool. Maybe that was for the best. Then Pidge tutted and made him take his sweater, because it was cold enough for snow, she said.

Lance gulped as they approached Daisy’s house, insides jumping. He felt like he’d swallowed a bag of live locusts.

“Chill,” Said Hunk, hushed, “You don’t have to point her out to us… You look great. Relax.”

*Her. Him. Them.* To his credit, Lance had never once referred to his mysterious crush as a girl. That was all on Hunk. He’d assumed it was a she. It was then that Lance was hit with a hard smack of irony. He’d done the same to Shiro on the first road-trip. He remembered how disappointed he’d been then, when Keith had shown up instead of a girl. Jeez… Shiro must have thought he was a complete jerk.

A strong beat emanated from the student house, blasting down the street. *Sororities,* Lance thought. A year ago he’d have done anything to be here, surrounded by a bunch of drunk girls. Heck, he remembered what had happened the last time he’d ended up at a party like this. He shivered. Fucking Lotor.

The house was packed already, and everyone was steadily on their way to getting drunk. Lance hadn’t had a drop of alcohol since Christmas. He kept his eyes peeled amongst the bobbing,
chattering heads for any sign of a mullet. None so far. Damn. He could be anywhere. Maybe he’d decided not to come after all. Lance wouldn’t know. He hadn’t checked his phone. He felt for it in his pocket, he should probably check now that he was here –

“LANCE!”

“Aaaaaaand, there’s Daisy.”

Daisy threw herself at Lance, screaming. He laughed. She was drunk already, that was for sure.

“What’s the music?” Asked Pidge, not recognising the lyrics.

Daisy waved her off. “It’s Norwegian, you wouldn’t understand.”

Lance frowned. “But… you’re not Norwegian.”

“Exactly.” Said Daisy in her coy British accent, “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Have you seen Allura?” He asked her.

Daisy shrugged, sipping her vodka out of a Starbucks cup. Classic Daisy. “Lance, look at me. Do you really think I’d remember if I had seen her, but to be fair that girl is fucking gorgeous. How could you miss – OH MY GOD, THERE’S LOTOR!”

Lance ducked away. He didn’t even want to look in the direction Daisy had run. The less he saw of Lotor, the better. The kitchen was even more crowded. Lance couldn’t move or think or breathe. Girls were screaming, people were dancing to the Norwegian music that he didn’t understand and… he was sober as hell. He’d left Hunk and Pidge with Daisy. When he did see Keith (if), he didn’t want them to be around; they’d guess who his crush was straight away.

A flash of red and black in the corner of his eye snagged his attention. He whipped around, looking for it. Whatever it was, it had headed toward the stairs. Could it be…?

At the base of the stairs, Lance was caught by a hand on his wrist.
“Yo.” It was Matt. Lance narrowed his eyes. He really didn’t like this guy. He could hardly believe he was related to Pidge, they were so different. “Did you know that Lotor’s here?” He said with a sly grin.

Lance pulled his arm away. “Yeah. And I don’t care.”

Matt raised his eyebrows. “Really?”

Lance wanted to punch him in the face. “Look, Matt. That was so long ago, it’s virtually in the Jurassic period. Go find some new gossip to get hard over.”

Maybe Lance was being a little more poisonous than usual, but he was in a hurry… He ignored Matt’s protests as he marched up the stairs, following what he hoped was Keith’s hair and mullet. Upstairs wasn’t as bad as the rest of the place. A girl sat crying at the top of the stairs, make-up running down her face in black tears. Usually Lance would take this opportunity to stop and ask, but he was losing the mullet. Or what he thought was the mullet, anyway.

A silver head emerged from the bathroom, blue eyes sparkling.

“Allura!” Lance waved. She spotted him, her face breaking into a smile. Wow. She’d never seemed so pleased to see him before. Allura ran over to him. She shimmered in a silver, sequined dress, face adorned with matching glitter.

“Hello, Lance.” She said smoothly. “How are you?”

“I’m good, uh… have you seen Keith?”

Allura smirked, biting her lip. Lance waited. What sort of a reaction was that?

“Yes, I came here with him. He went outside, I think.”

“Outside?! But I thought I saw… never mind. Thanks.”
Lance turned on his heel. So Keith was here. But whatever flashed up the stairs was not Keith. Great… Lance was beginning to doubt why he used to like parties so much. This was stupid. This whole thing was out of proportion crazy and his nerves were a mess.

The garden, lit by strings of fairy lights, was littered with smokers huddled together in little groups. It was freezing. The night sky was clear, shot through with tiny stars. A perfectly sliced half-moon lit the path, bathing everything else in silver. One figure stood alone at the end of the garden, hands in his pockets, jacketless, gazing up at it.

Keith.

Lance stood by the open French doors, watching him. He must have been freezing. His arms were bare in his black t-shirt, and his breath frosted out of him in puffs of white.

Lance wanted to keep this moment forever. Like the photograph, Keith’s face was relaxed, sealed in a content, private place only he knew about. His hair was longer too, frayed about his sharp features in neck-length wisps. He was perfect. Perfect. Perfect.

When Keith turned his head and spied Lance, locking their eyes together, Lance felt his insides drop out and his legs thaw to liquid. He never understood why the women in cheesy cartoons and films swooned whenever they saw someone they had a crush on. Now he could sort of get it. He was numb from the neck down. Lance wasn’t sure what he expected Keith to do now. Maybe smile. Maybe wave. Maybe greet him with a classic, “Hey.” He didn’t expect Keith’s features to fall. A moment later, Lance understood why. A hand grasped his shoulder.

“It is you.” Said the sickly, slimy voice of the last person he wanted to hear, let alone see.

Lance turned around, sure he might throw up. Sure enough, there stood Lotor, ruining this beautiful perfect moment in all his blond-haired glory. What a dick.

“What do you want?” Lance snapped.

Taken-aback for a moment, Lotor quickly recomposed himself and laughed.

“Someone’s tetchy tonight.” He teased, leaning against the doorway.
Could a human being possibly be anymore flamboyantly obnoxious? His posse of female lacrosse team members lingered in the kitchen, watching the exchange. Lance wouldn’t cross them if he was paid.

“Lotor, would you kindly fuck off?” Lance tried to venture into the garden, but Lotor held him back.

“You remember my name. I’m flattered.” He drawled, “It’s been so long that I almost forgot yours.”

“Good. I don’t care. Bye.”

This was a disaster. When Lance turned back to meet Keith with an apologetic look, he found the spot empty. Keith was gone. What the - ?

Lance ran into the garden, spinning on the spot like a mad man. Did he climb over the fucking fence? That was when he saw the gate leading to the front drive. It was open. As he ran to it, Lance pulled out his phone. There were six messages. One from Pidge, five minutes ago. Two from Hunk, two minutes ago and three from Keith… a while ago. His heart sank.

**Keith:** Thanks. But me? Likeable? That’s a stretch. Still, I appreciate it. I’ll let you know when I’m there. Xx

I’m here. Are you?

I went to get some air in the yard. Come find me when you see this. X

Shit. That was fifteen minutes ago. Had Keith really waited for him that long? Squirming with guilt, Lance reached the driveway. The mullet was leaving. THE MULLET WAS LEAVING.

“Keith!” Lance yelled, his voice breaking. Wow.

Keith stopped at the threshold by the side-walk, breath tumbling out of him. His dark eyes glittered intensely in the dark. Lance breached the distance between them with a jog, panting.
“Keith – Hi… I… Uh… Hi.” I’m a mess.

“Hey.” Despite being tinged with something bitter, it still sounded sweet to Lance. He closed his eyes momentarily.

“I just got your messages. I’m sorry. I didn’t see” –

“It’s cool. I’ll be off now. See ya.”

Keith went to turn, but Lance grasped him by the shoulder. He nearly hated himself for that. Lotor had just done the exact same thing. Did Keith feel the same way?

“Keith, why are you leaving? Do you not even wanna stay for a little bit?”

Stay. Please stay or there’s no point in me being here. Please, Keith. Please stay.

“I… don’t see much reason to. It’s too crowded.” Said Keith, tight-lipped, staring at the ground.

“Then just hang out with me.” Lance suggested, as casually as he could. It didn’t sound too casual.

Keith gazed at him, the oh-so-familiar frown etched between his brows.

“A lot of people want your attention, Lance. I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

How the hell was he supposed to save this?

“Lotor just cornered me.”

“I saw.”
“I told him to fuck off.”

Keith blinked. “You did?”

“Yes? Do you not remember me telling you how much I hate him?”

Keith smiled. The tiniest, barely there smile, but it was enough to make Lance’s heart soar again.

“Yeah. I guess I do remember that.”

The silence that fell between them was awkward as heck, but Keith wasn’t leaving anymore, so Lance didn’t care.

“This is the first time we’ve spoken IRL since the road-trip.” He told Keith with a grin.

“IRL?” Keith repeated, confused.

“In real life.”

Keith laughed, shaking his head. “Still trying to catch up with your abbreviations.”

“Get with it. What are you, an old man?” Lance teased. He felt drunk. His skin tingled everywhere.

“May as well be.” Said Keith, rubbing his nose.

“Yo, aren’t you cold?” Asked Lance, genuinely concerned. Keith’s arms were covered in gooseflesh. “What happened to your jacket?”

“Daisy took it as soon as I walked in. Held onto it like it was the only thing she had left in the world.”
So the flash of red with black hair he’d seen venturing up the stairs had been Daisy. Great. Lance shook his head.

“Wow.” This was better. It felt normal. The panic in Lance’s gut was beginning to subside. Everything bad that could possibly happen pretty much had. He didn’t see how it could get worse –

“LANCE!” Hunk bellowed from the front door. “Where the heck have you been?” He began to stride over. “Did you manage to find the person you have a” –

“AHAHA, well, look who it is!” Lance shrieked hysterically over Hunk. “It’s my best friend, Hunk! Keith, this is Hunk. Hunk, this is Keith – the guy I car-shared with!”

That was fucking close…

Poor Keith looked bewildered.

Hunk’s eyes fell on Keith, raking him up and down. Then back to Lance. Then back to Keith.

“This is the guy?”

“Hi.” Said Keith awkwardly.

Lance could almost hear the ticking progress of Hunk’s thoughts. It was so obvious. So painfully obvious. Hunk eyed Lance.

“Hi, nice to meet you.” He told Keith. “Wait, aren’t you the owner of the jacket?”

“I was.” Keith corrected sarcastically.

“Well, you better get in there fast. They’re turning it into what they’re calling a ‘flag of sexual freedom’.”
Lance and Keith shared a look of bemusement before running inside.

Thankfully they made it in time. The ‘flag of sexual freedom’ so far consisted of four scarves tied to the sleeves of Keith’s jacket which was being slung across between the kitchen walls. With surprising agility, Keith scaled the surfaces and tore his jacket free, much to Daisy’s despair. Then they started drinking. With Keith by his side, Lance felt invincible. It was like a brilliant, surreal dream. Keith didn’t say much, but he didn’t need to. When Lance wasn’t talking to him, they exchanged smiles in between snatches of conversation with the other people at the party. Lance was beginning to see what Keith meant, too; a lot of people were coming over to talk to him. It wasn’t something he’d considered unusual before this, but next to someone like Keith, Lance was as extroverted as they got.

It got to midnight, and a lot of the stragglers had left. Now only the hard-core party goers were left, including Lance, Hunk, Matt, Allura, Keith and Pidge. Pidge was falling asleep across her brother’s knee, however, so maybe she didn’t count. The colours were vivid in Lance’s vision. Every voice seemed louder than the next. The floor felt like jelly. He was drunk. He glanced sideways at Keith sat on the floor next to him, who gave Lance a hazy smile. He was still there. Still here. Still by his side. Lance reciprocated with what must have been the most idiotic grin to ever leave his face. No regrets.

It was then, that Daisy announced they would be doing a chilli challenge.

“Who are the first two volunteers?” She addressed the circle, challenge in her dark eyes. She was wearing Keith’s jacket again.

Instantly, Keith raised his hand. So did Lance.

Everyone yelled in excitement. It was only then that Lance processed the words… Chilli challenge. Chilli challenge. Fucking. Chilli challenge. His worst fears were coming true. He’d only put his hand up because Keith did. He hated spice. Amongst his family, Lance was the butt of all the jokes when it came to this. A Cuban who couldn’t take his hot food? Who was he? Weak. He could see it in their eyes. Weak… you’re weak. And he’d just agreed to do a chilli challenge, with Keith, the boy who hadn’t batted an eyelid as he’d downed approximately half a litre of Space Juice.

This was it.

His death.
In the form of a long, crimson chilli, stuffed into his hand with all the grace of a flailing worm. He was sure he heard someone whisper “welcome to chilli’s” in his ear but he was too drunk to place who.

Lance looked at Keith, eyes watering with the very thought of how hot this was going to be.

“I can’t do it.” He breathed.

Keith grinned. Lance had never seen that expression before. It was evil. The purest evil.

“What? You scared?” Keith bribed. Okay. Keith was *drunk*. Lance hadn’t noticed under his own alcohol induced haziness, but now it was plain to see. Keith had been drunk for some time.

“Uh, Keith? Help?” He begged.

“Nah.” Keith shook his head. “Suck it up or leave, Lance.”

Lance should not have found that as insanely hot as he did. And he hadn’t even tried the chilli yet. He gaped at Keith, aware that he was blushing scarlet.

Allura was chewing her nails nervously.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” She asked Daisy tentatively.

“Pfft, no!” Daisy laughed. “Let’s go go go!” She clapped on each “go” and that was enough to rile Keith up.

“Count of three?” He proposed. That crazy grin was still there. His hair was all off kilter, sticking to his flushed face. Lance desperately tried to ignore the pressing feeling stirring in his lower half. This was bad…

“One…”
Keith was already counting.

“Two…”

*Fuck.*

“Three!”

Lance stuffed the whole chilli in his mouth, biting down with all the strength in his jaw. Hmm… He thought, swallowing the chilli juice. This isn’t so ba…AAAAAAAD.

His mouth was on fire. Fuck that. His mouth was fire. Shamelessly, Lance spat out the entirety of the chilli, clawing at his tongue with his hands. The crowd roared with distaste, but he didn’t care.

Gasping, Lance looked up at Keith, who was… perfectly. Still. His eyes were wide, like black buttons, and his mouth was shut as he sat peacefully, cross-legged like a statue.

“Keef?” Asked Lance, still unable to close his mouth.

“Is he fuckin’ dead?” Asked Daisy.

Slowly but surely, a rouge wash climbed up from Keith’s neck to his face. He was sweating.

“Keef, anfer me?” Lance begged unintelligibly.

Keith’s lips parted. He had swallowed the entire thing. Everyone stared in horrifying silence.

“Excuse me. I am going to throw up.” Keith stated politely, before leaping up and sprinting up the stairs faster than wildfire.

Lance bolted after him, forgetting his pain momentarily.
The next fifteen minutes were not pleasant. Keith soon sobered up very quickly, expelling the contents of all chilli, alcohol and anything else that may have been inside him before the party. Lance patted him on the back the whole way through, repeating stupid shit like: “It’s okay, man. Get it all up.”

Whenever Keith came up for air he’d mutter a croaky, “I’m sorry… this is gross… you don’t have to be here.”

Lance ignored it all and sat by Keith the whole time. It was funny, he was usually the first to leave as soon as someone threatened to start spewing up. But now it really didn’t bother him. Maybe it was kind of wrong that he was still attracted to Keith even while he was bent over the toilet, emptying his insides. Great. I’m a freak, thought Lance. But he also partially blamed himself. He had, after all, plied Keith with drinks.

Finally, Keith stopped throwing up and leant against the bathtub, breathing heavily.

“Fuck, you really didn’t have to see that.” He muttered, closing his eyes.

“Dude, it’s cool. The amount of times I’ve done the same th” –

“It’s not... I didn’t want you to see me like that. I’m a mess…”


“I blame me and the chillies.”

Lance snorted. He didn’t feel great himself. But he hadn’t eaten the whole thing. He was amazed Keith was still alive.

“So this is why you don’t go to parties, huh?”

Keith opened his eyes and fixed Lance with a sour look. “Yup.”
“You know, this still doesn’t make up for the shit you’ve seen me do.”

Keith frowned. “Like what?”

Lance barked an incredulous laugh. “Er – the corset?”

“Oh, yeah…” Keith breathed, smiling at the memory. “That wasn’t bad, Lance.”

“Are you kidding? I wanted to die.”

“Can you just listen for a minute?”

Lance shut his mouth. Keith was serious.

“It could have been a lot worse.” Said Keith, “Believe me. I know you don’t think so, but there are worse things you could have been caught doing.”

*Like making out with Lotor.* He nearly said. But that would be inappropriate. Keith was trying to be nice to him.


Keith’s expression darkened.

“Bad time?” Asked Lance apologetically.

“It’s okay…” Keith started. “I just got nervous, that’s all.”
“Why? Because of the party?”

Keith paused. He sniffed, lowering his gaze. “Not just the party.” He said quietly. Keith’s eyes flicked upwards and met his, dark. Lance waited. Why were his legs trembling? He wasn’t cold. Why was Keith looking at him like that?

Someone knocked on the door. Allura peeked her head inside.

*I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.* Lance thought venomously.

“Keith? Are you okay?” She asked gently. Keith nodded in response. “I’m calling a cab. Want to share?”

Keith shrugged, sighing heavily as he hauled himself off the bathroom floor.

“Sure, why not.” On his way out of the bathroom, he gave Lance a final, awkward smile. “Thanks for staying with me, Lance. I’ll message you when I’m home.”

“Well… drink lots of water.”

“Sure. Bye.”

*Drink lots of water?* Lance hated himself. He hated that he felt so crushed. What had he expected? Nothing more than this, because this was already great. But it wasn’t enough. It wasn’t enough.
Chapter 7

Keith

The cold air hit Keith like a smack.

His stomach felt all twisted up, and it wasn’t because of the chilli-alcohol combination, all of that was long gone, much to his utter horror. He still couldn’t believe he’d done that in front of Lance. **Lance.** The thought made Keith want to kill himself, to jump off the nearest bridge and Hasta la vista the fuck out of life because oh my god he’d actually thrown up in front of Lance. It didn’t help that Keith was sobering up. It wasn’t as if he’d been that wasted to begin with! He’d been drunk yes, but the world-looks-fuzzy- and-giggling-at-everything sort of drunk. He wasn’t so far gone as to have forgotten his own name. It was those chillies, dammit. Why had he volunteered for that stupid game? It’d been the dumbest thought Keith had ever had, that maybe, just maybe, he could show off and impress Lance with his taste for spice. He remembered the exact moment he’d swallowed the chilli and realised that he was going to puke: it felt like the world had been dragged from under his feet like a carpet, stomach plunging down. He remembered Lance’s face morphing into…

Oh god, *Why, why, WHY?*

“Keith?” Allura asked, concerned. It was then that Keith realised he’d been groaning into his hands. “Are you alright? Are you going to be sick again?”

There was nothing left in his stomach, he wanted to tell her. Instead his brain just kept flashing back to the party. To the garden. The soft looks and softer smiles. The way Lance would brush against him, laughing at something Hunk had said, leaning on a hand so close to Keith’s that he could feel the heat of it against his fingers, the way Lance patting his back in the bathroom had subtly shifted into Lance rubbing comforting circles, how stupidly happy it had made Keith even through the vomiting, then he saw Lance’s eyes as he’d left: the quickly masked disappointment.
Keith stopped walking.

“Keith?” Allura asked. Their taxi was waiting for them at the gate.

“Sorry,” Keith muttered. “I’m, um, I’m going back.”

“What?!” Allura demanded. “Keith, you need to go home.”

“I will,” said Keith. “But not right now. I… I need to speak to him before I go. I don’t want to leave it like that.”

Allura’s eyes softened. “But-”

“Allura,” said Keith, taking her by the shoulders. He smiled- and not the tiny, guarded smiles he usually showed people- but a real, genuine smile. “I’m fine, honestly. I just- I have to do this.”

Whatever Allura found in Keith’s face convinced her. She nodded. “Okay,” she said. “But text me when you’re home, okay?”

Delighted, Keith planted a kiss on her cheek. “I will.”

“And not too late!” she called as he turned tail and sprinted in the opposite direction. “Drink some water too!”

“I will!”

“And Keith?!”

Keith spun around to find Allura sparkling against the black sky- all glitter and fierceness, warmth and heart. Fondness for their friendship overcame Keith in that moment. Her eyes twinkled with mischief as she cocked a hand at him like a gun. “Go get him, tiger.”
Grinning, Keith took off at a pelt when Allura shot.

The house was now officially a ghost town. Only a few bleary-eyed party-goers remained, collapsed on the floor or draped over furniture like alcohol-soaked blankets or else staring at some spot in the near-distance with eyes glazed over with the existential-crisis haze unique only to students. Daisy was still active though. She and two other girls were crowded around her laptop, screaming about something while a song by Journey blared from some speakers. Their voices were pitched so high that Keith couldn’t make out any words, just incoherent squeals, though they didn’t seem to have any problem understanding each other. Hesitantly, Keith shuffled over to Daisy.

“Hey,” he said.

“KEEEFFFF!” Daisy squealed, darting forward to clutch at Keith’s arm. He was almost worried she was going to steal his jacket again. “Oh my god, are you okay? I’m sooo sorry about the chilli thing!”

“Oh it’s okay,” Keith assured her. “I’m fine now.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, and Keith could see that she was genuinely feeling guilty- eyes wide and puppy-like. “I feel live such an evil person.”

“I’m sure,” said Keith with a slight chuckle. “I shouldn’t have volunteered,” his eyes darted around. “Have you see Lance? Did he go home yet?”

“Lance?” she echoed. It seemed to take her a moment to remember who that was. Though to be fair, Keith guessed with the amount of vodka in her system it would take her a while to remember her own name. Suddenly her expression lit up. “Oh. He’s up on the roof with Pidge and Hunk, I think,” she answered. “He looked sorta chummed. I mean bummmed.”

“The roof?”

“You can get to it from my window,”
“Thanks,”

“We’re炖号!” Daisy called in a singsong. She went back to her friends, who were busy rapping to Kayne like their lives depended on it, so Keith slipped silently away. Someone had draped the banister with a string of socks sometime during the party and there were empty bottles of beer, paper cups and discarded packets everywhere. Keith hadn’t noticed it before, too wobbly to really see anything, but now that his mind was clearing the mess was evident; the house looked like a post-apocalyptic world, if the world as we knew it ended in a nuclear explosion of Bud Light and bags of chips. There was dip on the stairs too, at least, Keith hoped it was dip.

Carefully avoiding the questionable white substance, Keith made his way up the stairs, across the hallway, pausing outside the bathroom when a sudden thought hit him. His breath. He couldn’t see Lance with vomit breath. Daisy wouldn’t mind if he…? Sending her a silent apology, Keith used her tooth brush and sent it tumbling into the bin, silently vowing to replace it as soon as he could. That done, Keith wandered a little dizzily into what he assumed was Daisy’s room. He remembered Allura vaguely telling him it was her room at some point during the night, but the memory was foggy. Deciding to have a look anyway, Keith ducked through the door. The room was a mess, full of laundry and dirty plates and stacks of papers, but the bed was clean and the walls were strewn in carefully-selected photographs. Keith even spotted Allura in a few of them. There was an open window in the far wall. Distantly, Keith heard voices.

“I don’t get why you’re so moepy,” he heard a female voice say, when he approached the sill.

“I’m not moepy,” replied a voice and Keith’s stomach clenched because that was definitely Lance.

“Are too,”

“Are not,”

“Why are we here then?”

“Why have you been so tetchy? You’ve been nagging me the entire night.”

“No I haven’t,”
“Guys,” said a third voice. It sounded like Lance’s roommate. “Can we just knock it off and look at the stars, please?”

It sounded like they were in the middle of something. Keith didn’t want to interrupt where he wasn’t wanted, especially because he’d been watching how close the three of them were all night. There were tons of stories and inside jokes they’d shared that, while Keith could smile and laugh and nod along, he couldn’t really take part in. Maybe he should just leave.

“God,” he heard Lance say, just as he was turning to go. He sounded tired or even… sad. “It’s freakin’ cold out here.”

Or maybe Keith should grow a spine. Taking a deep breath, he grabbed two blankets from Daisy’s bed (silently praying they didn’t have any special meaning) and stepped out onto the sill. From there it was an easy climb up the drain pipe onto the flat slats of the roof. He found Lance, Pidge and Hunk stretched out on their backs in a row, talking about a movie or something. Keith coughed politely.

“They could’ve shared the raft,” Pidge was saying.

“But it was romantic,” Lance argued.

“Being dead isn’t romantic,”

“I don’t know,” Hunk said. “Isn’t that the plot of Twilight?”

“You’ve honestly just proved my point,” Pidge drawled.

“Hey, hey,” Lance said. “Don’t attack Twilight, Pidge. It’s had enough hate.”

“Are you kidding? It’s terrible?”

“But isn’t that the point?” asked Hunk.
Keith coughed again. Louder this time.

“What do you mean, that’s the point?” asked Pidge. “How is it ever the point of a movie to be bad?”

“Transformers,” quipped Lance. “What’s dumber than giant robot aliens?”

“Juniper Ascending too,” added Hunk. “Oo oo! And The Room.”

“Noice,” said Lance, and he and Hunk fist bumped, before bursting out into, “You’re tearing me apart, Lisa!” and snickering about it.

“You guys need to get a life,” Pidge deadpanned.

“Um,” said Keith, realising that coughing was getting him nowhere. The three friends froze, before glancing up at him. Keith waved awkwardly. “Hey.”

“Keith!” Lance exclaimed, shooting upwards into a sitting position. “What are you- what are you doing here? Didn’t you go home?”

“I, er,” said Keith, scratching his head. “I decided to stick around a bit longer.”

“What about your stomach?” Lance asked. “Are you feeling alright?”

“Better, thanks to you and being outside.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Lance argued, a faint blush on his cheeks.

“No you did, honestly,” said Keith.

They stared at each other, Lance cross-legged and faintly smiling while Keith clutched at the
blankets and just stood there awkwardly. Pidge and Hunk looked between the two of them, then at each other.

“You’re Keith, right?” asked Pidge, suddenly. “Shiro’s friend?”

“Yeah,” Keith answered her, tearing his eyes away from Lance. Maybe he still was a little drunk. “You’re Matt’s sister… Katie?”

“Call me Pidge,” Pidge said, adjusting her glasses. She grinned suddenly. “Is that a blanket?” she asked.

Keith stared down at his hand as though he didn’t know how the fluffy white throws had gotten there. “Er, yeah.”

Pidge jammed her elbow into Lance’s side. “Ow!” he complained.

“Move over,” he commanded. “The boy has blankets, dumbass.”

Grumbling, Lance scooted across the roof so that a space was between him and Pidge. Keith stared at it like an idiot.

“Come on, blanket man!” Pidge exclaimed. “I’m freezing!”

Hesitantly, Keith shuffled over into the freed-up space, hyper aware of the fact that Lance wasn’t looking at him the entire time. Once he was safely in position, Pidge snatched up the blanket and proceeded to spread it out over her and Hunk, leaving the other one for Keith and Lance to share. Their hands brushed as they spread it out, sending a jolt of electricity through Keith’s body. When all of them were settled down, a comfortable silence ensued.

“So,” Pidge said, into the void. “How do you know Shiro?”

Right. This was the tricky part. Did Keith go with his usual Martial Arts Club answer? Or was he a little more truthful? He could feel Lance tense up at the question.
“My dad was friends with his mom,” he answered. “We used to visit them a lot. She’s a great cook,”

“Really?” asked Hunk. “Then why can Shiro like, not cook at all?”

Keith snorted. It was a well-known fact in the Shirogane household that Shiro was a useless chef. He could do the practical stuff just fine: boil rice, chop vegetables, that sort of thing, but when it came to making it taste good, Shiro’s ability was subpar. Akane always said he ruined Keith’s taste buds with his meals.

“I can’t imagine Shiro having a mom,” Pidge commented. “I mean, he’s such a mom himself. Or a dad I guess.”

“Yeah, he has that whole, ‘I’m not mad, I’m just disappointed face’ down pat,” said Hunk, sitting up to demonstrate.

It was so accurate that it made Keith laugh. “I thought I was the only one he did that to,” he said.

“Well,” said Pidge. “Last month we may have programmed a fire cracker robot using a lab under his name.”

“Oh man,” Hunk said. “That thing was so sweet though. You could see the fireworks from miles away.”

“Wait,” said Keith. “That was you? You were the fire cracker delinquents?”

“Hell yeah,” Pidge answered, grinning. It faded quickly. “But then Shiro caught us. We had to write a five-thousand-word apology to Iverson and we’re not allowed to work independently without supervision now.”

“Not that that will stop us,” quipped Hunk.
They high-fived, before launching into the sordid details of their criminal activities which involved, amongst other things, hacking into Iverson’s personal system, using his code to approve the use of gunpowder, and smuggling said gunpowder out of storage using a cleaning trolley.

“Lance helped us with that bit,” Hunk said.

“You did?” Keith asked, turning to Lance.

Lance’s eyes quickly darted away, a hand coming up to rub his nose in embarrassment. *Was he looking at me?* Keith thought, heart tightening.

“Yeah,” he answered, voice gruff. “S’no big deal.”

“Are you kidding?” Pidge demanded, sitting up to stare at her friend. “Who are you and what have you done with Lance? You love gloating about this story.”

“Shut up Pidge,” Lance argued, also sitting up. “Like I said, it’s not a big deal.”

“Lance dressed up as Doctor Emily,” Hunk explained, and Lance’s face turned scarlet. “He had this long wig on and everything. Me and Pidge hid in the trolley.”

“Yeah, well,” said Lance, settling back down and looking anywhere but Keith. “Your ideas sucked and I pitied you.”

“Oh please,” Pidge huffed. “You were *super* excited to jump onboard. We stayed up the entire night planning it.”

Lance glared into the distance, grumbling under his breath and Keith worried that maybe he shouldn’t have interrupted after all. There was a tension in the air and Lance seemed really pissed off. The idea made Keith’s stomach twist.

“I made gingerbread yesterday,” Hunk informed Keith, when the silence stretched. “They were so good. I might make some more tomorrow, actually. Hey Lance, are you working tomorrow?”
“Ten to three,"

“Sweet. I’ll make them in the afternoon then so they’re still fresh. Oh, and get me a mocha on the way out?”

“Sure,” said Lance, still staring into the distance.

“A caramel latte for me,” Pidge informed him.

Lance blew out an annoyed puff of air. “Anything else?”

Without thinking, the words, “How about a Horchata Frappuccino?” came pouring out of Keith’s mouth, filling the awkward space between them with shared memory. Lance’s eyes cut to his, startled like a deer, before settling into something dark. Something warm. Tentative smiles mirrored each other, and Keith felt Lance’s body subtly shift under the blanket so that he was angled towards him so discreetly only Keith would notice. It felt intimate, like a secret.

“Gross,” complained Pidge, forcing Keith to tear his eyes away from Lance. Hunk was looking at both of them with a frown. “You’re not another one, are you? Lance likes that crap as well. Diabetes in a cup.”

“Because caramel lattes are so much better for you,” Lance quipped with an amused smirk.

“I have coconut milk instead of regular milk sometimes,” argued Pidge.

“Whatever makes you feel better short stack,”

Before Pidge could counter, Hunk let out a gargantuan yawn and threw his arms up into the air. He checked his watch. “Wow. I’m beat. And I promised Daisy I’d have a look at her computer before I left. Help me out, Pidge?”

“Why? You made the promise, not me.”
“Aw come on,” Hunk whined, batting his eyelashes. “We’ll get it done quicker between us.”

“Again,” said Pidge, putting her arms behind her head. “Not my promise.”

“I’ll do your calculations for Monday’s class,” Hunk said with a sly smile.

Pidge froze. “…all of them?”

“Scout’s honour.”

It took Pidge all of two seconds to exclaim, “Deal!” before jumping to her feet. “You coming, Lance?”

“Nah,” said Lance, and Keith’s heart skipped a beat. “My head’s still spinning. I’ll be down in a bit.”

“Kay. Don’t freeze to death. And Keith,” said Pidge with a grin. “If he gets on your nerves, just throw him off the roof.”

Keith grinned back. He liked Pidge. He liked Hunk too. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Cool, see you later man,” said Hunk, following Pidge down the drainpipe. His eyes seemed to linger meaningfully on Lance for a moment, a look Keith couldn’t decipher, before they disappeared back into the house.

Silence descended.

The wind was icy tonight, running its fingers through Keith’s hair and creeping under the blanket. Overhead, the sky was emptier than Keith was used to. A few stars dotted the darkness but it was nothing compared to the skies over the desert, where the starlight was so strong and so bright that Keith navigate without a light if he wanted to. Beside him, Lance shivered so Keith turned to him with a question of concern on his lips, only to find that Lance was staring at him. His mouth
quirked upward.

“Hey,” he said.

Keith smiled. “Hey,”

“Sorry about Pidge and Hunk,” Lance said, though Keith wasn’t sure what he was apologising for. “They er, well they can be loud. And nosy.”

“I don’t mind,” said Keith. “I think they’re nice.”

“I can’t argue with that,” said Lance with a laugh. It sounded nervous. “They’re pretty great, to be honest.”

“Have you known them long?”

“I’ve known Hunk for years,” answered Lance. “He has family in Austin who live by me. We used to hang out as kids. I met Pidge last year. She’s in-”

“Hunk’s robotic class,” Keith finished.

Lance blinked. “Yeah, how’d you know?”

“Shiro,” Keith explained. “He’s really impressed with her. Whenever I see him after that class he won’t stop going on about how smart she is.”

“She’s super smart,” Lance agreed. “A smart ass most of the time.”

Keith laughed. Lance smiled.

“Are you sure you’re okay, by the way?” Lance asked.
“Yeah,” assured Keith. “It was mostly the chilli, not the drink.”

“I can sympathise,” Lance said. “I still feel a bit queasy and I didn’t even eat the thing. I’m just surprised you came back.”

Keith glanced at Lance then. He bit his lip. “I didn’t want…” he trailed off, but Lance waited, so he tried again. “I just didn’t want to… leave things like that. It didn’t feel like the proper ending, you know?”

Suddenly Lance let out a huge breath. “I’m so glad you said that,” he said in one long string of sound.

“You are?” Keith asked, caught off guard by the reaction.

“Yes,” Lance said. “I didn’t want to be weird but I was so bummed when Allura came in and you left. Like, I don’t know. Maybe it’s because when we see each other in real life we always spend like, twenty million hours with each other but it just felt so… short. You get me?”

“Completely,” Keith agreed, grinning. “It felt weird to not be stuck with each other.”

“To be able to leave,”

“To not have to drive for hours,”

“Or piss in a bottle,”

Keith laughed. So did Lance. His leg grazed Keith’s under the blanket.

“I was worried I’d interrupted, actually,” said Keith. “I was stood in Daisy’s room for ages trying to decide whether to come up. And then you seemed a little annoyed.”
“I wasn’t annoyed at you,” Lance argued. “I just didn’t want Pidge to blab about the…” Lance choked on the words in his throat, and abruptly looked away.

“About what?” Keith asked. “The fire cracker thing? I’m not going to tell the college if you’re worried about-”

Suddenly, it clicked.

“Because you dressed up like a female teacher?” he asked.

Lance swallowed. Their conversation from a mere half hour ago floated into Keith’s mind:

“Er – the corset?”

“Oh, yeah…” Keith breathed, smiling at the memory. “That wasn’t bad, Lance.”

“Are you kidding? I wanted to die.”

Was he still hung up about that? How many times had Keith told Lance it wasn’t a big deal? How else could he phrase it? Lance was studying the blanket now, nose pink and ears seared with, what, shame? The idea made Keith angry.

“Lance,” he said, gently. “About the corset thing…”

Immediately Lance tensed up.

“I want you to stop worrying about it,” Keith went on.

“Easy for you to say,” Lance said, laughing nervously. He still wouldn’t look Keith in the eye. “That’s two times you know I’ve worn girly stuff. You probably think I’m gay or-“
“Why would I assume that?” Keith demanded.

“Because,” said Lance, but then he noticed the serious way Keith was staring at him and his confidence failed. “Because…”

“Just because you’re a dramatic prick,” Keith said with a smile. “Who likes sparkly things- no, don’t even try to argue with me, have you seen your sunglasses? That doesn’t mean I’m going to assume anything. I’m not that sort of person.” he took a breath. “And to be honest? I er, I thought you looked, well, um,” Keith’s voice had gotten so quiet that Lance had to lean in to hear him. “I thought it looked cool.” He whispered, face hot.

Lance started, staring at him. Keith felt like his heart was going to jump right out of rib cage. Never mind throwing Lance off the roof, he wanted to throw himself off.

“Keith,” said Lance, slowly. “Are you gay?”


“Oh,” said Lance. “I thought, you know, with Allura…”

“I told you we were just friends, right?”

“Oh.”

“…”

“Ohhhh.”

“Yeah,” said Keith.

Quiet settled between them as Lance stared up at the sky, seemingly stunned by this revelation. Keith counted his breaths and waited for him to absorb the news. How would he react? Keith knew Lance well enough now to know that he wouldn’t react negatively, but with everything that had
been going on between them (what was going on between them?) would things be different now? Or would Lance put distance between them? Slap his shoulder and call him bro? Before the worried thoughts could consume Keith altogether, Lance asked quietly,

“How did you know?”

“That I was gay?”

Lance nodded.

“Hmm,” said Keith. “I guess in high school. Before that I didn’t even think about shit like that, but in high school I noticed a few guys. When we watched Romeo + Juliet in English all the guys went on about Clare Danes but I sided with the girls in my head. Leonardo DiCaprio was—” he blushed, embarrassed by what he was going to say, but pushed himself to say it anyway. It seemed to matter to Lance, who was watching him like a hawk. “… seriously hot.”

A heavy moment passed.

“Same,” Lance murmured after a while.

“What?”

“I thought the same,” Lance said, eyes on the sky once more. “But when I watch Titanic, I can’t take my eyes off Kate Winslet.”


Lance took a shuddering breath. “I’m not gay,” he said, clearly. “That never felt right to say. Even when I did… notice guys, cause I noticed girls too. When I was little,” he went on to say. “I used to love wearing my mom’s jewellery. And my sister would dress me up too, but then I’d go play cowboys with my brothers. I didn’t feel like a girl. I don’t want to be a girl. I was always kinda, just floating in this grey area, but everything made me feel like a I had to choose, you know? It’s easier to be lady-killer Lance then to explain… all of this.”
“You don’t have to choose, Lance,” Keith said, softly. “And you don’t have to explain yourself, at least not to me.”

Finally, Lance looked at Keith. His eyes were dewy.

“Besides,” teased Keith. “You were never a lady-killer.”


“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah?”

During the conversation, they’d turned onto their sides so that they were facing each other, pushed together by the cold. Keith had no doubt that Lance’s ‘game’ was as lame as those pickup lines he’d used on Allura all those months ago, and it was terrible… but Keith also knew that without all of that, as just Lance, the boy had serious game. He just didn’t know it. But oh man, Keith knew it waaaay too well, though he’d rather die than admit it. Lance’s ego would go fucking super nova.

“I don’t know about you, man,” Lance said. “But I’m seriously hungry.”

“I could eat,” Keith conceded.

Delighted, Lance announced, “Great, cause Hunk brought two pizzas with him and one of them has my name on it in Daisy’s fridge. Wanna share?”

“Sure,”

With that Lance clambered to his feet, taking the warmth of the blanket with him and stood up. He offered a hand to Keith, who took it and tripped slightly, surprised by the strength Lance used to yank him forward. They stumbled into each other, chest to chest, chin to chin, and stepped back as though struck by lightning.
“Ha ha,” breathed Lance. “Watch your step.”

“Heh, right.”

Keith’s face burned the entire climb down.

There were even fewer people in the house now. Even Daisy seemed to be running out of steam; she was collapsed at the foot of the coach, wrapped up in a giant, puffy coat and was scrolling through tumblr with all the intensity of a starved man finding food again for the first time. Hunk and Pidge were in the living room tinkering with Daisy’s laptop, but Lance didn’t even stop to say hello. He strode passed the communal space with Keith in tow and headed straight for the kitchen. Without pause he dragged open the freezer and produced a giant, pepperoni pizza, raising an eyebrow at Keith that said, well, aren’t you impressed by my pizza? Amused, Keith swatted at him and told him to hurry the fuck up and put the oven on.

While their meal was cooking, Lance plonked himself on the kitchen floor, glancing up at Keith with a smile. “Floor?” he asked jokingly, echoing their joke from their most recent road trip. Keith grinned. “Floor.”

Then they just talked. About everything and nothing. It reminded Keith of the texts they’d exchanged these last few months. Lance asked about Sendak, laughed when Keith told him about the furious face he’d pulled when Keith had scored 100% on his last three tests, and Keith asked about Lance’s family. Veronica, Lance’s older sister, was being interviewed for a really high position in her law firm and Louis was taking a year out from college to gain some work experience though volunteering at a school in Cuba, since he wanted to be a teacher. He’d sent them pictures of all the places Lance and his family used to frequent, which Lance showed Keith on his phone. There was so much love and pride in his voice that Keith couldn’t help but find the entire thing adorable.

Once their pizza was done they moved to the garden, taking coats and blankets with them. Keith wrapped his around his head and Lance told him he looked like a moody slug, which earned him a piece of pepperoni in the eye.

“Any plans for the summer?” Lance asked Keith around a mouthful of cheese.

“I’ll probably split my time between home and Shiro’s.”

Lance nodded thoughtfully. “Before, when you said that your dad was friends with Shiro’s mom,” he said. Keith tensed. Lance saw him do it. “I mean…” he shook his head suddenly. “Never mind.” He took another bite of pizza and asked instead, “When did you learn to ride a motorbike?”
Keith was thankful for the change in topic. There’d been too many emotions tonight, and the pizza was curing him of the last of his drunk-ness. “When I was sixteen, but I rode with my dad all the time as a kid.”

“Cool,” said Lance. “I always wanted to ride a bike.”

“Yeah?”

Lance nodded, a string of cheese drooping from his mouth.

“Maybe you could ride with me sometime,” said Keith, before he could talk himself out of it.

Lance’s eyes lit up and his hand flew out to grab Keith’s wrist. “For real?”

“Sure,” Keith replied, so very aware of Lance’s skin on his. “Next time we road trip, I’ll take you for a spin.”

“Aw man!” Lance shouted. “That’s gonna be so epic.”

Perfect, Keith wanted to correct him. But he didn’t day anything. Instead he kept very still in hopes that Lance wouldn’t move his hand. And he didn’t. Not for a long time.

They polished off the pizza between them and chatted a bit more before Pidge and Hunk joined them, explaining that Daisy’s laptop was fixed, and she was now comatose on her bed. They brought the other pizza with them which they gobbled up, asking Keith questions and throwing friendly shade at each other. By the time anyone checked a phone, it was past three in the morning.

“We should go,” Hunk said. “We can all share a taxi, right? Keith, which block do you live in?”

He told them.

“Perfect,” said Pidge. “Not too far from me. Let’s go.”
About thirty minutes later they were stood at the halfway point between Keith’s block and Lance’s, exchanging goodbyes and hugs.

“Come for gingerbread,” Hunk told Keith, scooping him into a cuddle. It was the best hug Keith had ever had.

“Sure,” he agreed. “Sounds like a plan.”

Hunk winked at him.

Beside them, Lance unwrapped himself from Pidge and the pair of them made eye contact. Keith tensed, brain frazzled with the decision a head. Did he just say goodbye? Maybe a handshake, they’ve done that before, right? Yep. Handshake. Keep it cool.

But just as he went in to do just that, Lance’s arms went wide for a hug and Keith ended up poking him the stomach. An awkward silence followed.

“S-sorry,” said Keith.

“No, no, I should have-”

“It was me,”

“I, er,” suddenly Lance laughed. He held out his arms in the same position as before. “Take two?”

Feeling as though his spirit had left his physical body, Keith stepped into Lance and wrapped his arms around his waist. It was so trim, the hip bones sharp against Keith’s, his chest warm and arms sure. Keith felt Lance’s hair against his cheek, quickened breath in his ear, he sagged into the heat of Lance’s body for just a moment- an instant- and was enveloped by his scent. No strange perfume this time: just pizza and hair gel, sweat and musk. It was Lance.

They stepped apart.
“Well, see you Keith,” he said.

“You too,” Keith managed to breathe.

They all went their separate ways.

Keith waited until his was a safe distance away before breaking into a sprint. He felt wild, raw, completely undone. There was too much energy coursing through his body, too much going on in his head to think straight, too much… everything.

He didn’t stop running until he reached his block, ripping the door open and taking the stairs two at a time before bolting into his bedroom. Once inside he flung his keys on his table, discarded his jacket, ripped off his shoes and collapsed on the bed. His skin felt hot, as though scorched by the sun, and the squirming feeling which had bloomed in his chest when hugging Lance had snaked down his belly, into his abdomen, lower and lower and lower until he was harder than he could remember being in a while. He closed his eyes, face buried in his pillow, and pictured Lance. His hair, his eyelashes, those few freckles on his cheeks, his lips…

He breathed in, pretending he was breathing in Lance’s scent, and reached down to unbutton his jeans. Everything felt sensitive, everything felt hyper real all of a sudden. He saw Lance on the roof, felt his heat next to him under the blanket, and focused on it as he gripped his dick. He thought about every time Lance touched him: hands brushing, feet touching, shoulders pushed together against the cold. Keith moaned into his pillow, breath hot, pressure building. He thought about how teary he’d looked, his admission that he found guys hot, the way he’d looked at Keith—all soft and warm and there—and Keith’s hand moved faster and faster. He gripped his sheets, twisting them, breath coming hard as his body reached the precipice of orgasm. Finally, he thought about that hug: Lance’s body flush against his, arms wrapped around each other. He felt the firmness of his thighs, the muscles of his back through his jacket, the way Lance’s chin had dropped to his shoulder for a moment—just a second—and Keith had sworn he heard him breathe in. Breathe in him.

“Lance,” Keith whispered into his sheets, small and desperate and full of need. “Lance.”

Then he pictured Lance saying his name, soft and sweet and a little breathless. “See you, Keith.”

Keith came hard with a shudder.

It was hot and messy: he’d soiled his boxers for the first time in years and his sheets were all tossed up. But Keith didn’t care. Colours were flashing behind his closed eyes, pleasure coursing through his body in waves, and as he came down, all he saw was Lance’s face. Grinning that idiotic grin.

Shit, he thought. Holy fucking shit.
He allowed himself a few moments to recover before his face down position grew uncomfortable, then he sat up with the intention of washing up in the bathroom. His phone vibrated. Remembering his promise to Allura, Keith tugged it out and felt his insides warm all over again.

Lance: I had a great time tonight. Like a really great time.

Do you maybe wanna do it again soon?

Also, I know I said some weird stuff, but thanks for listening.

Thanks Keith.

Sleep tight xx

Two kisses.

“Shit,” Keith whispered, grinning so hard his face hurt. He flung himself back on his bed and covered his face with his arm. “Shit.”

If he hadn’t known before, Keith certainly knew it now: he had it so, so bad for Lance Fucking Dumbass McClain. This was turning into way more than a crush. This was…

Keith laughed.

“Shit.”

Lance

Keith is gay, Keith is gay, Keith is gay… The revelation haunted Lance for the days and weeks to come. But not in a bad way. He had been scared it would feel… strange. And it did, just not in the way he thought it would. Lance knew plenty of gay people, sure, but he’d never had a close friend who was one, no less one that he’d had a crush on. BGK (Before Gay Keith), Lance had feared that learning the truth would cause him to become paranoid of Keith’s intentions towards him, which
was utterly ridiculous because he’d never been scared of any of his straight female friends like that. Now, AGK (After Gay Keith), all he could concentrate on was his own feelings, and whether there was a chance they might actually be reciprocated one day.

BGK, he had vaguely suspected – no, it was time to be honest with himself – he had hoped that Keith was gay. For the sake of his sanity, Lance blamed the alcohol in his system for plucking up the courage to ask the question that surged through the marrow in his bones, and had done for some time. He had quivered with the anticipation of it, with the proximity of their bodies, huddled under the blankets on the cold, star-lit roof… and now he knew. Keith had told him himself. Keith had told him, Lance, that he was gay. Not only that, but Lance had told Keith that he was bi.

In the dark, Lance met his own eyes in the mirror, catching his uncharacteristically serious expression. He hadn’t uttered those words once before or since telling Keith. Maybe it was the alcohol. Maybe it was the… Lance groaned. He’d wanted Keith to know.

He’d wanted to support him too, let him know he wasn’t the only one. If he knew what Lance felt about him, would he have told him the truth? Did he tell him because he knew how Lance felt about him? Had he guessed? If he had, then… why didn’t he make a move?

It was entirely feasible that since apparently Lance wasn’t attractive to any of the female population, he wouldn’t be attractive to any of the guys either. Wow. Depressing. Even so, Lance couldn’t help that his mind switched onto this dark paranoid side ever since he’d gained the knowledge that Keith was actually, really gay. He couldn’t help it. He was an analyst by nature, and he had to consider every possibility so that he wouldn’t get too… disappointed. Then he thought about that hug, and his insides squirmed violently. Keith’s arms had snaked around his waist, holding him tight, his chin resting against Lance’s shoulder like they were pieces of a two part puzzle; made to fit. At least, Lance had felt that way. Holding Keith in his arms had felt like the most natural thing in the world. He was a hugger, he couldn’t deny that, but he’d never embraced anyone like that before. Nor had he been embraced like that in return. Then again, Keith had just opened up to him about… so much. The hug could just as easily have been a thank you, and Lance being his stupid, reaching self, had decided that the hug was romantic –

Lance rose and thwacked his head against his bedroom wall, grinding his thoughts to a halt. Learning the truth about Keith’s sexuality was supposed to have helped him deal with his thoughts and feelings, not make them worse.

They were a lot worse.

Truth be told, the notions of dread and fear and anxiety had been spiking so hard lately that there were times when he’d had to go for walks in the dead of night, just to distract his brain from, well… itself. He hated his brain sometimes. He was his brain, he reminded himself. Thus, he hated himself. What a wonderful position to be in. He did that now, in the fog of the half moon, not
caring that he was still wearing his pyjamas and slippers. The ground was dry, it was almost Spring: and anyway… he only cared about one thing these days.

An afternoon mid-March:

“HUNK! I need pancakes.”

“Stop yelling at me! I’m busy!”

Lance pouted. “Too busy to make pancakes? Whatever it is you’re doing, it’s not important.”

“I’m writing an email to Shay! Shut up!” Hunk argued from the kitchen.

“You still email? You’re like an old married couple… get a life…” Lance mumbled, displeased.

He was huddled on the couch, hunched over his phone, waiting for Keith to read his latest message.

(13:43pm)

Lance: Have you watched the latest episode of BuzzFeed unsolved yet?xx

Keith told Lance all about BuzzFeed unsolved the last time he’d seen him – a series on YouTube that investigated murders and ghost stories and strange happenings from every walk of life. They were entertaining, sure, but Lance was only watching them for an excuse to talk to Keith. He had watched every single one, in fact. He was tragic for that, he’d accepted it, and now he was just wallowing in the sad, shallow truth that was his existence.

It had been the greatest surprise in Lance’s entire freaking life, the moment Keith had actually walked into Starbucks, glancing around for Lance, who waved enthusiastically with a loud: “Keith! Hey!” That had earned him a scolding from his boss, but it was totally worth it. Keith had given Lance one of those dazzling, rare smiles that was like sunlight and moonlight rolled into one, a blinding expression of the purest joy. Lance had melted, and spilt the bag of coffee beans he’d been holding, which had evoked an amused snort from the object of his affections. Keith had waited patiently for half an hour for Lance to go on his break so they could sit together for the painfully short fifteen minutes he had, sipping a latte each. Stomach jumping with nerves and excitement and
the sheer intensity of his growing attraction, Lance had sat and listened to Keith talk about BuzzFeed Unsolved with disturbing seriousness. He really believed this stuff, especially the ghost ones. He’d then urged Lance to watch them, but “not by yourself because that shit’s freaky”.

Lance had watched them by himself. Alone. In the dark. And… they weren’t that freaky, he had to admit. They were cool, spooky even, but he came away from the experience learning something wondrously adorable about Keith: That boy was easily scared. That was a week and a half ago. He hadn’t seen Keith’s face, heard Keith’s voice for a week and a half.

He was a mess.

Fucking Mullet-head, he thought bitterly as his message still read ‘unseen’. What had got him so busy that he couldn’t even take a glance at his phone? He’d sent the message like, twenty minutes ago.

“Lance!”

Lance ignored Hunk, tucking his feet tighter between his bundled form on the couch.

“Laaaance!” Hunk called again, his sing-song voice frustratingly sardonic.

Hunk stomped into the front room once Lance ignored him, once again, his face a thunderstorm in itself.

“Lance, we need to talk. Right now.” He fumed.

“Why? I’m busy.”

“Oh!” Hunk threw his hands in the air. “You’re busy! I’m sorry? I hadn’t noticed that you were so busy sat here for three hours doing - I don’t know - absolutely nothing!”

Lance creaked his neck up a fraction to glare at Hunk through the narrow slits of his eyes. Hunk took three steps back.
“Lance, are you on your period?” He asked in a hushed, terrified whisper.

“Funny. You’re funny, Hunk.”

“Seriously, Lance. You haven’t done the dishes in five days.”

Lance hung his head, guilty. Hunk was being easy on him. It had been longer than five days for starters. He’d been holed up in his room, stressing, texting, watching BuzzFeed Unsolved, stressing some more, sleeping, only leaving his room to go to work… anything but helping Hunk out. Hunk had done all the cooking, cleaning, chores, everything. He had kept Lance alive these past few days, and all he had done was snap at him, pining over his mullet crush.

“I’m sorry…” Said Lance in earnest, “I’ve been really crappy these past few days and I’m – I don’t have an excuse.”

Hunk’s eyes softened. “I don’t want to be harsh on you man. I get that you’re feeling low, but can you just talk to me?”

Lance chewed his lip. His phone vibrated in his hands, causing him to wriggle in his seat, but he owed Hunk this much.

“It’s the person you’re crushing on, isn’t it?”

*Person.* Hunk had stopped using the pronouns *she* and *her* every time he brought up Lance’s mystery crush, and that bothered him.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No yet.” Lance said in a small voice.

He’d been saying that since Daisy’s party. Hunk was doing his best, barely mentioning it, approaching Lance with caution each time, but… he was beginning to lose his patience.
Hunk sighed, and meandered back to the kitchen, shaking his head.

Berating himself with guilt, Lance shook his head and opened his phone. Keith… his heart leapt.

(14:09pm)

Keith: Yeah, just now. Sorry but, can you come over??

Lance gaped, staring at the message. “Uh…”

He quickly typed out. What? Now?! And hit send.

He had never visited Keith’s place before… the nervous locust swarm in his body had laid eggs. He was nauseous with it, and they began to jump as Keith typed…

Keith: Yes, now. Please. I’ll send you my address

Keith sounded desperate. What the fuck was wrong? Had something happened to him? Was it to do with his Martial Arts? Lance knew it meant a lot to him… His mind jumping with possibilities, he leapt from the couch and sprinted to his room, digging through the disgusting mess on his floor for clean clothes. It was a challenge, but he finally dug up a semi-clean pair of jeans and a t-shirt that was presentable – he’d only slept in it once. Hauling them on, Lance jogged to the door with a brief, “I’ll be back later!” To Hunk, who didn’t even have time to protest because the door was shut moments later.

Lance marched down the dewy streets, shoving on his headphones. Flicking his phone to shuffle, Your Protector by the Fleet Foxes began playing. It didn’t surprise Lance that the first thought that jumped to mind was, I wonder if Keith likes this band too, if not, he’d introduce him to them soon enough. Yet another excuse to talk to him…

According to Google Maps, Keith’s place was about a half an hour walk from Lance’s. That must be a trek to campus, he thought. Keith probably didn’t mind. He was a trooper. He’d been in the Air Force for a bit, after all. Wild. Lance’s stomach lurched with discomfort whenever he thought about the fact that Keith was a year older than him. Sure, it wasn’t that much of a difference, it just made Lance feel inexperienced in comparison. Keith probably viewed Lance’s priorities as way out of whack – immature, juvenile… Lance shook his head. Keith had just asked him over, hadn’t he? Hunk was always telling him to stop being so hard on himself. This was one of those times.
Lance stopped outside the place Google maps had led him too. He was stood in front of – no, that couldn’t be right? He checked the phone again. It was. A Tattoo Parlour. It was tucked away, shoved behind a few dingy looking restaurants and shops that no one seemed to go into. Lance scratched his head, wondering if the FBI Agent who was no doubt watching Lance through his front camera was laughing at him for getting lost. If this was right, he immediately felt sorry for Keith. Lance went to send a message to Keith, but a flash of curtains from the first floor of one of the front-facing windows told him he was being watched.

Moments later, a dusky voice called from the depths of an alley at the side of the Parlour.

“Lance!”

Lance ventured to the dark space, peering in. A blanketed head poked out of a door to his right. Yep. That was definitely Keith.

Hunched over with nerves, Lance jogged to the door. He tried (and failed) to hide the shock on his face. Keith looked terrible. His complexion was a nasty shade of pale nauseating grey and his wild, glittering eyes were ringed with dark circles. He’d wrapped himself in the entirety of his quilt, and his hair was crazily mussed about his face, much longer than Lance remembered. He gulped.

“Hey, man. You okay?”


Heart thudding, Lance followed Keith up a flight of bare-boarded rickety stairs until they reached an equally battered-looking door with a number 5 stamped on it.

“This is your place?” Way to state the obvious. Good one, Lance.

“Yeah.” Said Keith throatily, unlocking the door. “It’s a little cramped, hope you don’t mind.”

“Course not.” I’d share a cupboard with you in a heartbeat. “We’ve spent a lot longer cramped up in Blue, remember?”
Keith breathed the smallest of laughs.

Usually, when a person visits someone else’s place, they notice the stuff that marks them out as habituating it. Pictures, ornaments, plants, the odd book scattered about… stuff like that. Keith’s was the opposite. Lance couldn’t help but notice the absence of stuff. His bedroom was the kitchen. The kitchen was the bedroom. A small desk sat unassumingly by the one window on the far side of the wall, and there was one other door by the stove which Lance assumed was the bathroom. It was tidy, but that was because there was nothing in it. Even so, Lance couldn’t help the quickening of his pulse as he was enveloped by Keith’s scent - the musky leatherness of it, accompanied by a fresh, clean tinge that reminded him of toothpaste. It probably was toothpaste, he realised. The place was so small that he wouldn’t be surprised to discover he could smell Keith’s toothpaste from here.

Keith sat on the edge of his bed, drawing his quilt around himself, his pale face tinged slightly pink. He seemed nervous. He tapped his foot on the bare wooden floor incessantly.

“You’ll have to sit on the bed, there isn’t really anywhere else…” Keith trailed off awkwardly.

“Sure.” Said Lance with a nonchalant shrug, “I like it. It’s cute.” Cute?

Keith’s mouth tilted at the corners. Lance’s breath paused in his throat.

“You don’t have to say that.” He shook his head. “To be honest, I spend most of my time on campus so this place is hardly lived in. Would you like a drink?”

Keith jumped up, shoving his quilt back onto the bare bed. Lance drew back as Keith strode purposefully to the slim refrigerator wedged between the wall and the two-ringed stove.

“Er – sure. What do you have?”

“Water and…” He took out an empty carton of milk and shook it. “Water.”

“Hmm…” Lance hummed, “The water sounds tempting.”
“Good choice.”

Though Keith was joking with him already, his tone was subdued, tired.

“So what’s up?” Lance asked finally as Keith brought him a glass of water.

Keith shook his head, rubbing his temples. “I freaked myself out.”

Lance frowned. “What do you mean?”

Keith met his eye frantically. “BuzzFeed Unsolved! What the fuck was that last episode? Why did they do that? Why do I do this to myself?”


Affronted: “Yes! I am serious! I slept for – like - a freaking milli-second last night, got up this morning, watched the latest episode and I’m just” –

Lance couldn’t help the laugh that escaped him. “Keith! Demons aren’t real. It’s just a stupid trick.”

Keith’s mouth dropped open. “Do not say that.”

“Why?” He elbowed Keith gently, “Worried the demons will appear?”

“Lance! Shut up!”

Lance stood, branching out his arms, “Demons! Come party! We’ve got” –
He didn’t get much further because Keith grabbed his arms, shoving him down onto the bed with surprising strength for someone so fatigued. Keith shoved his hand over Lance’s mouth, eyes blazing. Lance was so shocked that Keith had pulled him down onto his bed that he didn’t even try to resist – he just stared up at him, face flushed, on his back.

“Lance. I will drop-kick you out of that window.”

Lance nodded frantically, and Keith slowly removed his hand, before crouching over into his knees, head hung.

“Wow, you really do take this stuff seriously…” Lance said softly, sitting upright. “I’m sorry.”

Keith shook his head. “I know it’s stupid. Sometimes I just work myself up and – yeah, I don’t think the insomnia is helping. Sorry to call you out like this. I… hope you weren’t busy or anything.”

Lance shook his head. “I wasn’t doing anything.” I was waiting for you to text me. He was so glad Keith couldn’t read his mind right now. “How long has it been since you slept properly?”

Keith exhaled, leaning back on his hands, eyes shut. “Two… no, three days?”

“Fuck, dude! That’s insane! Go to sleep right now!”

Keith fixed him with a level gaze. “It doesn’t work like that, Lance.” He sighed, “I also have a fuck tonne to read before tomorrow, and I just – I can’t see the words. I’m too tired.”

“What do you have to do? Can you wing it?”

Keith shook his head slowly. “No, I can’t… we’re being tested on three passages and I’m – I can’t do it today…” He looked at Lance, “Can I ask you a favour?”

“Anything.” Lance hadn’t meant to sound so breathless. He felt heat creep up his face.
“Could you… read it to me?” Asked Keith, giving him such a doe eyed look that Lance thought his face might fall off.

Lance shuffled closer to Keith, in that moment wishing he had the confidence to reach over and pull Keith’s hands into his own. But he didn’t. He kept his hands firmly to himself.

“O-of course!” Lance stammered.

“Are you sure?” Asked Keith uncertainly, tilting his head. “You don’t, I dunno, have anything better to do?”

The honest answer to that question was no. But instead Lance went with,

“Well, I walked all the way here… and I’m too comfortable to move. I don’t really have a choice.” He grinned.

Keith snorted. “That suits me.” Reaching into his bedside drawers, he pulled out a doorstopper of a book. He winced as he surveyed the cover. “God… just looking at it triggers me.”

“What is it?” Asked Lance, taking the book off him.

“The Iliad.”

“That thing Troy is based off of?! What a sick film!” Lance exclaimed, weighing the book in his hands. He gave Keith a wry smile, “Would you believe me if I told you I only watched that film for Brad Pitt?”

Keith rolled his eyes, “Jeez, Lance. You’re even gayer than I am. But yeah. I can believe it…” He lowered his voice. “And same.”

They both burst out laughing, rolling around on Keith’s bed like a couple of goons. Lance mostly did it to disguise the steady blush that was becoming a permanent feature of his face, and also because it felt good to talk about it like this. Like, really good.
Wiping tears from his eyes, Lance straightened up, “Okay,” He breathed, gathering his breath. “Tell me where I need to read from.”

Leafing through the pages, Keith signified the three chapters he needed Lance to read out to him.

“I hope you realise, this book is about to get a lot more entertaining.” Said Lance, clearing his throat as Keith settled his back against the headboard, stretching his legs out in front of him.

Keith raised a brow. “Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“Because I can do all the voices.” Lance stated with a wink.

Keith rolled his eyes. “Please don’t do the voices.”

“Of course I’m going to do the voices!”

Perched on the edge of the bed, Keith’s legs stretched out next to him, Lance felt a little awkward as he jarringly swivelled himself round to face Keith, knees crossed princes-style.

He began reading, and immediately he was lost. This book made no sense, especially when he was confronted with sentences like: “Like the generations of leaves, the lives of mortal men. Now the wind scatters the old leaves across the earth, now the living timber bursts with the new buds and spring comes round again...”

Keith laughed at Lance’s out of place character voices, slipping further down into his pillows with each minute that passed.

Lance stopped, his throat dry.

“Who the heck wrote this and thought it made any sense?” He demanded, brandishing the book at Keith.
“It’s an Ancient Greek translation of an epic poem, Lance. The original would have been in Dactylic Hexameter, artfully constructed by bards” –

“Keith, I don’t speak nerd.”

Keith scoffed. “It sounds weird in English, is what I mean. You have to read between the lines for a lot of it make sense, like really look into what the characters are saying. Oh, and your voice for Patroclus is all wrong.”

“Excuse me?” Lance retorted, offended, “What’s wrong with this voice?” He put on a ridiculously gruff warrior’s growl.

Keith sniggered. “Patroclus is really young. You know, the crazy demi-god? The Brad Pitt one?” He clarified at Lance’s blank look. “He really looks up to Achilles. He’s innocent in comparison.”

“Oh…” Lance breathed, “Yeah that makes more sense now.”

He continued to read – his throat became too sore to do the voices eventually, so he settled into a rhythm, keeping his eyes locked on the pages. At some point, Keith slipped his legs under the quilt. He slid slowly further and further down, until he was lying on his back, arms folded behind his head, eyes shut contentedly. Lance paused once, thinking Keith was asleep, and admired his face in the fading afternoon light that streamed in through his window. Completely relaxed and still in his warm comfort, Lance felt like Keith was allowing him to see something intensely private. That’s dangerous, he thought, don’t do this to me, Keith… I don’t know how deep these feelings will go.

Keith cracked open an eye. “You okay?” He asked quietly.

Lance started, shaking his head, looking frantically down at the book. “Yeah, yeah sorry I… anyway…” He thought he saw Keith smile.

Little more than fifteen minutes later, Keith really was asleep. The change in his breathing pattern gave him away. His position hadn’t changed at all, but his breaths were long, slow and sleepy, his chest rising and falling with rhythmic grace.

Lance read the line: “Any moment might be our last. Everything is more beautiful because we are doomed. You will never be lovelier than you are now. We will never be here again.”
Then he read it again. And again. Keith didn’t notice. *We will never be here again.* Lance repeated it.

Unfolding himself from his stiff stance, he placed the book back on Keith’s bedside table and inched closer towards his sleeping friend. They were friends, he could say that now. He was Keith’s friend. But Keith wasn’t Lance’s friend. Keith was Lance’s crush. This was dangerous. So dangerous.

“You will never be lovelier than you are now.” Lance whispered, that certain line sticking in his head as he gazed at Keith with intrepid eyes. Keith’s mullet was in his eyes, flopping over his glorious, sleeping face. Lance wanted to move it. He stood, towering over Keith as he slept. This was a weird position to be in. A million possibilities flashed through Lance’s mind as he watched him, but he was terrified that Keith would wake should he attempt a single one of them, so he went with the first.

With a feather touch, Lance reached down and brushed Keith’s hair out of his eyes in one, slow soft motion that sent tingling sparks jolting through his fingers. The feeling spread throughout every part of him, and he felt like his hand was physically met with resistance as he tried to pull away. Keith’s hair was soft, like silk.

Lance was so glad he hadn’t attempted anything more daring, because moments later, Keith sucked in a deep, drawing breath as he roused from sleep.

“Lance?” He muttered Lance’s name as he blinked awake. Lance fought back a shiver.

He chuckled. “Hey, man. I’m still here.” Positioning himself further away so he didn’t look suspicious, Lance waited for Keith to take in his surroundings.

Keith rubbed his eyes. “Wow. I really fell asleep.”

“I didn’t want to wake you. You looked like you needed it.”

Keith yawned. “Yeah… I’ve really stolen your day, huh?”

Lance shook his head. “Not at all. I actually enjoyed myself.”
That earned him a sceptical look. “You enjoyed reading an ancient Homeric text to an unconscious guy? Actually, I’m not surprised. That’s definitely random enough for someone like you.”

“Says the guy who freaked himself out to the point of insanity with BuzzFeed Unsolved. Lame much?” Lance countered, smirking.

Keith shook his head, laughing and muttered, “Shut up.”

“Hey, why didn’t you ask Allura to help you with the reading? Didn’t she do the same thing last year?”

Keith chewed his lip. *Is it because I’m special?* Lance thought, *Is it because you wanted to see me?*

“It helps to hear it from a fresh pair of eyes”, said Keith, “People who know the text too well tend to get bogged down with the technicalities and I wanted to hear it from someone who has no idea what they’re talking about.”

Lance pretended he wasn’t crushed. “Ah, I see.”

“But you actually did a really good job.”

His heart soared once more. He grinned. “Thanks… hey, why don’t I ever see you in college?”

“Huh?” Keith bunched his knees up to his chest, pushing his hair back out of his face in a similar motion to the once Lance had performed minutes ago.

“You should hang out with us. Pidge and Hunk thought you were really cool at the party.” Said Lance. Better to haul it off on his friends so he didn’t sound so desperate.

“They did?” Asked Keith, genuinely shocked.
“Yeah!” Lance laughed. “Once they get to know you of course, they’ll realise you’re a massive nerd.”

Keith pulled a face.

“Seriously though,” Lance continued, laughing, “give me a message and we’ll all have lunch or something.”

“Okay,” Said Keith, smiling. Then his face fell, “Oh…”


“I’m going to Shiro’s place for Spring Break in two days, so I guess it’ll have to be after that.”

Phew. “That’s cool. I’m staying in college to work, so… as you can see, I clearly have no life.”

“Yeah, true.” Keith laughed. “I hope you don’t mind, but I feel like I could actually sleep now. Would you” - ?

“No, of course!” Lance jumped in, springing towards the door. “Please try and sleep, man.”

Keith nodded thoughtfully. “I will. Thanks for… y’know.”

Lance nodded. “Anytime.” He meant it.

“Oh, Lance?” Keith called after Lance as he breached the doorway.

“Yeah?”

“When I get back, you should come and visit me at practice.”
When Lance got home, he discovered he had a text:

(16:51pm)

**Keith:** Thanks so much for doing that. You helped more than you know. I’ll see you in a few weeks.
Xx

_____ 

Usually, Spring Break was one of Lance’s favourite times of the year. He could sit back, relax and work at his own pace without having to think about his *academic* work – but this year was borderline torture. It was barely a week into the break, and Lance found himself pining again – stopping dead in the middle of a task to stare into nothing, reliving a flashback with intense vividness: A look, a brush of hands, a laugh… this time, however, he was making an effort to help Hunk out. He realised he’d been acting pathetic before. Faking cheeriness was something Lance was good at, so he made extra effort to do it now.

April came, and Lance was counting down the days to Keith’s return. One day, during his final shift on a Friday night, Lance received an out of the blue message from Keith. He hadn’t heard from him in a while. He’d discovered that Keith was one of those people who preferred talking in person.

(17:02pm)

**Keith:** This is the Picadillo Shiro’s mom made:

*Attachment: 1 image*

The Cuban dish looked mouth-wateringly good. Lance’s heart leapt and he was grinning at his phone like a mad man.

*Keith is typing*

**Keith:** And here’s Shiro’s attempt:

*Attachment: 1 image*

Lance snorted out loud, granting him a grumble from his boss. Shiro’s attempt at Picadillo looked like a dog had vomited up something dead onto a plate and then scattered it with dry rice.
Lance: Wow, real appealing!

Keith: I know. Lol.

Lance: Did you just say lol?! Do you know what that means?

Keith: It means something’s funny…?

Lance face-palmed. Keith was too cute for words.

“Lance? You nearly done?” Pidge had come to meet him, as they’d agreed. Fuck, his shift was nearly over. He hadn’t noticed.

“Oh, yeah! Gimme a sec.”

Pidge gave him an odd look, but he was too busy grinning to care.

Lance: Just google it, mullet ;)

Keith had been back for two days, but Lance hadn’t seen him yet. Come to my practice this Tuesday, Keith had told him. So here Lance was, rocking up to the part of Campus he recognised the least: The gymnasium.

Lance hadn’t stepped inside the huge, drafty gym since the careers fair back in freshman year. Back then, it had been jam-packed with stalls, each one beckoning Lance to join. He’d gone because his friends were. He didn’t really need a careers fair. His career was pretty much mapped out for him as soon as he’d chosen his course. Now, the gym was laid with soft, blue mats, dotted with pivoting figures dressed in black and white. Kicking, chopping, leaping… Lance stood in the doorway, his hands stuffed in his pockets.
He was definitely in the right place.

First, his eyes landed on Shiro, who was opposing a combatant with stoic grace, his mouth moving as he talked. It was too echoey for Lance to pick out one voice. He surveyed the gym, scanning for a mullet and then –

“YIELD! YIELD, NOW!”

Was that - ?

From a mat on the other side of the room, Lance’s eyes fell on Keith, who was locked in mortal combat with a blond kid who was pinned to the floor, jammed in a fierce headlock. Lance felt his mouth drop open.

Keith was dressed like the others - sleeveless, all black with a white, V-neck collar that plunged startlingly low, revealing every contour and outline of his neck and chest, every muscle tensed to the limit as he struggled to hold down his opponent. He shifted onto one leg, biceps bunching tighter around the kid’s neck.

“Yield!” Keith was shouting through gritted teeth.

The blond kid’s eyes were shut in what must have been agony. The muscles in Keith’s arms tensed once more, tightening, and finally, the kid tapped out.

“Alright, I yield!” He cried, furiously hitting the mat with his palm.

Keith let the kid go instantly, dropping him to the floor like a stone. Every other fighter in the room had stopped to watch the climax of this fight. Lance noticed the way their eyes widened in awe, following Keith’s path around the room with highlighted mixtures of admiration and jealousy. Keith pushed back the fringe of his hair, wiping the sweat soaked black tendrils of it from his forehead. He gathered the longer strands together at the base of his neck and pulled them into a hair tie.

Did he just…? Lance couldn’t cope. His legs turned to Jello. Arms still raised, displaying every fine-tuned line in his body, Keith leant back into his hands, closing his eyes, his skin sheened and glowing with the aftermath. He hadn’t seen Keith for three weeks and this is what he was greeted with? Was he trying to kill him?!

Keith opened his eyes, and he must have sensed he was being watched because –

Lance quickly composed his features. Lord knew what he looked like. He grinned, waving.

“Hey man!”

Keith blinked, as though he wasn’t sure if Lance was really there, before reciprocating with a barely-there lop-sided smirk.

Oh my god.

Lance hated what this was doing to his poor, ruined insides.
“Hey.” Said Keith, his voice echoing over the distance between them because no one in the room was talking anymore. Keith didn’t seem to notice.

Lance did. He noticed the way they leaned in to whisper, frowning at Lance, an outsider, and then back to Keith, confused.

Keith made to join Lance, but Shiro was by his side first. He placed a hand on Keith’s shoulder, talking to him in a low voice. The other fighters went back to talking amongst themselves, some taking up starting positions.

Lance stopped, mid-paced. He’d been ready to meet Keith half-way, but Shiro seemed to be talking to him about something serious. He hung back, unsure whether to walk over… He gulped, insides cold, suddenly feeling like a complete outsider. His eyes lingered on the way Shiro’s hand gripped Keith’s shoulder.

Keith was nodding slowly, hanging his head slightly.

*If Shiro was saying something hurtful to Keith he swore to god he would –*

“Lance! Come over here!” Shiro was calling to him, smiling merrily. Lance dug himself out of his own head. Getting jealous of Shiro was territory he didn’t want to step into, however much his paranoid side encouraged it.

Lance found that as long as he stared into Keith’s eyes, he didn’t get too flustered. Or too hard. Yes, that was rapidly becoming a thing, and he wasn’t sure how to deal with it right now. Crossing his legs as he stood just looked fucking weird so he bunched his hands in his pockets and concealed himself with his jacket, hoping that did the trick. That ponytail was doing something weird to him. It suited Keith well. Too well.

“You’re a little late.” Said Keith, “We’re just about to start packing up.”

*And I’m about to start panicking.* “Oh, yeah – sorry I got sorta lost. I haven’t been here since orientation and careers.” Lance laughed nervously. That wasn’t altogether true. It was mostly because he’d been so nervous, wolfing down the freshly made batch of stress pancakes Hunk had made for him.

“Yo, I was wondering if you want to come back to my place for a bit.” Lance proposed, trying to suppress the heat rising into his cheeks, “Hunk’s baking some cookies, so…”

Keith’s face lit up like the sun. Lance wrote his obituary in his head. “Sounds great! I’ll have to uh… mind if I use your shower? I have a change of clothes in my bag.”

*If I can go in it with you.* “Sure, no problem. I’ve got clean towels.”
They parted ways with Shiro (Lance couldn’t pretend he wasn’t a tiny bit happy about that) and headed back to Lance’s place. With a spring in his step, Lance told Keith all about his break which wasn’t much. Keith’s story sounded much more interesting. By the sounds of it, he and Shiro had made the most of their time away. Keith really sounded like a part of their family. A possessive voice in Lance’s head wanted to make Keith a part of his family, too. He already knew they’d accept Keith like a second son. He’d be perfect. Maybe one day he’d get to visit, they could sleep in Lance’s room and… he shook his head, tuning back into what Keith was saying. He was talking about Shiro’s pet husky. Lance didn’t have a pet husky. But he had a hamster. Lance 1, Shiro 0.

As soon as they passed the threshold into Lance’s block, Keith stiffened, glancing around nervously. Lance’s first thought was: Cute. Then it was:

“You good?”

Keith nodded.

Hunk nearly hugged Keith when he saw him as he exclaimed a loud, “Ayyyyy,” but backed off when he saw he was covered in cold sweat and the ‘ay’ transformed into “Eww…” Keith smiled apologetically. Lance didn’t know what he had to apologise for. After Lance had directed him to his shower, Hunk sat him down at the kitchen table.

“You went to watch his Martial Arts practice? That’s what you were so nervous about earlier?”

“No. That was about something else.” Lance lied.

Hunk huffed. “If you two are gonna become a thing, I’d rather know about it now so I can start soundproofing my walls.”

Lance blushed furiously. “Hunk! What did I just” - ?

“I’ve kept quiet up until now, but I know, Lance. I know.” Hunk’s voice was hushed, but the insane intensity was a collapsing force in Lance’s ears.
They had a stare down. Lance broke first.

“Hate you.” He moaned, defeated.

“You won’t hate me when Keith tastes my delicious cookies and wants to come back for more.”

“You’re saying I’m not good enough to make him want to come back? I’ll have you know, I’m” –

“Shhh!”

Lance was glad Hunk’s hearing was better than his. Keith entered the kitchen, hair wet. Lance sort of really badly wanted him to tie it up again. But he looked hot like this too. Fuck that. Keith always looked hot. It was inhuman.

There was a moment of silence.


Lance smiled. “No problem.”

Hunk feigned throwing up behind Keith’s back. Lance sent him a subtle scowl. But that was the only thing said on the subject all afternoon. The rest of it was spent eating cookies (which were indeed delicious) and playing video games in Hunk’s room. Keith was fiercely competitive, Lance discovered, which was brilliant because he was just as bad. It didn’t matter anyway, because Hunk was better at the video-games than either of them and won without blinking.

When it was time for Keith to leave, they were presented with another opportunity for a hug, which sent Lance into a reeling, sweating panic. Hunk pulled him into a brotherly cuddle first, slapping him on the back. Then they faced each other.

“Thanks for the” –

-“The cookies? Yeah no problem” –
“Yeah it was fun. See you soon” –

-“Yeah. Soon.”

Then Lance practically leapt at him in his panic, catching Keith in a vice-like grip that lasted for all of two seconds before he let go with a breathless “Bye, Keith.”

Keith’s face was red. Lance had done that. He probably thought he was even more of a freak now. Great.

“Bye, Lance.” He said slowly, with a tentative smile. Then he was gone.

“Hunk, I want to die.”

Hunk tapped him on the back. “You two are definitely gonna bang.”

“HUNK!”

Lance stormed up to the bathroom in his humiliation, ready to drown himself in the sink. He was filling it up when he spotted something black and crumpled in the reflection of the mirror.

“Hunk, put your clothes away…” Lance mumbled, picking it up. “Wait a…”

He unfolded the garment from its wrinkled state. This was Keith’s Martial Arts shirt. His heart skipped a beat. Lance ran for the door, ready to sprint down the street and heroically deliver the shirt back to Keith, but he second guessed it. Surveying the shirt, he hobbled into his bedroom and flung it on his bed. He could give it back when he next saw Keith. Right?
Chapter 8

There was a young, naked boy staring at Keith.

Okay, that sounded utterly wrong and it’s not what you think. There was a statue opposite Sendak’s office: a replica of the Apollo Belvedere. It was white marble, about a foot taller than Keith, and depicted the Greek God Apollo with an arm thrown flamboyantly out, cape streaming over his outstretched arm and shoulder while the other rested on a tree stump. There was something at ease about the statue, something confident—almost cocky. Keith could sense mirth in its empty eyes and had little trouble imagining those full lips quirking up into a smirk.

Suddenly Lance slipped into his thoughts.

*It suits him,* Keith thought with a grin, gazing up at the statue’s curly hair. *They’re both extra enough.* But then Keith realised he’d imagined Lance in place of a naked statue (emphasis on NAKED) and blushed scarlet. His thoughts drifted back to that afternoon spent in his tiny apartment: Lance’s voice rising and falling in tandem with the tales of the Iliad. He remembered the way Lance stumbled over unfamiliar words, squinting at the page and leaning over the book in a turtle like way: back curved and head bent over. He’d looked funny, though Keith hadn’t commented on it. Instead, he’d allowed himself the luxury of just watching Lance, comfortable in the knowledge that the other boy’s attention was focused solely on the book and he wouldn’t be caught staring. At some point, Keith’s eyes had grown heavy and he’d felt the lull of sleep tugging at him. He fought it for a bit, trying to focus, but it had been so long since he’d slept properly that, in the end, he just let the tide pull him under.

That made it two times Keith had fallen asleep to the sound of Lance’s voice.

He’d been worried having Lance over would be awkward. He’d never had anyone besides Shiro in his apartment before and the idea of Lance standing in his miniature kitchen/bedroom made him feel sick with nerves. But he’d been so sleep-deprived, so wracked with migraines and freaking out because of that bloody Buzzfeed Unsolved video that something bold had seized him. Something like lunacy.

*Keith: Sorry but, can you come over??*

He’d freaked out after hitting send—spending the next few minutes in agony waiting for Lance to reply. Was it too forward? Too presumptuous? They’d had great time at Daisy’s party and they’d texted each other since, but this was something bigger, something real, and the idea of Lance saying no hurt Keith in ways he couldn’t even put into words.

But within the hour, Lance had arrived. Below Keith’s window (yes he’d been keeping watch and he was aware how sad that sounded, thank you very much) Lance had ambled into view, looking around with suspicion and confusion and checking his phone. He’d looked adorably lost, like a puppy. At the sight of him, despite the elation, Keith felt himself tense with doubt. He imagined the pair of them standing together in his room, awkward as hell and Keith not knowing what to say, Lance getting annoyed and leaving because Keith was a socially inept moron. But every paranoid thought melted away as soon as Lance ducked into his room, eyes sweeping the small space. ‘Cute’, he’d called it. After that, things had gone so well that any shred of doubt in Keith about their friendship was completely eradicated.

“Friendship… huh?” he murmured. He glanced at Apollo’s marble face. “Is that what this is?”
At that moment the door opened to Sendak’s office and the man himself loomed into view. He was an intimidating giant, incredibly tall and surprisingly barrel-chested for a professor. There was a rumour around the collage that he was ex-military, but Keith wasn’t sure how true it was. Though to be fair Keith could totally picture Sendak in camouflage gear barking orders at the nearest, unsuspecting new recruit. His yellow-brown eyes fell cuttingly on Keith.

“Kogane,” he said, lips curling as though displeased by the very sound of Keith name. He jerked his head into his office. “In you come.”

Glaringly, Keith trudged into Sendak’s office.

“What?” Allura demanded, avocado sushi suddenly forgotten. It fell with a thud from her chopsticks onto her plate as she stared open-mouthed at Keith. “Are you serious?”

Keith nodded, shovelling a spoonful of katsu curry into his mouth. When Allura said nothing, simply continued to stare at Keith as though he’d suddenly stripped naked and began singing his own rendition of an ABBA song (maybe Dancing Queen?) Keith let out a huff.

“It’s not that big a deal, Allura.”

“No, it’s not,” she agreed, suddenly grinning. “It’s a massive deal! Like, galaxy-huge deal! Universe big in fact! What’s bigger than a universe? Oh, um,” she snapped her fingers. “Multiverse big! I’m just- I’m speechless! Congratulations Keith!”

“Thanks,” Keith replied a little shyly. He pushed his rice around his plate to avoid looking at Allura’s sparkling eyes. “I mean, it’s not set in stone. I have to get the grades this year but if I do that, well, Sendak said there shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Honestly,” Allura gushed. “I’m so happy for you! I want to buy you dessert. Let me buy you dessert.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

Allura gave him a stern look. “I’m buying you dessert.”

It was the tone of voice Keith knew meant there was to be no discussion on this point. He shrugged a little, unsure of what to do but ultimately pleased. He’d called Shiro after leaving Sendak’s office but had caught him in the middle of a meeting. Allura was the first person to hear his news.

“So where are you going?” Allura asked eagerly, leaning across the table with her chin on her folded hands. She was wearing an elaborate earring with chains and cuffs attached to the stud which sparkled silver. It was as bright as her twinkling eyes.

“There’s a few options,” Keith said. “New Zealand, Italy…” he smiled to himself. “Scotland.”

“Italy!” Allura groaned. “My goodness I’m so unbelievably jealous right now!”

“There are more places,” Keith added, sipping his drink while Allura ordered herself chocolate mochi and Keith a slice of strawberry shortcake. “But those are the digs with most ties to the college and the grant covers the entirety of the costs for six months. If I went anywhere else, it would be too expensive.”
Allura shook her head. “I just can’t believe Sendak picked you. I thought you said he hated you!”

“Oh I think he still does,” Keith quickly assured her. He grinned suddenly, remembering the way Sendak’s lip had curled through the entire exchange. “But it wasn’t just his decision. The Board of Humanities picks the students with the best grades and from there go by attitude. I’m pretty sure Dr Thace put in a good word for me and I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you, Allura. Really, I should be buying you cake.”

Their desserts arrived. When the waitress trundled away with a courteous, “Enjoy your food,” Allura leant across the table again and grasped Keith’s hands in hers. The smile on her face was warm and soft and Keith hadn’t realised until this point just how close they’d become. He squeezed her hands back.

“I’m so happy for you Keith,” she said earnestly. “You deserve this. And I’m going to miss you next year.”

“It’ll only be half the year,” Keith said.

“Still,” said Allura. “You’ll be sorely missed.”

Just then, Keith’s phone vibrated. He plucked it out his bag while Allura tucked into her food—letting out a delighted squeal. There was a text from Shiro telling him he was free to call or meet up if Keith was still around and another from Lance. Keith’s thumb went straight to his name first unthinkingly.

**Lance:** Quick question. *Do you think I could fit in this?*

*Attachment: 1 image:*

It took Keith a moment to work out that what he was seeing was a small suitcase.

**Lance:** Because Hunk says I can’t and I’m a moron to try, but I’m, like, 85% sure I can.

*You think so too, right?*

Keith chuckled.

**Keith:** Hunk’s right.

*You are a moron.*

Lance’s reply was almost instantaneous.

**Lance:** Gee thanks for the support, mullet.

*And btw I have to try NOW.*

*I can’t let you guys win.*

**Keith:** Lance, you’ll never fit in that.

**Lance:** Says who?

**Keith:** Um, physics?
Lance: Physics can suck balls.

Prepare to be amazed, mullet.

A few minutes later, Keith was rewarded with a picture of Lance crammed into the suitcase: cheeks red and squished like a pufferfish. The caption read, See? TOLD YOU.

Keith: Your leg is sticking out.

Lance: oH My GoD.

WHY ARE YOU LIKE THIS?

Keith chuckled.

“Keith?” Allura asked.

“Yeah?” he said, looking up. From the look on Allura’s face, he could tell she’d said his name a few times. He smiled apologetically. “Sorry, what?”

“I asked where you wanted to go next year. Do you have any idea yet?”

“Oh,” said Keith. He squirmed in his seat, suddenly overcome with some foreign, uncomfortable feeling. He was over the moon to have been picked for the International Digs project. Ecstatic. It’s what he’d been working towards all year and now it wasn’t just a pipedream, but a reality. So why… why did he feel so weird all of a sudden? He glanced down at his phone to find Lance had sent a meme of some sort, probably to make him feel stupid for not knowing it, and smiled a little sadly.

“I hadn’t really thought about it.”

_____

Keith was in the library when he next saw Lance.

For once, it was completely un-orchestrated. They’d been texting the night before, like most nights. The conversations usually ended in Lance drifting off to sleep. He did that a lot. At first, Keith had been offended by it- presuming that he’d gotten bored of their conversation or forgotten to reply, but the morning after always followed with a quick apology and explanation that he’d started snoozing. Keith had to remind himself that not everyone was an insomniac like him and they’d quickly fallen into this routine: chat, banter, Lance falling asleep. Wash, rinse and repeat.

Last night, Keith had been trying to get Lance to watch an animated film called Metropolis.

Lance: It’s more weird anime stuff isn’t it?

Keith: It’s not…

*Keith is typing*

Okay, it is weird. But it’s also great.

Lance: Do people turn into sex demons?

Keith: No.
Lance: Damn. What’s the point then?

Keith: Lol.

Seriously though, it’s better than Devilman.

Like, I don’t know how to describe it without giving it away.

It’s devastating.

Lance: Wow. Really selling it there, mullet.

Keith: It makes you think.

*Keith is typing*

On second thought maybe you wouldn’t like it.

Lance: Hey! I can be intellectual.

Keith: You told me you walked into a glass door at Starbucks the other day.

