“Oh.” Keith blinked. “Huh. Okay. But we got the info, right?” He asked. He remembered retrieving the USB (it wasn’t really a USB, but that was the closest English translation) pretty clearly, even if the rest of the mission’s details got fuzzy in the end.

Antok nodded. “Yeah. Good job on that.”

“What was on there?” Keith said, and moved to sit up. “Is Regris okay-” He cut himself off when he caught a glimpse of his hand.

His clawed, purple hand.

(When a trial mission for the Blade of Marmora goes awry, Keith ends up having to deal with certain... changes. A post-season 2 cannon-divergence fic, featuring Keith as a purple space cat.)
See the end of the work for notes.
A New Beginning

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Learning that he was part Galra hadn’t been on Keith’s to-do list.

He wanted to be mad about it, at first, but nothing he did could change how he had been born. He’d just have to accept it, and move on.

Still, finding out that he was a member of the warrior race that had been responsible for so much destruction wasn’t pleasant - in truth, Keith had wanted nothing to do with them. But here he was, being forced to view his situation through a different set of eyes.

At the very least, learning the truth about his heritage had provided some once-forgotten questions from his childhood. The answers he got… were not the answers he had been looking for, but… they were answers, nonetheless. After years of digging up nothing, Keith wasn’t in a position to complain.

Keith had known he was different far before the events that brought him to space. The first piece - of a rather convoluted puzzle - became clear in highschool, during what should have been a simple hearing test. Per the teacher’s instructions, the audio file began at around 12 000 hertz, and then increased in pitch until eventually, you wouldn’t be able to hear it and the sound became silence. 20 000 hertz was the maximum *homo sapiens sapiens*, or modern man, could hear. Anything above that shouldn’t have been heard.

But not for Keith. For him, it was absolute torture.

He sat there, listening to the crude audio with the rest, and for a long while it was fine. But then it just kept getting higher, and higher, and that was when it began to hurt. Keith’s eardrums felt like they would burst. His vision swam, the outlines of the other students becoming slightly blurry, and even then Keith could see that nobody else seemed to be affected. Only him.

An eternity later, the teacher turned off the infernal device and Keith slumped in relief. He zoned out for the rest of the class, mulling over what had happened, and grimaced at the simple truth - he was different, somehow. Great.

But it must have been a fluke. A one time thing. Maybe he had eaten something bad? Whatever it was, Keith was willing to let it slide, for now.

A later incident made it clear that Keith couldn’t handle spicy food - and not in the way some humans couldn’t handle it, either. When he’d once eaten *a mildly spicy pepper* (according to Shiro), it had soon turned into a disaster. Shiro ended up having to call poison control - and then the hospital - because Keith’s throat had swollen up and he couldn’t breathe. Later reports also indicated that he had a serious case of latent blood poisoning as well. And the scariest part of it all? There had been a very real chance of Keith dying.

Spicy food had been banned in their house after that.

The only logical reasoning Keith could apply to this was that he had a severe allergy to capsaicin, the compound in peppers that made them hot. Common in animals, yes, but not in humans.

When his adult teeth came in, the first thing Keith noticed was that they were sharp, unusually so,
and looked more like animal teeth than human teeth. His incisors were fairly flat, but his canines looked like something straight out of a vampire flick, and his molars resembled little diamonds. His teeth that looked nothing like the flat, uniform teeth shown on toothpaste and dental ads. These... were not normal. By human standards, they were freakish.

Keith smiled less after that, opting to keep his oddly sharp teeth to himself. They didn't need more things to label him as an outcast with.

As he got older, Keith actually developed mild night vision. Not as well as his sight during the day, but