Lance: THAT WAS ONE TIME.

*Lance is typing*

*Lance is typing*

But if you think it’s that good, I guess I could give it a go.

*Lance is typing*

Maybe

*Lance is typing*

Never mind. Have you listened to Fall Out Boy’s new album yet?

They’d talked about this and some other stuff for some time, the clock ticking by the minutes. They stayed up later than they usually did. Keith’s eyes felt heavy from staring at the phone for so long, the witching hour coming and going. He heard students trudging drunkenly back home and the digital clock on his stand read 3:14am. Even he was getting tired. And because he was tired he let himself be stupid, which is why he found himself typing,

Keith: I sorta miss you, yanno? xx

It felt like an age had passed before Lance replied. Keith blinked himself awake.

Lance: Yeah. Me too. xx

A dozy smile had spread across Keith’s face at that. He turned over, eyes slipping shut and didn’t find Lance’s message until the next morning when he was too awkward and embarrassed to reply.

Lance: Want to meet up soon?

And now here he was, blinking at Keith across a table by the window where Keith had nested all
morning. A dazed expression spread over his face, bag dangling from his hand where he’d intended to drop it on the chair next to him, and then his eyes lit up like a pair of suns.

“KEITH!” He exclaimed delightedly.

Several vehement shushes flew through the air at Lance with an army of dirty looks, and the librarian (a tiny, shrivelled old lady) scowled at him, motioning to the sign which asked for quiet. Blushing scarlet, Lance slipped into his seat and pulled his hood over his head. Keith quaked with suppressed laughter.

“Shut up, mullet!” he hissed, kicking Keith under the desk. “I’m already on the shit list! Anything else and I’m pretty sure she’ll take out her fake teeth and beat me to death with them.”

That only made Keith laugh harder. Under his hood, Lance smiled.

“Wanna go somewhere we can talk?”

Standing, Keith grabbed his stuff and crammed it into his backpack. He raised an eyebrow at Lance who watched him confusedly all the while.

“Coming?” asked Keith.

Lance grinned, also getting to his feet. “You kidding? I was waiting for you, slowpoke.”

“Sure.”

“It’s true.”

“Is that why you sat there like a dope for so long?”

“HEY!”

They were shushed on their way out.

In the end, they decided to grab some food and eat outside the cafeteria. There was an area with benches but they ignored these, instead opting to sit on the low wall at the top of some stone steps which overlooked a green area. It was chilly out so there weren’t many students milling outside, but there were still a few gaggles dotted about the wooden tables. It was odd, but the pair of them moved away from their fellow students without having to utter a single word about it, acting on some joint instinct which called for privacy.

Keith dumped his backpack on the wall beside him and began to pull away the plastic around his chicken wrap. Lance had opted for a pot of spaghetti and meatballs and a shallow tray of fries which he placed on the wall between them and nudged them towards Keith with an encouraging nod. Smiling his thanks, Keith helped himself to Lance’s food. Silence settled between them.

“So,” said Lance, looking out over the campus.

“So,” echoed Keith, staring down at his fingernails.

They glanced at each other, in sync, and giggled.
“Jeez!” exclaimed Lance, rubbing his nose. He was wearing a green hoodie and Keith liked the way it clashed with his blue eyes. “Wanna hear something weird?”

Keith nodded.

“So whenever I think about seeing you I always think I have so much to say—like, I can think of a million things I’d say. But when I actually see you…?” Lance laughed suddenly in a self-conscious way. He glanced at Keith. “I don’t know. My mind seems to just go blank.”

Keith’s throat went dry. He swallowed.

“I know what you mean,” he murmured.

“It’s so stupid, isn’t it? I mean, we’ve spent ages talking in Blue, right?”

Keith nodded, tasting words on his tongue. He didn’t want to sound like an idiot, but he also didn’t want to filter himself around Lance. It felt important to be able to say whatever he wanted, for some reason, so he pushed aside his shyness, rubbed his neck for something to focus on, and said, “But… in a lot of ways that feels like another world. When it’s just you and me…” he smiled. “And Blue, of course. It doesn’t even feel like we’re on Earth sometimes.”

To Keith’s relief, Lance didn’t laugh at him. On the contrary, he grinned so widely that Keith could see his pink gums. “Yeah! That’s exactly it, man! Like, there’s so much to focus on at college and so many people around. It really does feel like another planet. Especially when we hit up Coran’s Space diner.”

Keith chuckled. “He sent some space juice to Allura last week.”

Lance’s eyes widened. “What? In the mail?”

“Yep. Apparently it’s none perishable.”

“Gross,” said Lance, face screwing up comically as he made gagging noises. “Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“She gave some to me,” Keith commented, delighted by the way Lance gaped at him in dawning horror.

“Oh my god, you did not drink it.”

“Sure did.”

“EW. Keith, like what the actual hell? I swear to god you’re not human.”

Keith bumped Lance’s shoulder in mock offence, earning a bump back. They tucked into their food then, enjoying a short quiet while they munched and watched students milling about on the green, the distant sound of gossip and squeals and birdsong registering distantly. Lance finished off his can of soda and threw it at the bin, missing it by a good mile. Grinning, Keith went to retrieve it and also shot it at the bin. It went sailing straight in.

“Show off,” Lance grouched.

Keith smirked. “How’s college work going, by the way?”
“So, so,” replied Lance. “We’ve got a few theory-based exams coming up, which I’m not thrilled about. I’m better at the practical work.”

With sudden clarity, Keith thought back to the way Lance had helped that collapsed woman. That seemed so long ago now. Funny, how time works. He wanted to tell Lance that he had full faith in him, that he’d never seen something as cool as Lance in action- calm and collected and sure. Instead, he said, “I’m sure you’ll ace it,” said Keith.


“And modest too.”

“Is that sarcasm?”

“Not at all.”

This time Lance kicked Keith with one of his long legs, but Keith caught it and twisted it just so- eliciting a squeak out of Lance and a wave of surrender. Amused, Keith let him go.

“We should do this more,” Lance said suddenly. “I never see you at lunch.”

“I eat in usually,” said Keith, intentionally failing to mention that this was mostly due to budgeting. “Otherwise Allura drags me to one of her hipster spots.”

“Oh yeah,” said Lance. “They’re all over her Instagram account. You’re never in them, though.”

“I don’t really like photos. I don’t even have an Instagram account.”

“Oh, I do.”

“I know,” said Keith without thinking. Then his brain caught up with his mouth and he blushed scarlet. Panicked, he turned to Lance and found the other boy staring at him, lips parted slightly in shock. “I mean, I er…”

“You’ve looked at my account?” asked Lance, voice way too pleased.

“Allura showed me,” spat Keith in a nervous flurry. “You know, she’s really into it and you’ve got some nice pictures and- and stuff.”

“Oh, really?” said Lance, and Keith relaxed because he’d saved it. Lance believed him and didn’t think he was some weird stalker. Lance sipped at a juice carton he’d bought with the soda, but his mouth was a smug smirk around his straw. It made Keith nervous for some reason. But his gut instinct proved right because Lance went on to say, slowly, “Funny that. Seeing as Allura doesn’t follow me.”

Keith wanted to die.

“Keith?” said Lance.

But Keith had his face buried in his arms. His ears felt hot and he was sweating so much he was worried Lance would notice. The words *I’m an idiot* reverberated around his skull.

“Whoa,” said Lance, peering in at Keith through his hair. “Dude. You know you’re like, totally red right?”

“Shut up, Lance,” snapped Keith.
“Like a tomato.”

“Shut up Lance!” repeated Keith, snapping up to glare at him. But Lance just laughed.

“Dude, no sweat. I get it,” he posed, fist under his chin and pouting like a super model. “My selfies are legendary.”

Keith groaned. “Can we just forget it?”

“Negative.”

“I hate you.”

“I know. Match made in hell, remember?”

Keith finally smiled back at that. “You’re taking care of Blue, right? Having her maintained properly? I’m not getting stuck again next year.”

“Yeah, yeah” said Lance waving his hand in a dismissive gesture and sucking up a strand of spaghetti. Sauce splattered across his face and Keith handed him a tissue with a chuckle. “Don’t sweat it, mullet. I’d never let my baby down.”

“You did two years ago.”

“Again. I’d never let my baby down again.”

They dipped into silence again, tucking into their grub. Keith didn’t want to talk with his mouthful, terrified he’d embarrass himself in some way and he noticed Lance taking more care with his spaghetti now.

“So, any plans for the weekend?” Lance asked eventually.

Keith shrugged. “Not really. Oh, me and Shiro are seeing a movie, actually. It’s a Korean film called Train to Busan. He’s bringing a few friends, so I’m sure you could come too.”

“Maybe,” Lance agreed, voice suddenly sombre. He frowned and Keith’s heart stuttered. Had he said something wrong? Before Keith could worry himself into a state of panic, Lance broke out into a grin. “I started watching Fullmetal Alchemist, by the way.”

“Really?” Keith asked, all worries blown away by the sheer excitement which seized him. Fullmetal Alchemist was one of his favourite shows ever. “Brotherhood?”

“I think so,” Lance said around a mouthful of spaghetti. “It was the latest version anyway.”

“That’s Brotherhood,” Keith said, pleased. “What do you think? Where are you up to?”

“Episode five, I think? That shit with the dog was so fucked up- I cried so hard afterwards! The show really gets to you.”

“Doesn’t it?” demanded Keith, leaning into Lance in his excitement. He didn’t notice the way Lance’s breath caught. “I’m legit jealous you haven’t watched it, man. The fight scenes are so awesome and the characters are freakin’ cool. Ed is such a badass.”


“What’s wrong with Ed?” demanded Keith, ready to be offended.
Lance stared down amusedly into Keith’s face. “Dude. You’ve got, like, the same style.”

“What?”

Lance swept his arm over Keith in a grand, dramatic gesture. “The jacket? Like sure yours is cropped but it’s still red and flamboyant as hell.”

Keith warmed. “It’s not flamboyant!” he argued.

“And the long hair?” Lance continued, seemingly enjoying getting a raise out of Keith like this. “I’m pretty sure you could plait yours now.”

“That’s so not true.”

“Are you kidding?!” Lance reached out, hand a breath from Keith’s cheek, and sank into the bottom of his hair. His fingers curled into it, pulling it over Keith’s shoulder, and Keith shuddered. His skin tingled, his breath caught, and he would swear blind that this heart literally stopped.

“Look at it, you could totally plait this!” Lance continued, oblivious to Keith’s reaction in his mission to be right. “Trust me if my sister was around she’d—” Lance looked at Keith. His expression changed. “She’d … she’d…”

He tapered off.

They stared at each other: Lance’s fingers still in Keith’s hair, chests so close that Keith worried the other boy would hear the thumping of his heart. Lance swallowed and Keith watched the bob of his Adam’s apple.

“She’d turn you into a Barbie.” Lance blurted out at last.

Smirking, Keith punched at Lance’s shoulder, forcing him to block the attack and pull his fingers from Keith’s hair. Keith pretended that he didn’t miss it as soon as it was gone.

“Idiot,” he mumbled, stuffing himself with lettuce and chicken. “If it’s that bad I’ll get it cut.”

“Don’t do that!” exclaimed Lance, then he seemed to check himself on his enthusiasm and went on, gruffly, “I mean you can if you want but it doesn’t look bad. Either way is fine so why bother, yeah? You can rock either, like those Shiatsu dogs. They’re cute with short or long hair, right? You’re like that.”

Lance’s mouth shut with an audible click. Keith stared at him.

“Did… did you just compare me to a dog?”

Lance’s looked absolutely mortified. “WHAT? I MEAN NO- YES, BUT NO, LIKE-”

While Lance worked himself in a fluster, Keith tried to keep the laughter inside. But it was no use, before long his stomach was clenching with the pain of it. Tears pricked his eyes, and the sound of his laugh cut Lance off completely.

“Oh my god,” Keith breathed. “I can’t believe you (wheeze)- and then (wheeze)- a shiatsu!”

Lance watched him unhappily. “What?! he demanded. “It was a completely valid metaphor!”

Keith laughed harder. “It’s a simile you idiot!”

“Oh shut up. You know what I meant. No more fries for you, Shiatsu mullet.”
Keith laughed so hard he thought he was going to puke. After an indignant pause, Lance joined in with him. They cracked a few more jokes about dog-like Keith, and then Lance had an idea. He pulled out his phone and told Keith to smile.

“What?” Keith asked, but Lance snapped a picture of him before he could finish the question. When he flipped his phone around, Keith’s face stared back at him with the snapchat puppy filter over it—long tongue lolling outwards cartoonishly.

“I’m sending this to everyone,” Lance chortled, captioning it Shiatsu-Keith. “Which reminds me, you really need to get snapchat.”

“Why?” asked Keith. “I don’t know anyone on it.”

“You know me,” said Lance, mock offended. “And I’m a snapchat king.”

“Riiiiight,” said Keith, sipping at a cup of coffee.

“It’s true!” exclaimed Lance. “I work the camera like a dream.”

“Mmmmm hmm, sure,” said Keith with a smirk. He bit into his wrap again, in good spirits, but when he glanced at Lance he found Lance looking at him with an almost pensive expression which he quickly masked.

“Well, er,” said Lance, staring into the distance. “I’ll prove it. Let’s take a selfie.”

Keith blinked. “Both of us?”

Lance shrugged. “Sure,” he said, too quickly. “I’ll show you how you really work the dog filter.”

“Okay,” answered Keith, which seemed to surprise Lance. His face broke out into a pleased smile and he shuffled next to Keith like an excited kid with a new toy.

Lance fussed over their position in regards to the sun for a moment, looking for the right angle, and then threw an arm around Keith’s shoulder, his side plastered solidly along Keith’s, and bent his head so their cheeks were touching.

“Say cheese,” he said.

Keith swallowed. “Cheese.”

The picture was absurd. Lance looked great, of course, having angled his jaw line in just the right way and winking at the camera in a cheeky fashion which made the dog filter cuter. Keith just looked awkward.

“Gonna send that to everyone?” asked Keith, while Lance trolled through settings and filters.

“Huh?” said Lance, looking up. “Oh, no. I was just… not this one. I don’t really look my best in it, yanno? Haha…”

The statement brought with it a stunned silence on Keith’s part. He felt tingly and warm. Lance refused to look at him while he tinkered with his phone. With sudden clarity, Keith really looked at Lance. At the hunched way he held his body, the way he kept rubbing his nose or pulling at his hoodie straps, the way his cheeks were pink and his eyes darted everywhere. Keith wasn’t good at this stuff, he never had been, but something clicked into place just then. His pupils dilated.

“Could you send it to Allura?” he asked, softly.

Gathering his courage, Keith sprung to his feet. He threw his garbage in the bin and pulled out his phone.

**Keith:** Hey Allura, do me a favour? Lance is going to send you a snapchat.

*Would you save it for me?*

**Thanks.**

Then he gathered all of the heroics he could muster. Mouth dry, Keith pulled his jacket around him, buried his hands into his pockets and walked back over to Lance so that he loomed above him, casting a shadow over Lance’s curious face.

“So,” said Keith. “Are you doing anything tonight?”

Lance gulped. “No,” he squeaked.

“You know that film I was telling you about last night—*Metropolis*?”

Lance nodded dumbly.

“Well, do you want to watch it? With me, together?”

A whole second ticked by in dead silence. Lance just stared at Keith and Keith wasn’t sure whether he wanted to punch him or himself.

“You don’t have to if—”

“NO NO I WANT TO!” Lance exclaimed, standing up and sending his meatballs scattering everywhere. He swore and hurriedly bent to gather up the rubbish. Keith squatted down to lend a hand. “I, ER,” said Lance. He took a breath. “That sounds cool man. We could watch it at mine, if you like? Hunk’s out with the robotics club until later on so…”

Silently, Keith breathed a sigh of relief. He’d been prepared to host, but Lance’s place felt like safer territory at this point. It would be more public, with the possibility of Hunk walking in at anytime if he got fed up or forgot something, and the extra space would make it feel less… intimate. Keith wasn’t sure his nerves could handle having Lance in his room at night, nestled close to watch a movie and tucked up in covers, skin touching and—

Okay. Keith needed to stop that train of thought before it got dangerous. Also, he realised he hadn’t actually answered Lance yet.

“Sounds good,” he said. “What time?”

“Shall we say six— no,” adorably, Lance held up his hands and counted on his fingers. “Seven. Seven’s good. Is seven good?”

“Perfect,” said Keith.

They smiled at each other, two electrified idiots buzzing with nerves. Lance looked so handsome today. The green softened him somehow, complementing the brown of his skin. He hair wasn’t gelled either, but soft and curled as though he’d let it air dry, tumbling across in forehead in lazy waves. Keith remembered the feel of Lance’s fingers in his own hair and shuddered.
“I better jet,” said Keith, forcing himself to look away from Lance’s cute nose and faint freckles. “Got class in twenty and it’s a bit of a walk.”

“Same,” said Lance, also standing. When he threw his garbage this time it landed in the bin and he whooped, raising an eyebrow at Keith as though to say, see that? Aren’t I cool?

Keith sighed fondly. “Later, Lance,” he said, holding out his hand.

Lance clasped it in his. “Later, Keith. See you at seven?”

“On the dot.”

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It was a disaster.

“I really think you’re overthinking this, Keith,” Allura said with a sigh.

But Allura did not understand that this was a disaster.

“I think the purple shirt was nice,” she said again, cross-legged on Keith’s floor. There was no where else to sit because Keith’s bed was laid out with the entirety of his wardrobe.

“It’s too dressy,” Keith argued. He picked up a black t-shirt again. One of several hundred, apparently. “I’ll just go with this and jeans.”

“Okay, no,” said Allura standing. “We’ve been through this. You wear that all the time. You need to make an effort.”

“You just said I was overthinking things,”

“Yes but you don’t want to under think things either,” chided Allura with a shake of her head.

Keith crossed his arms. “You know, before you asked me what I was wearing this wasn’t even a problem.”

“Oh just let me have a rifle through this mess and you make me a cup of tea, yes?”

Since Allura had used her don’t argue with me voice Keith gave up on the pile and headed for the kettle. English breakfast tea bags and almond milk were now a permanent presence in his kitchen now, thanks to Allura’s frequent visits. He had to admit, if you sweetened the tea, it was a refreshing change from coffee.

“What about this?” Allura asked when the kettle started to boil, filling the room with a quiet rumble. It was a silvery shirt Keith had bought on impulse a while back but had never had the courage to actually where. He shook his head, about to reject it verbally, when a key turned in his lock and Shiro ducked into the apartment. Allura straightened up like a bolt of electricity had passed through her.

“Oh, hello Allura,” Shiro said, cheerfully. He glanced at the bed. “Wow, did a laundry meteor pass through here? What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Keith answered, too quickly. “Sup bro? Do you want some coffee?”

“Just water will do,” said Shiro, moving into the room. He was so big he made the apartment look miniature, especially since he’d changed into his relaxed work out gear- calves and bicep all on
show through the lycra. Keith saw Allura swallow and shook his head. “And I came over cause I though we could go out to celebrate. Noodles on me. Oh and of course you’re welcome to come Allura.”

She smiled brightly at him. “Thank you, Shiro. That’s very kind.”

“So?” said Shiro, beaming at Keith. He caught him a headlock and ruffled his hair. “What do you think?”

There was no way to get around this, Keith realised with a shock of mild panic. Shiro was so nosy he’d find out if Keith lied about tonight, and Allura could not be trusted in regards to anything Shiro-related. He armed himself for the conversation a head.

“Um, I’m actually busy tonight.”

Shiro blinked. “Oh…” he glanced at the bed again. He tried (and failed to keep his tone neutral). “What are you up to?”

“I’m watching a movie at a friend’s.”

“A friend?” Keith stared his brother down, refusing to budge. Shiro sighed and ruffled Keith’s hair. “Well, another time maybe.” Then he trotted over to the bed and picked out an item of clothing. He tossed it at Keith head. “But if you’re going,” he said, with a grin. “Wear that.”

Keith glanced down at the item in his hand. In the background, the kettle began to whistle.

_____

Seven O’clock

Keith arrived at Lance’s door at the exact minute but didn’t knock. He didn’t want to look weirdly eager or anything, so he milled about the hall and checked his reflection a window blackened by the night. The shirt Shiro had picked was all black, loose fitting which made it look less formal under his usual red jacket, paired with a pair of ripped skinny jeans. Keith didn’t usually wear skinny jeans- not since his emo years, but both Allura and Shiro assured him he looked cool.

“But not too much,” Allura assured him. “Rather than emo, I’d say it’s more a bad boy vibe.”

Shiro nodded his agreement. It was one of the strangest moments of Keith’s life.

“I hope they’re right though,” he murmured, staring worriedly at his bared legs and collar bones. “Maybe I just look like an idiot.”

Frowning, he mussed with his hair, flicking it out of his eyes. On impulse, Keith pulled an elastic band from his back pocket and tied up his hair at the back so that most of it was tame. Then he pulled out. Then up again. At ten to seven, Keith admitted that he was stalling and decided on leaving it up. He adjusted the straps on his backpack, which he filled with snacks (Cheetos included) and strode over to Lance’s door. He took a breath… and knocked.

It opened so fast that Lance must have been standing right by it. His face was just beginning to lighten with a smile when he finally saw Keith and any trace of it was blown completely away. Keith shuffled awkwardly.

“Hey,” he said.
“Hey,” Lance breathed.

“Can I… can I come in?”

“What? OH SURE,” exclaimed Lance. Stepping aside so Keith could venture into the apartment. He laughed nervously and swept a hand over the kitchen space. “Come on in. The place is yours too tonight.”

Keith nodded, heat hammering, unsure of what to expect.

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_Lance_

Was it possible to be both sexually and emotionally attracted to a hairstyle? If it hadn’t happened before in human history, Lance was the first, he thought as his mouth dried to the consistency of the Texas Planes.

Removing his jacket as he stood in the kitchen, Keith glanced uncertainly over at Lance, the hairs too short to be swept up into his god-sent ponytail framing his sharp features perfectly. Keith was in black, all black. No red. No white. Just black, subtle emo perfection. Lance never thought those words would go together, but Keith pulled it off. He wanted to pull that gorgeous shirt right off his back and reveal the even more gorgeous skin underneath. He wanted to –

“Uh, I brought food.” Said Keith into the wide open silence.

“Oh!” Lance squeaked. He sounded like his balls were trapped in a vice. “You didn’t have to – I bought some earlier.”

Keith smirked, his cheeks still flushed pink from the walk. “I guess we’ll have to eat more then.”

Lance raked Keith up and down with his eyes, trying desperately to figure out what was making him so appealing. More appealing than usual, anyway.

The first few buttons of Keith’s shirt were open, revealing defined collar bones and the perfect oval of the hollow below his throat. Hands tucked in his pockets, Keith was waiting for something to happen. And Lance was waiting for his brain to work.

“So… been up to much today?” Keith tried, now giving Lance a look that suggested he was worried for his mental wellbeing. Bless him, thought Lance. If only he knew. *If only he knew I’m trying to control my blood-flow from heading completely South.*

“Not really.” Lies. Lance had spent the past three hours bombarding Hunk with messages while he frantically cleaned.

A choice few included:

_Do you think he would prefer gummy bears or sherbet sticks?*_
WTH am I talking about, it’s obviously Cheetos

Sorry I’ll stop asking about food

But what should I wear?? Comfort casual shiz or like smart casual?? Idk???

Hunk???

Nvm I’m just wearing the usual I don’t want him to think I’m trying to impress him

Omg the dishwasher isn’t working and I messed up the kitchen WHICH BUTTON DO I PRESS TO MAKE IT WORK?! D:

Nvm I found it, I’m a dumbass

Btw do u have a pancake recipe? maybe I’ll make some b4 he comes over but I always screw it up I can’t make them like u can L

Wife y don’t u answer me?

hUnkKKKKkkKK?!

Hunk: Go to ‘easy-bake-recipes.com’ – remember to substitute the maple syrup with GOLDEN syrup (not honey)

Hunk: Now leave me the FUCK alone

Then Lance was pretty sure Hunk had turned his phone off because he’d tried to call him twice and it went straight to voicemail. As a result, the kitchen was spotless from Lance’s stress cleaning. He hadn’t even attempted to re-create Hunk’s pancakes after the first two failures. His room was spotless too and smelt like a lemon grove on a summer afternoon – those Walmart air-fresheners were getting snazzy.

For all his fussing, Lance was rather impressed with himself. If only his stomach would stop turning itself inside out.

Keith zipped open his backpack and drew out a bag of Cheetos.

Lance snorted. “Jeez, I’m going to turn into a Cheeto at this rate, we’ve got so many.”

“If we build another snowman we can load off a few on there.” Keith suggested, offering Lance a crooked smile. His insides lurched again.

“Yeah. It’s just a shame it’s the middle of fucking May.” He enunciated.

The tips of Keith’s ears tinged red. “Oh, yeah.” He laughed, ducking his head down and scratching the back of his neck.

A few more hairs slipped loose from his hair tie, slipping over his eyes. Lance wished he’d taped that and turned it into a gif so he could loop it on repeat for eternity.

“Next time, when it snows,” Lance began, “we’ll build another one, how ‘bout that?”

Keith looked up, raising a sceptical brow. “We giving Chez a mom now or something?”

“A whole family if you want!”
“What do we call them? Chez one, Chez two, Chez three…”

“What do we call them? Chez one, Chez two, Chez three…”

“Christ, Keith, they’re not prisoners. They can have other names.”

They chortled, shaking their heads, awkwardly leaning against a surface top. A hand on a chair. One foot tapping on the floor. Eyes sweeping the kitchen for something to say. Despite the noticeable awkward tension, Lance was beginning to relax. He could feel his lungs again, taking in the air they were supposed to. If he didn’t stare at Keith too much, it was okay. It was okay.

He held out his long arm for a fist bump. “So we’re building another one? You promise me?”

He could see Keith toying with the notion of rejecting him for the laughs, but instead he resigned, meeting Lance’s hand for a gentle knock of knuckles.

“Of course. Let’s give Chez a family so they can melt into oblivion together.”


“Not when you think about the pile of soggy Cheetos that’ll be left behind.”

Keith appeared to find that ridiculously funny, because he burst into a snort of giggles at the mental image he’d given himself.

Fuck, he was adorable.

“We’re gonna have to watch the movie on my laptop, that cool?” Lance asked, snatching the neatly laid out row of snacks from the countertop.

“Oh. Sure. How come?”

“TV’s bust.” Lance sighed, rolling his eyes. “I tried to adjust the aerial so it would pick up the neighbour’s cable, then Pidge explained to me that’s not how cable works so… yeah. I fucked it.” He admitted sheepishly.

“That’s… wow, Lance.” Said Keith, grabbing his backpack. “That’s a special kind of stupid.”

“But it’s still special, right?” Lance winked, ridiculously giddy as he bounded towards the stairs.

“Are we…?” Keith trailed off.

Lance spun around on the stairs. “Yeah?”

Keith gulped, face white. “Are we watching it in your room?”

“Uhmm, yeah. I mean, I was planning on. Why?”

Keith shook his head, staring directly ahead. “No reason.” He said.

He didn’t sound annoyed, Lance thought. Or pissed off in any way. And he didn’t look tired, so it wasn’t that… he decided to leave it. Keith would tell him if there was a problem, right?

His bedroom was well and truly spotless. Lance glanced at the wardrobe which was, gratefully, firmly shut. Pretty much everything he owned was stuffed haplessly in there. His clothes, his books, bits of paper and… he smoothed back his hair. It was fine. He’d give it back to Keith eventually. Eventually…
Keith gazed around Lance’s bedroom, taking in the posters, the figurines, the colours plastered on the walls.

“Y’know, I didn’t get a proper chance to look last time I was here ‘cause I only showered, but man… you’re a real nerd.”

“Not a nerd. Just a regular, run of the mill nerd. It’s your fault for making me nerdier with all that weeb anime.” Lance argued, affronted as he threw himself down onto his bed, dragging his laptop from under his bed.

“Those are… amazing.” Said Keith sardonically, narrowing his eyes at the drawings pinned to Lance’s noticeboard. “Who are you? Van Gogh?”

Lance rolled his eyes. “My five year old niece drew them, dumbass. Not me.”

“Is that a foot or the sun? I can’t tell.”

“That are child’s drawings, Keith, you’re heartless! Oh, and it’s supposed to be a baseball.” Lance exclaimed, hiding his embarrassment. Because Keith was in his room. Looking at his stuff. If he was being one hundred percent honest with himself, he was thrilled to pieces that Keith was in his bedroom, experiencing an insight into another side of Lance’s life. Pretending to boot up his computer, Lance watched every one of Keith’s reactions to his stuff; each time a photograph lilted the corner of his mouth into a tiny smile, each time his eyes shimmered as he discovered something else that Lance was into from whatever paraphernalia he had laid out for this exact reason. And he was nervous. Lance’s heart slammed in his ribcage, willing him to go towards Keith and wrap his arms around him – anything to quench the thirst to touch.

That damn thirst of his was getting dangerous. This afternoon was proof enough of that. He’d actually reached out and – he gulped – touched Keith’s hair. Exactly the same way he had when he’d been reading the Iliad to him and he’d lain there, asleep…

Lance couldn’t get carried away like that again.

He glanced at his wardrobe; one particular object he knew was inside drawing his attention. Shame filtered through him in a sharp, cold wash of squirmy guilt. If Keith knew what Lance had done, this very morning, he’d be out the door in a shot. He’d never talk to Lance again… Lance replayed the events of the morning in his head:

Spring sunlight had streamed in through a gap in his curtains, a single shaft of it falling across his pillow, breaking apart the darkness. By no means did the uniform fit him. Lance wasn’t wearing Keith’s Martial Arts shirt for aesthetic purposes – no. This had become an addictive, unrelenting habit of the highest sin. Lance couldn’t believe how low he’d sunk… but that didn’t stop him from doing what he did morning and night.

Keith’s scent had enveloped Lance as he lay on his stomach in bed, his face buried into his shoulder to get a full hit. It always began this way. An experience of just… Keith. His flavour. His essence. If Lance closed his eyes, he could imagine Keith lying right here next to him. It was about this point that he had allowed his hand to slide down, down and down past the hem of Keith’s shirt and into his pants. Lance bit the fabric that sat closest to his mouth. Not only did this help him muffle any sounds, it also let him taste –

Lance’s breaths accelerated, struggling to keep up with the quickening pace of his hand as he worked his way to the precipice of his pleasure. He’d learnt all too soon that if he pictured Keith doing this to him, it was over way too fast… he envisaged Keith sleeping, bundled up beside him
in the car seat, his lips dreamily moist from December condensation. He imagined kissing him with barely a touch, experiencing the cold, lingering breath that left him as Keith, unaware, unconsciously reciprocated. Lance’s desperate gasps rhythmically fell in tandem with his movements as he applied more pressure, reaching the brink – his mind flashed to Keith wearing this same shirt as he fought in the gymnasium, arms locked around a faceless opponent. He pictured Keith wrapping his hair into a tie behind his head, the shorter hairs sticking to the back of his neck with sweat – Keith, splashing his sheened, glowing face with water, one droplet of it crawling down his neck, past his erratic pulse, settling into the hollow of his throat, before dipping lower; down the defined planes of his chest and into the V of this shirt, saturating the fibres with Keith’s essence –

On this very same pillow he was idly leaning on now, Keith in the very same room, oblivious as he made fun of all the stupid posters, Lance had let out a strangled moan as he came into his hand, teeth locked around Keith’s shirt so he didn’t cry out his name.

Lance had never considered jerking off a tragic act before now. Before it was easy – little more than a simple routine he’d slipped into. But his imagination had never fuelled him so much before. He’d found a well. A well full to the brim with untapped pleasure, and he’d only just dipped his toe in… if he allowed himself to sink deeper, he might drown. Drown in his own semen at this rate. Lance couldn’t get enough of his Keith fantasies. He couldn’t get enough of picturing him at practice, of drinking in his scent…

He blamed the ponytail.

This. Damn. Fucking. Ponytail.

He was going crazy.

“Hang on in there buddy.” Lance murmured as he scowled at the back of Keith’s head.

“What?” Asked Keith whipping around.

*Just talking to my dick. “Just trying to get my laptop to turn on.”*

Keith smiled. “Cool room.” He said.

“Thanks.” *I jerk off to you in here every day!*

Lance felt the smile slide off his face as soon as Keith turned away, his insides marring with guilt. He patted the space on the bed next to his long legs, sighing.

“Get your butt over here. Let’s get this show on the road.”

Keith looked at Lance’s bed, gaze intense as he awkwardly clambered onto the freshly made cover, kicking off his shoes as he did, and rested his back against the headboard with his legs crossed.

Straight backed, Keith looked so formal – it didn’t quite fit the edgy biker aesthetic he had going on.

Lance sniggered.

“What?” Asked Keith, eyes innocently wide.

“Relax.” Said Lance smoothly. “I’m sure I’ll like the movie.”
“It’s not really a movie to be liked…” Keith pondered, stroking his chin like a wizened professor considering a great academic challenge before him, “It’s supposed to make you… melancholic, I guess.”

“Melancholic?” Lance echoed with trepidation.

“Yeah, I mean there’s a bit where” –

“Don’t spoil it!”

“I’m not! I’m just trying to explain!”

“Well, don’t! I’m about to watch it right now, okay?”

“Fine!”

“Yeah, good!”

Keith gazed at him, incredulous. “Do you always have to have the last word?”

Lance scoffed. “Excuse me?”

Keith smirked, probably because he’d guessed he was one upping Lance. “Every time we argue, you always have to be the last person to say something.”

“I so do not.”

“Oh, you so do.”

Lance threw his arms in the air. “You’re doing the exact same thing!” He cried.

“You’re still arguing with me.”

Lance felt heat rising to his cheeks. This time it wasn’t from embarrassment. “Ummm, it takes two to tango! And you’re doing a hella aggressive fox-trot right now.”

“You know the tango and the fox-trot are two different things? You’re not making any sense. Your argument is invalid.”

“Bitch, keep going and I will… I’ll…” Lance teetered off, panicking as he tried to think.

Keith’s eyes glinted. “You’ll what?”

“I’ll do something really bad!” Lance shot back with more fire than necessary.

They were inches apart, noses almost touching.

Keith lowered his voice to a purr. “Ooh, I’m so scared.”

Why did that sound so enticing? That wasn’t meant to sound enticing, right? Completely distracted, Lance gazed into Keith’s eyes, everything from the neck down going completely numb.

The embers of challenge lingered between them, riled up and ready to go, their breaths heavy. Lance felt his eyes drop to Keith’s mouth which Keith definitely noticed, because they were centimetres apart.

Swallowing hard, “What were we arguing about?” Asked Lance, whispering as a result of their
insane proximity.

Keith breathed a tiny laugh from his nose. He was so close that Lance felt its trail tickle his chin.

“I dunno. Something stupid. As always.”

“Yeah, we’re really dumb, aren’t we?”

“Unbelievably.”

“But at least we can be dumb together.”

They were whispering, neither addressing how close they were but neither pulling away. Their thighs brushed together. Lance’s gaze was flicking to Keith’s lips as often as his heart beat which was – every milli-second at this rate.

There was less than a second of this, but it felt like hours. It was cut short all too soon however, because a moment later Keith’s eyes ghosted over and he drew away, running his hands through his fringe.

“I need to use your bathroom.” He muttered, looking at his feet.

“Okay.” Said Lance, his tongue no more than a lead weight in his mouth.

“You get set up while I’m in there. Won’t be long.”

Keith shot up like a jet, bolting out of the room before Lance had time to reply. He gaped after him, the space on the bed still indented in Keith’s shape. Lance laid a hand there. It was warm, too.

Finally, he released all the breath he’d been holding inside. His lungs might collapse. His tongue might fall off. His dick might burst from the amount of blood that was now poised there, preparing Lance for an impossible event because – all this energy was going nowhere. His arousal was unspent, tortured, teased and left as quick as it had come. Or not come, in this particular case. He’d save that for after Keith left, picturing this exact moment, his exact outfit, his exact hair…

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck…” Lance seethed, clenching his fist around the corner of his sheets, his laptop heating his knees.

The movie. Right.

Lance met his reflection in the black, smudged screen of his computer. He blinked at himself, shocked. His face was a shocking shade of crimson, his eyes wide and sparkling, hair messily flicked into his face. He looked god awful. No wonder Keith had bolted. His lips pulsed, swollen and tingling with the idea of kissing Keith. Maybe Lance was imagining the feeling. It was strong enough to be real, for sure. Adrenaline coursed through him, and he watched himself bring his hand to his mouth in the reflection, realising that this is what he wanted Keith to do to him. But he couldn’t force it. Just because Keith had told him he was gay, that didn’t mean… it didn’t mean anything for Lance.

Boiling hot, he hauled his sweater over his head, flinging it over by his feet.

At that moment, Keith breezed into the room, a languid smile sweeping over his expression as he saw Lance. Lance couldn’t bring himself to smile, knowing what he’d just been thinking about it.

“Everything working?” Asked Keith, flopping back down next to Lance.
“Hmm… not yet.” Lance hummed, finally hitting the power button. “I forgot it wasn’t charged.”

Keith yawned, tutting. “What are you like?”

The scent that exuded off him was unbelievably sensual, that thick, addictive musk Lance was getting so hooked on. Unthinkingly, he sucked in a deep breath, inhaling it.

Keith gave him a look, but said nothing. Lance clicked his tongue, working down the serious flush that was spreading. This was bad… really bad…

His laptop screen opened on a half-finished assignment. Sighing at the thought of work, he clicked off it.

“That an essay you gotta do?” Asked Keith.

“Yeah…” Said Lance tiredly.

“When’s it due in?”

“Couple of days.”

Keith started. “A couple of days?!”

Lance frowned. “Yeah…?”

Keith’s eyes rounded like saucers. “Dude! You should have said! I shouldn’t be here! You need to get it done!”

Lance laughed. “Keith, I’ve got ages! Wait a minute…” He scowled, “You’re one of those nerds who does their papers weeks ahead, aren’t you?”

“Um, yeah? ‘Cause it’s the smart thing to do?”

Lance snickered, shaking his head. “Knew it! In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not very smart. Now grab the food, teacher’s pet, and let’s start this movie.”

Clearly intensely disturbed by Lance’s lethargic work ethic, Keith swiped up the first bag of Cheetos, wedging it between them.

“You’re sure about this?” Keith probed, as Lance typed in Metropolis watch online English dub –

“Yes!” Lance cried, “Now for the love of god and anime, chill out!”

Keith guided Lance through the process of finding a decent quality to watch the movie in through the multitude of illegal sites that kept trying to direct him to dodgy porn. It didn’t help that Lance insisted watching the movie in HD (He appreciated quality, okay?) so it took them a while, but finally they found one.

Settling back into the blankets, bodies pressed together, the smell of Cheetos drifting between them, they began to watch.

The art-style was weird, Lance thought. The music was weird. The setting was… weird. But he found himself drawn in to the bizarre animated sci-fi in no time. After about forty minutes of being totally immersed in it, Lance realised his legs had seized up. He stretched, hearing his bones crack. Keith winced.
“Want me to hold it for a bit?” He asked.

“Sure.” Said Lance, handing the laptop over to him.

“Oh, it’s warm.” Keith gasped, holding it.

Lance frowned, taking a moment to really look at Keith. His shoulders were hunched. His legs were crossed.

“Are you cold?”

Keith hesitated. “Oh” – he stuttered, “I’m fine, don’t worry.”

“You can say if you are. I’ll give you a sweater or something.”

Keith gazed at him. “I don’t want to… I mean… alright, yeah.”

With a dramatic forward roll, Lance journeyed to the end of his bed, picking up the sweater he’d flung off earlier. It was this or nothing. There was no chance he was opening the wardrobe in front of Keith. That shirt might fall out. Then he’d have a hell of a lot of explaining to do.

He presented it to Keith. “Hope this is okay. Sorry if it’s a bit… yeah.” Wow. Nice one, Lance.

Keith took it, holding it outstretched across his arms.

“You sure this one is fine?”

Lance rolled his eyes. “Christ, Keith. Just put it on. Your chattering teeth are distracting me from the movie.”

Face pale, Keith avoided Lance’s eyes as he pulled the sweater on.

Lance really hadn’t thought this through.

He hadn’t considered the connotations of this.

Keith was wearing his sweater. And it was weirdly oversized on him. He had to roll up the sleeves so they bunched up at his wrists. The hem travelled past his waist. Lance felt that weird thing in his stomach again.

Shaking his hair out of his eyes, Keith settled back, the laptop on his knees, wrapped up adorably in Lance’s sweater.

“Thanks.” He said nonchalantly. “This is better.”

“Yeah, it is.” Lance agreed, voice hushed. “I mean – don’t want you to be cold or anything.”

Keith scoffed. “It wasn’t that bad.” His cheeks were pink, and he was chewing his bottom lip.

WHAT THE FUCK? Lance’s brain screamed. Why had the universe done this to him? Was this a punishment from Satan? Because it felt like torture. He was bound to pine over this for weeks. Who knew when he’d ever get the chance to see Keith in his sweater again?

It was very difficult to concentrate on the movie after that. Lance found his gaze was on Keith most of the time, and he’d unconsciously shifted closer after the bag of Cheetos was finished. He was reluctant to lean over and get more snacks, loath to break the physical contact. If Keith minded the
fact that their legs were pressed together, hip to hip, he didn’t show it. Instead he obsessively fixed his eyes on the screen, chewing his nails. Lance wanted to stop him, take his hand and enfold it in his own, the long sleeve of his sweater between them.

By the climax of the movie however, he was completely taken in by the story.

“Oh my god…” Lance breathed, “This is…”

“I know.” Keith finished croakily.

Lance peeked at him. His eyes were sparkling, his mouth twisted around the sleeve of Lance’s sweater.

“Are you crying?” Lance exclaimed.

“No!” Keith snapped, rubbing his eyes. “I’ve just been staring at the screen too long.”

Fighting back a grin, Lance turned back to the movie, inching a millimetre closer to Keith. He reached over and rubbed Keith’s shoulder in what was supposed to be a friendly way, but it came across as… well…

“It’s just a movie, man!”

“But it’s intense! It’s…” Keith argued as the credits began to roll. He slammed the pause button, craning his neck to glare at Lance.

“Are you laughing at me?” He demanded.

“No!” Lance laughed, which sort of undermined his argument. “I’m just surprised. I never pegged you for the type to cry at movies.”

“I’m not crying.” Keith insisted, voice dead-pan.

It was impossible to take him seriously in that sweater. He thought of the almost-kiss, and drew his hand back. Keith shrivelled in on himself, knees bunched up to his chest.

“Are you having an existential crisis?” Asked Lance, still stupidly pleased.

“My life is a series of existential crises.” Said Keith, voice muffled in his knees.

“I’ve never heard anything so emo in my life.”

Keith flicked Lance’s arm. “Shut up.”

Lance shoved him on the knee. “You shut up!”

Keith shoved him harder. “Don’t pick a fight with me, McClain.” He warned, a small smile adorning his features.


“And I’ll have you flat on the floor in seconds? Yeah.”

“Bring it, Kogane!”

It was just scrapping. On Lance’s bed. Or at least, that’s how it looked. To Lance it was the
biggest turn on imaginable. Keith was being easy on him until Lance tried to elbow him in the face. Then, Keith grabbed Lance’s wrist and twisted it behind his back, before drawing him into a tight headlock, kneeling behind him.

“So, you gonna yield?”

It really was quite painful. If Keith pressed any harder with his arm, Lance’s wind-pipe would be crushed. But he didn’t.

“You wish.” He got out in a strangled voice.

Lance’s legs were hanging off the bed, his groin (thankfully) pressed into the mattress, his torso stretched up by the force of Keith’s headlock.

Keith jammed his knee into Lance’s back. Not that hard, but enough to invoke a high yelp from Lance. His breath was on Lance’s neck, and he whispered the next line,

“Are you giving up? Or do you want me to push even harder?” He provoked, knee twisting a little further in.

Fuck, Lance mouthed, because Keith couldn’t see his mouth.

Who knows what he would have responded with, for the next moment:

“Uh… Lance?”

Hunk’s voice sounded from the open door, and Keith couldn’t have pulled away faster. Lance flopped onto his belly like a fish out of water, before leaping upright in military fashion.

“HUNK!” He screeched.

“Hi…” Said Keith quietly, scratching his head from the other side of the bed.

Hunk’s expression was a mixture of horror and confusion.

“You guys having fun?” He asked into the unbelievable silence, strained.

“Yeah, ha ha ha! Keith and I were just messing around – Keith was just showing me some of his moves.”

Oh god.

“He was showing you his moves?”

Lance wanted to smack Hunk in the face. He knew what he was doing. And he knew how this looked. They were in the dark, brawling on Lance’s bed. That could have been… anything. But of course Hunk’s mind jumped to the extremes.

“It’s Martial Arts.” Keith interjected, helpfully. Apparently he was the only person in the room with a working brain.

“Yeah, yeah, I remember.” Said Hunk. He straightened up. “So… you been doing anything else?”

“We watched a movie.” Said Lance.

Hunk nodded, eyes falling on the laptop. “I see.”
Then no one knew what to say, and Lance wished he could Astral Project and fly to fucking Mars, never to return.

Then Hunk did a double take on Keith, scanning his form. No one said it, but they all knew he’d noticed what Keith was wearing.

“Well, imma take off… and leave you two to… yeah.” Hunk sidled out of the doorway, eyeing Lance. He would pay for that later.

The first thing Lance did was march over and slam the door shut. Which was stupid. Because now they were in total darkness with no light from the hallway.

“Um, Lance. I can’t see.” Said Keith’s voice from the dark.

“Yeah.”

“Would you mind, you know, switching on the light?”

“Sure.”

In the unflattering rinse of Lance’s bedroom light, a sense of finality hit them like a tonne of bricks. They stood there awkwardly for a few more seconds, Lance’s messed up bed sheets between them, before Keith picked up his bag from the floor and uttered.

“I should probably get going. It’s pretty late.”

“Okay.”

Lance had no idea how to articulate his thoughts. He had nothing cool to say after that.

They trudged down the stairs in silence, the enormity of what had just happened sandwiched between them like an awkward third human birthed from their shared embarrassment. At the door, Lance waited for Keith to pull on his shoes.

“I’ll see you soon, yeah?” Asked Lance.

Keith gave him a strained smile. “Yeah…” He trailed off, opening and his closing his mouth. “Does Hunk…?”

“Yeah?”

“Does he know about me?”

Lance was stumped. He blinked. “Know about - ?”

“Does Hunk know that I’m gay?” Keith got out in a short, serious breath.

“Oh.” Said Lance with an awkward, breathy laugh. Probably the wrong reaction. “I mean…”

How did he say yes without bringing up the reason they’d talked about it?

“He asked me if you were into girls…” Lance worked his way through the sentence, clicking his tongue.

“And?”
“And I said no.”

Keith waited, searching Lance’s expression like a laser beam.

“And that’s it?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

Lance could tell he was unconvinced. Keith dropped his gaze. “Alright, well… this has been fun, thanks.”

“Yeah, I’ll text you.”

“Okay.”

There was no hug this time. Keith ducked out of the door as soon as Lance opened it, leaving a cold rush of wind in his wake.

Lance stood in the hall, frozen, unsure what to think or feel.

Later that night, after he’d chewed out Hunk for embarrassing him, he lay in his bed, staring at the ceiling. Earlier, he’d thought he’d have been spending the night jerking off to his new Keith fantasies. But no.

He didn’t text Keith the next day. He didn’t know what to say. And he couldn’t sleep that night either, the heavy, cold weight inside him refusing to budge.

Lance couldn’t place his discomfort. Nothing bad had happened, but there had been such a noticeable change in atmosphere in Lance’s room after the intrusion.

Lance was back to where he’d started last year. Unsure. Uncomfortable. Except this time, his feelings had multiplied immeasurably.

Whipping out his phone, Lance unlocked it, staring at the selfie he and Keith had taken the other day. He didn’t even have to go to his camera roll anymore. Usually when he unlocked his phone, the picture was already there, waiting from the last time he’d been gazing at it, which he’d been doing an awful lot. Stomach knotting into strange, squirmy loops, Lance tried to take his mind off his feelings and lack of sleep by opening YouTube. He typed in *Binaural Sounbeats for Sleep*, found a ten hour version and flopped onto his pillow, shoving his headphones on.

The insistent, pulsing sounds usually soothed Lance into a dreamless sleep, but this time they just irritated. Growling, he threw his headphones down and went to his last resort: his diary.

*Abuelita*, he wrote. He took a deep breath, pen hovering over the page.

*I’m in love with Keith.*

_____

It was two am. Lance needed to walk after his huge confession to his Abuelita. It felt real when he addressed it to her, and he only ever told her the truth. So it was true.

Lion slippers padding across the dry pavement, Lance wandered in his pyjamas and hoodie along the deserted streets, turning his phone over in his pocket.
He wasn’t sure how, when or why he had ended up outside the Tattoo Parlour, but he had. He stared up at Keith’s window where the curtains were drawn, hypnotised by the idea that Keith was inside. Maybe sound asleep. Maybe watching BuzzFeed Unsolved. Maybe reading the Iliad, or doing some late night work… there was a whole world in there that belonged only to Keith, and Lance desperately wanted to be a part of it. Just a tiny bit of it.

Resigning to his urges, Lance pulled out his phone.

*Lance: Hey, man. Sorry I haven’t talked to you in a couple days – had that essay to do. You okay? Xx*

To both his surprise, and panic, Keith saw the message right away. Then he started typing.

*Keith: Hey, Lance xx*

    *Keith is typing*

    You’re still awake?

*Lance: Yeah, couldn’t sleep*

*Keith: Me neither*

Lance stared at his phone. Then back up at the window. Then back at his phone. This was insane.

    *Keith is typing*

*Keith: I was just thinking about you actually*

Lance’s heart definitely skipped a beat. He felt it bounce in his chest. Unable to believe his eyes, Lance typed back.

*Lance: I’m flattered ;)*

*Keith: I was thinking – feel free to say no because it’s late but*

    *Keith is typing*

    Wanna go on a walk with me?
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

WELL, it certainly HAS BEEN A WHILE! For your wonderful patience, this time we've written a 16K chapter to make up for all the time we've been away. It has pretty much EVERYTHING in it, you'll get all the feels, so I'm sure (hoping) there will be 0 disappointment from this!

Just wanted to give a quick shoutout to gimmebooksplz/@tusioart on Instagram who has created some absolutely beautiful fan art pieces for this fic, please, PLEASE go and check them out because this amazing human deserves all the love.

Without further ado, ENJOY!

Keith

The microwave pinged at Keith. Inside was an instant packet of rice, and on the stove there was a saucepan bubbling away with instant ramen. The noodles were too soft now. He'd let them cook for too long, but Keith didn't care. It was six o’clock at night and he hadn’t changed out of his sweats all day. Or showered. Or been outside for that matter.

Keith was a mess.

“I’ll text you,” he said out loud, into the empty air. “I’ll text you.” Then he smacked his forehead with too much force and flopped onto the floor, because Keith didn’t deserve the comfort of a soft bed. Nope. He belonged on the cold, hard floor, because that was what Keith was: cold and hard. “Yeah right,” he said, staring up at the ceiling. “You fucking coward.”

It had been a whole day since Keith left Lance standing in the hallway of his room with a promise of communication. But here was the cinch: Keith was a fucking terrible communicator. He knew it. He had a whole slew of certified psychologists who could attest to it.

Case File Keith Kogane: Has issues expressing emotion. Repressed emotional trauma. Difficulties expressing emotion due to abandonment issues. Yada yada yada bullshit bullshit bullshit. The bottom line was that Keith sucked at telling people exactly what he was feeling. He was a natural doer rather than a talker, so when an occasion arrived where he had to use… words, texts or otherwise, Keith struggled. He’d gotten so used to Lance reaching out to him first that as soon as the words, I’ll text you left his mouth he instantly regretted them, knowing the anxiety would kill him before he could type so much as a hello.
“And now he probably hates you,” Keith told the ceiling, voice dead pan. He picked up one of the discarded cushions and threw it straight up into the air so that it landed unceremoniously on his head. “Idiot,” he said into the cushion.

He sat up suddenly, snatched up his phone and opened his chat with Lance, all in one fluid motion. His nostrils flared with determination as his fingers hovered over the keys, shaking slightly, and he managed to tap out a rudimentary hi before a wave of embarrassment swept over him like fucking tsunami. The room shifted in Keith’s mind and he was suddenly back in Lance’s room, inches from the other boy on his bed, eyes slipping to his lips involuntarily and dipping lower in time to see Lance’s Adam’s apple bob in a slow, deep swallow.

Keith threw his phone across the room.

“Christ!” he breathed into his pillow, rolling onto his belly to smoosh his face into the floor. “Get a grip!”

He’d been acting weird all day. Even Shiro had commented on it at lunch.

“Dude… you good?” he’d asked.


“You’ve been glaring at your phone like you want to murder it for about an hour.”

“No I haven’t,” Keith had argued. “I’m just thinking.”

“That’s your thinking face?”

“I’m thinking really hard, Shiro,” Keith snapped in a huff.

“About what?”
“Nothing.”

Shiro had stared at him them. “Bro… are you okay?”

No, Shiro. Keith was not okay. Not in the slightest. He couldn’t function normally, couldn’t get any work done, couldn’t concentrate for five minutes without flashes and images and smells of Friday night overpowering his thoughts. It was exhausting.

Before Keith could burrow his way into the floorboards, there was a sharp, suspicious rap at his window. Then another. Curious, Keith plodded across his floorboards and withdrew the curtain, surprised to find a silver-haired figure below. Allura waved and Keith waved back, pointing exaggeratedly so that Allura would take his meaning. She did, and headed for the side entrance.

“Hey,” said Keith, when he opened the door. “I’m glad to see you. I’m in such shit Allura I--”

He stopped, suddenly realizing that Allura wasn’t smiling like she usually did. Instead she looked tired and her eyes (no makeup, which was a huge sign something was amiss) were rimmed red. Like she’d been crying.

“Allura?” spoke Keith, opening the door wider. “What’s wrong?”

Allura shook her head, a small sound like a whimper escaping her, and then she was crying. Keith started forward the same time she did and they were quickly tangled in a hug, Keith’s shirt staining with tears.


Later, when Allura was wrapped in every blanket Keith owned and had a hot cup of tea in her hands, she finally calmed down enough to speak.

“I’m so terribly sorry,” she said, sniffing. Her nose was bright red. “To impose myself
unannounced on you so late is awfully rude, Keith.”

Keith waved away her apology, sitting next to her on the bed with a cup of coffee. He reached under his bed and produced a box of chocolate cookies, explaining, “It’s for emergencies,” which made Allura laugh.

“Thank you,” she said, graciously accepting the treat.

“No problem,”

They slipped into silence. Keith got the idea that Allura was working herself up to something. Other people would probably prompt her to talk about her problems- Keith had seen Shiro do it hundreds of times- but that wasn’t Keith. Instead, he simply let the moment stretch, resting his knee against Allura’s so she knew he was there, and waited, sure she’d get there in her own time.

“This place is so calming,” Allura murmured, looking around. “It’s so small it feels like the rest of the world doesn’t exist.”

“Yeah,” Keith agreed, sipping his drink.

Allura bit her lip. “I…” she started. Then she stopped. She took a breath. “I think Shiro knows I like him.”

Keith blinked. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” agreed Allura.

“I mean… how?”

“Because! OH GOD.” Allura answered in a rush. She groaned, shook her head, and when she stopped there was a halo of frizzy strands around her face. “I ran into him outside the library- he’d been to a special lecture by a guest or something. I’d just come from the pub with Daisy and was a bit tipsy, we had a few, you know? And then there he was. My brains fried and Daisy disappeared and I couldn’t just ignore him, could I? So I said hi, hoping to god he didn’t notice how gone I was,
and then he offered to walk me home and— oh I don’t know! He was being so nice and then we were outside my block and I just—I didn’t want him to go so I just started rambling on about something or other and he looked so panicked Keith! Like I was crazy. I probably sounded crazy. And somewhere in all of this I just thought, fuck it, and hugged him. And I think I told him something along the lines of I thought he was really pretty and the best guy I know.” she hiccupped, tears welling in her eyes again. “Oh. God.”

Keith handed her a tissue, giving her a moment to compose himself, before asking, “What did he say?”

Allura winced. “I don’t know,” she said lowly. “Because I ran away after that.”

Keith winced as well.

“It’s bad isn’t it?” Allura demanded. “He probably hates me now, right?”


Allura bit her lip. “I know you’re right, Keith. But… that’s part of the problem isn’t it? Shiro likes everyone… but could he like me?”

That brought Keith up short. He’d known, obviously, that Allura had a crush on Shiro. But he’d never thought about it seriously. He was used to people, especially girls, crushing on his older brother- he was so goddamn likable after all- but Keith also knew his brother. Honestly, in all the time Keith had known Shiro he’d shown very little interest in girls; he’d had a couple of girlfriends since graduating college but nothing serious, always putting work before relationships. And Keith also knew Shiro’s policies when it came to dating undergraduates. After all, it wasn’t rare for one of his pupils to ask him out for a drink or flirt in a very un-platonic way.

“Is it such a big deal?” Keith had asked one afternoon when Shiro came in, white with guilt after rejecting a first year who then burst into tears.

“What?”

“Going out with an undergrad.”
“Oh…” Shiro had folded his arms and answered with all the seriousness of a stoic general. “It’s just unprofessional. Technically it’s not breaking any rules, but it’s a messy situation. I’m in a position of power at this college, and I’d feel like I was abusing that.”

Keith’s expression must have portrayed his thoughts, because tears welled up in Allura’s eyes and her smile was wobbly.

“I see,” she said, drawing her knees up to her chest. She burrowed into the blanket. “I guess it was silly to think a guy like Shiro would look at someone like me.”

“Allura!” Keith cried, genuinely shocked. “Allura how could you say that? You’re amazing!”

Allura just shook her head, tears falling again, and Keith tugged her into a hug. “Sorry,” she sobbed. “I don’t know, I’m upset about all of this but I think I’m also missing my parents too, you know?”

Keith gripped her tighter. He knew that feeling all too well. “I know,” he said. “You don’t have to apologise, Allura. I know.” He was glad she couldn’t see his face right now, because the expression of disbelief was unmistakable. The idea that someone like Allura could think so poorly of herself was almost unthinkable; after all she was smart, pretty, and more accomplished than most teenagers her age. Yet here she was berating herself for not being good enough.

“You’re one of the bravest people I know, Allura,” said Keith.

Allura laughed: a watery sound. “I don’t feel like it.”

“Well you should. I can’t believe you think you’re not good enough, any guy would be lucky to have you and you should have more confidence in yourself.”

“You’re one to talk,” she murmured.

“What?”
“Nothing,” sighed Allura. She sniffed a little and sat back, breath shuddery but at least now she looked less ashen. “Thank you, Keith. I feel better now.”

Keith smiled. “Good. And Allura, for the record, my brother’s a bit of a dope when it comes to romance and stuff, so don’t take it too hard, okay?”

“Really? My, then I suppose there is some family resemblance after all,” she teased.

“We’re not blood related.”

“I know Keith. That was a joke.”

“Oh,”

Allura laughed then and it sounded bright. Glancing over at Keith’s stove, she raised an eyebrow at the still-bubbling saucepan. “I don’t suppose you have anything to eat?”

“Not unless you like overcooked ramen.”

“Pizza then?”

Keith grinned. “Pizza.”

There was a new pizza place called Firehouse in the more hipster part of the city which Allura had been dying to try for weeks. Keith had put her off recently, worried about the undoubtedly pricey food (hipster places were notorious for charging five dollars for organic water after all, whatever the fuck that means) but he figured his bank account could suffer a little for the sake of Allura. In truth, Keith felt bad that he hadn’t really been taking Allura’s feelings for Shiro seriously. He’d been so wrapped up in his own head recently that he’d sort of pushed everything else to the back of his brain, and after everything Allura had done for him… well, Keith just felt like a jerk.
“They do a black sour dough crust,” Allura gushed on the way into the city. “Juniper said it was simply to die for. It’s going to be great.”

Keith hummed in agreement, sure that it would be. What he didn’t expect, however, was to walk into the smallest restaurant and spot Hunk behind the counter in the kitchen. It was a dimly lit place with lots of candles and soft, orange lighting overhead, igniting the ribbons of red threaded through the wooden furniture and counters. Soft music was playing over-head and it smelled divine—like freshly baked bread and herbs.

At first, Keith wasn’t sure if he was simply imagining Hunk behind the counter, but then Hunk turned around, spotted them, and broke into a grinning wave.

“Hey guys!” he called.

“Isn’t that Lance’s friend?” Allura asked.

“Hunk,” said Keith.

They walked over to the counter and Hunk came over to them, beaming under his chef’s hat which was a tad too big and fell into his eyes.

“Hey man,” said Keith. “You know Allura, right?”

“Oh, yeah, Lance has totally mentioned you,” said Hunk, and something unpleasant twisted in Keith’s stomach. “You’re the mechanic, right?”

“Something like that,” laughed Allura. “How long have you worked here?”

“Since opening,” said Hunk, proudly. “A lot of the dishes are my own recipe.”

“Really?” asked Keith, impressed. “Dude, that’s awesome.”
“Why thank you,” said Hunk. “Not to brag but you guys are totally gonna have your taste bud’s minds blown. In fact, tell me what you want. I’ll bump up your order and I can sit with you then. My break’s due in ten anyway.”

In the end, Allura ordered a vegan pizza with mushrooms and balsamic onions while Keith just went for a margarita.

“So boring,” Allura teased him.

When their food was ready Hunk brought it over himself and plopped himself down, barely able to conceal his enthusiasm while they prepared to take their first bite. They bit down at the same time and simultaneous groans rumbled through them; it was divine. Herbs had been baked into the dough which was salty and plump, and the sauce was thin but bursting with flavour, meshing with the creamy cheese like a dream.


“You like it?” Hunk asked.

“Dude,” Keith said. “I could cry it’s so good.”

Hunk laughed, clearly pleased. “I’m glad. The dough’s a fairly new recipe so I gotta admit I was sorta using you as guinea pigs.”

“I will gladly be a guinea pig anytime,” gushed Allura.

“Same.” agreed Keith.

Hunk just laughed again.

Later, when their plates were empty and the pair of them were completely stuffed, Allura excused herself from the table and headed to the bathroom, leaving the two boys alone together. Keith was in such a state of satiated food coma that he forgot to make conversation, instead staring out the window at the dark night. Catching himself, he turned to Hunk with the intent to ask about college
or robotics or something, to find him staring intently at him. The words withered on Keith’s lips.

“Hey dude,” said Hunk. “I wanted to say something. About the other day.”

Heat seared Keith’s cheeks. “Oh. Sorry about that. We- I didn’t, I mean we wer- aren’t—”

“No,” said Hunk, shaking his head. “Don’t worry about that. I’m not demanding an explanation. I just wanted to say that I like you Keith. Like, you’re a cool guy. So come over to our place whenever you want, okay? I know Lance would be over the moon.”

Keith gulped. “Oh. Thanks… is he… I mean, how is he today?”

A cloud of irritation descended over Hunk’s face. “Mopey as hell, man. Jeez, I couldn’t wait to get out of there. He’s just laying around in his pyjamas demanding food and complaining about the fact he’s run out of face mask. I was this close to throwing him out a window.”

This was information Keith didn’t know what to do with. Though the thought of Lance in a face mask was both funny and endearing so Keith quickly filed that fact away into his memory. “Oh. Okay.”

Hunk was looking at him in that funny way again.

“What?” asked Keith, shifting self-consciously.

“Lance is an idiot,” said Hunk, suddenly. “Like, a big idiot. He thought Ghandi was a Tibetan monk until Pidge told him otherwise, but he’s also an idiot in the sense that he makes everything convoluted in his head. He just can’t think in a straight line, instead everything has to be a maze.”

“O… kay?” said Keith, unsure of where this was going and growing more uncomfortable by the minute.

“What I’m trying to say,” said Hunk, exasperated. “Is that he’s hard to read sometimes, and if you want to know what’d going on inside his stupid head you can’t always rely on what he says or does. You’ve got to talk to him. Get it out of him. See what I mean?”
The ground didn’t feel solid beneath Keith’s feet for a moment. It was like he’d been suspended-filled with helium and left to float. Was… what was this? What was Hunk trying to say?

“I’m under strict bro code here, man,” continued Hunk, scratching his head in an embarrassed sort of way. “But all I’m saying is that there’s a reason he’s been a pain today.”

Just then, Allura came back and Hunk’s break was over. They said their goodbyes, paid the bill (leaving a good tip, because that food was worth so much more than the price on the menu) and on the way out, Keith glanced behind him to find Hunk giving him a thumbs up. His stomach felt wishy washy the entire walk home.

“Hey, Allura?” he said, at the entrance to her building.

“Yeah?”

“Do you… I mean…” it was hard to get these words out. Why was it so hard? Why had it always been so hard to give form to the thoughts inside his own head? Gripping his hands into fists, Keith took a deep breath. “I know how you feel. About everything. The way you’re missing your parents and how it feels like every fault you have is linked back to it somehow, like it’s this huge stain that’s tainted you, somehow. Like you can’t function properly because of it and nobodies ever going to understand it or see past it, and you’re not worth of being loved because it’s too much baggage. But it isn’t true. You’re fantastic and you deserve to be loved.” He stopped and took a surprised breath, elated that he’d finally been able to communicate.

“Keith…” breathed Allura, tears welling in her eyes again. She sprung at him, wrapping her arms around him in a tight hug. She smelled like perfume and pizza. “Thank you,” she whispered.

They stepped back and smiled at each other, before Allura turned to her door. Keith was about to leave when she said, suddenly, “It’s the same for you too though.” Keith blinked and Allura laughed. “You deserve to be loved Keith. Let yourself, okay? Lance is already gone, I’m telling you.”

Keith blushed. “I’m not sure about that…”

“I am,” she said, confidently. “Because you’re wonderful. If you liked girls, I wouldn’t even be stressed over Shiro, let me put it that way.”
Before Keith could process this, Allura leaned over and kissed him on his cheek, grinned, and then disappeared into her building.

Her words echoed around Keith’s head the entire walk home.

It was two in the morning.

Keith was going to text Lance.

He was going to do it, even if it killed him.

“Come on,” he muttered, pacing across his room with phone in hand. *Albatross* was playing softly in the background. “Come on. Just say hi, be casual. You can do it.”

Something had happened on the way back from Allura’s: a switch had gone off in Keith’s head. He couldn’t put his finger on what had triggered it exactly, he only knew that Allura’s tearful face, Hunk’s level stare and their words kept swirling around inside his head until, quite suddenly, Keith had decided that he was serious.

He was serious about Lance.

It was a shock to admit that, until this point, Keith had been doing a weird sort of dance with Lance McClain and he knew exactly why. At first, Keith had assumed Lance was straight so there was no risk in sneaking glances and teasing him. Then there was the fact that they only saw each other on their road trips at the beginning of their friendship, which was like a little bubble of a world. It felt safe there. Harmless. Like it didn’t affect real life. And then there was Lance himself. The guy acted like such a goof that it was hard to take him seriously most of the time. It was easy to dismiss their flirting and banter as a mere side effect of Lance’s personality.

But Keith did take Lance seriously. And Lance wasn’t straight. And this wasn’t a bubble. This was
the real world and, truthfully, Keith didn’t want their relationship to be separated from it. He’d thought that the road trips made what they had special, but Keith didn’t want something special. He wanted something mundane and ordinary and absolutely perfect because of it.

Finally, and Allura had helped him with this bit, Keith realised he’d done what he’d always done unconsciously. He’d just assumed that Lance wouldn’t want him. That, like his mom, Lance would think he wasn’t worth staying for. So he’d put up walls: always letting Lance contact him first, being reactionary, never fully admitting how invested he was.

But Keith was invested. And now he was going to prove it.

“No more messing around,” he muttered, fingers fluttering over the keys.

But then Lance texted Him.

**Lance:** Hey, man. Sorry I haven’t talked to you in a couple days – had that essay to do. You okay? Xx

It was so like Lance that Keith burst in laughter. The guy even competed with him telepathically. It made Keith feel lighter than he had in two whole days, so he decided to just switch off his brain and go with his gut. No more overthinking this shit.

**Keith:** Hey, Lance xx

*You’re still awake?*

**Lance:** Yeah, couldn’t sleep.

Was it too hopeful to think it was because of him? No overthinking things, he reminded himself, furiously typing.

**Keith:** Me neither
He bit his lip. Be a man, Kogane.

**Keith:** *I was just thinking about you actually.*

*Lance is typing*

**Lance:** *I’m flattered ;)*

Alright, you can do this, Keith. Just go with it. No walls. No bullshit.

**Keith:** *I was thinking – feel free to say no because it’s late but*

He took a breath.

Want to go on a walk with me?

The next few moments that passed felt like an eternity in which Keith’s heart was on the perpetual edge of bursting.

*Lance is typing*

*Lance is typing*

*Lance is typing*

*Lance is typing*

Oh god, had he been too forward?

**Lance:** *That sounds good actually.*
Keith let out a breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding.

**Keith:** Sweet, want me to walk over to your place?

**Lance:** No! I mean I don’t wanna put you ot like that man. Why don’t we meat in the miffl somewhere?

Keith chuckled at the spelling-mistakes. He must be really tired.

**Keith:** Outside the drama building?

**Lance:** Er yeah, sounds gokn.

*Good*

**Keith:** Cool, I’ll set off in five.

**Lance:** Take your time man! There’s no rush!

But Keith was in a rush. He felt giddy with excitement and couldn’t pull on his shoes fast enough. “Coat,” he muttered, looking around for his signature red jacket. But then his eyes landed on a soft pile of blue and, in his new found state of blissful not-thinking, Keith pulled on Lance’s jumper before dashing out the door. He broke into a half jog, grinning like a buffoon, and sprinted past the dull flickering lights of takeaways and corner shops which streaked by like the trails of fireflies. It was chilly and no body was out at this time; the only sound to be heard was the consistent *thud-thud* of Keith’s feet and the wild beating of his heart.

When he finally got to the Drama Building, there was a familiar figure hunched over his calves. Slowing to a brisk walk, Keith licked his lips, willing himself to be natural and honest and open. Communication, he reminded himself. Fuck the psychologists. Keith would prove them all wrong.

“Lance!” he called.
Whirling around, Lance’s eyes went wide, and he immediately straightened, lashing out a hand to lean against the building. Only he missed the mark and stumbled instead. Keith snorted.

“Oh, hey Keith,” said Lance, trying desperately to act casual. He looked sweaty and a little out of breath. “What took you so long? I’ve been here for ages.”

“Yeah, right,” snorted Keith. “You—” Then he stopped and stared. “…Lance, are you wearing pyjamas?”

Lance’s face bloomed red. “Maybe,” he said, defensively.

“Are those lion slippers?”

Lance folded his arms. “What’s your point?”

Unbidden, Keith began to laugh. It was just so ridiculous.

“Hey!” Lance complained. “Don’t laugh at me you jerk!”

“They’re so muddy,” Keith gasp between laughs. “Why didn’t you put shoes on?”

Scowling, Lance said grandly, “I forgot.”

“You forgot.”

“Yes.”

“Your shoes?”

“Yes.”
Another wave of laughter rolled over Keith.

“You’re a terrible person, Mullet,” said Lance, but he was grinning now.

“At least my feet aren’t wet though,”

“Fair point. But aren’t you jealous of my style?”

“Not in the least,”

“I’m just too relevant for you. You wouldn’t understand high fashion.”

“Idiot.”

“Jerk.”

They grinned at each other and Keith was beginning to wonder why he was ever nervous about texting Lance in the first place. It just felt so right to be here, with him. Whenever they were together, sharing the same air within easy reaching distance, Keith felt calmer. It was like there were two Keiths; on the one hand there was the Keith Shiro and Allura knew: reserved but self-assured, hard-working but closed off. And then there was this Keith. The way Lance made him feel… it was… well. This was the version of himself he wanted to be.

“So,” said Lance, shyly.

“So,” said Keith, grinning.

But Lance didn’t say anything anymore. It took Keith a moment to realise the reason why: his eyes had dropped to Keith’s jumper. To Lance’s jumper. The expression on Lance’s face made Keith’s stomach do an excited, pleased flip.
“Shall we get going?” asked Keith.

“Huh?” asked Lance, as though coming out of a daze.

“The walk?” said Keith, pointedly.

“Oh. Oh yeah…” Lance stretched his arms, trying to gather up the shred of his carefree persona. “Where to, dude?”

“How about the beach?”

“The beach?!” repeated Lance, voice breaking into a squeal. He cleared his throat, embarrassed, and continued, “You want to go to the beach at two in the morning?”

“Two-thirty,”

“What?”

“It’s about two-thirty now."

“Okay wiseass. You want to go to the beach at two-thirty in the morning?”

Keith grinned. “What’s the matter, scared?”

Immediately afront, Lance puffed out his chest and snapped, “No. I’m just wondering what’s got you on loopey juice all of a sudden.”

Keith shrugged. “Must be the lack of sleep.”

“Must be,”
Keith turned on his heel, glancing over a Lance with a curve of his lips, hip jutting out slightly in a way that would have Keith roiling with embarrassment if he was letting himself think about it. “You and your kittens coming, or what?”

Shaking his head, Lance jogged to Keith’s side and they set off into the night.

When they finally got to the beach, it was a little past three. Keith had made sure to chat with Lance the entire walk to the beach; he asked about college and his essay, told him that he’d seen Hunk that day and inquired after Blue, asking only half-jokingly whether Lance had gotten her serviced recently, he told him about his ruined ramen (though he kept the exact reason for why it was ruined to himself) and about the way his shitty bathroom sink kept clogging and even about his service plans for Red in the summer.

“I plan on giving her a complete overhaul as soon as I can get the parts I need,” he said as the grass gave way to gravel and then to sand. “And another paint job. She’s starting to look a little faded and I want her in prime condition for racing season.”

“You race?” asked Lance. He sounded more subdued than usual.

“Sometimes,” said Keith. His voice grew warm with enthusiasm. “My dad used to. When I was a kid I’d watch from the pitstop with the biggest bag of jerky you’d ever seen.”

“That might be the most cowboy thing you’ve ever said,” snarked Lance.

Keith laughed. “You might be right. It was dad’s favourite. You should have seen the way he rode, Lance. When he took corners the laws of gravity seemed to just disappear. So many times I thought he was going to fall and skid, but he never did. Not even once. It was like magic.”

“You…” said Lance. He bit his lip and looked up at the sky. “You seem different today.”

“Do I?” asked Keith, even though he knew exactly what Lance was alluding to. He’d not been this open with someone in a long time and the experience was both thrilling and freeing in a way Keith
found hard to explain. There was still the familiar prickle of fear up his spine: the dread and paranoid, but Keith squashed it down. He’d chosen to take this seriously, after all, to take Lance seriously, and he intended to follow through to the end. “Does it bother you?” he asked, genuinely curious.


“You seem different too,” commented Keith after a pause. “Quieter.”

“I guess I am,” agreed Lance with a chuckle. “But it’s nice. Being so… out there all the time can be exhausting.”

The distant sound of the sea drifted on the air, though it was too dark to make out the ocean. Their only light was given out by sparsely placed street lights and the torch on Lance’s phone. Keith inhaled the scent of salt and sand, felt the loose grains give beneath his shoes.

“You don’t have to be ‘out there’ with me,” he said.

“I know,” agreed Lance. “That’s why it’s nice. I know I come off as a hyper annoying jerk but I’m not always like that.”

Keith frowned. “You don’t come off as a hyper annoying jerk at all,” he countered.

“Yeah,” Lance agreed with a scoff. “Alright.”

“I’m serious,” insisted Keith, trying to read Lance’s expression in the dark. “You don’t.”

“Maybe you don’t think that now,” said Lance. “But you definitely did when we first met.”

“What, on the road trip?”

“Dude, yeah.”
“Um, dude, no?” Keith stopped now, grabbing hold of Lance’s arm so he had to stop too. Lance glanced at his face and Keith swore he saw the other boy gulp. “I never thought that.”

There was a pause, and when Lance spoke it was in a quiet, surprised voice: “You didn’t?”

“I wouldn’t have got in the car with you otherwise,” said Keith. “And you would have known about it. I’m not sure if you’ve noticed but I’m sorta brutally honest about that stuff. I can’t keep the emotions off my face.”

Lance thought about that and chuckled. “I guess you’re right. So you didn’t think I was annoying? Not even once?”

“I thought you were odd,” said Keith, gently squeezing Lance’s arm. “But never annoying. And for the record, I think you remember that trip wrong. Like, yeah, you were loud and pretty obnoxious at times, but I remember most of that trip as a chill ride with some chill music. You spaced out a lot, and when you were driving you looked…” Keith stopped talking, suddenly mortified, and pulled his hand away from Lance’s arm. He cleared his throat. “We should keep walking.”


They ambled by in silence, pausing to take off their shoes and slippers so they could feel the sand between their toes. Keith’s face felt warm, despite the chilly wind, and every nerve felt electrified.

“You didn’t text me,” said Lance suddenly.

Keith’s heart skipped a beat.

“I thought…” Lance paused. Took a breath. “I thought maybe I’d upset you.”

“What?”
Keith felt, rather than saw, Lance shrug. “On Friday. I thought I’d done something to… I dunno, offend you I guess.”

“You didn’t,” argued Keith.

“Oh.”

“…”

“…”

Now Lance stopped. “So why didn’t you text me?”

Worrying at his lip, Keith buried his hands in his jean pockets. Communicate, communicate, he chanted like a mantra in his head. He sat down and gestured for Lance to join him. They were close enough to touch at this distance, though neither of them did.

“I was nervous,” began Keith, but Lance immediately interrupted.

“Nervous? Why were you nervous?”

“Well—”

“We’ve been texting for weeks,”

“Yeah, but—”

“Do I make you nervous? Because you know I—”

“LANCE,” said Keith pointedly. “Can I speak?”
“Oh yeah. Sorry man, go ahead.” He zipped his lips for emphasis.

“I was nervous,” Keith continued. “Because I’m not good with people. Like, at all. I haven’t been since my dad died, really.”

In the growing light, Keith saw Lance go very still.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he continued. “I was never much of a people person even when he was alive- living in the desert does that to you, I guess- but when he passed away he took something of me with him. And it’s been hard trying to find that something since. That’s why I find it hard to reach out, I guess. I don’t know if you’ve noticed but I tend to wait for you to make the first move.”

The way Lance’s eye lit up with revelation prompted Keith to go on.

“So it wasn’t because you did anything wrong. It just… takes me a while to open up. It took me about a year to actually believe Shiro and his mom didn’t mind having me over at their place.”

“When did,” Lance swallowed and tried again. “When did your dad pass away?”

“When I was fourteen,” answered, surprised at how easily this was coming now that he’d started. “There was a car crash. Ironically, he wasn’t even on his bike at the time, but our pick up truck.”

“I’m so sorry, Keith,” whispered Lance.

Keith shook his head. “You’ve got nothing to be sorry for,”

“No, but,” slowly, Lance reached out and took Keith’s hand, sending a bolt of electricity up his arm. “I’m sorry that you had to go through that.”

Smiling slightly, Keith’s squeezed Lance’s hand back. “Thanks. It took me a while to realise it, but I had a lot of help and love around me at the time, so it wasn’t all bad.”
“Shiro?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you guys live together?”

“Technically. I mean, his mom adopted me not long after the accident, just so legal stuff would be easier. But Shiro and his mom have always been like family to be honest.”

“So… Shiro’s like a brother?” asked Lance, and for some reason he sounded relieved.

“Completely a brother,” answered Keith, confused. “Why?”

“Oh. No reason,” said Lance quickly, letting go of Keith’s hand to stretch. “Just clarifying. So, can I ask a question?”

“Sure,"

“Why don’t you go to Shiro’s at Christmas?”

Keith’s heart tightened. He drew up his knees to his chest. “The accident happened around then. I just—the desert feels like my dad and it’s easier to be as near to him as I can be at that time, you know?”

Lance nodded. “Yeah. I think I understand.”

They slipped into another comfortable silence, the sky growing lighter as the time ticked by- the ocean growing visible like a shifting blanket of midnight blue. Stretching, Keith lay down on his back, arms behind his head.

“Man. I feel better,” he commented.
“Yeah?” asked Lance, also lying down.

“Yeah.”

“Good, because I want you to know Keith, you can talk to me anytime, you know that right?”

“I know,” answered Keith, quietly. “And the same goes to you Lance. I know you’ve been stressing about something.”

“What?” demanded Lance, voice high. “I’m completely chill.”

“Hunk said you’ve been moping, what’s up?”

A few mutters escaped Lance’s breath, including the word traitor, and he sat up. “It’s nothing, honestly.”

Keith followed him into a sitting position. “Lance, you can tell me. Whatever it is,” he put a hand on Lance’s shoulder. “I can listen to—”

“Oh my god is that a crab?!?” exclaimed Lance, suddenly. He jumped up and sprinted away, leaving Keith dumfounded with his arm outstretched. “Wow it’s so pretty and pink. I love crabs.”

“Lance,” Keith began.

“Do you like crabs, Keith?”

“What are you—”

“Oh look a jellyfish, let’s look at the jellyfish. Jellofish. Get it, cause it’s like jelly? Ha ha!”
He was so jittery and all over the place that Keith decided to drop the subject, shaking his head with a laugh.

“Crazy guy,” he muttered.

“I heard that Kogane!”

“Yeah?” challenged Keith. “What you gonna do about it, McClain?”

In answer, Lance chucked a clump of seaweed in a graceful arc right at Keith’s head. It slid off his hair with a slick *flop*. Lance lost it and doubled over with laughter.

“You’re dead,” said Keith, deathly quiet.

He picked up a clump of seaweed himself and Lance’s eyes glittered.

“Not if you can’t catch me,”

“Bring. It. On.”

They both took off running at the same time. At first Lance had the advantage with his long, gangly legs, but Keith had more stamina. Eventually Lance began to tire and Keith struck, ramming the other boy into the ground and smooshing seaweed into his face until Lance laughingly tapped out.

“I give, I give!” he cried, bucking under Keith’s legs which had him pinned to the ground.

“Sorry,” said Keith, smirking. “What was that? I can’t hear you.”

“I give, you crazy bastard! Now get off of me.”
As soon as Keith loosened his grip, however, Lance rolled them both over so that it became a contest of strength. Over and over they went, giggling like children, until Keith decided to end with a judo hold that had Lance crying out again.

“OKAY YOU WIN.”

“I what?” asked Keith.

“YOU WIN,” whinnnered Lance, pained from the chokehold. “HOW ARE YOU EVEN HUMAN?!?”

Laughing and out of breath, Keith rolled over so that they were both on their backs, his arm under Lance’s neck, legs still entwined.

“What time is it?” asked Lance in a daze. The sun was beginning to peak through the clouds.

Keith checked his phone. “Five-thirty.”

“Shit. I better get back.”

A sudden, wonderful thought took hold of Keith and refused to let him go. “Stay at mine,” he said.

“Huh?”

“It’s closer. And it’s nearly morning. I can take the floor.”

“What. No. Keith, I can’t let you do that. It’s fine, I can walk.”

“You’re in your slippers, Lance. It’s cool, it’s no big deal.”
Lance bit his lip. They were so close Keith could see the tiny cracks in them, could imagine leaning into them.

They turned away at the same time.

“Well… okay,” agreed Lance, at last. “Shall we head back?”

Keith nodded and they quickly detangled themselves from each other, sneaking glances but not saying a word, and then headed back for home. It was a very different journey this time: Keith didn’t chatter and neither did Lance. It would have felt wrong, somehow. The spell of early morning had settled over them, slowly drenching everything in pale gold, and their hands kept brushing in a way that felt more intimate and reassuring than any words spoken. Every now and then one of them would catch the other one looking and they’d smile.

The apartment above the Tattoo parlour eventually loomed into view. The metallic click of Keith’s key turning in the lock sounded like a gun shot in the quiet, which made the boys giggle slightly, before they climbed the stairs. Keith didn’t bother putting the lights on- it was bight enough to see now anyway- and as soon as he stepped into the warmth of his home a sudden, overwhelming wave of fatigue roiled over him. Lance must have felt it too, because his eyes drifted to the bed.

Keith set a blanket out of the floor and went to lie down.

“Wait, that’s it?” Lance demanded. “You don’t have a spare mattress or a futon?”

“It’s fine,” argued Keith. “I can sleep anywhere.”

“Liar,” accused Lance. “You can’t even sleep in the car.”

“It’s fine,” repeated Keith. “Just go to bed.”

“Nope. You go to bed. I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“Dude, no way.”
“Yes way.”

“Why are you arguing with me about this?”

“Because you’re being a jerk.”

“How am I being a jerk by wanting you to be comfortable?”

“Because I wouldn’t be comfortable with you being uncomfortable, jerk.”

“Lance, I’m seriously too tired for this.”

“Then go to bed and let me take the floor.”

“For fuck’s sake- we’ll both take the bed, happy?!”

Lance’s mouth snapped shut, eyes wide, but Keith was too sleepy to think about the implications of his suggestion. He just wanted to sleep.

“Fine,” agreed Lance, after a while.

He was clearly nervous about… something, and waited for Keith to crawl into the covers before doing anything, unsure of how to act. Keith held back the quilt. “Come on,” he said, as though to a small child.

Scowling at him, Lance slipped between the sheet, bed dipping with the unfamiliar weight. It was a single bed, so it was a squeeze, and touching was unavoidable. Knees bumped and shoulders tapped, cold feet caused sharp intakes of breath and muttered curses.

“Your elbow’s in my rib,” Keith complained.
“Your rib’s in my elbow, mullet. And your hair is tickling my nose.”

“Then move.”

“There’s nowhere to move to,”

“It’s not my fault you’re freakishly long,”

“That’s vaguely insulting,”

“Really? I was going for plain insulting.”

That earned Keith a jab in the ribs.

“OW!”

“Oh, sorry, my arms are so freakishly long I just can’t control them.”

“Dick,”

“No thanks, I’m not in the mood.”

It was meant as a joke on Lance’s part, that much was evident. But given their close proximity and the way the night had been going, it landed strange and awkward between them. They shifted, aware of each other’s every breath and move, so incredibly close and trying so incredibly hard to be distant about it.

“Well, good night,” said Lance at last, twisting over so that he was facing the room, back to Keith. “And thanks for letting me stay.”
The words, ‘any time’ rose and fell in Keith’s throat. A little soon, maybe.

“Good night,” said Keith. “And Lance?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for listening.”

Keith’s breath caught in his throat when the words, “Any time,” fell from Lance’s lips.

With that said, Keith’s heavy eyes couldn’t take it anymore. They slipped shut and the last thing Keith saw were the curls at the nape of Lance’s neck.

It was still early morning.

Keith knew it as soon as he opened his eyes.

Damn insomnia. He couldn’t have been asleep for more than an hour. The idea angered Keith so much that he vowed to stay in bed until noon. He was about to grab the covers and roll over when he suddenly realised there was a weight on his chest. An arm. An arm attached to a sleeping Lance. Memories of last night came flooding back as Lance’s face swum blearily into view. They’d twisted in the night so that they were facing each other: Keith’s head tucked into the space between Lance’s chin and shoulder, ankles interlocked, Lance’s arm thrown across Keith’s chest.

“Chocolate milkshake isn’t for zombies,” he mumbled.

Oh, thought Keith. So that’s what woke me up.

But he wasn’t mad. Far from it. Instead he took the opportunity to look at Lance’s features: his
soft, brown skin and long nose, the eyelashes brushing his cheeks in dark crescents and the vulnerable, curved shell of his ears.

“It’s not my horse,” he mumbled, and Keith giggled.

He looked so cute like this.

“I like you,” Keith whispered in the dark.

Lance’s eyelids fluttered, but he didn’t wake.

Keith swallowed. His eyes dropped to Lance’s lips again. Hesitantly, he reached up, gentle and inquisitive and quivering with nerves. He brushed his mouth against Lance’s, lips parted slightly, eyes slipping closed so he could feel every moment of this.

Then he leaned back, smiling softly.

“Maybe I even love you,” he whispered.

Then he burrowed himself into Lance’s shoulder, and slipped back into the world of sleep.

---

Lance

Lance remembered everything that had happened the moment before he opened his eyes. There was a brief second of simply looking at his own sunshine-lit eyelids, relishing the fact that he could, potentially, remain unconscious for the rest of his life and just accept that this was as good as it was ever going to get. But that would mean dying. And he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to go that far to preserve the heavenly incident that was last night.

Lance opened his eyes.

“Fuck.” He breathed.
He had expected (hoped) to be greeted with the sleepy, mullet-tousled, beauty of sunbathed perfection that was the vision from his dreams. AKA, Keith. Instead, his hand reached out and grasped empty space. He groaned when he caught sight of the digital clock perched by Keith’s bed. 12:10. He’d slept for hours. He had vague memories of briefly waking in the early morning, immediately shutting his eyes against the light. But he’d hardly dared to move; all the while he could feel Keith’s strong legs entangled in his, his face buried in the crook of his neck. It was sweaty, hot, and uncomfortable, but Lance had never felt more at ease in his life. He only wished that Keith had actually been aware of all that, not just acting unconsciously in sleep because, you know… the idea of Keith consciously cuddling up to him in a way that was visibly gay was just too much to bear. Maybe it was too much. Lance had sensed things getting… dangerous at the beach. And he’d panicked. And started screaming about fucking crabs. Lance thumped his forehead with his fist, saying “idiot, moron, dumbass, jerk…” over and over. It didn’t make him feel any better.

Lance wasn’t sure what he was scared of exactly. He was head over heels for Keith, that was obvious to anyone with a set of eyes by now, but… he wanted to run away. And despite that, he’d gone so far as to share the bed with Keith. His mind had reeled at the proposal. Keith wants to share a bed with me?! What does that mean?! Does he wanna do it?! Is it just because I’m here and there’s no one better around?! Lance hated that his thoughts immediately jumped to that. He’d taken one look at Keith and known that wasn’t the case. That boi was sleepy af. And tired of arguing. Lance wasn’t tired then. Not in the least. His body was buzzing with electricity from the beach, his skin alive with Keith’s touch… even remembering it now…

Lance groaned again. If he’d been in his own bed, he knew exactly what he’d be doing. And the fact that he was in Keith’s bed, surrounded by Keith’s goddamn fantastic scent, made it all the more tempting. But he couldn’t beat one out in Keith’s bed. That was just damn disrespectful. Even so, he ran a hand over the place he’d become unbearably hard, which was a mistake. That only made it worse. No wonder he couldn’t think properly. All of Lance’s blood had gone to his boner. Growling with frustration, Lance threw off the sheets and thwacked his head against the pillow.

“Lance?”

Lance started as Keith poked his head out of the tiny bathroom, staring at him with a toothbrush hanging out of his mouth.

“Keith!” Lance squeaked, his voice breaking. His hand was still placed suggestively over his crotch. He scrambled upright into a sitting position. “I didn’t know you were” – he coughed – “here.”

Keith smiled. “I jus’ got back from practice. One sec.” Keith disappeared into the bathroom to spit out his toothpaste and re-emerged, wiping his face with a towel. Lance crossed his legs, heat flushing every part of him from the neck up. He must be a picture. Keith was dressed, deliciously, in his martial arts uniform.

“S-sorry I was out for so long.” Lance stammered, averting his eyes.

“It’s cool, man. You must have needed it. I left some food on the stove in case you woke up after I left, but I guess we can eat together.”

Lance plucked his phone from the floor by the bed. It was nearly out of juice. He had one text from Hunk: Dude where you at?

He sighed, rubbing his eyes. “I might head. But thanks.”
What’s wrong with me? He thought, what’s going on? But he couldn’t place it. He just knew he wanted to leave.

Keith shrugged. “Cool. I’ve gotta do some laundry and grocery shopping anyway.” He pulled at his top. “I’ve only got one of these left…” he tutted. “Such a pain in the ass. I can’t afford to buy a new one off sensei so I have to wash it all the time.”

Lance’s stomach churned with guilt. He was such a jerk. Literally. He’d been jerking off over Keith’s shirt this entire time.

“Maybe it’s at my place…?” He suggested weakly, knowing exactly where it was.

Keith frowned. “Hmm. Don’t see how. I didn’t see it last time.”

Lance’s pulse was rising in his throat. “I’ll have a look for you. It could be somewhere amongst the mess, ha ha ha, you never know!”

Keith eyed him. “Dude… your room was super tidy.”

Lance huffed, “Alright! I was only trying to help.”

“You’re acting weird.” Said Keith, deadpan.

Lance flapped his arms around his head, gathering his slippers. “No, no… I’m just… I’ve got a lot to do and I should get back” – he caught sight of Keith’s face and stopped. He forced himself to slow down and look Keith in the eye. “Look, man…” He began. What did he say? I’ve been using your shirt the way a sex-starved man uses porn? Nope.

He grinned instead, scratching his head. “I’m really freaking… tired.”

Keith wasn’t convinced. “You slept until noon.”

“I’m a lazy bitch, Keith.”

Keith’s lip curled. “Good point, jerk. Wanna borrow some shoes?”

Lance shook his head. “Nah, I’ll call a cab. I’m not doing the walk of shame in these.” He blushed instantaneously, realising how that sounded. “Cause, y’know… that’s what people will assume.”

Keith raised a brow. “You think people would believe you got some action?”

“Don’t try and offend me, mullet. I’m impenetrable at this time of morning.”

Keith rolled his eyes, smiling. “Morning came and went, idiot. It flew right over your head while you were knocked out and rambling on about chocolate zombies.”

Lance scowled. “You made that up.”

Smug, Keith’s eyes sparkled. That made Lance’s heart beat just a little faster.

“Did not.”

“Oh, I forgot. You have no imagination.”

“Do I have to kick you out?”
“Chill, chill, I’ll be out of your hair before you can say ‘mullet’.”

Keith’s smile dropped. “Funny.” He dipped back into the bathroom. Lance breathed a long, hefty sigh of relief. He dodged that one like a pro. Now he just had to make Keith’s shirt magically reappear somehow. He’d think of a way. And he’d make sure to wash it first. Twice.

When he was ‘dressed’ (pyjamas counted, didn’t they?) he lingered by the door, waiting for Keith to come out of the bathroom. He did, his lower half wrapped in a towel, everything else exposed and dripping. Lance gaped. Keith smiled pleasantly.

“Are you going?”

“Oh - um – yeah.” Off planet earth right now.

Unphased, Keith walked right up to him. The proximity was – no exaggeration – fucking unbelievable. Lance felt his face glow crimson, but if Keith noticed, he didn’t show it.

“Thanks a lot for last night,” He told Lance sincerely, brushing his hair off his forehead. What the... “It meant a lot to me to be able to talk about all that. I usually really struggle but last night was...”

“Perfect.” Lance finished for him. Was he referring to last night or this moment? Who knew? Who cared?

Keith’s eyes lit up. “Exactly.” He opened one arm for a half-hug. “Sorry.” He laughed. “I’m wet.”

Me too, thought Lance. He laughed, patting Keith’s glistening shoulder in return. He couldn’t breathe. Was Keith really this oblivious? Keith pulled away, still smiling like the shining star of utter gorgeousness he was.

Lance knew he was staring. He couldn’t help it. He should have left by now.

“L-later, dude.” He stammered, throwing open the door and bolting down the stairs.

“Later, Lance!” Keith called after him.

Lance forgot to call a cab.

____________

Hunk was shocked to say the least when he came to greet Lance in the hallway, who was hitting his head against the wall like a mad-man.

“You’re in your pyjamas.” Hunk stated.

“Yes.”

“I’m guessing you didn’t sleep on the streets?”

“Correct.”

“So… care to explain?” Hunk asked with feigned politeness. And then, “LANCE, you’re gonna put a hole in the wall. I’m not paying the maintenance man for that.”
Head still pressed against the wall, Lance pivoted to face Hunk.

“Hunk… I’m goin’ crazy, dude.”

“Going?” Hunk scoffed, “You’re already there, amigo.”

Lance slid down the wall until he was a heap of muddy pyjamas and slippers on the floor. Hunk’s face crumpled in disdain.

“Gross.” He commented, before attempting to haul Lance to his feet. Lance flopped like a fish in his best friend’s arms, his face withered in despair.

“Seriously, what the hell happened?” Hunk demanded, shaking him. “And walk on your own!”

Lance stumbled to his feet into the sitting room, where he collapsed onto the sofa.

“I slept at Keith’s last night.” He got out, his voice croaky.

Hunk’s jaw dropped. Lance watched him visibly compose himself.

“Hmm.” Hunk hummed, tapping his fingers against his lips like a child going to Disneyland.

“Really?”

“Hunk I can see you faking it.”

Hunk squealed. “DUDE! Are you serious? Did you guys actually” —

“NO!” Lance interrupted before Hunk could go any further. “No we did not. It wasn’t like that. We just went for a walk cause, y’know, I was outside anyway ‘cause I couldn’t sleep and then I walked to Keith’s house and I was stood there and I text him and then he text me back and I was like ‘wow’ and then he asked me to go on a walk” —

“woah, woah… back up.” Said Hunk, waving his hands. “You were outside Keith's house?” He repeated.

Lance blinked. “Yeah, man.”

“Stalker alert…” Hunk whispered.

“Wanna hear the rest of the story or not?”

Hunk closed his mouth, nodding feverishly.

Lance told Hunk everything that happened, minus the embarrassing details (like Keith’s shirt and the fact that Keith had probably caught him in the act of stroking his dick this morning). Hunk stared at him by the time he was done. It killed Lance.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” He demanded.

Hunk threw his hands in the air. “Why aren’t you still at his house?”

“…huh?”

Hunk slapped his forehead and crossed his chest muttering, “Oh, Lord Jesus this boy is useless.”

Lance leapt to his feet. “HUNK!” He screamed. “I NEED YOUR GUIDANCE AND WISDOM,
“LANCE. SORRY. YOU’RE AN IDIOT.”

Lance glared at him. “Elaborate?”

Hunk sighed, standing, and clasped Lance on the shoulder. “Keith obviously wanted you to stay.”

“No he didn’t.” Lance insisted, “He said he needed to do laundry and groceries.”

“Yeah. *After* you said you’d leave.”

That dawned on Lance like the sound of a thousand choirs screaming ‘epiphany’ in his ear.

“Keith wanted me to stay.” He stated, his throat sore. “I’m an idiot.”

Hunk clapped. “Theeeeere it is. Invite him over.”

“What?”

“Invite him over. Right now.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

“Because what?”

Lance stopped, staring into the void. “I was supposed to be at work for one pm.”

Hunk gaped. “You serious?”

“Yup.”

“Wanna call in sick?”

Lance sunk to the couch, gripping the sides, his face white.

“I’m a bad person.” He heaved, his chest tight.

Hunk snorted. “That’s a stretch. You’re just a mess. I’ll call Pidge over and we can have some cookies and play some Mario, how’s about it?”

“I’d love that.”

Exams were upon Keith and Lance before they had the chance to properly meet up again. Twice (not once, Lance relished, but twice) Keith came to his Starbucks and ordered a Frappuccino, and on the second occasion he brought Allura with him. For the most part it was spent talking about their mounting nerves for the dreaded exams and essays, but Lance noticed – Keith really was
different. It hadn’t just been that night. He smiled a lot. Like a lot. Almost every time he looked at Lance. And that meant a lot of blushing. Lance had never blushed so much in his life as he did when Keith smiled. He had it bad. But he was scared. That feeling didn’t change, however much he willed it away, because this is what he wanted, wasn’t it?

Before each one of Lance’s exams, Keith sent him a message:

**Keith:** Hey man, it’s your first exam today right? Good luck xx

**Lance:** Yeah I’m nervous. Thanks.

**Keith:** How’d it go? Good luck for tomorrow! Xx

**Keith:** I saw Hunk at Firehouse today. He told me your last exam is in a couple days. I really hope it goes well and you’re not stressing out too much, Lance. Tell me if you need anything xx

**Lance:** Thanks Keith

There were moments in Lance’s study-filled evenings, gaps in his mind where he really could have done with Keith’s voice. A walk. A laugh. A look. Instead he stared at the walls. Or watched YouTube videos. He was avoiding Keith. That was becoming obvious. But for now he could just put it down to studying… right?

Almost the very moment he had left the gym after his final exam, a cool almost-summer breeze brushing away his stress, his phone bleeped.

**Keith:** Hey Lance. I hope your exam went well. Let me know if you want to meet up soon x

Lance stared at it. He locked his phone and slid it into his pocket. Then he wandered home in a daze, lost in a maze of unintelligible thought, plonked straight up the stairs, to his room, opened his diary and wrote:

*Abuelita,*

*Why am I so afraid?...*

*____________*

The next night, Lance received a message from Allura. He blinked. *Allura.*

**Allura:** Hello, Lance! I hope your exams went well. As long as you studied hard, I’m sure they did! Anyway, to celebrate the end of another year, I’m hosting some pre-drinks at my place next week on the 30th. Of course you’re invited, and you’re very welcome to bring your friends. Everyone is going so it would be wonderful to see you there. : )

Lance stared. Of course he would go. He already knew about Daisy’s party, but he never imagined Allura would host pre’s… before replying to Allura, however, he dragged up his message thread with Keith, before hurriedly typing out:

**Lance:** Hey man, sorry for the radio silence. I’ve been sort of out of it since exams finished. Yours finish next week, right? Allura sent me a message inviting me to hers for pre-drinks before Daisy’s party which I was already probs gonna go to. Idk. Anyway, let me know if you’re going. It would
Lance glared at the message after he’d hit send. Perhaps it was too long. It looked like a weak excuse disguised with vague humour. Not his best. He tutted, throwing his phone back onto his bed. He was overthinking things again. Everything was fine. Fine. He grumbled nonsensically in the dark, his laptop screen the only light in the room. He was watching *Jumanji* on Netflix in an attempt to drown his thoughts which were, of course, absolutely fine.

**Keith:** Of course I’m going. Yeah, knee-deep in revision right now. R.I.P me. The party should be great if it’s anything like last time… minus the chillis and puke. I’ll see you next week dude. Can’t wait. Xx

Lance didn’t reply. Keith probably didn’t want to be bothered in the midst of exam season, anyway.

Lance knew exactly when Keith’s last exam finished, but he didn’t say anything. Keith would probably be busy celebrating with friends, anyway. And it was two days until the party. He’d see him then. Second year was over. Life was good. The sun was shining. The lake shimmered in the evenings like a crystal lagoon. Lance was spending most of his hours there, alone, thinking about how *good* life was because he was *fine*.

“Life is beautiful isn’t it?” He said to Pidge as they headed to Allura’s. It was seven pm. The sun bathed the streets in golden, dusky light.

Pidge squinted. “Err… sure. Hunk, is Lance high?”

Lance laughed, waving his hands. “Such a *drama* queen, I’m high on *LIFE*, Pidge.”

Hunk snorted. “He hasn’t been out in a while.”

Lance pretended his heart wasn’t hammering as they reached Allura’s door. He tried not to think about whether Keith was already in there. He tried not to think about what Keith was wearing. He tried not to think about whether Keith had been thinking about him. He tried not to think about Keith.

Allura answered the door, her cheeks spread with glossy silver and blue glitter, her hair tied into a silver cascade of curls.

“Allura, have I ever told you that you look like a princess?” Lance said exaggeratedly, leaning against the doorframe.

Allura rolled her eyes. Pidge smacked him on the back of the head.

“Ouch!” Lance yelped as Pidge said,

“What he *meant* was: Hey Allura, it’s nice to see you again.”

Allura gave Lance a tight smile.

“Nice to see you all too. Come on in, I’ve baked some cinnamon rolls as well. They’re probably not as good as yours though, Hunk.” Said Allura fondly.

Lance drew in quick, twitchy breaths as they followed Allura inside. There were people here – Matt, Matt’s friends, Allura’s friends and – Keith. Keith. Keith. There was Keith. And his dark eyes shone brighter than the lake ever could when he saw Lance.
Lance didn’t know why he averted his eyes so quickly, only to look right back up again. Keith was frowning. He waved from the floor where he was perched on a purple, velvet cushion.

“Hey, man.” He called, smiling.

“Keith!” Lance exclaimed with a nervous bubble of laughter. It was fine. The others were talking. They probably wouldn’t have heard that embarrassing squeak. But Keith did. And he looked… so good. Maybe he’d done something with his hair – oh. Oh, no. He’d tied it back again.

Lance was staring. Keith’s eyes glittered. Matt entered Lance’s entire field of view, dabbing with a low:

“Duuuuude.”

Lance blinked.

“Yo.” He said to Matt, deadpan, almost grateful for the interruption.

“I haven’t seen you in ages, buddy. How you been?” Asked Matt, clapping Lance on the shoulder. This was weird. Lance didn’t dislike Matt right now. Actually, he was beginning to see that perhaps he’d been a little harsh on him since last year. They chatted for a while, and Lance had to consciously remind his eyes to stop staring at Keith.

Tonight Keith was dressed in grey pants and a black shirt, his lengthening hair tousled around his defined, candid features. There were girls in the room staring at him, just as Lance was.

Huh… Lance thought smugly, he would never go for you. But of course they didn’t know that. The drinks flowed, Lance made his way around the room in a circle, saving Keith for last. Hunk, Pidge and Allura were gathered in a knot with another dark-skinned girl called Vanna who spoke passionately (and non-stop) about mechanics. Lance got bored of that conversation pretty quickly, so he finally eased his way over to Keith, settling onto a pink, sequined cushion beside him.

He sighed, downing the rest of his vodka and coke.

“Feels like this week has really dragged, huh?” Said Keith fondly, folding his knees up to his chest as Lance stretched his out, lying back onto his arms.

He didn’t want to say that in fact, he thought time had flown.

He laughed. “Yeah… your exams went okay then?”

“Well, I think. But I could have done more…” Keith chewed his lip. Lance had a mental flash of him kissing Keith, biting him in between gasps. His stomach flipped. The alcohol in his system sent his mind spinning. “But I guess it’s over now. No use thinking about it… woah, you drank all that really quickly.”

Lance hiccupped. “Yeah.” His abdomen clenched. Why was he so nervous all of a sudden. Keith looked down at him.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah, yeah! I’m great! Allura’s place is nice, huh? I didn’t know you guys had so many friends. I really like these cushions, too. Hey, would you like another drink? Actually I’m gonna go to the bathroom first. Then I guess we’re leaving for Daisy’s party soon… anyway, I – uh – I’ll be right back.”
Lance gazed at himself woozily in Allura’s bathroom mirror. How had he drank so much so quickly? An hour and a half had already gone by. Who had he talked to in that time? Maybe he and Matt had chatted for longer than he’d realised, maybe… maybe he was avoiding Keith. But why would he avoid Keith? His confused blue eyes glared back at him. He scowled at his reflection.

“Stop being a jerk.” He told himself.

He’d left the bathroom door open. Allura stood there, arms folded.

“Some sound advice there, Lance.” She said, her lips curling into a smile. Lance groaned. “That’s awkward. Imma go downstairs… see y’later.”

“We’re leaving in five!” She called after him.

Lance had one more drink before leaving. Everyone in the room counted back from ten as he downed it, cheering when he’d finished.

Keith approached him as he staggered to the door. “Slow down, Lance. You’ll make yourself sick.”

Keith appeared as a hazy radiant beauty in Lance’s mind. Lance realised too late that he’d reached out to brush Keith’s face with his fingertips, which immediately began to glow pink.

“Shhhhh…” He said, “I’m good. I’m so good. You look nice, Keith.”

He’d said ‘nice’ because he’d been about to say something else. Keith didn’t smile back. His eyes were wide, and he stammered,

“Oh – thanks. But” –

“Lance!” Hunk called, “Pidge can’t find her shoes.”

Lance left Keith’s side to help his friends… though he wasn’t much help. Instead he rolled around on the floor, giggling with Matt about his stupid mispronunciation of Allura’s name when they’d first met.

“And – and then,” Matt wheezed, “I asked her on a date. And she told me to get over myself!”

Lance didn’t know why that made him laugh so much.

“MATT. LANCE.” Pidge shouted from the door, both shoes intact, “Everyone’s left! Move your butts!”

It was a good job Daisy’s house wasn’t more than a few minutes away, because Lance could hardly walk in a straight line. Or breathe; he and Matt were giggling so hard. Lance remembered giggling on the beach by the lake with Keith as they play-fought, Keith’s strong arms pinning him to the ground. Lance tried to catch up with Keith as they walked, but he was always a little ways ahead or a little ways behind.

Music boomed from Daisy’s house, and when she saw Lance and Keith again, she screamed.

“Laaaaarrnce!” Her British accent caused him to burst into a fit of laughter again. Keith gave him a side-eye.

“Hey, Daisy.” He said stoically where Lance couldn’t speak.
“Where’s your jacket, Keith?”

“It’s nearly June. I don’t need it.”

Daisy rolled her eyes. “Disappointing. Get in, I’m waiting for Lotor.”

Lance gasped, “Oh, no” and scurried inside. During the scuffle, he lost Keith. But that was okay, because Matt was already handing him another drink. This was so different to most parties Lance had been too. This one was amazing. Everyone was smiling, and Lance talked to everyone, about everything. Because he was fine – better than ever in fact. But he was starting to feel a little sick. Somewhere, from nowhere, as if from a dream, Keith appeared as Lance flopped onto the stairs, pressing a glass of water into his hands.

“Lance… maybe we should go.”

Lance blinked up at Keith. “Don’t be a buzzkill, man. I’m having a great time.”

Keith frowned. “Yeah, but you look kind of…”

Lance huffed. “Jeez, dude. It’s the end of the year. Let loose a little.”

He put his head in his hands, taking a sip of the water.

“But I guess I am getting too… huh?” When he looked up again, Keith had gone. Had he said something wrong?

A flash of white hair sent alarm bells peeling in Lance’s head. Was that - ?

“A flash of white hair sent alarm bells peeling in Lance’s head. Was that - ?”

“Lotor.”

“Lance.” Lotor nodded, “It’s been a while.”

Lance turned his head away, muttering: “Not long enough.”

The Lotor did the worst thing and sat down next to him, sighing.

“You know, Lance. This night reminds me of last time.”

“Do not bring that up.” Lance protested.

Lotor’s eyes darted to Lance. “Excuse me?”

Lance moaned, “I’ve tried everything to block that from my memory. The last thing I need” –

“I was referring to our talk.” Lotor said tightly. “But it was quite a long time ago I suppose, you might not remember…”

“We… talked?”

“God almighty,” Lotor cursed, peering at Lance disbelievingly, “Were you really that drunk?”

Lance remained silent, scowling with all his strength. Was he messing with him?

“Dude. What the hell happened that night?”

Lotor blinked. “You helped me out quite a lot. Remember? We talked about my… problem.”
Lance raised his brows. “Problem… riiight.” He feigned realisation. What problem? Crippling depression? Erectile dysfunction? Lance had no idea what Lotor was talking about. But he wasn’t about to let on to the fact.

Lotor, Lance now realised, was almost as drunk as he was. His hair, which usually flowed in an annoyingly perfect mane of white, was dishevelled, and his face was flushed. He exhaled hard, balancing his chin on his knees.

“Absolutely nothing has changed. I was hoping you could give me some advice, but…”

“No, no. I’m good at advice. Hit me with it, man.” Said Lance, shaking his head to clarify his thoughts. “What’s up?”

Lotor narrowed his eyes into the crowds of people buzzing around the sitting room.

“The one person I’m interested in still hasn’t noticed me. She” –

-“She?!” Lance piped, gaping. “You’re not gay?”

Lotor glowered back with disdain. “No, Lance. I’m not gay. No offence, but just because I drunkenly made a mistake with you, that did not alter my sexual orientation in the least.”

Lance nearly spat out the mouthful of water he’d gulped. So Lotor thought it was a mistake too. He’d been such an idiot…

“Sh-shit… sorry, yeah. I mean I didn’t think” –

-“Oh, save it.” Lotor sighed, “It doesn’t make any difference. I may as well be gay. It’s not as if she’ll miraculously realise I exist.”

Lance felt a stab of pity for Lotor. It really sounded like he’d been suffering. Fuck. Who knew?

“Dude… I think you should tell her how you feel. You don’t need to make a big, crazy romantic gesture or anything, just… say something. If it’s really been going on for this long” –

-“It has.”

-“Then do something.”

Lotor huffed again. “Maybe you’re right, Lance. I should have listened to your advice the first time.”

A girl with a high, dyed-red ponytail and shaved sides loomed over Lotor, resting her elbows on his shoulders.

“Uh, oh…” She cooed, flicking Lotor’s hair. “Is he pining again?” The girl’s ears were lined with an array of rainbow-coloured piercings and her cat-like blue eyes found Lance’s.

“Hey, I’m Ez.” She told him, her high voice cutting through the undercurrent of drunken noise.

“’Sup.” Said Lance. He left the water Keith had gave him on the stairs, and accepted the half full bottle of vodka mixed with lemonade Lotor’s friend offered him. It was mostly vodka.

And then Lance was sure he blacked out the next half hour, because next thing he knew he was aggressively dancing, covered in sweat with a crowd cheering around him. He’d been in a trance, dragged along amongst the crowds by hazy hands. He didn’t recall working himself up into the
state he was now, the centre of attention, the most extra person in the room. He dropped the empty bottle of beer from his hand, staggering to a dumbfounded halt. His shirt had come totally open and a bunch of girls were laughing and dancing with him. The Lance at the start of the college would have fucking loved this. But the Lance right now felt… uneasy, to say the least. This wasn’t right. Ez, Lotor’s friend, was thrust up against Lance, apparently doing her best to make marks on Lance’s nearly bare shoulders with her lipstick. When Lance realised what was going on, he pushed her away, half-laughing, half-frowning because he really really didn’t remember things getting this weird.

“Woah…” He said. “What happened to Lotor?”

Ez frowned. “I dunno.” She shrugged, necking the drink from her cup. Something about her tone implied she didn’t care. Then Lance recognised her as one of the girls from Lotor’s Lacrosse team. A new song started playing and she grabbed Lance’s arm. “I love this one! Come dance with us” –

“No, sorry.” Said Lance, pushing past her, through the crowd. Hunk was in the corner, texting, his legs crossed on the sofa. Matt had his arm flung around a dark, pretty girl who was way out of his league and Allura and Lotor were stood by the porch, talking out of Lance’s earshot.

Lance glanced around, looking for Keith. And found him.

Keith was leant against the wall by the front door, staring at his nails. He must have sensed Lance watching him, because the next moment he glanced up. And his expression was thunderous. Closed. Leagues away from the sweet smiles and tentative laughs Lance had come to love so much.

The next moment, he turned from Lance and flung open the door, marching into the cool summer night.

Lance tripped after him, stumbling over legs and cups and cushions. The mild breeze hit him like he’d been dunked in cold water, drying the alcohol/dance induced sweat on his skin. He didn’t think he’d ever sobered up so quickly in his life. It was instantaneous as soon as he saw Keith’s back stalking away from the house.

“Keith!” Lance called. “Wait up!”

Keith pivoted, his eyes dark in the moonlight. “What?” He snapped, as Lance caught up with him.

They both knew there was no point in asking why Keith was so pissed off.

“What the hell is up with you?” Keith demanded.

Lance flapped his arms. “I don’t know man, I’m just… I’m drunk, that’s all.”

Keith folded his arms. “No, Lance. I think you got drunk to cover up whatever the hell is going on because I really just - I have no freaking clue anymore.”

Lance hauled in a deep, desperate breath. “Keith… I” –

“You what?” Keith fired. “We’ve hardly spoken all week. I keep thinking I’ve been doing something wrong, but then earlier you – you keep sending me mixed signals! The things you say
and the things you do are completely different! One minute you’re talking to me like I’m the only person on earth and the next you’re hitting on some girl” –

“‘I wasn’t hitting on her!’” Lance protested, “We were just – Keith – for crying out loud! I mean, did you see her? That girl is obviously gay as hell, come on.”

Lance regretted those words as soon as they left his mouth. Keith physically flinched, his beautiful features crumbling in disbelief and contempt.

“Are you for real?” He began, his voice lowered with scorn, “Can you fucking hear yourself? Sometimes, Lance, I think you’re forgetting who you’re talking to. Fuck knows I certainly do. I really, really don’t like you right now.” He began to back away. “Come talk to me when you’re sober and dressed like a decent human being. Or don’t. See you around, Lance.”

This time, Lance didn’t try to make him stay.

It was as though the whole party had fallen apart in the short time he’d been outside arguing with Keith.

He swore half the people had left, somehow slipped by without them even noticing. Or disintegrated. Maybe they had never been there at all, and Lance’s drunken brain had just counted more people than there actually were.

Ez found him, treading amongst the wasteland derelict of the party like the life-ruiner she was. She slung an arm around his neck, smirking.

“‘You’re quite cute,’” She brought her face close to his, tip-toeing to reach him. “‘Why don’t me and you…?’” She began to whisper, her hot, alcohol smelling breath tickling his chin. Lance was half-tempted to accept, to fully self-destruct and accept his new title as fuck-tard of the year. But no. No matter how shitty of a person he was, his selfish, mind-bogglingly intense feelings for the boy who had just walked out the door got in the way. He recoiled, pushing her aside.

She wasn’t gay then. He hated himself.

There was nothing to stay for now.

____________

Lance wished his hangover was the worst part of the next day. But the recollection of his and Keith’s argument hit much harder. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Keith’s face: a bedazzlement of hurt and confusion and disappointment. He’d done that.

In the early hours of the afternoon, as he lay in bed berating himself, Lance grabbed his phone, looking for any sign of Keith’s name.

There was none.

Of course.

Lance brought up their messages. The proportion of Keith’s messages to his recently was… telling. He stared at the cursor which was flashing like a light-house light, calling out to him. Text Keith.
Keith. What right did he have? What excuse could he use? None. He had no excuses.

*Lance is typing*

Lance: I’m sorry about last night.

Lame. Pathetic. Poor. He deleted the words and opted to throwing his phone which, instead of landing on the other side of his bed, hit the floor instead.

Great.

“I hate my life.” Said Lance aloud. Then he cursed himself for being such a self-pitying bastard.

When he eventually rolled out of bed and slugged down the stairs, he was faced with a look of pure resentment from Hunk.

“Where did you go last night?” Hunk demanded.

Lance groaned, rubbing his brow. “Sorry, I…”

“You can’t just wander off like that, Lance! We were worried about you!”

Lance tramped into the kitchen. “I’m sorry. I’m the worst person on earth. I hate myself. I know.”

Hunk rolled his eyes. “Do you have to be so damn dramatic? What I’m trying to tell you is… Lance? Fuck, Lance, don’t cry.”

He hadn’t realised his tears were dripping into Hunk’s cold, leftover porridge. He swiped them away, frustrated, and marched past Hunk. He wasn’t hungry anymore.

“Wait!” Hunk called, his voice softening. “What’s wrong with you?”

Lance was too close to sobs to reply, so he slammed his door shut to send the message. He knew the walls were thin, so he cried into his pillow. Cursing his tears. Cursing himself. Cursing his angst. He hadn’t cried since… he couldn’t remember the last time. Lance wasn’t a crier. And it wasn’t just because of Keith. He missed his Abuelita, and he hated imagining what she’d say if she could see him like this. He’d acted like a jerk last night, and everyone had seen it. He’d pushed Keith away, and now he might never get to hang out with him again, let alone be friends with him. Just as he was thinking this, his phone began to ring.

“Hello?” He answered without checking to see who it was. In case it was Keith. He wanted to hear a soft voice on the end, telling him everything was okay, that he was forgiven…

But it wasn’t Keith.

“Lance, can you come and meet me at the campus bar?” Asked Shiro, his voice level and calm.

Oh no.

“Uh… sure. Now?”

“As soon as you can. I’ve got a few hours free and I want to talk with you.”

“O-okay. Everything alright, man?”

“Yeah.” Said Shiro, his tone mildly bright. “Nothing to worry about. And I haven’t seen you in
Keith had definitely spoken to him. Now even everyone who hadn’t been at the party knew what he’d done. He was in deep shit.

“Okay, see you in twenty, Shiro.”

Lance washed his face and got dressed in lightning speed. His eyes were still a little red, but that could easily just be allergies. Right?

He strode out of the house, keeping his eyes to the ground as he made his way to campus. Shiro was waiting for him at a table near the bar with a large plate of fries in front of him.

“Take a seat, Lance.” Said Shiro with a pleasant smile that didn’t quite reach his dark eyes.

“Jeez, you sound like a teacher.” Lance muttered.

Shiro raised a brow. Oh, right, Lance reminded himself. Shiro was a teacher.

“Fry?” Asked Shiro, pushing the plate towards him. Lance shook his head, bleary eyed. He had zero appetite.

“Hungover?” Shiro probed, a knowing gleam in his expression.

Lance nodded. “Mmhmm… look, Shiro, I know Keith is upset” –

“Lance, I didn’t bring you here to talk about Keith.”

Lance looked up, his mouth agape. “Then why…”

“I want to talk about you. About what’s making you act so weird. Keith’s not the only one who’s noticed. Hunk and Pidge have, too.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “So everyone’s been bitching about me behind my back? Great. Thanks for the heads up, Shiro. I’ll keep my angst more internal next time.” He picked a fry from the plate, shaking his head. “I’m sorry…” He apologised immediately. “I’m tired and–and messed up.” The fries tasted really good, the salt making him realise how hungry he really was.

“Why?” Asked Shiro calmly, folding his hands on the table.

“Because!” Lance exclaimed. “I dunno what to do anymore, man! I’m a jerk at parties, I’ve pissed Keith off more times than I can count and… and I’m confused. Like… I know I’m not gay, I told Keith” –

He stopped mid-flow. How much did Shiro know? How much had Keith told him about their conversations? Was he about to admit, out-loud, to one more entire person, that he was bi? And in love with Keith? Even Hunk didn’t know how far deep he was in regards to his feelings for Keith – though he’d probably guessed by now.

“Told Keith what?” Shiro prompted.

“That I’m… y’know… not just into the ladies.” Lance didn’t know how else to put it. God, it sounded so lame.

Shiro’s mouth curved into a small smile. “I guessed as much.” He said. “Listen, Lance… when I was a little younger than you, I was really similar.”
Lance narrowed his eyes. “You’re the straightest guy I know. How could you” - ?

“The first person I slept with was a guy.”

Lance’s jaw hit the floor and all of his doubt disappeared with one look at Shiro’s face.

“And the next.” Shiro continued, ignoring Lance’s shock. “And the next after that. But I kept calling myself straight, cause you know what? I was just messing around, wasn’t I? It was just a phase. I flirted with girls. I rejected nearly all of them in the end. But I was still straight, ‘cause god help anyone think I was gay.” His voice was dripping with sarcasm, and Lance felt himself shrink under the weight of it. “No, Lance. I’m not gay – you were obviously wondering – but I’m not straight either. It took me a while, but I’ve been in a position where I can comfortably call myself bisexual for a good few years now. So when Keith came to me and confessed he was into guys too, obviously I was in exactly the right place to help him out. Keith never had a problem coming to terms with who he was because he had me. And you know Keith. He hates most people as it is. But you… Lance, you’re only just starting to get to grips with who you are. And whether that’s gay, straight, bisexual, whatever – it’s rough when other people’s feelings get involved. You need to think outside yourself for a minute here, okay?”

Lance stared at him wildly, “But, Shiro… this isn’t just about me. If it hadn’t been for Keith, I wouldn’t have realised. I didn’t even like Keith at the start but – I dunno – something just sort of… happened between us. To me. I don’t know.”

Shiro’s eyebrows knit together. “You need to sort your feelings out before you hurt people. And in this case, it’s Keith you’ve hurt, and unfortunately for you, I’m his older brother, so it’s up to me to – politely – warn you not to do that again.”

Lance was at risk of crying again. But he couldn’t do that. Not in front of Shiro.

“I didn’t want to hurt Keith.” He said in a small voice. “That’s the last thing I wanted to do. But as usual I just… I fucked things up.”

Shiro grimaced.

“A little. But not entirely. Keith still cares about you.”

Lance’s stomach did a backflip. “He does?”

Shiro’s eyes wandered a little and he cleared his throat. “Don’t get me wrong, he’s pretty pissed about the way you behaved, but… I think you could patch things up with him.” His expression hardened. “But I won’t let you near each other unless you promise me you won’t mess him around on account of you being confused again. Got it?”

“Shiro, I promise you… I ain’t doing shit like last night again. I’m confused, I won’t lie, but I promise not to hurt Keith.”

Shiro’s features relaxed. “That might be the most genuine thing I’ve ever heard you say, Lance.”

“So if I told you I’m straight…”

“I know you’d be lying.”

They both cracked up laughing, and Lance felt like a physical weight had been lifted off his chest. Almost. At least Keith didn’t completely hate him.
Lance caught a flash of silver behind Shiro, and a whip of dark skin.

“Allura!” He called, standing to wave. She’d almost walked past them.

Her blue eyes widened in surprise. “Lance.” She said, blinking. “…hello, Shiro.”

Shiro coughed and stood, “Hey, Allura.” He averted his eyes to Lance. “I hope you don’t mind, but I’m gonna take off. Feel free to finish these off.” He told them both, indicating to the fries. “See you guys later.”

Lance glanced, confused, at Allura who watched Shiro leave, chewing her lip.

“Um… that was weird.” He commented as Allura sat in the now empty spot opposite Lance.

“Allura went scarlet. “No!” She exclaimed. “I had to stop – I couldn’t jeopardise Shiro’s position like that. I’ve had a lot of time to think about it – anyway” – she swatted the air, as if ridding the atmosphere of the subject of Shiro. “I’m glad I bumped into you.”

“You are?” Asked Lance, raising a brow. He thought everything that had happened last night would just make her dislike him more.

“Yes!” She slammed her fist on the table. Her eyes pierced him like daggers. “You” – she began.

“Shiro already berated me about last night. I know, Allura. I screwed up. I upset Keith. And I – I will sort things out with him, just – okay?”

Allura drew back, simmering. “I talked to him this morning.”

Lance waited, pulling at his sleeves. “I’m sorry.”

“Why on earth are you apologising to me?” She blasted, raising her voice. “It took Keith months – a whole year – to trust me. I worked at him like a…a… I’m too angry to think of a metaphor, but you get the point! When I invited you to my house for pre drinks, it was because Keith wanted you there. Of course I didn’t mind, but I wouldn’t have done it if… if… oh, Lance. What’s going on?” She deflated, gazing at him helplessly.

He shook his head. “It’s like I was just telling Shiro, I – I’m confused, Allura.”

“I know you like him.”

He gaped at her. “Huh?”

“It’s obvious, Lance. Don’t pussy-foot around it. Do you like Keith, or don’t you?”

“Yes. I like him.” He got out through gritted teeth, ignoring the heat that rose to his face as he said it, lowering his voice.

She threw her arms in the air. “Then what. Is. The. PROBLEM!?”

“Allura could you keep your voice down…?” Lance was flattened to the table, hiding from the disgruntled eyes that had turned their way. “I’ve never” – he huffed – “had a boyfriend before, Allura.”
She shrugged. “Neither has Keith.”

“I’m not Keith.”

She shook her head, rolling her eyes. “It’s so much easier to talk to him about this sort of thing. He doesn’t try to twist his way out of his feelings the way you do. You’re impossible.”

Lance gave her a look. “Yeah. That’s my problem, Allura. I’m impossible. I push people away because I’m afraid of…”

“What? Commitment?”

“No… that’s not it. I guess I just – it’s like…” Lance had to physically expel the voice in his head that was screaming at him to resist admitting it. But he had to do it. “I’m not good enough, Allura. I’m just not. I’m not good enough for something so – so pure.”

She blinked. “You believe Keith is pure?” She repeated incredulously.

He nodded. “I… I guess. Yeah.”

She shook her head, sighing and placing her head in her hands. “Keith has… a lot of baggage, Lance. I hate to say it like that, but he has. It’s almost impossible for him to trust anyone. Believe it or not, he’s difficult to be friends with sometimes. Whatever you believe to be not good enough about yourself, Keith doesn’t see that. He sees the best in people, but only when it counts. Only when he believes they won’t abandon him. And even then, he’s terrified…”

Lance’s frowned. “Allura, I know about his dad but… that was an accident. Surely he doesn’t blame himself for that? It’s not like his dad abandoned him.”

Allura stared at him, her eyes round. “So… he didn’t tell you about his mother?”

“What about his mother?” Lance asked slowly, his voice hollow in his throat.

Allura looked down at her hands, her voice low. “Keith’s mother left when he was just a child with no explanation… since then, he’s always… blamed himself. He’s only spoken to me about it once, and he was a little drunk at the time. He wouldn’t have said it otherwise. Keith has a lot of demons when it comes to his mother. I’ve tried to tell him that there are a million reasons why she could have left – none of them right, obviously, but he’s always believed it’s because he wasn’t good enough, he… well, you get the picture. I think in some ways that scarred him more than his dad’s death.”

Lance’s heart dropped to his stomach and was thumping a thousand miles a minute. How many times had Lance talked about his huge crazy family in front of Keith, not once considering what that might mean? How many times had Keith considered telling Lance the truth, he wondered, about his mother?

“Oh, I…” He breathed, unsure how to begin. “I had no idea.”

“So please,” Allura implored him, “Never say that you’re not good enough. At least not to him, because whatever you are feeling, Keith is feeling a hundred times worse.”

Lance stared at his feet, speechless. The fries had gone cold. And he’d never felt like more of a jerk in his life. But something switched in him… now was not the time for self-loathing.

“Allura… how do I make this up to him? What do I say?”
Allura clicked her tongue. “Keith is terrible with words, Lance. He never knows what to say – he’s a doer. You have to act to show him that you care.”

The things you say and the things you do are completely different. That’s what Keith had said, right? He’d tried to show him how he felt, but had somehow fallen flat between ‘half-assed’ and ‘too much of a coward to go for it’ which were basically the same in the end.

“An action?”

“Yes!” Said Allura. “But don’t stand outside his window and make his name out of candles. He would probably drop kick you and call the police.”

Lance gave a low laugh. “Nah, that’s not my style. I’m not into the whole American Beauty stalker shit.”

“Well, that’s my advice anyway. I don’t think he’d trust what you say now.” She glared at him. “He’s tried that.”

Lance’s face prickled. “I know, I know… would you believe me if I told you I’m definitely as much of a dick as you think I am?”

Allura couldn’t help the smirk that crept onto her face. “Yes, I believe you. Just… don’t do anything stupid.”

Lance grinned. “Stupid is my style, Allura. You know that.”

Allura rolled her eyes. “Again – you’re right. Let’s get out of here. I could do with a smoothie. These fries aren’t quite enough to cure the hangover I’m sporting.”

Lance spent the night curled over his laptop, checking his phone, searching desperately for inspiration. Anything… anything at all. An action. Something that would show Keith he was sorry, but also show him how much he cared. Words would never be enough, he knew, because he’d used words to mislead Keith this entire time.

It happened when he’d almost given up, and had resorted to scrolling through Instagram, convinced he’d lost Keith forever.

“What the…? Is this for real?”

And Lance was sure, then, that fate was real. Because what he found was good. Too fucking good. Sucking in a deep breath of disbelief and blinking to make sure he wasn’t hallucinating in his extreme anxiety to make something happen, Lance followed the link on the page and immediately drew up his bank details. The transaction was completed in minutes. Yes.

Lance leapt from his bed, his sweatpants covered in Cheeto dust, and hauled a notepad from under the piles on his desk.

Keith… he began writing, a slow, excited smile spreading over his tired features.

Keith, follow these instructions…

Reluctantly, Keith released his chokehold on some first year. Keith wasn’t even sure what his name was, Taylor or Tristan or something. Whatever. Keith couldn’t give less of a shit right now.

“D-dude,” Taylor or Tristan or something stuttered between splutters. A disbelieving hand went to his throat. “Is that even allowed?”

Keith just looked at him, knowing his expression was hard and disinterested.

“Kogane,” Sensei barked, striding across the practise mats. He sent Taylor or Tristan or something away and then turned blazing eyes on Keith, face blotchy and red. “What the hell was that?”

“I pinned him,” said Keith, deadpan.

“With excessive force, he couldn’t breathe!”

“It’s not my fault his defence was weak.”

Sensei gave him a hard look. “He tapped out. I know you saw him do it. I expect more of you, Keith,” continued Sensei, and now he looked less angry and more disappointed, more worried. That pissed Keith off even more. “Is everything alright?”

“Fine,” snapped Keith. “It’s a sparring match. We sparred. If he can’t handle it maybe he should train harder. Or leave.”
With a sigh, sensei put a hand on Keith’s shoulder and said, sadly, “I think that’s enough for you today.”

Keith blinked. “But—”

“No buts. You’re out. And if you treat any of my students like that again, you’re banned, you hear?”

The red-hot wick of rage Keith had barely been containing these past few hours burst into a sudden, flaring inferno. “I hear you,” he muttered, voice pitched low and dangerous. “Loud and clear.” Then he shook off sensei’s hand and stalked over to grab his bag, sending Taylor or Tristan or something such a nasty glare that the poor boy physically flinched. Keith didn’t care. He let his rage bubble and boil over until the whole damned room felt it. Then he ducked through the gym door and stalked out into the daylight.

Perversely, it was a bright, sunny day with a sky of pure blue overhead. Keith hated it. He hated the sun, the birds, the sky. All of it. Everything irritated him.

“Fuck!” he exclaimed, kicking a nearby bin. He aimed too high and took the lid off, scattering empty wrappers everywhere. “Fuck fuck fuck.”

This was dangerous or rather, dangerously familiar. It was no secret Keith had a temper on him: he’d sat in enough principle’s offices and repaired enough damaged property to know when he was about to lose it. Worse still, Shiro hadn’t been at practise this morning. Keith really needed him right now.

“Patience yields focus,” muttered Keith under his breath, picking up the bits of litter. “Patience… yields… GAH!” He threw the empty can of coke in his hand against the floor so hard it flew up and hit him on the head. In retaliation, Keith sent it flying with a swoop of his foot. A couple walking by eyed Keith warily and, snarling, Keith snapped, “WHAT?”

They hastily jogged away.

Christ, thought Keith. *I need to get it together. Where’s Shiro?*

He sent his brother another text, joining the unread message he’d sent him at the beginning of
practise. The last time Keith had seen Shiro was last night, when he’d turned up on Shiro’s doorstep in an utter fury. He’d ranted for two hours straight, relaying everything he-who-shall-not-be-named-least-Keith-kill-someone had done. Then the hurt had set in and Keith had found himself fighting back tears.

“I just don’t get it, Shiro,” he remembered saying. “What does he want from me?”

“It sounds like he’s confused,” Shiro had answered. “He probably doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

“I thought—” Keith had swallowed a sob here. “I thought he might actually... like me. Seriously like me. I guess he was just playing around the entire time.”

“I wouldn’t jump to any conclusions,”

“Maybe I scared him off. Maybe he realised I’m too big of a fuck up.”

“Keith! Don’t be ridiculous. You haven’t even talked to Lance yet.”

“I don’t want to. I’m done.”

But Keith was so very not done. And secretly, under an overwhelming desire to punch Lance or at least throw something very hard at his head, Keith did want to talk to him. He wanted to talk to him so badly that it felt like an ache, like a pang of hunger. But every time Keith pictured picking up his phone to call Lance, to organise a meeting so that they could argue or talk their way through this, the image of Lance and that girl dancing popped into his head. All his thoughts became consumed by the sight of Lance, shirt unbuttoned, openly flirting with anything that approached him, gaze sliding off Keith whenever they made eye contact or ignoring Keith’s insistent warnings. He saw Lance’s hand’s on Ez’s waist, her lips on his shoulder, Lance’s drunken, obnoxious voice telling him to loosen up.

“Loosen up?” he demanded of the empty air. “What, like that? No thanks, asshole.”

Then the anger was back and Keith was left thrumming with pent up rage. Slinging his backpack on, Keith fished around in his jean pockets until he found his phone and headphones. Then he broke into a run, feet pounding to Fallout Boy’s *Phoenix*. He ran a mile, then two, then three, the same images of Lance running through his head like a reel of film. His chest ached and his head
hurt and his throat felt drier than the desert, but Keith didn’t stop running. He ran and ran until, at last, he’d managed to quell the fire within him, until the incessant voices in his head telling him, *told you so, it never works for you, you’re not wanted, not loved*, had quietened into their usual whisper. Only then did he crawl back to his apartment, sweaty and tired and hurting all over. There was a hollow feeling in chest- again, a familiar one- that Keith had managed to fool himself into thinking had been filled these past few months. Even when he crashed into his apartment, finding several missed calls off Shiro, endless missed texts from Allura and even a message from Pidge, the hollowness remained.

It just wasn’t enough.

It was a terrible truth, but Keith always felt alone. Even when he was surrounded by other people who, logically, he knew cared about him. But this loneliness didn’t correlate to the number of loved ones in his life, or even how much they loved him- which was a lot. No. This loneliness was of a different ilk. It stemmed from the feeling of distance Keith felt towards people, especially people his own age. Ever since he was a kid, Keith had never been able to tap into the energy, games and wordplay other people had no trouble with. He was too straightforward. Too honest. Too willing to open his heart and give people everything he had inside. Most people didn’t wear their hearts on their sleeves- promises were easily made, easily broken, and what people said couldn’t always be taken at face value. Keith had never been able to do that.

Then his dad died, and his world fell apart.

From that point on, Keith had kept himself locked up tight. He ignored the stabs of loneliness at the end of long school days when friends went away with arms thrown carelessly around each other’s shoulders to play football, play video games or hit the mall. Instead he lost himself in books, myths mostly, and spent weekends fixing up his bike or hiking, lost in the clouds in the sky and his own thoughts. He told himself he didn’t miss anything. How could he? You can’t miss what you never had. Besides, Keith had Shiro and his family, and more recently, Allura. So it was fine. He was fine.

But he wasn’t.

It was torture to realise just how lonely he’d been all this time.

You can’t miss what you never had, but, just for one deluded instant, Keith had thought he could have Lance.

“You idiot,” he breathed, defeated. He wasn’t sure whether he was talking to Lance or himself. “You
should have known this would happen."

Tiredly, he walked over to his small set of drawers where a picture of him and his dad stood, the pair of them grinning like idiots at the end of their trip in Alaska. He opened a drawer and pulled out a small, wrapped bundle. Inside, was a decorative, sharp knife. The only thing he had of his mother. Keith unwrapped it carefully, staring at his reflection in the carefully polished surface.

“It always does,” he whispered.

Sighing, he brought the knife over to his bed, putting it carefully on the bedside table, and crawled in between his sheets. He hadn’t washed them since Lance stayed over, and they still smelled vaguely of seaweed. He inhaled deeply, hating himself for it, but most of all he hated the fact that he’d give almost anything to have another, familiar weight squished next to him on the single bed.

“Idiot,” he repeated.

The next day Keith didn’t have time to wallow over past events. He was busy as fuck. Firstly, he woke up to an email from Professor Thace who wanted to meet with Keith as soon as possible, this afternoon if he was available. Keith sent him an email back to say that was fine, and almost instantly Thace organised a time at three o’clock. Keith had just blearily stepped into the bathroom when his phone started ringing. It was Shiro, and when Keith picked it up he was promptly given a half hour lecture on appropriate behaviour at club practise.

“I know you’re upset Keith, but taking it out physically on Tim was unacceptable.”

Ah. Tim. Not Taylor or Tristan. Keith really needed to learn the first years’ names.

“Seriously Keith, the poor guy was shaken, he threatened to drop out!”

“Okay, okay!” exclaimed Keith. “I’m sorry.”
“You will be. I’ve volunteered you for clean up.”

Keith sighed. He should have seen that coming.

“Fine. When should I be there?”

“Eight. Don’t be late.”

Glancing at his clock, Keith found he exactly forty minutes to get to campus. He’d have to sprint.

“And Keith?” said Shiro, voice softening. “You okay, bro?”

“Fine,” said Keith, though he could hear the lie in his own voice. “Just… just fed up. I want to forget about it.”

“Has Lance contacted you?”

“Nope,” said Keith, hardening to steel. “And I don’t care if he does.”

“I don’t think you even believe yourself on that one, bro.”

Eyebrow twitching, Keith snapped, “See you at eight, Shiro,” before hanging up. Damn busy body. He’d told him, hadn’t he? Keith was done. Sure, Lance could get in contact to apologise if he wanted to, but Keith didn’t care. He’d just gotten the wrong end of the stick, but now Lance had made his position perfectly clear and there was nothing Keith could do about it but move on. So he would. Move on.

“Right,” he said.

Keeping an eye on the clock, Keith brushed his teeth, pulled on a black hoodie and jogged down the street until he arrived on campus. Shiro was waiting outside the building along with some first years who hadn’t turned up to their last team meeting.
“Keith will show you where the mops and buckets are,” he said, smiling brightly. Keith knew his brother well enough to know that Shiro was enjoying this behind his friendly façade. “Finish up within the hour. The gym opens at nine, after all. I’ll be back to check.”

Then he went on his merry way, leaving Keith with the first years. “Come on,” he said, because Keith didn’t mind strangers if there was a goal in mind. “Let’s go.”

“You’re Keith, right?” asked one of them, on the way through the foyer. “Didn’t you win the first-year championships?”

“Yeah,” answered Keith, deadpan.

“Whoa, dude!” exclaimed the other. “You can do the uki-otoshi throw, right?”

Keith shrugged. “Sure.”

“Dude! That’s so awesome!”

Keith looked at their eager, pleased faces and knew that Shiro had lured him into a trap, one he’d walk happily into because it was one more thing to think about that wasn’t Lance, right?”

“Want me to show you?”

“YES!”

Exactly one hour later, Shiro returned to find the gym sparkling and Keith instructing the first years on their stance. He’d learned their names by this point, Molly and Ethan, and was actually starting to enjoy himself. They were good, if a little rough round the edges, and Molly had amazing rotation of her hips. She’d be hard to beat with the right training.

“Having fun?” asked Shiro with a laugh.
He distracted Ethan, who was suddenly sent flying onto his back.

“Good throw,” called Keith from the side lines, earning a huge grin off Molly. “You okay, buddy?”

In answer, Ethan gave him a wobbly thumbs up.

“The first years aren’t so bad when you aren’t trying to throttle them, right?” asked Shiro, grinning.

Keith nudged him with his shoulder, and Shiro pulled him into a headlock to tousle his hair.

“Fancy a match?” challenged Keith.

“I would, but someone’s waiting for you outside,” said Shiro.

Puzzled, Keith wandered through the halls (calling goodbye to Molly and Ethan) to find Allura standing outside the gym in a long, flowing summer dress. As soon as she saw Keith, she put her hands on her hips and pointed an accusing finger at him.

“Well!” she exclaimed.

“Um, hi?”

“Don’t, um hi me! I’ve sent you an insurmountable amount of messages and you couldn’t even be bothered to answer one, could you? I was worried! You could have been in a ditch, for all I knew!”

“Allura,” said Keith with a sigh. “Don’t be so dramatic. It’s only been a day.”

“Still,” said Allura, alight with polite British fury. “My point stands,” then her angry expression crumpled and she pulled him into a hug. Awkwardly, Keith hugged her back. “Are you okay?”
“I’m fine,” answered Keith, blowing air through his nose. “Jeez. I’m not dying. I just want to forget about it all, honestly, so I’d appreciate it if we can talk about something else.”

“Okay,” agreed Allura, stepping back. “But if you ever need backup…”

“I know who to call,” said Keith. He paused, noticing glitter on Allura’s eyelids. She was wearing lipstick too- a dark, dusty rose colour and- where those heels? “Allura…” said Keith slowly. “Are you going somewhere?”

“Not today,” she answered blushing. “This is a test run for tomorrow. I… er, I have a date,”

“A date?!?” echoed Keith. “With who?”

Allura twirled a stand of her hair around her finger. “Promise not to freak out,”

“Sure,”

“With Lotor.”

“WITH LOTOR!?!?”

“I said not to freak out!” Allura exclaimed, shushing him.

“But!” spluttered Keith. “I mean, when—w-what?”

Offering him a sheepish smile, Allura said, sweetly, “Fancy a coffee?”
When they were comfortably seated in Allura’s usual, hipster coffee house, she rushed into the story without stopping for breath, words escaping her lips in a nervous, excited stream.

“It was at the party, Daisy’s party. At first I didn’t even really notice he was there because, well, he only ever seems to lean against walls at parties, like he’s too good to join in. Or at least that’s what I thought. Anyway, you know me, I tend to butterfly around at these things, I just love seeing everyone. But I noticed he seemed to be watching me, or at least, I thought he was. Every time I looked over he was studying something with vague disinterest, so I didn’t think much about it until a little later. I was by the back door, just getting a breath of fresh air, you know? When he comes marching over to me. He looked quite scary, actually, like he was going to pick a fight. Then he just seemed to stop and swallow before turning to the sky outside and pointing out a constellation. Then he just starts spouting poetry about The Lyre. Like, actual poetry. He recited a verse about Orpheus’s love for Eurydice and then asked if I like the stars.”

“Whoah,” said Keith, taking a bite out of his gluten free sandwich.

“I know!” exclaimed Allura. “What was I supposed to do?”

“What did you do?”

“I laughed,” said Allura. “He didn’t know how to take it at first. He asked if he’d offended me.”

“He sounds like such a…” Keith searched for the right word.

“Gentleman?” supplied Allura. “You haven’t heard half of it yet.”

Keith indicated for her to go on.

“So after I assured him that I wasn’t offended I asked where he was from. New Hampshire, of course, I knew his accent sounded familiar. And then, I don’t know, we started talking about this bookshop in Shoreditch- oh, in London- and then about the places we want to visit, things we want to see… I don’t know. One thing led to another. I felt so… light talking to him. It felt easy. We spent the rest of the night together- he even walked me home.”
“And then…?” Keith prompted.

Now Allura was the same colour as her lipstick. “You won’t believe it.”

“Try me.”

“Before he left, he asked me if he had permission to court me.”

Keith’s mouth dropped open.

“I know!” exclaimed Allura. “Who does that?!”

“I mean,” said Keith, lost for words. “Which century did you say he was from?”

“I haven’t a clue, I thought I dreamt the whole thing up. But then this morning, I get this text.” She presented her phone to Keith with a thrust.

Grinning, Keith glanced at the message.

Lotor: Allura, I had such a wonderful time last night. If you are not averse to the idea, I wonder if you would like to meet this Tuesday evening? Of course, there is no pressure.

• Yours, Lotor.

“Holy fuck,” said Keith. “He’s serious.”

“Deadly serious,” said Allura, slumping back in her chair. “He’s so sincere, Keith. Nothing like I thought. I think he’s standoffish because he doesn’t know how to join in. You should have seen how nervous he was when he came to talk to me! And the way he spoke about the world…” here Allura’s eyes took on a dreamy quality. “He has such passion.”

Now Keith was really grinning. “You like him,” he said.
“I think I could,” said Allura, squirming in her seat. “I think I really could,”

“So what did you say?”

In answer Allura showed him her phone again:

**Allura:** That sounds lovely, Lotor. I’d very much like to meet up. Where?

**Lotor:** I thought we might go for dinner. Is eight o’clock acceptable?

**Allura:** More than acceptable.

**Lotor:** Wonderful. I’ll pick you up at six.

Keith couldn’t contain himself. “You’re so formal. It’s like a modern-day Jane Austen novel,” he said with a laugh. “Is this even real?”

“Apparently so,” said Allura, smiling shyly. “It’s so strange. It’s strange, isn’t it?”

“Not gonna lie,” said Keith, still laughing. “But yeah.”

Allura started laughing too. “I can’t believe people like this exist!”

“Maybe he’ll turn up on a horse,” suggested Keith.

“In armour,”

“Blowing a bugle,”
Now they both dissolved in giggles.

“You’re excited though, right?” asked Keith.

Allura nodded. “Yes. Given everything that’s happened, it’ll be nice to date.”

Something twisted in Keith’s stomach at that. There was a flash in his brain, and he saw Lance lying beside him on a rooftop under the stars. They’d talked about the constellations then, hadn’t they? His thoughts must have shown on his face, because Allura reached out a hand to hold his.

“I know you said you don’t want to talk about it…” she said. “But do you want to talk about it?”

“There’s nothing to say,” whispered Keith. “He’s not interested.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” argued Allura.

“Then why did he—?” Keith paused and studied Allura’s face. She looked at the ceiling. “What makes you say that?”

“Nothing. Just—”

“Allura,” said Keith warningly.

“Oh, alright,” huffed Allura. “I talked to him.”

“You what?” exclaimed Keith, ignoring the flutter of butterflies in his stomach. “Why did you do that?”

“I was angry!” said Allura. “And I didn’t set out to. I just saw him talking to Shiro and—”
“SHIRO TALKED TO HIM TOO?!” thundered Keith, mortified.

“We were worried,” said Allura hastily. “And, besides, it wasn’t just about you. Pidge and Hunk were worried about Lance.”

All of Keith’s rage subsided at those three words. “Why were they worried about Lance?” he asked, worry creeping into his own tone. “Is he alright?”

“Well,” said Allura, twirling the straw of her Frappuccino around. “Apparently he’s been acting weird for a while.”

“Weird how?”

Allura shrugged. “Not eating right. Getting up in the middle of the night. Not changing out of his pyjamas. Hunk said he didn’t leave his room once during exams except to use the bathroom and eat sporadically.”

This information filtered slowly through Keith’s brain, leaving him, once again, with the question, WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN? ringing in his ears.

“I,” he said slowly. “Am so confused.”

“I do think he likes you,” said Allura timidly.

“Then why did he do that?” demanded Keith, sharply. He pounded the table in his confused irritation and made their drinks jump. Carefully, Allura picked up her biodegradable cup and placed it on her lap.

“I honestly don’t know,” said Allura. “I’m not completely sure I understand how Lance’s brain works. Maybe if you talk to him—”

“Nope.” said Keith at once.
“But maybe he could explain—”

“I’m not texting him. He hasn’t texted me.”

“But—”

“Nope.” repeated Keith, taking a swig of his black coffee for emphasis.

Allura stared at him as one stares at a very large, very impossible mountain. “You’re so stubborn sometimes. Won’t you even listen to what I have to say?”

“Nope,” said Keith for the third and final time. “Now are we going shopping or what? I have to be at college for three.”

Sighing, Allura left a tip on their table and slid on her denim jacket. Keith couldn’t fathom why she wanted to buy a new outfit (the one she had on now was perfectly lovely) but she was dearest on having something new.

“What kind of thing are you looking for anyway?” asked Keith as they ducked out into the street, waving farewell to the moustached owner.

“Something to go with my makeup,” answered Allura.

“That narrows it down,” grumbled Keith.

“If you’re going to complain you can leave,”

“I told you I was terrible at shopping. You’re the one who insisted I come.”

“Oh for goodness’ sake! Does it really hurt your manhood that much to admit that shopping is fun? What is wrong with guys and…”
But Keith zoned out at this point. His feet slowed to a stop as an idea formed in his head like the
sun appearing behind a bed of cloud.

“-and another thing—Keith?” questioned Allura. She looked from him to the shop he was staring
at. “What are you doing?”

“I’ll be right back,” said Keith, disappearing into the brightly-lit barbers.

_____________________

It felt strange to feel the air on his neck again.

Keith hadn’t cut his hair for at least a year, so he’d gotten used to the feeling of it tickling his neck.
Now he felt a bit naked without it, as though he’d been caught exposed. But he also felt a million
times better, freer somehow.

He knew, deep down, it was because he’d thought of it as a sort of punishment for Lance, which
was ridiculous because it was just hair after all. But then he’d cast his mind back to all those times
Lance had called him mullet, both fondly and insultingly, and the way his fingers had brushed it
from his cheek Saturday night.

Hence, Keith had chopped it off.

The front and top were much the same, but the back was short and tidy, cut into what the barber
had enthusiastically assured him was popular in Korea. Keith hadn’t known
whether this was racist or not but seeing as the guy was Asian himself he’d let it slide. The sides
were trimmed too, and the tips of Keith’s ears were visible. He kept running his hand over it self-
consciously, despite Allura’s insistence that he looked cool.

“What do you think?” he asked the naked statue of Apollo.

Before the statue had enough time to magically come alive and answer his question, the door to
Sendak’s office opened and the hellish teacher invited him inside. Professor Thace was already
there, as was another teacher, a math professor who also doubled as the head of student finance.
His name was Slav or something.

“Keith,” said Thace, warmly. “Come in, have a seat.”

“That’s right,” said Keith. “You approved it last week,”

Ignoring him, Keith focused his attention on Thace’s eager expression. It wasn’t even a question, really. This was his dream- the entire reason he’d applied for this college in the first place. When
else would he get the opportunity, or have the financial aid he’d need to get to Scotland? To finally realise his dad’s dream? And there wasn’t anything keeping him here… not now anyway.

“If I apply, will I definitely get it?” he asked.

“Based on your past grades, there is a ninety-nine point nine per cent chance you will,” answered Slav.

“Then I’ll take it,” said Keith, resolute and final.

_________________

It was way past dinner time by the time Keith arrived on the street which led to his home. His stomach had chosen that same walk home to remind him he’d forgotten to eat today and had so far survived on a single cup of coffee. It was tempting to ignore his stomach altogether, to just slip home, crawl into bed and watch a film, but the sound of Shiro’s voice chiding him guilted Keith into stopped off at a 7-eleven to grab a sandwich. And ice cream. Maybe he’d watch a Studio Ghibli movie…

Keith was just deciding between *Princess Mononoke* and *Earthsea* when he came to his door and found something attach to it: a piece of paper. No, a note, carefully tapped to the splintered wood. Mind whirling with the possibility that his rent hadn’t gone through, Keith pulled it off his door, relieved that the writing wasn’t the pointy, jagged mess of his landlord, but a cursive, flamboyant hand. It read:

*Keith, follow these instructions.*

*It is EXTREMELY IMPORTANT that you do.*

*Step One) Head towards the old shack on York Street.*

Puzzled, Keith looked up and around in case this was some kind of joke, scanning the bushes and building for sight of anyone suspicious. But the streets were mostly empty. Frowning, Keith reread step one. The writing was quite feminine… was this Allura? Was she trying to babysit him again?
“Oh whatever,” said Keith, turning around and heading towards York Street. It wouldn’t do any harm to play along, would it? Besides, as much as Keith was trying to assure himself that Ghibli and Ice cream sounded like a good night, he welcomed the distraction.

At the end of York street, pinned to the shack, was another note.

*Congratulations! You made it. You have officially levelled up from starter noob to Level 1 Fighter class.*

*Step 2) Follow Willow road until you reach the infamous Kissing spot.*

Amused, Keith did as he was told. Every on campus new where the kissing spot was. It was an old bench under a birch tree just before the lake, where years’ worth of names where carved into hearts on the wood. This was sort of fun.

Thankfully, when Keith arrived at the kissing spot there was no one there. Only another note.

*You have obtained a third note and have advanced into Level 2 Knight class! Nice one.*

*Step 3) Follow the golden trail.*

“The what?” asked Keith out loud. He looked around, thoroughly confused. What was it talking about? Determined to see this through to the end now, Keith carefully scanned the floor, uncaring that he probably looked quite strange and was giving someone a good laugh somewhere. It was only when he actually went *around* the birch tree that he found it: the golden trail. Or, to be more exact, the trail of Cheetos scattered across the floor.

That was when the suspicions set in, but Keith followed the trail any way. He was too far along now to give up or go back.

The Cheeto trail snaked down the pavement which slid into gravel, and the sandy bank of the lake. By this point, the sky was melting into the soft pinks of sunset, shooting through and around the bright white of spongy clouds and there was a chilly breeze which carried the swampy scent of the water. Keith breathed it in, trying desperately to calm the sudden nerves which wracked his body, hands curried deep inside his jean pockets.

His suspicions were proved even further correct when the sight of Blue loomed into view at the end of the Cheeto trail. Her headlights were on and someone had plastered bits of paper all over her.
Unpon closer inspection, Keith realised they were lyrics from song upon song, from Wild Beasts to Elvis to Ed Sheeran. There were tens upon tens of phrases and snap shots from about a dozen different love songs, all written out in that same, cursive handwriting. And There was a fourth and final note too, tacked to Blue’s windscreen which simply read,

*Step 4) Check under the rear-view mirror.*

So Keith pulled on Blue’s familiar handle, unsurprised that she wasn’t locked, and slid into the passenger seat he’d become so well accustomed with. Inside, Albatross was playing softly on the radio and Keith’s heart started to hammer like hell. Ignoring his erratic heartbeat, Keith reached for the envelope dangling from the rear-view mirror and opened it. Inside, was another note, which read,

*I wanted you to know that I’m sorry. And that I am serious. I know you probably wouldn’t believe anything that comes out of my stupid mouth (what can I say? I never claimed to be an intelligent, functioning human) so I hope these prove it to you. If not, I plan on proving it over and over to you until you’re convinced.*

*Love, Lance xx*

Licking his nervous, dry lips, Keith peeled open the envelope and tipped out the remaining contents. His breath stopped dead when he realised what they were.

“Oh my god,” he breathed, hand flying to his mouth. “Oh my god.”

In his leather clad hands, were two tickets to see Wild Beasts in concert.

Outside, there came the sudden noise of someone clearing their throat. With a jerk, Keith looked up in time to see Lance standing awkwardly outside the car, hands clasped nervously in front of him with an expression like a frightened deer. He was wearing a white shirt and dark, blue jeans, giving him an oddly formal look, and kept pulling at his shirt collar.

Composing himself, Keith slowly climbed out of the car.

“Hey,” said Lance, awkwardly.
Keith folded his arms. “Hey,” he returned.

They stared at each other: two faces of pensive nerves and chilly contempt. Lance was the first to break: he scuffed his shoes and ran a hand through his hair, spiking it up.

“I’m so sorry, Keith,” he said, and his blue eyes were wide and earnest. “About the way I behaved at the party. No, shit, I mean the way I’ve behaved since before exams. I’ve been such a massive jerk—”

“You’ve been a dick.”

“Yeah, I know, I just- I didn’t—”

“Is that what all this is about?” asked Keith, waving the envelope and gesturing to the car and the Cheetos. “Because you’re sorry?”

Lance licked his lips and nodded.

“Why’d you do it?” asked Keith, anger suddenly evaporating like a bubble. He felt tired and washed out. “At the party? I thought things were going well.”

“They were!” exclaimed Lance, taking a step forward. He seemed to think better of it and stepped back. “They really were. Too well. That was the problem, really. I got… freaked out.”

“Freaked out?” Keith echoed, incredulous. “You?”

Sheepishly, Lance nodded.

“But,” said Keith, and now he sounded unsure. “I thought this was your thing?”

“What?” asked Lance.
“Romance and shit,” said Keith, gesturing widely. “I mean, aren’t you always going on about being a lady-killer and flirting an-and stuff?”

“Dude,” said Lance, laughing under his breath. “That’s all just a big show. When it actually comes to it I’m scared.”


“Terrified,” confirmed Lance, deadly serious.

Keith blinked. He felt like he needed to sit down. Or go for another run. Instead, he asked, “Why?”

“You probably don’t know this, cause I guess you can never be outside your own head,” said Lance, thoughtfully putting his hands in his pocket. “But you’re so… sure of yourself. It’s like self-doubt can’t touch you. And you’re so good at everything- school and athletics and, I don’t know, life I guess. And then you seemed so sure of me… and well… I guess I was worried I wouldn’t measure up.”

“So you… self-sabotaged?” said Keith, slowly.

Lance nodded.

“That is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,”

“Again,” said Lance with a laugh. “Never claimed to be an intelligent, functioning human.”

Keith laughed too, and then glanced down at the tickets in his hands. “Where did you even get these?”

Lance tapped his nose. “Trade secrets,” then he shuffled again. “They’re both for you, by the way. I get that what I did was totally over the line and I understand if, yanno, you never want to speak to me again. I just wanted to show you how I really felt, I guess. Instead of half-assing everything.
But I’m not pressuring you or anything!” he exclaimed, suddenly. “Like, yeah I was hoping you’d forgive me and we could talk again and go together but you don’t have to take me or anything.”

“Lance,” said Keith.

“Cause I’ve been such a jerk,” Lance continued, oblivious. “And I’d totally hate me too if I were you. I mean, I hate myself.”

“Lance,”

“So you can take Allura and I won’t bother you again. Honestly, I just wanted to—”

“LANCE,”

Lance mouth closed with an audible pop. Smirking, Keith closed the distance between them and held out the envelope. “Wanna go to a concert with me?” asked Keith.

Every fibre of Lance’s body seemed to relax at that. “Yeah, man,” he said softly. “More than anything.”

“I’m still sort of mad at you though,” Keith said, eyes warning. “So don’t expect me to forget any of it any time soon.”

“I know,” said Lance quickly. “I know. If it’s alright with you, I’d like to take things slow.”

Keith nodded, liking the sound of that.

“And I know I’ve said it about a million times. But I am sorry.” Continued Lance.

But Keith waved him away. As far as he was concerned, Lance had proven that he was sorry, and he was prepared to let it go. “How many bags of Cheetos did you use anyway?” asked Keith, laughingly.
Lance’s whole body sagged. “SO many bags of Cheetos,” he said, swooping his arms around in a trade-mark Lance gesture of dramatics. “I swear to god people thought I was summoning the chilli cheese devil or something!”

That made Keith laugh. Then a thought occurred to him. “Want some ice cream?” he asked, holding up his shopping bag. “I bought some before and it’ll probably melt otherwise.”

A big, dopey grin spread across Lance’s face. “Sure man. Sounds dope.”

Before they clambered into Blue to share it, however, Keith caught Lance by the arm and said, “And just so we’re clear- cause, you know, I know I’m not the best talker- I want you to know that I’m serious too.”

Now that big dopey smile melted into something soft and gooey. “Thanks, man,” said Lance. He swallowed and asked, nervously, “How ‘bout a hug?”

Returning the smile, Keith held out his arms and stepped into Lance’s. He breathed in his scent, arms winding around his upper torso while Lance cupped the back of his neck. It was warm and soft and everything Keith had needed these past two days. He sighed contentedly.

“Um, mullet?”

“Yeah?” asked Keith, blissfully.

“WHERE THE FUCK IS YOUR GODDAMN MULLET?!”

Lance
Dear Abuelita,

It’s been nearly a month since Keith decided to forgive me. Yes, you heard me. My god-sent ex-mullet (that’s what I’m calling him now… I’ll get to that later) actually freaking talked to me again. And not only that, but we’re going to see Wild Beasts together. Damn right. Lance McClain is back in the game, G-Ma! Sorry. I’ll never call you that again. But you get my drift, yo?

This isn’t to say I don’t have to worry anymore. I’ve never been happier in my life, but that’s a danger too, I guess, because one more wrong move and all that comes crashing down. But ex-mullet’s got another thing coming if he thinks I’d ever screw up like that again. Screwing up is a thing of the past. At least when it comes to Keith. I still managed to shrink all of Hunk’s sweaters in the laundry before we left. Still trying to get the hang of that one.

Anyway, I’ve written an obituary for Keith’s mullet – I’m going to send it to him at 4am to remind him of how much a mistake getting rid of it was. It’s summer vacation, so obvs he’s gone to Shiro’s and I’m… here. So if I can’t mess with him IRL, my only choice is over text. I wish I could see his face as he reads it. It goes like this:

**Keith’s Mullet**

AKA, “The Mullet”, god-knows-how-old-but-too-young-to-die, perished on the 2\textsuperscript{nd} of June after a short, yet tragic battle with a pair of scissors. A once majestic asset to the head of Keith Kogane, the Mullet shall be remembered in the mind of his truest admirer, Lance McClain, and in its name a new Mullet shall be regrown or god help Lance, there will be much pestering. On this day, we remember the Mullet. R.I.P.

Even though we’ve said to take it slow, I kind of still really want to kiss him. Is that bad? I don’t think it is. Keith forgave me, even after I was such a douche. That means he accepts me. He might (might) even want me. Me! How crazy is that, Abuelita? There’s nothing crazier and cooler and sweeter than that. I still feel like kind of a jerk-wad, but I think my way of apologising was pretty rad, wouldn’t you say? And that took some god damn dedication. As in, four hours of writing out personalised lyrics to all our songs and arranging them on Blue. I spent a lot of money on post-its that day. Some may call me sad, I call me smooth. But I need to think of another name than ‘Lance the Lady-Killer’ now. Pidge suggested ‘Lance the mullet-killer’ cause she thinks it’s my fault Keith got a haircut, but I’m still bitter about that so nope.

I wonder what you’d say, Abuelita, about us being two guys. I’ve thought about it a lot, because you left us before you had a chance to see me fall in love. Which kind of makes me really sad. But also not, because sometimes I can feel you scowling at the back of my head whenever I do something douchey and I know you’re watching me (in a non-creepy, non-ghost way, of course… but ghosts are cool in my humble opinion so don’t be offended lol). But I don’t think you’d mind at all. You always used to tell me that love was the purest thing in existence. I used to think that sounded really gay. I wasn’t wrong! Because here I am, being extra gay with a gay guy, even though I ain’t gay, Abuelita, I’ve figured that out now. I’m definitely bisexual like Shiro. I think a lot of people are… so I’m not weird. I mean I am weird, but not because of that. From here on in I’m going to make Keith feel like he’s the most incredible person in the whole freaking universe (which of course, he is) because he really freaking deserves it because that boy needs all the freaking love.

I love him.
I keep saying it to myself in the dark or when I’m on a walk or driving blue. I’m pretty sure soon I’ll be saying it in my sleep soon. I keep saying it because sometimes I can’t believe it’s true.

I love him. And now I just gotta wait for him to love me back.

Peace out, Abuelita.

The day was dragging for Lance. Like, really dragging. It had gone something like this:

Wake up.

“WHO STOLE MY LED ZEPPELIN VINYL?”

Sigh.

“NO ONE IN THE HOUSE LIKES LED ZEPPELIN EXCEPT YOU, VERONICA.”

Except Marco.

“I DO!”

There it is.

“We know, Marco.”

This isn’t solving anything.

“FINE, BUT WHO STOLE IT? I NEED IT.”

Mom’s about to get angry.

“CAN YOU GUYS SHUT UP? I’M TRYING TO WORK!”

I’m god damn telepathic.

“SORRY, MOM.”

She doesn’t mean it.

“SORRY, MOM!”

Lance: “I’m going for a walk.”

After spending such long periods of time in his place at Wisconsin with Hunk, his chilled out baking mom, he’d forgotten what it was like to live with his crazy-ass family. He always did. And now he had a permanent headache. Lance sighed as he strolled around the hazy, sun-lit block, the pavements baking beneath his sandaled feet. There was a market out today, and the scent of spicy Mexican food wafted deliciously over Lance as he passed the humming, hot vans, scattered with enthusiastic foodies and busy-bodies. Lately, Lance hadn’t been hungry. Hunk would say he was love-sick. Thankfully none of his family knew about Keith, yet. His stomach twisted with the idea of telling them, but he desperately wanted Keith to meet his family. Even if it was just as a friend.
For now, Lance knew his family would dote on Keith. He had the perfect puppy-eyed look Lance’s mom was bound to fall for. Heck knows, Lance had fallen for it. He was way too much like his mom.

It was on walks like these that Lance remembered the last precious few days he and Keith had spent together before they’d had to set off for the summer, before promising to meet on the first of July for the concert. These memories were the only thing keeping Lance from going insane. It had been less than a month, but it felt like a year. The Wisconsin trees had been traded for tall tower blocks, and the lake was traded for desert and fields. Of course, they’d texted, which abolished most of the awkwardness they’d experienced before leaving. The lingering stares with short, sweet smiles in between. The way Lance laughed at every one of Keith’s sarcastic remarks, in turn then berating him for losing the mullet. Which was a serious matter. And then they’d spent one last night together. That made it sound much more romantic in Lance’s head – actually they’d taken another midnight trip to the beach by the lake and talked about everything except their relationship. They talked about Allura and how she was totally going to fall for Lotor, which made Lance roll his eyes. They talked about the upcoming martial arts tournaments next semester and Keith’s lengthy training plan for the summer. They talked about the concert, and loosely made some plans to meet up in Seattle where the concert was taking place. But then Lance’s stomach had jumped and he started rambling about how once a customer at Starbucks had been so impressed by his coffee making that they’d assumed he was from Seattle, which had earned him a confused look from Keith.

“Why would they think you’re from Seattle?”

“Seattle is all about grungy hippies sipping coffee in the rain, you know?”

“…no. I had no idea. That’s so random, Lance.”

Then they’d slept in Keith’s bed again, only this time there was a lot of awkward laughter. A lot of awkwardly angling their bodies away from each other. A lot of awkwardly trying not to hog the covers. Just a lot of awkwardness. But they’d still woken up entangled in each other, fitting together like pieces of a puzzle in Keith’s tiny, awkward single bed. Lance pretended to be asleep when Keith woke up and left the bed first. He didn’t know what he’d have said or done if they’d woken up like that, Keith’s eyes finding his, the true realisation of what they’d been doing hitting simultaneously and creating yet more awkwardness.

It was four days until Lance flew to Seattle to meet Keith. It was four days until Lance saw his mullet-less almost-boyfriend.

He took a deep breath.

Keith: Dude… I just woke up and saw this. You’re crazy.

Lance: It needed to be said. Your mullet deserved a proper send-off :P

Keith: The mullet had outstayed its welcome. I won’t apologise for that.

Lance: You’re mean

Keith: Only to you xx

Lance grinned. His stomach flipped. Only four days.
“Lance I need to search your room.”

It was 7pm. Two days before Lance set off. Veronica stood moodily in his doorway chewing gum. Lance looked up from his phone.

“Why?”

“Mom’s convinced I’ve been doing pot in the house.”

Lance sat bolt upright.

“V! You think I did this?”

Veronica shrugged nonchalantly, wading through the clothes on Lance’s floor.

“I dunno, man. You’ve been really quiet lately so I just figured you were stoned.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “No, you guys are just super loud. *Everyone* seems quiet to you.” He stood, peering suspiciously at his sister as she dug through the piles on his floor. “Sis, I haven’t been doing pot.”

She straightened up, sighing. “Then who has? Lance, mom is gonna go spare if she finds out you’ve been” –

“I haven’t!” Lance insisted. “Have you?”

She rolled her eyes, flopping onto Lance’s bed. He scowled. One of her favourite pastimes was inviting herself into people’s rooms and invading their space.

“No, believe it or not.”

Lance sank into his chair. It was covered in clothes that didn’t really fit him anymore but he hadn’t gotten ridden of yet. All his good ones were at college, or stuffed into the open suitcase by his bed.

“Where is she getting that from? I haven’t smelt any pot.” Said Lance, sniffing the air as he spoke.

Veronica shrugged. “You know what mom’s like. She’s paranoid of us going corrupt.”

Lance snorted. “Corrupt?”

“Yeah. Y’know, experimenting in college and all that… don’t act innocent, Lance. You know.”

Lance stared at her, aghast. “I’ve never done drugs, V.”

She raised her pierced brow. “You haven’t? Shit.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Did… did you?”

“Yeah!” She lowered her voice, glancing paranoid at Lance’s open door. “I mean… a little. *College is there* for experimenting. It’s where you discover yourself.”

Lance gave her a dead-pan look. “That was so pretentious.”
Veronica threw a pillow at his head which he dodged skilfully. “What? Haven’t you discovered anything about yourself in college?”

Lance hesitated. “I mean…”

Veronica’s eyes glittered. Lance’s breath caught. He should have just said no. Veronica sat up, crossing her legs and leaning forward.

“What? Something happened you didn’t tell me about, bro?”

Lance was sweating. Where did he start with that? A lot had happened.

He began to laugh. “I dunno, V, you know, college is crazy, a lot goes down it’s hard to pinpoint just one th” –

-“Cut the shit, Lance. I can tell when you’re bluffing.”

He gulped. His sister knew him too well. She wasn’t Keith.

Lance’s breath shook as he inhaled. “V…”

She raised her brow again, the piercing winking silver. “Yeeees?” She said exaggeratedly.

He exhaled. “I’m bi.”

Lance stared at his feet as the silence ensued. When it stretched on for too long and he was unable to endure it no longer, he apprehensively glanced at his sister. Whose expression hadn’t changed.

“Cool.” She nodded finally. “You got a boyfriend?”

“Veronica!” He snapped. And then… “Kind of. Not really. No. I don’t know.”

Veronica sniggered. “How can you not know if you have a boyfriend or not?”

Lance chewed his lip. “It’s… kinda complicated.”

Veronica smirked. “Now who sounds pretentious?”

Lance threw his pillow back at her, unsmiling. “Thanks, V.”

“So do I get to meet him? Who is he? What’s his name? Where does he” - ?

“Slow down! He…” Lance sighed. He was really going there. “His name is Keith. He goes to Wisconsin with me. We’re going to the concert together in Seattle.”

“Ahhhhhh…” Veronica’s grin widened. “So this ‘friend’ you were going with is no friend at all, huh?”

Lance’s mouth formed a hard line. “We are friends right now. We’re taking it slow.”

Veronica blew a raspberry. “We’ll see how long that lasts. Is he cute?”

Lance blushed before he could help himself.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Said Veronica smugly.

“You’d like him. He’s an emo… used to be.”
Veronica’s mouth opened into a small ‘o’. “For all the crap you gave me about being an Evanescence fan! Hypocrite.”

“And he likes anime.”

“A fellow weeb? Lance, I’m seriously shocked.”

Lance shrugged, unable to keep the smile off his face. “I’m full of surprises.”

Veronica was shaking her head. “I’m speechless.”

“That’s rare.”

They laughed, and Lance felt as if a weight he hadn’t known was there had lifted from his shoulders. He hadn’t realised he’d wanted to tell someone in his family so bad.

“But don’t tell mom and dad. Please.” He implored.

Veronica waved him off. “Dude. I wouldn’t. The shit mom and dad don’t know about me” –

-“I’d rather not know, V.”

She winked. “Didn’t think so.”

It was the morning of the 1st of July. Very early morning. In fact, the sun hadn’t risen yet. Lance groaned. And then his phone lit up.

Keith: You up yet, sleepyhead? Xx

Lance: Barely. I’m just about ready to cry from lack of sleep xx

Keith: You didn’t sleep either? Xx

Lance: Nah, too excited, ex-mullet xx

Keith: Me too. I’ll see you soon xx

Lance blinked. He’d expected a sarcastic remark. It was impossible to tell for sure over text, but he sensed a strange energy coming from Keith. He shook his head, unplugging his charger to stuff in his bag. He was probably overtired.

Despite his supreme reluctance to get up early, driving on the open roads into the dusky morning light of the desert was a special kind of bliss. It was about an hour to the airport from here. Lance was about to play some music when he stopped to gaze dead ahead at the salmon pink clouds streaking the horizon, listening to the sound of his banged up tires purring across the sandy road. The window was open, and the breeze whipped his hair and woke his tired eyes. This would be perfect if Keith was beside him, zoning out by the window. Lance liked to pretend he was an extreme extrovert whose entire personality was derived from memes and the validation of other people, but moments like these were his favourites, and something about being totally alone made them all the more special.
He only got bored of the silence once the sun had risen, and switched on a new playlist he’d created: RED AND BLUE. The first song that played was Every Breath You Take – he had vowed not to listen to any of the Wild Beasts songs until the concert. That shit had to be appreciated to the fullest.

When he got to the airport, Lance patted Blue goodbye and resumed listening to his playlist all the way through customs.

On the plane, his insides buzzed with nerves. Not for the flight, he loved flying – especially the crazy rush of adrenaline he got when the plane lifted from the ground, soaring into the air like a bird. No, he was nervous because of Keith. They’d never arranged to meet like this before. It baffled Lance that at one time he’d been able to spend a whole 24 hours with Keith, cramped up in Blue, and hardly given it more than a disgruntled thought. Now here he was, chewing his nails off over the idea of just seeing his face again.

Wait up - was this like a date? He guessed it was. He’d never really thought of it like that before but…

Shit. This was a date. A real. Full on. Date.

If he really, really thought about it: this was sort of like a romantic getaway.

Lance shuffled in his seat, sweating.

The old lady next to him turned, smiling.

“Flight got you jittery, sonny?” She asked in a thick African accent.

Lance shook his head. “Nah – more like what happens after the flight.”

The old woman hummed as if she knew Lance’s entire backstory, the headscarf wrapped around her head glinting with gold beads.

“You’re a young man. Young and in love I’m guessing.” She said with a wink.

Lance cringed. “Huh…?”

Then the woman proceeded to relay the whole of her life story to Lance. She told him everything. Everything. Every love affair, every detail of her children’s lives –

Lance was far too nervous to listen, let alone reciprocate. All he wanted to do was shove on his headphones and think about Keith and the concert. But no such luck. The old lady gabbed on at him for the next three. Whole. Hours.

Jeez, Lance thought as he fled off the plane with a quick, “Nice chat, lady, bye!” that must have been how Keith felt on their first road-trip together. For the first fifteen minutes Lance had done nothing but talk at him. But at least it wasn’t three freaking hours.

Slowing as he reached Duty Free and he was sure the old lady was way behind him, Lance nabbed his phone from his pocket.

**Lance:** Yo, just landed. Where you at? Xx

**Keith:** Me too. About fifteen minutes ago. I’m at the airport lobby. You’ll never believe this: it’s actually raining. Xx
**Lance: Rain in Seattle! Surprise surprise. I'll make my way down. See you soon Keith xxx**

Lance’s heart thumped as he jogged past all the shops, skidding across the shiny airport floors. His entire being was waiting, searching for any sign of Keith even way before he reached the airport lobby. When he did, Lance slid to a halt, panting. He stood stock still in the middle of the cavernous hall, eyes flitting over people, wheely suitcases, couples…

Lance felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Hey.”

He whipped around, and his stomach flipped, skipping, his heart probably died for a sec there. He couldn’t help the grin that spread over his face at the sight of Keith.

“You didn’t have to run.” Said Keith, lips curving into a small smile as he looked at Lance through his eyelashes.

Was this *allowed*?

Lance felt heat prickling his face. “Y-you saw that?”

“I was waiting for you – of course I saw.” Keith let out a short breath of laughter. The rest of the noise from the airport faded into non-existence, and all Lance could see was Keith. He was wearing a red hoodie over a pair of khaki shorts and a beanie. Probably to hide the fact he didn’t have a mullet anymore.

Lance dragged his eyes away from Keith (with difficulty) to scrutinise the weather through the huge wall of glass.

“You’re right, it’s pouring it down. That’s almost too much of a cliché.”

“So I guess exploring the city until the concert is off.” Said Keith.

Lance gasped with feigned horror. “Keith! This is Seattle. We *have* to experience the rain and the coffee shops and the art.”

Keith rolled his eyes. “You’re such a hipster.”

Lance leaned in a little, smirking. “So you don’t want to sip coffee in the rain with me?”

Keith stared at him, and slowly his face began to tinge pink. Fuck. Lance had meant to sound stupidly ironic and hipster, but instead it came off as kind of… seductive. He coughed, running a hand through his hair and glancing around at nothing. God, he was a cringe.

“So – so wanna get a bus into the city centre? There are a couple outside – I mean I checked before I came – I mean” –

“Yes.” Keith interrupted Lance, smiling fondly (Lance hoped). “Let’s get a bus.”

Working off his embarrassment, Lance led the way to the bus station, bugging Keith about his summer so far. Keith explained how, as usual, Shiro’s mom cooked them all masterpieces and Keith was tasked with taking the dog out for long walks – but Keith made them into runs. The huge Husky loved it apparently, bounding through the park with Keith.

Lance tried hard not to think about Keith exercising. It was difficult.
The bus didn’t take long to arrive. When it did, Lance headed straight for the back, flopping down by the window.

“I never would have taken you for a back-of-the-bus kid.” Said Keith wryly.

“Oh really?” Said Lance, “All the other kids used to fear me. I dominated the bus, Keith.”

Keith snickered. “Sure. I find that hard to believe.”

“I’ve changed, Keith. Before college I was a thug… well. The nerd kind.”

Keith rolled his eyes. “I’m sure you did plenty of thugging with those muscles. How was the flight?”

Lance sunk into his seat. “Torture. This old woman rambled on at me for hours about her life.”

“That’s sweet.” Said Keith.

Lance spluttered. “Are you kidding? I’d rather read the yellow pages.”

Keith shrugged. “I like talking to old people.”

“Why? Cause you relate to them?” Lance snorted.

Keith gave him a straight-faced look, pulling off his beanie. “Yes. They’re way more interesting than people our age.” He said, mussing up his hair as he tried (and failed) to flatten it. His new haircut looked a lot more difficult to maintain as a carelessly dishevelled type-look, Lance thought with satisfaction.

“Well, thanks!” He retorted.

“I didn’t mean you.” Said Keith hurriedly. “They’re just… interesting I guess. They’ve had a lot of life.”

“Well this one was well on her way to becoming senile.” Lance joked. But he did sort of agree with Keith, though he’d never let on. The only reason he hadn’t been able to talk to the old woman on the plane was because he was wrecked with nerves. Thanks to someone. Keith caught him staring at him as the bus began to rattle down the road.

Keith smiled. “What?”

“So do you want to get coffee?”

Keith shook his head, laughing. “You’re obsessed.”

“We’re in Seattle!”

“You work at Starbucks! You must be sick of the stuff!”

“Keith, you can just say no.”

Keith was pulling the threads off his hat, he glanced away from Lance.

“No – I – I do want coffee. I was just thinking of y” –

-“Don’t worry about me, Keith. If I didn’t want to do something, I wouldn’t suggest it.” Lance
shrugged off his seriousness. “Besides, we’re here because I was a doofus, so the least I can do is get you a drink.”

Keith tutted. “You don’t have to get me an apology coffee.” He muttered.

“It’s not an apology. I want to.”

Keith raised a brow. “You sure this isn’t just cause of your guilt?”

Lance sat up, nearly grabbing Keith’s hands as he did. But he didn’t go that far.

“Keith… do you know how excited I was to come here? I’ve literally been counting the freaking hours. I got the tickets because, first and foremost, I wanted to do something to make you – I dunno – happy, I guess. It wasn’t about me.”

Keith held his gaze, eyes wide. “Okay.” He said with a breath. “I believe you.”

Lance sighed, he hadn’t realised his hands had been shaking as he said that. He tucked them in his pockets, kicking the back of the empty seat in front of him.

“Good. ’Cause this trip is gonna be ridonculously good.”

“Ridonculous?” Keith echoed, sniggering.

“You’ve never heard of ridonculous? It’s a great word. I highly recommend you work it into your Texan lexicon. Ooooh, that was satisfying to say.”

They bickered about made-up words for a while, only stopping when the bus shuddered into the rain-soaked city, the tall old buildings forming around them.

“You know I’ve never been to Washington State before?” Said Keith as they clambered off the bus.

Lance pulled out his phone, opening snapchat. They were outside an old public office that looked like it should be famous.

“Me neither,” He told Keith, snapping a picture to put on his story.

Lance was glad they both had hoods. The rain had thinned to a misty spatter. They weren’t due to check into a hotel until after the concert, so in the mean time they were stuck hauling their rucksacks around. They dipped into a place that did ramen for lunch – Keith said he was craving it – and ate before heading for a particularly indie coffee shop nearby that Lance found on trip-advisor.

The coffee shop was located underground, down an ominous-looking flight of stone steps decorated with clear stones. Keith and Lance exchanged a worried look as they descended the steps and opened a door draped in dream catchers. The coffee shop was dark, lit by low-hanging, dim orbs over chipped wooden tables and squishy sofas covered by embroidered drapes. An old TV playing episodes of Friends hung above the bar, set to low volume. The only other backdrop of noise was the sound of an acoustic band playing through some speakers. Lance was sure it was playing Fleet Foxes.

The café was virtually empty.

“This is…”
“Ambient?” Keith finished.

“I was gonna say hipster.”

They sat on one of the sofas, forced to squish next to each other thanks to the size. One glance at the menu and Lance could tell they were in indie town. Keith had no idea what to do with himself. They all had names like: *Elderberry Matcha Latte* or *Pumpkin infused tea with strawberry liqueur*. And then,

“Look! They have Frappuccino.” Said Lance.

“Thank fuck.” Keith breathed. “I don’t like the sound of a *spicy chocolate Maccachito with lemon-grass flakes*, do you?”

“Not my cup of tea.” Lance winked. Keith gave him a dead-pan look. “I’ll order!” Lance leapt up and headed for the bar, leaving Keith to gaze, dazzled, at his strange surroundings.

As he waited for their drinks to be prepared by a woman with questionably dyed bright yellow hair and a piercing in the centre of her nose, Lance found himself watching Keith who sat, tucked up, his hair stuck slightly on end thanks to the humid air. He was hit with a shot of awe as he gazed at the object of his affection, unable to shake the crazed tingling in his fingers. He smiled. He was so damn lucky.

“Here’s your drink.”

Lance whipped around. He stopped. Stared at the tall glass placed in front of him.

“Yo, where’s the other one?”

“Other one?” The yellow lady asked.

“Yeah… the other Frappuccino?” Lance asked, drawing out the words.

The woman raised a brow. “You asked for a *double*. Not *two*.”

“Ah, fuck…” Lance breathed. He’d been so distracted by his excitement.

“I can give you two straws?” The woman suggested, “It’s big enough for two people.”

He sighed. “Okay. Hit me with the straws. Thanks.”

The woman disappeared under the counter. Lance frowned. She was taking a while to get a couple of straws. He glanced behind him, where Keith was watching with a questioning look. Lance gave him a thumbs up.

The woman re-emerged. “I… only have one straw left.” She said apologetically.

… “That’s cool.”

Lance brought over one drink, with one straw, and set it in front of Keith.

“Um…”

“I accidentally ordered a double.”

“Right.”
“And there was only one straw left.”

“…”

“So you can have it.”

Keith rolled his eyes. “We’ll just share.” He said.

“No!” Lance protested. “You don’t want to share a straw with me. What if I’m diseased?”

“We’ll just have to take that chance.” Keith scoffed, lifting the tall, over-filled glass. He took a long sip from the straw. “It’s really good.”

“Fine. Pass it over.” Said Lance through gritted teeth. The straw was still wet from Keith’s mouth. Oh god. He couldn’t even taste it, he was thinking so hard about the fact that this was basically an in-direct kiss.

“It’s… really good. You’re right.” He told Keith, his insides turning. Keith took the drink back, smiling.

“This was a good shout.”

“I’m full of great ideas, Keith.”

A bubble of coffee foam had formed around Keith’s lips. Lance laughed, and reached over to brush it off.

“You’ve got” –

-“Oh, you don’t have to” –

- “I got it. It’s gone.”

Even in the dim light, Lance could tell Keith’s skin had darkened to a shade of red. Lance was getting weirdly satisfied by that. Despite his nerves on the plane, his confidence was mounting. Maybe it was because of the excitement for the concert. Maybe it was because he’d had no sleep. Maybe it was because he’d finally accepted he was so in love with Keith that he didn’t care what anyone thought anymore.

“We should take a picture.” Said Keith.

“You read my mind.”

The coffee shop was so badly lit that Lance had to fiddle around with the flash for a while before managing to dredge up the doggie filter.

“We are such hipster hoes.” He said as they posed for a stupid selfie.

Keith grinned. “Yeah but I’ve never done this before, so it’s fun.”

Lance turned to look at Keith as he snapped the photo. Unintentionally, of course. He swore, and went to delete the photo, but Keith put a hand on his arm.

“Wait – d-don’t delete it.”

“But I turned around. The filter went off.”
Keith gazed at the picture. “I like it. Send it to me. Or save it.”

Lance looked at the photo again, his stomach curling inward because – wow – his expression said everything. He was turning to look at Keith with a smile on his face, his eyes searching and filled with nothing but love. Was that what Keith saw? Or did he just see a cute, candid moment?

Lance shrugged. “Sure.” And saved the picture.

When they left the café, the rain had turned into a deluge.

“We’re gonna drown!” Lance cried over the roaring drops creating a lake in the street.

Keith grinned at him, and Lance knew why a second later – he’d wrenched down his hood and sprinted into the street, tipping his head back to let his face, his hair, everything get soaked by the rain. Lance gaped. And took another photo. This time without Keith’s knowledge. Keith’s face was one of pure, childish joy as fat raindrops splashed onto his eyelids, but he didn’t care.

“Come out here, you pussy!” He called.

“Fine, ex-mullet!” Lance replied, hopping over a puddle. Not like it made any difference. His shoes were becoming pools of water already.

Tugging his hood further over his head, Lance jogged to Keith’s side.

“You’re crazy.” He laughed as Keith took off his hoodie, exposing his arms. He was only wearing a black t-shirt. The water caused the fabric to stick to him, clinging to every curve and jut of his torso. Lance’s mouth went dry.

“I live in the desert, dingus. Rain is a once in a blue-moon treat for me.”

Lance shrugged. “It’s just rain.”

Stepping towards him, Keith faced Lance, reached up and yanked down his hood.

“Hey!”

“What? Scared of a little water?”

“You wish!”

Lance chased Keith in the street, kicking the puddles to send sprays of water into the air, soaking them both. Laughing like a maniac, Keith rose to the challenge, each doing their best to get each other as wet as possible. Lance used his rucksack as a shield. The waves of puddles didn’t appear to bother Keith at all. Finally, when they were both exhausted, they ducked under a veranda by a line of shops. Hair dripping, Keith pulled a bottle of water from his bag, taking a long glug.

“God,” He sighed once he’d finished, handing the bottle to Lance, “I love the rain.”

“You’re easily pleased.” Lance smirked, sipping the water.

Keith elbowed him. “Says the guy who…”

“Yes?”

“I’m trying to think of a comeback.”
Lance threw back his head and laughed hard. “I guess I win, then.”

Keith grinned, and he truly looked devilish again, his dark eyes sparkling.

“We should get some drinks for later.” He said.

“You mean, like, alcohol?” Asked Lance.

Keith flicked him on the forehead. “You don’t look 21 yet, doofus. Just some soda. We’ve got an hour and a half before we need to go get the tickets.”

Lance checked the time on his phone. “Woah, you’re right. I can’t believe it’s that late already.”

Hailing a cab, they ventured to a bar situated right next to the venue. The bar was packed with people who, Lance presumed, were also here to watch the British band.

Lance ordered a cream soda (which Keith turned his nose up at) and Keith got a cola. They smiled at each other because it was too difficult to speak over the hubbub of rising noise around them, and simply enjoyed their drinks, both feeling the buzz of mounting excitement. When it was time to collect their tickets from the box-office, Keith’s hair had almost dried – but it stuck to his head in rain-mussed tendrils. He would have gotten away with it if he still had a mullet.

“I can’t believe we’re here.” Said Lance as they queued to get in.

“I know.” Said Keith.

“We’re about to listen to *Albatross* live.”

“What if they don’t play it?”

“Then I’ll get up on stage and – and twerk.”

Keith almost spat out his drink. “You wouldn’t.”

“Watch me.” Said Lance, and winked at Keith, who shook his head. But his face was tinged pink again.

They filed into the huge theatre. They were standing – and all the seats in front of the stage had been put away. Lance gawked at the huge painted ceiling above them. The place was stunning. He glanced at Keith, and saw his expression mirrored.

They pushed their way to as close to the stage as they could get, marking their territory with their rucksacks. They were surrounded by hipsters. And hippies. And goths (weirdly). And everything in between.

“Is it just me,” Keith whispered, “or do you feel strangely… normal in here?”

“Yeah,” Lance agreed, “I’ve never felt this normal.”

They both turned, mesmerised as the lights went down and the stage became bathed in a strong, green light.

Lance gasped as the first song began to play, and he felt Keith tense beside him. They were pushed together by the screaming crowds around them. The atmosphere was intoxicating. After the first song, *Loop the Loop*, the singers introduced themselves in their British accents. They were crazy good live. Way better than anything a CD could produce. With each high note, each spellbinding
beat, Lance and Keith gazed at each other, grinning, lost in the crowd and the music and the atmosphere. They were becoming drunk with a special kind of ecstasy – the ecstasy of being here, spending time together like this, watching their favourite band for real. Lance felt a musty haze drift over him, a sense of euphoria that he’d never experienced before, fuelled by the palpable beat all around them and Keith by his side.

Lance threw his arm around Keith’s shoulder, yelling the words to Devil’s Crayon, feeling Keith shake with laughter beside him.

They both swayed along to Burning, because this wasn’t the sort of song he could scream along to. And then…

They both stopped cheering and fell silent when the band began to play Albatross. Lance wasn’t sure he could bring himself to look at Keith. He wasn’t sure what he might do.

He couldn’t help it when the lyrics started, because this song meant so much. The emotions seared in his stomach, and he had to say something. But when he turned, Keith’s face was wet. Not from the rain.

“Keith!” Lance shouted over the song.

Keith whipped towards him, startled. “Y-yeah?!”

“You’re crying!”

Keith swiped his hand across his face, laughing. “I guess I am!”

The lights flashed purple and white. Lance brought his hand to Keith’s face, rubbing his thumb gently over the place where his tears fell. Keith paused, staring at him, lips parted.

“Don’t cry.” Said Lance.

“I can’t hear you.” He saw Keith mouth.

Lance brought himself closer, their bodies pressed together as people moved all around them, oblivious to the insane energy crackling in the air around them. The heat from Keith’s hot, damp face seeped through Lance’s skin, charging him. He was beautiful, the purple glow of the stage lights illuminating him in a pool of indigo. Lance’s hand moved from Keith’s cheekbone to lightly trace his barely open mouth where his gaze intentionally dropped.

“I said… don’t cry.” He whispered, before leaning down into the only space left open between them, closing it with his lips.

Chapter End Notes

Earlier this year, we had the privilege of seeing Wild Beasts’ last ever concert live in London. As it was such a beautiful and emotional time, we thought, what better way to immortalise the experience than to have our OTP (FINALLY) get together at the concert?! Thank you, Wild Beasts (if you ever weirdly see this… hope not lol) because we legit started Klancing out during the concert thanks to the red and blue lighting during some of our favourite songs.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Keith

Time slowed.

Keith knew Lance was going to kiss him before he did. He knew it before Lance’s fingers brushed his lips, before Lance’s eyes dropped to them, even before Lance reached out to catch his tears, trailing like comets down Keith’s cheeks. It was a feeling in the pit of his stomach which reminded Keith of that bend in a road when he was on his motorbike. It was always a hard curve- a sharp left or right- and it was always obvious that it could go so very wrong, or so very right. Yet, when it finally happened, when Lance leaned in and closed the distance between them, it wasn’t anything so dramatic. No, it felt strangely, bizarrely casual- like they’d done this a million times before and it was natural for Lance to tip forward and close his eyes and for Keith to do the same. The butterflies were still there but the promised fireworks of endless love songs were absent. Instead, there was something different, and something all the more wonderful and sweeter because of it. When he felt the heat and silk of Lance’s lips against his own, Keith didn’t feel the ground slip away beneath his feet, there wasn’t an earthquake and the stars didn’t fall and realign. No. Instead there was just the sure, unshakeable knowledge that Keith was wanted and that this- Lance’s arms winding around him, threading through his hair, holding him close and breathing him in, was a sort of home. This, was Lance telling him he was loved.

Lance


Keith

*Albatross* stopped playing when they broke apart. People were cheering and pushing forward, beers raised high and more than a few were wiping away tears. Lance’s eyes were glassy and heat was flushed across his cheeks. He swallowed, embarrassed, and fingered the collar of his t-shirt.

“Great song,” he said with an awkward laugh.

But Keith wasn’t listening. Instead, with a smirk, he reached up and pulled Lance in for another kiss as *Mecca* began to play.
Lance

Keith was fire. He just was. His lips burned, crackling heat and moisture and—god—Lance had barely caught his breath and now—

Keith’s hair was still damp from the rain, tight and slick between Lance’s fingers. He pulled harder with the last breath in his body, pressing their faces together as if to weld them that way forever. He broke apart for less than a second to breathe, and in that time he was sure he felt Keith sigh his name against his lips in a short, helpless—“Lance.”

Lance gripped Keith’s shirt, grappling with his need for more. Now he thought about it, it was as though Keith was grappling with him; his arms flung around his neck, dragging their lips together, his mouth opening beneath him pushing forward needful sighs—

Keith. He was kissing Keith. Keith was kissing him.

Keith

There was the dim awareness of lights and bodies and people singing in time with the lyrics around them, but it was muffled, as though heard through water. Lance reminded Keith of water: pliable and fluid and ever changing— a thing of hidden depths and secrets stashed in ocean beds.

He couldn’t get enough.

It was ludicrous, how much Keith could suddenly want. Moments ago they’d barely held hands, had engaged in a few awkward, sexually-charged hugs, and now they were wrapped up so tightly in one another it was hard to tell where one began and the other ended. And Keith never wanted to let go. Metaphorically more than physically, but the sheer force of this want was so searing and sudden that Keith felt it like elastic in his stomach.

He pulled back a hand from Lance’s waist and reached up, brushing his cheek as they finally came up for air. Lance followed his motion backwards, which made Keith chuckle. He pressed their foreheads together smiling, and whispered, “You’re so beautiful.”

Lance

“Beautiful?” Lance giggled before he could help himself, his face hot and flushed, his voice raw with what had just happened. “You think I’m beautiful?”

Keith pulled back an inch, smirking. “Yes?” He challenged raising a brow. They could only hear each other in this proximity. No one could hear them. This was their own little world for now.

“It’s just…” Lance started, and pecked Keith once on the lips – he felt like he could do that now.
“That’s how I’ve always thought of you.”

Keith’s shoulders shook. And they were both laughing. Both had their hands in each other’s hair, legs overlapping as they stood, swaying slightly to the music.

Despite their laughter, Lance felt his eyes prick with hot moisture. He might cry. Because Keith thought he was beautiful. No one had ever thought he was beautiful before. Lance buried his head in the crook of Keith’s neck, pulling him close, despite the fact he must be a thousand degrees.

“You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to do this.”

“It’s been… a long time.” Keith replied. Lance was surprised he could hear him.

“Yeah,” Said Lance, thinking of Keith lying asleep before him, the Iliad clutched in his hand. Keith, bundled up in a blanket, moodily staring into a wall of snow - in Lance’s sweater, sprawled on the beach, laughing without a care. “It has been a long time.”

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**Keith**

Being so close to someone felt strange. Keith didn’t think he’d ever been this close to someone before; he could feel, rather than hear, Lance humming along to the song and every sway of his body rippled into Keith’s. He just looked so… perfect.

“I feel like I should be honest though,” said Keith, smirking.

“Hm?” said Lance, smiling like a dope.

“That wasn’t our first kiss.”

“What?”

Smirking wider, Keith leaned into his ear.

“WHILE I WAS SLEEPING IN YOUR ROOM?!” demanded Lance.

Keith couldn’t help the laughter which bellowed out of him, uncaring of the curious glances which got thrown their way.

“Keith Ex-Mullet Kogane,” said Lance, shaking his head. But he was giggling too. “My perception of you has changed.”

“Really?” asked Keith. He wound his hand around Lance’s torso, slow and lingering, until he cupped his ass. Lance’s face went bright red. “Shall we skew it more?”

___

**Lance**
Lance felt his jaw drop, and all the heat go to his middle, and lower... Because Keith was grinning at him. One hand on his ass. The other on his stomach. Lance’s knees buckled and he dipped his head to try and hide the extent he was feeling this, slowly reaching behind him to gently peel Keith’s hand upwards to the small of his back.

“That was very” – he coughed – “not PG.”

Keith’s eyes sparkled in the gleam of red lighting thrown their way, and the singer announced (timely) they were going to be performing a song about sex. Of course, it was *Bed of Nails*. Lance blushed deeper.

“For someone so obsessed with flirting,” Keith began, licking his lips, “You’re not so great at receiving it.”

“I meant what I said – my perception of you has changed. And is changing as we speak.” Lance’s voice broke.

Keith laughed, delighted, the sound bringing more butterflies to Lance’s stomach. He slid his hands upwards to his neck where, instead of his ass, he cupped Lance’s face.

“I’m kidding.” His eyes darted sideways. “Mostly.”

“You’re terrible.”

“The worst.”

“I’m obsessed with you.”

Keith’s teeth shone as he smiled, and he stopped, his fingers brushing Lance’s lips exactly as Lance had done to him.

*I’m so obsessed with you that I still have your freaking Martial Arts shirt in my room.* But Lance wasn’t ready to say that yet. There was a lot he wasn’t ready to say out-loud.

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**Keith**

The main singer, Hayden Thorpe, was speaking into the microphone- thanking the crowd for being so amazing and announcing the final song, *End Come too soon*. Lance glanced at Keith, grinning, and wrapped one of his hands from Keith’s waist so they were facing the front again. They were still plastered together, glancing at each other and smiling like idiots, but this was the last song and, if Keith remembered right, one of Lance’s favourites.

A curtain at the back of the stage rose, revealing a hidden choir all dressed in black veils, who began to sing their hearts out- clear and sure and almost holy. Keith put his head on Lance’s shoulder, drinking in the pure sound, the flashing, white lights, the sheer ecstacy of living this moment- and was struck dumb by how happy he was. He felt the drunkenest and most sober he’d ever felt in his life- caught between hysterically giggling and sombrelly holding onto Lance’s waist.

The crowd was starting to sway and Lance wanted to sway with them, so Keith carefully inched
them apart, winking at Lance’s confused face, until they were holding hands. Then they both had their arms in air with everyone else, singing the and swaying as the music swelled and the choir mounted into angelic harmony.

It was, Keith thought, staring at Lance’s floppy hair, his bright blue eyes, his smiling mouth, perfect.

*Lance*

Lance glanced at Keith by his side, who caught his gaze immediately, smiling back. *I love you*, Lance told him with his eyes. *Keith Kogane, I love you so damn much. I just don’t know how to say it yet.*

Chapter End Notes

We cried.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Keith

The moon was out when they stumbled out of the concert.

People were meandering about in groups, some drunkenly clinging to each other, others forming human chains, but all were abuzz with conversation and excitement or singing along to *Wild Beast* songs. The air was cool with night- which was a welcome change after the close heat of bodies pressed together, the blare of white lights and the sweaty swaying of hundreds of eager fans. It smelled like smoke and summer outside, like donuts and cigarettes and promises newly made.

Keith and Lance burst out into it in a knot of joined limbs and laughter.

They were holding hands, pressed close, and in-between the nonsensical giggles they peppered kisses on each other- which made them laugh even more.

Keith was unbelievably happy. It felt like there was a sunburst in his chest, radiating energy and light to every last cell of his body, melding a smile permanently to his face. All of the self-doubts and fears he’d felt over the past month, no, the past year, melted away under the sheer force of his joy.

*It isn’t just me,* he kept thinking, giddily. *Lance likes me too.*

Whereas before he’d been plagued by questions and worries with no concrete answers, now Keith only need glance at Lance to see the warmth and tenderness shining in his eyes. It was all the evidence he needed, far more reassuring than any pretty or dressed up words. He just needed to close his eyes and feel Lance’s hand in his or lean into Lance’s space- confident that Lance would do the same- and experience the feeling of lips on lips.

“Christ,” he whispered.
“What?” asked Lance, glancing at him.

“I feel drunk,” explained Keith.

Lance laughed. “Me too,” he paused, a sudden thought occurring to him. “Want to get drunk?”

“Huh?”

In answer, Lance reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a fake ID.

“Why am I not surprised you have one of these?” asked Keith, shaking his head.

“So?” asked Lance, grinning. “We could get some beers before we go back to the hotel.”

“What, crack open a few cold ones with the boys?” asked Keith with a smirk.

That had Lance cracking up. “What the fuck?” he asked.

“What?” demanded Keith. “It’s a meme.”

“Dude, no it’s not.”

“Is too.”

“On what planet?”

“Maybe you just haven’t heard it.”

“Boi, I’m a meme lord. I know my memes, and that is not a meme. You made it up.”
Keith grinned. “Maybe,”

“Do you want beer or not?” demanded Lance with mock anger.

Keith pecked him on the cheek. “Sounds good.”

Blushing (and extremely pleased) Lance got out his phone to look for a liquor shop near the hotel. Luckily there was a corner shop just down the street from where they were staying, so Keith hung around a little ways down the sidewalk while Lance slipped into the store to do the criminal deed. It wasn’t long before he reappeared with a plastic bag and a smug grin on his face; he waved the bag at Keith as though to say, *See this? Aren’t I cool? Huh? Huh?*

It was strangely endearing.

“That was quick,” said Keith. “How much do I owe you?”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Lance with a wave of his hand. “It’s on me.”

It took Keith a moment to register this. “Um. No?” he said.

“What?” asked Lance.

“You’re not paying for me,” said Keith, pointedly.

“Dude, it’s fine,” said Lance with laugh.

“It’s not fine,” insisted Keith. “How much do I owe you?”

Keith saw the moment Lance’s eyes set with determination.
“This is my apology,” said Lance. “So I should get the drinks.”

“That’s stupid,” said Keith. “And I already accepted your apology. So this isn’t a part of it.”

“Yes it is,”

“No it isn’t,”

“Listen, Mullet,” said Lance, putting a hand on his hip. Their voices were getting steadily louder down the street. “Just let me get this.”

“No,” argued Keith. “I won’t, you jerk.”

“I’m a jerk for being nice?”

“Yes.”

Lanced started cracking up.

“It’s not funny, Lance!” exclaimed Keith.

Lance just laughed harder. A woman passing them by gave them an odd look.

“What’s so funny?” demanded Keith.

“It’s just--” Lance sucked in a breath. “It reminded me of when we broke down in Blue. The first time. Remember? We fought over who was going to pay Coran.”

Casting his memory back, Keith realised he was right.
“I don’t know,” Lance continued, still laughing. “I just kept picturing you drinking that space juice and it was funny.”

Keith raised an eyebrow. “I can think of funnier things I saw that day.”

In answer Lance nudged Keith so he stumbled forward. Swinging around, Keith tried to do the same but Lance was ready and tripped him, laughing evilly.

“Where are your moves now, samurai?” he asked. Then he looked at Keith’s face and started pelting down the street.

“It’s on, you little shit,” muttered Keith, running after him.

The chase lasted until they reached the hotel; Lance finally gave up and doubled over to catch his breath. Seizing his chance, Keith tackled him and set them both laughing again. They tumbled into the hotel lobby, trying to act mature past the concierge and avoid questions about their concealed beer, before falling into the elevator and giggling hysterically. It was odd, but everything just felt so goddamn funny. Maybe it was a post-concert high, or a post-first kiss high, or maybe they were just exhausted.

In the end, Keith didn’t really care. He just cared about this moment.

At the hotel room door Lance fumbled the key, cursed and tried again, whooping when he did. They took a look at their single beds, eyed each other, and sprinted at them, each vaulting stupidly onto their own mattress. After roughing up the sheets a little, they put the beer in the fridge and pushed the two beds together, goading each other when they stuck and refused to budge.

“What’s the matter, having trouble, ex-mullet?”

“Oh I’m just fine. You seem to need a hand though.”

“Yeah, in your dreams!”

In the end, they got the job done, slumping onto the mattresses. It was Lance who eventually
crawled across the room to retrieve two bud lights. He cracked one open before Keith could warn him, and the spray which came off the can soaked him through.

“You idiot!” exclaimed Keith through laughter induced tears.

Lance grinned sheepishly.

Seeing that his clothes were wet, they both decided to change into their PJs- blushing and avoiding looking at each other the entire time. Then, the deed done, they bounced back onto their now double bed and started drinking.

“That was amazing,” whispered Lance, lying on his back contentedly.

“What, the concert or the kiss?” asked Keith with a sly smile.

“Again,” said Lance, blushing and smiling. “You’re the worst.”

“And you haven’t answered my question,”

“Both were good- no. Both were amazing. But I was talking about the concert in this case.”

“I know,” said Keith. “And yeah, it was fucking incredible. How does that guy go so high?”

“Maybe he puts his balls in a vice before a show,” suggested Lance.

Keith kicked him.

“I can’t believe they played Albatross though,” continued Lance, ignoring the kick. “I mean, I hoped they would, but still, when it started playing it didn’t feel real.”

“The whole thing felt like a dream,” agreed Keith. “It was almost too good to be true- like we’ll
wake up any minute.”

The room filled with a certain kind of silence then. Lance slipped his hand into Keith’s, rolling over so they were facing each other nose to nose.

“You’re not waking up from me,” he whispered. Then, “God, that sounded so corny.”

“I don’t mind corny,” said Keith with a chuckle, squeezing Lance’s hand.

“I’m beginning to see that,” remarked Lance dryly. “It’s kinda disturbing.”

Keith kissed him.

“Still disturbing?” he asked.

Muttering under his breath, Lance simply kissed him back, rolling them over and over until they nearly fell off the bed. This occupied them for an immeasurable amount of time—before the air thickened with something a little dangerous and they drew apart to open another can of beer each. It tasted dry and bitter—just what Keith needed to keep him grounded.

“So, how’s the summer been?” asked Lance, settling himself against the headboard.

That had Keith jumping into a description of Shiro’s family—his mom and dad and the grandparents. There were a few cousins visiting from Hokkaido, and the house was busy with feet and food and a constant flow of Japanese and English, melding into a strange, hybrid language of its own. Lance asked if Keith could speak Japanese.

“A little, not much. Enough to ask directions and order food. Oh, and if anyone’s using the bathroom. It’s weird, I know more Japanese than Korean.”

“You’re Korean?”

“Half,” answered Keith. “My mom’s side.”
“Oh,” said Lance softly.

Keith didn’t notice the change in his voice, instead he talked about the part time job he had there-fixing up engines and bikes. He talked about demanding customers and going for runs with Shiro’s husky, Goku.

“Like Dragon Ball?!” demanded Lance, gleefully.

“Don’t look at me like that,” said Keith. “Shiro named him. I had nothing to do with it.”

“It sounds like something you’d do,” commented Lance. They were on three beers apiece at this point and were getting tipsy. “We had Guinea pigs as kids. My sister named hers Tuxedo Mask,”

“What did you call yours?”

Lance gave him a long sideways look. He pointed a wobbly finger at Keith. “… you’re going to laugh at me.”

“I won’t,” Keith answered, puffing out his chest stupidly. As though this proved his honour.

“Fine,” said Lance, taking a breath. “You know spongebob?”

“Yeah?”

“You know Squidward?”

“You named your guinea pig Squidward.”

“Nope,” said Lance, arms spread dramatically. “I was a misled young man. As a mere boy, I always thought Squidward was called Squidworth.”
“You named your guinea pig Squidworth?”

“The Squidworth,” answered Lance, grandly.

In the end, Keith lied. He laughed until his belly hurt.

“What the fuck?” he asked.

“I knew you’d laugh at me!” accused Lance.


“The Squidworth had a disgustingly good life, actually.”

Keith started cracking up again. “You’re insane,” he said.

“You finally noticed.”

They opened up another beer each. At this point the room was beginning to go fuzzy at the edges and Keith’s skin felt hot, like there was liquid fire in his veins. It felt wonderful.

“Ah shit,” said Lance suddenly. “Oh nod go,”

“What?” asked Keith, lolling around on his back.

“My mom’s face-timing me,” he said in a stage whisper. “Dude, dop laughing it ain’t funny. She’ll kill me if she sees me like this!”

“Then pretend to be sober,” said Keith joyfully. Then he bopped Lance on the nose.
“You’re no help,” Lance told him.

“Nope,” agreed Keith cheerily. Then he rolled over and fell off the bed, which was fine. The floor was comfier anyway.

“Hey mom,” he heard Lance say.

“HELLO HONEY. ARE YOU TWO BOYS OKAY?”

“Mom,” said Lance, cringing. “I’ve told you a hundred times I can hear you fine. You don’t have to shout.”

“I’M NOT SHOUTING,“

Lance sighed.

“SO HOW WAS THE CONCERT?”

“Good,” said Lance, hiding a discreet hiccup. It sounded so cute. Glancing up at the bed, Keith found one of Lance’s socked feet hanging off the bed. He inched his way towards it.

“ARE YOU OKAY FOR MONEY? I CAN WIRE YOU SOME IF YOU NEED ANY.”

“No-no, it’s fine, we—” Lance gave a small whelp when Keith grabbed his toes. Keith snickered into his hand.

“YOU WHAT DEAR? I MISSED THAT,”

“We’ve eat, I mean, eaten an- and everything, so it’s fine,” said Lance, swotting at Keith’s hands. Keith pulled tongues at him. “Don’t worry.”
“GOOD GOOD. WHAT TIME IS YOUR FLIGHT TOMORROW?”

“Two,” said Lance.

“WHAT ABOUT KEITH?”

Keith jolted to hear his name. He’d never pictured Lance talking about him to his family before.

“What time’s your flight, man?” asked Lance.

“IS HE THERE?”

“Er yeah,” said Lance, nervously. “But—”

“Well, let me speak to him,”

Keith’s heart skipped a beat.

“I dunno mom,” said Lance, sweating. “I mean—”

“I’M NOT GOING TO BITE THE BOY. I JUST WANT TO SAY HELLO.”

Lance looked at Keith. Keith looked at Lance.

“COME ON.”

Sighing, Lance jerked his chin in a motion that simultaneously told Keith to climb onto the bed and not act like a drunken idiot. He mouthed the words, Be cool, before handing him his phone. Suddenly, staring back at Keith, was a face full of Lance’s features: the long, pointed nose, the
freckles, the same shade of warm brown hair— but it was longer, tinged with grey and the eyes which stared back at him weren’t seawater blue, but honeyed brown.

“LOVELY TO MEET YOU KEITH,” said Beatriz McClain, face all beaming smiles and laugh lines.

“You too, Mrs McClain,” said Keith, trying desperately to swallow down the desire to act like an alcohol influenced idiot.

“Oh call me Beatriz, please. Did your flight go well?”

“Yes, it did,” he replied.

“Good. Lance has told us so much about you. You’re staying with Takashi Shirogane, aren’t you?” she clasped a hand to her heart and shook her head. “Wonderful boy. We met him at the induction.”

“Yes, ma’am,”

“Beatriz,” Beatriz insisted. “So when are you flying back?”

“Um,” said Keith. He’d been trying so hard to act normal that his brain had gone blank. “Tomorrow, I think.”

Beatriz’s eyes narrowed. “Tomorrow, what time?”

“Um,” said Keith.

Lance was looking at him, willing him to say something sensible.

“I’m um, I’m not completely sure. Sorry, I’m pretty tired.”
Beatriz eyes softened. “IT’S OKAY LOVELY. JUST TELL LANCE SO HE CAN LET ME KNOW. I DON’T LIKE THE THOUGHT OF YOU BOYS FLYING HOME ALL ALONE.”

“Mom,” protested Lance. “I’m nineteen.”

“YOU CAN BE FORTY-FIVE AND I’LL STILL FEEL THE SAME WAY,” Beatriz sniffed, and Keith’s heart clenched because her eyes caught fire the same way Lance’s did. “IT’S A MOTHER’S WORRY. IF ONLY YOU TWO LIVED A LITTLE CLOSER. YOU COULD HAVE FLOWN TOGETHER.”

“Well, Keith could come back to ours,” suggested Lance.

Silence descended over the room.

“Um,” said Keith.

“What a wonderful idea,” exploded Beatriz. “WE’RE ALL DYING TO MEET YOU AT LAST KEITH. I SWEAR LANCE CAN’T GO A SINGLE SENTENCE WITHOUT MENTIONING YOU THESE DAYS.”

Was it just Keith, or did Beatriz look a little sly and smug when she said that?

“We’ve got plenty of room for you since my eldest moved out.”

“Oh, I couldn’t—”

“NONSENSE!” went on Beatriz, oblivious. “WE’LL SORT YOUR TICKETS. DON’T YOU WORRY. THERE’S SURE TO BE A SPARE SEAT SOMEHWERE. OOO THIS IS WONDERFUL! I’LL LET YOU BOYS GO NOW, I’M SURE YOU’LL NEED PLENTY OF SLEEP. I’LL TEXT YOU THE DETAILS LANCE. ALRIGHT, LOVE YOU!”

The phone clicked off.
“What,” said Keith. “Just happened?”


“I’m coming to yours?” asked Keith, dumbly.

“Looks like it,” said Lance.

“To stay,”

“Yep,”

“With your family?”

“That’s right.”

Keith flopped back onto the bed with a groan. “This is too much to think about. I need another beer. Nope, took late, I’m already freaking out.”

Lance laughed then. “Dude,” he said. “I’m joking. Don’t worry. My mom gets these ideas in her head but it probably won’t happen. I mean, the plane’s probably full anyway.”


“We have to get up tomorrow morning and catch a flight, remember?”

Keith groaned again. Then he snuck a glance at Lance’s face.

“You’re pleased,” he said, realising it.
“What?” asked Lance.

Slowly, Keith sat up. He poked Lance’s cheek.

“You were pleased at the idea of me coming.”


“I thought you just said that because you’re drunk.” said Keith.

“I guess so,” agreed Lance. “But I also meant it.”

Keith smiled like a dope.

“Why are you so surprised?” asked Lance around a giggle. “Of course I want to spend more time with my boyfriend.”

Keith’s heart stuttered. “Boyfriend?” he echoed.

Lance went pink. “Yeah… I mean… that’s what we are, right?”

But Keith just gazed at Lance’s face. “Boyfriend,” he repeated dreamily.

“Oh my god Keith, you are such a light weight!”

“Am not,”

“Uh huh,”
“Am not,”

“Alright, alright. You’re not. Quit pouting, it’s gonna kill me.”

Pleased, Keith slumped onto his back again, staring up at the ceiling. Lance did the same, close enough that the slightest shift could be felt by the other.

“I like your mom,” said Keith, quietly. “She seems nice.”

“She’s loud,” said Lance, scrunching up his nose. “And she treats me like a kid. But…” his voice softened. “Yeah, she’s a good mom.”

A heavy quiet filled the room. There was a question in the silence; Keith closed his eyes and waited for Lance to ask it.

“Where’s your mom, Keith?” he asked at last.

They were like the words of a spell, loosening something Keith always kept locked up tight inside himself- something he’d buried in a chest long ago and cast into the sea of try-not-to-think-about-these-things.

“I don’t know,” he said. The words came easily, but it always felt like someone else was speaking them. “I don’t know all that much about her, really. My dad used to get upset when I asked him so I learnt not to ask…”

Lance waited.

“She was in the South Korean army,” he continued. “My dad was backpacking across Europe and ended up in Edinburgh. Mom was doing a stint there and they got together. He never said it but I’m pretty sure I was a surprise. Anyway, after a year Mom got called up back in Korea. She still had two years to serve before she could retire, so dad agreed to take me until she could come back…” he took a breath. “But she never did.”
“What happened?” asked Lance, softly.

Keith shrugged. “Dunno. She went MIA. Dad spent ages trying to find her, but there wasn’t a trace. Eventually he moved back here so Grandma could help us out.”

“That’s why you want to go to Scotland,”

Something roiled in Keith’s gut. How did Lance know that? Did he know Keith was leaving soon? He wasn’t ready to have that conversation yet. “What? Who told you that?”

“You did,” said Lance. “Remember? Twenty questions. If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?”

“Oh,” said Keith, relaxing. “Yeah. I can’t believe you remember that.”

“Hey, I listen.”

Keith gave him a look.

“Most of the time.” relented Lance.

“But yeah.” said Keith. “That’s why. I guess… I guess it’s the closest I’ll ever get to her, you know?”

“I get cha.” agreed Lance. Carefully, he slid his hand into Keith’s. “I also know that if she’s anything like you, she’s probably a pretty badass person.”

Keith shrugged again. He felt all choked up.

“Sorry.” he said, covering his eyes with his arm.
“What are you saying sorry for?” asked Lance, leaning up on his elbow to look at Keith.

“I don’t know… being a mess? You don’t want to listen to this crap, it’s so stupid. I didn’t even know her.”

“Keith,” said Lance. He pushed Keith’s arms aside and leaned over him. “I want to listen. And it’s not stupid. She was your mom- still is. That kinda stuff doesn’t just magically go away, no matter how hard you push.”

Keith felt tears prickle at the way Lance was gazing down at him- as though he was something precious.

“And besides,” said Lance, and the smugness was back in his voice. “I’m like, the King of being a mess, so suck it weeb.”

They laughed, and Lance settled against Keith’s chest. Hesitantly, Keith ran a hand through his hair.

“Thanks, man,” said Keith.

“Any time, Ex-mullet,”

“You’re still sore about the haircut?”

“YOU KILLED THE MULLET, HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO REACT? YOU MURDERER!” exclaimed Lance, springing up to jab an accusing finger at Keith chest. “From now on all haircuts must be authorised by me, you got it?!”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Keith. He reached up, quick as a viper, and wrapped his arms around Lance before pulling them both down. Lance gave a whelp of surprise. “Loud and clear.”

They stayed tangled up in each other’s arms for a moment, and Keith was just beginning to drift off when Lance said, quietly.
“We didn’t finish,”

“Huh?” asked Keith, sleepily.

“Twenty questions, we never finished the game.”

“You want to play now?”

Keith felt Lance nod his head against his chest.

“Heh, okay. You go first.”

“Did you think I was hot when we first met?” asked Lance.

It was not what Keith had been expecting. Worse still, Keith could hear the smugness in Lance’s voice- the expectancy to see Keith squirm.

“Oh, we’re playing like that, are we?” asked Keith.

“Stalling, ex-mullet?”

“Fine,” huffed Keith. He listened to the distant sound of traffic for a moment to gather his courage. “Yes.”

“What?” asked Lance, the smugness growing louder.

“I did. Think you were hot. Or like, I guess the closer term is cute… at first. Then I saw you in a corset.”
“Can you drop that—wait what?” asked Lance. He sprung up again, genuine surprise on his face.

“What?” asked Keith, confused.

“You thought I was hot in that corset?” demanded Lance.

“Well yeah,” said Keith. “Haven’t I told you that?”

“Er? NO,” said Lance. “I mean you’ve told me it was okay and I shouldn’t be ashamed and you liked it but not, like, in that way.”

“Well, I can’t help that it turned me on, can I?” demanded Keith, then he smacked a hand over his mouth.

Lance’s own mouth was hanging open and working like a fish out of water. “Turned you on?” he echoed. “That turned you on?!”

“I want to die,” said Keith, rolling over to bury himself in the covers. “Let me suffocate.”

But Lance just laughed, gleefully pulling at Keith and goading him the entire time. Keith batted him away with his legs, accidentally kicking him off the bed with excessive force.

“OW!” complained Lance loudly.

“Serves you right, jerk,” snarked Keith.

“Oh come on, I promise to drop it now.”

Keith glared at Lance over the edge of the bed.

“Scout’s honour!” he said, making the symbol and smiling far too innocently.
Grumbling, Keith allowed Lance back onto the bed. “It’s my turn now,” he informed him. Lance waited obediently and Keith let the moment drag. “When did you know you liked me?” he asked.

Now it was Lance’s turn to squirm. “Um, you know, I’m not sure.”

But oh no. He wasn’t getting away with that.

“Only honesty in twenty questions, remember?” said Keith.

Lance blew out a breath. Luckily the both of them were still drunk enough that they weren’t dying of embarrassment. Yet. Keith was fairly sure that would come tomorrow morning.

“Okay, okay, so like. I have two answers.”

“Go on,” said Keith.

“So like,” Lance was stalling for time. “I admitted it to myself after the second road trip,” Keith did the math and was surprised to find that was some time ago. “But like, oh my god you’re gonna think I’m crazy, but like do you remember that note you gave me?”

“Note?” asked Keith.

In answer, Lance reached into his wallet and unfolded a well-folded piece of crumbled paper. On it were the words,

*Don’t forget Albatross.*

*-Keith.*

“This was with the cheque I gave you,” said Keith, wonderingly. He looked up at Lance. “You still have this?”
Shy, Lance nodded. “I dunno. I kinda just hung onto it. And I think, oh my god I’m so glad I’m drunk cause I’ll deny the heck out of this tomorrow, but I think maybe, on some level, I started liking you then.”

“Whoa,” breathed Keith.

It was a shock, that was to say the least. He wasn’t sure why… no, Keith did know why he was shocked. It was because, despite everything that had happened, he had assumed that he was the one who felt the most in this recent relationship. He’d assumed that his feelings were greater than Lance’s, or that Lance took this less seriously at the very least. After all, Keith wasn’t the one who danced with another girl that night. But this… this. He looked down at the paper again, the ink marred by the touch of greasy hands, the smoothed edges and torn corners. This told a completely different story.

“But, you know,” continued Lance, nervously. “I wasn’t like super into you at this point. I was just sorta like, I don’t know, charmed? Oh god that sounded gay- oh I shouldn’t say that… but, I mean, I guess this is super gay, so it’s alright to say, right? Anyway, the point is I thought you were cutetoo.” This last part was said in such a panic that it became one giant string of sound and Keith had to pick it apart to make sense of it.

“Thanks,” he said, unable to think of anything else to say.

“Um, your welcome?”

Silently, Keith handed Lance back the note. Before the awkward silence could stretch, Keith said, “Your turn.”

Relieved that the spotlight was safely directed away from himself, Lance considered his question with a hum.

“Why did you really cut your hair? Don’t give me that bullshit about ‘wanting a change’ again.”

Keith grinned. “To piss you off.”

“I KNEW IT.”
“You’re so dramatic,” Keith sniggered.

Lance folded his arms and proceeded to sulk like a toddler. “Says the guy who did a Mulan!”

“A what?”

“A Mulan,” said Lance. When Keith just stared at him he elaborated, “Like the Disney movie?”

“Oh,” said Keith. “I never watched Disney.”

“WHAT?!?”

“Oh my god,” exclaimed Keith. “Do you have to shout?”

“You’ve never watched a Disney movie?” asked Lance, ignoring him.

“I have,” said Keith. “I just got bored.”

“Which one?”

“The Lion King?”

“YOU GOT BORED OF THE LION KING?”

Wincing, Keith considered shoving a pillow over Lance’s head and shrugged.

“Is this one of those too-intellectual-for-you weeb things?” asked Lance, eyes narrowed.
“No,” said Keith. There was a pause. “But when you’re watching Ghibli films as a kid everything else just seems so dull and—”

“I KNEW IT!”

That did it. Keith leapt at Lance and muffled his extremely loud voice with a cushion until the other boy tapped out. Once released, Lance immediately threw a sneak attack and they wrestled around the bed for a bit.

“Your turn,” panted Lance, after the two of them had tired themselves out. The beer sloshing around in their stomachs was making them sleepy, and it was way past two in the morning at this point.

“When we go to Austin together, want to go riding with me?” asked Keith dozily.

Lance blinked several times. “On your bike? In the desert?”

“No on my sledge in the Antarctic,”

“Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, ex-mullet.”

“Then you must be pretty stupid,”

Lance kicked him.

“I’m serious though,” said Lance. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” said Keith, reaching out to stroke Lance’s face. He’d never get tired of the fact he could do that now. “I’m sure. I want to show my boyfriend my shack.”

“That sounded dirty,”
“Did it?” asked Keith, innocently.

Smirking, Lance leaned into for another kiss. It was deep and sensual and lasted for several long minutes. Afterwards, Keith had to discreetly use bathroom.

“Your go,” said Keith around a yawn when he plopped back on the bed, snuggling into Lance. He was so long that it was easy for Keith to settle his head in the crook of Lance’s shoulder. It was funny, because Lance wasn’t that much taller than Keith, but his limbs were just so goddamn gangly that it gave the illusion he was much taller, especially laid down like this side by side. Keith didn’t mind. He liked it.

“Why do you like me?” asked Lance.

“Because of the free Cheetos that come with you, obviously,” said Keith with a smirk.

But Lance just looked at him, eyes round, thoughtful, serious, and still a little drunk. “I mean it. This feels like a goddamn dream. I mean, everyone knows you’re way out of my league.”

Keith’s eyebrows drew together with a flash of anger at Lance’s words, but he forced himself to swallow it and be patient. “You don’t have a vey high opinion of yourself, do you?” he asked, quietly.

The only answer Keith got to that was a shrug, so Keith turned Lance head to him and pinned him down with his eyes. “Why do you think like that?” he asked, seriously.

“I dunno,” whispered Lance. “I guess… I always have. Like, if you have low expectations of yourself you can never be disappointed, right?”

“That’s stupid,” said Keith.

“To someone like you, it probably sounds stupid. I’ve never been sure of who I am.”

“Well, I know you,” said Keith. “And you’re funny and smart- smarter than you let on- and a good friend. Why else would Hunk and Pidge and Shiro put up with you?”
“I guess,” said Lance, smiling a little. “I dunno, it’s like, even when I was a kid, I’ve always been running to catch up with people. My older brothers were always so set, you know? Like Louis was always the smart one who was going to be lawyer or a doctor or something impressive, and Marco was always athletic and really into hiking, and then V was always like, I don’t know, the rebel or whatever, and they were so much older than me anyway. I might sound loud to you, but I only shout to get noticed, you know? I never had… anything.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Lance,” said Keith at last. “You are an absolute idiot.”

Lance’s mouth opened with an argument, but Keith cut him off.

“You really don’t see what a great guy you are, do you?” he demanded. “When you walk into a room, somehow, you always manage to put every at ease. Shiro always talks about how you usually end up starting discussions in class and how everyone opens up because you’re not shy about sounding stupid.”

“That sounds like an insult,” said Lance.

“It isn’t,” Keith insisted. “You’re so… warm. Like, you give off the impression that anyone could come up and start a conversation and you’d just– I don’t know– chat to them like you’ve been friends for ages. Do you know how relieved I was when I first got into Blue and you just babbled away? It made me feel so much calmer.”

“You were nervous?” asked Lance.

“Terrified!” exclaimed Keith. “I hate talking to people. And you’re always willing to help and yeah, you’re not perfect, but hey, no one is. I’m certainly not. So stop treating me as though I’m better than you, cause at the heart of it I’m still just an awkward emo kid who listens to Fall Out Boy and Muse like an alcoholic who drinks whiskey.”

At the end of this tirade, Lance just stared at him. Then he snorted. “I can’t believe you just called yourself an awkward emo boy,” he said between laughs.
Keith stuck to his guns and puffed out his chest, refusing to back down.

“Oh my god,” breathed Lance, pulling Keith closer. “I’m just no match for you, Kogane.”

“I feel like you didn’t listen to a word I just said,” Keith said fiercely.

“No, I did. I promise.” Said Lance. He yawned. “And thank you. It… means a lot.”

Finally relaxing, Keith slumped into Lance, also yawning. “Don’t worry about it. It’s what boyfriends do.”

Lance hummed, pleased. “Boyfriends,” he whispered. His breaths were getting deeper, evening out. Keith could feel himself slipping too. “I really like the sound of that.”

“Me too.”

“Good night, Keith,”

“Night Lance.”

“And Keith?”

“Yeah?”

“I really, really like you.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“You like yourself too?”
“Go to sleep jackass.”

Lance’s laughter followed Keith into oblivion.

The next morning, Keith woke up to the sound of Lance’s voice shrieking into the early morning light.

“What?” he demanded.

In answer, Lance just shoved his phone in Keith’s face. There, plain for the world to see, was an electronic ticket to Austin with Keith’s name on it.

Lance

The best similarity between Lance and his mother was that they were both night owls, so Lance hadn’t been surprised that he was awake past three am when his mother sent a message:

Mom: Honey, I hope I didn’t put too much pressure on Keith earlier. I’ve got tickets ready for him to fly back to Austin with you, but I just want to double check to make sure you’re both okay with it. He might have other plans, and I could tell he was a little apprehensive.

Mom: I know I come on a little strong sometimes

Next she’d sent the face wearing sunglasses emoji. She did that a lot. Lance had tried to show her multiple times how emoji’s worked but she hadn’t quite grasped the concept.

At this time, the only light coming in through their hotel window was the dazzling points of Seattle’s skyline. The illuminations freckled Keith’s relaxed, sleeping face like stars. Oblivious to Lance awake in bed, sat up against the headboard, Keith had shifted, throwing an arm over Lance’s
legs. Hoping Keith wouldn’t wake up, Lance traced circles on his wrist, his eyes growing heavy as he gazed at his new boyfriend. He smirked in the dark. Boyfriend.

**Lance:** S’all good, mom. Get the tickets. Thanks. I’ve had the best time.

Pretending to act surprised in the morning was easy. His ecstatic exclaim was real, because he was excited to see Keith’s face, and even more delighted when the sleep-mussed ex-mullet slowly gave Lance his brightest morning smile.

“Looks like I’m coming home with you.” He muttered, rubbing sleep from his eyes. And then, concerned, “But are – are you sure your family won’t mind?”

Lance swatted his hand, “Dude, did you hear my mom last night? They’d love to have you. Plus, it’s a mad house. You’ll be a welcome addition to the chaos.”

Keith cocked an eyebrow. “Addition?”

“No one stays sane for long in the McClain household,” Lance yawned, stretching his long limbs and gazing out at the strong morning light. Both he and Keith had shed their tops at different points in the night. All the cuddling was making them hot and a little sweaty, and though neither of them had said it out-loud, there was something exhilarating about the skin on skin contact now that it meant so much more. Of course, that was as far as it had gone. They’d both been drunk and exhausted and high off excitement and their newfound honesty. It was weird. And Lance wasn’t sure how ready he was to get… physical yet. He wasn’t sure how ready Keith was. And he was sure Keith knew he was unsure so that made them both unsure. There was a lot of un-surety lingering between them, but amongst it all, a palpable anticipation to explore every doubt and niggle and qualm. Lance grinned as the events of last night shattered across his mind like a flash-power-point. The lights, the music, the heat, the rain, the slip and slide of their lips locked in passion…

Things could have gotten dangerous.

He was glad they didn’t.

He turned to Keith and found he, too, was staring out of the window at the blazing, fresh morning.

“Looks like the clouds have cleared.” Keith stated, catching Lance’s gaze.

“Looks like they have.” Lance replied, and a knowing smile passed between them.

Was this heaven?

Lance felt like a fucking acoustic soundtrack should be playing in the background to their conversation. Like a freaking Nicholas Sparks movie.

“Yo, do you ever think about, like… what if we aren’t real?” Lance said aloud, running with his thoughts.

Keith shot him a sour look.

“What.”

“’Y’know… what if we’re just brains in a tank that someone’s filling with hallucinogenic juice to make us think we’re real, but actually we’re just part of some kind of virtual reality show with” –
“Lance, imma stop you right there,” Keith interjected, grimacing, “because I do not need this Black Mirror mind-fuckery shit at this time of the morning. Christ, I forgot how weird you are when you’re tired.”

Lance threw a pillow at Keith’s head. It sorely missed, brushing over the top of his untidy head and cruising onto the floor anti-climatically.

“Too intellectual for you mullet – I mean – ex-mullet? Damn, I can’t get used to it…”

Keith groaned, the bones in his shoulders cracking as he swung his arms, stretching amongst the tangled sheets. Lance noticed the dark smudges under his eyes. He smirked.

“Hungover, are we?”

“Shuddup, jerk. My head is pounding. You and your fake ID did this.”

Lance winked, and was met with a withering glare, which was far too tempting to resist. He leapt across the bed and tackled Keith onto his back, burying his face into the crook of his neck, peppering it with semi-kisses. Keith protested with a groan for only a second before relenting and wrapping his arms around Lance’s back.

“Where’d you get all this energy from?” He could hear the smile in Keith’s voice.

Lance didn’t know himself. He’d been up until three, staring at Keith’s sleeping, beautiful face.

“Maybe I’m just excited.”

“You’d definitely be a freaking terrier or some shit if you were an animal.”

“Keith, that is deeply insulting.” Lance said with feigned offence, rising to frown at him. Hooking his arm behind Keith’s head, he flopped onto his side, gazing up at the ceiling fan which spun in lazy circles.

“God, I wish we could stay in bed all morning.” Keith sighed.

Lance tilted his head towards him, licking his lips. He didn’t want to assault Keith with his morning-breath, but the idea of stealing a languid, slow morning kiss was so tempting. He resisted, locking their eyes to communicate his intention instead.

“Same.” He croaked, his voice husky with a different kind of desire now. “But we have a plane to catch.”

Keith’s coal-dark eyes raked Lance’s form in response. Lance blushed under his gaze. It felt like Keith was mentally undressing him… despite him being mostly naked already, save for his underwear.

“What?” Asked Lance, unable to mask his embarrassment at being checked-out so blatantly.

“Nothing.” Keith beamed, implying otherwise. “Just, I might be more of a morning person than I thought I was.”

Lance felt paralysed by the meaning of those words as Keith leapt upwards with brand-new energy, bending to touch his toes with his fingers.

“Come on,” He prompted Lance, yanking the sheets out from underneath him, “Maybe we can grab some breakfast and coffee or something before we head out.”
Hopping into the shower, Keith gave Lance the space he needed to get ready. Lance decided he’d shower once he’d get home. Until then a quick brush of his teeth and wash of his face would do. He always felt dirtier after travelling, anyway. Once he was dressed and packed, Keith emerged, hair dripping. Lance stared at him because wow, Keith looked god damn delicious like that. And this time he knew what Lance was thinking as he gaped at him.

“You’re looking at me like a snack.” Keith commented wryly.

Lance would never admit it, but Keith had balls coming out with stuff like that. Then he remembered how Keith had grabbed his ass at the concert and he really wasn’t surprised.

“Sorry.” He said quickly, turning his head and scratching it and god he was a mess. Even though Keith knew how he felt and why he was looking at him like that, he was still… incapacitated by him.

Keith laughed, shaking his head. “We need to separate the beds.”

“Ah, y-yeah.” Disarmed by his sudden embarrassment and Keith’s dripping, glowing half-nakedness, Lance flitted to the other bed, busying himself with hauling them apart. Keith was stronger than him (obviously) and pulled his to the other side of the room much quicker, watching with satisfaction as Lance struggled.

“You sadist.” Lance huffed, “You gonna help me, or just watch?”

“Just watch.” Keith stated evenly, crossing his arms with smug gratification.

“Get some pants on you hoe.”

“Is my partial-nudity rubbing you the wrong way?”

Lance shot him a look. “You know what you did there.”

Keith smirked, and Lance’s knees buckled just a little bit because it was still the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

“Maybe I did.” And he disappeared into the bathroom again, saving Lance the awkwardness of watching him get dressed.

They didn’t eat at the hotel. They found yet another coffee shop (this one a little less indie than the last one) and had chive bagels with coffee. It still felt so surreal to Lance, laughing like this, their feet touching under the table as they cast meaningful glances and smiles at one another.

*You don’t have a very high opinion of yourself, do you?*

Keith’s words from last night echoed in Lance’s mind as they hopped onto the bus to the airport, watching the city unfold and dissipate around them like a fading dream.

Why were those the words that stuck with him? They reverberated around his skull, confusing him as they wandered around the airport, searching for their gate. The words began to lose all meaning as tiredness caught up with Lance, and probably, just a teensy, tiny bit - his hangover.

“Tired, are we?” Keith threw over his shoulder at Lance in the same mocking tone he himself had used earlier.

Lance retorted with a scalding scowl, dragging his heavy feet behind Keith, his trainers squeaking
on the tiled floor.

He drew out his phone before the plane took off, Keith settling beside him on the aisle seat.

“Hunk and Pidge are gonna throw a party when they find out.” Said Lance, rubbing his forehead.

Keith stopped, a small crease appearing between his brow.

“Find out about… about us?”

“Yes?” Lance arched an eyebrow.

Keith’s lips turned into a small, pleased smile, his eyes glinting.

“You’re telling them?” He asked hesitantly, hushed.

Lance studied Keith’s features. He really was surprised, wasn’t he? He gave a small laugh of disbelief.

“Yeah, man! What did you think my plan was? Just to sneak you round for a smooch and hide you under the bed when Hunk walks in? Nah. I’m…” He paused, heaving in a deep breath, because Keith needed to hear this. And he needed to say it right. “I’m done with all that, Keith. I’m done with pretending I’m not crazy into you, and pretending I don’t want a real – y’know” (he gulped back his pride) “– relationship. I’m done pretending to be an easy flirt because that’s not who I am… you bring out the best in me, kay? Hunk and Pidge know that, ‘cause they’ve seen how I am around you, and they’re gonna be freaking thrilled when I tell them about us.”

Lance watched Keith fight to keep his composure, his features jostling between emotions: cool, collected Keith and over-the-moon crazy Keith. Keith settled somewhere in the middle, his hand reaching out to grasp Lance’s, his smile resting in a half-bowed grin of pure delight whilst a tiny frown of disbelief remained.

“I… don’t know what to say. Just – thank you.” Keith told him, his voice quiet.

Lance smiled, gripping Keith’s hand, because he knew he’d said the right thing.

“But I can’t do it now, obvs,” He laughed to break some of the intensity that had fallen between them, “The plane’s about to take off and if they reply when I have no signal, I’m gonna spend the whole flight chewing my nails off over what they’ve said.”

He put his phone away and snuck in a quick peck on Keith’s jaw before anyone around them noticed.

And then he must have fallen asleep, because the next thing, Keith was tapping him hard on the shoulder.

“Lance. Lance. Wake up, we’ve landed.”

Lance groaned, digging his face into Keith’s shoulder where he’d been resting it. Half of his face was squashed, imprinted with Keith’s jacket, his hair pushed up on one side. Keith sniggered when he blearily woke, yawning.

“Wha’? Already?”

“Yeah.” Keith chortled, roughly pushing down Lance’s hair, but to no avail. “Your hair looks like a hedgehog’s ass.”
“You’re a hedgehog’s ass.” Lance muttered sleepily, groaning at the harsh beams filtering through the airline window. He was pissed he’d missed their descent over the desert. That was always cool to look at it, but… he’d slept on Keith’s shoulder. His spirits soared at the thought and he shook himself awake.

“C’mon, boyf. Let’s get to Blue.” He prompted, urging Keith out of his seat with his knees as he stood.

Keith gave him a dead-eyed look, refusing to budge. “If you start calling me boyf,” He said seriously, “I will make you walk back to yours while I drive.”

“And who has the keys, boyf?” Lance jeered, ruffling his hair.

“I preferred mullet…” Keith mumbled, grabbing his bag.

Lance legged it through Duty Free, beckoning a disgruntled Keith to keep up. All of a sudden he couldn’t wait to show off Keith to his entire family. They’d freaking love him.

Blue shone in the parking lot like a vision from the gods.

“My baby!” Lance cried dramatically, draping himself over the bonnet. “I’ve missed you.”

“It’s not even been two days.” Keith sneered, opening the passenger door.

“Well, I’m very sorry that me and Blue are attached!” Lance jibed.

“Objectophilia.” Keith commented dryly. “Another fetish to add to the list.”

Lance punched him gently in the shoulder as he twisted the keys in the ignition. “Wiseass. Do you have to make everything sexual?”

“Everything.” Keith winked with a twinkle in his eye reminiscent of the concert.

At this time of the afternoon, traffic was low. Rush hour wouldn’t hit for another couple of hours. Even so, Lance’s eyes were heavy and the sun beat down on him through the windscreen like a physical weight on his shoulders. Last night’s antics were catching up with him again.

“Want me to drive?” Keith suggested softly as Lance yawned for the fourth time.

“Nah.” And then, “Ah crap, main road is blocked off.”

The barriers prevented them from going any further. It was left down a side-road, or no way at all. Lance sighed as he turned the wheel.

“Don’t get us lost again.” Keith flashed sardonically.

“Ha ha.” Lance replied with no humour. “I can’t wait to get to my bed… and drink some lemonade… and have some… I dunno… pasta.”

He expected a jeering remark, instead, he was jolted into wakefulness by the gentle pressure of Keith’s hand on his thigh.

“Not long to go now. Look, you can see the city in the distance.” Said Keith soothingly. And Lance nearly lost his grip on the wheel because his hands got all slick and his face went hot and his lower half got very tense, all of his awareness going to the spot where Keith’s hand rested on his thigh.

The roads this way where nearly empty, heading closer to the dusty plains. It was a much longer route this way, but it was the only one. Lance squinted at the rocks and boulders heaped around them, all waving in the mirage of heat that surrounded them. A short, echoing bang reverberated a little ways off. Lance started.

“Did you hear that?” Asked Keith.

“A bang? Yeah, just now…” He sniffed as the air-con blasted. “Do you smell” –

“Smoke?” Keith finished for him, his charcoal gaze widening with worry.

The road ahead was misted with dust, billowing upwards into the air in grey clouds…

“Lance.” Keith’s warning sounded beside him.

“I know.” Lance confirmed, slowing down.

A little ways up the road, their narrow path was obscured by a tall plume of smoke.

“Someone having a bonfire in the middle of the road?” Lance asked, dread mounting as they neared the commotion. He saw then that things were a little more complicated.

A figure staggered in the smoke away from its source – a trailer: the kind used to transport cattle. The trailer burned, its double doors flung open, and a car was parked jauntily off to the side of the road, dangerously close to the flames. Something else was moving in the smoke as well, something staggering.

“Jesus!” Keith exclaimed in the most Texan accent Lance might ever have heard from him, “That’s a darn horse!”

The horse, a chestnut variety with a flowing, cream mane, was limping in the road away from the figure, whinnying in distress.

Keith leapt out of the car without a thought, waving his arms at the guy following the horse as the smoke thickened.

“Hey!” Keith called, “Do you want some help?”

The guy halted, and Lance couldn’t make out his features, but from what he could see the dude sure was *not* glad to see Keith. He bolted on his heel as Lance slammed the car door shut behind him, running to Keith’s side.

“Wait!” Keith called.

Lance gripped his shoulder. *Don’t, Keith. I’ve got a nasty feeling about this…”*

The car at the side of the road rumbled into action, its frantically screeching tires eroding tracks into the dust. Before it could zoom off, Lance whipped his phone from his pocket and snatched a photograph of the car’s number plate. It was slightly obscured by smoke, but still readable.


The horse was bucking as the fire engulfed the trailer with a roar.
“What the- what the hell is going on?” Keith breathed, twisting around to look for signs of anyone else. Any answers as to what had just happened.

Lance wasn’t interested in answers yet, he was too focused on the horse whose front leg was glistening with blood.

The bang they’d heard – that guy must have shot the horse. But why?

Lance approached it as Keith got out his phone to dial 911.

“Woah, woah boy – girl? Genderless…? Doesn’t matter – calm down now.” Lance attempted to appease the horse by holding up his hands in front of it and whispering continuous meaningless nothings at it.

Keith was done on the phone, but Lance signalled at him to stay where he was. He didn’t want to startle the horse further.

Slowly, the horse began to calm down, and Lance tried everything he could to lead it closer to Blue, away from the searing heat of the fire. Lance was sure his eyebrows were getting a little singed at this proximity.

Hands trembling, Lance inched closer and closer to the horse, holding out his fingers for it to sniff.

“Please don’t bite off my hand, please don’t bite off my hand.” He muttered desperately, because the horse’s eyes were round and wild, but it didn’t. Instead it bowed its head, sensing Lance was harmless, and allowed him to gently stroke its soft, velvety nose.

Backwing away, Lance managed to get the horse to follow him, its gait worsening with each step.

“The cops are on their way.” Keith told Lance grimly as the horse buckled onto its hind legs, letting out a sad whimper of pain. It was away from the fire now. That was the main thing.

“Fuck…” Lance breathed, pushing sweat off his forehead. “Fuck fuck fuck.”

“Don’t panic.” Keith told him, though his voice was edged with it, “it’s all gonna be good.”

He cupped Lance’s sweat sheened face in his hands, looking comfortingly into his eyes. “I told them about the fire, too. It’s gonna be fine.”

“B-but what about the horse?”

Keith turned and studied the graceful beast, brought to its knees by the bullet wound in its leg.

“She’ll be alright. I’m sure.”

“She?” Lance echoed, “How do you know it’s a she?”

Keith threw his arms up in the air, “Well, I don’t see a horse dick, do you?! You’re the one who’s supposed to be good at biology, I’m just guessing!”

“I’m a paramedic, Keith, not a vet!” Lance doubled over, resting his elbows on his knees, the hot wind blowing the smoke away from them now, thank god. “Jeez, I’m too exhausted for this. Why do we always get ourselves mixed up in weird shit?!”

A smile twitched across Keith’s worried features. “’Cause we are weird?”
Lance shook his head. “Fuck, you’re right. We’re so fucking weird!” He yelled, exasperated. The horse bowed its head at the sound.

“Sorry girl,” Lance said quickly, “didn’t mean to scare you.”

The horse responded to the calm in Lance’s tone and stopped shifting around so much. He approached her again, flattening his palm between her ears.

“Someone will come and help you soon, gorgeous,” He muttered, his heart going out to the creature, “You must be in so much pain.”

Keith hung back, wary of the scared beast, which was probably wise. But Lance’s head was messed up and this whole situation was so weird that he wasn’t thinking clearly. The fire brigade arrived first, blasting the flames on the blackened trailer with giant hoses. Then the police turned up. Lance was quick to show them the picture of the car he’d taken which apparently helped no end in the search for the thief. A car just like this one had been reported missing only a few hours ago, an officer told them, and the same owner of the car had reported the horse missing too. She’d claimed it was stolen by her ex-boyfriend who’d apparently gone crazy over the past few weeks and began threatening to murder her horse.

Keith and Lance listened, horrified, as the officer relayed the situation to them.

“We might need you to stand as witnesses should a court case arise from this,” Said the female officer, her features marred with distaste as animal rescue coaxed the injured horse into a new trailer to be taken for medical attention. “But it seems you boys stepped in before the man had a chance to shoot the poor thing dead. I’m sure the owner won’t be able to thank you two enough.”

“It was him who helped,” Keith rushed in, flustered, “He took the photo of the car and calmed the horse down… I just” –

“You called the cops!” Lance protested.

“You both helped.” The female officer supplied, smiling.

It wasn’t until the sun had dipped low in the sky and the city became a platter of twinkling lights in the near distance that they were allowed to go. They’d been questioned until they were blue in the face, searched, checked over by medics – it was exhausting. At the end, both gave their contact details and climbed into Blue, shattered, but as Lance was the more shattered of the two, Keith offered to drive. This time he let him.

Muttering vague directions in his ear as they reached Austin, they finally pulled up outside Lance’s house.

Keith let out a long exhale as he stomped on the breaks.

“We’re here.”

“Yeah.”

“So…”

Lance perked an expectant smile. “Yes?”

Keith faced him seriously, “How should I” – he cleared his throat – “introduce myself?”
Lance arched an eyebrow. “Try: Hi, I’m Keith Kogane. Nice to meet you. That’s a nice geranium you’ve got there Mrs McClain. I hear you make an excellent casserole.”

Keith looked murderous. “Lance, you know what I mean.”

Lance huffed, turning away, kicking his feet onto the dashboard. “Yeah, I know.”

A very awkward silence pushed itself between them.

“So” – they both said at once.

“You first” –

“No, you first” –

“Oh for fuck’s sake” –

“Listen, Keith…” Lance sucked in a breath, “My parents don’t even know I’m bi yet. I’m not – I’m not saying they’ll mind it’s just – this might be a little difficult. Maybe if I introduce you as my friend first…? Y’know, let ‘em get used to you and then eventually I’ll” –

Keith gave a huge sigh of relief, placing his hand on his chest. “I’m glad you said that. I wouldn’t have known what to say if they knew I was your” –

“Boyfriend?” Lance loved saying it. They grinned at each other.

“Yeah.” Said Keith breathlessly.

The silence transformed into expectancy of something else. A move had to be made. And Keith made it, leaning forwards to place a chaste kiss on Lance’s lips, which opened at his touch. He touched their foreheads together, and they closed their eyes, breathing in each other’s proximity for a precious, quiet moment.

“I still can’t quite believe we can do that.” Keith whispered.

“Me neither.” Said Lance letting out a short breath of delighted laughter. He leaned forward for more, twining his fingers in Keith’s hair as they kissed, hungrily this time. Keith’s tongue was hot and demanding. There was no in between with Keith, he’d discovered since last night. He was either like this, or innocent and gentle. Lance pulled away with a gasp as a familiar feeling stirred behind his navel.

“We should” – he breathed in hard – “go inside.”

“Yeah.” Keith agreed, drawing back and gazing at Lance with dark eyes. “We should.”

Lance grinned, the passion between them ebbing as a more pressing matter awaited them.

“So… ready to meet the McClain’s?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

It was Beatriz who flung the door open before they’d even reached the threshold, her surprised eyes widening at their arrival.

“You should have arrived hours ago!” She cried, her voice edged with the familiar tone every mother had when they weren’t sure about the whereabouts of their children, even if that
child was a responsible adult.

“Long story, mom…” Lance breathed, tugging himself free out of her arms and stepping aside to let Keith through the door.

“So… this is Keith.” He said. “Keith, this is my mom. But you guys met on Face-Time yesterday, so…”

Smiling sweetly, Keith stoically held out his hand.

“Nice to meet you, ma’am.” He said in a low voice.

Beatriz took it, her mouth opening in a small ‘o’ of admiration. She shot Lance a look that told him everything he needed to know – she was already charmed.

Babbling about how Lance’s dad was away at work until the weekend and apologising for the mess, Beatriz ushered them into the living room, where she had a feast of lemonade and Ropa Vieja laid out surrounded by crackers, Cheetos… all of Lance’s favourites. He sat before the spread hungrily, his mouth watering. Seconds later, Veronica and Marco came bounding down the stairs, bickering over who got to eat what first.

Beatriz shooed them away, while Keith awkwardly settled down next to Lance, unsure what to pick at first.

“You’ve eaten already!” Beatriz screeched, batting Veronica and Marco out of the kitchen as they gnawed on leftovers from earlier. “Give your brother and his… his friend some space.”

Lance paused eating for a second as he heard the hesitation in his mother’s voice before ‘friend.’ Surely she couldn’t have known. He’d only told Veronica. It was probably nothing. He eyed Keith by his side who hadn’t seemed to notice, and was instead gently sipping lemonade like the shy awkward emo boy he was. Lance smiled, swallowing a huge mouthful of food.

“Sorry for the noise.” He said over the clatters and shouting and arguing in the kitchen. “They always act like this.”

“I-it’s cool.” Said Keith, his voice two notches higher than usual.

Lance’s grin widened. “Don’t be nervous, you.” He elbowed Keith playfully in the side.

Keith jumped more than he would in any normal circumstance and gave Lance a glance of pure panic. He was definitely freaking out way more than he did when there was fucking flames in the road and a shot horse lying injured whilst sirens blasted around them. His priorities were all skewed, but then, Lance loved that about him.

“I’m not nervous.” He said with all the conviction of a two year old.

“Sure.”

One they’d finished eating, Lance and Keith sat on one of the orange couches in his sitting room, relaying the story of their dramatic journey home to his mom, Veronica and Marco. The entire time, Beatriz had her hands clasped to her mouth, Marco looked suitably baffled and Veronica uttered an admiring: “Cool.”

“Sweetie…” Beatriz breathed. “You should have turned around and drove off in the other direction’
“We didn’t know what was happening!” Lance protested, “And someone had to call the police!”

“Heaven only knows I’ve had ten lifetimes worth of worry with three boys. Getting lost in the Amazon was less stressful than parent-hood.” She tutted, and turned her attention to Keith. “Have you got any siblings, Keith?” She asked much softer.

“J-Just an older brother kind of.” He stammered, unsure how much to say.

Beatriz clicked her fingers. “Oh, of course! Lance told us about Shiro, didn’t you, honey?”

“He’s told us all about you, like, a thousand times.” Veronica rolled her eyes.

“V!” Lance hissed, giving her an incensed glare.

She shrugged, swatting a feigned innocent gaze around the room before turning back to her phone. Keith was chewing his lip.

“Um – I’m very sorry but – do you have a bathroom?”

Beatriz stood. “Of course, honey! Just up the stairs, last door on your right.” She pointed her arms fathomlessly as if Keith could understand. He gave her a polite nod and stiffly headed out of the room.

“Mom, have you sorted out where Keith is gonna sleep yet?”

A deadly silence descended on the room. Lance glared between each of his family members suspiciously as each pointedly avoided his eye.

“What?” He snapped in a hushed whisper when no one said anything. “Mom?”

Beatriz opened her mouth and said, “Well… I just assumed he’d be sleeping in your bed with you, sweetie.” She said harmlessly.

Lance’s eyes fell on his sister who was hunched over her phone with all the believability of a guilty sloth.

“V…” He said, his voice low with threat. “What did you say?” He snapped.

She glared back, her eyes wild. “Nothing!” And then, “Well…” She looked at Marco. “Marco, you promised not to tell!” She accused.

“You told Marco?!” Lance flared, his face glowing.

“Marco told me, honey. Don’t be mad at your sister.” Said Beatriz sheepishly.

Lance stood, jabbing his finger. “I don’t believe you people!”

“I can’t believe you told mom!” Veronica was repeating, hitting Marco on the arm.

“Ow!” He protested. “Shut it, V! It’s not like you can keep a secret!”

Lance was seething, he slowly sank back down into his seat, his entire body burning with embarrassment. He put his head in his hands, completely at a loss of what to say to anyone.

“Mom, I’m…” He began, his voice shattering. She rushed over, grasping his wrists urgently.
“Before you say anything, Lance, I – I was thrilled when I found out about you and Keith.”

He looked at her uncertainly, biting his lip. Her eyes were swimming. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Veronica aggressively shove Marco off the shoulder, and they very un-gracefully retreated from the room.

“You were?” He said.

She nodded. “It doesn’t matter to me who you like… as long as you’re happy. You know that, don’t you? I’d never judge you for” –

“I know, mom. I know.” He sighed, “I was just… this is all really recent and stuff, so… Christ, this is embarrassing.”

She smirked, and her dark eyes twinkled with something not dissimilar to his own mischief.

“I was surprised though. Keith’s really cute.”

“Mom!” Lance shushed, unable to bring himself to reciprocate her humour quite yet. His face was still sizzling. He couldn’t believe everyone had found out… “Does dad know?”

“Not yet.” She said, “I… thought I’d let you tell him when you want.”

He exhaled. “Well that’s a relief at least…”

At that moment, Keith re-entered the room to find Beatriz knelt by her son on the floor. He cleared his throat, his cheeks tinging pink.

“Erm – sorry, am I interrupting?”

“No, no,” Beatriz fussed, standing quickly and adjusting her hair, “I was just checking Lance’s temperature.”

Lance resisted the temptation to roll his eyes. She was just as good of a liar as he was. Which wasn’t a good thing.

Keith offered a tentative smile, a question in his eyes that only Lance could interpret. He shook his head in a motion that said, I’ll tell you later.

Later came quickly enough. Their exhaustion became apparent in no time, and Beatriz very pointedly said,

“Now you guys get to bed – Keith, if you’d like I can arrange for you to sleep somewhere else” –

“Mom, it’s fine. He can sleep in my room.” He said with suggestion in his voice as they marched up the stairs. As in a suggestion to quit it, mom, because Keith is nervous enough about meeting you guys as it is!

Lance’s room wasn’t tidy. At all. He hadn’t known Keith would be coming back with him, or else it would be spotless.

Clothes scattered the floor. Books, too. And DVD’s. And his old laptop lay in a heap of cables and missing keys and posters were hanging off the walls and – god, this was all a mess really, wasn’t it? But at least he had a double bed. They’d be able to sleep with a little air between them… or maybe not. His insides quaked. What did Keith expect from him now? They hadn’t done anything last night because of – well – everything, but now…
Lance swallowed. “Erm” – he stuttered, “sorry for all this. Shove your shit anywhere. I dunno about you but I’m beat.” He said, flopping backwards onto his bed, switching on the light on the side table and turning off the harsh, overhead one.

_Ambience_, he told himself. A little ambience will help. The ambience did nothing for the roiling in his stomach.

“I’m exhausted.” Keith told him, pulling off his shirt and neatly folding it into his rucksack. Lance’s breath caught. The shadows made by his stupid _ambience_ accentuated the tones and curves in Keith’s body perfectly. He changed at a three-quarter angle from Lance, and it was almost as if he was doing it on purpose… maybe he _was_. Lance scowled, and Keith caught his eye.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Said Lance, righting his expression. “I need to have a shower.” Lance stalked out of the room, every inch of him still cringing from the residue of his conversation with his family. _Fuck sake_. It was impossible to keep anything secret in this family for long. As he scrubbed off all the craziness of the day in the shower, Lance made sure to use a giant dollop of Veronica’s shampoo to get his own back in his own twisted way. The suds ran into his face, clouding into foam around his head, and he banged his forehead repeatedly against the tiled shower wall. A few seconds later, another fist was banging on the other side of the wall.

“Shut the hell up!” Came Marco’s muffled voice, “I’m on the phone to Emily.” _Emily_. Marco’s dumb girlfriend.

It was never a problem for him. He didn’t have the stress Lance had bringing Keith home. Well… at least he had one less thing to worry about now. _Everyone_ knew. Except his dad.

Lance scrubbed himself like a fate-fearing man, his skin red-raw when he stepped out of the shower. What the fuck now? Did Keith just want them to sleep together? Or did he want them to _sleep_ together? _Fuck_ if he knew.

Lance wandered back into the bedroom in his pyjama bottoms, topless, and Keith blinked innocently at him from Lance’s bed where he was sat, also topless.

He smiled sweetly at Lance’s return.

“What a day… are you alright?” He asked as Lance settled beside him, crossing his legs and throwing his arms behind his head.

Lance blew out a long breath. “Yeah… so, my mom knows about us.”


“I told Veronica last week… well, she guessed. And then _she_ told Marco and Marco told… you get the idea. That’s why my mom was hugging me when you came in.”

Keith was staring at him frantically, his hand poised to touch Lance’s shoulder.

“And… she’s okay with us?”

Lance snorted. “Okay? She’s over the freaking moon!” Keith’s expression softened at that and Lance couldn’t help but relax a little. He reached out and brushed Keith’s jaw with his fingertips. “Plus she said you were really cute. I guess we have that in common.”
He felt heat prickle in Keith’s skin. He caught Lance’s hand and pressed it to his face.

“I never said thanks for - everything.”

“Everything?” Lance echoed.

“The concert, driving me here, letting me stay…” His eyes darkened and his gaze flitted to the end of the bed, “This kiss.”

“There’s no reason to thank me for that.” Lance laughed, “I wanted to.” His hand slipped lower, tracing the hollow of Keith’s throat. Keith shivered as he trailed his fingertips down past Keith’s chest, stopping on the hard plain of his stomach. Lance gulped.

“Lance, are you a virgin?” Keith blurted all of a sudden.

Fuck.

“Erm – I’m…” Lance stammered, pulling back his hand until it awkwardly rested on Keith’s knee. “Yeah.” He said finally. “I am.”

Keith nodded, avoiding Lance’s eye. “I – I thought so.”

Lance sat up, defensive. “Why would you think that?”

He saw Keith realise his error immediately, and he tried to backtrack.

“No, I didn’t mean – I’d only assumed because – just the way you acted.”

“When?” Lance demanded, “What about the way I acted made you think I was a virgin?” Which I am, he didn’t add.

Keith’s expression hardened. “I dunno – the flirting?” He said with obvious sarcasm, “It was so over the top, I just thought only someone who didn’t have any experience – which is fine by the way before you get all touchy – would act like that! I’m sorry! It’s just what I thought!”

Lance struggled to control his breathing. His worst fears were coming to light, and Keith had seen through him all this time, and yet… he couldn’t help the strange bubble of laughter that left his lips.

“You knew that and you still wanted to be with me?”

Keith blinked, surprised by his reaction. “Well… yeah.”

Lance clutched his stomach, giggling like a mad-man. “Fuck, Keith! I should be so pissed at you for saying that right now but I’m just… not… oh my god, I was such an idiot, wasn’t I?”

Keith’s lips twitched, his offensive guard fading as Lance laughed. “A little. I’m sorry, I realise how that sounded” –

“It’s fine.” Lance dismissed, shaking his head with a sigh. “And for the record I do have experience. It’s just limited.” Keith waited for him to elaborate. Lance cringed as he dredged up the awkward memory from a place he’d buried it a couple of years ago. “It was Fresher’s week, actually. Some random party.” Said Lance.

“I didn’t go to any of those.” Said Keith.
“Why aren’t I surprised, ex-mullet? Anyway, as usual I got too drunk and started kissing this chick. She kind of led me to this bedroom – it might’a been hers, I dunno – and we carried on making out on the bed for a bit. Anyway, I sort of… tried… to do some hand stuff. But I was just fumbling around in the dark. Literally. I think she hated it, because she pulled away after that and told me I was too drunk. God, it was so embarrassing…”

Keith smirked. “Lame.”

Lance tapped his arm harmlessly. “Shuddup. How about you?” He asked, keen to get away from the subject of his one failed conquest, “All your virtues still intact?”

“No.” Said Keith bluntly.

Lance sat up. He’d been expecting the same answer. His stomach turned, and he hated that he was instantaneously jealous of whoever the fuck had slept with Keith Kogane before him. Shit, calm down, Lance.

“No? When… when did you…?”

Keith downcast his gaze, gnawing his lip and twiddling his hands.

“I was sixteen. It was… a party. The last one I went to before college, actually.” He sucked in a shaky breath. “I knew I was probably gay, but I wasn’t sure. Anyway there was this guy” –

-“A guy?” Lance interrupted with a squeak, “Your first time was with a guy?” He placed his finger over his lips when Keith gave him a look. “Sorry. Continue.”

“*There was this guy*… I was pretty drunk, so was he, I actually had to wake him up so we could… anyway, it was awkward as hell and neither of us spoke to each other afterwards. I just sort of… left. I knew I was gay for sure after that. Shiro doesn’t know about that. I’ve… never told anyone. I wasn’t in a good place.”

“Fuck…” Lance breathed. “I’m… I’m shocked.”

Keith gave him a tentative peek beneath his stupidly long lashes. “Does it – does it put you off?”

“Fuck, no!” Said Lance, scooting closer to Keith, “No, Keith. Jesus. I’m just… I’m relieved we can talk about this now. I’m relieved you trust me enough and” – he laughed, “Fuck, I’m just so lucky, Keith. I’m so lucky.”

He’d thought of a million things he could have said while their conversation was happening, but now it came to it, words abandoned him. Instead, to show how much he appreciated Keith confiding in him, he snaked his arms around Keith’s waist and pulled their bodies close, sinking down into the pillows with him in a tight embrace.

They stayed like that for a while, exhausted, exhilarated, loving the skin-to-skin contact, until Keith finally pulled away, saying,

“I won’t make you do anything. We’ll take it slow, alright?”

Lance nodded, sliding his finger in circles on the dip of Keith’s waist. “Slow. We’ll take it slow.” He said, sealing the promise with a soft, gentle kiss.

“Goodnight, Lance.”
“Goodnight, boyf.”

Chapter End Notes

Shout out to our friend Katie for giving Wynne_Jayne the idea of the 'Mulan' comment - after chapter 10 she sent me a message:
"KEITH IS SUCH A DRAMA QUEEN - keith: *thinks Lance doesn't like him*
WELL I GUESS IT'S TIME TO CUT OFF MY GLORIOUS HAIR"
I didn't save the Mulan bit on snapchat because I'm a fool, but it really made us giggle, thank you Katie :D

Just a disclaimer - Neither of us are American, and neither of us have ever even been to Texas. I (SophiaLilith) tried to describe how I imagine Austin's surroundings from Lance's POV so before anyone jumps to the comments criticising us for inaccuracy, please just remember we are from an entirely different country & culture! The same goes for any other cultures mentioned i.e, Cuba, Korea etc. This is a story, first and foremost, and that's what we like to concentrate on! We try to make things as believable as possible, but obviously that's difficult being so far removed from the culture. Sorry for the long note, we just felt this needed to be said!

Otherwise, thank you again so so much for all your spectacular comments that genuinely make us squeal and get all mushy with feels. You're all stars! xxx
Breakfast at the McClain household was a novelty to Keith.

It wasn’t as if he was unused to busy houses. After all, Keith only spent Christmas break at his shack. The rest of the time he stayed with Shiro at the Shirogane family home, which was always teeming with people. But where there was polite conversation in Shiro’s house, there were arguments and accusations in the McClain kitchen:

“Veronica! Did you use all the butter?”

“LANCE. GET OFF MY CHAIR.”

“Yeah, I made croissants, do you want one?”

“IT’S NOT YOUR CHAIR MARCO.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you’d used it all?!”

“I WAS SAT THERE FIRST.”

“I thought you had more in the fridge!”

“You two stop bickering! What will Keith think of us?”

“He started it.”

“Did not. Marco started it.”

“WELL I’M FINISHING IT.”
“Does anyone want a croissant?”

“I ALMOST DROPPED MY CROISSANT,”

And where there was peace in Shiro’s house, there was disaster in Lance’s. People stamped about the kitchen grabbing plates and glasses of juice, nudging each other out of the way, and passing cutlery back and forth in a well-rehearsed dance of organised chaos. The radio was playing in the background at the same time Veronica was playing music on her phone, and Beatriz was shouting to be heard over it, taking orders for omelettes and toast and pancakes. Marco did most of the cooking- hovering over a dozen sizzling pans while somehow maintaining an argument with Lance, who had been roped into cleaning up the pots and dishes as Marco went along.

Keith had offered to help, but there’d been a loud chorus of decisive no’s which had relegated him to the kitchen table. Lance kept shooting him worried glances, and when he was finally free of Marco’s orders he sidled over to the table and asked,

“Okay?”

“Sure,” said Keith. “I just feel bad there’s nothing I can do.”

“Don’t worry about it. Sorry, I know it’s really crowded.”

“It’s not as bad as I thought it would be,” said Keith, smiling. “From what you said this morning, I thought I wouldn’t be able to move.”

Lance grinned. “Oh, you won’t.”

But before he could explain himself Marco barked at Lance to, quote, “Move your skinny ass and get the coriander, otherwise you’re having egg shells for breakfast,” and Lance stamped away. Really, Keith should have known then. He should have known by the amount of food being produced- far too much for five people- and by Beatriz’s constant muttering in the background as she picked up odd articles of clothing and stashed them in whatever cupboard she could find. But Keith wasn’t used to extended families, so he didn’t realise what Lance meant until the doorbell rang and Beatriz screamed for Veronica to answer it.
“Luis’ here!” she screamed back.

Suddenly, two small children careened into the kitchen.

“Abuelita!” they exclaimed, flying into Beatriz’s legs.

She gathered them to her in a smothering hug. “Hello lovelies!” she exclaimed.

A man followed them closely, a baby strapped to his front, and it shook Keith to realise that the older man was the spitting image of Lance, except lined and hardened with age. His hair was longer too, and curlier for it, while his eyes were brown behind the trim frames he wore.

“Hey mom,” said Luis, tiredly. “Michelle, Logan, stop clinging to your grandma like that.”

Another woman followed Luis; she was tall, had skin the rich, dark brown of a nut, and wore her hair in long deadlocks. “Hey Bea,” she said, planting a kiss on Beatriz’s cheek. “I brought strawberries.”

“Wonderful,” said Beatriz, accepting the gift. “Thank you, Adria,”

Luis’ eyes landed on Keith. “You must be Lance’s friend,” he said, smiling and bobbing the tiny baby strapped to his front. Even his smile looked like Lance’s. It was obvious that both Luis and Lance favoured their mom. “Nice to meet you. What was your name again…?”

“That’s Keith!” Veronica hollered from the other end of the kitchen. Logan, the youngest of the two children, was dangling from her arm.

Luis nodded. “Nice to meet you Keith,”

“You too,” said Keith, and then, after a pause, added, “Sir,” because Luis was a lot older than Lance and his other siblings and Keith’s grandma had drilled manners into Keith like a sergeant major. He regretted it almost as soon as he said it.
Luis laughed and said, “Just Luis’ fine. Jeez, where’d you find someone so polite, Lance?”

“I know, isn’t he just wonderful?” gushed Beatriz. “A proper southern gentleman if I ever saw one.”

“How do you put up with Lance?” asked Adria, eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Yeah, I’ve been wondering about that,” said Veronica, smirking at Lance. “You’re, like, the opposite of a gentleman.”

“Hey!” said Lance, flicking soapy suds at Veronica’s evil face. “That’s not true! I’m polite.”

“On what planet?” asked Luis, drolly.

“Not this one,” added Marco.

“Mom,” complained Lance. “They’re harassing me again!”

“It’s not our fault you’re the youngest,” all three of them said at once, which had everyone cracking up at what was obviously an old joke.

“You leave Lance alone,” Beatriz said, pulling him into a hug. Though even her lips were twitching. “He’s only a young boy, he can’t keep up with you yet.”

“Gee, thanks mom,” said Lance dryly.

Everyone laughed, and Lance let a smile slip through his hurt act.

Then the doorbell rang again. Moments later Veronica returned with two wrinkled gentlemen in Guayabera shirts. One was a good few years younger than the other- tall and willowy, like a wilting mast, while his companion hunched over a cane like a turtle, peering out at the world through large, thick glasses.
“Abu!” cried Lance, rushing over to hug the older man. Lance’s grandfather, Gonzalo.

“Mi corazón,” greeted Gonzalo, seizing him with surprising force. His blue eyes were large and serious behind his glasses. “I’m glad you’re home.”

“I was only gone a few days,” said Lance with a laugh.

“I don’t trust those flying contraptions,” he said resolutely. “It’s not natural.”

“Don’t start that again, Viejo,” said the other gentleman, Ulises. He covered his mouth and stage whispered, “He’s been watching conspiracy documentaries again.”

“You mock me now,” said Gonzalo. “But when the government turns you all into brainless monkeys don’t come crying to me.”

“Right about the time we find out the moon landing was a hoax, right?” asked Ulises, winking at Lance.

“There’s no physical proof it happened!” cried Gonzalo, and every groaned because for the next ten minutes he gave them a lecture on why the American government faked the moon landing. When nobody really stood around to listen, Gonzalo latched onto Keith, the only rapt listener and prattled on for an immeasurable amount of time. “I’ve just realised, son,” said Gonzalo, suddenly. “I don’t know your name. Or why you’re in my daughter-in-law’s kitchen.”

“My name’s Keith, sir,” said Keith. “Lance’s friend.”

“And my dad’s prisoner,” said Ulises, chuckling. “Leave him be, papa. The poor boy’s ears are going to fall off.”

“I don’t mind,” said Keith, meaning it. He’d thought the theories were cool. “I think the flag thing’s pretty convincing.”
“A ha!” said Gonzalo, jabbing a shaking finger at Ulises’ chest. “A true academic. Tell me, son, what do you study?”

“Classics,” answered Keith and Gonzalo’s watery eyes sparkled.

“Wonderful!” he exclaimed. “I used to lecture on literature back in the day, did Lance tell you? We ran a course on Homer. I was very fond of Greek Literature.”

“You don’t say,” said Ulises, dryly. “I’d never have guessed.”

Keith’s eyes widened with understanding. “Ulises,” he said. “Odysseus.”

Ulises winked at him. “Though I would have preferred Achilles. He always seemed more noble than the King of some rocky goat island.”

“Are you going on about dead Greeks again?” asked Beatriz, laying the table with the first heaping of pancakes.

“Yes,” said Gonzalo to her, and “You’re too slow for swift-footed Achilles,” to Ulises.

“What are they talking about?” asked Lance, finally free from Marco’s wrath. He gave Keith a smile and sat beside him at the table.

“Nerd stuff,” said Veronica, not even bothering to glance up from her phone.

“Homer,” explained Keith. Under the table, Lance gave his hand a squeeze. “But mostly the Iliad.”

“Oh, that book we read?” asked Lance.

Beatriz breezed over to the table with more pancakes and a jug of syrup. “You read the Iliad?” she exclaimed. “What have you done to my son, Keith?”
“It was cool,” said Lance, a tad defensively. “Kinda wordy, but yeah. Pretty cool I guess.”

“And gay,” sniped Veronica.

Keith and Lance went red at the same time.

“And there’s nothing wrong with that,” said Beatriz loudly, smacking Veronica’s head with a wooden spoon on her way past.

“I never said there was!” argued Veronica. “You guys just reminded me of a really cool book called The Song of Achilles, that’s all.”

Surprised, Keith said, “I’ve read that book,”

“You have?” asked Veronica, eyes sparkling. “What did you think?”

But Keith never got a chance to answer, because Luis chose that moment to sidle over and ask, “Where’s Aunt Harriet?” He was carrying a crying Logan in his arms. The poor thing had tripped outside in game of tag and now Adria had baby Rosa instead. “Hush now, little man. Is she coming later?”

“She’s gone to a water aerobics class with Sandra,” answered Ulises with a roll of his eyes. “She might drop in later.”

“I thought she did Pilates,” said Veronica with a frown.

“That was last week,”

“What about horse riding?” asked Lance.

“That was last month,”
“WOULD SOMEONE HELP MOM WITH THE FOOD?!?” screamed Marco.

Everyone jumped up then, including Gonzalo. Immediately Ulises and Luis were convincing him to stay put but the older man wasn’t having any of it. In the end, Beatriz asked him to lay out the napkins (which placated her father-in-law’s need to be useful) before giving everyone else plates laden with eggs and vegetables and jugs of milk and juice. Keith smoothly carried two platters of fried tomatoes and mushrooms as well as a jug of water over to the table, much to everyone’s delight.

“Show off,” muttered Lance, nudging him in the side.

Keith grinned at him.

Then everyone was at the table, munching on food and jabbing forks at each other whenever the conversation got heated. Logan was dozing in Luis’ arms now and Michelle was busy building something with lego at the end of the table. All of the chairs in the house were drawn up in a mismatched array to accommodate everyone, and even then Marco ended up perched on a wobbly stool, tipping about much to the table’s amusement. The food was delicious: the eggs light and buttery and the vegetables still crisp, the pancakes were dream-soft, sweet and sticky with maple syrup or honey. Jams were passed back and forth, bread cut and spread with heapings of butter, and there were three pots of coffee on the table which were quickly drained.

It was a confused, jumbled morning. Having so many people talk at once, kids crawling under and over the table, the shouting, jokes, casual displays of open affection, the demands and talking over each other- it all made Keith a little nervous. Jittery. Unsure of his place in this rabble. But it was also incredibly, endearingly warm.

“So this is what you meant,” he whispered to Lance, just as Ulises was regaling the family with a story of some recently divorced cousin. “This morning I mean.”

Lance grinned at him apologetically. “Saturday breakfast has always been a kinda family thing. Usually Dad and Aunt Marie are here too- Ulises’ wife I mean. My cousin Ike used to come, but he’s in England at the moment doing an apprenticeship. Pyrotechnics or something. Then there’s my grandpa’s friend from bingo, sometimes he comes too, and Jodie (Marco’s girlfriend) shows up if she’s not working and—” Lance stopped, noticing Keith’s bewildered expression. “Sorry, my mom loves having people over, so I’m used to it, but it’s kinda mad, isn’t it?”

“I don’t mind,” said Keith, shaking his head. He glanced at the big family just as Ulises got to some punchline and everyone laughed. Marco snorted into his orange juice and got it all over
himself, which made everyone laugh harder. “I like it.”

Lance’s grin deepened, and he took Keith’s hand under the table again, this time not letting go unless he desperately needed all motor functions. It made Keith’s stomach feel like jelly.

By the time the food was polished off it was just about noon. After the main meal Marco and Beatriz brought out fruit and tea: big, juicy mangos, plump grapes and Adria’s sweet strawberries. While everyone nibbled on fruit the conversation lulled into something more relaxed; booming voices quietened to thoughtful murmurs and thunderous laughter turned to subdued chuckles. The very air was saturated with content, sunshine drenching the kitchen in honey-warm afternoon light-catching in the shining fruit and in Lance’s eyes like flecks of gold dust. Keith felt himself sinking into his chair, stomach full to burst and hand wrapped warmly in Lance’s. He couldn’t remember the last time he felt so at ease.

“Well,” said Beatriz standing. Her lined face was relaxed, but her eyes sparkled with mischief. “I suppose it’s time to clean up.”

Suddenly, everyone tensed.

“My Corazoncito,” said Gonzalo, rising painstakingly to his feet, cane wobbling. “What can I do to help?”

“Oh no, not you, Papá,” said Beatriz, shaking her head. “And not you, either, Luis. You and Adria did them last time,” she added when the couple began getting to their feet. Instead, Beatriz looked pointedly at her youngest children, who all sank into their seats. “I think it’s someone else’s turn.”

At that moment, Marco’s phone rang. “It’s Emily!” he exclaimed, jumping up and relieved as hell. “Gotta take this, sorry mom!” then he bolted out of the room.

In the following silence Veronica looked at Lance, and Lance looked at Veronica.

“On three?” asked Veronica.

“Prepare to lose,” said Lance.
“One, two, three. ROCK PAPER SCISSORS!”

The family leaned forward to look at the result. Hovering in the air Lance had thrown rock… and Veronica had thrown paper.

“BOO YEAH!” she cried, whooping.

With a thunk Lance banged his head against the table and groaned.

Amused, Keith patted his shoulder. “I’ll help you,” he said.

Lance just groaned louder.

“Hard luck, Lance,” said Ulises, smirking mildly. “Not everyone can enjoy a lazy Saturday.”

“I don’t know what you’re grinning about,” said Beatriz. “Hattie said you’d take a look at that broken fence I mentioned. Come on.”

Ulises’ eyebrow twitched. He followed Beatriz reluctantly out the door, muttering under his breath about the scary conspiracies made between women. Michelle and Logan bounded after them, keen to run about in the yard, and started shouting about making a tree house.

“Not again,” said Luis, turning quite pale and running after them. “The last time they did that Michelle nearly hung her brother with a skipping rope,” he explained to Lance and Keith, ducking out the door.

“He frets so much,” said Adria with a laugh. On her lap, Rosa gurgled happily. “Shall we go for a stroll too, sweetie?” she asked, offering Lance a warm pat on the arm and Keith a wink. They were still holding hands but drew back self-consciously at that, palms suddenly cool.

When Adria left, the boys were left with only Gonzalo and Veronica.

“You don’t need to help, abu,” said Lance. “I got this.”
“Yeah, he’s got this,” said Veronica, tapping away on her phone.

Gonzalo hummed unhappily but didn’t get up. Unthinkingly, Keith began collecting plates.

“Um, what are you doing?” asked Lance.

Keith blinked at him. “Helping?”

“You don’t have to. I’ve got this.”

“I want to help,” argued Keith. He eyed the mess on the table. “And there’s a lot to get through.”

“Nope. It’s cool, man.”

There was something about the dismissive way Lance said this that annoyed Keith. “But it’ll be quicker if we both do it,” he said.

Lance must have heard the challenge in Keith’s voice- the sound of his heel digging in, the edge of his teeth creeping into his tone- because he stopped and faced him, hands on hips. “You’re a guest.”

“So?”

“So guests don’t clean.”

“But I want to,” argued Keith.

“Dude, it’s fine.”
“It’s not.”

“It’s fiiiine,”

“It’s not.”

“WHY ARE YOU LIKE THIS?”

“Why are you yelling?”

“I’M NOT YELLING.”

“Yes you are.”

“NO I’M NOT.”

The sound of Gonzalo laughing interrupted the boys. They turned to find the older man shaking his head while Veronica just stared at them. Embarrassed at their sudden outburst they looked at anywhere but each other.

“My, my,” said Gonzalo. “Such energy. I miss being young.” He got creakily to his feet and brought his plate to the kitchen sink before either of them could stop him. “Don’t worry, Mi corazón,” he said, before Lance could complain. “I won’t do anymore, but if I were you, I’d accept Keith’s help. There’s an awful lot to clean up, you know, and you don’t want to be here until dusk.”

“But!—” argued Lance. He cleared his throat and made an active effort not to yell. It annoyed Keith that he found it stupidly cute. “But he’s… he’s…” Gonzalo waited. “A guest?” finished Lance lamely.

“And a good one, if he’s offering to help,” said Gonzalo. “Let him clear up, Lance. The poor boy’s been fidgeting this entire time because he wants to do something. Isn’t that right, son?”
He winked at Keith (it must be a family thing) and Keith smiled back. “Yes, sir.”

“Nice boy,” said Gonzalo half to Lance and half to himself. He trundled out of the kitchen, following the rest of the family outside. “Good taste in books, too.”

When he was gone, Lance let out a long breath. “Ah geez,” he said, coming over to Keith’s side and putting his head on Keith’s shoulder. “Thank god. I thought they’d never leave.”

“You were nervous?” asked Keith, surprised.

“Er, yeah?” said Lance, staring at Keith like he was some sort of special species. “Weren’t you?”

“Not really?” said Keith with a shrug.

“You’re not human, ex-mullet,” mumbled Lance into his shoulder.

“You had a mullet?” asked Veronica.

“Not important, V,” said Lance. “And you’re a dick, by the way. What was with that gay comment? We’re trying to keep a low profile here.”

“Are you kidding?” asked Veronica, voice droll and expression the very picture of are you serious?. “A low profile? You two were making moon eyes at each other the entire time!”

“Shut up, V!” hissed Lance. “We were not!”

“And did you think we couldn’t see you holding hands under the table?” she continued. “They’re not stupid, Lance.”

Now Lance was blushing too. “Don’t you have some cartoon to watch or something?” he demanded.
“Nope,” said Veronica. The silver bar in her eyebrow glinted maliciously. “Why, do you want some alone time?”

“V!”

“Alright, alright, I’m going,” she said, jumping up, shimmying to the door. “Try not to get too hot and steamy now!” Then she disappeared.

Lance put his head in his hands. “I hate her.”

“You’re kinda alike,” said Keith. When Lance shot him a dirty look, Keith put his hands in the air with an apologetic smile.

They both looked at the mess before them then: the heaps of plates, platters, dishes, pots and pans and coffee-stained mugs. There was no dressing it up the fact that this was going to be hard and tedious as hell. Fortunately, Keith wasn’t shy of work and when Lance just started going at it like a headless chicken, he put a hand on the crook of his elbow and said,

“Dude, we’ll never get it done that way. We need a system.”

“A system?” echoed Lance.

“Yeah, first let’s stack all of it in matching piles. Then I’ll wash, you dry, and that way you can put it away at the same time.”

“You sound like Shiro,” commented Lance amusingly. He’d gravitated naturally over to Keith during his instructions and now (hesitantly) he wound a hand around Keith’s waist.

“Who do you think taught me?” asked Keith, leaning into Lance. “Shiro’s house is a well-oiled machine of proficiency. You think he’s bad, wait till you meet his mom.”

“Yeah?” asked Lance. He licked his lips nervously. “I guess she’s gonna hate me then.”
“She’s gonna love you,” said Keith, planting a quick kiss on Lance’s cheek. His expression lit up as though Keith had given him the greatest present in the universe. “Now stop stalling. We’ve gotta get this done.”

Groaning, Lance unwound his arms from Keith waist and shuffled over to the sink. They set to work. It was a gruelling task: endless grease stains and immoveable bits of charcoaled food stuck to pans, passing plates and arguing over pointless things. Outside they could hear the distant cries of Michelle and Logan, the wind tickled the house plants above the sink and the clink of cheap china was an unmusical melody. Keith was methodical in his work ad unrelenting, leather gloves removed for the task and fingers turning into soapy prunes by the second. Heat rose from the sink and filtered in through the doors and open window, congealing thickly in the air. Taking a breath, Keith stood back and ran a wet hand through his hair, pushing it back from his face. He caught Lance watching him do it and felt a thrill run through his stomach.

They talked while they worked, about anything and everything, to make the minutes go quicker.

“Marco’s a good cook,” commented Keith. “Those pancakes were amazing.”

“He’s always liked cooking,” answered Lance. “Abulita taught him. Mom’s pretty useless so when dad’s not around Marco does most of the meals.”

“Where is your dad?”

“Work,” answered Lance, climbing on a counter to put away some plates in a topmost cupboard. “He’s been in New York for about a week now but he should be back any time this afternoon.”

“What’s he do?”

“He’s in publishing. He went for the launch of a new book- apparently it’s set to be a best seller.”

Keith hummed thoughtfully. “So he takes after your grandpa, then.”

“Yeah,” agreed Lance. “They’re all big on books. V too. She can read crazy fast, like, it’s scary.”
“So, let me see if I’ve got this right,” said Keith. “Your grandpa is your dad’s dad, right?”

“Yeah,” said Lance, grinning.

“And Ulises is your dad’s brother,”

“Right again,”

“So was your abuelita…”

Lance’s smile dimmed into something more melancholy. “She was married to my grandpa, yeah. When she died dad moved him out here to be nearer us. He lives in a little apartment above my uncle’s garage.”

Keith nodded. “What about your mom’s family?”

At this, Lance shrugged. “Never met them,” he said.

When he offered no further explanation, Keith waited.

“She got kicked out after she got pregnant with Luis,” continued Lance, eventually. “She was younger than us, I think, and wasn’t dating seriously. They wouldn’t even let her explain before they’d packed up her stuff,” he stopped, tapping his chin thoughtfully. “I think that’s why she loves having people over, honestly. For the longest time it was just her and a baby in a tiny apartment.”

“So your dad…” said Keith.

“Isn’t Luis’ birth dad, no,” answered Lance. “But like, he is in every other way, you know? None of us have ever met our grandparents though. They still don’t want anything to do with mom.”

“That’s awful,” said Keith. He thought of his own mom, never coming back, and felt his insides twist sharply. “How can anyone do that to a kid?”
Lance shrugged. “I don’t know. To be honest, I don’t want to meet them. Not after all that. And to be fair, mom didn’t let it stop her. She saved up and took a teaching course, then she went to Mexico to teach English there with Luis. She ended up travelling all over the place before she met my dad,” Lance’s eyes were sparkling. “It’s pretty cool, actually.”

“Very cool,” agreed Keith.

“What did your dad do?” asked Lance suddenly.

“He fixed up bikes,” said Keith. “And did odd maintenance jobs here and there. At one point he was a security guard at some plant or something too,” he smiled a secret smile. “But at heart I think he wanted to be a carpenter. He didn’t have much time to practise because he had me to look after, but I used to catch him carving things when I snuck down from bed. Small things at first, then stools and tables. He hated having nothing to do, it was like his hands were always reaching for work.”

“Sounds like someone else I know,” said Lance.

Keith shoved him. Lance shoved him back. Then they reluctantly went back to washing and drying. By now, the heaps of dirty plates were depleting and the kitchen was beginning to sparkle. Lance hooked his phone up to the radio and started playing Cascada- screaming the lyrics. When Keith could take no more, he demanded that Lance play something more palatable.

“Like what?”

Keith thought about it. “Muse?” he suggested.

Grinning, Lance immediately put on Unnatural Selection. Now Keith was screaming the lyrics. They danced around the kitchen, doing stupid moves: legs kicking and arms everywhere. Keith was laughing so hard it hurt. The commotion drew the attention of Marco, who popped his head through the hall door. He grinned.

“Now this is a tune,” he said.
“IS THAT MUSE?” screamed Veronica from somewhere.

That was how all four of them ended up dancing their hearts out in the kitchen. By this point *United States of Eurasia* was playing and both Marco and Lance had donned a pair of sun glasses. They didn’t know the words to this song as well, instead they bobbed like madmen and dabbed at regular intervals while Veronica and Keith (who knew every syllable and tonal shift of the song by heart) shouted so hard that Keith felt light-headed. When *Knights of Cydonia* began blasting next Marco started galloping like a horse and everyone followed suit, howling with laughter. Lance and Keith collided in the middle of the kitchen and, unthinkingly, Lance wound his arms around Keith’s middle so they were dancing together, hearts beating in time with the wild tapping of feet. The feeling of Lance’s body pressed against Keith’s back was warm and comforting and yes, admittedly, maddeningly sexy. It was new and familiar and exhilarating, made all the sweeter because Marco and Veronica didn’t even bat an eyelid. It was like a dream.

“*Ahem,*” said a voice.

The four froze and looked up to find Beatriz in the doorway, very much amused, with Gonzalo and another man behind her. The stranger was a tall man in a crinkled green suit with a no nonsense undercut; he was carrying a suitcase in one hand and a word paperback in the other. When Keith found his eyes he knew immediately that this was Lance’s dad. They were the exact same shade of blue.

“Hey dad!” said Veronica. She bounded up to him and gave him a hug. His smile made the sides of his eyes crinkle.

“We didn’t mean to interrupt,” said Beatriz, eyes sweeping over the scene. She seemed content, at least, that the kitchen was clean. When her gaze landed on Lance and Keith they stepped away from each other as though scorched. “But we have neighbours, you know. And your grandpa is leaving.”

“Sorry, mom,” said Lance, embarrassed. “We got… carried away.”

“You don’t say,” said Lance’s father. His expression was entirely neutral as he waltzed into the kitchen, putting his suitcase on the kitchen table. He went over to the radio and turned it down. “I’m surprised your ear drums are still intact.”

Keith’s face burned.
“Come now, Héctor,” said Gonzalo. “It is nice to have so much energy in the house. It keeps me young.”

Héctor said nothing. He merely donned an apron and began cracking eggs into a frying pan. “Did you make omelettes?” he asked Marco, mildly.

“Yeah,” answered Marco, passing his dad the milk.

“Did you use coriander?”

“Yep.”

Héctor nodded and Marco beamed as though he’d been given the best compliment on earth.

“Well, I’ll be off,” said Gonzalo. “Jean wants to play bowls.”

“See you soon, papa,” said Beatriz, leaning down to kiss her father-in-law on the cheek. “Kids, say goodbye to your grandfather.”

Obediently, everyone exchanged hugs and kisses while Héctor left Marco in charge of the eggs and went to start the car, having offered to drive his father home. Keith felt slightly awkward standing apart as this display of affection took place. He didn’t know where to look.

While Lance was enveloped in his grandpa’s arms, Keith heard him say, “I’m proud of you, mi corazón.”

“Er, thanks?” said Lance, confused. “But it’s only a few dishes, you know.”

“I know,” he said. “I know… well, best not to keep Jean waiting.” He turned to go, but seemed to change his mind shuffled over to Keith. At first, Keith though he was going in for a handshake, so he was surprised when Gonzalo tugged him into a hug instead. The smell of mothballs and shaving cream filled his nose.
“What did you think of *The Song of Achilles*, Keith?” asked Gonzalo, when he finally leant back. “I lent it to Veronica in January and I’m curious what you thought of it.”

Blushing, Keith stammered, “Oh, er, I liked it.”

Gonzalo nodded to himself. “As did I. A wonderful writer, and I feel she did those star-crossed lovers beautiful justice. I very much approve, and I just wanted you to know what I thought.” Then he trundled away, leaving both Keith and Veronica with a slack jaw.

“Hey,” said Lance, noticing. “What’s the matter with you two?”

“I think your grandpa just gave us his blessing,” said Keith, struck dumb.

“What?”

*The Song of Achilles* is about Patroclus and Achilles,” explained Keith.

“Yeah, so?”

“In this version,” continued Veronica. “They’re a couple.”

“…”

The boys looked at each other and burst out into laughter.

“Dude,” said Keith between laughs. “That was so smooth.”

“Oh my god,” said Lance between laughs. “Did that even just happen? What is *with* my family telling me it’s okay to be gay before I’m even *out*?!”

“Well,” said Beatriz, pulling Lance into a hug. “Did you really think we’d be any different? Silly
boy. Now I think you two deserve a bit of a break, don’t you?” she asked, winking at Keith. (Yep, definitely a family thing). “I suggest you go out a for a bit. Poor Keith probably needs a rest.”

Lance raised an eyebrow at Keith. “Wanna ditch?”

Grinning, Keith nodded.

Being outside was bliss after the drudgery of the kitchen. It smelled like freshly-cut grass and that warm scent which is the indiscernible spice of summer. The whole of Austin was open to them and the buzz of being alone together was yet to wear off. When they turned the corner away from Lance’s house, Lance roped Keith’s hand into his and swung it lightly as they walked.

“So,” he said, smiling shyly. “Where to?”

Keith knew exactly what he wanted to do. “Wanna go to the desert?” he asked.

“To your shack?” asked Lance, surprised.

Keith nodded. The feeling of being enveloped in the bubble of Lance’s life- in his family and home- was a giddy, heady thing. He loved being apart of this side of Lance’s life and wanted to share the same part of himself. All day, he’d been picturing Lance standing in his tiny living room, on the hand-woven rug his grandma made before she died, fingers tracing the lines and edges Keith had known all of his life. He wanted it so much it was like an ache.

“Sure,” said Lance. “Are we… are we going on Red?”

“Biking is the only way you should drive through the desert,” said Keith, firmly.

Lance licked his lips. “Okay. Sure. Let’s do it.”

But before they could set off, Keith’s phone buzzed. He picked it up.

“WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?!?” demanded Shiro on the other end of the phone.
I forgot to tell Shiro I was staying here, thought Keith. Then, Fuck.

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Lance

Lance watched as Keith hesitantly apologised on the phone, his lip screwing up in guilt.

“Sorry – yeah… yeah, I know – well tell her – tell her I’m fine, Jeez! Stop stressing… I’m sorry, Shiro…”

Lance scuffed his feet on the concrete sidewalk, feeling like a lemon. Dammit, Keith… what if he had to go home now? What if they couldn’t go to the desert anymore?

Keith hung up with a sigh. “Well, I’m officially in the dog-house.”

Lance felt a smirk tugging his lips. “I thought my memory was bad.”

“I was – distracted!” Keith threw his hands in the air, huffing. “I’m not usually so…” He trailed off, clearly berating himself.

“Flustered?” Lance finished for him, stepping forward to brush the flyaway hairs back out of Keith’s eyes. It was growing a little… nowhere near mullet-standard yet, though.

Keith’s eyes twinkled as he relented to the touch. “Yes.” He said deliberately. “You successfully distracted me.”

Despite the punch of satisfaction in his stomach, Lance worried: “You don’t… have to go, do
Keith’s expression flickered. “Soon. I gotta go soon. But not before I take you out to the desert.”

Lance grinned. “That’s fine by me.”

Keith’s bike was stored safely in a garage in the city – the same one Lance had left him at on their road-trips together so long ago… only this time the side-walk sizzled with summer heat. The metal garage doors were searing – the guy manning the keys donned a sweaty bandana and a sleeve of tattoos, tossing Keith the spare keys to the garage without blinking.

Lance gulped as Keith wheeled Red into the street, her glossy paint-job impeccable in the glare of the sun, glowing like embers in a dying fire, the silver spokes of her wheels winking maliciously. *Fuck.* He hadn’t thought this through. At all.

He simpered over, arms hugged around his middle as Keith offered him a spare helmet.

“Is this” – he struggled, - “safe?”

Keith scoffed. “Are you kidding? Don’t tell me you’re scared.” His eyes glinted in time with the spokes of Red like a challenge.

Lance straightened up. “Nah, man. I’m cool.”

He was so not cool.

Lance felt his breath quicken into a nervous pant as he awkwardly mounted the bike behind Keith, tugging the claustrophobic helmet tighter onto his head. The visor was flecked with dust and markings. He couldn’t see *shit.* He hoped Keith’s helmet was cleaner…

“Grab onto me.” Keith called, his voice muffled by the helmet as he half-swivelled around.

“Whu’?” Lance didn’t know where to put his feet. Or his hands. Or himself.
“Grab! Onto me!” Keith called as the engine revved. Lance felt Red come to life beneath him, purring through his thighs like a mechanical tiger.

He made a noise of surprise and grasped Keith’s waist, curling his fingers in his jacket. Keith must have been laughing, his shoulders were shaking, and he turned to say something unintelligible to Lance with a sly wink before jamming his foot down and twisting his hand.

Then they were off. Flying through the streets.

Lance’s heart was in his throat. His legs had turned to rods of steel, welded to the sides of the bike as he tensed violently and his hands were sweating in Keith’s jacket. He might have been screaming. He couldn’t hear over the roar of the engine or make sense of anything past the multi-coloured cars streaming past them. Keith was fast.

It was worst when he leaned into a corner, bringing their knees inches from the rough concrete. Lance could hear his mom’s voice in his ear: “Once I was on a bike with my ex-boyfriend… he crashed and took all the skin off one side of our bodies.”

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. Lance was repeating that word over and over - he felt it reverberating through the helmet as they breached the dust-covered roads into the desert…

Here, the engine wasn’t so loud. There was so much space around them. It really did feel like they were soaring at an incredible speed.

Lance allowed his fingers to uncurl from their vicious hold on Keith’s jacket and wind around his waist instead. Releasing the breaths he’d been holding, Lance loosened his torso and pressed himself into Keith’s back.

It felt safer like this. Less like he was going to go flying off the back to his doom, rather.

Keith reciprocated, straightening his back to accommodate his wimpy boyfriend.

A sharp bend in the street made Lance practically crack Keith’s ribcage, he was squeezing so hard. Keith swerved to avoid a bird in the road. Lance squealed. Keith took them over a short hill, and Lance’s stomach committed suicide.
In the middle of the desert, the hazy rocks painting a mysterious landscape on the horizon, Keith slowed to an eventual stop, leaving Red on at a quiet, patient buzz.

Reaching, Keith yanked off his helmet, his face sheened with exhilarated sweat, hair mussed around his face like a black halo.

“Uh – Lance?” He chuckled, “You can let go of me now.”

Maybe he was paralysed. It took an extreme amount of effort to creak his joints off of Keith and pull himself back into a straight sitting position on the bike.

“A-are we there?”

Keith shook his head, his eyes gleaming amusement. “Nope, just taking a break. You seem like you need it.”

Lance coughed back a retort. He did need a break.

“Stretch your legs?” Keith proposed.

Lance nodded stiffly. He was in shock.

It was with effortless grace that Keith propped himself off Red, strolling to the edge of the road with lazy appreciation of the landscape, helmet clutched under one arm. Lance had to take one leg at a time. His groin was so stiff from tensing, it felt like someone had shoved a melon between his legs. He walked with his legs drastically apart, arms tense by his side. Keith busted up laughing when he saw him.

“You’re white as a sheet!” He laughed, gently pulling off Lance’s helmet for him because he seemed to have lost the use of his limbs.

“Hold me. I’m dying.” Said Lance meekly, flopping his head onto Keith’s shoulder.
“We’ve still got another hour to go. You sure you can do this?” Keith tried (and failed) to mask the glee in his tone.

Lance nodded. “We’re halfway there. Can’t give up now. I’m putting my life in your hands, Keith. My life.”

Keith patted Lance’s head, his shoulders shaking with more suppressed laughter.

“I’ll take care of you.”

Somehow, getting on the bike was easier after that. At least if he died, Lance thought, he’d be dying in the hands of the only person he’d ever loved like this; he wouldn’t want to die any other way.

Perhaps he was being melodramatic.

Once he relaxed a little (still clinging onto Keith like a neurotic sloth), the ride was actually… kinda fun. The desert was gorgeous – as always – but on the bike it unfolded itself to them like a dream, the hills and boulders rolling into one cohesive mass. A black hawk circled over-head, letting out a shrill cry. And they were alone on the road. Just him and Keith. This time, when Lance tightened his arms around Keith’s waist, it was because he couldn’t believe this was real – because he had to make sure that it was actually Keith, the Keith he’d been obsessing over for the better part of college, who was driving him to his hide-out in the desert. As his boyfriend. Lance didn’t need to tell Keith that his family had accepted him – more than accepted him, in fact. His knowledge of the Classics had impressed Gonzalo no end (and baffled Lance) and Veronica related to his tastes on a level that was uncanny. Marco was Marco and accepted everyone as long as they weren’t a Republican and everyone else followed Beatriz’s lead because she was the best judge of character.

A black dot amidst the sea of dusty yellow and brown got bigger and bigger, and as it did, Red slowed, Keith’s foot slowly pressing down on the brake.

The shack really was… a shack.

This time, it was Lance who slid off the bike first as she became quiet under Keith’s command. He pulled off his helmet to survey Keith’s home better.
“Whoa.” Was all he could muster.

He turned to Keith who was totally zoned out, glaring at the shack with squinting eyes against the hot desert wind.

Lance’s legs felt alien on the safe, solid ground, but he schooled his composure as he re-joined Keith by Red.

“Are you…?”

“I’m good.” Said Keith blankly, snapping out of it. His serious eyes met Lance’s concerned blue ones. “I just haven’t been here this time of year in…” He sucked in a sharp breath, “A while.”

Lance knew he didn’t have the right words to sum up Keith’s feelings, so he didn’t try to explain it. Instead, he lifted his hand to Keith’s fine-boned face and planted a soft kiss on his cheek-bone.

“We don’t have to do this.”

Keith caught Lance’s hand, his face relaxing. “It ain’t a big deal, really. Just a little strange. Come on. Let me introduce you to the loner-pad.”

Lance scoffed, reassured by the return of humour in Keith’s voice.

Keith led him to the front door by the hand, unlocking it with a swift jingle of keys and…

*Whoa.* This time he didn’t say it out-loud. There was barely any furniture save for a large woven rug thrown across the nicked floorboards, a tiny desk piled high with files, a computer with more scratches on it than there was screen and a small bed pushed against the wall. The first noticeable difference to Keith’s apartment in Wisconsin, however, was the walls. The walls were peppered with images, lines, markings, question marks… a slew of Keith’s thoughts exploded the small expanse. It was like stepping into his mind. Lance gaped at the scene.

“You auditioning for *Buzzfeed Unsolved*?” He couldn’t help but ask with a smirk.

As Lance surveyed the circumference of the walls, surveying the extent of Keith’s obsessions, he began noticing a pattern. Records from the Korean military dotted points between the red, connecting lines, and a map of Scotland punctured the centre of it all.

“You were… trying to find your mom.” Lance said bravely. He felt the room shudder with the statement.

“Yeah.” Keith hummed. “All of this information is useless to me, though. It’s public, meaning anyone can access it. I requested permission to their private records so many times, but…” He sighed, “I didn’t have the authorisation. They insisted I couldn’t prove my intentions were innocent.” He kicked the tiny chest of drawers. “But what else I’d do with them, who knows…” he muttered.

Lance realised these weren’t the only things pasted to the walls. The other side was subject to a whole different topic altogether. Pictures of the desert marked with Keith’s musings scattered this side.

“Lay lines?!” He exclaimed, feeling it would be appropriate to get away from the topic of Keith’s missing mom.

“Laugh all you want!” Keith threw his hands in the air, “This area is notorious for them.”

Lance laughed, running a hand through his helmet-flattened hair. “God – I can’t – you’re just too cute.”

He turned to his boyfriend who stared back, perplexed, “Cute?” He echoed.

Lance sauntered over, grasping both of Keith’s hands in his.

“Such a fucking hipster.”
Keith rolled his eyes. “Says you.”

Lance bit his lip, more to stop himself from hurling back another insult, but he noticed Keith’s eyes linger on the action.

“So, what other crazy stuff you got in here, ex-mullet?” He said because the moment was becoming heavy.

Keith’s expression changed. “Wanna see some vintage Nintendo?”

“Obviously.”

Under his bed, Keith had stashed a collection of old consoles, games and retro hardware straight out of the 90’s.

“Dude!” Lance exclaimed, practically drooling as he handled the old Mario cartridges. “This stuff could go for a fortune.”

Keith eyed the collection thoughtfully. “Nah, I couldn’t sell it. Believe me, I’ve been tempted, but…” He shrugged, “Me and my dad used to play them.”

Lance was shaking his head. “Pidge would have a field day. She’s so super into this stuff. If you ever told her about this she’d leap on you.”

“You’re the only one who’s allowed to do that.” Keith said wryly, and Lance gave an awkward laugh to match his furious blush.

“You know, for a gay guy, the décor in here is kind of plain.” Said Lance.

Keith rolled his eyes. “It’s what I needed.” His eyes fell to Lance’s fingers which tugged on the edge of the rug on the floor. “My grandma made that though.”
“This?” Said Lance, gazing at the rug. “It’s pretty.”

He glanced up and caught Keith staring at him. “What?”

Keith shook his head slowly. “Nothing, just… I can’t believe you’re here.”

Something about the way he said it made Lance’s insides ache. It sounded so… lonely.

“Guessing you don’t bring people back here often.”

“Never.”

“Keith, are you sure…?” Lance halted himself from finishing that sentence. It wasn’t his place to finish it. Keith, are you sure it’s a good idea to spend so much time here by yourself? He’d never lost a parent. He couldn’t understand how badly Keith needed to be here, surrounded by his memories, his thoughts… maybe it was unhealthy to an extent, but it wasn’t his place to say it. Not right now.

Keith tilted his head. “What?”

Lance gave him an easy smile. “Nothing. Let’s play some of these games, nerd.”

And they did. Every. Single. One. They played, yelling at the top of their lungs as they battled Aliens and Predators on Atari, a pixelated version of Dungeons and Dragons, some ancient Mario Kart… it was like being in the arcade from Lance’s childhood, except it was just the two of them with only the desert critters to hear their cries of delight and vanquish and victory. When Lance was convinced his eyes were turning square, he threw the controller down and lay back on the woven rug, laughing like a mad-man.

Keith lay back with him, throwing his arm across Lance’s chest.

“That was hella fun.” Said Lance.
“Hella fun.” Keith agreed.

Lance had a flashback to Keith saying ‘Hella Gay’ and giggled, and it was as though Keith was reading his mind because he laughed too.

“This has been… a crazy year.”

“Bet you never thought this would happen.” Said Keith with a smirk.

“Dude, I didn’t even know any gay people. I didn’t think I was going to be in a gay relationship.”

Lance was glad Keith found that amusing.

“Really? You didn’t know anybody gay?”

Lance clicked his tongue. “Well… I used to think Pidge was gay.”

Keith cocked a brow. “You did?”

“Yeah… I said it to her once and she got really pissed and stormed off. Hunk told me I was a dick and she’d been into this guy for months, so obviously I felt like a huge jerk… but you can see why, right?”

Keith shrugged. “Not really.”

Lance gave him a dead-pan look. “Help me out here, man!”

“I mean… I think it’s nearly impossible to judge someone’s sexuality based on their appearance. Take me for example – what did you think of me?”

“Asexual emo with a taste for 80’s fashion.”
Keith frowned. “Right…” He said hesitantly. “But you never would have thought I was gay, though. That’s probably why Pidge was so mad. Or unless of course it was because…” He trailed off.

“Because what?” Lance probed.

Keith’s expression twisted at his own thoughts. “Nah. Anyway, wanna go outside? The sun is setting.”

Apparently most of Keith’s possessions were stored under his bed, because the next moment he’d pulled out a Bluetooth radio wound with masking tape.

The sky was a brushstroke of cobalt and orange, feather-grey clouds swept across the horizon in long, wispy trails. Lance marvelled at it, the cooling wind blowing through him as they sat atop a mound by the shack with a perfect view of the land.

They sat like that for ten minutes at least, just gazing out in marvelled silence.

“I spend hours and hours out here sometimes.”

Lance looked at Keith, his features perfectly clear in the glow of the descending orb.

“I’ve actually fallen asleep once or twice and woken up with my mouth full of dust.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

Their hands linked on the ground, winding fingers around each other in no particular order until Lance’s thumb was stroking Keith’s wrist.

“Last night I had a dream I was trying to play Nintendogs with Brian May, but he wouldn’t stop crying at how cute the puppies were.”
Keith slowly turned to face him. “Okay, one: you successfully *obliterated* the mood. Two: *Nintendogs*?! And Three: Brian May as in the guy from *Queen*?”

“Veronica gave me all her old games! It was a solid game! And yeah. Brian May from *Queen*. What a legend.”

“Gotta agree with that.”

*Queen* are pretty gay.”

“Actually you’re more on par with them.” Keith corrected, “Freddie Mercury was bi.”

“Okay smartass.” Lance rolled his eyes. “How about Gaga? You ever been a fan?”

Keith pulled a face.

“Judy Garland?”

“Really?”

“Hayley Kiyoko?”

Keith opened his mouth. Closed it. “Okay… I’ll *admit* – that woman is pretty good.”

Lance punched the air. “Knew it!”

“Only took you three guesses.”

Lance slung his legs across Keith’s lap, leaning back on his elbows. Keith raised an eyebrow, but made no protest.
“Favourite song?”

Keith thought about it. “Molecules. Maybe. Not listened in a while.”

“Put it on.” Lance prompted, nodding at the taped-up radio which had so far remained unused. The song sounded tinny in the expanse of desert with nothing to bounce off of, but somehow that added to the atmosphere. They listened to the whole album, singing along to some songs, nodding to others, lying and gazing at the new stars popping into view over-head. Just as the album was about to start anew, Keith suddenly jumped up –

“I almost forgot!”

Lance placed a hand on his heart. “Jesus, Keith… nearly gave me a heart attack…”

Keith bounded down the hill back to his shack, careering around to the other side, before hauling an awkward, heavy-looking object obscured by a sheet up to them. Panting, he threw off the sheet to reveal an elegant telescope.

Lance’s jaw dropped. “Cool!”

Keith’s eyes flashed in the dusk. “Right? Wanna see Jupiter?”

“What about Uranus?” Said Lance with a wink.

“How did I know you’d say that…?” He replied, shaking his head as he twisted the cogs and levers on the telescope. Taking a moment to peer through the lens, Keith grinned.

“Weather’s perfect. I’ve angled her. Go on and take a look.”

At first, all Lance saw was an array of jewels, spangled across the clear sky, then he saw it – a tiny, red dot that wasn’t blinking like the others.
“Sick.” Was all he could come up with.

He heard Keith breathe a disdainful laugh behind him. Lance moved the telescope an inch, and suddenly he was gazing at a whole new portion of the sky. Here, the stars curled into a tail surrounded by a thin veil like a cloud.

“The milky-way…” He breathed, stunned. “I’ve never seen it like this.”

“You’re lucky. It’s especially clear tonight.” Said Keith, slinging his arm around Lance’s shoulder. Lance held back a shudder as Keith played with the stray hairs on his neck.

“Isn’t it funny how the stars twinkle? Kinda magical.”

“It’s atmospheric disturbance here on earth that causes it. No magic involved.” Keith said by his ear.

Lance prised his eye away from the lens to give Keith a withering look. “For someone obsessed with ghosts and lay-lines, you can be real sceptical sometimes.”

Keith shrugged. “It’s just science.”

“Then how do you explain us?” Lance teased. “Where’s the science to that?”

The conflict in Keith’s expression as he tried to come up with something dry and logical was comical. He settled on a shrug and a, “Mutual attraction?”

Lance snorted. “Understatement of the year.” He buried his nose in Keith’s neck with a yawn. “I guess… I’m sleeping here tonight.”

He felt Keith’s smile widen behind his ear. “Glad you said it first.”

“So that’s a yes?”
Lance was slowly learning that Keith’s place was like a treasure trove. He hadn’t spotted it at first, because its wood was the exact same shade as the floorboards it was stood on, but a battered guitar leant nonchalantly against Keith’s bed like an old friend. Lance felt himself drawn to it, his fingers inching to touch.

“That’s a yes.”

Lance didn’t usually put much credit in ‘spirits’ or ‘chakras’ or anything like that, but the tips of his fingers buzzed with a strange energy as he touched the guitar, and he really couldn’t explain it.

Sitting on Keith’s bed, Lance laid it across his knee and picked a vague couple of strings. The sound was rich and familiar – these strings were almost worn out, but nowhere near close to breaking yet.

“Can I hold it?” He asked tentatively as Keith put the old games back in their boxes.

“Sure.” Said Keith without turning to look.

Lance hummed, preoccupied with his increasingly intensive clean-up task. Lance eyed him.

“Will you play something for me?”

Keith gave a nervous laugh, scratching the back of his head.

“I’m – erm – not that good.”

Lance grinned, plucking some strings in a fashion that could only be described as tuneless.
“I don’t believe that. Come on.”

Keith’s face was already a shade darker. “I…” He stammered.

“Come on!” Lance laughed, jumping up and shoving the guitar in Keith’s hands. “I want to be serenaded by my boyfriend.”

Keith glared at him from under his eyelashes. “You’re insufferable,” he said, taking Lance’s old spot on the bed. He fiddled nervously for a few second, tuning the strings, before letting his fingers break into a coherent tune. He didn’t look up to gage Lance’s reaction once. His face remained a solid shade of pink as his fingers elegantly picked out the song, the acoustics sounding perfect in the small living room.

“That was a song.” Said Lance as Keith’s picking trailed off with no ending.

Keith’s eyes sparkled with doubt as he looked up. “Yeah?”

“I know that song.” Said Lance with relish. “It was Dust in the Wind. You know the words, right?”

Keith’s silence was answer enough. Heart-beating with how far he was pushing this, Lance tried to control his features into anything other than a grin.

“Would you… sing it?”

“Absolutely not.” Said Keith outright, his face set in stone.

Lance pouted. “Please?”

Keith rolled his eyes. “I ain’t singing shit.” He said, slipping into his deep-south accent.

Sidling over with a practiced puppy-look, Lance sat cross-legged beside Keith.
“But you have a great voice.”

“How in the heck would you know?”

“I’ve heard you singing along to the stuff we like together. I’ve heard it.”

Keith blushed a deeper shade. “That’s – not the same. It’s just messing around. This is… different.”

“I love different.” Lance said, tracing Keith’s forearm with his index finger, a touch that spoke his request more deeply.

Keith huffed, “You’re not gonna let this go until I do it, are you?”

Lance shook his head happily.

“Fine.” Keith relented through gritted teeth. “I’ll sing it. But you have to stand over there. And face the wall.”

“What!?! That’s not fair” – Lance began to protest, but at Keith’s thunderous expression he hauled himself off the bed and stomped to the other side of the room. “Go on, then. Gimme all you got.”

It was strange, listening to the silence, his pulse a palpable presence in the room. Keith began to play, slower this time, and he played the introduction three times before he let out his voice.

I close my eyes

Only for a moment and the moment’s gone

All my dreams

Pass before my eyes with curiosity…
Everything about it suited Keith’s soft, low voice perfectly. Even his accent. The first lines were shaky with his nerves, but that only made the ache in Lance’s abdomen deeper. He stuffed his hands in his pockets to stop himself from doing anything rash and put his forehead against the wall, closing his eyes until he was drowning in Keith’s voice and the sound of the guitar.

_Same old song_

_Just a drop of water in an endless sea_

_All we do_

_Crumbles to the ground though we refuse to see_

_Dust in the wind… All we are is dust in the wind_

Lance pivoted as slowly as he dared, a step with each breath, his eyes on the vision of perfection before him. Keith’s eyes were shut and he’d lost that spectacular shade of crimson. Seeing it made it more real somehow. His wrist moved deftly along the neck, his fingers placing themselves silently over the correct strings as though it was instinct, his voice only as loud as it needed to be, non-intrusive with the clean acoustics.

Keith opened his eyes on the last line of the song, and his breath hitched when he caught sight of Lance watching him, fading out the last word as though he’d planned it that way. His eyes rounded in surprise and panic and the last note hung in the air between them.

“You weren’t supposed to be looking.” Said Keith, his voice husky.

“I guess I broke the rules.”

Keith flushed again, the guitar sliding out of his lap. “Well” – he coughed “That was it.”

Lance couldn’t stop his legs moving, breaking the space between them in three swift strides. And he couldn’t stop his hands reaching out to cup Keith’s face. And he couldn’t stop himself from leaning down and kissing him like Keith was his only source of oxygen. Without so much as a pause, Lance took the guitar from Keith’s loose grip and laid it gently on the floor at their feet, before pushing them both down onto the bed. He felt Keith’s doubt play between his lips, his need for some kind of verbal confirmation that what had just happened was okay. Lance didn’t know how to tell him that if he had been in love with Keith before, he was now utterly, irrevocably besotted and there was no going back. Ever. When Keith’s grip became tense and uncertain, Lance broke away to utter:
“Keith, that was perfection…”

Keith turned his head away. “It was embarrassing.” He muttered. “I’ve never done that in front of someone.”

“Is it selfish that I want to be the only one you do that for?” Lance whispered against Keith’s lips.

And thank god, that must have been the right thing to say, because Keith’s coal eyes shone with delight and he bit his lip.

“Extremely. But I am completely down for that.”

They both laughed, and Keith became easy in his arms again. Soon, it was Keith taking the reins. He flipped them both over, and the old bed-springs gave a dangerous creak. Bracing himself over Lance, he kissed him for an immeasurable amount of time, only going so far as to play with the collar at Lance’s neck, giving it the occasional tug.

Finally, when moon-beams sliced the room into quarters, Keith flopped off Lance, gasping for air. The bed was so small that Lance’s feet hung off the end, and there wasn’t enough room for them to lay comfortably beside each other, so even now they were tangled together.

“Why is it always music with us?” Lance broke the silence with a gasped whisper.

“…You’re right.” Keith laughed, “Seems to really get us going.”

“We’re fucking hipsters.”

“Damn right.” Keith leaned over and pecked Lance once on the lips before going to get them both a much needed glass of water.

Lance sent a quick message to his mom:

*Lance: Staying at Keith’s. Will be back in the morning.*
Lance shook his head, and stripped out of his clothes down to his underwear. It was almost mid-
night, and he was worn out. He noticed (with a stupid amount of satisfaction) Keith’s eyes rake
over him as he returned, holding two glasses of water with a lazy smile.

“Shit. I forgot the WiFi.” Keith muttered, tapping some passwords into his phone. “Emails.” He
explained cryptically, rolling his eyes.

Lance didn’t fail to notice Keith’s expression change as he glared at his phone with a different kind
of intensity.

“Everything… okay?” He asked when Keith failed to move for the twentieth second. He was like a
statue.

Keith blinked, tossing his phone onto the bed. “Yeah. Fine.” He said shortly, his mouth twitching
into an unconvincing smile.

“College stuff?”

Keith drew in a deep breath. “Yeah… just… the usual crap, you know?”

Lance didn’t know what ‘the usual crap’ meant, but he didn’t pry. It was Keith’s business, and a
moment later Keith was stripping off anyway so he was promptly distracted.

“Dunno about you,” Said Keith, discarding his clothes on the floor, “But I’m beat.”

“Beat.” Lance agreed, settling down into bed with his arm hooked around Keith’s shoulders. Keith
flicked a switch on the wall, and they were plunged into darkness, the only light a pool of silvery
light flung over them by the moon.

Lance stared at it through the window, his insides turning electric as he replayed the events of the
day over in his head. Keith had partaken in a legendary McClain breakfast and managed to impress
every single member of his family, he’d ridden on Red, they’d played vintage video games
together, watched the sun set over the desert, Keith had sung to him… did it get any better than this?

Lance smiled in the dark.

He didn’t think so.

“Night, boyf – ow! You didn’t have to flick me!”

“I warned you about the boyf thing.”

“Fine. Night, jerk-face.”

“That’s better, douchebag. Sleep tight.”

“You too.”

Lance had planned a slow, easy morning of surveying the rising sun with a cup of something hot and Texan and caffeinated – but there wasn’t time for that. It was the intrusive vibrating of Keith’s phone that woke them from their hot slumber, limbs tangled like sweaty noodles.

“‘Sup?” Keith asked groggily into the receiver. He groaned. “Yeah, I’m catching it today… don’t worry. Mmm… see you this evening. Bye.”

“That Shiro?”

“Yeah.” Said Keith, sleepily rubbing his eyes as he leapt out of bed, stretching and clicking his joints. Lance cringed at the sound.

“So when you said you had to go soon…?”
“I meant today.” Said Keith dimly. “I’ll ride you back to yours, then…”

“Then I’ll drive you to the airport.” Lance finished for him. “You got it, man.”

Lance was too buried in the bliss of the last couple of days to get too apprehensive about the ride back to Austin. It still felt as though he’d left all his internal organs behind as the bike whipped onto the empty roads, but he eventually regained the sensation of breathing, gripping onto Keith even harder than he had yesterday, because now… Keith had to leave. And he wouldn’t see him until – fuck. The start of term? It was too expensive to fly back and fourth. It was too expensive to drive up and down. It really would be months…

Keith dropped Red off at the garage with a tearful: “Bye, girl” before they set off, fast-paced, back to Lance’s. Leaping into the house, they bounded up the stairs and packed the little of what Keith had brought with him.

Beatriz and Veronica emerged from the sitting room, faces matched with concern.

“You’re leaving?” Asked Beatriz, genuine sadness in her voice.

Keith nodded politely, “Yes… but thank you so much for having me. Thank you for everything.”

Beatriz waved him off. “Anytime! We’ll always have a space for you here.”

Veronica stepped forward. “Yo, do you like Fall Out Boy?”

Keith blinked. “Yeah.”

“Approval complete.” Veronica clapped. She placed her hand on Keith’s shoulder. “I knew we had a kinship. Now be free, Keith.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “You’re such a cringe.”
He saw Keith grin and shook his head with feigned disapproval. The grin teetered from Keith’s face as he caught sight of something behind Lance’s shoulder.

Lance turned to see his dad returning from the grocery store.

“‘Sup, Daddio.” He said, “Keith is leaving now. I guess you guys didn’t really meet properly.”

Héctor passively gave Keith a once over. “It was nice to meet you, Keith. However brief. You’ll come back soon, won’t you?”

Lance tried to read Keith’s expression. It was impossible. He nodded stiffly. “Yes sir.”

Héctor’s mouth twitched in approval and he moved past them in the hallway. It was time to go. Beatriz and Veronica waved Keith off as they drove away in Blue, and Lance felt a pang. It could be ages before they got to do that again.

“I don’t want you to go.” Lance burst out as he pulled up outside the airport.

Keith gave him a sad smile. “Me neither.”

Lance gripped the wheel hard. “These have been… the best few days of my life.”

Keith’s eyebrows shot up. “The best? Really?”

Lance turned to him seriously, nodding. “The best.” Was it still too early to say I love you?

“Well…” Keith sighed, hugging his backpack on his knee. “Same. Like, really same.”

The silence was thick between them, full of the memories they’d have forever.

“I’m gonna miss you.”
Keith gave a tiny laugh. “It’s only a couple months.” He said breathlessly. In response to Lance’s silence, he reached out and grabbed Lance’s hand.

“Listen, Lance…” He started, his lips ajar with words that wouldn’t spill.

And Lance’s heart began to thrum with tension. He fixed his gaze on Keith.

“Yes?”

“Next year… is gonna be pretty weird.” Keith said simply, squeezing Lance’s hand.

“Damn right! Lady-killer Lance is dead and buried now. Gonna be quite a shock for some.” Lance laughed, but the humour fell flat. Keith didn’t seem to notice he was making a joke at all, he was so lost in his thoughts.

“Lance,” He said in the same serious tone as before. “I will see you before term starts, got it?”

Lance frowned. “I’d love that, but… okay? You sure it’s not too expensive? I can always come up to” –

Keith shook his head. “It doesn’t matter how. But we have to see each other. I can’t… anyway. Just – thank you. Thank you for this. Thank you for – for everything. I’m gonna miss you too.” And before Lance could ask what the frig was up with him, Keith leaned forward and kissed him hard, muddling his thoughts and reminding him what it was like not to think for a while. The kiss lasted for as long as either of them could bear before Lance took Keith hostage, and then Keith was opening the door, climbing out of Blue, a sad smile lingering on his lips, something else like stress in his eyes.

As Lance drove away, he felt his lips burning, scarred with the kiss and the words Keith couldn’t come out with. Next year… is gonna be pretty weird. What did that mean? There was still so much unsaid between them – like an avalanche yet to collapse, and Lance couldn’t tell whether it was good or bad. A spike of dread in his gut warned him of the latter. There was only one thing he knew for sure: No matter how badly he longed to say it, it was still too early for I love you.
Chapter 14

Sorry it's taken us so long to upload!!
Sadly we have been separated by distance for the summer, and our only method of communication is email, crazed texts and hurried FaceTime calls - but the Klance is strong, and nothing can stop us!! Also, it took us... a while to recover from Season 6. For reasons. Obviously not going to post spoilers on here but we'd love to hear what you guys thought of the new season - send us a message or an ask on Tumblr (sleepy-paladin) - we're interested to know what other people think. This is an extra long one, so please enjoy!! Thank you so much to all the kind people who've left us feedback so far, it's truly motivational and means a heck of a lot to us :) <3
Enjoy! xx

Keith was lying in his room at Shiro’s house when his phone started pinging. It’d died on the plane journey and Keith had spent the last ten minutes impatiently throwing a ball up and down waiting for it to charge. With the wildness of a starved man, Keith snatched up his phone.

**Lance:** *Text me when you touch down xx*

*So V found Fullmetal Alchemist on my Netflix history and now she’s making me watch it all in one go.*

*My butt is numb and I blame you.*

*I hope your flight was good.*

*Jesus, though. This shit is pretty good.*

*Fight scenes are sick.*

*Roy is so cool too.*

*SHIT JUST GOT REAL.*

*Omg, is that Ed’s dad?*

*Is it not Ed’s dad?*

*Wait... what?*

*V keeps getting mad at me for checking my phone.*

*She’s accusing me of lying to her about not being a weeb.*

*Again, I blame you for this mullet.*
They were such casual messages, with no real hint of intimacy, but somehow they still made Keith’s insides churn as though Lance had written him a freakin’ sonnet. Smiling stupidly, he flopped onto his back and set his thumbs to work.

**Keith:** Where are you up to?

*I’m back by the way.*

*Flight was good xx*

Lance began typing almost immediately.

**Lance:** They’re going to the North.

*Armstrong is a fucking legend btw.*

**Keith:** lol. *His sparkle makes me laugh.*

**Lance:** “Passed down for generations!”

*This shit is cracking me up dude.*

*Also V says hi.*

*Lance is typing*

**Lance:** How did it go with Shiro?

**Keith:** Pretty much how I expected. He alternated between yelling and lecturing me the entire drive back from the airport.

**Lance:** Shiro can yell? I can’t imagine him losing his cool.
Keith: *He doesn’t often, but he’s crazy scary when he does. Still not as scary as his mom though.*

Lance: *lol. Whenever you mention Shiro’s mom I just keep picturing a tiny version of him in an apron I’m not gonna lie.*

Keith: *You’re not far off.*

Lance: *Hahahahaha.*

*Lance is typing*

*Lance is typing*

Lance: *Is it crazy that I miss you already?*

Keith’s insides melted into a gooey mess. He’d been thinking the exact same thing, but was glad Lance had brought it up first. He’d felt the other boy’s absence as soon as they parted, felt it like a shadow on the plane which had followed him all the way home. For the first time in years, Keith had another place beside here and his shack where he felt welcome and warm, despite having spent so little time as Lance’s actual boyfriend. It was a strange sensation.

With a jolt Keith realised he’d just been staring at that message for a good minute or so.

Keith: *No, I was thinking the same thing. I miss you too xx*

Lance: *PHEW.*

*I legit thought you were just gonna leave me hanging there!*

Keith: *Sorry. Got distracted.*

Lance: *Thinking about my hot bod?*
Keith smirked. It had been a delicious discovery, realising that for all of Lance’s pick up lines, innuendos and flirting, he was adorably awkward when it was directed at him - when it was real life with real consequences. Keith could just picture him now: reclining at an easy angle, grinning like a dork, thinking it was safe because Lance was there and Keith was here and it was all on text, wasn’t it?

Keith: Obviously.

Keith paused, grinned, and wrote the truth.

I think about you all the time. Especially since we watched Metropolis at your place ;)

*Lance is typing*

*Lance is typing*

*Lance is typing*

Smothering a cackle, Keith watched Lance’s active icon flicker on and off and imagined him hacking out sentences only to delete all of it with a frustrated groan in the next instant.

Lance: I know what you’re doing.

Keith: What am I doing?

Lance: YOU KNOW WHAT YOU’RE DOING!

Keith: WHAT AM I DOING?

Lance: I hate you.
Keith: No you don’t.

*Lance is typing*

Lance: No, I don’t.

Again, that giddy warmth flooded through Keith. Would this ever get old? Would he ever be able to have a conversation with Lance, text or otherwise, that didn’t leave him as a jellified mess?

Lance: My grandad leant me The Song of Achilles, btw.

That gave Keith pause for thought. He glanced over at his bookshelf, a uniformly organised beast that even Shiro would be proud of. At first Keith took care of it because it was the first thing Shiro’s mom bought for his new room so he’d have somewhere to put his dad’s books and their collection of VHS tapes and DVDs, as well as a few photographs and trinkets. But later, as he filled the shelves with more stuff: birthday knickknacks, postcards, books for pleasure and books for college, it became a reminder of the time which had passed since Keith’s new life began. He could trace the spines with his finger, drifting through years as he went, through memories. Now he tugged out that particular book. It was a hard back and the spine was cracked from years of frequent reading. How old had he been when he first picked it up? Fifteen? He’d been so confused then, about a lot of things, but this had helped a little bit. Had made him feel less alone. It was even sweeter because Keith hadn’t even known that it was about a romance between two guys, he’d been looking for some ancient Greek action of a different nature than the one he found.

He rifled through the book until he found the page he always kept bookmarked.

Keith: Have you started it yet?

Lance: Not yet. I’m going to tonight.

If V ever lets me go.

RIP me and my butt.

Keith: I hope you like it.
Lance: *It has hot people in it, right?*

Keith: *I guess?*

Lance: *And hot an’ heavy action?*

Keith: *Lance.*

Lance: *I’ll take that as a yes. I’ll probably like it then.*

Keith: *Wtf is wrong with you?*

Lance: *Jk.*

*I’m gonna try and finish it before semester starts.*

*It’s crazy that for once in my life I can’t wait for school to start. Next year’s gonna be so fun!*


Putting the book back in its place, Keith dragged his feet over the wooden floor, the rug, and sat down heavily on his bed. He needed to tell Lance that he was leaving, that much was apparent. He remembered with ringing clarity being in his shack, tangled up in Lance, heart thudding as the admission burned on his tongue. Why hadn’t he said anything? Because it all felt so tenuous. What was happening between them was still so new, so fragile, like a finely woven spell and Keith had been afraid to break it. Even at the airport, even when his brain had *willed* him to bring it up, he hadn’t. He’d been too wrapped up in their bittersweet parting, in the way Lance kept smiling at him as though they were tucked up in their own private universe. He hadn’t wanted the real world to ruin it.

But now…
How was he supposed to say this over text? It didn’t feel right. Too impersonal. Too removed. Lance would think he’d left it this long so he could avoid telling him person, would think Keith was a coward, and the idea of that made Keith balk. Should he call him?

While Keith was pondering his next move, there was a soft knock at the door. Looking up, he found Akane in the doorframe, back from work.

**Keith:** *Brb.*

“I see you’re back in one piece,” she said dryly, stepping into the room. She was still wearing her uniform, Chief badge winking in the evening light. She must have just got off shift.

“Yeah, I’m um, about the whole Austin thing…” Akane merely sat on Keith’s bed and waited, eyebrow raised. Most of her hair was grey now, so they stood out in stark contrast. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have disappeared like that without saying anything.”

A smile played around Akane’s lips. “No,” she agreed. “You shouldn’t. And as a cop I can’t condone what you did, but as a mother… I’m quite relieved.”

Keith looked at the older woman with a question in his expression. She smiled, and stroked a dry hand through his hair. “Since college you’ve been disgustingly well-behaved,” she explained. “At first it was a relief, I know how much you hated high school, but as time wore on you seemed… like you were waiting.”

“Waiting?” echoed Keith.

Akane nodded. “For what, I wasn’t sure. Shiro had all sorts of theories, of course. You know how he is with fixing things. I think that’s why he bullied you into joining martial arts.”

Keith matched Akane’s knowing smile. “He wanted me to make friends.”

“Instead you got into so many fights you were a black belt in Judo and Karate before two years were out,” said Akane, shaking her head fondly. “Do you remember Markus?”
“He was such a bully,”

“His mother called me, you know, to complain that you’d flipped him outside club the and scruffed up his uniform.”

“I didn’t know that, what did you say?”

“I told her you probably had excellent form while doing it,” said Akane with a grin. “And I hoped Markus payed attention.”

Keith laughed. “Shiro chewed me out for days over that.”

“My son is disturbingly social,” said Akane, tapping her cheek thoughtfully. “Heaven knows he doesn’t get it from me. Your dad used to call me a hermit.”

“Not that dad could talk,” said Keith, smile tinged with melancholy. “He’d never leave the desert if he could help it.”

“Sometimes,” said Akane. “I didn’t blame him.” She stopped combing Keith’s hair and laid her hand against his cheek. “You don’t seem like you’re waiting, anymore, Keith,” she said seriously. “It seems like you’re getting where you’re supposed to be, that you’ve found some of what you’re looking for. I’m so proud of you.” She paused, contemplating him. To those who did not know her, Akane had a blank face, devoid of much emotion. Some found it disconcerting, but Keith had always appreciated the coolness, the lack of judgement. Now, however, he knew her better and there was consternation in the line between her brows.

“The university called me for your birth certificate,” she said, carefully. “You’re going to Scotland?”

Keith’s throat tightened. He nodded and said, quietly, “I have to try,”

Akane sighed. “Of course you do,” she gazed at him, dark eyes stern. “But you know how hard your father tried, don’t you?”
“Even if I don’t find anything,” said Keith, swallowing. “I just—it’s as close as I can get. But it’s not—it’s not as if I’m unhappy. You and—and Shiro—there’s just this whole part of myself I don’t know and—”

“I understand,” interrupted Akane, her hand was still pressed to his cheek. Now she grasped his hand instead. “She’s your mother, your history, and there’s no getting around that. I love you, Keith… but you know that. This is for you, not anyone else. It’s the right decision, I just want to make sure you’re not going to be too disappointed if there’s nothing there for you, because there will always be something for you here. Understand?”

Squeezing Akane’s hand, Keith nodded. “I do.”

Akane tugged him into a hug. “And of course we’ll help with the costs,” when Keith tried to argue, she shushed him military style. “Scholarship or no scholarship, it’ll be tough, Kogane. You either accept my help willingly now, or a I burn your birth certificate and have your name on a list which ensures you’ll never leave the country, understand?”

Keith sighed. “Yes ma’am.”

She patted his back. “Good boy,” they parted, and Akane brushed the hair away from his face one last time. Then she stood, pin straight, and said, “And just so we’re clear, if you suddenly disappear to another state or country again without a word, you’re grounded for the rest of your life.”

Keith laughed. “I’m not a kid anymore, Aunt Akane.” When Akane did not laugh and instead stared down at Keith with all of hell’s fire in her serious eyes, he blanched and quickly added. “Understood.”

Her answering smile was pleased and she lingered in his doorway for a moment. It reminded Keith of nights not too long ago, when this room was still foreign and he feigned sleep when Akane bobbed in to check on him in the night. Sometimes she came over to tuck him in. Other times he felt her hand on his head. Would she ever know how much that had meant?

“See you at dinner, Keith.”

“Yeah… and thanks, Aunt Akane.”
The door clicked shut. The following silence felt heavier than usual so Keith plugged his phone into a set of stereos on his desk and started playing some *Thirty Seconds to Mars*. There were more messages from Lance.

**Lance:** *No prob.*

*Christ, why is anime so intense?*

*I thought it was all Pokemon.*

*Ok. That’s a lie.*

*Sailor Moon got pretty intense.*

*You haven’t watched it have you?*

**Keith:** *Nah. More of Yu Yu Hakusho kid.*

Lance’s reply came mere minutes later.

**Lance:** *We should watch it together at college.*

Keith bit his lip. This would be the perfect opportunity to tell him. It was so simple, just a sentence or two. An explanation. Lance would understand, wouldn’t he? He knew what Scotland meant to him and they’d… they’d be okay, wouldn’t they?

**Keith:** *Sounds good xx*

He’d tell him tomorrow.

The day went by like a blur. Then the next and the next. Soon, a whole week was gone and still Keith hadn’t told Lance about Scotland. He typed out the sentence so many times, had sat with his
finger hovering above the call button. But no dice. He just couldn’t seem to force himself to do it, especially because all of Lance’s messages were so happy. Eventually, Keith’s responses became slower and slower, too consumed with guilt to take part in light-hearted conversation.

He needed advice. Badly. But the one person who Keith would have gone to wasn’t an option right now.

Shiro was still mad at him, simmering quietly around the house whenever he wasn’t working on his paper. Summer wasn’t really a break for him anymore, not since he’d started working towards his diploma, so he never lingered for long outside his room. But whenever he crossed paths with Keith in the hall or the kitchen, he always wore the same expression on his face: worried disapproval. It was driving Keith insane.

“You’re going to turn your hair grey,” said Akane one morning. She was on her way out to work, protein shake in hand, and Shiro had just appeared at the kitchen door. He was still wearing Pyjamas and looked exhausted.

“I’m fine, mom,” he said, grabbing coffee and staring at it as though it would solve all his problems. “Just stressed. I’ve got a lot on my plate, and recent events haven’t helped.”

Akane glanced at Keith then, who looked down at the table guiltily. She sighed. “You two need to talk,” she said, a command rather than a suggestion. “I suggest you do it now.”

Then she left.

Quiet filled the kitchen. Keith munched his toast.

“Keith,” said Shiro, taking a breath. He pulled out a chair and sat down in it with a sigh. When Keith looked at his brother, his dark eyes were serious. “I’m sorry.”

Keith blinked. “What?”

“I’ve been acting irrationally,” continued Shiro. “It’s been stressful, this past month, but I shouldn’t be taking it out on you.”
“Shiro,” said Keith, dumbfounded. “You don’t—I should be sorry. Taking off like that wasn’t cool.”

“No,” agreed Shiro, thoughtfully sipping his coffee. “But you’re not a kid anymore. I can’t keep tabs on everything you do. It’s just been hard, realising how much you’ve grown up these past two years or so. Mom told me about Scotland.”

Keith was too stunned to say anything.

“It was weird, finding out that way,” continued Shiro, wearily. “I’ve been so out of it recently that I’ve almost felt like a different person. So when I heard you’d made that decision by yourself, I dunno, I felt like I hadn’t been there enough for you.”

“Shiro,” said Keith, quiet and appalled. “Shiro, you’re the last person who needs to feel like that. And I haven’t really been around for you either. I know how stressed you are about school.”

Shiro waved him away. He hadn’t shaved yet and his chin was stubbly. “Don’t worry about that. Just a lot of sleepless nights catching up with me, I think. I’ll be fine as soon as I hand this damn paper in.”

“So… are we cool?” asked Keith.

Shiro smiled. “Yeah, we’re cool. But if you ever disappear again I’m gonna kick your butt.”

Keith huffed a laugh. “You can try.”

The smile turned into a grin. Draining the last of his coffee, Shiro decided on having poached eggs for breakfast. “Want some?”

“Sure,” said Keith. Underneath the table, his phone pinged.

**Lance:** Hey dude, you okay?
“So,” said Shiro, interrupting the train of guilty thought coursing through Keith like a river. He slipped on an apron and got the frying pan going. “Why did you go to Austin?”

“Huh?” said Keith, snapping to attention.

Shiro smiled amusedly. “You went with Lance, right? Are you two…?”

A red blush rushed to Keith’s face. He swallowed. “We - um. He’s my boyfriend.”

Shiro nodded. Then a thought seemed to occur to him. “Did you…?”

It took Keith a moment to realise what Shiro was implying. “What? No. NO. Shiro!”

Shiro shrugged. “Hey, we haven’t had that conversation yet.”

“Dude! I don’t want that conversation! I’m twenty!”

“Do you like him?” asked Shiro, switching tactics.

It caught Keith off guard, which he supposed was the point. He fiddled with the fork on his table. “Yeah, I do.”

Again, Shiro nodded. “That’s a relief. Have to say, I’m kinda surprised. I thought Lance would take a little longer to wrap his head around it all.”

It was then Keith remembered that Shiro had had a little ‘talk’ with Lance. “What makes you say that?”

“He seemed really unsure about everything,” answered Shiro, casually cracking eggs into the pan. It smelled heavenly. “Not that I can blame him. It’s a hard time, you know? You’re never sure if you’re lying to yourself. I mean, it was obvious he liked you… but, I dunno. The guy’s hard to read, isn’t he?”
In his pocket, Lance’s message seemed to burn a hole into Keith’s side.

Finished cooking, Shiro expertly buttered toast and placed the eggs on top with a good helping of spinach. He put it down in front of Keith and took up his chair again, an eager, *itadakimasu* on his lips. But then he caught sight of Keith.

“Keith?” he asked, shocked.

Keith glanced up, struck. “Yeah?”

“What’s up, man?”

“What do you mean?”

“Keith, you’re white as a sheet. What’s wrong?”

Keith bit his lip. “I’m…” he swallowed and started again. “I haven’t told Lance about Scotland.”

Everything clicked into place for Shiro then. “*Ah.*” He said.

“I just can’t seem to find a right time!” exploded Keith, days of pent up dread bursting forth. “I mean, it’s like you said, he wasn’t sure for the longest time and then things kept going wrong or getting in the way and now I have to drop this bombshell of, *oh hey Lance, sorry to break it to you but I’m ditching our relationship for six months, is that cool?* I mean, what if it ruins everything? What if he gets mad at me? Will he even still want to keep this going?” his voice got quiet all of a sudden and when he looked at Shiro, there was raw fear in his every feature. “What if he doesn’t want me anymore?”

Shiro put down his knife and fork. “What sort of guy do you think he is?” he asked calmly.

“What?” asked Keith, confused and annoyed by this sudden fork in the conversation.
“Lance,” explained Shiro. “What kind of guy do you think he is?”

“I dunno,” said Keith, annoyed. “Loud? Dramatic?”

Shiro nodded encouragingly.

“Obnoxious,” continued Keith. “I mean, he has the stupidest sense of humour. And he can’t take things seriously at all…” that gave Keith pause for thought, because that wasn’t exactly true, was it? “No, that’s not right. He can take things seriously.”

“Does he take you seriously?” asked Shiro, softly.

Keith thought about the shack. The McClain house. All of the things Lance had shared with him. “Yeah, I think so.”

“Do you think he’s messing you around?” asked Shiro, still just as calm.

A certainty took hold of Keith’s heart. “No.”

“Then I think you just need to talk to him,” said Shiro. “I’ve known Lance for a while now, and he might be hard to read, but when he decides on something he usually sticks to it.”

“You’re right,” said Keith, nodding. “I’m being stupid.”

“A little,” agreed Shiro, digging into his eggs with a knowing smirk. “But you should tell him soon.”

“I know,” said Keith. “I just suck at this whole texting thing. It feels so impersonal. And I’m too scared to call him.”

“What?!?” asked Keith.

“Well, no matter what happens, you aren’t going to see each other next semester,” said Shiro. “I think it would good for you guys to meet up before you leave. And then you can tell him in person.”

It wasn’t a bad idea.

“Mom won’t mind,” said Shiro.

“I don’t want to do it here,” said Keith, suddenly sure of this fact.

“Then would you go to Austin?” asked Shiro.

No, thought Keith. He knew what he would do. He sprung up from his chair, eggs forgotten. “Thanks, Shiro,” he called over his shoulder, already bounding upstairs. Heart thudding, he launched himself on his bed and sent Lance a text.

**Keith:** You free to call tonight? xx

As was standard now, Lance’s reply was almost instant.

**Lance:** Yeah man, of course xx

**Keith:** Around eight okay?

**Lance:** Sweet my dude.

Then Keith got out a map, located Michigan, and set to work.
He spent the rest of the day locked in his room working out logistics. He’d worked out a rough plan and the travel time from Bay City to their destination would likely be about three hours. Way less time than they were accustomed to sitting in a car together for their usual road trips. Those two words, road trip, did weird things to Keith’s stomach. It made him feel excited, nostalgic, there was even a hint of the old slither of anxiety he used to feel at the prospect of sharing a car with a stranger. But somewhere along the line, Lance had gone from stranger to tolerable idiot to friend and now boyfriend. It was dizzying, thinking about it like that.

He’d thought a lot about what Shiro had told him. This would be the last time Keith would see Lance for six months, at least. He didn’t want it to end with a phone call. He wanted to touch Lance, to pull him in close and breathe him in one last time. He worried that if he didn’t, he’d never leave, tempted by the prospect of seeing Lance on campus in September, shining and bright and warm. But Keith couldn’t let this opportunity slip. Not now. Not even for Lance.

So he’d wracked his brains and concluded that the best way to do this, the best way to show Lance that this wasn’t really goodbye, was a road trip. A mini one, yes, but a road trip nonetheless because that was their thing, wasn’t it? This way, it would be easier to break the truth. At least, Keith hoped it would be.

Over the course of the day Keith could hear Shiro swearing at his laptop, heard Akane dip in because she’d forgotten her lunch, replied to Allura’s texts, played a bit of guitar and stalked the internet for cheap plane tickets from Austin to Michigan. He passed on dinner, too nervous to eat, until, eventually, the clock struck eight. He called Lance the moment it did.

“Yo yo yo, Kogane,” a familiar, smug voice said into his ear. It made Keith grin like a fool. “Your favourite badass speaking.”

Keith snorted. “Badass, really?”

“HEY! I’M TOTALLY A BADASS.”

“Whoa, you shout down the phone like your mom,”
“No I don’t,” argued Lance, though he’d noticeably lowered his voice. “You’re just sensitive.”

“Really?” drawled Keith.

“Wow, you’re a real nice boyfriend, huh?” There was a pause, then Lance’s tone shifted into something softer. “Hey, Keith,” he said.

“Hey, Lance,” said Keith. “It’s good to hear your voice.”

“You too man,” said Lance. “I thought maybe… nah never mind. You’re here now so…”

“Yeah,” agreed Keith, not really paying attention. He’d rehearsed what he was about to say about a million times today and wanted to get it right. “Listen, I’ve got an idea.”

“Yeah?” said Lance, tone bright with curiosity. “What sort of idea?”

“I meant what I said, at the airport,” said Keith, quickly. “I want to see you before semester starts.”

“That would be great,” said Lance. “But—”

“So how about you come here for a weekend?” interrupted Keith, nerves getting the better of him. “I’ve found some cheap plane tickets and Shiro and his mom are fine with it.”

There was a pause.

“You want me to fly out to Michigan?” asked Lance eventually. “To stay with you?”

“Yeah,” said Keith. “Cause, I thought, maybe, we could go on a mini road trip?”

Another pause, but this one sounded excited. “Where?”
“Ever heard of the Sleeping Bear Dunes?”

“ Nope,” said Lance.

“Good. Don’t google it. It’s better if it’s a surprise. Just know that it’s a beach.”


“So you’re in?”

“I’ll have to see about funds,” said Lance, uncertainty creeping in.

“I can help with that,” said Keith immediately.

“No way man, I—”

“You never cashed in my check, right?” asked Keith. “For Blue? Just use that money.”

There was uncertain quiet. Keith twisted in the knife.

“I really want to see you, Lance,” he murmured, voice low and breathy.

It did the trick.

“I won’t be able to come until August,” said Lance. “I gotta help my uncle out at the shop, and I should have some cash together by then, but yeah man. Yeah. I really want to see you too.”

Keith smiled triumphantly. “Thank you.”
“I get invited on a beach road trip and you’re thanking me? Dude!” Lance laughed and it sounded bright, delighted even.

“What?” asked Keith, smiling giddily. He curled up into his sheets. “What?” he insisted when Lance just kept laughing.

“You’re just—I dunno man.”

“What?”

Lance huffed and exclaimed, “You’re just so cute!”

Keith was so glad Lance couldn’t see his face right now. “Shut up!” he said, scandalised.

“You started it!” argued Lance.

“Started what?”

“I dunno!”

“You’re such an idiot.”

“I hate you mullet.”

“Ex-mullet, remember?”

“Another reason to hate you.”

Keith grinned, aware that he was stupidly, sickeningly love-struck. “I can’t wait to see you.”
“Same,” said Lance. “Driving home in Blue was so depressing.”

“Even with your tunes?”

“Are you kidding? I listened to a CD I named Hello Darkness my Old friend. It’s a lot of Jeff Buckley and Lana Del Ray.”

Keith whistled. “Sounds like a party.”

“A rave,” corrected Lance. “Mom says hi by the way, and like, everyone else. Luis said good luck with your studies, the nerd.”

“What does he do?” asked Keith, warmed by the thought of Lance’s family liking him enough to send any sort of message.

“Pharmaceuticals,” answered Lance. “I’m pretty sure there’s an actual title for what he does but I always zone out when he starts talking about it. It’s pretty boring stuff.”

“So there are two of you are going into medicine?”

“Yeah, I guess. I never really thought about it like that.”

“Your mom must be really proud.”

Keith could feel Lance swell with pride over the phone. “She gushes,” he said, brushing the subject away. The energy changed suddenly. “Do you… do you think Shiro’s mom will like me?”

Keith hummed, grinning evilly. “Oh, I dunno. She’s pretty hell bent on locking you up because of the underage drinking. Chief Shirogane’s pretty strict.”

“Wait! SHE’S A COP?”
Keith chuckled. “She’ll love you Lance.”

“Okay,” said Lance, voice quiet. Then, “That explains *so much* about Shiro.”

They moved on to other things then: catching up on what they’d done this week, plans for the summer. Lance’s uncle Ulises owned a shop in Austin which sold outdoor equipment, fishing poles, tents, that sort of thing, and Lance had been helping out since he was sixteen. When he wasn’t there he’d been transferred to a Starbucks in Austin. Between all that, college work and his family, he was pretty swamped. In turn, Keith told Lance a little about the garage he worked at. His dad had frequented it whenever the pair of them came to visit Akane and Shiro, so when he turned up asking for a part-time job the owner was more than willing. Then they talked about movies coming out, how much reading they had to do before the semester started, Hunk’s new waffle obsession and Pidge’s weird radio silence recently.

“She keeps blowing me off on text!” complained Lance. “It’s like I don’t even matter anymore.”

“I don’t think that’s what’s going on,” said Keith, lightly. He’d had suspicions about Pidge since he’d met her on Daisy’s roof - something about the way she looked from Lance to Keith and back again. But he wasn’t certain, and he didn’t want to put his foot in it. “You can tell you guys are good friends. Just give her some time, maybe?”

“Yeah, I guess. Hey, I didn’t know Lotor and Allura were a thing.”

That gave Keith pause. “Is it official?” he asked, frowning. It wasn’t that long ago that Allura had been crying in his apartment over Shiro.

“You knew?”

“She told me he’d asked her on a date.”

“Well now they’re all over her Instagram. It’s gross, how perfect they look together.”

“You sound jealous,”
“I’m not jealous!” argued Lance. “I just get bad vibes off Lotor, that’s all. Don’t you?”

Keith didn’t really know enough about the British student to judge. “I don’t know, I’ve never really had a chance to talk to the guy. Do couples really do stuff like that? Post stuff on Instagram together? I didn’t even know Lotor had Instagram.”

“Everyone has Instagram, Keith,” said Lance, tiredly. “Except you. And it’s totally normal for couples to post selfies and stuff.”

Was it Keith, or did Lance sound sore about this fact? “Is that what you’re jealous about?”

“I’M NOT JEALOUS.”

“Okay, okay! Jeez, don’t blow my ear off.”

“Have you not talked to her about it then?”

“Not yet,” said Keith. He’d texted Allura on and off since he’d gotten back, but nothing more than casual conversations. “But I will.”

Then they went back to chatting about inane things. The hours were creeping by and Keith’s throat was getting sore, but he didn’t mind. He didn’t want to stop talking. He didn’t want to stop hearing Lance’s voice. Akane locked the front door and went to bed, while Shiro retreated to his room for another sleepless night of research. Keith knocked on his lava lamp and crawled into bed, voice growing quieter as sleep beckoned him into warm darkness.

“I’m pretty beat,” whispered Lance, at last.

“Me too,” agreed Keith. “I just don’t want you to disappear.”

“That’s stupid, neither of us are going to disappear.”
Keith’s throat tightened. He swallowed thickly and reminded himself that now was not the right time. He had a plan and he was going to stick to it.

“Hey Keith?” said Lance.

“Yeah?”

“I’m so pumped to see you.”

“Me too,” agreed Keith. “Speak to you tomorrow?”

“You betcha. Night man.”

“Night Lance.”

When sleep finally did catch hold of Keith, he was smiling like a fool.

It was a couple of days before Keith finally got around to FaceTiming Allura. Summer always saw a rush at the garage; people excavated family cars from dust-covered garages for vacations or day trips only to find faulty spark plugs, odd gurgling engines or oil spills. On top of this Allura was pretty swamped at an internship programme she’d secured at UNICEF America. But finally, one Saturday, the stars aligned and they both had a day off.

“It’s so good to see you!” gushed Allura, as soon the connection came through. “It feels like forever since we last spoke.”

“We texted last night,” said Keith. He was in the kitchen, putting together a late breakfast of leftover hot pot while Goku tried to sit on his feet.
“It’s not the same Keith,” said Allura, disproving but full of humour. She was still in her PJs and her silver hair was caught up in a messy bun. She was also wearing glasses. Keith hadn’t known she wore glasses. In the background Coran’s distant voice gibbered. “I like being able to read your expression, I can tell when you’re avoiding things then.”

“Gee, thanks,” said Keith. The scent of soy sauce broth filled the kitchen while the pot boiled. “But for once I think that should be my line.”

“Oh?”

“Um, Lotor?”

Immediately Allura’s face flushed. “Oh. How did you…” her face changed. “Lance. Of course. I’ll have to get used to you having intel on social media from now on.”

The hot pot was warmed through by now, so Keith switched off the stove and scooped out a generous helping. He plonked down at the table.

“So? What’s going on?”

The look on Allura’s face was adorably love-struck. “Well, I told you about the dinner, didn’t I?”

Keith nodded, mouth full of shitake mushroom. “It went well, right?”

“More then well,” said Allura. “It was incredibly romantic. He took me to an Italian place called Antino’s - which was exquisite. He even made sure they did vegan food too. And when he turned up he was so…” her eyes went all glassy. “Dreamy.”

“I’m eating Allura,” said Keith, gagging.

“Oh shush!” she exclaimed. “You’re just the same about Lance!”

“Am not.”
“I beg to differ!”

They grinned at each other. “So what’s happened since?”

“We talked a lot,” continued Allura playing with a stray strand of loose hair. “He took me to a few museums and there was this poetry reading at this adorable little café that becomes a bar at night - I’ll have to take you. It’s just been a whirlwind, to be perfectly honest. I haven’t had time to stop and take it all in really.”

“Is he nice?” asked Keith.

“He’s a little closed off,” replied Allura, thoughtfully. “I find he doesn’t really enjoy speaking about personal matters. Particularly about his parents.”

“Why?”

Allura pursed her lips. “I don’t think he gets on well with his father. Or his mother, for that matter. There seems to be a lot of pressure there but… well. He’s very private. I get the impression he moved to America to distance himself from it all. He’s back in England for the summer, but he was so reluctant to leave. He joked about taking me with him.”

“Bit soon,” commented Keith.

“Yes,” agreed Allura with a chuckle. “But… he’s so genuine, Keith. Whenever he talks about his beliefs - what he wants to do and how he’s going to do it, I believe him. He wants to work towards a brighter future.”

“As long as you’re happy,”

“I am,” said Allura. Was Keith imagining the worry line between her eyebrows? “I know he cares about me.”
“Well he better, or I’ll kick his butt.”

“I can do my own butt-kicking, thank you. It is the twenty-first century.”

“Then we’ll kick butt together.”

“Better.”

After that they talked about Allura’s internship, Keith’s plan with Lance (which Allura very much approved of) and Coran’s latest diner concoctions.

“He’s hellbent on producing this ‘space slime’ and there’s nothing I can do to dissuade him!” she said. “It doesn’t help that the company that bought space juice has already put in a pre-order!”

“Is it the same recipe?”

“Just about, except it’s solid and has no expiration date. The last batch turned Coran’s moustache green.”

A burst of laughter bubbled through Keith’s lips at that image. He was still laughing when Shiro stumbled into the kitchen, stubbled and red-eyed and muttering something under his breath in Japanese. He reached for the coffee pot and tsked when he found it empty. Then he dropped a mug and swore violently, causing Goku to whine in protest. Shiro did not usually swear.

“You okay bro?” asked Keith. Allura had gone deathly quiet.

A sound like a bear grunt left Shiro’s mouth. He squinted at Keith, hair a disarrayed mess, and then he really looked. His gaze fell on Allura.

“Oh,” he said, straightening. “Sorry, I didn’t know you had… I mean that you were talking to…” he cleared his throat and ran a self-conscious hand through his hair. Keith had to choke back a laugh, unused to seeing Shiro so flustered. “Sorry, Keith… Allura.”
“Oh no!” exclaimed Allura, voice pitched. She adjusted her glasses with a nervous flutter of her hand. “Not at all. I’m sure you’re very busy with your paper.”

“It’s not too bad,” said Shiro, lying through his teeth. He’d been surviving on four hours of sleep a night for weeks. “It’s er… a work in progress.” He was trying to put on his easy, Shiro smile, the kind he flashed at his students or the younger members of the martial arts group. But for some reason, it wasn’t one hundred per cent convincing. “I… haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Oh well—!” said Allura looking anywhere but Shiro. “It’s been rather busy as of late, so you’ll have to excuse my appearance. I’m a bit of a mess.”

“No!” exclaimed Shiro, surprising Keith. Even Shiro looked startled by his intensity. He swallowed and covered his mouth, eyes shifting sideways. “You look great.”

There was a long, pregnant pause. Shiro avoided Keith’s eyes like the plague.

“Well, it was nice to see you Allura,” said Shiro, eventually. He was acting very stiff all of a sudden. “I’ll um… leave you to it.”

He left without any coffee.

“Oh goodness!” whined Allura, clearly distressed. “I’ve really done it, haven’t I? He can’t even be in the same room as me now. I’ve made it awkward forever.”

But Keith, staring after Shiro with a thoughtful frown, wasn’t so sure Allura was right.

It felt like August 23rd would never come.

That was the weekend Keith and Lance had settled on. The plane tickets were booked, Keith had Shiro’s permission to use his car and Akane showed mild interest at the prospect of meeting Lance,
which meant she was excited. The time in-between was just a painful waiting game of work, chores, organising Keith’s time in Scotland and keeping up with friends. He ran in the day and listened to music at night, dressed in pyjama bottoms and Lance’s blue jumper with his guitar slung across his knees and Goku curled up around his feet. He reread *The Song of Achilles*. He googled Korean military exchanges in Scotland. He filled his days with anything and everything he could think of to take his mind off Lance’s visit until, at last, it was happening.

“Whoa,” said Shiro, tripping over the vacuum cord. Keith had been up since six, cleaning the house from top to bottom and frightening Goku into Shiro’s room with a distressed growl. Right now he was vacuuming the hall upstairs. “You’re really going at it. Why don’t you take a break?”

Keith simply glared at Shiro, stress rolling off him in waves. “He’ll be at the airport in three hours.”

“Yeah, pretty sure you can afford five minutes. And I’m sure Lance isn’t going to inspect the skirting boards.”

“Let him be,” said Akane, breezing past them with a cup of sweet tea in one hand and the newspaper in the other. She’d taken the day off (a rarity that warranted surprise) and was wearing a comfortable white sweater over some cords. Keith didn’t know how she wasn’t melting into a puddle. “He’s nervous, and if I get a clean house out of it I’m not complaining.”

“He’s making Goku agitated,” argued Shiro. As though sensing the conversation had shifted to him, a white, furry face appeared in Shiro’s doorframe, blue eyes terrified.

“The dog’s a coward,” said Akane with a dismissive wave of her hand. “It’s good character-building. And I was thinking, Keith, does Lance like curry?”

“I don’t know,” said Keith, suddenly panicked. “I didn’t ask. Should I text him?”

Akane shook her head and said, cryptically, “He’ll like my curry,” before disappearing down stairs.

“Relax bro,” said Shiro, putting a hand on Keith’s shoulder. He looked better today: clean-shaven and dressed in a white button down. The red was mostly gone from his eyes now too. “You’ve been looking forward to this, right?”
“Yeah,” agreed Keith around a sigh.

“Well you can bet Lance will be feeling the same way,” said Shiro, smiling warmly. “So just enjoy it.”

“You’re right,” said Keith, knocking off the vacuum. Everything was spick and span. He’s already cleaned and tidied his room three times, the bathroom was done and the rest of the house was spotless. He glanced at the clock. There was so much time left to fill.

As though sensing his train of thought, Shiro asked, fondly, “Wanna play racquetball?”

Keith couldn’t remember another time he’d been so thankful for Shiro’s attentiveness. They suited up and set out for the court, chatting idly in the car until they arrived. Keith resisted the urge to bring up Shiro’s behaviour the other day when he’d been talking to Allura. At least for now. Then they were too busy trying to beat each other to talk. It helped, having something else to focus on, and it ate up some of the time Keith would have spent waiting. By the time they’d gotten home, showered, changed, and had something to eat, it was almost time to pick up Lance.

Akane handed him the keys, eyes raking over his appearance.

“What?” asked Keith, glancing down at himself self-consciously. Did he look stupid? He was only wearing ripped black jeans and a black T-shirt as per usual.

“Tuck in your shirt,” said Akane. She walked over to a washing pile by the drier and pulled out a plaid shirt, so washed out that the red had bled into shade between it and pink. She held it out for Keith. “And wear this. Put it on, tie it round your middle, I don’t care. But just please have a splash of colour.”

Keith begrudgingly did as he was bid, choosing to wrap the shirt around his waist because it was too hot outside for anything else. “Am I acceptable now?” he asked, mock annoyed.

Akane’s answer was a soft smile. She pushed the hair out of his eyes. “You’ll do. Go on now.”

He went.
The drive there was a surreal experience. The anticipation was so strong it was like a miasma, filling the car and surrounding him in a thick fog. He flicked through songs distractedly, never settling on anything for long and fingers tapping against the steering wheel. It was only about half an hour to MBS International Airport, but it was one of the longest drives of Keith’s life. Every red light and slow driver was a torture, just another delay between him and Lance. He kept checking his phone, re-reading Lance’s last text.

**Lance**: *Boarding now. See you soon boyf ;) xx*

Nothing else. At least he hadn’t landed yet. But then again that wasn’t a surprise; Keith was stupidly early, but he was determined to be there when Lance’s touched down, waiting. He wanted to see him get off the plane and his face to light up when Keith waved and their eyes met. He wanted to pull him into a soul-crushing hug. He wanted to kiss him. He *wanted, wanted, wanted.*

When he found a spot outside the airport, parked up, and strode into the building, it was busy. Packed. People were milling about in vacation shorts and Hawaii shirts, bound for tropical destinations while others had the tanned skin and relaxed expressions of those returned from a well-deserved break. Keith chose a spot by a wall near the gate so he could lean back, a clear view of all of the people coming in and out. He sent Lance a quick text.

**Keith**: *Outside by the Dunkin Donuts xx*

Then he plugged in his headphones and waited.

The boards overhead flickered with golden digital text, showing cities and states and times in a dazzlingly, confusing mess of organised chaos. Keith watched families reunite: children and grandchildren come to visit grandparents, friends bumping fists and pulling each other in for group hugs, a man burying his nose in his girlfriend’s hair, body limp with relief. Keith wondered how he’d greet Lance. What should he do? Act cool and go in for a bro hug? Wait until they were at the car? He wasn’t sure how public he was comfortable with this being, and that was just him. What if he embarrassed Lance?

Before Keith could process his worried thoughts fully, the gate opened at the time Lance’s plane was supposed to touch down and people began spilling out. The faces of strangers streamed by Keith’s vision, unimportant in his search for brown hair, dark skin, blue eyes. He stepped away from the wall, straining to see, until… *there.*

It was Lance, an aggressively orange holdall slung across his shoulders and a baseball cap turned backwards on his head. He was wearing a pale blue bomber jacket Keith had never seen before
(was it new, was it stupid that Keith hoped it was? That it was for him?) over a white T-shirt, shorts and converse. His hair was a little longer than Keith remembered and he’d tanned over the summer to an even darker brown, legs nicely defined. He stopped outside the gate, looking around for the Dunkin Donuts with the cutest, stupidest expression on his face until he located it. Then Keith. His face broke into a delighted smile.

And that was when Keith realised exactly what he was going to do.

He was off like a shot, across the floor and through the people in long, powerful strides. Lance blinked at his expression, mouth coming open with a comment, but Keith got there first. He threw himself at the other boy, lips sealing his. He pushed himself against Lance, thighs and hips pressed tightly together as Keith explored Lance’s mouth, tongue sliding across his lip and biting down. His hands were tight on Lance’s waist, thumbs hooking into the loops of his jeans. He tasted like coffee and smelled like cologne, shampoo and the smell that was Lance’s alone. The same smell that filled Blue and lingered on his sweater.

They parted for breath and Lance’s eyes were swimming with stars.

“Whoa,” he breathed, grinning at Keith.

Keith hummed an agreement, tucking himself against Lance and nuzzling him like a cat.

“Is this the standard in Michigan, then?” said Lance, chuckling. “Friendly place, huh?”

“Missed you,” mumbled Keith, against Lance’s shoulder. “I missed you so much.”

Lance wound his arms around Keith. “Same,” he whispered. Then his tone changed. “I missed me too.”

Keith laughed and they came apart, only now glancing around a little self-consciously. He offered his hand to Lance, “Shall we go?”

“Hell yeah!” exclaimed Lance. “Let’s go see the Shirogane pad,” then he took it and they set out for home.

Lance set his mission to Michigan out like a video-game. It helped quash his nerves for one thing – they’d been building ever since he’d known he was coming here. Meeting Keith’s family was a BIG deal. Like, real big. He was so nervous that he’d spent a week’s pay on this new outfit.

“Mom, do you think I look dumb?”

Beatriz had looked him up and down with a click of her tongue, her tiger tattoo flashing at him from under her crop top where it sat, forever leaping on her dark hip.

“You look like you’re ready to sell me something, honey – that something being some sweet-lovin’ Jesus.” Then she started to laugh, stifling the giggles unsuccessfully with the back of her hand.

His first outfit had been a white shirt tucked into his darkest jeans accompanied by a copious amount of hair gel. He could see why his mom was insinuating he looked like a bad-boy Mormon. Current Lance cringed at himself. Past Lance thought Shiro and Keith’s cop-mom would be very impressed with the effort.

Beatriz had corrected the issue and taken Lance shopping for something a little less… dorky. Lance looked dorky no matter what he was wearing – but that was all part of his charm, Beatriz had assured.

Lance never thought he’d have to go to his mom for fashion advice. But he was pleased for it now. From the rocket-launch of a kiss that Keith had given him at the airport, he clearly approved.

Lance’s lips tingled from that kiss as they talked in the car. His mind was on fire. This was really happening. This was real. Keith was his boyfriend, and he was being driven to meet his pseudo-family.
Lance grinned. And couldn’t stop.

Eyes inching away from the road, Keith looked at him.

“And then what?” Asked Keith.

“Huh?”

Keith raised a brow, a smirk holding his features in perpetual amusement.

“You were in the middle of telling me about your uncle’s cursed hot-dog machine and then you just sort of… stopped.”

Lance shook his head, the road blurring into a grey strip before his eyes. He couldn’t remember what he was talking about. He cleared his throat.

“Got distracted.”

“By what?”

Lance made his gaze penetrative. “You.”

Keith flushed, his neck stained crimson, and his hands gripped the wheel tighter. Lance smiled, biting his lip, Keith’s reaction muddling his insides into a knot of excitement and glee.

Keith expelled a long breath. “Carry on with the story, idiot.”

“I lost my train of thought.”

“I was interested!”
“Too bad – the punchline was just that my uncle was lying to me anyways. Once my mom told him I was up all night shaking in my bed at the idea of a cursed hot-dog machine coming to get me in my sleep, he stopped making up goofy stories and made me watch Disney instead.”

Keith barked a laugh - a singular, *ha!*

“Explains the screwed up dreams.”

Lance was about to retort when he realised they were pulling into a driveway. It was an unassuming street with squat, uniform houses bundled together like Lego bricks, all different colours. The Shirogane household was a pleasant shade of pastel peach. Like the kind of flowers Lance used to see in his abuelita’s front yard back in Cuba. Lance didn’t know what they were called. He wished he’d asked.

Lance gulped, his anxiety rolling into a ball of vibrating nausea in his stomach. What was wrong with him? It was just Shiro’s mom. Nothing to be afraid of. Right?

Keith yanked the brakes and gave Lance a knowing smile as he tugged open the driver’s door.

“You ready to meet Chief Shirogane?”

“Um” –

Keith reached out and thumbed Lance’s cheekbone, his eyes soft. “Relax. She’ll think you’re cool. It’s *Goku* you have to be worried about.”

“The dog?”

Keith grimaced. “He pees from excitement when he meets new people, so make sure your shoes aren’t anywhere near his” –

-“Got it.” Lance interrupted, pulling his cap tighter on his head and gathering his holdall onto his
The laminate floor and long white curtains of Shiro’s house were a breath of clean, summer air. It was narrow and quiet and pleasant and so unlike Lance’s house. There was no clutter – everything was bright and welcoming, like a homeware showroom. Lance nudged off his shoes in the doorway, and as he did, a stern-faced lady in a slouchy white sweater padded down the grey-carpeted stairs. Rather than smiling, she bent her head a touch to the left, her dark eyes inquisitive.

“H-hi,” Lance stammered before he could help himself, tripping over his shoe, “Mrs Shirogane.”

She stopped at the foot of the stairs, giving Keith a look with a twinkle in her eye.

“I see what you meant.” She said enigmatically, tossing Lance a wink, before yawning and heading for the room at the end of the hall.

Lance shot Keith a panicked glance, whose ears were scarlet.

“You’ll have to forgive us today, Lance,” Akane called over her shoulder. “It’s my first day off in a while – we’re all a little exhausted. You boys keep it down upstairs, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Keith replied, an unreleased sigh in his voice. He whispered to Lance, “You’re good. She likes you.”

Lance, bewildered, “Wha – but – I hardly said two words! How can you tell?!?”

“Aunt Akane is a very quick judge of character,” He told Lance, picking up his bag for him and tip-toeing up the stairs, “Believe me: it would be pretty obvious if she didn’t like you.”

Lance didn’t have time to express his relief because another member of the family was bounding down the stairs towards him, hurtling past Keith like a furry cannonball.

“Woah!” Lance managed as the tongue-lolling, fast-wagging husky launched himself at him. Lance laughed, sinking his fingers into Goku’s fur. “You’re huge! And… friendly!”
“Wanna take him for a walk?” Keith proposed. “He’s not been out today.”

“Yeah!” Said Lance, barely visible behind the overly excited hound.

After dropping Lance’s stuff off in Keith’s room (which Lance hardly got a glimpse of before he was ushered out by an enthusiastic Goku desperate for his walk) and they’d crept past Shiro’s ominously closed off room, they ventured out into the neighbourhood towards the park.

“Do you wanna walk him?” Keith offered the lead to Lance.

Lance took it and immediately felt his arm being yanked out of its socket.

“Jesus-fucking-Christ!” he yelled as Goku led him down the street in a run. Keith’s laughter followed him from way back, and Lance had to use both his gangly arms to tug the animal into control. Goku took that as a signal that Lance wanted to pet him and ran back to jump up, his paws on Lance’s shoulders, tongue in his face. He hadn’t been expecting it, so Lance went careening onto his back on the sidewalk. Goku jumped on him like a trampoline.

Keith was clutching his stomach from laughing so hard as he caught up with Lance.

“Man!” He exclaimed, making no effort to help, “I wish I’d got that on camera.”

“Help me up, doofus!” Lance growled, his voice compressed with the weight of an entire dog on his chest.

“Come on, Goku!” Said Keith lightly, tapping his thighs. Goku leapt off Lance like a gazelle and circled Keith twice before sitting on his haunches, tongue swinging happily from his chops as he surveyed Lance on the floor as if he hadn’t been the one to put him there.

“Oh, sure. Look all innocent now.” Lance berated the dog, scowling, which only made Keith laugh more.
At the park, Lance and Keith walked side by side along the paths, watching Goku tear through the expanse of grass in a streaky blur.

“He won’t run off, will he?” Lance asked, concerned.

“Nah.” Said Keith, “He’s an ex-police dog so he’s trained pretty good.”

“Huh.” Lance sniffed. “Still didn’t stop him knocking me on my ass.”

Keith rolled his eyes. “Jeez, get over it.” He laughed, prodding Lance in the side. “It means he approves of you… you’re clearly not suspicious. Shiro says Goku and Aunt Akane have one mind sometimes.”

“Well they do both come from the cops.”

The park was littered with families and couples spread on the grass with picnics and portable speakers and dogs of their own. As they walked, Lance was overly aware of his proximity with Keith – if he moved his hand a centimetre, they’d be touching… he could reach out and grab his hand. It would be so easy… then Lance’s heart dropped to his stomach because Keith did exactly what he’d been thinking first. He reached out. And took Lance’s hand.

Lance tried to pretend he wasn’t internally screaming and entwined his fingers with Keith’s, swinging their arms lightly.

Keith angled his head towards him, the sun’s rays capturing the lustre of his face perfectly.

“You don’t mind?” He asked softly.


Keith’s mouth curved into a tiny smile, and he dropped his gaze. This was one of Lance’s favourite expressions on Keith – always had been. It meant he’d said the right thing. It meant he’d got to him. It meant Keith felt exactly the way he did. His heart hiccupped again.
“Y’know, Shiro was right.”

“About what?”

Keith was rubbing Lance’s inner wrist with his thumb. It was doing strange, flutery things to his abdomen.

“He told me that once you decide on something, you usually stick to it.”

“Pfft. I’m insulted.” Said Lance.

Keith looked at him, a pucker forming between his brow. “Why…?”

Lance grinned. “Because once I decide something, I always stick to it. And this time I’m sticking to you.”

Keith’s expression was unreadable for a moment. A second. Then he squeezed his hand, and gave a soft laugh.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Akane made curry for dinner. The delicious smell wafted through the house, then, at eight o’clock, she called them down to eat. Goku sat under the table waiting for scraps. At the first mouthful, Lance felt his bones melt.

“This is… amazing.” He said with a genuine moan of pleasure.
“Isn’t it?” Said Akane – somehow she still seemed modest as she said that. Lance puzzled over this. “I told Keith you’d like it.”

Keith, his own mouth stuffed full, gave his Aunt a withering look.

“I ‘ever ‘ed ‘e ‘ouldn’t ‘ike ‘i!” He protested unintelligibly.

Akane watched him with disgust. “Swallow your food, Keith.”

If Lance hadn’t been so nervous he would have laughed out loud. She spoke to him like a little boy. And it worked, because a moment later, Keith said,

“I never said he wouldn’t like it.” He articulated, his ears red again. This was cute. So cute.

Halfway through dinner, Shiro emerged looking like a corpse.

“Yo, ‘sup, man!” Lance greeted, forgetting his manners the instant he saw his college buddy.

Shiro blinked, bleary eyed.

“Lance,” He said happily, though his voice was subdued with exhaustion. He yawned. “How was your flight?”

“Great,” Said Lance, “how’s the paper going?”

A grumble left Shiro’s lips. “It’s… going.”

“What happened?” Asked Keith, a concerned furrow lining his forehead, “You seemed fine this morning.”

“I was,” Said Shiro, spooning out a heap of steaming curry from the pan into a bowl, “but then I
took a nap. Which was a mistake.”

Akane pursed her lips, glaring at Shiro as he sat down.

“You shouldn’t nap in the day, son. What did I tell you?”

Lance, who napped in the day all the time, buried his face in his food.

Shiro sighed heavily, holding his chopsticks between his teeth as he scattered black pepper over his food. He was one-armed today, not wearing his prosthesis. Lance often forgot his college senior had the disability – if it could be called that. The guy was a machine.

“I know,” Shiro said, rooting through the curry but not actually eating it, “I know, I know, I know… things will get back to normal once this is done.” He said with a forced smile.

Lance, suddenly panicked, started thinking about how much work he’d have next semester. All the upper-years on his course always warned of how hard it became later in the course. It was hard enough already. He was glad he’d have Keith with him; maybe they’d be able to study together. Keith’s presence was bound to take some of the stress off at least.

Thinking this, he smiled at his boyfriend across the table, who reciprocated with a somewhat puzzled tilt of his lips. In response, Lance nudged Keith’s foot under the table. When he didn’t respond, he pushed harder, tickling his ankle with his toes.

Slowly looking up from his food, Shiro frowned at Keith.

“Bro,” he said, his voice hushed, “what are you doing?”

Oh god, thought Lance, oh god, oh god, oh god. He quickly began shovelling food in his mouth. I got the wrong foot.

Keith met his brother’s frown, confused. “Huh? I’m not doing anything.”
“You were kicking me under the ta” - !

It was at that moment that Shiro noticed Lance’s scarlet face, bowed into his curry, desperately trying to pretend this wasn’t happening.

“Never mind.” Said Shiro, ducking his head as a smirk stole his features.

“What is going on?” Akane demanded.

“Yeah, what’s going on?!” Keith repeated, glancing from Shiro to Lance. Shiro’s shoulders were shaking with barely suppressed laughter. Lance resisted the urge to crawl under the table and hide.

“Sorry, Shiro,” He mumbled, “I thought you were – the dog.” He said unconvincingly.

Shiro lost it, banging his fist against the table in raucous laughter. Lance covered his burning face with his hands.

“Oh, god. Kill me. Kill me.” He repeated over and over. At this point, Keith caught on to what was happening, and covered his mouth, his eyes creased with laughter.

“You can show yourself out now, Lance.” He said, actually kicking Lance’s leg under the table.

Akane rolled her eyes as the boys cackled ceaselessly with a disdainful, “Boys.” But she was still smiling.

After dinner, Lance collapsed on Keith’s bed, still sweating with embarrassment.

“I want to die.” He said, his voice muffled in Keith’s pillow.

“You really put your foot in it.” Said Keith, creasing with laughter again.
Lance threw the pillow at Keith’s face. “I’m the pun-master!” He cried in despair, “Don’t take that away from me too!”

Keith shimmied on the bed beside Lance, lying on his side, propped up by his elbow. He looked like a French painting, the part in his tempting lips only adding to the effect.

“We’d better get to bed. Early start tomorrow.” Said Keith.

“You still haven’t told me anything about this place.”

“And I’m keeping it that way.” Keith told him, mischief sparkling in his eyes. Lance didn’t like to be the recipient of surprises. He liked giving them – he enjoyed being able to plan for whatever was heading his way. At least a few weeks in advance.

He hummed suspiciously. “I hope it’s kooky.”

Keith raised a brow. “Kooky?”

“I don’t know what it means.” Lance admitted, “Sounds like a me kind of word.”

Keith’s face broke into one of his sunshine smiles. “It is a you kind of word.” He said, twining their fingers in a loop on the bed between them.

Lance’s eyes fell to Keith’s shirt. “I like what you’re wearing.” He said, his voice low. He’d been meaning to tell Keith all afternoon.

Keith plucked at the faded shirt. “This? Heh. It’s something Aunt Akane pulled out the wash. Kind of a weird colour.” His face was tinged the same colour as the shirt.

“You should wear pink more often.”

“Why? Does it make me look gayer?” Keith joked.
“No, because it suits you.”

An intense silence fell at that.

“Would look better if you could tie your hair back, though.” Lance winked.

Keith bonked him on the head. “Gah, the moment you’re smooth you ruin it with something like that.” He shook his head, grinning, “You’re an idiot, Lance McClain.”

“You’re sexy, Keith Kogane.”

Keith was still shaking his head, blushing, and Lance could tell he was flustered. He leapt off Keith’s bed and stripped down to his underwear.

“I didn’t bring pyjamas.”

“That’s… fine.” Said Keith, his eyes everywhere except Lance’s face.

“Because I knew it would get hot.”

“What do you mean? You’re sleeping on the couch, tonight.”

Lance froze, studying Keith’s expression. “For real?”

Keith nodded, serious. And then burst into a fit of giggles. “Dingus. ‘Course not.”

Lance felt his entire body droop. “Keith!” He accused, “That’s mean! I thought your mom was gonna be like – some conservative freakin’… ah!”
He jumped on top of Keith, rolling them both onto their sides. “You’re mean.” He mumbled into Keith’s soft hair.

Keith wound his arms around Lance’s bare middle, laughing. “Only for you.”

Lance shut his eyes. He was exhausted. It had been a long day. A perfect, long day.

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Until morning.

Keith’s alarm was like a fog horn next to Lance’s dreamy ears. He groaned, curling closer into the heated arm around his neck. Keith…

“Time to get up!” Said Keith brightly, bolting upright in bed, sending Lance flying. It wasn’t big enough for both of them to occupy so much room.

*Sleeping Bear Dunes*… Lance’s brain provided… *Right.*

He hadn’t googled it, as Keith had ordered. But it had been so tempting. His dad had asked,

“Your mom told me you’re going to visit Keith in August. Where are you guys headed?”

“Some place called the Sleeping Bear Dunes.” He’d told his father, whose face immediately lit up. Which was rare for him.

“I see.” Said his dad enigmatically, “Take lots of pictures for me, won’t you?”

Lance promised he would, packing his yellow Holga 120n. The camera had belonged to V before him. She’d given it to him for his eighteenth birthday. Now he was finally getting a chance to use it.
It was weird, going on a road trip without Blue. They both seemed to feel it as they clambered into Shiro’s car, eyes misted against the blinding morning sun.

“We only have three hours of this,” Keith told Lance as they backed out into the street, “And then…” He trailed off.

“And then?”

Keith flashed a white smile at Lance. “You’ll see.”

Lance wasn’t good with surprises.

The open roads were long and quiet, and Keith was playing something tinny sounding from the car’s speakers.

“Turn it up.” Said Lance.

“You sure? It’s pretty early.”

Lance turned in his seat, staring at the driver until he obliged to his request. The song blasted – an electric guitar and rough, gravelly voice emitting into the scenic space.


“It’s not!” Keith protested.

“But love heals, love feels alive
Cause love’s here when you’re by my side…”

Actually, Lance had to admit, the song was pretty good.
“Yo, who is this?”

“W.E.T.” Said Keith in a tone that sounded like he was preparing to get roasted for his taste in music.

“I like it.” Said Lance, “It’s kind of… cool.”

Keith’s face lit up, and Lance would have lied about liking the song just for that.

An hour later, they’d played the song on repeat more times than they could count, and were screaming along to the lyrics:

“LOVE HEALS, LOVE’S REAL THIS TIME!”

Keith kept laughing as Lance said “meal” instead of “real.”

“You can’t have a love meal.” Said Keith rolling his eyes. “That’s weird.”

“What about a snack?” Lance teased.

“There are snacks in the back if you want some.”

“Nah. You’re enough of a snack for me.”

Keith threw a bag of pretzels in Lance’s lap. “God, you’re so vulgar.”

“Uh huh.” Lance agreed, exaggeratedly licking salt crystals off of a pretzel which made Keith’s mouth form a hard line, “Suck it up, ex-mullet.”

Keith laughed, and then zoned out, staring out at the empty road ahead of him, his face void of expression.
“This is strange, huh?” Lance said, lowering his voice.

“Wha - ? Oh… this drive, you mean?” Said Keith, snapping to.

“Yeah. I mean… remember our first road-trip?”

Keith breathed a laugh. “How could I forget it? I was terrified. And you were weird.”

“I was nervous too!” Lance argued.

“And pissed off ‘cause I wasn’t a cute girl.” Keith’s voice was tied to something accusatory. He caught Lance’s expression. “I’m kidding… I know things are different now.”

“I was a moron then, Keith.” He was keen to get the point across. It was taking everything for Lance to shed his former façade as a failure of a playboy. Why the heck had he thought that was how he should behave?

Keith was thoughtful. “I was a moron, too.”

Lance straightened in the passenger seat. “What?!” He squealed, “Nah, you were this cool, mysterious, cool stranger.”

“You said cool twice.”

“Well, you were very cool! Apart from the mullet…”

Keith rolled his eyes. “Are you ever gonna let that go?”

“It was just an observation.” Said Lance, a note of salt in his tone.

They were both rendered silent by the view that unfolded. A crystalline, turquoise expanse spread
before them, ringed with a pure white shelf where the waves broke gently on a beach formed from bright, sparkling sand and dunes higher than Lance’s house… this was…

“Oh my god…” Lance got out gaping… “Is this?” He got out his camera, snapping the first picture of the trip.


It didn’t feel real. Lance decided this couldn’t possibly be real because he’d never seen a place like this in America. Never in real life, anyway.

“How’d you find this place?” He asked Keith as they made their way from the sand-dusted car park towards the inviting feast of dunes before them. It was a hot day. Seriously hot. Akane had packed three towels, (One each for after they’d swum, one to lie and eat on) sun-cream, a delicious selection of sandwiches and a first-aid guide which Keith had rolled his eyes at saying, “He’s a paramedic, mom.”

Keith hooked his hand in Lance’s, an excited spring in his step.

“Just did some research.” He said mysteriously.

A strange feeling niggled in Lance’s gut. Before they reached the foot of dunes, Lance put his hand on Keith’s shoulder, stopping him.

“Why’d you do this for me, Keith?”

Keith’s expression clouded over for a moment. It was then that Lance realised he’d seen this expression before – in the car this morning, yesterday, in the car before Keith had left Austin… It was righted in a second though.
“Because… you deserve this.” He replied, eyebrows knitting together as he gave Lance a soft smile.

“But I haven’t done anything.” Lance found himself saying.

The smile faded into something serious. Keith nibbled his lip, his eyes falling to Lance’s mouth. Rather than reply, he leant forward and joined them together for a long, chaste kiss. No passionate tongues this time. No hands raking through hair. Just this – a precious moment that stole Lance’s breath away. Keith broke the kiss, his eyes dark.

“I’ll race you to the top.” He whispered against Lance’s mouth before dragging himself away and bolting off into the sandy dunes, heavy bag slung over his shoulder.

“That’s cheating!” Lance called after him, bolting as fast as his long-legs would allow.

The steep incline of the first shifting, hot dune was an obstacle – but Keith conquered it without a problem. He waved at Lance from the top, silhouetted by the blinding orb in the clear blue sky.

“C’mon, slow coach!” He called, disappearing over the summit.

“Fuck you!” Lance replied, breathless. This dune was a bitch.

Keith poked his head over the edge, the sun so bright that Lance couldn’t read expression. But his voice said everything.

“That can be arranged.”

In way of response, Lance flicked a bunch of sad in the air at Keith, but the wind blew it back in his face and he got a mouthful of the stuff.

“Bleugh!” He coughed to the chorus of Keith’s delighted cackling.

Once at the top though, the view was spectacular. Wind-surfers dotted the impossibly blue waters
like swans. The beach below was a view of multi-coloured towels and umbrellas. Small children tumbled in the tiny waves and sandcastles of every variety created a fantasy land for the kids to explore. Most people splashed in the shallows, but the braver swimmers ventured further, where the azure faded into cerulean depths.

Keith’s hair blew about his face in the wind as he gazed at the sight before them with wonder. It was definitely growing…

Lance threw his arm over Keith’s shoulders.

“You? Me? The ocean? How ‘bout it, beautiful?”

Keith’s expression was a beaming paradise.

Lance wasn’t as enthused as his toes were lapped by the cool, cold water. Keith had jogged ahead, the cold seemingly nothing to him, splashing his face with sea water. The sun dazzled off the surface like a million diamonds, and if nothing else Lance was glad for the sight of Keith amongst it all.

“Scared, chicken?” Keith taunted, walking backwards and backwards until he was up to his waist. Without waiting for Lance, he dipped under completely, re-emerging and flipping his wet hair off his face. His wet body glistened with drops, running effortlessly downed the accentuated tone of his torso and his muscled biceps. Lance waded further in, gritting his teeth against the cold simply so Keith wouldn’t see the growing arousal between his legs at the sight. These trunks weren’t the best at hiding things, Lance was quickly discovering.

Keith, unawares, dove from his standing point and began a forward stroke deeper towards the shelf. The curve of his form was exquisite, Lance thought, dancing among the waves as if he was born to astonish every living thing around him. And he was. A troupe of girls, bobbing in the water some way off, were watching his journey.

He’s mine, Lance thought possessively, and swam hard to keep up. By the time he reached Keith, who had stopped, his feet could barely touch the sand beneath him.

Grasping Keith’s wet face in his slick hands, Lance kissed Keith hard. In the water, Keith wrapped his legs around Lance’s waist. Kissing was different when they were wet like this. It was purposeful and slippery and it tasted of salt. Opening his eyes for the briefest moments, Lance
caught the girls watching them – one had her hand clasped over her mouth in shock, the rest were screaming in excitement – unable to believe their eyes. Maybe Lance had done this for the wrong reason, he thought, but it was worth every reaction that ensued – including Keith’s, who was kissing him like it was their last moments left together.

Lance hummed against his lips as they parted for air, and dipped his hands under the water to pull Keith closer to him, using his legs to paddle them upright.

“This wouldn’t be a bad way to drown.” Lance commented.

Keith pecked him, biting his lower lip. “Don’t say that. I’d like you to live.”

“I am living. It feels like I’m living forever with you.” Said Lance breathlessly – the emotion and the paddling to keep them both afloat was making it hard to keep oxygen in his lungs.

Under the water, his hands travelled up Keith’s silky torso slowly and deliberately, stopping when they reached the line of his trunks. He let one hand slide over Keith’s ass, and stroked his thigh, which was clenched hard against Lance’s middle. Keith shivered, nibbling Lance’s shoulder.

“Hold your breath.” Said Lance all of a sudden, knowing exactly what he was about to do.

Keith drew in as much air as he could, and at the same time, Lance pulled them both under the water. He’d always wanted to do this.

His eyes stung as he opened them – Keith’s were already open, and in the water everything was in slow motion. The waves of Keith’s hair floated languidly about his pale, ghostly but intensified features, and small bubbles of air escaped his lips.

Swimming forward, Lance clumsily bumped their mouths together. Keith steadied them by cupping Lance’s face with his hands. Shafts of sunlight illuminated the cavern of their underwater world, bathing them in an aura of slow-moving blue and gold. As they broke apart, Keith smiled under the water, and it was an image Lance would remember for the rest of his life.

They were still holding each other as they broke the surface.
“Now we can say – gasp – we’re really – gasp – a couple.” Said Lance, spitting out seawater.

Keith gave an inquisitive tilt of his head. “Weren’t we a couple before?”

“No one’s a couple until they’ve done a romantic under-water movie kiss.” Lance elaborated. “So in other words… this is the first time I’ve been in a couple.”

“Me too.” Said Keith. And then, “This is all getting a little soppy. How about a splash fight to the death?”

“There’s nothing I’d like more.” Lance grinned.

Neither of them won. That is to say, neither of them could win. They managed to drive off everyone within a ten metre radius thanks to their aggressive splashing. Lance developed a technique – if he angled his elbow a certain way on the surface of the water and spun in a half-circle, he could conjure a miniature tsunami that completely covered Keith and himself. Keith tried to copy him, but couldn’t quite master it, and instead took to punching the water as hard and fast as he could. They both got exhausted at the same time, and languidly swam back to the shallows, out of breath. Keith hauled himself out of the water.

“I’m going to check on our stuff.” He said as Lance lingered.

“Cool. I’m gonna stay for a bit.”

Keith didn’t protest – he simply gave him one of his sweetest smiles and ventured down the emptying beach to where they’d parked their possessions.

The sun wasn’t dipping quite yet, but it was on its way. Soon, Lance knew, this day would be over. But this was now, and now would never come again. He floated on his back, gazing at the cloudless sky, feeling the heat dry his stomach. With his ears under the water, he could only hear muffled versions of reality and the rush of currents flying by. This, he thought, was what he always imagined heaven to be like.

Lance wasn’t religious. He didn’t give the afterlife much thought – it induced too much of an existential crisis – but he thought If this is life from now on, I’ll be happy. And he was. He’d never been happier in his life. For once, the doubts and tribulations and persistent angst that had plagued
him since the conception of his crush on Keith had gone. Since before then, he realised, Lance had been lacking something within himself that informed him who he was. For the first time, Lance felt truly confident in himself. In his actions. In his relationship with Keith. Even his relationship with his family had improved. He wished his abuelita could see him like this. Once, she’d described love to him. She told him, *It’s not something you can force, nieto. It is a part of you, and if you cannot accept that part of yourself then you will never truly love.* He hadn’t known what she’d meant, of course. How could love be a part of you when it included someone else, he’d thought? But she was right. Lance hadn’t been able to love Keith until he’d accepted who he was. That had been the hardest part in all of this. And now it was over. She’d be so happy. It wasn’t sadness that filled him at the thought of her anymore, but a warm buzz in the pit of his stomach; he knew she’d be proud. He knew, somewhere, she *was* proud.

“Thank you, abuelita,” He told the sky, “for telling me how to love.”

On the high sand-dunes, as the sun descended on the horizon, Lance massaged sun-cream into Keith’s smouldering skin.

“I thought you’d put some on before you left!” Lance berated him.

“I forgot.” Keith mumbled into the sand, “I’m gonna be so burnt.”

Lance tutted, “You’re gonna be a tomato.”

“It’s easy for you! You don’t burn!”

“Yes, I do!” Lance argued, “It just takes me longer!”

Soon, though, Lance was distracted by the mesmerising muscles in Keith’s back and the perfect structure of his shoulder blades. He massaged Keith’s shoulders, straddled on the peachy curve of his butt.

Keith groaned with pleasure. “Keep doing that.” He told Lance, wiggling into the sand.
Lance bent forward to kiss the nape of Keith’s neck where his hairs whorled into a perfect, black curl.

“Yes, sir.” He joked, but he didn’t stop. He slowly worked his hands from Keith’s shoulders, down his spine, to the base of his back, and back up again, working out the knots of tension that wound Keith’s muscles.

“Where’d you learn to do that?” Asked Keith.

“I didn’t.” Lance replied honestly, “I must be a natural.”

“You are.” Keith agreed, and then, “What did I do to deserve this?” It was a mutter to himself, but Lance felt his insides flare at the statement. It wasn’t anger, but a protest of sorts.

“You didn’t have to do anything, Keith. You deserve everything, you know? You deserve your family – you deserve Shiro and Akane. Most of the time I think I don’t deserve you – but then I think it’s okay because you deserve to be loved by someone who – who means it like I do.”

Lance froze his massaging. Shit. He’d basically said it. Fuck. Had Keith noticed? Of course he’d noticed, his dumb brain told him. His breath was quick and shallow and for a second he had no pulse. Keith shifted in the sand with a sigh.

“Thank you,” He told Lance lightly, “But I really didn’t mean anything by it… it was just a passing comment. I mean, I’m just happy, you know?”

Lance exhaled. It was fine. He hadn’t said ‘I love you’ after all. Even though it was the truth. The thing was, he was scared those words were going to slide from his lips any second, unbidden. And even though he was 99% sure that Keith loved him too, he didn’t want to be the one to rush things. He didn’t want to be the one to send a spanner into the works. Not again.

“I’m happy too.” He told Keith, rolling onto the towel beside him. “And now it’s my turn for a massage.”

Apparently Keith’s idea of a massage was to crack Lance’s spine until he was sure it would break,
digging his nails into his skin like tiny claws.

“Why does this feel like a special form of torture?” Lance grunted when the pain was a little too much.

Keith huffed. “I never said I was good at it.” He told Lance, his voice tinged with hurt as he sat cross-legged on the towel, arms folded like a sulky kid.

Chortling, Lance sat up and tried to tug Keith’s arms free. They wouldn’t budge.

“Hey! You’re good at other things… actually you’re good at every other thing.”

Keith gazed at him from under his stupidly long eyelashes. “Now you’re exaggerating.”

“I’m not,” Said Lance, “It’s one of the reasons I started to like you.” Now he had Keith’s attention, “At first I thought it was jealousy. I thought I wanted to be you – it was kind of tough when I realised I wanted to be with you… I tried to fight it.”

“Tell me about it.” Said Keith sardonically. But then his eyes softened. “But then you didn’t.”

“Then I didn’t.” Lance repeated, lying back on the towel. From here, he had the perfect view of Keith and the sunset, propped up against a mound on the dune.

“I think…” Keith began, lying beside him, “I think Allura is forcing her relationship with Lotor.”

Lance frowned. “What makes you say that? I mean, sure the dude’s creepy, but he really likes Allura, right?”

“Oh, sure.” Keith agreed, rubbing his chin like a scholar, “He likes her, alright, but she seems… unsure.”

Lance shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. I can’t read women.”
Keith scoffed. “That I know. I want to talk to her about it. But I don’t wanna mess things up for her too. And then there’s Shiro…”

“What about him?” Asked Lance, reaching into Akane’s basket and pulling out one of the wrapped sandwiches, offering it to Keith.

Keith took it from him, taking a bite and swallowing before saying, “I think he likes her.”

“Really? Even after the stuff about his job and everything? He wouldn’t, would he?”

Keith shrugged. “Shiro’s the honour-bound type. He’d never make a move. But I can tell there’s something there.”

Lance nudged his side. “Uh oh, don’t start playing the cupid game, Keith. It’s a messy business. Sooner or later people are gonna start blaming you for all sorts of shit, and when one breaks up with the other they’ll wanna peg the blame on someone.”

“You mean when Allura breaks up with Lotor?” Keith said bluntly.

Lance looked scandalised. “Keith! Have a heart! I know he’s creepy, but…”

Keith shrugged. “It’s gonna happen. I can see it.”

Lance was shaking his head, munching on a sandwich. “You’re weirdly psychic sometimes. Except when it comes to yourself.”

Keith toyed with his sandwich. “Yep.” He replied, before stuffing the rest of it into his mouth.

The sun was on its way out and the sky was an ombre of yellow and pink and blue and blazing orange. It was unreal. It made Lance wish he spent every day like this; watching the dawn break in the morning and the sun set in the evening with his favourite person on earth.
Neither of them spoke for a long time as they watched the sun-set, buried in their own thoughts. Lance was thinking about the future again – about the days of bliss to come. Silently, Keith leant his head on Lance’s shoulder. It was almost time to go home.

When the time came, they packed the car with their sand-covered wet towels and empty bags and Lance took up the wheel without instruction. The silence between them was bitter-sweet in a way that Lance couldn’t put his finger on. It was the end to a perfect day, but there was expectation in the air, an unsaid something that lingered between them like a ghost, and a palpable tension… the kind that made Lance want to reach out and touch Keith all over. That kind that made him want to kiss Keith’s lips until they blistered. The kind that made him want to abandon everything and wrap himself in Keith until he couldn’t tell where he began and Keith ended anymore.

It was late at night by the time they got back, and Shiro had left a key out for them. The house was dark and silent and sleeping, and they crept up the stairs without a word exchanged. Keith didn’t bother turning on the light as they entered his bedroom. They didn’t need it.

Their eyes were closed as they kissed in the dark – words didn’t exist to explain this. They knew it as they kissed, translating each other’s feelings into pure, untampered sensation. Something clicked, and Lance felt himself plunging into oblivion – not caring what Keith did to him next. Was this it? He wasn’t sure if he was ready. He hadn’t… prepared.

Keith was undressing him, pulling his t-shirt over his head. Lance raised his arms and his fingers found the button at Keith’s navel, and then the zip that loosened his shorts. Keith stepped out of them, his breaths heavy as they parted for less than a second, and then they were connected again, tripping onto Keith’s bed in a jumble of limbs and half-off clothes. Neither of them made to tug off the other’s underwear – and Lance was silently grateful. He couldn’t… not yet…

But the energy was different. It was a heightened heat of incomprehensible passion that burned his lips, and then, as Keith kissed downwards, his neck, the hollow of his throat – his stomach…

In panic, Lance bolted upright, joining their lips again. Keith had his legs wrapped around Lance’s waist, just as he had underwater, only this time there were no people to watch. The room was dark and private and Keith’s hips jolted dangerously close to where Lance felt it most, invoking a small sound of pleasure that he couldn’t hold back. The sound spurred Keith on further, and his hands were travelling across Lance’s body like a wildfire – merciless and wanting, he pushed Lance onto his back, their legs caught between each other’s, and pressed into him over and over again in a motion that could only be described as a simulation of what could be if it wasn’t for the thin barrier of clothing that prevented it. Lance’s hands rested on Keith’s rocking hips, and as he broke away for breath he gasped –

“Keith.” It was half pleasure half protest, because he didn’t want this to stop. But he needed it to.
Keith bit into his neck, licking the same spot twice, before persisting with a heated moan right by his ear. This was almost enough to make Lance come on its own. It took every fibre of resistance he had to untwist himself and push a distance between them with a firm hand on Keith’s chest.

“I – I can’t.” He told Keith, panting, “I don’t know how… I mean…”

It was impossible to see Keith’s expression in the dark, but his chest rose and fell with roused breaths.

“It’s okay…” Said Keith, completely still, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologise.” Lance whispered. “I love this, it’s just…”

“We’re taking it slow.” Said Keith, echoing words from months ago.

“Right.” Said Lance. “And we have ages – we have so much time, Keith. I want to do this right. When semester starts we can work this out together. We can” –

But he didn’t get any further, because Keith leapt at him, pouncing onto his mouth with a burning need that Lance couldn’t have resisted if he’d tried. But he didn’t try. He tangled his fingers in Keith’s hair. He pushed his knee between Keith’s legs, demanding a reprise of the response he’d heard earlier. It worked – and Lance felt how much harder he’d gotten, grinding against his thigh with instinctual desire, the groan leaving him as a guttural reaction to the pleasure that Lance was making him feel. Resigning to his own mounting arousal, Lance wrapped his legs around Keith and arched his hips upward, responding to the hypnotic lull of Keith’s movements, all his thoughts becoming a whirr of knotted senselessness in his head because nothing seemed more immediate than this – Keith – the tension they’d felt in the car bursting fourth in a wave –

Keith stopped. It was so sudden that Lance drew back, waiting. But Keith was still, his head hung over Lance’s, his hair tickling Lance’s nose.

“What’s wrong?” Lance whispered, scared he’d done something incorrect.

Slowly, Keith unwound his legs from Lance’s, and lay back onto his side in a mechanical fashion.
“You were right.” He told Lance, his voice marred by something thick and unreadable. “We need to take it slow.”

“D-did I do something?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

Keith leant over and planted a soft kiss on Lance’s mouth, much like the one he’d given him when they’d arrived at the dunes.

“Yes. I’m sure, Lance.” He told him carefully, stroking the sweat-tendrils of hair off Lance’s forehead. “I’m sure.”

What was going on in his head?

He was still crazy hard – Lance could feel it pressing against the side of his thigh. And it was doing things to him. He wanted nothing more than anything to satisfy Keith that way, but maybe he’d done something wrong after all… maybe Keith just thought he wasn’t ready yet. Which, he guessed, he wasn’t.

“Lance?”

“Yeah?”

“You know, I…”

“… you what, Keith?”

A sigh. A beat.
“Nothing. Goodnight.”

“…goodnight.”

Lance fell asleep with Keith’s hand still mussed in his hair, and with the thought that Keith wouldn’t sleep at all.

He was right.

Come morning, Keith was pale, his eyes ringed with dark circles. Lance resisted the urge to ask, was it because of me? He knew that whatever Keith wasn’t saying had tormented him from sleep. Was it about his mom? His dad? Heck, was it about his damn bike? Lance didn’t want to ask. He didn’t want to probe further than he already had, because he was sure, Keith would tell him when he was ready. Keith had a lot of demons, he knew that now, and they couldn’t be forced out. But it was still strange; the way Keith avoided his eye over most of breakfast. The way he didn’t watch Lance pack his stuff (which didn’t take very long at all, really), the way Lance ushered a hurried goodbye to Akane who waved him off, half-awake over her coffee, and Keith barely said a word, unceremoniously climbing into the car to drive Lance to the airport, his eyes fixed on the road.

Lance eyed him nervously as they drove. Keith’s exhaustion was a scary thing - even scarier was when Keith pulled up alongside the empty freeway with no warning and stopped, the engine still running.

A whole moment of nothing dragged by.

“Um… Keith? You okay?”

Keith closed his eyes, his hands gripping the wheel so hard his knuckles had turned white.

“Lance, I need to tell you something.”

Lance’s anxiety did a number on him, his stomach plummeting to his shoes before darting back up again, churning like a washing machine. Was he breaking up with him? That was his first thought, and it terrified him more than he could’ve known before this moment. He pushed back the lump in
his throat. Keith hadn’t told him anything yet.

“W-what is it?” He asked, trying to sound cool. But it didn’t. His voice broke.

Keith’s eyes were closed as he voiced the next sentence, and it was funny, because Lance was sure he didn’t hear it right.

“Lance, I’m going away to Scotland next semester.”

The word Scotland bounced around his brain accompanied by the stupid sound of bagpipes. Why was his mind this way?

He burst out a strange laugh of disbelief, numb. “What?”

Keith turned to Lance, his eyes full of that thing Lance had only seen glimpses of over this weekend – even in Austin. That sad smile played on his lips with an irony too cruel to be real.

“I’m…” He swallowed – Lance’s eyes followed the movement of the throat he had fervently kissed hours before. ‘I’m going to Scotland for six months. I was supposed to go later, but this was the only space they had and – and I really want – I need to go, you know? It’s not because of you or – or anything, I’ve been dreading this, I…”

Keith continued to talk, but Lance had gone deaf after the ‘six months’ part. His world slowly fell apart piece by piece, like a jigsaw down a wormhole… Keith was going away for six months. He wouldn’t see Keith for six months…

It was true. Lance wasn’t good with surprises. Especially ones like this.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Keith

Whenever Keith pictured telling Lance about Scotland there were always a few reoccurring features in the scenario: exclamations, Lance’s voice pitching upwards, a lot of shouting, a lot of drama, a lot of typical Lance behaviour. But not… this.

Keith was desperately spilling out excuses and apologies and explanations, but Lance wasn’t even listening. He was just staring straight ahead, eyes glassy and unmoving as a mannequin. It was freaking Keith out and he faltered, sentence trailing off into the tense quiet. A few cars drove past them and the radio was playing dimly, some unrecognisable tune. Shiro had hung a prayer from his rear-view mirror: a charm his grandmother had brought back from Hokkaido for a safe journey, and it was fluttering in the summer breeze. The dashboard was lit because the engine was still running and the digital clock there was a constant reminder that Keith had fucked up, that he’d left this too late. He cut the engine and allowed the silence to swallow them, to choke him. It was taunt as a bow string pulled tight.

“Scotland,” said Lance suddenly.

Keith whirled round to Lance. “What?”

“You’re going to Scotland,” repeated Lance in that same, calm voice. He refused to look at Keith.

Keith swallowed. “Yeah…”

“For six months?”

“Yeah.”

Lance nodded slowly. He glanced at his watch. “My flight’s in three hours,”

“I know,”

“I have to be at the airport in thirty minutes,”

“I know,” repeated Keith. “Listen, Lance—”

The sound of the car door opening and slamming shut cut Keith off. Surprised, he watched Lance stride away from the car and away from the road. He made no move to follow, too shocked and flustered to know what to do. Instead, he tracked Lance’s movements as he strode one way, then another, hands on his hips. Then Lance came to a stop, back to the car, and stared up at the sky. His hands balled into fists.

“What the fuck?!” he screamed suddenly, making Keith jump. Even from inside the car, Lance’s voice was thunderous.

Then he marched back to the car, got in, and strapped his seatbelt on.
“Drive,” he said.

“Uh, Lance—”

“Drive,” repeated Lance. “Step on it.”

“It’s not that long to the airport, we can—”

“We’re not going to the airport,”

“What?”

Lance finally looked at Keith then, and his eyes were full of blue fire. “We’re not going to the airport, Keith. We’re going for a drive. I don’t care where, just go.”

“But your flight—”

“I couldn’t give a flying fuck about my flight right now!” exploded Lance. He pointed a finger at Keith and punctuated each syllable with a prod of the air. “If you think I’m just gonna let you drop a bombshell on me like that and then- then I just leave! Oh my god, you are such an idiot. Just drive, Keith.”

“But—”

“DRIVE.”

Switching on the engine, Keith pushed the pedal and they set off.

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When Shiro’s eyes finally cracked open he was sure he’d jumped through a wormhole into another dimension. That was how disorientated he felt. The sun was creeping through the cracks in his window and sliced across his face like a golden scar. He’d fallen asleep with his prosthetic on, again, and the joint ached with the strain of lying on it. His mom would chew him out if she found out, but for once Shiro didn’t much mind the possibility of this. He didn’t mind because, there, in a neat pile on his cluttered desk, weighed carefully down with a glass paperweight, was his paper. His thesis. A complete first draft.

Just the sight of it had tears pushing out of the corner of Shiro’s eyes.

A few minutes later he was dressed and heading down the stairs, prosthetic discarded so his limb would have room to breathe, with the sole intention of doing nothing else but eating and binge watching Queer Eye for the rest of the day. There was a spring in his step and he was humming under his breath. When he got to the kitchen, the world looked so much brighter. Even that high pitched buzzing was a pleasant sound to his ears.

Wait… buzzing?

Glancing at the kitchen table, Shiro found that Keith had forgotten his phone. As usual. He was always leaving it lying around. It’d taken about a year of convincing just to make him get the bloody thing. Sighing, Shiro picked it up—
And paused.

The name read *Lura*. She was trying to FaceTime him.

Did Shiro ignore it? Would it be okay to… just this once…?

Before he could double-guess himself, Shiro hit the green button.

“KEITH!” exclaimed Allura, then she faltered, realising it was Shiro. The way her face fell made Shiro feel like a jerk. “Oh. Hello Shiro. I’m um, terribly sorry for the shout. I was looking for Keith.”

“It’s okay,” said Shiro, meaning it. Allura’s passion had always been part of her charm. “I think he’s taken Lance to the airport.”

“Oh no,” said Allura, despairingly. “I got here too late.”

“What do you mean?” asked Shiro, concern creeping into his voice. “Is something wrong?”

“It’s just, um,” Allura peeked at Shiro from under her eyelashes, weighing something up. Shiro waited. “Last night I asked him how it went. You know, telling Lance about Scotland.”

“Yeah?”

“But the thing is… he hasn’t told him, Shiro!” she exclaimed suddenly. “I just know he’s going to leave it last minute, probably at the airport gate, and it’s going to devastate Lance! Oh, I specifically told him to do it when Lance arrived, or at the beach at least. This is a disaster!”

*That*, Shiro thought, staring out the window with a sigh. *Was an understatement.* His little brother was an idiot.

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The drive was tense and quiet and electrically charged.

Keith didn’t know where he was going, he just turned corners and followed vague directions, summoned up out of his unconsciousness on spur of the moment decisions at road signs. He tried to stay as close to the airport as he could in case Lance suddenly had a change of heart and they needed to rush there, but Lance didn’t show any signs of budging. He was sat, rigid as a piece of steel, in his seat, chin propped on a fist as he glared out of the window. They hadn’t talked in over twenty minutes. Keith bit his lip.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to the airport?” he asked, unable to take it any longer.

“Nope,” said Lance, still not looking at Keith.

“But how will you get home?”

“There are other planes,”

“But the money—”
“Keith?”

“Yeah?”

“Shut up.”

Keith’s mouth closed with a soft click. He gripped the steering tight.

“No,” he said. “I’m not going to just shut up. We need to talk about this.”

“Oh?” said Lance, voice full of bite. “Is that why you brought it up so soon? So we’d have plenty of time to talk it over?”

“I fucked up Lance—”

“You don’t say,”

“No, listen to me!” exclaimed Keith. “Just listen, okay? I know I fucked up. I know this was stupid. I know I know. But I’m… I’m sorry. It’s the way it’s happened and I’m sorry.”

The only response this got was a contemptuous snort. It made Keith angry, even though he didn’t have any right to be, so he swallowed his feeling and turned back to the steering wheel. There was a junction coming up ahead and, seeing how stubborn Lance was being, he doubted they’d be going to the airport anytime soon. He took a left and headed out of the city.

Soon the industrial landscape gave way to a more residential area: houses and yards passed by, kids walking dogs and playing on skateboards. Then even all of that disappeared and they were left with the empty Michigan land surrounding Bay City. Half an hour passed, then forty minutes. Keith put on the radio, hoping some background noise would lighten the mood. It didn’t.

Soon the two-hour mark was coming up and Lance still hadn’t said anything else. Not a word. He hadn’t even moved- not a shift or twitch in all that time. Keith kept glancing at him, hoping to find… something. Something in his expression beside the closed-off glare which would tell him what to do, how to make this better. Lance’s plane was in an hour and there was no way he’d be catching it now, but even knowing this didn’t stop the stress building in Keith the closer they got to the take-off time. What would Beatriz say when Lance wasn’t on his plane? Could he even afford to go back now? Obviously Keith would help out as much as he could but would Lance even accept his help?

No, said a voice. Of course not. Of course he doesn’t want your help. You’ve screwed up and he doesn’t want you at all. Not anymore. This is it. He’s going to finish it with you for good.

The thoughts made Keith’s chest tighten with pain. He felt his breath come in shallow bursts and his heart thunder against his ribcage. The idea that this was it, that he’d never see Lance again or hold him close or breathe his name… it was too much. He’d wanted to make this all better, not worse, but here he was again, just a fuck-up. He’d always be a fuck-up. It was only ever a matter of time before something liked this happened anyway. This was always going to happen. He was always, always going to be alone.

Before he could get a rein on his emotions, a sob burst from Keith’s lips. Then another. His eyes were swimming and his throat was rattling with a soft, broken sound which was distant in his own ears. The road blurred and he couldn’t breathe all of a sudden.

“Keith? Keith?” said Lance. He was in Keith’s provisional vision, a hand coming to rest on his shoulder. His voice was soft. “Hey, hey, come here. You can’t drive like that.”
Leaning over, Lance guided Keith’s hands on the steering wheel so they came to a stop at a hard shoulder. Keith cut the engine and as soon as it died he began to cry in earnest. It was hot and ugly, his nose and eyes were streaming and he couldn’t catch his breath.

“I’m sorry,” he sobbed, over and over again. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

There was a click when Keith’s seatbelt came free and then Lance’s hands were on Keith’s back, guiding him into the warmth of his shoulder. Keith collapsed against it, burying himself in Lance’s hoodie and the darkness that came with it while he cried and cried and cried.

“Hush now,” he heard Lance murmuring. “It’s okay Keith. It’s going to be okay. Just breathe with me, okay honey? In through the nose, out through the mouth.”

It was the first time Lance had called him honey. If he’d been in a better state, if it had been last night instead of right now, Keith would have teased him for it. Would have said he sounded like his mom. Instead Keith could only nod, matching his breaths to Lance’s in order to calm down. It’d been a while since he’d last had a panic attack.

The moment stretched like that, measured not by minutes but by the length of Keith’s breaths. Lance murmured to him the entire time, whispered words of comfort and encouragements. Eventually the sound of rushing panic left Keith’s ears and he was able to get a handle on the situation. He was painfully aware that Lance’s hoodie was wet and wrinkled from where he’d been crying and gripping the soft material. Slowly, he released it and sat back, scrubbing at his face.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m okay now.”

When he finally peeked at Lance, he found that the other boy was the very picture of concern. It made Keith feel even worse.

“This is such a disaster,” said Keith.

“Yeah,” agreed Lance. He didn’t sound mad anymore though. Just tired.

“This isn’t the way I wanted it to go,” spoke Keith into the quiet. “I can’t believe I cried. You’re the one who should be upset.”

“Yeah, no duh.”

Keith bit his lip. He took in a shaky breath and summoned every bit of emotion into his voice. “I am sorry, Lance. So sorry. I thought… I thought I was doing the right thing. I didn’t mean to hurt you… that’s the last thing I want. Please, believe that at least.”

Now it was Lance’s turn to take in a deep breath. It came out in an exhausted sigh. “You know,” he said. “When you pulled over like that I thought you were breaking up with me.”

“What?” demanded Keith.

Lance shrugged. He was hunched over himself, eyes downcast, and he was hugging himself in a way that broke Keith’s heart.

“You were acting really weird. I had no idea what was going on and—I don’t know. I just assumed the worst. Or, well, I thought I assumed the worse. Gotta say, Scotland was a bit of a curve ball.”

“I’m sorry,” said Keith, again, because what else could he say?
“Why didn’t you just tell me, Keith?” asked Lance. “I mean, how long have you known you were
going?”

“Since May?”

“MAY?” exclaimed Lance, voice pitching.

Keith winced. “Yeah.”

“And all that time we- you—” Lance struggled and a flash of that anger from before was in his
eyes again. “Why didn’t you say anything?!”

“Because I just didn’t!” erupted Keith, tears springing to his eyes again. “I wasn’t sure where we
were for the longest time and then when things seemed to be going well you went and acted all
weird with that girl at Daisy’s party and—”

“Don’t pin this on me!” interrupted Lance. “You can’t blame that for not saying anything. That was
months ago and it was all sorted. You can’t—”

“I’m not!” argued Keith. “I’m just trying to explain! It was all weird at the time but then it was
good. It was so good. And I didn’t want to screw it up again. But the longer I left it the harder it
was to tell you. I don’t know. I’ve never done this before, I’ve never been in a relationship!”

“Neither have I!” exclaimed Lance, flinging his arms wide. “But I sure as hell know I wouldn’t
invite my boyfriend over for a magical weekend getaway only to be like, oh hey man, hope it’s not
a big deal but I’m flying halfway around the world in less than a month!”

More tears pushed out of Keith’s eyes. “I meant to tell you sooner.”

“Well, you didn’t!”

They stared at each other, Keith white with worry and Lance flushed an angry red. As though in
sync, they both looked away.

“This is a mess,” said Lance.

Keith let out a weak laugh. “Yeah. It is.” He was biting his lip so hard he could taste blood. Still,
he had to push these words out. “I… if you… I understand if you wanna cut out at this point,”
Lance’s head whipped around so fast Keith was surprised it didn’t fly off his neck. He ploughed
on. “I mean, this has been really shitty and six months is a long time. I’d completely get it if—”

“Keith,” said Lance, voice serious. “I’m not breaking up with you.”

Keith swallowed. “You’re not?”

“No,” said Lance. “That’s why I’m sat here, you dingus, and not halfway to Texas by now. I want
to sort this out.”

Keith let out a shuddery breath that ended in a sob. “Oh. Okay.”

“Seriously, you thought this was it?” demanded Lance. He sounded offended. “You’d think I’d
bale at the first hurdle?”

“No—I mean, I don’t know!”

“We have not come this far to let you being an idiot and some stupid ocean come between us,” said
Lance, folding his arms. “And I resent the idea that I’d ditch you so easily.”

“But it’s a big thing,” said Keith. “Isn’t it?”

“Well yeah!” shouted Lance, and he sounded more like himself now. Which meant he was waving his arms around a lot and his voice was pitching all over the place. “That’s why I can’t believe you thought it would be okay to drop this on me so last minute. Oh my god, I was literally on my way to a fucking flight! What were you gonna do, FaceTime me and be like, oh yeah so picking up where we left off I’m outta here, please don’t be mad?”

“Are you mad?” asked Keith.

“Of course I’m mad!” snapped Lance. “I’m mad you did it this way and I’m mad I’ve missed my flight and I’m mad I’m not going to see my boyfriend for six whole months!”

“I’m sorry,” whispered Keith.

Like a balloon, Lance deflated. “I know,” he whispered back. “And… I just want to understand.”

“What’s going on in your head,” said Lance. “This is obviously important to you. I… I know it’s probably about your mom, but I don’t know Keith. I want—I need to understand this. I need you to walk me through it.”

It wasn’t much, but it was something to focus on. A goal. A mission. Make Lance understand. Keith could do that.

“Okay,” he said, brushing away the remaining tears away. He started up the engine. If he was going to do this, he had to be busy while doing it. “We need gas. Mind if we stop off? There’s a station nearby.”

“Sure,” said Lance. He put his seatbelt on. “That’s fine.”

Keith waited ten minutes after they set off. He counted each of them, eyes scanning the road as the scenery streamed by- grey under the overcast sky. He licked his lips.

“You know my mom was in the Korean military, right? That she had to go back to serve.”

Lance’s voice was soft. “Yeah. I remember.”

Keith nodded, palms sweaty with the effort this was taking. He pushed on. “Dad kept looking, after we moved back here. He used to go every few years, if we had the money. I stayed with grandma until she passed away. I was pretty young still, so I don’t remember that much. Later I stayed with Shiro and his mom, dad and Aunt Akane were good drinking buddies back in the day. He always set out with so much optimism, but every time, every time, dad turned up a blank. He tried getting in contact with the South Korean army, but because they were never married dad didn’t have a right to a lot of information. Finally he found out that mom had been MIA for a few years…” he gripped the steering wheel tight. “It used to kill me, how sad he was, sometimes. He tried to hide it so hard, but there were moments when it was just written across his face- all of those crushed hopes.”

Lance was quiet. Keith could feel his eyes on him but he stared straight ahead.

“I’d get upset about it sometimes, you know? I knew all the other kids had a mom and it sucked
that I didn’t. But because I had dad it wasn’t… it wasn’t bad. I wasn’t bummed out about it all the time. But then the accident happened and…” his throat felt tight.

“You lost your dad too,” prompted Lance gently.

Tears were burning Keith’s eyes again. He refused to let anymore fall. “The hope of her… was all I had left. Obviously Aunt Akane and Shiro are my family, they always will be and they put up with so much of my shit. I was in foster until Aunt Akane won her case appeal, and I got into so many fights with kids they threatened to send me to a specialised home which would have made the process so much longer and more difficult. But they were there through all of it. I owe them so much, and I love them so fucking much Lance but…” he paused, choked up on memory. “You see my bag in the back?” he asked.

“Yeah?” answered Lance, confused by the sudden change in topic.

“In the front pocket, there’s a bundle of purple cloth. Open it.”

Lance did as he was instructed, sending Keith a puzzled glance, and unwound the strips of cloth with careful hands until a knife was revealed. The blade was a deadly, silver slash and the handle was worn smooth, engraved with faint characters.

“It says, ‘To my heart’, said Keith. “My mom gave it to my dad… to give to me. It was my tenth birthday. I… I have to find her Lance. I have to try. I know it’s a long shot, and I’m prepared to not find anything in Scotland. Dad never did. But I’d always planned to begin this way because…”

“Because she’s your mom,” said Lance.

Keith breathed out a long breath. “Yeah.”

They pulled up at the gas station. Mechanically, Keith got out the car and filled the tank, hardly seeing or hearing anything as he handed over money to the bored, blank-faced cashier. When he climbed back into the car, Lance had turned on the radio again. He was still holding the knife. Silently, Keith pulled out of the station.

Bland landscape passed them by, worn smooth and watered down by the weight of emotion hanging over the car. Lance fingered Shiro’s charm, long fingers brushing across the paper. Keith pretended he wasn’t about to lose it.

“I get it, Keith,” said Lance, after a few miles. He sounded tired again. “I get all of that. I mean, of course I understand why you need this. But I still don’t get why you didn’t tell me sooner. And don’t say ‘just because’, cause that’s a bullshit none-excuse.”

“I just didn’t want to hurt you,” answered Keith. “It was difficult—”

“And this is better?”

“No! I mean… I knew you’d freak out—”

Lance’s eyebrows flew up. “So it’s my fault again?”

“That’s not it either!” shouted Keith, louder than he’d intended.

Lance matched his volume. “Then what is it, Keith? Just answer the question!”
Tires squealed as Keith flung the car over to the side of the road for the second time today. Lance grasped at his seat, head snapping at the abruptness of Keith’s manoeuvring, a shout of protest leaving his lips. Keith’s chest was heaving now, tight with everything he’d kept hidden and close for the past few months. The past few years.

“You wanna know why?” he whispered. “Fine. It was because it was too hard, Lance! It was too fucking hard to tell you, okay? God! You have no idea what this has been like, you have no idea how screwed up I am right now cause this has been my goal ever since my dad died and I decided to sort myself out. This has been my mission for so long and I knew I wasn’t going to let anything get in the way. That’s why I bust my gut at college, that’s why I’ve been working since I was fourteen, that’s why I never let anyone get close to me because I knew, knew, this was where I was headed. I didn’t think I’d care about anything else this much but then… but then you came along,” his voice broke on this last word. He covered his face with his hands, finding comfort in the red dark there. “You and your dorky smile and loud laugh and weird rivalries. You make me not want to go, Lance, you make me want to stay and that… that scares me. I guess I didn’t tell you because if I told you, then it was real. I was really going to leave and we wouldn’t see each other for so long and I was scared I was going to lose you. I’m still scared I’m going to lose you. And I’m scared I’m going to cave and miss out on Scotland because I love you so much. It’s not even been that long since we got together, but it feels like I’ve known you forever and the idea of putting an ocean between us kills me.” He took a deep, shaky breath. “It was just too hard, that’s your answer. Happy now?”

When no reply came, Keith hesitantly cracked his fingers open to glance at Lance’s expression, sure he’d find anger or an emotion near to it, seeing as Keith had just flown off the rail a bit there. But he was surprised to find Lance staring at him with wide eyes, mouth open in a small o of surprise.

“What did you say?” he asked.

Irritation clawed at Keith’s throat. “Are you serious? Were you not listening at all? Jesus Christ Lance.”

“No, no, I was listening,” said Lance, hastily. “But you—just then, that last bit.”

“About the ocean?”

“Before that.”

When understanding hit Keith, his whole face lit up like a beacon. He’d just told Lance he loved him. They hadn’t done that before. They hadn’t… oh god, oh god. Keith’s brain became an angelic choir of oh shit oh shit oh shit as the consequences of what he’d just done hit him. They’d been going out officially for over a month and it was way, way too soon to have said that. Anyone would be freaked out by that, wouldn’t they? This was it, Lance was going to end it with him right now. Well done Keith, you giant dick.

“What did you say?” insisted Lance.

“Nothing,” snapped Keith.

“No, you definitely just declared something,” said Lance, and there was something else in his voice now. Something warmer. “Say it again.”

“Lance, I’m sorry, okay? Just drop it.”
“Nope,” said Lance, and Keith was surprised to find that the other boy had migrated across his seat and was leaning into Keith’s space. His face was serious, but his eyes were sparkling with… what was that? “After everything you put me through this past day, you owe me this, mullet. What did you say?”

Keith swallowed sandpaper. Lance had a point, he wasn’t really in a position to argue. “I…” he lowered his voice to a whisper. “I love you.”

And to Keith’s surprise, Lance’s whole face lit up with the most delighted smile he’d ever seen. Honest to god, it was one of the most beautiful things Keith had ever seen in his life: the way Lance’s blue eyes danced with light, the way his skin creased around the sheer force of his smile, folding over the faint freckles Keith had traced in the dark just the night before.

“You love me?” he asked.

Something bold enfolded in Keith. This wasn’t the expression of someone weirded out, this was the expression of someone reassured.

“Yeah,” he said, voice gruff.

Suddenly Lance’s arms were around him, pulling him against his seatbelt so they were enfolded in each other. He could smell Lance’s shampoo.

“You idiot,” whispered Lance against his ear. “Oh my god, you’re such an idiot Keith Kogane.”

Keith frowned but reached out to hug Lance back anyway. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you’re an idiot,” said Lance with a weak laugh. “But you’re my idiot.”

The warmth in Lance’s voice sent opened something up in Keith’s chest. He felt lighter, as fragile and bouncy as a bubble. He buried his head into Lance’s shoulder, willing him to feel the emotions bubbling inside of him.

“So we’re okay?” he whispered.

“We’re going to get through this,” answered Lance, running his fingers through Keith’s hair. “You and me, we’re going to get through this.”

Keith’s grip tightened on Lance’s hoodie. “We are?”

“Yes,” said Lance, sounding so sure that Keith believed him. Believed him with his whole heart. “I… I won’t to lose this Keith. I don’t want to lose you. So we’re going to make this work, you get me?”

Keith bit back a sob. “Yeah. I got cha.”

Lance let out a soft chuckle. Keith felt it on his neck. “Did I ever tell you I love it when you slip into a Southern accent?”

“Do I?” asked Keith, genuinely surprised. He’d thought he’d lost his Dad’s soft twang years ago.

“Only sometimes,” said Lance. “It’s kinda sexy.”

“Shut up,”

“Make me,”
“You sound sexy when you speak Spanish.”

“That so? Eres muy lindo.”

“What?”

“Not telling.”

“Jerk.”

They laughed, and the air felt lighter, free of the negative miasma which had been weighing down on them the entire day.

“Just don’t leave me for a hot Scottish guy, okay?” said Lance after a moment.

“What?” asked Keith, leaning back to laugh.

“I’m serious!” said Lance, waving his arms around. “Don’t be tempted by muscly ginger men, okay?”

“Lance,” said Keith, frowning at his boyfriend fondly. So fondly. God he loved this idiot. “I’m going to find my mom and work on a dig, not go galivanting with kilted men.”

“Oh my god, kilts. I didn’t even think of that!” exclaimed Lance, shaking his head. He looked genuinely upset at this imaginary scenario. “Keith,” he said, suddenly seizing him by shoulders. “Don’t talk to any guys while you’re over there. Only girls.”

That did make Keith laugh. “By that same logic you can’t talk to anyone while I’m away.” It was obvious from Lance’s face that he had not taken this into consideration. Chuckling, Keith leaned forwards and pecked Lance on the lips, thumb brushing along his cheekbone. “It’s alright,” he said. “I only want you.”

A dopey smile spread over Lance’s face. “Well, that’s good,” he said, then he frowned. “But if you ever do something like this to me again I’m gonna kick your butt, okay?”

“Roger that,” said Keith and this time he lay the accent on thick, earning a groan and a kiss. Keith leant down to nuzzle Lance’s neck.

“Uh, Keith?” asked Lance.

“Hmmm?” Keith murmured against his skin.

“Not to kill the mood or anything but… where the fuck are we?”

Cold dread spread over Keith. He leaned away from Lance and peered through the window onto a dusty, dirty track of a road far, far away from Bay City.

“You know,” he said. “I have no fucking idea.”

A little while later Keith found himself in the lobby of a motel on the Lance’s phone to Shiro. Over
by the front desk Lance was collecting their keys, chatting to the woman behind the counter with a signature smirk and twinkle in his eye. For once Keith didn’t care either, since Lance’s flirting had gotten them a semi-decent room for a ridiculously low price.

“Yeah, Shiro, I know,” he said into the receiver. “But we’re fine. I found us on a map and we’re not that far out. It’s just a pain to drive all the way back.”

This was partially true. The other bit of truth he wasn’t saying out loud, however, was that Lance and Keith were both far too embarrassed to go back to the Shirogane household. In Keith’s case, he knew both Shiro and Akane would give him that look, that mix of pity with a healthy dollop of what the fuck Keith? and he didn’t want Lance to see that. Lance, on the other hand, felt bad about staying an extra day. Plus they were both too exhausted to explain the situation anymore than they had to. Hence, they’d opted for the cheapest motel they could find that didn’t feature mould and rot as their star attractions.

“You do realise this is ridiculous,” continued Shiro down the phone. “You can just come home. Staying out is just stupid. Or stupider than what you’ve done so far. Mom’s gonna freak, I hope you know.”

Keith winced. “Did you tell her?” he asked. “What happened?”

“She’s not home yet so no, but I’m gonna have to at some point.”

“I know,” said Keith, rubbing his face. “But I’d rather put it off as long as possible.”

There was a weary sigh in Keith’s ear. “But you two are fine now, right? You worked it out?”

“I think so,” answered Keith, glancing at Lance. He was attempting to juggle the desk pens in an effort to impress the woman, but ultimately dropped them all on his head. She laughed. “He… we want to make this work.”

“Good,” said Shiro. “Cause I think he’s good for you. I think you’re good for each other.”

“You think?”

“When you’re actually communicating, yeah.”

“We need to work on that,”

“No shit.”

Keith grinned. It was always a novelty when Shiro cussed. Endless days spent in classrooms and being professional had beaten it out of him as a natural habit. “So you finished your paper, huh?”

“The first draft, yeah,” said Shiro, voice full of pride. “But editing shouldn’t take as long. It’s always easier when you actually have something to show people and work off.”

“You have a critique partner?” asked Keith, surprised. Usually Shiro made a point of doing it all himself. “Who?”

“Oh well,” said Shiro, voice suddenly gruff. “Allura said she’d read through it for me.”

Keith blinked. “You two talked?”

“Yeah, after we’d established that you’re an idiot. She was really upset, you know. You need to call her when you get back tomorrow.”
“I will,” answered Keith, distractedly. “So… she’s gonna read through it for you, huh?”

“Yeah,” answered Shiro, tone even tighter. “She’s always had excellent scores on her essays, after all. And she said the experience of reading a post grad paper would be useful. She wants to go on in her studies, did you know?”

“Yeah,” said Keith, trying to keep the smile of his face. “She told me. She always said your passion was part of her inspiration.”

There was an awkward pause.

“She’s an awesome person,” continued Keith, mercilessly. “Isn’t she?”

“… yes. Of course she is. You’re very lucky to have a friend in her.” Before Keith could twist the knife any further, Shiro cleared his throat. “So, have you sorted a plane ticket for Lance?”

“Yeah,” answered Keith. He’d drop it. For now. “I made him let me pay. God, I thought we were going to get into another argument over that, but in the end he caved.”

“I’ll transfer you the money.”


“You used your savings, right?” asked Shiro, bored. “You’re gonna need that when you go to Scotland. You’re an undergrad, Keith. I know what your pay checks look like. I’ve got a full-time job, research grants and more years on you. And you’re my brother, man. Besides, I feel partially responsible, seeing as I suggested this course of action to you. Just let me help, okay?”

Keith bit his lip, prepared to dig his heels in, but then dropped his head. The digits from the last time he checked his bank account flashed through his head. “Okay,” he whispered.

“Good,” exclaimed Shiro, chipper now that he’d gotten his way. “And Lance’s mom knows about all this, right?”

“Yeah,” repeated Shiro. “Then you’re all sorted. Don’t worry about mom, I’ll explain the situation when she gets in. Just don’t do anything else stupid, okay?”

“Trust me, I’m not doing anything stupid ever again.”

“That’s the biggest lie you ever told.”

“Whatever. See you later man.”

“Bye Keith. Love you bro.”

“Love you too.”

They hung up. Sighing, Keith wandered over to the main desk.

“Yo!” exclaimed Lance, twirling their keys around his finger. “You all good? Shiro okay?”

“As well as can be expected,” said Keith, tiredly.

“Did he call you an idiot?”
“He called me stupid.”

“Good.”

Keith elbowed Lance in the rib.

“Your room is on the second floor,” said the lady behind the counter. She was an older woman, at least in her sixties, petite, dyed blonde and wore way too much blush. It made her look like a porcelain doll, but her smile was friendly. “The door handle’s a little stiff and you have to flush the toilet twice.”

“Thanks Marianne,” said Lance smoothly. “We appreciate it.”

“Don’t you worry about it sweetie. You boys have a good time now.”

“Oh don’t worry,” said Lance, looking pointedly at Keith. “We will.”

Blushing furiously, Keith shoved Lance into the hall much to Lance’s amusement. The elevator they found there looked dangerously rickety so they took the stairs, unwilling to invite more bad luck their way today. It was around four o’clock in the afternoon and the motel was mostly empty. The walls were decorated with a hideous, patterned wallpaper from the seventies and the carpet underfoot was a relic from a time best forgotten. Their room wasn’t much better when they found it: The lamps were huge and a sickly green, the same colour as all the furnishings, and there were framed pictures of Lionel Richie on the walls, but it was clean. Everything was neat and there were even mints on the pillows. Keith noted that Lance had gotten them a double bed with as much disinterest as possible.

“It’s not bad,” commented Lance.

Keith nodded. “I’ve stayed in worse.”

“You have?”

“Yeah.”

“Where?”

“Here and there.”

“Oooo, so mysterious.”

Keith shoved Lance aside. “Shut up,” he said.

“You know what you have to do in a hotel room, right?” asked Lance.

They glanced at the bed. Then back at each other. They grinned. In unison, they flung each other onto the mattress, sending the mints and pillows flying. The frame gave a dangerous creak when they did, making them both laugh. It felt good to laugh. Or, well, that wasn’t quite right. It did feel good to laugh, but it was also tinged with something else now. A shadow. Keith knew that Lance was feeling it too from the expression on his face.

“Was your mom okay?” he asked.

Lance scooted over to Keith, tucking his arm under Keith’s neck and curling into him. “Mom was cool,” he said. “I mean, with some of the stuff she got up to when she was younger, this is pretty tame to her. I think she might have even been proud, in a weird way. My dad though… I mean, he
never really ‘tells me off’ but I knew he was pissed. So, I think they compromised by going down the whole, you’re a grown man now so you can make your own decisions, but we don’t approve and will guilt you route. Which sucks. I think I prefer being yelled at, to be honest.”

“Same,” agreed Keith. “Shiro’s so good at the ‘I’m disappointed but won’t comment’ face.”

Lance laughed. “I’ve seen it a few times in class.”

“At you?”

“Of course not.”

“Liar.”

Lance only chuckled, leaning down to kiss Keith on the head. Keith leaned into his touch. “Did you tell them what happened?” he asked, voice hushed.

“Some of it,” answered Lance, matching his tone. “Not all of it.”

That same weight settled over them again. Keith glanced at Lance’s face, but he was looking the other way.

“Lance…”

Suddenly, Lance sprung up. “How about pizza?” he asked, beaming down at Keith. “I dunno about you, but I’m starved. Pretty sure I saw take out leaflets at the front desk. What do you think?”

An amused puff of breath left Keith’s lips. “Sure. Sounds good.”

“Alright!” said Lance, fist pumping the air. He was so bouncy all of a sudden, every step a spring and every gesture pop. “Peperoni here I come!”

“Ham and pineapple for me,” said Keith, sitting up.

Lance froze. Slowly, like a mechanical doll, he turned to Keith. “You did not just say that.”

“Say what?”

“I knew it,” said Lance, disgusted. “You have the worst taste buds in the world!”

“What’s wrong with Hawaiian?”

“EVERYTHING.”

“Don’t you think you’re overreacting.”

“Hell no. We’re breaking up.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah!”

Smirking, Keith jumped forwards and pulled Lance’s hood right over his head so he couldn’t see. Then he tackled him back to the bed, batting his protesting hands out of the way, and sat on him until he tapped out.

“Alright, alright! You win!”
Making sure to take his time, Keith inched away so Lance could finally get free and breathe. He came up like a scooper diver deprived of oxygen.

“Why are you so freakishly strong?!” he demanded.

“You love it,” said Keith, kissing Lance’s forehead. “Don’t even lie.”

Red as beetroot, Lance wriggled out of Keith’s now loose grip and shimmied to the door, declaring his intent to quote, *smite your ass one day, ex-mullet.* Then he careened dramatically out of the door, acting so over the top that Keith couldn’t help but chuckle. The night wore on like that, Lance being goofy and overly grand, taking every opportunity to act crazy and make Keith laugh. He fished around in the bathroom until he found a shower cap, then did a bit pretending to be a very stereotypical granny. When their pizza came he fashioned himself a cheese moustache and did impressions of Coran. Come night fall they climbed out to the roof to gaze at the stars and he spun some crazy tale about his brothers duct taping him to a tree in their back yard. It was everything Keith loved about Lance: his vibrancy and joy and weird sense of humour. His cheeks hurt from smiling all night. Yet, despite all of this, he knew Lance well enough now to see the cracks. To see what this show was hiding. To know that this was Lance’s way of trying to overcompensate for everything he didn’t have the words or nerve for. He knew that every time Lance held his hand, he didn’t imagine the way his grip would tighten for a second, or the way he stared at Keith when he thought Keith wasn’t looking, as though trying to drink in every detail.

Even with all of Lance’s caring antics, it didn’t disguise the fact that this was a goodbye. And they owed it to themselves to do it properly.

“And then my grandma found me and chased Marco around for, like, an hour. That woman had some stamina, let me tell you,” continued Lance. They were lying on the tiles and Keith could see the stars shining in Lance’s eyes. “Then she made them read Moby Dick out loud for an hour as punishment. That was her thing. Cause of her I managed to get through Pride and Prejudice. It bored me to tears. V kinda liked it though, she—”

“I’m going to miss you,” whispered Keith, unable to keep the words in anymore.

Lance froze, words stilling on his tongue. He looked away.

“I’m gonna think about you every day,” continued Keith. “*Every day.* You understand that, don’t you?”

When Lance said nothing, Keith shifted over so that he could reach an arm out and turn Lance’s face gently towards him. “…Lance?”

A soft sob pulsed through Lance’s body and when he finally faced Keith, there were tears shinning in his eyes along with the stars. Like pools of silver.

“I’m gonna miss you too,” he whispered. “I’m gonna… *fuck* Keith I’m…” Another sob burst past his lips.

Swallowing, Keith tugged Lance even closer and made soft hushing noises, much like Lance had done for him only hours before. He smoothed his hair and breathed him in, trying to memorise every tiny detail in this moment. Every line and breath and sensation.

“I know,” he whispered. “I know.”

Lance inched back, staring at Keith with an intensity that almost scared him, and bent into a soft kiss. Keith returned the kiss, nothing more than a brush of lips, before they parted. A spark passed
between them. Again, they were kissing, but it had morphed into something else now, into something hot and wet and needy. Limbs tangled, teeth scraped in their desperations. When they parted both their eyes were glassy.

“We should go inside,” whispered Keith.

Lance nodded mutely, and they moved back into their room. Nobody bothered to turn the light on or draw the curtains, they simply tugged off their shoes and crawled beneath the covers, too preoccupied with the need to be in each other’s arms to worry about stripping either. Their hands found each other as though magnetically drawn, and with a bit of shuffling here and there they fitted themselves together beneath the darkness and quiet of their shared quilt. They didn’t fit together like two puzzle pieces, that wasn’t their style after all. Instead they were odd, jagged and unsuited in places, with edges that didn’t line up and corners that didn’t quite fit. But, bizarrely, that was what made them work, wasn’t it?

“I know I shouldn’t say this,” whispered Lance. “I know it’s selfish…” he swallowed thickly. “But I don’t want you to go.”

Keith closed his eyes. There were a thousand things he could say to Lance. Hundreds of apologies, hundreds of rational explanations or reassurances that this wasn’t it, it wasn’t forever, but none rose to his tongue. Lance knew everything he could or would say anyway. It wasn’t a plea for Keith to actually stay, it was just a plea for Keith to understand. So instead of saying anything, Keith shifted and kissed Lance with all of his being. He poured everything into that kiss, all of his worry and love and regret. Lance rose to meet him, responding in kind to his feelings. Hands roamed over clothes, knotted in hair. Lance rolled them over, straddling Keith’s hips, and as the quilt fell away he parted for breath. There was a hunger in his eyes Keith recognised in himself from last night, a desperation brought about by impending parting. Except now Lance knew it was coming too.

Keeping his eyes on Keith, Lance shrugged off his hoodie, then his T-shirt. Keith sat up, ran his fingers up Lance’s ribs and felt him shiver.

“I don’t want to go either,” he whispered. He wrapped his arms around him, and felt Lance do the same. “Or maybe I want to take you with me.”

“Eloping already?” joked Lance, despite the wobble in his voice. “Brave, Kogane.”

“You make me feel fearless… and the most afraid I’ve ever been. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah,” said Lance. His fingers flitted around Keith’s front and tugged at his T-shirt. He stared straight into Keith’s eyes. “Perfectly.”

Then Keith’s chest was free and they were kissing again. Keith felt Lance’s fingers dancing across his skin, sending spikes of electricity racing through his veins. Keith pulled at Lance’s bottom lip with his teeth, then trailed kisses down his neck, his shoulder. He could hear Lance’s slick heart beat beneath his fingers, feel his quickened breath ghosting on his skin. It was hot all of a sudden, and they were tugging their trousers off, touches becoming fevered, kisses becoming almost bruising. Keith bit Lance’s shoulder, Lance raked his fingernails down Keith’s back.

It was getting dangerous. Keith could feel his cock straining against his underwear, could feel Lance hard against his hip as they pushed and pulled at each other, groaning at the friction. Keith wanted Lance so badly. Wanted him like he’d never wanted anything before. But even more than that, even more than the wanting Lance, he wanted… he wanted to give. To see Lance’s lips part in pleasure, to see the evidence of it flushed across his skin. But what did Lance want?
“Are you okay?” he whispered.

Lance hummed, lips on Keith’s ear.

“Lance, I’m serious, are you okay with this?”

Instead of saying anything, Lance crawled onto Keith’s lap and they both moaned at the pleasure that brought them. Lance’s fingernails dug into Keith’s shoulders and he returned the favour, grasping Lance’s hip to steady them.

“Jesus Christ,” he breathed.

Lance let out a breathy laugh. “Not really the time for church,”

Keith stared up at Lance, at his brown skin and dark hair, his bright blue eyes and the flush across his cheeks. It snaked down to his chest, where Keith had left a trail of kisses scattered like cherry blossoms.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said.

Lance swallowed thickly. “You’re one to talk. Do you even know what you make me want to do to you, Keith Kogane?”

“I don’t want you to do something you’ll regret,” said Keith, quickly. “Or I’ll regret. I don’t want you to do anything because you feel pressured or like there’s no other option. I’m willing to wait Lance, I’ll wait for as long as you want me.”

“I want you,” said Lance. “I want you Keith. And… I’m not ready for everything. But I want…”

Lance trailed off but Keith understood. He nodded.

They slipped their underwear off as smoothly as they could (which was an awkward tangle of limbs) before coming back together, both relieved at the release. Gently, unsure and self-aware, they began to explore one another. They traced patterns on each other’s skin with fingers then lips, hands otherwise busy, and in the dark, close room of that motel they shared more of themselves then they’d ever shared with anyone before.

Keith would remember the sweetness of that moment forever. The bitterness and intimacy. But more than that, more than any of that, he’d remember lying quietly in the dark afterwards, holding each other. Both afraid to let go.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered into the darkness of Lance’s chest.

Lance shushed him, but Keith simply repeated himself. “I’m sorry I just… I just—” The words ‘I love you’ were there again, but this time Keith couldn’t bring himself to say that. Not consciously, not with purpose in this quiet, intimate dark. It made this all too real. Too awful. And as much as the feelings demanded to be voiced, it was too much right now.

“I’m just really gonna miss the free Cheetos.”

There was a pause, then Lance laughed and croaked, “Idiot.”

Because some things didn’t have to be said to be heard. Some things were too big to rush. But Keith was fine with that because he knew.

He knew.
One Month later

**Lance:** Don’t go looking for the Loch Ness Monster, you conspiracy freak.

Also don’t freeze. It’s cold in Scotland. Not like the desert.

Mom says good luck, btw.

And V is being a freak and telling me to send you links to some Fall Out Boy song.

I said no.

Cause you need better taste in music.

Except Young Volcanos is pretty good. I’ll give you that.

*Lance is typing*

*Lance is typing*

**Miss you already asshole xx**

Smiling softly down at his phone, Keith quickly tapped out a reply, shifted the weight of his backpack, and put it on silent. Then he slipped through the terminal tunnel and boarded his plane.

**Keith:** Miss you too jerk xx

Chapter End Notes

SO... there's a reason we did this. Hope y'all like having this from Keith's POV for now, Lance will have his time, DON'T WORRY! Wynne_Jayne did an excellent job as usual and y'all need to show her some much needed love <3 THANKS EVERYONE AGAIN FOR THE SPIFFING COMMENTS XXX
Chapter 16

Chapter by Spinsomnia

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lance

September

The first thing Lance did on the first day of the semester was set his phone to GMT, so he’d always know what time it was for Keith. He’d know what time it was when they talked to each other. He’d be able to envision his boyfriend, day and night, eating breakfast, lying in bed, playing the bagpipes… whatever.

The skies were overcast that first day. He’d been preoccupied with hauling boxes into their new place over the weekend. It was a cool student house; big open kitchen, double bedrooms, a window with a seat on it in Lance’s room… he’d have been more excited about it if he didn’t have the constant thought on the back of his mind: Keith is gone. I won’t see Keith for six months.

A lot could happen in six months. He knew that much.

Monday, 12:00pm GMT

Keith: So Haggis is disgusting.

*Keith is typing*

Don’t ever try it. Like, don’t.

It was 7am. Lance rubbed his eyes. He had a special ringtone for Keith now, so he’d always know when it was him.

He smiled at the blinding screen. It was afternoon for Keith.

Lance: What the fuck is haggis?

Keith: You sure you wanna know?

Lance: Yeah, man! If you’re spending six months in a foreign land, I wanna learn a little, you know? ;)

Keith: It’s sheep organs wrapped in its stomach. Served nice and hot. I feel violated.

Lance: WhaT tHe FUUCK?! GROSS!!!!

Keith: It should be illegal.

Lance chortled. His own stomach (thankfully not encasing his organs) did a number on him. It was difficult to imagine that Keith was thousands of miles away. Not even on the same freaking
continent. An entire ocean stood between them. He chewed his lip, wondering how to respond. This was the first conversation of any length they’d had so far.

**Lance:** So... made any friends yet?

**Keith:** don’t hate me but I haven’t spoken to many people yet... at all.

**Lance:** Get out there and make friends!! I know what you’re like. Believe me, people wanna speak to you.

It took Keith fifteen minutes to reply. Lance’s eyes were beginning to shut again.

**Keith:** …they do?

**Lance:** Want me to come over there and show you how it’s done ex-mullet?

13:05pm GMT

**Keith:** I wish you could.

*Keith is typing*

**Keith:** Miss you xx

**Lance:** Miss you too. Xx

Time to get up. Time to stop dwelling on how long was left before Keith came home. Time. Time. Time was not on Lance’s side.

And classes were hard.

The seminar leaders wasted no time this year in giving everyone as much work as possible, so when Keith text Lance on Wednesday at 11:18 am GMT (6am for Lance), he’d had exactly three and a half hours sleep from staying up working so late.

**Keith:** The highlands are so beautiful Lance.

Sleep is beautiful too, Lance wanted to reply. But he sat up in bed, shieling his eyes against the sun pouring in through his high window. The world swam. He was exhausted.

**Lance:** Describe it to me. Tell me where you are.

It took Keith another ten, long minutes to reply. But it was worth it.

**Keith:** Have you ever seen a Kestrel? It’s a kind of Falcon, I think. The ones here have amazing blue stripes on their wings and there’s a guy leading the excursion who handles them. This morning we hiked up a mountain and he let the bird fly free. I’ve never seen anything like it. She soared above the mountains and through the clouds like nothing you could imagine. And she had this cry that just... echoed. It was magical, Lance. It’s cold, of course. The very tops of the mountains have snow on them, but we didn’t go all the way. There wasn’t time today. I’m gonna try and do a hike every day, I think, just to see the valleys and rivers from this high up. It’s like I can see the whole world.

Lance lay back on his pillow and closed his eyes, trying to imagine the sound of the Kestrel as it circled Keith above the mountain. In his imagination, Keith was alone, his features alight with
wonder, the wind whipping his hair this way and that… Lance imagined Keith’s hair a little longer too. He exhaled at the thought, smiling.

**Lance:** That’s crazy. I wish I was with you.

**Keith:** Me too.

*Keith is typing*

**Keith:** You’d love the beaches. They’re really wild.

**Lance:** You been skinny dipping yet? Ha ha ha

**Keith:** You’ve got to be kidding me! I’d die of

*Keith is typing*

**Keith:** I can’t remember what it’s called

**Lance:** Pneumonia?

**Keith:** That was just a whole lot of letters that shouldn’t go together but yeah sure

*Keith is typing*

**Keith:** What are you up to right now?

**Lance:** Sleeping. Well I was. Aren’t you lucky your boyfriend is nice enough to wake up just for you?

**Keith:** Huh? You were sleeping at this time? Don’t you have class?

**Lance:** You’re such a dingus. It’s six in the morning here.

**Keith:** F

*Keith is typing*

**Keith:** Fuck! I forgot!! Time zones!!

*Keith is typing*

**Keith:** Jeez I’m sorry. I’ll try and text later next time xx

**Lance:** Don’t worry. I kinda like it : ) xx

Just like before, Lance couldn’t sleep after texting Keith.

Hunk blinked when Lance sloped into the kitchen to make himself coffee.

“Whoa, you’re up early.”

Lance groaned. “Mmmm.”

He felt Hunk’s eyes on him. Lance hadn’t told Hunk or Pidge about… well… *everything.* He was
waiting for the right time, but it hadn’t arrived yet. The irony, Lance thought, was that was probably how Keith had felt telling him about Scotland… never the right time. He slurped his coffee and simpered into the sitting room to stare at the wall. His new favourite past-time.

It wasn’t that he was feeling sorry for himself (much), it was just there wasn’t time to relax. Or think. Or exist. He had a report to finish by tomorrow. He had a presentation to organise with three other people. He had work-experience to sort out by the end of next week. And Keith was away for six months.

On his break, Lance received another message from his beloved.

3:25pm GMT

Keith: The site manager is officially an evil prick.

Lance: I can feel the heat coming from the phone hahaha

Keith: We didn’t get a break for six hours.

*Keith is typing*

Keith: Six

Keith: HOURS

Lance: What happened to that immortal stamina of yours???

Keith: It abandoned me for the afternoon lol

And I’m still not used to the time difference, it’s killed my sleep even more

*Keith is typing*

Keith: But our coordinator (Danny), he’s pretty nice. He took me out for lunch today.


Lance: Oh! So you’re making friends! Great!

Lance’s eyes skipped over the words, ‘he took me out for lunch’. That sounded kind of… he shook his head. Get it together, Lance. It’s only been a few days. But his heart was slippery with dread. What if this was the beginning, what if –

Keith: Yeah, he knows this place like the back of his hand. I’ve already got lost a few times so it’s good to know someone has my back

*Keith is typing*

Anyway, better get back. The tyrant manager is calling us back again. Speak soon!

Lance: We need to arrange a time to call. Let me know when you’re free xx

It was too early to be feeling like this. But Lance didn’t sit there and panic. He had a meeting in
ten minutes, so he pushed back the nauseating discomfort in his abdomen, packed up the rest of his lunch, and headed for class.

3:46pm CST

_Allura:_ Hello, Lance! I hope your first week of term is faring well. It’s pizza night at the grove and I was wondering if yourself, Hunk and Pidge would like to come along for a slice or two? I’ve spoken to Keith earlier today and sent him my wishes. It would be lovely for us all to have a catch up.

_Lance:_ Yo, sounds great! Thanks! I spoke to him too. Sounds like he’s having fun. See you later, Allura.

_Allura:_ Oh, and feel free to bring Shiro along as well.

*Allura is typing*

_Allura:_ Only if he’s not too busy, of course.

Lance smirked.

_Lance:_ I’m sure he’ll be down. Peace out

“I’ve never been to the grove before.” Said Pidge as they left home for the grove that evening.

Lance had a spring in his step, despite not having slept properly all week. He was running on empty which made him extra hyper.

“Not even _once?”_ Asked Lance.

“No! I was too busy trying to prove I deserve my scholarship. It’s hard for women to be taken seriously in science, you know.”

“Oh yeah.” Lance snorted, “Prodigy.”

Hunk had his arms folded. “This pizza will be _nothing_ like the ones I make. I guarantee you.”

Pidge and Lance exchanged a look. He’d been salty about Allura’s venue of choice all afternoon.

“I’m sure it won’t be, boo.” Lance reassured, ruffling his best friend’s hair. _Tell them about Keith._

_Said his brain. Tell them about Keith._

“I heard from Keith today.” His voice cracked. Darn it.

Hunk’s eyebrows shot up his forehead. “You did? How’s he doing?”

Lance shrugged. “Good, I think.”

He didn’t miss the way Pidge’s mouth quirked knowingly.

“What’s it like sharing a place with two guys?” He jibed, “You grossed out by us yet?”

“Please,” Said Pidge. “You two are tame compared to the baboons I shared with freshman year. Don’t flatter yourself.”
“Tame? I ain’t tame.” Said Lance, “Last year I didn’t change my clothes or shower for three days straight once.”

Hunk wrinkled his nose. “I remember.”

“Yeah?” Pidge challenged, “Did you puke on the window and then draw a smiley face in it?”

Lance physically cringed.

Pidge smirked. “Didn’t think so.”

“Christ, Pidge,” Said Hunk, “You could have come to live with us sooner, you know?”

“Yeah, we asked you!” Said Lance.

Pidge shrugged. “Eh. I’m here now, aren’t I?”

Allura was a shining image of beaming delight when they met her at the grove. She wore a tight blue crop top over a pair of pale pink culottes, her hair wrapped in two deliberately mussy space buns atop her head.

“Where’s Lotor?” Asked Hunk as they sat down to order after they’d all greeted each other.

Allura played with a stray curl by her face.

“Oh… he’s gone back to England for two weeks to try and negotiate with his parents.”

Pidge’s brows tucked together. “Negotiate?”

“Well…” Allura seemed uncomfortable, “He’s not – shall we say – overly supportive of their business plans. He didn’t elaborate, but it seems quite tumultuous at the moment. I’m sure they’ll be able to find a middle ground though.”

“Well…” Allura seemed uncomfortable, “He’s not – shall we say – overly supportive of their business plans. He didn’t elaborate, but it seems quite tumultuous at the moment. I’m sure they’ll be able to find a middle ground though.”

“Wow,” Said Lance, “You shouldn’t have to do business with your own parents.”

“That’s what I said,” Said Allura, placing a sparkly pink nail between her lips. “But anyway! How are all of you? What did you get up to this summer?”

Hunk told them about his three week stay in Colorado with Shay, and her plans to join the hiking club at college there. **Hiking… thought Lance, Keith…**

Pidge and Matt had gone to visit their father at NASA, where he’d taken them on an exclusive tour and accidentally unveiled plans for a new rocket that wasn’t supposed to be released to the public for another year. Lance hadn’t seen why that was such a big deal, but her technical jargon seemed to shock Hunk.

“A booster independently controlled with Graphene microchips?” He’d exclaimed, “Insane!”

Allura’s startling eyes found Lance’s, and he knew he couldn’t hide it any longer.

“What about you, Lance?” She asked innocently, “How was everything with Ke” - ?

“Hey guys. Sorry I’m late.”

Lance had never been more grateful for Shiro’s presence. Keith’s older brother looked a lot better than he had the last time he’d seen him. He glowed with energy, beaming at the students one by
one, until his dark eyes fell on Allura.

“Hi, Lura. Thanks for the invite.”

“Oh! B-but of course!” Allura stammered, flattening her already perfect hair. “Take a seat, won’t you? We haven’t ordered yet. I’m assuming you’re hungry.”

Shiro gave her an easy smile. No wonder he was so popular when he was younger. After embracing his bi side, Lance could admit Shiro was a looker and a half. But then he thought of Keith, and his nerves plummeted and surged as he remembered their last intimate night together. Christ…

Shiro sat beside Allura, and the two stared dead ahead. Lance had never seen anything more awkward.

“So, Lance, now I’ve got you on your own… what’s my brother like in a relationship?” Shiro winked.

Lance could kill him.

Hunk spat out his water. Pidge turned to slowly face him.

“Did he just say?” –

“Boyfriend?” –

“What do” –

“Wait” –

“Does he mean Keith?”

Of course it only took them three seconds to work it out.

“I knew you hadn’t told them.” Allura rolled her eyes and Shiro shook his head.

Lance sighed. He was too tired to do anything else.

“Keith is my boyfriend. It happened… at the concert.” He said it without looking at his two best friends, glaring instead at Shiro and Allura who were appropriately smug.

“I knew it.” Hunk was saying with quiet intensity. “I knew it. I knew you’d get together.”

“That was months ago!” Said Pidge, “Why didn’t you tell us? Actually – don’t answer that. I get it. Because it’s you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Lance flared.

“You plus feelings equals awkward.” Pidge drawled.

“Don’t math me! I’m not an equation, Pidge!”

Shiro began laughing.

“She’s right, though.”

“You two were impossible.” Allura agreed.
“You know, when they were at my mom’s place, Lance accidentally played footsies with me under the table instead of Keith.” Said Shiro with enormous satisfaction.

Lance thwacked his head on the table. “Shiro! Don’t tell that story!” He cried into the wood, face blazing.

Allura cackled. “No way! That’s so embarrassing!” She unsuccessfully bit back more giggles. “Poor Lance.”

He groaned, burying his face in Hunk’s shoulder instead.

“Back me up, big man.”

Hunk shrugged him off. “No way, dude. That’s too hilarious. I ain’t sticking up for you when you didn’t tell me nothing! Now spill. How did it happen?”

So Lance told them. He recounted everything. Seattle, the concert, Keith’s spontaneous visit to his place (at which Shiro pursed his lips like a disapproving grandmother), their trip to the Bear Dunes, and Keith’s unpleasant reveal about Scotland, at which they all fell silent.

“It feels like he should be here.” Said Allura, nursing her last slice of pizza.

She was right. There was a spot right by Lance that could so easily have been occupied.

“I miss him.” He said without thinking. “But I – I shouldn’t – I mean it’s hardly been any time at all.”

Allura gave him a sympathetic smile.

“He had his reasons.” Said Shiro stoically, drawing himself up and nodding approvingly, “He needed to do this, even if…”

*Even if he doesn’t find her, he wanted to say. Lance was glad he didn’t.*

“I wonder if he’ll like Haggis.” Said Hunk.

Lance snorted. “He said it should be illegal.”

Hunk’s face fell. “But it’s a delicacy, right?”

“It’s sheep entrails, Hunk! Last time I checked that’s not the Urban Dictionary definition of *delicate*!”

And thank god they were laughing again. Because Lance needed to laugh. He checked his phone when he took a break to the bathroom, and his heart leapt when he saw a text from Keith. It had been sent hours ago. He hadn’t had time to check it.

6:00pm, GMT

**Keith:** Tell me about school. What’s everyone up to?

**Lance:** Jesus sorry I just saw this! I haven’t been able to check my phone since class.

*Lance is typing*

**Lance:** Class is hard, dude. Like seriously crazy. And it’s only just started! I’m actually with
everyone right now. Shiro and Allura are already acting like the mom and dad of the group. I think you were right. Lotor’s not here (thank fuck). Hunk and Pidge just found out about us… you can imagine their reactions. Oh, and Shiro embarrassed me in front of EVERYONE so next time you speak to him make sure to tell him off, kay?

When Lance came back from the bathroom, Keith had replied.

2:10am, GMT

Keith: Whoa, I just woke up to this

*Keith is typing*

Keith: So you’re having dinner with them? Staying for a couple drinks?

Lance: Yeah. It’s nice. But not as nice without you.

Keith: I’m a little jealous, I won’t pretend

*Keith is typing*

Keith: I don’t really know anyone yet and our friends are the best

Also I was just dreaming about you

Lance was well aware everyone had just seen him grinning at his phone screen under the table.

Lance: What were you dreaming about? Something sexy I hope ;)

Keith: Not telling. Use your imagination.

Lance: Not even a hint? Come oooooon

Keith: Remember that night at mine when we nearly

*Keith is typing*

When we were like

*Keith is typing*

God, don’t make me explain it over text

Lance: I know exaaaactly what you mean

Keith: Picture that but this time there was nothing in the way – clothes-wise, I mean

Lance paused. Fuck. Now he was turned on.

Keith: It’s late so im gonna get back to sleep, I hope you don’t mind

Lance: You’re just gonna leave me high and dry like that? rUde, Kogane!!!

Keith: You know it would be different if you were here

*Keith is typing*
Keith: I wish you were here xx

Lance: I wish I was too xx

*Lance is typing*

Lance: It’s gonna sound crazy, but I already hella miss you. The hell is up with me man? This semester better go fast xx

Keith: I’m gonna warn you, I won’t be able to talk much. We’re travelling to a remote area soon and signal is bad. But I’ll text when I can.

Goodnight, Lance

Love you xx

Lance stared at those last two words. He couldn’t believe Keith had said it first. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t said it back. He loved Keith. Of course he did. He was so in love with him it was like physical pain sometimes. It burned him to be close to him. And it froze his heart to be away. But he felt… he couldn’t explain his reluctance to say it yet. It wasn’t because it wasn’t true. He’d forsaken the chance to say it when they’d been together, and he couldn’t say it over a phone call. He sure as hell couldn’t say it over text. And now he’d have to wait for months… this was a special king of torture.

That night, Lance tried to picture Keith’s dream. And then he had one about Keith. Keith was talking to him, saying something, but Lance couldn’t hear the words. He woke up feeling disheartened and upset – it was an eerily similar feeling to the one he’d felt when Keith had told him he was going to Scotland. Maybe the dream was a memory.

____________________

October

As the weeks rolled by, Lance didn’t hear from Keith much at all. And it was killing him.

Every few days he got the occasional:

Keith: Just found a spot with signal! Hope you’re good

Gotta go now, bye xx

But that was about it.

As it was, he had his new work experience to keep him busy. Lance was shadowing paramedics at the local hospital, and it was more intense than anything he’d had to do in his life. The blood and pain and love and mess of other people’s lives were enough to take his mind off his own pain and love when it counted. The first couple of times had shaken him pretty bad, but he’d been assured that was normal. Lance was scared he hadn’t been cut out to do this, but his overseer, Romelle, had told him she’d thrown up at the sight of blood before becoming a paramedic. That made Lance feel better. He couldn’t imagine her being scared. She was serious-faced and assertive and everything a paramedic should be. She was pretty too, but that was the last thing that occurred to Lance when he met her. For the hundredth time recently, he thanked his past self for accepting Shiro’s request to drive Keith to Texas all that time ago in first year. Who knew what he’d be like now otherwise. Would a Lance without Keith still hit on every girl he saw without an ounce of self-respect? He freaking hoped not.
Aside from his work-experience, class was getting harder and harder. And he was beginning to fall behind.

Lance from a year ago would have brushed it off and gone for a walk. Or watched some dumb show and procrastinated until finally getting his ass in gear and making the effort to write whatever essay or report that was due. Not this time. He struggled. He couldn’t wrap his head around simple concepts. He stared into space during seminars. He spent hours at the library pouring over the same sentence a thousand times until his eyes couldn’t take it anymore. But nothing was going in.

One night a month later, Lance dug out his diary. He hadn’t written in it since coming back from the concert in Seattle. He re-read the last entry and envied this version of Lance. The one who had months of love and kisses and phone-calls and hours of bliss with Keith ahead. The one who had no idea Keith was about to leave him for six months. The one who had no idea college was about to get seriously difficult. The one who was ignorant about what real pain looked like; just that day he’d taken a man to hospital who’d got his leg trapped under his own car, only to find out it would have to be amputated. Day after day, the more he worked at the hospital, Lance found himself so grateful for his life. For his friends. For his luck. So why the fuck was he feeling so damn sorry for himself?

Dear Abuelita,

I don’t even know how to start this. I can’t believe it. Keith and I kissed. Well, I kissed him. Then he kissed me! Remember me telling you about the concert? Well, it happened. And we kissed. And I still can’t believe it. Only hours ago, I was worried that maybe nothing would happen between us. I was worried he didn’t feel the same way, but now…

I’ve never been so happy, Abuelita. Not since you died.

I love him. I love him so much. He’s asleep next to me. We’re in a hotel. I can’t sleep because I’m so excited. He’s gonna come home with me, Abuelita. We’re going to –

Lance slammed the diary shut. This shouldn’t have been depressing him more, but it was.

His phone began buzzing. He reached for it immediately, as he always did. But it wasn’t Keith.
“Mom?” He answered the phone tiredly. It was late. “How’s things?”

“Oh, Lance…” She sounded teary. “It’s your sister, she” – Beatriz choked on a sob.

“Veronica? What happened?” Lance sat up, painfully awake.

“She’s taken off. None of us know where she went. Lance, I’m sorry to call you like this, but” –

“No, mom. Don’t apologise. What happened?”

There was a long silence.

“She’s getting married.”

Lance’s ears rang. Huh? But Veronica wasn’t even with anyone. Was she? Not that he knew of at least.

“But…” He was speechless.

“I know…” Beatriz sighed, her voice filled with emotion. “None of us knew. She kept him quiet
for so long.”

“Who? Who is he? Why has she taken off?”

Lance was pacing. He hadn’t changed out of his paramedic uniform yet.

“Some… some guy she met in Chicago last year. But – she – she says she wants to marry him. Oh, Lance, your father and I went spare. What on earth is she doing? She’s so young for god’s sakes! I don’t understand, after how we raised her, how could she’” - ?

“Mom, calm down.” Said Lance, breathing through his own panic. There had to be an explanation for this. He could already picture the shouting match that had inevitably taken place.

“I’m gonna call her, alright?”

Beatriz sniffed. “Okay… maybe you can talk some sense into her. I’m sorry, Lance.”

“It’s okay, mom.” Said Lance softly, sitting on the edge of his bed. “Don’t worry. Everything will be fine.”

She gave a humourless laugh. “You’re so precious, you know that? I love you.”

“Love you too, mom. I’ll call you back soon.”

Lance called his sister immediately. She nearly let it ring out before answering with a great sigh.

“So… you’ve spoken to mom.” She said dryly.

Lance tutted. “Don’t be like that, V. What the hell is going on? Where are you right now?”

“On my way to Chicago. I knew they wouldn’t understand.”

Lance stood. “Give them a chance! This is weird, V! None of us knew you had a boyfriend! Why’d you keep it a secret?”

“I see mom left out a few details.”

Lance waited. “What details?”

“Dave is older, okay? Quite a bit older. But it doesn’t matter. I love him. He loves me. That should count for something, right?”

Lance put his head in his hands. “Veronica… you know how that sounds.”

“I know! But if they’d just – just open their eyes a little.” Now she sounded teary. “Look, Lance. I know it’s been hard for you to notice because you’re so in your own world and you’re their precious baby” –

“What?!” Lance protested, “I’m not their baby” –

“You are!” Said Veronica. “You’re shielded from the – the shit. But I knew it would all kick off once I told them about Dave.”

“Give them some time!” Said Lance, pacing up and down again, “You didn’t have to run away!”

“I did! I can’t stand it!” She cried.
There was a long silence.

“It was always going to be different for you and Keith.”

Lance clenched his fist by his side. “Veronica. That’s completely different.”

“Is it? Just because you’re the same age?”

“Yes! No! I don’t know! For a lot of reasons! Because it was obvious Keith was never going to take advantage of me!”

Veronica clicked her tongue. “Dave would never take advantage of me.” She said, her voice low. “He wouldn’t, Lance. Please just get on my side here. Mom and dad would listen to you.”

Lance couldn’t believe this was happening. Now of all times. His sister. His emo sister, Veronica, was getting married.

“It’s not about money, is it?”

“Fuck, no!”

That made him feel a little better. The idea of Veronica marrying for money disturbed him. He let out a long sigh, pushing a hand through his hair.

“Okay, V. I’ll talk to mom. But you *have* to promise me you’ll go back. And I’m not on anyone’s side, got it? Not until I’ve met this guy.”

He could almost hear the smirk in her tone. “My Cuban brother looking out for his sis, huh? Very traditional, Lance.”

He huffed, though he was glad to see she’d got some of her humour back. “I’m serious, V.”

“Okay… I’ll call mom. Thanks, bro.”

When Lance went to bed, his head was spinning. He sent Keith a message.

*Lance*: Yo, some crazy stuff has gone down. Can I call you tomorrow? I need to talk to someone sane. I miss you xx

_________________________

**3:00pm, GMT**

*Keith*: Sorry. Can’t call right now. Super busy at the dig. Might have found something and Danny wants me hands on. Call tomorrow?

*Lance*: Sure. What time?

*Keith*: 9pm my time. So... like 4pm for you?

*Lance*: Okay. Speak then xx

*Keith*: Love you xx
Lance seethed at his phone screen in the middle of the lecture. This was stupid. He was stupid. He shouldn’t have bothered Keith with his dumb family drama. But it would be so good to hear his voice…

“Your sister’s getting married?” Hunk and Pidge repeated in unison when Lance got back from college.

He slumped onto the couch. “Yup. To some guy from Chicago.”

They looked at each other.


“Agreed.” Said Hunk.

Pidge sat by Lance, grimacing. “Are… you okay?”

Lance pushed out a breath through his teeth. “Honestly? No. This semester sucks. I thought it was gonna be – be the best – I thought everything was cool now. I thought I was finally happy with being me… but then” –

He stopped. He couldn’t finish that sentence.

“Keith left.” Hunk did the honour for him.

“Yeah.” Said Lance, gazing at his own knees. “Keith left. And now my dumb sister is getting married to a guy who’s probably twice her age! I mean – Veronica? She’s not the type. Believe me.”

Pidge shrugged. “Sometimes you think you know someone and then you just… don’t. You think you’ve got it aaaall figured out.”

“No kidding.” Lance snorted. He leapt up, slinging his bag back over his shoulder. “I’m gonna go to my room. Got some stuff to read before I head to the hospital. Later, y’all.”

As Lance bounded up the stairs, Pidge and Hunk relaxed.

“He’s out of it.” Said Pidge.

“Waaaay out of it.”

“Should we be worried?”

Hunk narrowed his eyes at the place Lance had disappeared. “No… not yet.”

Lance was restless. He paced his room. Boxes were still piled in the corner that he hadn’t had a chance to unpack yet. The walls were spare save for a few crumpled timetables and reminders for upcoming deadlines. Leaves fell by his window.

And Keith would call any minute.

It was ten past four.

Lance chewed a whole pack of gum until his mouth burned with the intensity of the mint.
It was twenty past four.
Lance played Candy Crush on his phone, constantly checking his notifications.
It was half past four.
He stared out of window, the uncomfortable feeling in his stomach knotting.

*Lance: Hey, are you still good to call? Xx*

*Lance is typing*

*Lance: No pressure, I'm good for whenever. But I have to go in 45 minutes.*

Another ten minutes passed.
Lance wanted to die.

*Lance: Dude, you there?*

The moment he hit send, his phone began to ring.

“H-hello?”

“Hey, man.”

It was as if every nerve and ball of tension in his body unwound at the soft, crackly sound of Keith’s voice over the phone.

“Keith… it’s so good to hear – you. God… I thought you were never gonna call.”

Keith’s soft laugh spread warmth from the core of his chest and throughout his entire body, spreading through his limbs and making him tingle as he melted onto the bed.

“Well, here I am. Are you alright? Sorry it took me so long. I had to shower when I got back.”

“Y-yeah!” Said Lance, chewing his nails. “I’m good! How are you? Tell me everything.” He was so nervous. Why was he so nervous?

“Everything? You got time?” Keith laughed.

“I always got time for you.” Said Lance, loving the way his face heat up as he said it. The quick pause on the other side told him Keith was probably blushing too. He could picture it.

“O-okay” – Keith coughed – “Jeez… where do I start?”

“Tell me about today.”

So he did. And Lance could see why he’d taken so long to reply. They were constantly digging at the excavation site. But not digging in the way Lance had envisaged with spades and heavy machinery – it was more intricate than that, Keith explained. They had to be careful not to accidentally damage the artefacts, so a lot of it was slowly brushing away at the layers and layers of dust and rock, using sensitive scanners to search for metal and signs of anomalies in the dirt.

“I love it though,” Said Keith, “the level of concentration puts me in a trance, sometimes. Requires a lot of patience, you know?”

“Hey! I’m very patient!” Keith protested. “*You* just have a knack for getting under my skin.”

Lance was grinning. “You love it.”


Lance bit his lip. He couldn’t say it like this. *I love you.* The words tripped on his tongue, but instead his dumb brain went with this:

“S-so, who’s this Danny guy? The one you’ve made friends with, I mean.”

“Oh, Danny! Danny’s great.” Said Keith. Lance didn’t like the way his stomach lurched at the tone. “Today he told me I have a ‘keen eye for objects of worth’.”

“Obviously.” Said Lance, “That’s why you like me.”

“Very funny.” Said Keith, and Lance could literally hear him rolling his eyes. “But yeah… he’s cool. I’m still getting to know everyone else. It’s kind of a culture shock. The others here have no clue about American culture whatsoever. All they seem to think we do is eat burgers and wave flags all day.”

“Damn right we do,” Said Lance with his best Southern accent (which wasn’t very convincing), “‘Murica is *God’s* country.”

Keith sniggered. “Nice accent, Lance… I… miss you a lot.”

Lance sighed and lay on his back, throwing an arm behind his head. “I miss you too.” He said. “Every day I think about hopping on a plane and coming to see you. Even if it’s just for a few days.”

“If either of us could afford that, I wouldn’t hesitate.” Said Keith.

“Sucks, huh?”

“Yeah… sucks.”

Lance closed his eyes and tried to see Keith lying beside him. It was strange the way his face became more and more vague in his imagination. Already. As though Keith had never been real at all. Staring at pictures of him for hours on end before he slept helped, sure… but it was hard to animate the stillness of a photograph. It was hard to capture Keith’s special way of smiling, or the way his eyes dipped when he was embarrassed. It was just hard.

“Tell me about your life right now.” Said Keith.

So Lance did. He skipped out the part about falling behind in college work and having an existential crisis almost every day. He didn’t want to worry Keith. Keith had enough on his plate.

“Your sister’s getting married?” Said Keith, echoing Hunk and Pidge.

“Yup.”

“Heavy… how do you feel about it?”

Lance turned over on his bed, picking at the blanket. “I dunno, man. She says she loves him,
but…”
Keith laughed. “Unless he’s a serial killer, it shouldn’t be a problem then, right?”
Lance blew out a puff of air. “I guess so. It’s just weird.”
“Weirder things have happened.”
Damn Keith and his wisdom.
“Yeah, you’re right. So… the wedding’s in Spring.”
“Spring?”
“Yeah… I’ll need a date.”
“…Are you asking me to be your date to a wedding, McClain?”
The smirk in Keith’s voice made a specific point behind his navel flutter.
“Maybe I am. If you want to, that is.”
“Do I want to?” Keith hummed dramatically, “Hmm… I’ll think about it. Depends if you’re nice to me.”
“You’re a jerk, mullet-face.”
“Mullet-face? That’s a new one.” Keith laughed.
And then they were both laughing. And then before either of them knew it, it was time to hang up.
This really did suck.

Lance: Hey, man. I’ve not heard from you in four days. I know you’re probs super busy but just keep me posted, kay? Shiro says you might not have signal. Get back to me soon xx

11:36pm, GMT

Keith: Just got back to camp. I’m borrowing some guy’s charger, sorry. Ran outta juice. Gonna hit the sack now but everything is cool. I’ll text when I can. Xx

“Gig.” Said Hunk.

“Huh?” Lance groaned, looking up from his pasta which he pushed around with his fork. They were at an Italian diner for lunch. Lance was thinking about the time he and Keith had stopped at an Italian diner on one of their road trips. He couldn’t remember if it was the first or the second…

Hunk pulled a disapproving face. “Are you listening? I said Matt invited us to a gig in December. Wanna go?”

Lance sucked in a huge breath. “Sure. When is it?”

Hunk shook his head. “December! I just said! Dude, you are a million miles away.”

Lance rested his head in his hands. “Sorry. Got a test tomorrow and I can’t stop thinking about it.”
Hunk flicked spaghetti at Lance’s face. It slopped over his nose.

“What was that for?” He moaned, rubbing bolognaise off his face.

“Did a witch steal your soul?” Asked Hunk, “Cause you’ve been acting like a zombie. Pidge is worried about you. Actually so am I. So is Allura, and Shiro and everyone.”

Lance tutted. “I’m fine.”

He was definitely fine. Once these tests were out of the way, he’d feel much better. But as soon as the tests were over, he was up for observation at the hospital.

“There’s nothing to worry about.” Romelle told him on their break one evening as Lance meticulously poured over his notes. “You’ve done better than most of the amateurs that walk through these doors thinking they’ll breeze through it. You know it’s hard work.”

Lance chewed his lip anxiously. “Really? You think so?”

“Yes.” Said Romelle. She was nothing but honest. “Besides, you’re work experience. You’re allowed to make mistakes. We don’t let you close enough to hurt anyone.”

Was that supposed to be comforting? “Thanks.” Said Lance somewhat dryly. “As long as they don’t write me off, I’m cool with it.”

“Do you want to work here?” Asked Romelle, regarding him.

Lance blinked. “In Wisconsin?”

She nodded.

“I- I dunno. I mean I haven’t really thought about it. I just go to college here.”

“You need to start thinking seriously about where you want to end up.” She told him in her British accent, “Soon you’ll be put on a grad programme, and that’ll keep you busy for the next five years or so.”

Lance scratched his head. “Yeah… okay…”

So now he had to pass this year with a decent mark, get a good score on his work experience report, think about his future, try not to think about Keith, keep his own family from yelling each other into oblivion, and try and not to run out of money before the semester was over. He’d had to give up his job at Starbucks this year. He was too busy, and studying was the number one priority in his life right now. He couldn’t help but think about how much nicer this would have been if Keith was here to share it with him. That’s what he’d been looking forward to all summer – spending as much time as physically possible with Keith. Studying together. Eating together. Walking together. Being there for each other. But Keith’s presence in his life was getting smaller and smaller with each day that passed without a message. And that terrified Lance. He’d been so ready for Keith to be a part of his life. More than that. He was ready to share everything with Keith. It was hard to do that with five thousand miles between them.

If I could walk five thousand miles… Lance had never related so much to The Proclaimers. And they were Scottish. Irony. Yay.
November

Lance was beginning to go completely numb. He’d worked himself into a scrupulous routine. At 7am he woke up, showered, re-read the last chapter of whatever had been assigned the night before, and went to class. At 3:30pm he went to the library and worked until his eyes fell out of his head which usually happened around 6pm. 7pm on a good day. And then he’d grab a takeaway from the Chinese place on the corner of their road, eat it on the way home, get changed, and head to the hospital. Sometimes the routine changed around depending on when the hospital needed him, but it was all the same in the end.

His seminar was interrupted by a text from Keith today.

7:00pm, GMT

Keith: How’s it going?

Lance hated it when this happened. He always wanted to reply straight away, but it was impossible. He had to concentrate… concentrate…

The lecturer was pointing at a diagram of an arm on the board. Wait, that wasn’t an arm. It was a femur. Fuck. And what had they just been talking about? Respiration? But what would respiration have to do with the femur? Femur. Thighs. Lance pictured a Scottish man atop a hillside, tartan kilt blowing aggressively against thick, muscled thighs. Great, now he was thinking about Keith. Now he was thinking about Keith’s thighs. Now he was thinking about Keith naked in a motel room, whispering sweet-nothings against his bare neck as he jerked him off.

Dammit, Keith.

Lance whipped out his phone under the table. The lecturer was still talking about femurs.

Lance: Hey! It’s going good, thanks. How are you?

*Keith is typing*

The girl next to Lance was giving him a sour look. The light from his screen could probably be seen from three rows up. He hunched over it further.

Keith: Exhausted. Some Satellite images have brought up something promising this week so we’re working around the clock, h-

“Mister McClain? Can you answer the question?”

Fuck. Lance’s fingers were clammy on his phone as he tried to shove it in his pocket.

“E-Err,” He stammered, blushing furiously. “No.”

The lecturer raised his bushy monobrow. Douchebag.

“I’ll thank you to pay attention next time, Mister McClain. This will be on the paper at the end of the semester.”
“Y-yes, professor.”

There was a sharp clatter as Lance’s phone slipped out of his fingers, smacking onto the hard floor below.

Oh shit. That did not sound good.

The area around Lance laughed. Some dude in front of him picked up his phone between his thumb and his forefinger, passing it back to him.

“Here you go, man.” He whispered grimly.

Yup. It was smashed. That was another eighty dollars out of his pocket. If he was lucky.

Lance was really loving his life right now.

“…thanks.”

His routine was screwed. On his way back, Lance stormed into the nearest phone repair shop and waited an hour for them to fix his screen before doling out ninety-five dollars. He would really have to budget this month or he’d have to go back to his part-time job, and his studying would take a serious dip if he did that… no one told him college would be this hard.

As soon as it was fixed, Lance typed out a reply to Keith.

_Lance: _Sorry, dude. Smashed my phone in the lecture. I’m definitely holding you responsible.

He deleted that last part.

_Lance: _Something promising, huh? Find something cool and sell it to a museum, please :P could really do with the money lol

*Lance is typing*

_Lance: _Not that I’m using you for money. I’d never do that.

_Lance: _I ain’t no hoe

_Lance: _Wtf am I talking about

_Lance: _Sorry, tired. It’s been a weird and kind of dumb day.

_Lance: _I miss you, jerk xx

________________________

Lance didn’t get a reply until one in the morning.

6:04am, GMT

_Keith: _Sorry. Fell asleep. Things are really crazy here. Xx

7:39am, GMT

_Keith: _You’re probably asleep but I’m leaving now so we’ll speak soon, kay? Calling would be good. I need to hear your voice. I love you xxx
Soon never came.

Lance didn’t hear from Keith for days.

On the sixth day, he resorted to calling him, but it went straight to voicemail.

After over a week had gone by, Lance began to worry. Understatement. He’d sort of been at a constant level of worry ever since Keith had left, so now he was… madly anxious. That was still an understatement. He was sick. He couldn’t sleep. He was always checking his phone. He’d bothered Shiro so much he was sure the exhausted post-grad was about to drop-kick him out the window.

“Lance, calm down!” Said Allura.

They’d decided to meet in Allura’s favourite hipster joint for a pizza. The fairy lights strung across the ceiling did absolutely nothing to calm him. Nor did the enormous pizza before him. Nor did Lotor, who was studying his nails in a blasé fashion, one arm slung across Allura’s narrow shoulders.

“I’m sure he’s fine.” Said Lotor without even looking at Lance, “My mother used to disappear for months at a time.”

Lance scowled. “Keith isn’t your mother, Lotor. He’s never done this before.”

Allura pursed her lips, glancing between them unhappily. “I’m sure there’s a perfectly valid explanation.”

Pidge popped a piece of garlic bread in her mouth. “He’s alright. I’m telling you. There’s probably no signal out there,”

Hunk was very quiet.

“Where’s Shiro?” Asked Lance, glancing around. “Maybe he’s heard something.”

“In the two hours since you last called him?” Said Pidge, “Doubt it.”

Lance gave her a look. “You’re so supportive, Pidge.”

She threw her arms in the air. “I’m trying to make you feel better!”

“Well you’re not doing a very good job!”

Allura sighed. Lotor looked embarrassed by the whole situation and straightened up, clearing his throat loudly. Lance scowled at him instead.

“If I didn’t hear from Shay, I’d be worried too.” Said Hunk, “So ease off on him, okay?”

“Thank you, Hunk!” Said Lance, “Someone cares!”

Allura frowned. “We all care, Lance. We all care about Keith. But it’s only been a few days… maybe his phone ran out of battery again.”

“Why isn’t Shiro here?” Lance demanded, “He should be here!”

Allura fiddled with her hair. “I’m not sure. I did text him.”
Lotor looked at her. “You didn’t tell me that.” He said quietly.

She raised a brow at him. “Come on, now. Don’t get possessive again. Go and get me a drink, won’t you?”

Lotor did as he was told, rising to stand at the bar with a less than happy expression.


Allura eyed her boyfriend uncertainly. “It does look like that I suppose… but most of the time… anyway. I think we all simply need to take a deep breath and view the situation objectively. Especially you, Lance.”

“I tried calling him. Like, fifty times.” Said Lance, “But it always goes to voicemail.”

“That means his phone is dead! Or there’s no reception!” Said Pidge.

Lance shrugged, flicking peppers off his pizza. “I dunno… I can’t go another day like this.”

“You know, there’s a poem that describes this same situation quite well,” Said Lotor, setting down he and Allura’s drinks, “It goes” –

They all groaned, except Allura.

“Lotor, your poetry is the last thing I need right now.” Lance growled.

“But it’s Milton.”

“I don’t care if it’s fucking Shakespeare!” Lance flared, getting to his feet. “I’m sick of this. I’m going home. If Shiro shows his face tell him I need to speak to him.”

Lance regretted leaving the way he did, but it didn’t lessen his mounting panic any less. Hunk and Pidge had the decency not to come into his room when they got back that night, but they both sent him a message.

**Pidge:** Sorry if I wasn’t helping or whatever. We’re all trying our best. I’m sure everything will be okay

**Hunk:** If you need anything, call me okay? Any time of the night/morning. There’s left-over soup in the fridge

**Lance:** Thanks guys. Sorry.

“**I really don’t know why you’re worried about your grades.”** Shiro told Lance a few days later after giving him a report to proof read. “You’re doing better than ever. I think you’re just being paranoid.”

“**You think so?”** Said Lance. They were at the library. “I still haven’t got next week’s paper down and there’s an essay due in on the fourth of December that I” –

“**Lance, let me give you some advice.”** Said Shiro in his dad voice, which was both reassuring and terrifying at the same time. “Remember how at high school you had to get a real high mark to do well?”
Lance nodded.

“This isn’t like that. Marks work differently here.”

“I know.” Said Lance tiredly.

“Yes, but you’re still looking at it the same way. You think a 70 isn’t good enough. A 70 is great, actually, and if that’s your lowest mark then you’re doing pretty well. You don’t have to worry at all. And stop working yourself into a fever. It’ll only make class more difficult.”

“But I was falling behind last month.”

“And now you’re not.” Said Shiro pleasantly.

Lance sank into the table. “Do you think I could afford to get my job back?”

Shiro scratched his chin. There were dark circles under his eyes and he hadn’t shaved for a few days, giving him a rugged appearance that wasn’t altogether terrible.

“I think so. It might actually help take your mind off things, especially if you’re worried about money.”

Lance let the breath off his chest. “Good. I need money. Badly… thanks, Shiro.”

Shiro gave him a meaningful smile. “Anytime, Lance… and try and not to worry about Keith, okay? I spoke to his course supervisor this morning. He said this kind of thing is totally normal.”

Lance was doubtful. “Really?”

“Yes. He’ll turn up. I’m concerned too, Lance. But I know there’s no point in working myself up into a state until there’s something to be worried over. And right now there isn’t. Don’t let this distract you from the important things.” He said, tapping Lance’s report.

But Keith is the important thing, Lance wanted to say. But how did he say it without sounding completely sorry for himself? He couldn’t. So he didn’t. Instead, he took his report to his tutor and got full marks.

When fourteen days passed without a word, Lance was ready to throw himself into Lake Michigan while declaring every one of his sins to the soundtrack of *Jurassic Park.*

He was on the phone to Shiro at four-thirty.

“Shiro, this isn’t cool.” Said Lance, pacing up and down in his room. “This really isn’t cool.”

“I know, I know,” Said Shiro, equally breathless, “I’m gonna contact someone, okay? We’ll find out where he is.”

“The police? The highland patrol? What else do they have up there? FREAKIN’ EAGLES?”

“I don’t know, Lance! You’re stressing me out. I think the best thing to do is - wait – I’m getting another call. Mind if I hang up?”

“Go.” Said Lance. “Go, go, go.”
He threw his phone on the bed before diving after it. He couldn’t remember a time in his life when he’d been driven so insane with worry. Every scenario imaginable ran through Lance’s mind when he considered what had happened to Keith. The first, bizarrely, was that he’d got lost in the wilderness somewhere and was living in a cave. The second was that he’d met someone else and run away with them (That Danny was his prime suspect). The next was that he’d been taken hostage by Scottish gangsters (was that a thing? It was in Lance’s head). The next was that he’d lost cell reception. The last was what Lance hoped for. But the second was the one he couldn’t stop thinking about.

The next moment, Shiro was calling Lance back.

“News?” He barked down the phone.

“Keith is fine.” Shiro breathed. “I just spoke to someone on the excavation team. Apparently there was no signal where they were, just like I said. It’s okay now, Lance. You can relax.”

Lance wanted to cry. Actually, he did cry. Long, streaming tears that slid down his face, unbidden.

“Thank fuck for that.” He sobbed, choked. “I’m gonna go.”

When he hung up, he had a message.

9:42pm, GMT

Keith: Sorry for the radio silence. Think I’m onto something.

*Lance is typing*

Lance: YOU

*Lance is typing*

Lance: BASTARD

*Lance is typing*

Lance: I THOUGHT YOU WERE FUCKINJG DEAD

Keith: Why would you think that?

Lance: Because it’s been two fucking weeks!! I didn’t hear anything for two fucking weeks!! Shiro and I have been so fijo

*Lance is typing*

Lance: fkcuking worried, Keith!! It’s bad enough that you’re gone in the first place!! Don’t do this to us. it just isn’t fair!

Keith: Jeez, sorry

*Keith is typing*

Keith: Hopefully I won’t be so busy for a while. I have some time off in a few weekends and I have a trip planned
Lance: Right

*Keith is typing*

Keith: I have to do some asking around

Lance: I see

Keith: I think I met a guy who knew my mom, at some pub

Lance: Wow… right. Well, that’s something, I guess

Keith: ???

*Keith is typing*

Keith: Look, I get you’re pissed at me for not replying but I literally had no signal! I’m sorry, okay?

Lance: I’m not pissed

Keith: I’m not blind, Lance. There’s no need to be a dick about this. I wanted to text you, but I couldn’t. I tried but nothing went through.

Lance: Yeah, I get it

*Lance is typing*

Lance: So you’re going away again?

Keith: Yeah

Lance: To find your mom?

Keith: Yes

Lance: Well good luck

*Lance is typing*

Lance: Want to call and talk about it? You said last time you wanted to call me

Keith: I can’t

Lance: Oh. Okay then.

Keith: I don’t have enough time. I’m only sticking around here for like 10 minutes.

Lance: okay.

If Keith replied within the next two minutes, Lance didn’t see it. He hated this. He hated everything about this. A horrible, sickly feeling of guilt and dread and sadness built up inside him and sat there simmering in his stomach as he lay curled up on his bed, fighting tears. Hearing Keith was fine had been a relief, but… it was like Keith hadn’t thought about him at all. He sounded so cold. Lance wanted nothing more than to hear his voice – a reassurance that he still felt something.
What had happened in these two weeks? What had changed? He picked up his phone and scrolled through their messages. Short. Curt. And yes, Lance was pissed, even though he knew he shouldn’t be. Jeez, he was so selfish. Keith might find his long lost mother and all Lance could do was whine like a child.

*Lance is typing*

**Lance:** I’m so sorry, Keith. These past two weeks have just been horrible. I was worried about you. I kept thinking something terrible had happened. I know it was dumb, and I’m sorry for being such a dick. I didn’t mean to take it out on you. I know how much this means to you, and I really, really do hope you find her. If you can’t text me, no pressure. At least I know why now. I’m sorry. I miss you.

**Keith:** It’s fine.

*Keith is typing*

**Keith:** Gotta go. Sorry

Lance unpacked some boxes that night. He found Keith’s martial arts shirt he’d stolen last year and cried in it until he was sure he’d dehydrated himself into a state of near death. It sure felt like it.

*Hey, Abuelita*

*I’m pathetic. That’s all.*

Chapter End Notes

...sorry :)
Chapter 17

Chapter by Spinsomnia

Chapter Notes

Uh, just before we get started I wanted to say: you guys left some crazy comments last chapter!! Like... THAT WAS SOME INTENSE ABUSE Y'ALL!!! My favourite comment: "Choke."
ASHJsdJKANKJDSBHJfJSA
Anyway, I hope you all don't hate us as much after this chapter! XD thanks again for all your feedback and please enjoy, as usual!
xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lance

December

“One…Two…Three…Four…Five…Huff…Siiiiix…”

Lance was doing push-ups in his room. It was his new way of…dealing. Dealing with the silence. The dumb thoughts in his head. His blank phone screen. The silence. When Keith and Lance messaged each other over the next two weeks, it was sporadic and short-lived. They never talked about their weird text-fight, and then Keith was gone again. For another. Whole. Month.

Time for sit-ups. He’d started off with twenty every morning, then thirty, then fifty… now he was on eighty. And it had only been a few weeks.

Soon it would be Christmas, and Lance had never felt less festive in his life.

Mom: Are you coming home before next semester?

Lance: Sorry, mom. I have to work over the holidays. I love you all

Mom: We’ll send your gifts in the mail. Cheer up, sweetie.

Lately, Lance was seeing Keith everywhere – in the black locks of a stranger, in a red jacket, in a pair of boots glimpsed in a shop window; Keith popped up in random places. But he wasn’t there at all. Every time it happened, Lance’s heart skipped and his brain did a: It’s Keith, it’s Keith! But a second later he’d realise he was wrong. The black hair on that stranger belonged to a woman. The jacket slung over that chair in the library was too dark to belong to his boyfriend. Those boots didn’t belong to anyone yet.

Even Keith’s face appeared in crowds, but Lance would blink and the face would disappear. Curse his overactive imagination.

“Y’know,” Said Hunk, presenting Lance with a pile of waffles on a morning mid-December, “You’ve been super helpful recently. It’s not like you.”
Lance shrugged. *Anything to keep myself busy*, he nearly said.

Hunk narrowed his eyes. “You’re *real* helpful.”

“Thanks.”

“You know, not like you were before.”

“Y-yeah, Hunk, I get it. I said thanks. And no problem.”

Hunk slammed his fist on the table. “Gah! You’re not even offended?”

Lance blinked at his friend. “Should I be offended?”

“Yes!” Said Hunk, “You should be all like *yo Hunk, what the hell? Are you try’na imply I’m a lazy bum or somethin’?*”

Lance frowned. “So you’re *trying* to offend me? What the hell is up with that?”

Hunk’s waffle pile wobbled dangerously as he cut into it with barely contained frustration.

“I’m trying to get *something* from you, man. Anything. You’re acting weird.”

Lance picked at his pancakes. “Oh. Sorry.” He stood, bringing his plate to the fridge. “I’m gonna eat these later. Tell Pidge her yoghurt is three days past its due date and there’s some green stuff growing on it. I’m gonna go… work out. Later.”

Lance stomped to his room before Hunk could voice the protest he was gearing up to. As Lance got ready for his final day at college before the vacation started, he thought about what Hunk said. *One push-up*. He knew he was acting weird. *Two push-ups*. The truth was, being around his friends was exhausting. *Three push-ups*. Being around *anyone* was exhausting. *Four push-ups*. He felt he had to entertain them with his usual self. *Five push-ups*. Good ol’ Loverboy Lance. *Six… Seven…* But he couldn’t be that guy anymore. *Eight… Nine… Ten…* He couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed. Okay, maybe he’d snorted at a few vine compilations on YouTube but he was pretty sure that didn’t count. And it wasn’t just about Keith. *Thirty-three…* It was everything – the work, the decisions to come, the pressure to do well. *Fifty…* Keith was the only person he could really talk about that with. Before he’d been his boyfriend, Keith had been his friend. The best friend he’d ever had in his life, even. That deep connection was what had made him fall in love with Keith in the first place, and just to talk about it with him would be…

But he couldn’t. Keith hadn’t talked to him in nearly a month, but it felt like a year. It felt like an *age* since they’d last been together. And Lance had stopped looking at their pictures together every night. It made him too sad. And it distracted him. But mostly it was too sad. His energy was a pathetic splutter of the wave it used to be. For the first time in his life, Lance wanted to be invisible.

Sweating, Lance stood and examined his body in the mirror. He’d had no plan when he’d started doing this – no agenda to become some buff heart-throb. He’d just wanted to feel in *control* of something. But now, looking at his transformed body, the lean muscles in his arms and torso strictly defined by hard curves… he was actually sorta’ proud of himself. Plus, the extra energy was nice.

That night, Hunk rang him from his room. He’d been doing that a lot lately, rather than risking barging in on Lance and ruining his concentration. But tonight Lance had nothing to concentrate on. All his tests were done and most people were going home to their families tomorrow. The
hospital had already given him the time off until January. He supposed Hunk had got into the habit.

“Yo, buddy. Come downstairs.”

“Huh?”

“Get down here, Lance.”

“But I’m” –

“You’re not studying. The semester’s over. Come on.”

Lance had been staring at his bookshelf wondering whether to start reading. *The Song of Achilles* stared at him from the top shelf. He hadn’t started it yet. He was scared it would make him think about Keith too much. Not like he wasn’t already or anything.

“Okay, okay…” He mumbled, slipping out of bed in the same clothes he’d gone to college in.

“Gimme a sec.”

When Lance wandered into the living-room, he had to pinch himself to see that he wasn’t dreaming.

Everyone was here. Everyone except Keith, that was.

“Lance!” Allura exclaimed excitedly. “It’s been ages! How were your tests?” She asked, coming over to give him a hug.

He returned it, baffled.


“I knew you’d forgotten.” Said Hunk, shaking his head and presenting Lance with his jacket. “Gig tonight. Remember?”

Matt waved from the corner. “’Sup, man. A friend of mine is playing down at Bar One.”

Lance shook his head. “Sorry, dude… I totally gapped it.”

Matt came over to give Lance an enthusiastic bro-fist. “No worries, my bro.”

“You never told us how those tests went.” Said Shiro, a knowing look in his eye. It was the: *I know you’ve been studying so hard you forgot what day it is*, look.

“Oh, f-fine. I guess.” Lance stammered. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen so many people he knew.

“Okay, errbody let’s goooo!” Said Matt, practically bouncing to the door.

Pidge rolled her eyes at her brother. “How many shots have you had?”

“Only three, lil sis.” Matt winked, “I needed something to get my blood pumping. We about to listen to some tuuuunes!”

Shiro stifled a laugh.
Lotor frowned. “But it’s only seven pm.” He said disapprovingly.

Allura sighed. “I’ll have what he’s having.”

Despite his eternal terrible mood, Lance found himself smiling. This felt familiar. A throwback to an easier time, maybe. He didn’t go to the trouble of getting changed, but he shrugged on his jacket and followed the others out the door.

“Want some gum, Allura?” Lance heard Shiro offering as he followed closely behind.

“Oh, sure!”

“Be careful, Allura,” Said Lotor, placing a hand on her shoulder, “Chewing gum notoriously erodes the walls of the stomach when taken in excess.”

“I wasn’t exactly going to give her the whole packet.” Said Shiro, a crease forming between his brow. He rolled his eyes to Lance who definitely didn’t want to be involved.

“I’ll have one. One.” Allura accentuated with a look at her boyfriend.

“If you must.” Said Lotor.

Yikes. Lance jogged past them and found his way to Matt.

“So, you really went off the radar recently. You’ve been scarce, man.” Said Matt, licking a lollipop he’d materialised from somewhere.

“Yeah… had a lot of work, you know?”

“Me and you both, man.” Matt sighed. “So there’s supposed to be a hella load of hot people coming to this gig. Want me to wingman for you?”

“Huh?” Lance took a step away. “Dude, no! I’m – I’m sorta taken.”

“Wait… you and Keith didn’t split up?”

Pidge smacked his brother on the arm. “How are you this dense? I told you Keith had split to Scotland, not that they’d split up, dumbass!”

“Oh,” Matt laughed, scratching his head, “Sorry, man. Sometimes people forget I exist and I get the gossip a little mixed up. I don’t get the actual facts until way later, you know?”

Lance sniggered. “It’s cool. But… yeah, we’re still together.” I think. If he doesn’t hate me now.

Matt beamed, an alcohol induced twinkle sparkling in his eyes. “I’m so happy for you, man.”

Lance blushed. “Uh… thanks.”

Pidge led her brother away by the elbow. “It was more than three shots, wasn’t it? You lied to me. Dammit, Matt.”

The venue was dimly lit and packed with students. The band was getting set up on stage. It was exactly the sort of place that would have got Lance excited a few months ago. Now he just felt an uncomfortable squirm in his stomach and a pressing anxiety to get home.

Shiro’s hand on his shoulder startled him. “You look kind of tense. I’ll get the first round.”
“Oh, no, Shiro.” Lance protested. “I don’t know if I should drink.”

“Why?” Shiro frowned. “Are you on medication or something?”

“No, I…” Lance didn’t have an excuse.

“I’m getting you a drink. Vodka and lemonade?”

Lance blinked. “You read my mind.”

He shrugged. “Keith said it was your favourite.”

And then Lance was left stood there, baffled and emotional and _when had Keith told Shiro that was his favourite drink? How the fuck did Keith remember that was his favourite drink?_ No, thought Lance. I will _not_ cry here.

After glugging back the first drink, Lance felt a lot better. He stared into his empty cup, licking his lips. Then he got Shiro to buy him another one.

Allura cornered him at the bar while Lotor got more drinks. “How are you holding up?”

“Good,” Lance lied.

Allura gave him a deadpan look. “None of us have seen you for ages! We’ve missed you!”

Lance raised a brow. “You missed me?”

“Don’t act surprised! You’re my friend, too. Not just Keith.” She smiled. “It’s good to see you looking… vaguely happy again. And it’s okay if… if you miss him.”

“Of course I miss him, Allura!” Lance shouted over the music that had begun playing on stage. “I miss him so damn much! Why else do you all think I’ve been working so hard?” He threw his empty cup on the floor with a growl. “Dammit, I need more alcohol!”

As if on cue, Lotor set a glass down in front of Lance. It was gone in seconds.

“Agh!” He cried, the burn of alcohol stinging the back of his throat, “I love you guys! Why is it so hot in here? Where’s Matt? I need to tell him something.”

Allura giggled. Lotor stared at him, mouth slightly agape.

“I believe he’s by the stage, but there’s quite a crowd” –

“Thanks, dude!” Lance shouted as he sprinted to where Matt was cheering for the lead singer. Lance grabbed him by the shoulder.

“Matt, is that you?”

“Course it’s me, man! Woah, you look crazy.”

“I just wanted to say…” Wait… what had he wanted to say? He’d been so sure on it a second ago. So he settled with, “You’re cool, man!”

Matt howled with laughter, clapping Lance on the back.

“You’re cool too, man!”
And then they were waving along to a song he’d never heard before, and suddenly Hunk was by his side. Or had he been there all along?

“Hey,” Hunk laughed after the first song, “Don’t you think that guy kind of looks like Keith? But like… older?”

Lance blinked up at the lead singer Hunk was referring to. He was a guy in his late twenties or thereabouts with mussed up floppy black hair. *Fuck.* Hunk was right. This guy *did* resemble Keith a little. Or at least enough for Lance, in his drunken state, to have tears welling in his eyes.

“Oh, no.” He groaned. “I… I have to talk to Keith.”

Hunk gaped. “Right now?”

“Yeah, man! Right now!”

Lance pushed out of the crowd and stood by the bar where Shiro was zoning out with a glass of whiskey in his hand like a movie character.

Without thinking, Lance found Keith on his contacts and hit ‘call.’ It went straight to voicemail, as he expected, but that would be okay for now.

“Hey, man…” He said, “I-it’s Lance. I mean, I guess you know that ‘cause my name would come up or whatever but – I –I just wanted to say… I miss you, Keith. I miss you like – like I ain’t never missed anyone before. ‘Cept maybe my Abuelita but, like, it’s different ‘cause I know you’ll come back. You better come back, Keith! Oh, and Hunk just said the lead singer of this band we’re watching looks like you and now I can’t un-see it. Why’d he have to say that?! So, yeah… in conclusion I miss you. And, like, I’m not even that drunk. But I wanna cry ‘cause I miss you so much… did I already say that? Oh, dammit I’m running out of time.”

“Voice message recorded.” Said the robot woman on the other end.

That was definitely a good decision.

Shiro was staring at him. “What was that?” He laughed.

“What was what?”

“Did you just call Keith? In the middle of the gig?”

“Yeah, man.” Said Lance, “He didn’t answer though so I left a voice message.”

Shiro considered this. “Can I leave one?”

“On my phone?”

“Yeah.”

Lance passed over his phone.

Shiro smiled fondly before hitting call. “Hey, Keith. It’s your brother. We’re all thinking of you right now, wondering how you are. I hope you can hear me over the music. I-is there a volume button? *Tsk,* I can’t work these stupid phones. Anyway, I… I was thinking about what you told me the day before you left. And I think you were right. I love you, Keith. Stay safe.”

Lance stared. “What did Keith tell you?”
Shiro tapped his nose. “Secret.”

Lance was about to pester him for answers when Matt bounded over, using Lance’s shoulders to launch himself at Shiro.

“What are you guys doing?”

“Leaving voice messages for Keith.” Said Shiro before Lance could think of an excuse.

“Oh!” Said Matt excitedly, “Can I leave one?”

“S-sure.” Said Lance, passing over his phone. And the next thing he knew, they were all leaving messages for Keith.

Matt’s went something like, “Hey, don’t know if you remember me that well but it’s Matt. You’ve got a rad style and a rad boyfriend, man.”

Pidge told him to check out the observatory near a place called Glasgow.

Hunk scolded Keith for being away for so long and then insisted he give Haggis another chance because he “probably didn’t get the real stuff.”

Allura took the phone tearily, “Hello, Keith!” She said, “We all miss you an awful lot. I hope you got us some wonderful presents while you’re there. I’m joking, of course. But pick up some pretty rocks for me, won’t you? They’d look nice on my window-sill. I can’t wait for us to catch up when you get back. Call us soon, Keith. We love you!”

“Are you okay, Allura?” Asked Hunk when she hung up, passing the phone back to Lance.

“Oh, yes!” She assured, brushing tears from her eyes. “I’m fine. I’m just being silly.”

Lotor produced a handkerchief from his pocket and presented it to her.

“Here you are, my dear.” He said with the soppiest tone Lance had ever heard in his life. He caught Pidge’s eye, who gave him a look of bewilderment.

Allura waved him off. “Oh, no need to make a fuss. I’m just going to the bathroom.”

Matt joined their circle as Allura disappeared. “Yo, why was she crying?”

“She misses Keith.” Said Lance, “We all do.”

“That’s so sad! Alexa, play Despacito!” Matt shouted, which made Lance double over laughing. “Wait, you’re Spanish right? Tell me you know Despacito.”

“Cuban.” Lance corrected, “And of course I know Despacito!”

“You should sing Despacito for Keith.”

“You should not sing Despacito for Keith.” Said Shiro, deadly serious.

“What is Despacito?” Asked Lotor.

“I’m gonna sing Despacito for Keith!” Lance decided, calling Keith again.

Shiro pinched the bridge of his nose. “I can’t watch this.” He said, wandering off into the crowd to
watch the actual band that was playing while Lance enthusiastically yelled the lyrics of Despacito down the phone.

Lotor watched with fascination while Matt (badly) beat-boxed along.

“Voice message recorded.”

“Yeah, man!” Matt exclaimed, high-fiving Lance.

They joined the crowd again, dancing along to the music. It was at this point that Lance had a sudden, stomach-curdling realisation. It had been nearly five months since Keith left, and throughout that entire time, he’d been acting like a douchebag. For months, he’d been neglecting his friends and using work as an excuse. *Fuck*. The wave of guilt and shame that hit him in that moment was overwhelming. He stopped dancing and stared dead ahead.


“Y-yeah… I’m gonna go…” Lance didn’t wait for Matt to reply.

He left the gig and wandered down to the strip of sand by the lake where he and Keith used to go. He was so drunk that he couldn’t remember actually getting there, or how he’d managed it. His feet led him, reassuring his slurred brain they knew the way. It had been so long since he’d drunk like this. It had been so long since he’d drunk at all.

He plonked himself onto the freezing sand. The waves lapped in a hypnotising lull, lit by the full moon hanging starkly overhead. It really was too cold to be here, but he didn’t care. It had been less than a year since he and Keith had play-fought on this beach, sharing glances they knew meant more, both unwilling to say what they really meant – both too scared of rejection to risk it. How different things were now. Back then, Lance had been so afraid of his feelings for Keith. Right now, he wanted nothing more than to pour his heart out to him. Lance pulled out his phone again. This time, when he was met with voicemail, he was lost for words. The words he wanted to say so badly formed on his lips, but the silence stretched on for an age until he finally found his voice.

“Keith? I told myself I wouldn’t do this over the phone, but I can’t hold it in anymore… I love you. I love you, Keith. I’m so in love with you and I’m sorry I didn’t say it while we were together. So that’s it. I love you.”

“Voice message recorded.”

He hung up and buried his face in the sand, grinning. He’d said it. Finally. Standing up, Lance clenched his fists by his side and screamed at the water.

“I LOVE YOU, KEITH KOGANE YOU JERK! I LOVE YOU AND YOUR STUPID MULLET AND YOU BETTER GET YOUR ASS BACK HOME SOON, YOU HEAR ME?”

By the way his throat hurt afterward, Lance was almost certain his voice had carried all the way to Scotland. He stood there, chest heaving, face flushed… it was amazing how much lighter he felt now.

A small cough behind him sent him reeling. He spun around, and his eyes landed on a small, shivering figure.

“Pidge? You gave me a heart-attack!”

“What are you doing out here?” She asked as she tip-toed over the sand to stand next to Lance.
He shrugged, his face heating. “Uh – nothing.”

“You know, you sounded exactly like Nicolas Cage from Moonstruck, declaring your love like that.” She said dryly.

“I’ve never seen that movie.”

“Don’t. You’ll get ideas.”

He scratched his head. “Ah, man. I can’t believe you heard that.”

“I don’t think anyone in a ten mile radius missed it.”

He glared at her. “Make it worse, why don’t you?”

Lance slumped down into the sand with a sigh. Pidge crouched next to him.

“Why’d you go and run off like that? We were all worried.”

“I haven’t been gone that long.” Said Lance.

“It’s been two hours. It’s nearly one am.”

“Oh, shit.” Lance cursed. He’d been sat here for longer than he’d thought. “Sorry about that… how did you find me?”

“Snap maps.” Said Pidge, holding up her phone. “And it wasn’t hard to guess. You came here a lot last year.”

He didn’t think anyone but Keith knew that. “Oh… yeah.” He looked at her. She was only wearing a sweater. Yanking off his jacket, he held it out. “Take this.”

She looked at him as if he’d just spat at her. “What? No, thanks.”

He rolled his eyes. “There’s no need to act tough. Just take it!”

“I said no!”

“Why?!”

“Because…!” She snatched it off him. “Fine.”

He stared at her, his alcohol-muddled brain trying to fathom why she was so pissed at him.

“Pidge, what was that about?” He asked, softening his voice.

She looked at him, at least having the decency not to deny she’d acted weird.

“You really don’t know, huh?”

“Believe it or not, I don’t!” Said Lance.

Pidge sighed heavily, wrapping Lance’s jacket around her shoulders like a blanket. She tutted.

“Why did I have to fall for a complete idiot?”

Lance blinked. “Wha – you – Pidge” –
“It’s okay, it’s okay,” She said tiredly, “I’m over it. I’m over you. It’s ancient history. I was just sick of you brushing me off all the time… not noticing, you know?”

He didn’t know. He stared at her, a gobstopper in his windpipe constricting his words. She laughed at his expression.

“You look so dumb right now.”

“You… liked me?” He asked quietly, hands clammy in the sand.

Her mouth twisted and she quirked a brow. “Yes? It’s amazing you didn’t see it. Hunk guessed… you were always talking about hot girls and memes and stupid shit, I didn’t think you’d ever like someone like me. You just saw me as this robotics nerd with a hard-on for mechanics – don’t even deny it, Lance, I know you did. But hey… in the end even the hot girls didn’t stand a chance. It’s hilarious, really. I should have given up way sooner than I did.”

“God, Pidge…” Lance gazed at his feet, “I’m – I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

“I know.” Said Pidge, “But it’s okay. You don’t have to be sorry.”

“But I’ve said some horrible things to you about all that, I mean… I just didn’t think” –

“Honestly, Lance.” Pidge told him, nudging him with her elbow, “It’s cool. This is why I didn’t want to tell you. I knew you’d feel bad. I guess I just… wanted you to know. Just so we’re clear.”

Lance rested his chin on his knees. “Now I feel like a huge jerk.”

“You are a huge jerk.” She teased, “And I don’t know how the heck Keith puts up with you.”

“Thanks, Pidge.”

“But…” She started, looking over the dark water, “He’s lucky. Real lucky. You’re not always that bad, you know?”

Coming from Pidge, that was a god-tier compliment.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” Said Lance, “And one day you’re gonna meet someone awesome who will notice.”


“No… thank you.”

When Lance got home that night, he took the Song of Achilles off his shelf and put it by his bed.

____________________

After that night, things got a lot easier. Aside from the killer hangover and the sudden recollection of the stupid amount of voice messages he’d left for Keith on his phone. The first thing he did was check it for a response, but there was none. Then he remembered Pidge’s admission about her crush on him and stuffed his face back in his pillow, willing himself into unconsciousness as he cringed at his past self for teasing her about not having a boyfriend and being completely oblivious. It had always been there, he was just too dumb to see it. Just as he had been with Keith. Wow. For a flirt, he was terrible at realising when people were flirting with him.

But that night had made him realise one thing – all he needed to do was get over himself. So the
first thing he did was send Keith another message.

**Lance:** Whenever you see this… I’m sorry!! I’m gonna be super embarrassed when you listen to all those messages

**Lance:** Especially that last one xx

Then he sent a message to his dad.

**Lance:** Hey, dad. I told mom I wouldn’t be home for vacation. I’ve changed my mind. Don’t tell her though, I want it to be a surprise. I’ll fly down on the 23rd.

**Dad:** I’ll send you some money for plane tickets. Don’t you dare try and pay me back.

**Lance:** But dad!! Ahhh!

**Dad:** Accept the money, son. This won’t happen often. See you soon.

**Lance:** Thanks dad. I love you guys.

Then he did forty push-ups and eighty sit-ups. Then he went downstairs and said goodbye to his friends as they left for vacation (Pidge was friendlier than ever. He was glad neither of them were awkward about last night), and then he was alone.

But strangely he wasn’t lonely.

It wasn’t until the day before he left to catch his plane that he finally had messages from Keith. He’d received it in the dead of night when he’d been fast asleep:

**7:10am, GMT**

**Keith:** Hey! Look at that I have signal! I haven’t had a chance to listen to these mysterious voice messages yet but I will in a sec

**Keith:** I wanted to text you first just to say

**Keith:** Sorry again. I know we haven’t spoken in ages.

**Keith:** And I know we left things weird last time. But it made me so happy to get internet and see that you were still talking to me. I was super worried.

**Keith:** I’ve definitely found something though.

**Lance (8:31am, CST):** KEITH! YOU’RE ALIVE! FUCK FUCK FUCK I’VE MISSED YOU SO MUCH!! I’M SO SORRY ABOUT LAST TIME I WAS SUCH A JERK!! I’M SORRY!

**Lance:** And on second thoughts, listen to those when I’m not around… yikes. When you say you’re onto something, what do you mean?

*Keith is typing*

**Keith:** I don’t want to get anyone’s hopes up… or my own

*Keith is typing*
Keith: But things are looking super promising. I’m heading out to a valley further north. Won’t have internet for a bit once I leave town.

*Keith is typing*

Keith: You said you wanted to call before I left. I’m sorry for blowing you off like that

Lance: It’s cool now, don’t worry

Keith: Are you sure?

Lance: Yeah, man. I’m just happy to hear you’re freaking alive!! These months have been heavy

Keith: Hope you’re okay

Lance: Much better now I’ve heard from you

Keith: I’ll text you later, there’s some stuff I’ve gotta sort out but I promise I’m not just disappearing

Lance: You better not ex-mullet. Text me later kay?

Keith: I will

*Keith is typing*

Keith: Oh, and Lance?

Lance: Yeah?

Keith: I love you too

*Keith is typing*

Keith: Especially the way you sing Despacito ;)

Lance: You listened?! AJDKSLKKD I can’t believe you!!!

Lance threw his phone, squealing, reduced to an icky blushing mess. Keith was the only person alive who could transform him into an embarrassed, mushy puddle of Lance. He was the only person who ever would be able to.

Lance didn’t know when ‘later’ was, and he had a whole day to kill. He’d done his packing and his book was waiting for him for the plane journey home. Plus, his muscles ached too much to do any more intense exercise. So he took a walk.

Once again, Lance found himself outside Keith’s apartment. This time, though, it was empty. The curtains were drawn. The tattoo parlour’s neon lights buzzed and, next door to it, a sign for a barber’s hovered. Was that new? Lance had never seen that place before. Perhaps he hadn’t noticed because he’d been so damn busy staring up at Keith’s window wondering what the subject of all of his daydreams was up to. Lance dug in his pocket which jangled with the tips he’d collected over the past few weeks. There had to be at least twenty dollars in there, on top of another five he’d been saving for… he couldn’t remember what he’d been saving for. Shrugging, Lance took a chance and ventured into the barber’s.
45 minutes later, he emerged feeling… different. And *looking* different. When Lance got home, he stared at his reflection in the mirror for a solid ten minutes, adjusting the new way his fringe fell on his forehead and running his hands over the smooth, shaved sides. Lance had never got an undercut before, but it really… suited him. He hoped. Taking a picture of himself, Lance sent the selfie to Allura on Instagram with the caption: *Do you think Keith will like this? I have time to grow it out if not. I need your real opinion.*

A few minutes later he got the reply: !!! Followed by, *WOW! Lance!!! Yes!!!*

Grinning, he sent back a selfie of him doing finger guns with a caption: *Thanks* and a thumbs up emoji.

If Allura approved, it was a win.

Half an hour later, Shiro sent him a message.

**Shiro:** Dude, Keith is gonna go wild over your new hair

**Lance:** You think so? Allura send you a pic?

**Shiro:** Yes. Good move.

*Shiro is typing*

**Shiro:** Also, points for copying me

**Lance:** Wait!! I wasn’t copying you!! That’s not what this is!!

**Shiro:** Suuuure, it’s not.

*Shiro is typing*

**Shiro:** I’m kidding. Have a good Christmas, bro

**Lance:** You too man. Give my love to your mom.

*Lance is typing*

**Lance:** That sounded weird. You know what I mean.

Later, when Lance was chewing on a takeaway pizza and watching *The Cat Returns* for the second time that month, Keith sent him a message.

**Keith:** Shiro says you have a surprise for me?? What???

Lance cackled, his mouth full of pizza.

**Lance:** Did he really?

**Keith:** …

*Keith is typing*

**Keith:** What are you up to?
Lance: I’m not up to anything

*Lance is typing*

**Lance:** I can get down to whatever you want though. Up isn’t an option.

Keith: That was a terrible joke and a terrible distraction

*Keith is typing*

**Keith:** Anyway, I don’t have long

*Keith is typing*

**Keith:** This time I don’t know how long it’ll be until we can speak again. It’ll be quite a while I think

Lance felt his heart fall, his breath quicken and his panic burst all at once.

**Lance:** Longer than last time??

**Keith:** I don’t know. Maybe. I’m sorry.

*Keith is typing*

**Keith:** About to head out now.

**Lance:** DON’T LEAVE ME!!!!!!!111!!

**Keith:** I’m sorry, Lance. For argument’s sake, let’s say we’ll speak soon.

*Keith is typing*

**Keith:** So

*Keith is typing*

**Keith:** Speak to you soon xx

**Lance:** I’ve decided I’m going to text you anyway, whether you respond or not. Yes, I’m going to be that clingy boyfriend.

*Lance is typing*

**Lance:** Speak soon, Keith xx

**Keith:** Oh! I almost forgot: Follow this link [cats.lunix.net](http://cats.lunix.net)

*Keith is typing*

**Keith:** It’s something I’ve been meaning to set up for a while. It might help with the distance. I love you xxx

**Lance:** Uh, Keith. Buddy. That’s a freakin’ cat video website
Lance: KEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEIIIIIIITH

It was too late. Lance followed the link over and over on his phone, but it led to the same cat site. Then he tried it on his computer… the same thing happened. Why did Keith think this would help with this distance? Had he ever told Keith he was even remotely a cat person? Maybe Lance had laughed at one cat video in his life. Once. When he was twelve. Maybe. So this was… why was Keith so freakin’ random?

Lance sighed, shaking his head, and got the rest of his stuff ready to go home.

Lance cried on the plane home. And for the first time, it was nothing to do with Keith. It was The Song of Achilles.

The man sat next to him inched further away from Lance as he shamelessly sobbed on the plane.

Lance: I hate you for recommending this book to me

Lance: Okay, I don’t hate you

Lance: But it’s so fucking sad!! I cried on the plane like a little bitch

Lance: Why do the gays get such a bad wrap in literature? If I ever get a time machine I’m gonna make sure Achilles and Patroclus get married for reals

Lance: No joke. Never mind preventing the holocaust. This is MorE ImPoRtAnT!!!

Lance: Did Troy even happen?? Is this based on a true story?? I can’t work it out

Lance: I wish you were here to nerd out over it for me… I’m gonna say this every fucking day for the rest of my fucking life but I miss you, Kogane

Lance: Pardon the language, I’m very emotional right now

Lance: I’m gonna watch videos from the dumb cat video website you sent me to cheer myself up. Yea, I’ve reached that point. Did you do this on purpose?? Is that why you sent me the link?? I can’t work it out

When Lance’s mom answered the door, she screamed.

“BABY BOY, IS THAT YOU??”

Okay, maybe Veronica had been right. Lance’s parents really did see him as an infant.

“Yeah, mom. Surprise!”
Beatriz’s face was a picture. Grasping her son’s face in her hands, she kissed him all over.

“Oh my god, I had no idea you were coming home! Did you drive? Did you fly over? How did you get here?! And your haaaaaair! Honey, you look so grown up… so mature! Oh, we’re gonna get so many good photos this Christmas!”

Héctor winked at him from the hallway. Lance grinned and mouthed, *Thanks, dad.*

To say Christmas dinner was awkward this year was an understatement. Everyone was there: Uncle Ulises, Aunt Marie, Gonzalo, Luis and his kids: Logan and Michelle, his wife Adria, Marco, Marco’s new girlfriend Mei, Beatriz, Héctor and finally, Veronica and her new fiancé. It was the latter couple that made the start of dinner the awkward affair that it was. By now, the gossip had spread to everyone, but Lance was surprised to see that Veronica’s new betrothed wasn’t as old as he’d anticipated. Thirties, maybe – he could hardly be older than that. His family was so dramatic.

“Oh,” Said Lance as Veronica and Dave came in, “I’m Lance, Veronica’s brother.”

He was tall, dark-skinned with curly black hair and wearing a *Metallica* shirt. Oh. He gave his sister a look that said: *I see why you went for him.* She returned the look with one that said: *Embarrass me and I’ll burn all your underpants* which she had threatened to do on many an occasion.

“Oh, nice to meet you.” Dave stammered, glancing around the house as if searching for traps.

Gonzalo spotted them enter from his place at the table. “That’s the one, see Ulises! That’s the one I was talking about!”

Veronica face palmed. “Dave, meet the rest of my stupid family. Rest of my stupid family, meet Dave.”

“Hi Dave.” Said Marco, Luis and Adria at the same time.

Dave gave an anxious ‘hello’ to Héctor who simply stared back. Anyone who didn’t know Lance’s dad was terrified of him. Lance, however, knew that his father was simply processing what he saw before passing judgement. He liked to take his time, unlike Beatriz who slammed starters on the table and said pointedly,

“Now that everyone’s here, I guess we can start!” Flustered, her hair a frizzy halo about her face, she barked, “Can someone *please* help me whip up the cranberry sauce?”

“Oh, I can help!” Said Dave. Everyone looked at him.

Beatriz blinked. “Y-you can? Well… I suppose…”

“He’s a Sous Chef.” Veronica explained, sitting at the table and piling her plate high, giving everyone her best smug smile.

Beatriz couldn’t help but look impressed. As they disappeared into the kitchen to negotiate over cranberry sauce, Veronica elbowed Lance.

“Hey, thanks for talking mom down. She’s been a lot… nicer about it since you spoke to her.”

Lance shrugged. “You were right though. Mom overreacted because she married so young the first time, you know? I think she always envisaged a better life for us. But you know yourself. And he’s totally your type. Besides, he’s one hundred percent gonna get on her good side today. You know
how much mom hates cooking for so many people.”

Héctor shook his head. “I offered, but you know how she is.”

Lance’s mom always cooked on Christmas day, while Héctor made dinner the other 364 days of the year. There was a disaster every year, but that was part of the fun. It was family tradition. Something had to go wrong.

“So, Lance” Said Gonzalo as everyone tucked into their meal, “How’s that Keith of yours?”

Lance nearly choked on his turkey.

“I- err” – he studied the faces of his siblings and his parents. How much did the rest of his family know. “H-he’s good, abu. He’s in Scotland.”

“Oh, Scotland!” Said Gonzalo, his fork shivering in his hand as he tried to find something else to say. And then he was stuck because apparently he knew nothing about Scotland. His forte lay in other areas of the world. Marco and Lance smirked at each other. Their grandfather really liked to be a know it all.

Now there were two awkward unsaid topics at this table: Veronica’s marriage and Lance’s gayness. He wasn’t sure which would be weirder to talk about in front of his entire family. At least Keith wasn’t sat here with them – poor Dave was, and he was visibly shaken by the entire ordeal of being surrounded by almost every McClain in existence.

“W-would you mind passing the Asparagus?” Dave asked Marco.

Marco gave him a blank look. “I’m sorry, Dave. I cannot do that, Dave.” He said in his best robot voice.

Veronica flicked gravy at him. “Marco! Stop it!”

Dave laughed. “Hey, 2001. That’s a good movie.”

Marco pointed his fork. “See, V? He gets it! He’s got a good sense of humour. Yo, Dave, you ever been to space?”

Marco really was a shit sometimes.

Marco’s new girlfriend, Mei, was training to be a psychic, and she offered to do a tarot reading for them all after dinner.

“I’m not sure if that’s a good idea.” Said Veronica, the sceptic that she was.

“I met a real witch once,” Beatriz began, “I was in Prague with a circus troupe I met on the road.”

Lance had the sudden thought that his mother and Coran would probably get on extremely well. He made a mental note to tell Allura and Keith.

“Hey, I read the Song of Achilles.” Said Lance when dinner was over and they were all wearing the hats they’d pulled from Christmas crackers.

“Really?” Said Veronica and Gonzalo at once.

Lance nodded. “I cried.”
“How one cannot cry at that book, I have no idea!” Said Gonzalo dramatically. “But, oh, didn’t you think it was beautiful?”

Oh no. He was thinking about Keith. “Y-yeah… it really was.”

Veronica smiled. “You have the soppiest look on your face right now.”

Lance pouted. “Shut up, V.”

The carpet became strewn with crinkling swathes of wrapping paper when it was time to open presents.

“Oh, Lance, a Bowie record!” Veronica exclaimed, hugging him. “Thank you!”

Marco chimed the wind-up music box that played the *Game of Thrones* theme tune. “It’s random. I love it. Thanks, Lance.”

For his mom, he’d bought a print of the *Great Wave Painting* by the Japanese artist, Hokusai, which she’d had her eye on for a while. For his dad, a book on traditional Scandinavian recipes, and for Luis and Adria, some plush toys for the kids, who yelled in delight.

Lance opened the present from his parents. It was a blue shirt with an iridescent sheen to it and a pair of shiny, black shoes.

“Whoa,” He said, “This is… wow. Thanks, mom. Thanks, dad.”

“Oh, no.” Said Marco, “Lance is getting a glow up.”

Lance knew this was exactly what he’d wear when he saw Keith again.

Instead of a tarot reading, Mei read their palms. Lance shivered when the enigmatic girl took his hand, her beaded hair hanging over his arm as she peered at the lines on his hand.

“I see a lot of love in your life.” Said Mei seriously.

“That’s nice.” Lance quipped. Veronica snickered. Marco shushed them and hissed, *take it seriously!*

“And… an affinity with the ocean.” She finished.

Lance thought about that. “Well, you’re not wrong.”

The palm reading became a great source of entertainment, and out of all of them, Gonzalo appeared to enjoy it most, exclaiming the girl had described his life perfectly. Then they all got drunk and started playing poker. Surprisingly, Dave won after three hours of solid competitive concentration. He quietly accepted his victory, hauling in a pile of everyone’s chips with an innocent shrug of his shoulders. Then Beatriz cried and apologised for not accepting him sooner before pulling out a binder the size of Lance’s head with page after page of wedding plans, admitting she’d been secretly invested for months.

Veronica buried her face in her hands, scarlet, and they all toasted to their engagement. Really, it couldn’t have been better.

Before they knew it, it was time for bed, and Lance was left with a bittersweet hollow in his chest as he closed his eyes to sleep. Due to the overabundance of people, they were forced to share rooms. Marco snored on the mattress by his bed. He pulled out his phone.
Lance: Happy Christmas, Keith. I can’t wait to see you. Xx

They were in the hotel they’d stayed in after the Wild Beasts concert. It was evening time, and the setting sun poured an orange glow over the larger-than-life king-sized bed they were sat on. Keith sat opposite Lance on the bed dressed from head to toe in riding leathers, his motorbike helmet by his side.

Lance glanced down and saw cards set out before them.

“Two of a kind.” Said Keith, eyeing Lance’s hand. “I guess you win that round. Thank god I only had to take off my helmet.”

“Wait…” Said Lance, only dressed in his new shirt and his underwear. “Are we playing poker?”

The light danced an orange fire in Keith’s dark eyes. “Strip poker. You’re losing.”

“Crap.” Said Lance, and suddenly, Keith was throwing a new hand down. “Woah!” Lance exclaimed. Keith had thrown down an Ace, King, Jack, Queen, and a 10, and all were diamonds. “That’s a straight flush… impossible.”

“Not for me.” Said Keith wryly. He nodded at Lance’s boxers. “Now take them off.”


Keith shook his head slowly. “I want you in that. Only in that.”

Lance gulped, stripping off his pants and sitting cross legged on the bed, his face heated to a thousand degrees. He couldn’t look at Keith.

“N-now what?”

“I’ve had enough of poker.” Said Keith, swiping the cards off the bed and crawling on his hands and knees towards Lance. The cards turned into petals when they hit the floor, and the bed started rocking like a boat. The riding leathers zipped up to his throat, Keith reached out a gloved hand and pushed Lance onto the bed, unbuttoning his shirt with his other.

“It’s gonna get creased.” Lance protested, mostly because he could feel himself getting unbelievably hard.

“Good.” Said Keith, before nipping Lance’s neck with his teeth.

Lance gasped, arching his hips up to meet Keith, who cruelly drew away. The white sheets tangled around Lance’s bare legs, and Keith knelt between them, his fingers at the zipper on his throat. Keith’s hair was longer, and it fell over his eyes, partially concealing them. He licked his lips.

“Time to take this off, I think.” Said Keith, eyeing Lance with intention, before inching the zipper down and down and –

Lance woke up.

“Fuck…” He gasped, sweating. “Oh, god.”

Lance felt the sheets, his stomach plummeting with dread when he his hand met sticky warmth. Thank god Marco was still asleep. But he’d still have to find a way to change his sheets in the
morning without anyone noticing. This hadn’t happened to him in years… and he hadn’t dreamt so vividly in months. The sensation of Keith’s dream lips burned against his neck and his body was strung with aftershocks. This was unbelievable. He felt like a child.

Lance glanced at the calendar by his ticking clock on the wall. It couldn’t be long now, right? The six months had to be up soon. Keith would be home soon… he just didn’t know when.

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January

Lance got the plane back to Wisconsin two weeks later, and he was glad to be back. Pidge and Hunk were there when he returned, and they celebrated by going out and getting pizza with Shiro.

Shiro’s haggard appearance had returned, and Lance could swear a cluster of grey hairs had started to bloom at the front of his head.

“Thesis?” He asked when he saw him.


Hunk and Pidge grimaced at each other. “This is a direct look into the future.” Said Shiro. “I hope you all know that.”

“So…” Pidge began, “I think we all need to talk about the elephant in the room.”

Lance pulled a face. “Huh?”

“Your hair, man!” Said Hunk. “Your freaking hair!”

“Oh,” Lance laughed. He’d totally forgotten about it, and rubbed the back of his head self-consciously, “Yeah.”

“You… look like a totally different person. And we’re not even mentioning the fact you’ve become a total gym nut now… like look at you.” Said Pidge.

“I’m not a gym nut! I haven’t changed that much!”

They exchanged a look.

“You look way older.” Said Hunk.

“That’s what my mom said.”

Pidge hummed. “I preferred your old hair.”

“What?!” Hunk screeched. “His old hair was totally lame. This is way better. It compliments his athletic figure.”

Shiro and Lance shrugged at each other. His friends had a way of turning every topic into a debate. Even something as mundane as Lance’s hair. His stomach flipped when he thought about seeing Keith again. Despite Allura and Shiro’s reassurance, he really hoped Keith liked it.

Soon, college started up again, and so did Lance’s work at the hospital alongside his job at Starbucks, reminding him what it was like to be busy twenty-four seven. That didn’t stop him checking his phone at every possible moment though. It didn’t stop him from seeing Keith’s face
everywhere, even in people who didn’t resemble him at all. Now that Lance had embraced the fact he missed Keith, he wasted no time telling his friends about it. He decided the only reason they didn’t complain was because a Lance that talked to them was better than a moody Lance who had stalked the house like a soulless ghost the past few months. Hunk provided Lance with pancakes and waffles each day and Pidge played Mario Kart with him until they were blue in the face. Then Lance would go upstairs and write in his diary, immortalising his feelings until his hand ached, at which point he’d strip off and perform his sit-ups and push-ups until he was lying on the floor, muscles aching. Thanks to the amount of work he’d done last semester, college was easier this time, and exams were months away.

“I can’t believe it,” He told Allura during a study session in the library. “Keith is gonna be home soon. He hasn’t told me when, yet, but it’s gotta be this month, right? Surely he’ll be back from wherever he is, right?”

Allura’s face fell. “Oh, Lance…” She began. She’d straightened her hair today, and it fell down her back in a glossy, silver curtain.

“What?”

“Keith isn’t back until the end of February.”

He couldn’t believe it. “What?!?” He shouted, earning some deathly looks from the students working quietly around them. He lowered his voice. “How do you know? Did he tell you that?”

Allura nodded. “Last month… I… he probably didn’t want to upset you.”

Lance hung his head. “Are you kidding? J-just when I thought things were getting better…”

She put a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t be like that. The time will fly by, you’ll see.”

“It won’t, Allura,” Said Lance, crestfallen, “As soon as I think we’re getting closer to the end, he just gets pulled away from me again. I hate this. I can’t believe he didn’t tell me.”

He began to pack away his things.

“Lance” – Allura began.

“Thanks for today… thanks for telling me. It’s more than he did. Later, Allura.”

Lance had no energy left to cry. It would be stupid at this point. He’d learnt to expect disappointment.

“Sorry Pidge,” He said, throwing the remote down later, “My mind’s not on the game.”

“I noticed… didn’t wanna ask though.” She said, her face twisting with concern. “Are you okay?”

“No.” He sighed, “I should go call my mom.”

Speaking to Beatriz made him feel marginally better. *Just hold out, sweetie. It’s hard when you miss the people you love,* she told him. If anyone could empathise, it was her, he realised. But he still felt at a dead end. When January came to an end, all Lance could think of was the fact that there was still an entire month left before Keith was back. And he still hadn’t heard anything.

“Did you know Keith was coming back at the end of February?” Lance demanded as Shiro read over his essay at lunch.
“Err…” Shiro began guiltily, not glancing up from the paper. “Yeah. Why?”

Lance kicked the table. “You’re kidding me! Everyone freaking knew!”

Shiro frowned. “Wow, chill out, man. It’s just another month. It’s not a big deal.”

“Yes it is a big deal, Shiro! This semester has been hell and just when I think I’ll be happy again” -

“Look, Lance. I think you’re overreacting. Keith didn’t want to upset you, that’s all.” Said Shiro disapprovingly.

“Tha’s what Allura said.” Lance mumbled. “And he has upset me. He upset me when he told me he was leaving. He upset me when he disappeared for two weeks and acted all weird about it. He upset me when… Agh! I’m just upset! I miss him! I’m freaking done!”

Shiro was watching him with raised brows. “You’re done?” He repeated. “So lunch is over then?”

Lance gaped at him, incredulous. “ARE YOU EVEN TAKING ME SERIOUSLY?”

The smile Shiro responded with was a very clear ‘no’. Lance snatched his paper off the table and marched to his class early with a:

“Thanks. Whatevs.”

Hunk and Pidge were no help either. “Relax. He’ll be here before you know it.”

“Yeah.” Said Pidge, emptying a bag of scrap metal onto the kitchen table. “Just keep yourself busy ‘til then.”

“What do you think I’m doing?” Lance roared, storming upstairs. What the hell was up with everybody? It was as if no one cared about him or Keith anymore. Was that it now? Was he the only person who remembered what it was like to have Keith in their group? Had they all… moved on? Or was this really as simple as Shiro said it was and he should just get over himself?

To vent, Lance sent Keith a message.

Lance: I can’t believe you told everyone else when you’d be coming back but not me. Not cool, man. NOT. COOL.

*Lance is typing*

Lance: Oh, and next time you disappear for two months I’ll

*Lance is typing*

Lance: I hit send too early

Lance: I’m thinking of a threat, bear with

Lance: Anyway, you get the point: something bad will happen

Somehow Lance wasn’t any less angry. He’d straight up humiliated himself over texts that weren’t even being reciprocated. What if Keith really had disappeared this time? Surely the Highlands were a dangerous place. They looked scary from what Lance had seen on Google images. Had he got lost in the same place his mom had gone missing? Was Inverness the Bermuda triangle of
Scotland? Lance was sure beginning to think so.

That night he did pull-ups off his doorframe until Hunk came and screamed at him for damaging the property to which Lance responded with a “fuck you” before immediately apologising and making Hunk a cup of coffee.

February

A week later, Lance got a call from Allura.

“Good afternoon, Lance. What are you up to on the 14th?”

“Of this month?” Asked Lance.

“Yes! I’m inviting everyone out for a meal and a few drinks.”

Lance sighed. “I guess I can make it… wait… isn’t that… Valentine’s day?”

“Oh! Yes, I suppose it is.”

Lance grimaced. “Don’t you have plans with Lotor?”

“Erm – he’ll be there but I thought it would be nicer for us all to” –

“No offence, Allura, but I don’t wanna be the page-boy to your date. Have a good time.”

“No, no!” Allura continued, her voice rising to a hysterical pitch, “I absolutely insist you be there, Lance!”

Lance tried to think of another excuse. But it was too late. “Fiiiiiiine.” He conceded, “But any PDA and I’m out of there.”

“PDA?” Allura echoed, confused.

“Google it.” Said Lance tiredly.

He was so depressed. This was all so annoying. Why couldn’t he just hibernate until the end of this month?

Lance got another haircut on the morning of Valentine’s day (as per Hunk’s suggestion which he thought was extremely rude) and Allura and Lotor came to their house at noon to walk with them to the diner.

Lance frowned. “Isn’t it closer to your place, Allura?”

She fiddled with her hair. She was acting weirdly, sharing strange glances with Pidge and Hunk and constantly shuffling her feet. Lotor looked bored.

“Yes, but… I wanted to see you all before! Shiro’s already there so we’d best hurry!” She said with a strange laugh, before looking Lance up and down. “Are you wearing that?” She asked with undisguised disdain.

Lance looked down at his jeans and t-shirt. “Yeaah…?”

She shook her head. “Wear something nicer.”
He blinked. “Excuse me?”

Hunk pushed Lance up the stairs. “You heard the woman! Wear that shirt your mom got you for Christmas.”

“I-I was saving it!” Lance protested as Hunk wrestled him into his room and out of his t-shirt. “This is totally weird, Hunk! What the hell?”

Hunk grabbed the iridescent blue shirt from Lance’s wardrobe and a pair of black skinnies he hadn’t worn in months.

“This’ll do!” He told Lance, throwing the clothes at him. “Hurry.”

Grumbling, Lance changed into the outfit that made him look way better than he felt and plodded down the stairs. Everyone was beaming at him, standing in a line as though he was about to get married or some shit.

“What?” He asked, frowning.

Allura stepped forward, clutching something in her hand. “Something’s missing…” She said, scrutinising Lance’s face like a painting. She popped the lid off the lip balm she was holding and assaulted Lance’s face with it.

“Hey, hey, hey!” He said, swatting her hand away. His mouth tasted like strawberries. “You guys are acting super strange, it’s freaking me the fuck out!”

Allura paced back, regarding him. “That’s better.”

“Are any of you listening to me?” Lance flared.

She rolled her eyes, “Yes, Lance. We heard. Now let’s go! We’re late!”

“FOR WHAT?!”

No one answered him. Lance moodily followed the overly excited troupe to Allura’s favourite diner while she and Lotor walked hand in hand. Stupid Valentine’s day. Who came up with that? Some dude called Valentine, he guessed. Stupid name.

This would have been so much better with Keith.

Stupid Keith.

He didn’t mean that.

The diner was busy today, full of couples making eyes at each other. Lance wanted to be in bed, not dressed in his favourite shirt with his rad new haircut and no Keith to show it to. The fairy lights that were usually a dim yellow had been replaced by dainty purple lights in the shape of dew drops. Or tears. Lance thought they were tears. Everything was glowy and ambient and it smelled like pizza and goodness and – he turned to Hunk.

“I really don’t wanna be here.”

Hunk was looking past Lance’s shoulder. “Lance, look.”

Lance turned. Shiro was stood behind him beside a shorter guy with black hair tied at the nape of his neck that reminded Lance of Keith. Jeez, that guy was hot. Hating the resemblance, Lance
turned his back with a sad sigh.

“Yes. It’s Shiro.” He told Hunk. “Interesting. I wanna leave.”

Hunk and Pidge started giggling. Then Lance heard a voice that made his stomach hit the floor so hard he had to freeze to stop himself doubling over.

“Hey, man.”

Slowly, very slowly, Lance pivoted on his heel.

Keith’s voice had come from the guy by Shiro’s side. Lance blinked. He was wearing a red bomber jacket over a black V-neck and jeans, and his hair had grown so much it hung over his eyes and was tied behind his glorious head.

Lance’s jaw hit the ground.

“I’m dreaming.” He breathed. He had no lungs. He had no body.

Shiro was smiling. Allura’s hands were clasped over her mouth. Pidge and Hunk were smug.

“Wait…” He started, pointing at each of them. They began laughing. They *planned* this. He turned back to Keith, who he was sure wasn’t real and less than a foot away from him.

Reaching out both his hands, Lance brushed Keith’s face with a feather touch.

“Keith?”

Keith smiled under his fingers, and Lance felt the warmth as his muscles moved, as his breath tickled his hand, as Keith *smiled at him.*

“KEITH!”

Lance threw himself at Keith, flinging his arms around his neck and burying his face in his sweet, Keith-scented hair.

“I missed you, I missed you, I missed you!” He said over and over again into Keith’s neck, uncaring that everyone was watching.

Drawing back for less than a second, Lance cupped Keith’s warm face in his hand, gazing into the dark eyes he hadn’t seen for months. Tears blurred his vision, but he didn’t care.

“You asshole,” He sobbed, “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

Keith dipped his head, breathing a small laugh that made Lance fall in love with him even harder.

“I guess… I wanted to surprise you.”

“It freaking worked!” Lance touching their foreheads together, laughing through his dumb tears. But it was okay, cause Keith looked like he was about to cry too.

“Happy Valentine’s day.” Keith laughed, overwhelmed.

“Happy Valentine’s day, Mullet. I can call you that now.”

Keith blinked at him, his face tinged pink. “Lance, your… your *hair.*”
Lance’s heart hiccupped. “Aha… well… two can play at that game - switching up the strands and all…” He glanced up at Keith nervously, “You like it?”

“Are you kidding?” Keith whispered, “You look…” But he didn’t finish, because the next moment he was kissing Lance.

And it was so damn good. Where their first kiss had been a dream come true, this was the kiss of star-crossed lovers separated for an age. Keith would laugh at him for thinking something so dramatic, but it was true. Lance breathed Keith in like he was oxygen, threading his fingers in his overgrown hair, breaking apart to feather his face with tiny kisses before bringing them back again.

Someone shouted, “Get a room!” (It sounded like Hunk) which just made them laugh against each other. Into each other. Lance never wanted to let go of him again.

“I love you.” Lance told Keith when they finally parted for air, gasping and flushed. “I love you so damn much, Keith Kogane.”

Keith’s mouth tipped in a half smile and his eyes twinkled. “I’ve been waiting for you to say that.”

“I guess voicemail wasn’t enough.”

“Oh, god! This is too much! One minute!” Allura hurried off, blowing her nose.

“She’s been doing that ever since Keith got back.” Shiro explained.

Lotor looked lost and confused.

They all sat down, and Lance intertwined his and Keith’s fingers, squeezing his boyfriend’s hand as hard as he could without hurting him. They were gazing at each other constantly, and Lance’s face hurt from smiling so hard. When had he last smiled like this? He couldn’t remember. He didn’t know. His heart was a light, bouncing rocket in his chest, he was hot all over, and Keith was back.

“Oh,” Said Keith softly as they ordered a drink, “One thing you should know.”

Lance didn’t let him finish his sentence. He leaned in and kissed Keith, drawing it out for as long as he could before pulling away with a husky, “Yes?”

Keith smiled. “I brought my mom back with me.”

Chapter End Notes

Phew... that's better lol.
BTW IMPORTANT: We've decided that, in light of new information coming out at the SDCC panel (y'all see what I did there?) we've decided to change Shiro's character in our fic to fit with canon Shiro (in one particular way). Some of the decisions we've made regarding his character don't sit well with us anymore - we feel it would be wrong to carry on down the route we planned and we're making some changes to parts that have already been written! It won't change anything plot-wise tbh, but these changes will take a few days or so thanks to our fic being so. Damn. LONG. But yeah, we had a little discussion and decided we'd be more comfortable changing things :) that was hard to say without giving away spoilers but I'm sure you all know the 'thing'
we're referring to XD Anyway, hope that's cool with everyone! Let us know what you think!
P.S The link Keith sends to Lance is real. It's funny as hell.
Chapter 18

Keith

A memory rose in Keith like the tide coming in. It was night, because nights drew in quickly in the highlands, and freezing. It was so cold Keith could taste the ice in the air, could feel it slipping into his bloodstream. Long, weather-hardened grass pierced the canvas material of his trousers, sharpened by the numbness of Keith’s flesh, but he didn’t mind. He didn’t mind the cold or the pain, because he was looking at one of the most beautiful places he’d ever seen: Knoydart was a remote, desolate area of the highlands. It was treacherous and deserted, rocky and mountainous with very few people inhabiting its inhospitable landscape. Voices of the ocean rose around him: the roar of waves, the crash of rock spearing through great walls of water, wind howling through the gaping mouths of empty caves. It was electric, charged with a wild energy, and Keith felt it spark at his fingertips. Behind him was the rough, rugged hills which made up most of Knoydart—a perilous, crumbly scene which Keith had become well-acquainted with, had even come to love—but even this paled into comparison to the sky overhead. It was a lake of diamonds, filling his eyes with light, twinkling in the inky, midnight darkness. The moon hung like a coin, giant and pearly, tinged with gold so strong that he didn’t need a light to see. Moonlight and starlight were more than enough, lending the night an ethereal quality.

Sat beside him, was his mother.

Her face was at once familiar and strange, an echo of features Keith recognised from mirrors. Long, dark hair, piercing eyes, a pointed nose and sharp chin. She even had a bit of a mullet which she’d dyed purple.

She was speaking to him in hushed tones across a chasm of years, just loud enough to be heard over the din of the ocean. She was telling him a story of the stars Altair and Vega, called Kyonu and Jingnyo in Korean mythology. In the starry heavens, he was a noble herder of cattle and she a weaver of many beautiful things. They’re love for each other was so great it caused them to forget their duties, and so the lord of heaven separated them with the milky way. Forever after, they could only meet on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month by treading upon the heads of magpies who took pity on the couple and bridged the stars. That is why, according to the legend, it always rains on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, allowing crops to grow anew.

“I told your dad that story,” she said, quietly. “A long time ago. Right here.”

Tears pricked Keith’s eyes in that moment because he finally had all the answers he’d been searching for. He’d thought finding his mother would reveal some truth about himself. He’d thought that since his dad died his only chance at finding a home again was through finding his mother.

He’d been so stupid.

Looking at Krolia in that moment, with her eyes misted over and a small, wistful smile on her lips, he realised that home wasn’t something you found. It was something you carried with you. It was subtle and complex—a smell that made you feel calm, a steadiness and stillness inside your soul, it was a moment of, ah yes, that feels right.

That was what Keith felt when Lance threw his arms around him.

The pleasure of holding his boyfriend was almost too much to bear. He grasped Lance close, felt his warmth, buried his nose in Lance’s hair, breathed him in and filled every sense he had with Lance, Lance, Lance while the other boy uttered a mantra of I missed you.

When they finally drew apart, there were tears shinning in Lance’s eyes.

“You asshole,” He sobbed, “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

Keith dipped his head, breathing a small laugh. “I guess… I wanted to surprise you.”
“It freaking worked!” exclaimed Lance, touching their foreheads together and laughing. His smile was so bright that Keith felt tears sting his own eyes. This was it. This was home.

“Happy Valentine’s day.” Laughed Keith, overwhelmed by the emotion churning inside of him. “Happy Valentine’s day, Mullet,” Lance breathed back. “I can call you that now.”

Keith was about to make some glib remark when he stopped. He’d been so happy to see Lance that he’d been seeing him through a sort of memory-fuelled filter, but now he really looked. His heart fluttered inside his ribcage as Keith drank in the new, hard lines of Lance’s body, visible through the tight material of his blue shirt, the way his jaw had hardened, his shoulders broader, his stomach firm beneath Keith’s fingers. It caused a hot flush to crawl across Keith’s skin. Lance looked good. And was that—

“Lance,” he stuttered. “Your… your hair.”

The boy had gotten a fucking undercut.

“Aha… well… two can play at that game - switching up the strands and all…” said Lance, glancing up nervously. “You like it?”

“Are you kidding?” Keith whispered. Like it? Keith wanted to marry that goddamn hairstyle. The temptation to run his fingers through it was overpowering. “You look…” But in the end he chose not to finish his sentence. Instead he crashed into Lance and kissed him. Then they were laughing, and Lance was saying the words Keith had been listening to on voice mail on repeat. I love you. It made Keith run hot and cold in ways he hadn’t thought were possible. I love you. This time when they kissed, Keith teased his fingers into Lance’s waistband. Just a dip. A promise. Just enough to drive Lance a little crazy and feel the intensity spark between them. But then everyone was whooping, and someone was yelling at them to get a room (probably Hunk), making Keith painfully aware that they weren’t alone. They were surrounded by friends. Stupid friends.

Self-control, Keith, he reminded himself.

They drew apart, and then Pidge was clapping him on the back in welcome, Hunk was scooping him into a hug, even Lotor gave him a firm handshake. Shiro was teasing Lance and Allura was back, having touched up her makeup, and she was hugging the pair of them and crying all over again. It was wonderful and chaotic and home. The way it had always been. Well, almost always. Now there was just one added bonus…

A little later, when they were settled in a booth with their drinks safely ordered, and everyone was immersed in their own conversations, Keith leaned into Lance’s space. They were sat as closely as two people could without being in each other’s laps: Lance’s arm thrown across the back of the shiny couch, knuckles brushing Keith’s shoulder, ankles interlocked under the table. It was such a rush to be able to do this, to just have… access to Lance. He lowered his voice to a murmur.

“Oh, one thing you should know—”

But Lance cut him off with a kiss. A slow, passionate kiss that made Keith’s toes curl. When Lance drew away, his expression was extremely smug.

“Yes?”

God, Keith was so in love with him. Stupidly, drunkenly in love with him. Which was the reason Keith wanted Lance to be the first to know. “I brought my mom back with me.”

It took a while for the penny to drop. Keith could see the explosive, WHAT?! on Lance’s lips and preemptively reached out to silence him. “Yes,” he said, finger pressed firmly to Lance’s lips. “I found her, Lance. In Scotland. In the middle of nowhere in this shack, and yeah before you say it, it must be a family thing. And I didn’t think I’d find anything but I did. I did, Lance.”

“Holy shit,” breathed Lance. “For real?”

Keith nodded.

“Holy shit,” repeated Lance, grinning from ear to ear with delight. “Keith! That’s amazing!”
“What’s amazing?” asked Pidge, sharp as a tack.

“Nothing,” said Lance, immediately.

“There’s definitely something,” argued Pidge.

“There is not!”

“You two have been whispering conspiratorially,” said Shiro. He’d been suspicious of Keith since he declined his offer of a ride from the airport. There’d been a question mark hanging around him all afternoon.

“Dude,” continued Lance, as though mortally offended. So over the top. So dramatic. Jesus, Keith had missed him. “We are a totally open book.”

“Uh huh, yeah no,” chimed in Hunk. “Lance always does the eye twitch when he’s lying.”

“So what is it?” asked Allura, now also intrigued. Even Lotor was leaning in.

Lance opened his mouth to argue again, to make some sort of denial, but Keith touched his elbow and smiled at him. “Lance, it’s okay. It’s not a secret. I just wanted you to know first.”

“Know what?” demanded Pidge.

“I found my mom in Scotland,” said Keith.

A full beat of silence passed. Then, there came a resounding, “WHAT?” It was the same sort of “what?” Keith had stopped passing through Lance’s lips only a moment before.

“Oh my goodness!” exclaimed Allura. “How?”


“Where is she now?” asked Shiro.

“I’m not sure I follow,” said Lotor.

“Whoo, guys,” said Keith with a chuckle. “One at a time.”

“I can’t believe you found her,” breathed Shiro, gazing at Keith with so much pride that Keith felt himself swell with it. They clasped hands over the table. “I’m so happy for you, bro.”

“Thanks, Shiro,” said Keith.

“So is she here?” asked Shiro.

“She’s here here”? demanded Lance. “You brought her all the way from Michigan?”

“You took her to see mom?” asked Shiro.

“Wait, Shiro didn’t know?” asked Lance. He turned to Shiro. “You didn’t know?”

Shiro shook his head.

“Slow down, guys,” said Keith, still laughing. He felt kind of bubbly. “Mom isn’t in Michigan. She came with me, she’s in an air bnb near my place.”

“You didn’t go to Michigan first?” asked Lance. For some reason his voice was really quiet.

“Yeah,” said Keith, frowning. “I came straight from Scotland. Why?”

“No reason,” said Lance. “I just figured you’d wanna go home first. You know, get clothes and see Akane and… stuff.”

“Yeah, I thought about it,” said Keith. “But I wanted to see you more than anything, so I came here.”

Lance went bright red.

“Ew,” said Pidge, making gagging actions.

“Really, in front of my salad?” asked Hunk.

“It’s so adorable!” exclaimed Allura.

Lance buried his face in Keith’s shoulder.


Shiro shook his head at him.


“You’re going to kill me, mullet,” whispered Lance, breath tickling his shoulder.

“What did I say?” demanded Keith.

But Lance just chuckled weakly, planting a swift kiss on his cheek. “Nothing babe, don’t worry.”
Keith was still annoyed that everyone seemed to be in on something that he wasn’t, but the way Lance said the word ‘babe’ placated Keith enough to let it go. Besides, their drinks came just then, and everyone was preoccupied with passing glasses and coffee cups around. Then they were placing food orders.

“Alright,” said the waitress, a slim girl with long, blonde pigtails. She sounded British. “Is that everything?”

“Yes, thank you,” said Lotor, graciously.

The girl paused, eyes fixing on Lotor with something like recognition.

“You look awfully familiar,” she said, uncertainly. “Have you been in before?”

“Once or twice,” answered Lotor, pleasantly. He turned to Allura. “We’ve come for dinner before. Haven’t we, sweetest?”

“Yes,” said Allura. “And I have to say I wondered then, but with your accent and everything, whereabouts in England are you from?”

“Oh, I haven’t lived in England for years,” replied the waitress. “But my parents are from around Bristol.”

“Oh, Bristol is a splendid city!” gushed Allura. “I visited when I was very young. My name is Allura, by the way, and this is Lotor.”

Lotor smiled. “A pleasure. I too, have visited Bristol on a number of occasions. It’s a very… up and coming place. It has a real sense of tangible history, I find.”

“Wow,” said the waitress with a laugh. “I don’t think I’ve been around this many English people in a while.”

“We Brits must stick together,” said Allura with a wink. “What with all of these terrible Americans.”

“Hey!” protested just about everyone else at the table.

“At least we don’t sound like some poncy historical drama,” said Hunk, then he put on his best imitation of Allura and continued, “Oh, dearest, would you go to the trouble of passing me that saucer? I would be ever so grateful.”

Everyone laughed.

“That wasn’t half bad,” said the waitress. “I’m Romelle, by the way.”

“Hunk,” said Hunk, with a small smile.

“Well, I better go place your order, else you’ll never get any food,” said Romelle. She bid them farewell, giving a little wave over her shoulder.

As soon as she was gone Allura leaned over the table to grasp Keith’s hand. “So tell me,” she said. Seeing her bright, familiar smile was such a welcome sight. He’d missed her sorely in Scotland.

“How did it happen? How did you find her?”

“Um,” said Keith, scratching the nape of his neck. “It’s kind of a long story.”

“Don’t give us that,” argued Pidge. “Come on, spill!”

“Don’t pressure him, Pidge,” reprimanded Shiro, though Keith could tell by the way he was holding himself that he was just as interested. “He’s had a long flight.”

“I’ll tell you the whole story soon, I promise,” said Keith. “But for now… well. She was out in the middle of nowhere by herself. A pub owner gave me the directions.”

“Was she living in a shack?” asked Lance, grinning.

Keith opened and closed his mouth, finding there was no way out of this particular verbal trap. He settled on a defiant, quiet, “Maybe,”

That had everyone cracking up.

“No doubt you’re related then,” said Allura.

“Not a shred,” said Shiro.

“Don’t laugh! She built it herself, from the ground up!” exclaimed Keith, though even he could see the humour in the situation. He settled back into his chair, pouting. “It was a nice shack.”

“I’m sure it was, honey,” chuckled Lance, leaning into Keith to plant a kiss on his head.
“Anyway,” said Keith, ploughing on. “I want you all to meet her, eventually. But I think meeting
the whole gang would be too much at first. Shiro, would you come for coffee tomorrow?”
A softness glowed in Shiro’s eyes that only be described as love. “It would be my honour, Keith.”
“Alright, alright, I get the point,” said Pidge. “But we get to meet her next, right?”
could go savoury.”
“Ooh, we could have a party!” exclaimed Allura. Seeing Keith’s panicking face, she continued, “A
small gathering sort of party. I’m sure my roommates would be happy to give me run of the house
for an evening.”
“Or perhaps I could supply a venue,” suggested Lotor, almost shy in his offer when Allura whirls
to him in surprise. “Well, I have this large house at my disposal, whether I want it or not. It only
seems proper to put it to good use.”
Allura’s eyes sparkled.
“Whoa, hey guys, don’t get carried away, okay?” said Keith, tensing. He tensed further when
everyone dismissed him and carried on with their planning. “I mean it, okay? Mom doesn’t like
any fuss.”
“I’ll keep a rein on the things, Keith,” said Shiro with a wink. “Don’t you worry.”
“Yeah, and besides,” said Lance, loud enough to get everyone’s attention. “We’re just glad that
you found her. I mean…” he shook his head. “I’m so proud of you, mullet.”
“Yeah dude, well done,” added Pidge.
“Agreed.” said Shiro.
“I’m so happy for you, Keith,” said Allura.
“Aww man,” sniffed Hunk. “I’m getting emotional.”

A lump rose in Keith’s throat. “Thanks guys. It… means a lot.”

“Well,” said Shiro, raising his glass. “I say we toast to Keith.”
“To Keith!” everyone chimed, clinking glasses and laughing and taking sips. The conversation
began to flow again after that- breaking apart into tangents and rivers of stories and jokes. Pidge
and Hunk started regaling Allura with a science experiment gone wrong while Lotor and Shiro
began discussing something which sounded vaguely political. It was all so very normal, and Keith
loved it. He settled into his chair and just let himself drink it all in.
“Hey,” whispered Lance.
“Hmm?” asked Keith. He hadn’t realised it, but he’d absently been drawing circles on
Lance’s palm with his thumb.
“I mean it, Keith,” whispered Lance. “I’m really fucking proud of you. And I’m so happy that you
found your mom.”
Warmth spread through Keith’s veins. “Thanks Lance. I think… I think you’re partially the reason
I was able to find her.”
Lance blinked. “Me?”
“Mm hm,” hummed Keith, slipping his arm around Lance’s middle to snuggle into him. “You
have no idea how much braver you make me.”
“That’s scary,” said Lance, grinning like an idiot. “Cause you were pretty brave before you met
me, you know. Or maybe reckless and stupid is a better description.”
Keith elbowed him in the side, earning a laugh, and then whispered, “My mom can’t wait to meet
you.”
“You told her about me?!” squeaked Lance.
“Of course,” said Keith with a chuckle. “I annoy myself with how much I talk about you.
Especially when we’re not together. I mean… I’m not gonna lie, Lance, I’m so happy that I found
mom but being away from you… it was torture.”
“You?” asked Lance, small and hopeful.
“Well yeah, didn’t you feel the same way?”
There was a flash of something Lance’s eyes, then. Something small and vulnerable. But it was gone as quickly as it was there.
“Eeh,” he said, grinning. “It was alright.”
Keith prodded him sharply in the side. Lance responded by sticking his tongue out at him. Soon they were involved in a small tussle until Pidge started making gagging noises again. Then they drew apart and left their private little world to engage in the scene around them. Keith hadn’t been lying when he told Lance it was torture to be away from him, but it had also been hellish being away from this motley crew. He’d missed Hunk’s warmth and Pidge’s dry humour, he’d missed Allura’s sincerity, Shiro’s calm and even Lotor’s awkward formality. There’d been times in Scotland, cold and shivering inside a tent on the edge of a dig, where the missing had turned into a large, unfillable hole inside of Keith. He felt it most in the quiet moments, when there was nothing to do and the Scottish students crowded together in a tight huddle of inside jokes and cultural familiarities. The easy way with which they interacted made the hole yawn widely open, dark and hungry inside his chest. There were other international students of course, and eventually Keith waded into that tight circle with some help from Dan, finding comradery and even friendship. But it was different to this. Somewhere inside of him, he knew that this was his place, that these were his people and always would be, no matter how they separated or where they ended up.
It was a strangely comforting thought.
“What are you smiling about?” asked Lance in a whisper. Their food had arrived and almost everyone was distracted by Romelle.
“Just thinking about fate,” said Keith, cutting Lance a glance.
“Howdy mister mysterious,” said Lance with a laugh. “What do you mean, fate?”
“I didn’t want Shiro to post that invitation on Facebook,” said Keith, seeing something click into place in Lance’s mind. “Actually I was hell-bent against it. I was prepared to walk to Austin oversharing a car with a complete stranger.”
“I can imagine that,” said Lance with a chuckle.
“But he did it anyway,” continued Keith. He squeezed Lance’s hand. “And I met you. And through that I met Allura, and then everyone else and—I don’t know—it just feels right. Know what I mean?”
They smiled at each other, before becoming very preoccupied with the arrival of burgers and French fries and all the un-nutritional comfort foods Keith had been craving. That first bite of bun, patty, pickles and ketchup was so good it had him almost tearing up. From then on it was business as usual with the group, which meant stories and catch up and a hell of a lot of teasing. Everyone was keen to fill Keith in on the six months he’d missed, which resulted in a lot of voices vying for dominance, overlapping and adding details to stories that weren’t necessary, arguing over the way certain events took place and correcting inaccurate details.
“No, I’m being serious,” insisted Pidge. “The lead singer looked just like you!”
“No he didn’t,” argued Allura. “His hair was too short.”
“Keith’s hair was short when he left,” said Pidge. “And Matt got so many selfies with him after the concert that I’m sure. Look!” she presented her phone to the group, showing a goofy close up of Matt and some guy in a black t-shirt with dark hair.
“He doesn’t look anything like me,” argued Keith.
“Yeah, and how did Matt managed to get a selfie with him?” demanded Lance.
“They took pictures with the crowd at the end,” said Allura. “But you were too busy pining and wandered off.”
Lance went bright red. Keith looked at him. “Pining?” he asked.
“Oh man,” said Hunk. “He was pining so hard.”
“I was not!” squeaked Lance. “I’m afraid you were,” said Allura. “We were all quite worried about you. You seemed—”
“Well, Shiro nearly worked himself into a coma!” intercepted Lance, eager to cut Allura off. Keith
noticed, but chose not to say anything.

“He was a literal zombie for three months,” agreed Pidge.

“I thought he was gonna eat my brain,” added Hunk.

“I don’t see why I’m being dragged into this,” said Shiro, nonchalantly sipping his water.

“Especially by the two students who hacked into Iverson’s computer last month.”

Hunk and Pidge exploded into a chorus of, “HOW DID YOU KNOW?” and then everyone was laughing. They finished their food and sat for a while, satiated, until the raucous conversation turned into something decidedly more mellow. The afternoon was slipping away from them through the fogged, diner windows, and the first patter of February rain began to fall against the glass. Lance’s head slipped onto Keith’s shoulder, both feeling pliant and rubber-limbed rather suddenly. They shared a look, and with it the same thought.

“I’m pretty beat,” announced Lance, stretching.

“Me too,” added Keith, around a yawn. “I’m still jet-lagged.”

“I must admit,” said Allura, linking arms with Lotor. “I could do with an early night. And you have to fly out again tomorrow, don’t you darling?”

Lotor’s face darkened, but when he turned to Allura, there was only softness in his features.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Let’s call it a night, then,” suggested Shiro, standing. “I’ll get the bill.”

Lotor stood. “Please allow me,”

“I appreciate it, Lotor,” said Shiro, smiling his Shiro smile. “But this is on me. Honestly.”

“Very well,” accepted Lotor, graciously. “You have my thanks.”

“Yeah, thanks Shiro,” said Pidge and everyone echoed the same sentiments. He waved them away, going in search of Romelle.

They started chatting about some random, idle thing then, but Keith paid little attention. Now that he’d seen everyone and caught up on most things, there was a sudden, urgent need deep within him to be alone with Lance. To be able to do as he wished away from prying eyes and Pidge’s allergy to PDA. He snuck a glance at Lance and found the other boy already looking at him. There was a similar fire in his eyes.

Keith stood. “Tell Shiro I’ll catch up with him tomorrow,” he said. “I gotta get back to the flat to call mom. I said I’d check up on her. Lance would you, er… help… me?”

It was the worst cover Keith had ever come up with in his life.

Lance stood as well. “Sure. Yeah no, I’ll help you… call her.”

“We’ll wait up for you then, buddy,” said Hunk, grinning smugly. “What time will you be in? Nine? Ten? A phone call shouldn’t take that long.”


“That’s alright, Hunk,” he said, voice strained. “Don’t stay up on my account.”

“Nah, what sort of friends would we be if we didn’t?” asked Pidge, mirroring Hunk’s shit-eating grin. “We can’t go to bed knowing Lance might be out alone in the cold.”

“I won’t be alone,” mumbled Lance.

“What?” asked Hunk and Pidge in unison.

“I’m staying out!” exploded Lance. “I’m not coming home tonight. There! Happy?”

Their only answer was a chorus of wolf whistles. Grabbing Keith’s arm, Lance pulled him quickly to the diner exit, grumbling.

“Have fun!” called Pidge in a sing song.

“Stay safe!” added Hunk.

Whirling round, Lance presented the entire table with a gallant middle finger before shoving open the diner door and storming out into the cold. “Assholes!” he exclaimed, shrugging on his quilted, denim jacket. He pulled a rust-coloured scarf from his pocket and waved it in the air. “They’re so goddamn smug I could—gah!”

“They’re just teasing,” said Keith, even though his cheeks were pink with embarrassment. “You shouldn’t be bothered by it.”
“Why aren’t you?” demanded Lance, whipping the scarf at him in accusation. “They never did that to Allura when she started dating Lotor.”

“Maybe I just don’t care,” said Keith, taking the scarf from Lance’s hand. Deliberately, he wound it around Lance’s neck, moving so close that their noses were nearly touching. “Maybe I’m more bothered about the fact that my boyfriend is staying the night after six months of not seeing each other.”

Lance melted like an ice cream. “Oh.” He said, eyes on Keith’s lips.

“Mm,” agreed Keith, gaze also sliding down.

They both moved in at the same time and Keith could tell it was going to be a wondrous, romantic, spine-tingling kiss—until they smacked foreheads with enough force to knock each other out.

“Fuck!” exclaimed Lance, leaping backwards.

“Shit!” agreed Keith, doubling over to clutch at his head.

They glanced at each other, both pictures of pain, and burst out laughing.

“What the fuck?” wheezed Lance, between bouts of laughter. He sounded like he was dying.

“What the fuck just happened?”

“You went too low!” said Keith, gut hurting with how much he was laughing. “You nearly knocked me out!”

“You nearly knocked me out!” corrected Lance. “And I didn’t go too low, you are low. You went too high!”

They burst into another round of laughter, listening to the echo of how ridiculous they sounded.

“What’s wrong with us?” wheezed Keith.

Lance just shook his head, straightened and said, “Come here, mullet.”

Keith did as he was instructed, allowing Lance to wrap his arms around him and pull him close, the red mark on his forehead a mirror for Keith’s own wound. Smiling, Lance brushed it with his thumb, blue eyes sparkling like sun-warmed pools. He kissed it gently.

“I love you, Keith,” he whispered.

An earthquake took hold of Keith’s heart. He gripped Lance’s scarf—too tight, too possessively—and whispered with all the fierceness and emotion he possessed, “I love you too, Lance.”

Then they kissed, and it was everything Keith had imagined their previous attempt would be: deeply passionate and warm, a flurry of questing lips and hot breath, tentative tongues and teeth scraping lightly against sensitive flesh. When they drew apart, Keith rested his forehead against Lance’s, wincing slightly at their shared pain.

“I still can’t believe I’m not dreaming,” said Lance. “I’m not, am I?”

Keith pinched him.

“Ow!”

“Got your answer?”

“You’re a shit, Keith Kogane.”

“I’m your shit.”

“…”

“…”

“Okay that didn’t sound nearly as romantic as it did in my head.”

“No kidding!” laughed Lance. “Is that what you’ll put at the end of cards, Dear Lance, Happy birthday, love your shit?”

“Shut up,” complained Keith, slumping against Lance. “It’s the jet lag you bastard.”

“Whatever you say, honey,” chuckled Lance. He shivered, and the air misted with his breath. “Can we get out of here? I’m freezing my nuts off.”

Taking his hand, Keith offered Lance a sly smile. “I know just the place.”

Not long after that, the pair were inside Keith’s tiny apartment—dusty with disuse but otherwise
just as Keith had left it. It had felt strange, twisting the familiar key into his familiar lock and stepping inside his room. It was like he’d never been away, as though these past six months had been nothing more than a glitch and now everything had reset, rebooted. There were no signs he’d been away either besides the aforementioned dust and a heap of unopened mail on the welcome mat, which Keith dumped on the kitchen counter without a second glance. Most of it looked official and he was not in the mood for official mail tonight.

“Want something to drink?” asked Keith while Lance tugged off his shoes. He didn’t take his jacket off, however, because the heating was still kicking in. Already used to his dodgy pipe work, Keith clicked on the mini heater he’d bought two years ago, sending a shock of hot air into his icy apartment.

“Let me guess, water or water?” asked Lance with a chuckle.

“Actually,” said Keith, crossing his arms and entirely pleased with himself. “I got cocoa.”


“So, want a cup?” asked Keith, moving to the kitchenette.

“Sure, sounds like a dream.”

Quickly busying himself with a kettle and mugs, Keith tried not to let Lance’s presence put him off balance too much. They’d been together all afternoon, sure, but being alone inside Keith’s apartment felt different from his previous visits. There was so much time stretching between them and for the first time since Keith touched down on American soil again—he felt nervous. Wary. A lot could change in six months, after all, couldn’t it?

Suddenly a pair of arms wound around his waist. “What are you fretting about?” asked Lance.

“What?”

“Dude, you’re totally freaking out about something.”

“How’d you know?”

“I just do.”

“That’s not an answer.”

An impatient huff. “I just know how to read you, man. You always bite your lip when you’re over thinking something, and right now you’re mashing it.”

Suddenly conscious of it, Keith released his lip. “I guess… I guess I was just thinking that things might be different now.”

“How different?”

Keith whirled around. “What did Allura mean, that she was worried about you?”

Lance averted his gaze, suddenly finding the ceiling very interesting. “Nothing. She was just teasing.”

Keith’s eyes narrowed. “It didn’t sound like it,”

“Keith—”

-“Did something bad happen while I was away?” asked Keith, cutting Lance off in his worry.

“No, nothing happened. I promise.”

Keith stared at Lance’s face, trying to find a hint of a lie in his expression, his eyes, the way he held his mouth. There was nothing there, but Keith got the distinct feeling that Lance was shuttering away something important. “You’d tell if something did happen though, right?”

Was Keith being paranoid, or did Lance pause too long? “Yeah, of course.”

Keith nodded, wrapping his arms loosely around Lance’s neck. “Sorry. It’s just so weird being back. I’m not sure where I stand with anything yet.”

“It’s okay,” murmured Lance. “I’m just glad you’re back.”

Keith tightened his grip. “Me too.”

“Now are you making me cocoa or are you just a pretty face after all?” asked Lance.

With a swat, Keith sent Lance to wait on his bed while he brewed the cocoa, adding marshmallows with a pointed look in Lance’s direction. He whooped, impressed and Keith grinned.

“This is good!” exclaimed Lance, sipping the warm drink.
“Why do you sound so surprised?” asked Keith, tossing a blanket over their shoulders.

“Dunno, I just never imagined you being good at stuff like this. You always struck me as a protein shake and steamed chicken sort of guy.”

“That’s… not far off the truth, to be honest,” said Keith with a laugh. Lance laughed too, and Keith poked him in the ribs. “But’s it’s better than your diet of pizza and Hunk’s pancakes.”

“I’ve been doing better this year!” argued Lance. “I’ve been taking care of myself!”

“I know, I’ve noticed,” said Keith, unable to stop himself from glancing down at Lance’s hardened body. He glanced back up, and found Lance staring at him with a red face. Clearing their throats, they both looked away at the same time.

“So,” said Lance, voice too high. “How was Scotland?”

“Honestly?” said Keith. “It was amazing.”

“Yeah?” asked Lance, expression softening.

“Yeah,” answered Keith. “It was so goddamn beautiful. Like, getting used to the people and the culture was a little weird. I didn’t think there’d be much culture shock considering we all speak English, but the Scots are so different. Really loud but so friendly. And they have the weirdest foods too.”

“Like haggis?” teased Lance. “Did you eat any?”

“Once,” said Keith, shuddering. “Never again. But deep fried mars bars, on the other hand, best thing ever.”

“Deep fried mars bars?” repeated Lance, scandalised.

“It’s disgusting,” agreed Keith. “But so good. Dan ordered me three on a night out.”

Something clouded Lance’s expression. His body tipped away from Keith’s ever so slightly. “Did he?”

“Yeah,” continued Keith, oblivious. “He bought all the freshers—that’s what they call freshmen there—and all the international students some. Apparently it’s a right of passage.”

“Sounds friendly,”

“He was,” exclaimed Keith. “And really genuine too. You would have liked him.”

“Hmm.”

That caught Keith’s attention. He studied Lance’s face. “What does that mean?” he asked.

“What?” asked Lance, way too innocently.

Keith eye’s narrowed. “I knew it,” he said. “You were being weird about Dan over text.”

“I was not!” exclaimed Lance, staring at his mug like he might murder it. “He just sounds like a douche.”

Keith’s mouth dropped open. “Are you really this jealous?”

“I’m not jealous!” snapped Lance. “It just sounds pathetic having some third year hanging around all the freshmen and international students, like, didn’t he have a life?”

“That was his job,” explained Keith. “He was a peer mentor.”


“He also had a girlfriend,” said Keith, watching Lance’s reaction. He saw the individual emotions flicker over Lance’s face—anger, confusion, realisation.

“Oh,”

“Yeah, oh,” said Keith, with a laugh. “Jeez Lance, I didn’t think you’d make such a big deal out of it.”

“What was I supposed to do?” asked Lance, voice suddenly quiet. “You weren’t here. It was… hard.”

Keith mouth went dry. “I know.”

“It’s just—” continued Lance, blowing out air. “It felt like you didn’t miss me or want me speaking to you. I know logically you were busy and didn’t have internet or whatever but you kept disappearing and I was worried…” he took a breath. “I was worried you didn’t want me anymore.”

“Lance,” breathed Keith. He put his cocoa down and took Lance’s face firmly in his own, forcing his gaze to his. “I missed you so much. All day, every day. And I’m… I’m sorry, about leaving and
not being there much. I’m so sorry. But there wasn’t a single moment where I didn’t want to fly home just to see you, believe me.”

Tears pricked Lance’s eyes. Choking up, he nodded and leaned into Keith’s touch.

“I was hoping the Instagram account would help,” continued Keith. “But I guess it was a stupid idea.”

The room paused.

“Instagram account?” asked Lance.

“Yeah,” said Keith, frowning. “… Did you not look at it?”

“What Instagram account?” asked Lance. “What are you talking about?”

“I sent you a link,” said Keith.

“Yeah, to a cat video web page,” said Lance.

“Oh,” said Keith, flushing. “Oh no. You didn’t see it.”

“See what?”

“Nothing. It doesn’t matter.”

“No, tell me,” insisted Lance, leaning forward.

But Keith was blushing so hard with embarrassment he didn’t know if he could cope with doing this now, in person.

“I—I,” he stuttered. “I set up an Instagram,”

Lance blinked.

Keith swallowed. “For you,” he whispered.

Lance’s face practically glowed. “Let’s see.” He said.

“No,” said Keith.

“What?! You said it was for me!”

“Yeah but I didn’t think I’d be here with you when you opened it!” exclaimed Keith.

“Show me!” demanded Lance, more excited than a kid at Christmas.

“It’s embarrassing!”

“Keith!”

“Fine,” sad Keith, whipping out his phone. He tapped the screen before his brain could really register what he was doing and all but threw the bloody thing at Lance’s eager face. He wanted to bury himself in a very large, deep pit and never see the light of day again. He imagined Lance laughing at him, at the phone, or cringing at what he found. But Lance didn’t so any of that. Instead, he grew very still and the held the phone close to his face. He seemed to stare and flick through things for an eternity, never saying anything, barely even breathing, and Keith began to worry he’d done something very wrong.

But then Lance looked up, and started to cry.
WE'RE BACK!! I'M SORRY IT'S BEEN SO LONG!! life has been wild and we've been rushed off our feet. This fic is nearly done, but hopefully the next update won't take as long as this one did. EEK. if you've stuck with us since the beginning, have every single uwu i possess because... wow. This fic reached 10K hits. Wild. Honestly DID NOT ANTICIPATE THIS! we're so proud of this baby, it was our life a year ago and then things.... HAPPENED! LIFE HAPPENED! as it always does. anyway, enough of the disclaimers. Please enjoy this chapter and please let us know you're thoughts! Biggest hugs ~ Spaladin.

Lance

Dammit. Why couldn't he stop crying? Lance hiccups, choking on his stupid tears. The phone screen was blurred from them. He swiped his hand across his eyes, only half-aware of Keith talking to him. A hand on his shoulder, warm and comforting. The kind of close contact he hadn't had with anyone since before Keith left.

"Fuck." He got out, sniffing hard. His own tears had splashed onto the phone, half-covering the picture that had triggered him into waterworks. It wasn't so much the picture as the caption.

The first picture on its own had thrown him for a loop. It was a selfie of Keith, arriving at the airport in Scotland, and an oddly placed set of bagpipes in the background with the caption, 'could this be any more cliche? I miss you already.'

Then there was an insanely gorgeous (even if it was slightly blurry) shot of the highlands in the distance, snow-capped, wild and green and grey, with the caption: 'driving past Applecross. One day we'll have to do a road-trip here too.'

Photo after photo of everything Lance had missed scrolled past his vision, saturating him with an ache of missing him. Missing him all over again. There was a picture Keith sat amongst strangers at a large oak table, a feast displayed out in front of them. ('Haggis belongs in hell') Keith, his hair in his eyes, attempting a shy smile with his hands tucked in his pockets atop a windy hill ('Dan took this one. Then I dropped my phone and it smashed. Thanks, wind.'). Keith, stroking an impossibly shaggy dog, his face alight with joy. Keith, Keith, Keith... the one that had set Lance off was a candid shot of him, facing an impossibly magical expanse of mountains and hills, a valley stooped below him, water rushing in a maze of crystalline blue: Today my mom told me everything. Is it strange that everything she said about her and my dad reminds me of us? She loves him after this long, and so will I.

It wasn't perfect or particularly thought out or a sonnet by any means. It was just so Keith. Pure and honest and true and overflowing with emotion. To anyone else viewing the profile, the captions could be addressed to anyone. Or no one at all. But it was all for him. It was all for Lance. And as soon as he realised that he'd lost it, the tears he'd fought so hard to reign under control bursting over the brink.
"Hey," Said Keith softly. His cheeks were tinged pink from embarrassment still, but his eyes were wide with alarm. "I-I'm sorry." He stammered.

Lance shook his head vigorously. "Don't be," He said, his voice coming out croakier than he would have liked, "Seriously, don't be, I'm"-

His sobs became too strong to control. He gave in to them, falling sideways into Keith's ready and waiting arms, letting him gently push his hair off his forehead in soothing rhythmic motions while he made small shushing noises and Lance wet his shirt with his tears. He couldn't explain the surge of overwhelming emotion that swept him from sanity like a tidal wave. Maybe it was relief. Maybe it was everything he'd been feeling over the past six months hitting him all at once. Maybe it was the sheer force of his love for Keith. It could have been all those things or none of them. Either way, Lance was crying like a baby against Keith's chest.

He let out a strangled laugh in between his sobs. "What the - hic - fuck is - hic - wrong with me?"

Keith chortled beside him. "Want a list?"

Lance shoved him gently, "Shut up."

He was calming down now. But he didn't pull away. He leant against Keith, allowing the other boy to stroke blissful patterns against his forehead, his fingers travelling into his hair every once in a while.

Eventually Keith said, "I'm so sorry."

"It's fine," Lance sniffed, "I'm seeing it now. I mean, sure, maybe I wouldn't have cried like a little bitch if I'd known about it from the start but we all know you're not the best with technology so it's"-

-"No, not the Instagram thing." Said Keith. Lance noticed the strain in his voice. "I'm sorry for... everything."

Lance was silent as he pulled away from him to look at his face. He waited. Keith sucked in a breath, eyes dropping to the mug of coco which was surely going cold by now in his lap.

"I know I said it all before I left. I know I keep... apologizing. But, like, until I left I didn't realize how shitty I was. Not telling you I was going might be the worst thing I've ever done. Or at least, I don't think I've ever felt so guilty about anything before. I shouldn't have... I mean, I should have told you I was leaving as soon as we made up. You were always honest with me after that. I should have done the same."

Shit. He was really feeling it hard. Lance had been so overcome with relief and affection that he hadn't even thought about that. Seeing Keith's face again had made all his resentment and bitterness evaporate in an instant.

"I know I was mad, especially after you left." Said Lance slowly. Keith glanced up at him, eyes crowded with emotion. "But it wasn't because of all that. It was because I missed you." He laughed at the memory, "I was pathetic. I sulked like a little kid. It was pretty funny actually, especially those first few months. I actually cried over your..." Fuck. Lance blushed, his face hot as he realized what he was about to say -

"My what?" Keith prompted, frowning.

Lance's breath went shallow. "Nothing." He couldn't have sounded less genuine.
Keith drew back, mouth tilting into a smirk. *Fuck.* "Tell me. What did you do?"

*Fuck, fuckety fuck fuck fuck -*

"Honestly, it's - I forgot what I was gonna say."

"No you didn't! Tell me right now!" Keith ordered, shuffling back to get a full view of Lance, who stared at his shoes unblinking, arms folded around himself.

"Keith," He ground out, "Just leave it."

Keith licked his lips slowly, placing his half-empty mug on the floor. "If you don't tell me," he warned in a low voice, "I'll send you home."

Lance gaped at him, horrified. "You wouldn't do that." He gasped.

"Try me." Keith threatened. There was no teasing in his tone. He was dead serious. *Bastard.*

Lance scowled. "You - you just got here! There's no way you'd send me back." He didn't even believe himself. "And it's Valentine's day!"

Keith shrugged, "It's just one night, Lance. We've got months to make up for lost time. Now spill or you're going cold tonight."

Lance made a conscious effort to close his jaw before it hit the floor. The *nerve.*

He coughed. "Well, if you're gonna be like that..." *Fuck.* How did he start? *I've been using your shirt as wank material since before we confessed to each other.*

Yikes. He couldn't imagine that going down too well.

He scooted nervously to the edge of the bed, crossing his legs and chewing his nails.

"R-Remember when you...lost your..." he risked a peek at Keith who watched him expectantly, one brow raised, "your shirt?"

Keith cocked his head, and Lance thought *adorable.* "My shirt?"

Lance huffed. "Your martial arts one."

It took a full two seconds for Keith to realize, his eyes widening in revelation and his mouth opening in a small 'o'.

"Yeah! I looked for that everywhere!"

"Yeah. You left it at my place."

"I-I did? When did you find it?"

"...

"...

"Don't laugh."

"Lance, when did you find my fucking shirt that I've been looking for for *months?*"
"It just - it smelled really good! I hung onto it because I'm a dumbass and I - I liked imagining we were together and - ugh, I dunno! I'm pretty sure it doesn't even smell like you anymore but I remember what it smelled like and"-

"When did you find it?"

"March."

"JESUS FUCKING - oh my god, Lance." He leaned forward into his hands, shoulders shaking. He looked up in the silence, dark eyes sparkling in the half-light. Lance wasn't sure what to expect but it sure as hell wasn't the somewhat breathless, "You god damn moron. I love you so damn much."

Perhaps it was the accented southern lilt that did it, but Lance's stomach somersaulted three times over and his breath hitched.

"I-I love you too." He replied, tentative.

Keith was laughing at him, shaking his head. "C'mere, you idiot."

Lance blinked. "You're...not mad at me?"

Keith rolled his eyes. "I'm furious. Do you know how much I had to spend on a new shirt?"

Lance chewed his lip, insides curdling with guilt. "Ugh... I'm so sorry. I-I'll pay for a new one."

When Lance didn't move, Keith boldly started forwards and laced their fingers together, using his other hand to cup Lance's heated face.

"Don't you dare." He said, just above a whisper. "It was worth it. I'm never gonna let you forget this."

Lance deflated like a balloon. "You're dating a fucking moron." He dropped his head, and Keith pulled it back up again with a gentle tug on his chin.

"Yeah, but you're my fucking moron."

"Jeez..." Lance muttered, "corny, much?"

"It's been six months, Lance. I can be as corny as I want."

Keith's breath was tickling his mouth, and his lips tingled with anticipation. He tried not to let it show, but his eyes kept darting to Keith's mouth. It was pretty obvious what he wanted.

"Y-you're right." Lance hardly knew what he was saying. And he hardly had time to finish before they were kissing again. Softly at first. Keith caught Lance's bottom lip with his teeth, daring the kiss to deepen. Lance complied, melting into him, winding his fingers through his gloriously mussed hair, drinking in his scent and his essence and the feeling of kissing him like a drug. It made him dizzy, and he was afraid if he opened his eyes he'd sway. So he didn't. He let his hands roam Keith's body of their own accord, listening to the lull of their breaths whenever they broke apart for less than a second, only to reconnect again like magnets. It was a need, a moment he'd been fantasizing about since... since... god, he didn't know. He didn't remember a life without Keith. Keith was all he knew right now.

They fell into a tangled heap on the bed, drawing apart, breathless.

Keith's eyes were shut, and a serene smile rested on his features. It was the smile Lance had dreamt
of in his absence, the same one he'd been struck with in his loneliest moments when he was lying in bed, yearning to reach out and touch - so he did. He traced Keith's jawline, the short curve of his nose, his cheekbones, and, very gently, the smiling curve of his mouth, which widened at his touch.

Keith made a low, content sound in the back of his throat and cracked open an eye.

"Your hair looks really sexy like that."

Lance grinned. "You keep talking about it."

"Because it's hot. Not to mention the rest of you... someone should have warned me you've been working out. I would have prepared."

"Keith, your gay is showing."

In response, Keith nipped one of Lance's fingers which still lingered near his mouth.

"Ow!" Said Lance dramatically, lunging forward so he was half-on top of Keith, tickling him violently. Keith groaned.

"Noooo, Lance... ugh... I'm too tired to fight back." He swatted him away pathetically. Lance was straddled on him, his hands hovering over Keith's half-exposed stomach threateningly. But instead of tickling him, he laid his palms on Keith's abdomen. Keith flinched, then frowned.

"What are you doing?"

"I dunno. You have really good abs, I guess."

Keith smirked. "Now your gay is showing."

"It's been showing for a good while now, Keith."

He was stroking tentative lines along Keith's waist. Keith closed his eyes again with a sigh. "Guess it has... god, I've missed this."

Lance lay down, tangling their legs together and resting his head on Keith's chest, hand still curled around his waist.

"Me too."

The soft thuds of Keith's heart under Lance's head began to slow as they lay there, their breaths falling in tandem. The sound of traffic outside muted into an insignificant blur alongside the chatter of the creaky old pipes in the walls. Keith's soft, sleepy breaths drew deeper and slower, and Lance allowed his eyes to shut, winding his hand in Keith's warm curled one as he did. *This* was what he'd been missing. *This* was one of the infinite things he adored about being with Keith - lying together in the silence, content to be close and tangled together like a singular entity -

"FUCK, I ALMOST FORGOT!" Keith bolted upright like a shot, flinging Lance to the other side of the bed.

"Agh, what?" Lance grumbled, rubbing his head as Keith bristled about his room, grappling for his bag. "Some warning would be nice..."

"Sorry," Said Keith breathlessly, digging around in his back-pack. "It's just" - he stopped, clearly finding something and grinned at Lance, the dark circles under his eyes and hair swarmed in a
frazzled halo around his face giving him a manic air - "I brought you something back."

Lance's heart leapt. He hadn't even considered the possibility that Keith had got him a gift and he felt his face colour.

"I-I hope you didn't spend any money." He muttered nervously.

Keith shook his head. "Nah. I knew you wouldn't want me to. It's two things actually. Close your eyes."

Lance's drowsiness dissipated as he let his eyes flutter shut at Keith's command, gingerly cupping his palms to allow a heavy, rough object to be placed gently in them.

"Alright, this is the first one. Open your eyes."

Lance did, and gazed at the object in his hand.

At first glance, it was a rock. Just a rock. But when he turned it over, he saw there were markings on it. Drawn faintly in faded red paint, the markings clearly showed two, tiny male figures, seemingly hand in hand. Lance blinked.

"That's a nice drawing you did of us, Keith. I had no idea you were such a talented artist." He couldn't help himself, and earned himself a slap on the upper arm for his cheek.

"I didn't draw it, idiot!" Keith scolded, a steady flush working up his neck. "I-it's something I found while I was excavating. I shouldn't have taken it... technically it's college property, but... I dunno... it reminded me of us, I guess, and I just sorta slipped it in my pocket."

Lance gaped at him, the rock suddenly feeling three times heavier in his grip. "Keith!" He gasped, scandalized. "You could get in serious trouble for this!"

Keith watched him through his impossibly long, black lashes with an expression Lance couldn't say no to if he tried.

"Not if you don't tell anyone." He said quietly, his small voice edged with mischief.

Lance was shaking his head in disbelief. "I-I literally - I'm lost for words - Keith - I can't believe you broke the law for me."

"I'd do more than that for you." At Lance's look of complete shock, he continued, "I can turn it in if you wa"-

He didn't get any further. Lance lunged himself at Keith, piling him onto his back and locking their mouths in a furious kiss. Lance kissed him over and over again with no grace or skill - just big, smacking kisses going from his lips to his chin to his cheekbones.

"I - kiss - do not - kiss - deserve - kiss - you!"

Keith laughed, flushed. "It's just a stupid rock."

Lance eased off him, allowing them both to sit up again, though their knees were still pressed together and their faces were bright crimson.

"No, it's not." Said Lance earnestly. "This is..." He brought the painted chunk of stone up to eye level again, studying every individual marking made. "This is really freaking cool. And cute. And romantic. And... unpredictable."
Lance realised he'd just described Keith and locked eyes with his boyfriend, eyes twinkling. Keith read it in his expression and glanced away, embarrassed. He smirked.

"I'm glad you like it."

"I love it," Said Lance as he reached out to smooth down Keith's mussed hair.

"Are you ready for the next one?"

"I dunno, am I? Or will I end up demolishing you again because you're so cute?"

Keith snorted as he grabbed his bag, "Oh, I like the connotations of that."

Stumped for a reply, Lance blushed and ignored the rush of blood southward at Keith's tone. "Shush, mullet." He murmured, smiling so hard he felt his face might crack.

This time, Keith didn't ask Lance to close his eyes. Maybe he forgot in his anticipation, but the next moment he was presenting Lance with a small, rough wood carving. Marveling at it, Lance took the small object between his thumb and finger and let the figure roll into the cup of his hand. It was a bird. Its edges weren't completely smooth and its beak was blunt at the end, but it was definitely a bird; its oak wings were splayed in two elegant peaks and its hewn body was covered in tiny scratches representing feathers, and for its eyes were placed two tiny, turquoise stones that glinted with a life-like light of their own.

"Keith, did you make this yourself?" Lance whispered, fearing he was close to tears again.

Keith nodded shyly. "Dan taught me. We had a lot of time to kill up there and uhh, he was really into wood-carving so he showed me a thing or two... it's kind of shitty, I know."

"It's an Albatross, isn't it?" Lance sniffed as the lump in his throat grew bigger. He grinned at Keith, sure the sparkle of tears in his already weep-tired eyes were showing.

"Yeah."

"My favourite. How did you know?"

"Oh, just a hunch." Keith laughed, nibbling his lip. "I showed Shiro and he wasn't impressed."

"What?" Lance gasped, scandalized that anyone possessed the gall to insult his boyfriend's wood-carving skills. "Why?"

"He didn't think it was bad. He just doesn't like Albatrosses. 'Ugly birds', he called them."

Lance tutted, laughing. He had to admit, Shiro had a point. Albatrosses were pretty ugly as birds went. But Keith's woodcarving for him was beautiful. He noticed a small circular hole attached to the top of its head for a chain to loop through.

"I am going to wear this every day for the rest of my life," Lance promised, closing his fist around the warm wooden figurine.

"Y-you don't have to do that." Keith laughed nervously at Lance's intensity.

"Nah, dude. I ain't ever taking this thing off. Not ever."

Keith coloured immensely and Lance was again struck by just how startlingly attractive Keith was. Through the hard angles and sharp planes of his face he was all soft expressions and gentle words.
His jet-black hair was a stark contrast to his skin in the faded dim hue of the room. He was all contradictions and opposites. Everything in between was hidden by a firm wall he'd built for himself over the years, and Lance was gradually taking it down; brick by brick. Lance didn't bring pyjamas, because he figured he wouldn't need them, and Keith didn't bother to put his on. But it had been six months since they'd been in close contact like this, and Lance couldn't help but suddenly feel extremely nervous as he stripped down to his underwear. He was more than aware of Keith unashamedly watching him.

"Uh - Keith."

-yawn- "Yeah?"

"You're um... staring at me."

"Heh. Sorry."

Shivering, because Keith's room was so god damn cold, Lance bolted underneath the covers, encasing himself in the cotton duvet while Keith was in the bathroom brushing his teeth. When he returned, he burst into uncharacteristic giggles.

"Wha's so funny?" Lance demanded, his mouth half covered by blankets.

"You look like a worm!" Keith exclaimed, pointing as he stood there in his way-too-tight-to-be-legal underpants, losing his shit over the sight of Lance swathed head to toe in the sheets.

"Keith, you're fucking delirious. You need sleep. Badly." Lance said, struggling to keep his tone serious.

"Mmm, nah," Keith sighed as he clambered into the narrow bed beside Lance, "I've stayed functional on way less sleep before."

"How much less?"

Keith scrunched up his nose as he fought hard to remember and Lance was momentarily distracted by the heated press of Keith's thigh against his own.

"Uhhhh three days. Bit over."

"KEITH!" Lance screeched.

"Shhhhh, I have neighbours!"


"It's fine. Could you turn the bedside light off?"

Lance did so. "Um. It's not fine. That's - that's bad for your health. Sleep is the most important part of"-

Keith was kissing him. In the dark. Mostly naked.

Lance was cut off with a small 'guh!' as his boyfriend made the calculating move to shut him up. Warm hands grasped Lance's face, pulling him sideways to meet Keith for the lip-lock. The jolt in Lance's navel at the sensation of their legs tangling together made him completely forget what he'd been talking about. Or arguing about.
"So, you're going down this route, Kogane?" Lance rasped against Keith's lips. "I'd say I disapprove but that would be a lie."

Keith did no more than smile against him in response with a low, sultry hum that made Lance's blood rush like nobody's business. This is where Lance would like to say the next half an hour involved a lot of tumbling and grinding and moaning and all the other fantastic sexy things he'd been fantasizing about. This is where he'd like to say they spent all night getting each other off. This is where he'd like to say he sauntered back home the next morning, satiated and smug, facing Hunk and Pidge with the face of the man who'd just conquered Keith Kogane.

But alas, he could not.

Instead, he forgot when they'd stopped kissing. The pair of them fell asleep in each other's arms in an exhausted sweaty mess, and when he woke up the next day half-hanging off Keith's bed, he simply tugged the other boy closer with a muttered:

"God, we are such grandads."

"Speak for yourself."

"You fell asleep first, mullet."

"Prove it."

"Can't."

"Exactly."

"Shut up, Kogane."

"Make me."

"...Fine."

Keith was off to meet Shiro so he could introduce him to his mom, and Lance sauntered hope, yawny and sleepy-eyed and all achey for the wrong reasons. Keith's bed wasn't built for two people, but then it didn't matter.

A grin overtook his features as he neared his street, making an old lady do a double take.

His boyfriend was home.

Keith was back.

His fingers brushed the mark Keith had kindly left behind for him on his neck, and he could already hear Hunk teasing him about it. He doubted they'd believe him if he told them they'd just fallen asleep.

Lance took out his phone.

**Lance:** Hope you're not planning to fly off to Germany or something while I'm gone. ;)

...
The reply came before he'd reached home.

**Keith:** *Fuck. You got me. I was just booking my tickets to the Bahamas.*

Lance chuckled, his pockets weighed down with the two presents Keith had brought back from him. He brushed his knuckles against the rough, ancient (illegal) artifact in one pocket and curled his fingers around the small, pretty carving in the other. He couldn't remember ever being this happy. Where their first kiss at the concert had been a rush of elation, an ecstatic explosion of everything they'd been holding in, now was... quiet. It was a buzz in his abdomen, a slow purring anticipation that the future ahead was bright and promising and through it all, Keith would be by his side.

He thought back to twenty four hours prior when he'd woken up on Valentine's morning, a hollow kind of resolution sitting uncomfortably in his chest. It was amazing how different everything felt now. The clouds were still the same mottled shade of February gray. The local tom-cat was out doing his daily rounds of the block, searching for scraps. Nothing had changed. But everything had.

Everything...

Keith had even found his mom.

Despite his amazed relief - because *wow* Keith had searched the entirety of Scotland for his mom and *actually* found her, not everyone could boast that - a surge of anxiety rose with it.

What if she didn't like him?

What if they met and Lance made a fool of himself?

When Keith stopped replying to his messages later, that was when he guessed he and his mom and Shiro were all together, sitting at a cafe and talking happy families. Perhaps. For some reason, when Lance thought of Krolia, he pictured her marching onto the premises in full camo with an AK47 slung over her shoulder.

"What's got you all worked up?" Asked Pidge later with a wink, "Rough night?"

Lance chewed his nails. "No... N-No, jeez Pidge get your mind out the gutter."

"You're the one who said you 'weren't coming home for the night' and that usually only means one thing." Hunk provided.

Lance gave him a look. "Thanks, man. No. It's his mom. I'm terrified of her."

Pidge and Hunk exchanged a glance. "Err... you haven't met her yet, Lance." Pidge pointed out with a tone that suggested she was worried for his sanity. "Have you? Wait, did you meet her?"

"No."

"How can you be scared of a person you've never met?"

"Because!" lance fumbled with his words, leaping up from the couch to pace the living room. "I mean, look at Keith. He's a unit. Yeah, he's adorable and gorgeous and one of the sweetest, kindest unique and talented people I've ever met"- Pidge cleared her throat - "Sorry. But. You know, he's also kind of terrifying. Sometimes he gets a look in his eye that genuinely makes me fear for my life and I don't think there's anything he couldn't do if he put his mind to it, and - and that's just her
son! The woman is ex-military! She lived in a shack in fucking Scotland, for crying out loud! She can probably sword-fight with her eyes closed. She probably has an army of fucking eagles - no, what's a Scottish bird? - dragons? I dunno. But she's probably even more of a tank than Keith is. If she decides I'm not good enough for him, I'm toast!"

Lance stopped in the middle of the room on the last syllable, whirring around to face his two best friends, waiting for a solution.

Hunk approached him and clapped a large hand on his shoulder. "Ah, young Padawan. You have reached a time in every man's life when they must meet their partner's parents. Face the battle with dignity, friend, and he who is worthy shall'st emerge unscathed."

Lance shrugged his hand off. "Don't laugh at me. Pidge, stop laughing. This is serious."

Hunk scoffed. "Dude, I've been there. I spent the two days before I met Shay's parents trembling like a leaf. You remember that, right?"

Lance huffed, "Yeah, but this is"-

"Don't tell me it's different. I promise you, this is normal. I'm sure she'll love you."

"Plus, you actually have muscles now." Pidge chimed, "So you might hold up to scratch. She might not dismiss you as a beta-male just yet."

"Thanks, Pidge."

"Anytime, Soy-boy."

The time to meet Krolia came the next day. Keith called Lance and asked him if he'd be down to meet him and his mom at the Steakhouse in town centre. Typical, he thought. No doubt she'd want to be within range of large meat cleavers in case he didn't meet the standard. He gulped and agreed anyway, spending the whole of the next day cleaning his bedroom, then the rest of the house, snapping at his unfortunate housemates whenever they got in the way. By evening, they were not best pleased with his behaviour, even less so when he dissolved into nervous chattering and spent a whole forty minutes making them help with his outfit.

"Just wear what you usually wear." Hunk said with a yawn.

"What do I usually wear?" Lance said, standing by his mirror in his underwear, two crumpled shirts in either hand. "I-I mean, I don't wanna look too casual, but if I look like a try-hard she's gonna think I'm trying to win her favour - which I am - but I don't want her to know that. Or do I? Do parents like that sort of thing? My mom might not. Oh, god. Oh, god."

Pidge threw a sweater at his face. Hard. "Put it on!" She yelled, "If I have to hear another word of this fuckery, I'm burning your clothes and sending you out in the one dress I own, and oh boy is it ugly."

Hunk clicked his tongue in agreement, and they both eyed him from the edge of the bed. Sensing a fuse about to go off, Lance got dressed without a word save for a few muttered, "sorry"s.

He headed out fifteen minutes later into the chilly night, wrapped in his favourite double-breasted coat and a blue sweater with a shirt, teeth-chattering more from nerves than the cold. The last time he'd seen Keith had been half-dressed, tangled in sheets, hair a mussed mess from sleep and Lance running his hands through it. The thought warmed his face and a jolt of excitement-come-fear added a brusqueness to his walk.
This was so like Keith; he shouldn't have expected anything less. Six-months of absence and he not only arrives looking like that (no wonder Lance couldn't stop thinking about the night of their reunion, counting the seconds until he could kiss him again) he also brings along his estranged mother who'd been hiding out in the Scottish mountains. Classic. Lance allowed himself a smirk despite his nerves. This was like a movie or something. And he was lucky enough to be a part of this wonderful moment in Keith's life.

He consoled himself with that as he approached the bustling Steakhouse. Town centre was busy, and faces blurred by too quickly. He wished time would go slower, but the inevitable moment came when he pushed open the doors of the restaurant and spotted a tousled head of black hair sitting at a table directly across the room. And there was a woman sat by him. Lance blinked as he willed his feet to move across the floor and approach the table where there was a spare seat left for him, right beside the woman and opposite Keith. Christ.

"Hello." Said Lance, stopping at the table. Why did his voice sound like that? All shaky and hollow?

The woman's dark eyes (so like Keith's) fixed on him.

"Lance!" He was aware of Keith saying, "Come, sit down. Mom, this is Lance. Lance, this is my mom."

The woman stood. She wasn't very tall, but her frame was sturdy and sure, her glossy black hair schooled into a tight ponytail, thin wisps framing her sharp features. There was no mistaking her. This was Keith's mom alright. But instead of reaching behind her and pulling out an AK47 (as Lance had pictured numerous times), she held out a straight hand, offering it to Lance.

"Hello, Lance, it's a pleasure to meet you."

Lance took it, overly aware of how clammy his hand had gotten and allowed it to be shook firmly.

"Hello Mrs. Krolia - I mean Kogane. Err."

Fuck. Could he call her that? Was that insensitive?

She offered him a small smile. She smiled more with her eyes than her mouth, Lance noticed. Just like Keith.

"You can call me Krolia." She told him, already retaking her seat.

Lance realised he'd been stood in the same spot for far too long and shuffled to the open seat. When he'd shrugged off his coat (staring at the menu placed in front of him the whole time) he finally glanced upward to meet Keith's eyes across the table. The smile he received was so warm and encouraging that he almost managed a full smile back. Almost. The result probably came off as more of a grimace, he was sure. Clearing his throat, he picked up the menu and began intently scanning the list. He couldn't see the words though. They swam in front of his face meaninglessly. He could have been looking at Ancient Greek for all it was worth.

"So" - he tried, "Uh, where are you staying, Krolia?"

"An Airbnb downtown." She told him levelly. "It's quite nice. There are lots of trees around. Though I would prefer something with a little more air conditioning."

He gave a laugh. It sounded forced. "Ha. Yeah. I suppose you're used to a colder err... climate."

He knew Keith knew how nervous he was, and it was for that exact reason he refused to meet his
"I certainly am." She said airily, drumming her fingers on the tabletop in a fashion that reminded Lance of a police officer waiting for a confession. *I'm innocent!* He wanted to cry. "I hear you live in Texas?"

Lance nodded. "Yeah. Family's from Cuba but we live in Austin now."

"Interesting." She said with a cool tilt of her head. Her gaze was direct and unclouded. Lance flit his eyes from the menu to her, unsure if she was waiting for something.

"So yeah," He stammered, "It's, uh, much hotter there than Scotland. I imagine. I mean. I've never been but. Keith - y-your son - told me it was quite... cold."

*Did Keith say that?* Fuck, he couldn't remember. He might've just straight up lied.

Krolia raised a brow. "Yes, Keith - *my son* - wasn't quite accustomed when he first arrived."

"I got used to it though." Said Keith, his voice muffled in his glass as he sipped at his water. If Lance wasn't mistaken, he was holding back laughter. He and Krolia shared a glance and Lance's heart thumped faster. Why did he feel like he was being interviewed? Why was he such a dumbass? Why was he suddenly unable to string a coherent sentence together?

The conversation remained fairly stiff and polite with Lance stumbling over every word until the food arrived. He was grateful when the waiter arrived, carrying a burger probably twice the size of his head.

Stuffing his face with the burger and fries gave his mouth something else to do other than talk his way into humiliation. Halfway through some silent munching, Krolia stood.

"I'm getting a drink. You want anything?"

There was a moment's pause before Lance realized she was addressing him.

"O"', he said, mouth full. "Uh uh. 'Fanks."

"Lemonade please, mom." Said Keith. When she was gone, Lance gave an almighty swallow and slumped down onto the table. "Keith, I'm so sorry." He gasped out. "I may as well just write 'worlds worst boyfriend' on my head and be done with it."

Keith laughed, reaching across the table to grasp Lance's limp fingered hand in his. "What are you talking about? She likes you."

Keith's expression flickered. "You can't tell?"

"If she's anything like you, the poker face isn't exactly a dead giveaway."

Keith tilted his head. "You think we're alike?"

"Scarily." Said Lance with a shiver, regaining some of his confidence. "You both act like you're carved from stone - she reminds me of you before I knew you, a little. Huh. Now I think of it I was super nervous then as well. I thought you hated me, remember?"

Keith chuffed, bringing Lance's hand to his lip and planting a soft kiss on his palm.
"How wrong you were."

"How wrong I was."

Keith smiled into his hand, apparently uncaring of the other people in the restaurant, a couple watching their interaction with curiosity. Lance was tempted to turn around and see if Krolia could see them from the bar... best not.

"So, you see? She likes you."

Lance felt more like himself. "If you say so, mullet. Shame she doesn't have one of those. Then you'd basically be twins."

Keith nipped his finger.

"Ouch! Still hungry?"

Keith's gaze on him darkened. "I might be."

Somehow Lance guessed he wasn't talking about food. He felt himself involuntarily flush with heat. "Keith..."

"What are you doing after?"

"You mom"-

Keith raised a brow. "My mom?"

"No! Fuck! Your mom is here, you can't - you can't act like this, I'll"-

"You'll what?" Keith smirked, stroking Lance's calf with his foot under the table.

"Keith!"

Before any more protests could be made, Krolia placed a glass of lemonade and ice down in front of Keith and settled down with her own glass of something rich smelling and amber. Whiskey?

"Thanks, mom. I'm just going to the bathroom."

Lance didn't miss the sideways wink his bastard boyfriend gave him as he left. Don't leave, oh god please don't leave me alone, Lance thought. But when had Keith ever made things easy for him?

His mouth went dry as a long silence between he and Krolia endured. Krolia tilted back her head and tipped the liquor into her mouth, swallowing it back with a smack of her lips and an 'ah!' She slammed the glass back down on the table and Lance couldn't help but think if this was a movie, she would glare at him and whip out a deck of cards, betting her life or her fortune...

She was glaring at Lance. But there were no cards.

"Um"- said Lance.

"Whatever you want to say to me, say it." Said Krolia harshly, "I want it all out in the open."

Lance was at risk of going into cardiac arrest. "Um - Mrs. Kogane, I don't know what you mean"-

"Lance, I know what people think of me. If you believe I abandoned my son, I want to hear it from
Lance stared, gaping like a goldfish. "Mrs K - Krolia, that's... that's not why I came here." He managed.

A small frown puckered her brow. "No? Do you..." She seemed hesitant now, and her intense honey glare fell to her empty glass, "do you have any qualms with me? I had this conversation with Shiro yesterday. Of course, I cannot blame him for how he viewed my return - I can understand how it must seem from an outsider's perspective. He was quite thorough with me. I had assumed you would wish to have a similar conversation."

Her voice was tight and constrained. She was nervous, Lance realized - scared even.

"No," He said softly. "No, I wasn't expecting this at all. Honestly? It didn't even cross my mind." He gave a small laugh. "Maybe it should have. I mean, you had been MIA for years."

Kroli's grip on her glass tightened. "I see."

"But," Lance started up again, amazed at his nerve, "I will say this. Finding you meant everything to Keith." She looked up at him, the hard lines in her features still the same, but the depth in her eyes hanging on his every word. "I think he would have done anything to find you. He missed you, even though you two didn't know each other. It's crazy, really. I've never had to think about my parents that way. I've never had to wonder where they are, or if they're alive or if they still love me. It's something I took for granted so much until I met him, and his dedication to finding you showed me how important his family are to him. When we first met I thought he was detached and cold. I thought he didn't want to get close to anyone. Turns out, he just had a fuck tonne - sorry, I mean - a butt-load of walls up. It's taken me months to get past those walls, and I don't think I'm done yet. But... they were there because of you. Because he didn't want to get close to anyone. Because he didn't want to be left behind. And I - I'm not saying I blame you. Not fully. I don't know what happened in the past. I don't know your story. I just... as long as you know how much of himself he gave to believing you were still out there, and how much it means to him now you're back - well, we don't have a problem. I think... is what I'm trying to say."

A single tear tracked down Kroli's toughened cheekbones and she grasped Lance's hand in hers on a sharp inhale.

"Thank you for saying those things." She told him earnestly. "I don't quite think I deserve them, but thank you."

Lance smiled. "Uh - anytime."

She swiped the tear away. "Now, I think, time to get you a drink. Whiskey?"

"I..."

"Neat or on the rocks?"

"Rocks?"

"Good." She stood briskly and no less than a minute later returned with Lance's drink. He sipped it uncertainly, not completely hating the burn that seared the back of his throat but not loving it either.

Any trace of Kroli's tears were gone by the time she'd downed her second whiskey, and she didn't seem any less stone-cold-sober than before the first.
"So, what are you studying?"

Lance choked on a burning gulp. "Para- cough - paramedics."

Her eyes widened. "Ah, yes of course. Keith told me. What a noble occupation." She laughed, chewing on a cube of ice. The crunch made Lance's toes tingle. "I shouldn't have expected anything else from Keith's choice in a partner." At Lance's blank look, she elaborated, "His father was a fireman. Of course he values bravery."

"Oh," Said Lance blushing, "I wouldn't call myself brave. It's not the same really..."

When Keith returned from his suspiciously long retreat to the bathroom, it was to find his boyfriend and estranged mom laughing heartily over a story he'd just missed, both far more relaxed than how he'd left them.

Suffice to say, the night was a success.

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Perhaps, Lance thought with a pinch of shame, he had been a tad melodramatic over the past few months. Hunk and Pidge noted with grumbling pointedness how much his mood and overall amiability had improved since Keith's return. In the days following, he made it up to them by cleaning the house from top to bottom (even the bathroom, which he hated cleaning most. He even bought new, fresh sponges and soaps in their favourite scents - Hunk was way more forgiving after that) and paying for their drinks for a whole week.

The bliss of having Keith back did not subside quickly. They spent almost every moment together. Even when Lance was working, Keith made sure to stop by and order a Caramel Frappuccino. As the weather began to warm, they took long walks around campus, hand in hand, arm in arm, snatching hurried lip-locks under the shade of trees and shop-fronts. Time slipped by so wonderfully that Lance wasn't prepared for the shock of Allura standing on his doorstep one night, eyes shining with tears.

"A-Allura." He stammered, hoping he didn't look too disheveled; Keith had just left after insisting Lance get on with his essay. He hadn't let him go easily though, and his heart was still suffering from its excessive pounding over the last couple of hours.

"I'm sorry." Allura sniffed, "I wasn't really sure where else to go. Can I come in?"

Her eyes were red rimmed and she was wrapped in a hat and scarf, her long silver hair draped over her face in a curtain to conceal it.

"Of course!" Said Lance, stepping aside and ushering her through the door. "I'm afraid Hunk and Pidge are at an engineering seminar with Shiro right now."

"Oh, yes." Allura said, the brightness in her tone sounding forced. "Shiro was quite nervous for that, wasn't he? He's been working on his presentation for weeks. I said I'd go... Oh, god. I can't believe I let myself get so worked up, I should have gone, or at least told him I wasn't coming..."

Her breath came in short gasps. She sounded on the brink of more tears.

"Allura," Said Lance softly, guiding her by the shoulder to the sitting room. "Sit down, have some coffee or - maybe tea would be better - and tell me what happened."
He gave her two extra sugars, because she clearly needed it, and emptied out a packet of cookies into a small bowl for good measure. She took three noisy slurps of tea and had nibbled her way anxiously through three cookies before starting.

"It's Lotor." She finally told Lance.

"...what's he done?"


Lance frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well," Allura chewed her lip. "He was only supposed to be gone for two weeks. Obviously it's - it's been a little longer than that."

"Nearly a month." Lance confirmed, surprised at how fast the time had gone. A week ago Krolia had left to go and stay with Akane, who had graciously agreed as Keith's pseudo-mom to put his real mom up for a while. Lance hadn't given Allura's overly gracious boyfriend some thought for a while. It had all seemed so easy breezy the last time they were together. "Don't tell me he cheated."

Allura breathed a humorless laugh. "I wish it was that simple."

"Fuck. What'd he do? Kill someone?"

Allura's jaw was hard-set and she stared dead ahead, her mug vibrating in her hands. "Indirectly. Probably. I gather he has the same disregard for human lives as his parents, seeing as he's refused to take a stand against them."

"You're kidding..."

"Again, I wish... Oh, Lance. Whatever got into me? I genuinely thought"- she swallowed thickly - "I knew his family's corporation was, well, shady to say the least, but... Lotor had so much ambition. He talked so much about changing things for the better and - and doing some good in the world, but... turns out it was just that. Talk." Her next laugh was bitter. "He wanted me to marry him."

Lance's jaw dropped. "What the fu"-

-"He wanted me to marry into that. He wanted me to support their awful work. I called him yesterday to find out why he wasn't coming back. It seems he is to inherit the family business." She said through gritted teeth, angry tears welling again. "I replied no, obviously - not if he planned to support such a dishonest organization. He said he'd get back to me."

"And?"

"He did. Today. About an hour ago. By email."

Lance couldn't help his squawk of indignation. "EMAIL?"

Wordlessly, Allura pulled out her phone, gave it a few curt taps, and handed it to him. The email wasn't very long.

Allura,

I am deeply saddened by your decision to remain in America. I would implore you to reconsider, but I know how stubborn you are when it comes to matters of the heart. As for the matter of my
family, I have no choice. If I choose to disobey them, my inheritance will be cut off. Completely. Can you understand how detrimental that would be to my life? To the future we could have had together? I feel it is appropriate to mention that I would have stayed with you despite my family’s obvious disapproval. Not that it means anything now, but we could have had a perfect life together. I fail to understand how your notions of moral justice could drive away your supposed feelings toward me, but that is why I cannot return to you. In the end, I understand you no more than you understand me, and it truly is a shame that such an opportunity was lost between us.

Kind regards and sincere wishes for the future,

Lotor

Lance lowered the phone, mouth open in horror.

"Who the fuck does he think he is?" Allura burst out as soon as he was done. "Mister-fucking-Darcy? 'I would have stayed with you despite my family's obvious disapproval'? Boo-fucking-hoo! Oh no, mummy and daddy won't give me my inheritance because I'm slumming it with a poor engineer's niece with no aspirations except to help others in need! Fuck off! I should have seen his conceit from the very beginning!" With that, she stood and slurped down the rest of her sweet tea. "Why are the good ones either complete and utter arseholes or gay?!" She demanded as though Lance was responsible for this.

He was still catching up with Lotor's pretentious emails and Allura's pronunciation of arseholes when Hunk, Pidge and Shiro returned from the seminar.

"Oh, fuck!" She breathed, "I can't let them see me like this."

"You look fine." Said Lance. And she really did. She was pretty as ever. Her eyes were a little red and her hair was flustered about her face, but he doubted that was the real issue. Of course, Pidge knew something was wrong the second she walked through the door and saw Allura standing in the middle of the room.

"Lotor is cancelled." Said Lance before anyone could swarm her.

"What?" Said Hunk.

"Does someone's jaw need breaking?" Pidge asked Allura with disturbing intent.

"Allura. Are you okay?" Asked Shiro from the doorway. He was looking sharp after his presentation, Lance noted, in a cornflower-blue blazer - the top two buttons of his shirt undone.

Allura batted their concerns away, blowing her nose on the tissue Lance offered. "Oh, I'm fine. Fine."

"She needs a drink." Lance directed at thr group. "I'd go, but... essay." He grimaced. "Sorry."

Hunk and Pidge exchanged a look. "We have a demonstration tomorrow." Said Pidge.

Allura laughed it away. "No, I don't want you all worrying over me. Honestly, I'm - there's the weekend for that - I'm really... fine."

Lance threw a sharp glare at Shiro, who frowned back. Because clearly he wasn't getting the message. Lance nodded in Allura's direction and then back to him. Finally, it clicked.

"Oh - uh - Allura, I could take you for a couple if you're free. I'm not busy tomorrow."
The room went still. Allura gazed at him, her mouth open. She snapped it shut.

"Shiro, I don't want to inconvenience you." She said quietly.

He gave her a smile - one of those Shiro-smiles that lit up his whole face and was surely what won him every last one of his ex-girlfriends and boyfriends. "Allura, you could never inconvenience with me. C'mon. I promise I won't keep you long."

Lance suspected even the pope couldn't say no to a line like that. Of course, she didn't. And after she left, Lance turned to Pidge.

"There's no demonstration tomorrow, is there?"

She flashed a wicked grin. "Nope."

They high-fived and Hunk rolled his eyes.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the last of Lance's shocks for the week, and the latter came the very next day after a face-time call from his mom. She was a little concerned about him; he hadn't phoned in a couple of weeks, thanks to his happy distractions, and it was without mercy that she reminded him of an incredibly important date coming up at the end of the month - one he had, again, completely forgotten about.

When the call was over, Lance sat on his bed in slight panic, heart thrumming as he realized he'd not made any arrangements to travel or even... did he have anything to wear? But with the anxiety came a jolt of excitement, too. This was the perfect opportunity to officially come out to the rest of his family, with Keith officially as his boyfriend.

With this thought in mind, Lance dialled Keith's number.

The hoarse laugh on the other end melted the bones in his legs. It did every time.

"I thought I told you no more late-night phone calls. You'll fall asleep on the phone again."

"Not this time," Said Lance, grinning. "So um... got any plans for the 31st of March?"

He could almost hear Keith's frown. "That's very specific. And no?"

"I hope you have a spare tuxedo lying around." The silence that followed was incredibly satisfying - he loved watching the cogs work in Keith's mind as he tried to piece together what Lance was saying. It was a shame he wasn't here to see it. "You wanna be my plus one?"

"To what?"

"My sister's wedding."
In case you hadn't realised, each of us writes the different POV so Wynn_Jayne writes from Keith's POV and I write from Lance's! It's been such a blast so far and we can't wait to do more.
I hope you enjoyed! We love comments + and feedback, it lights our way in the dark xx

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!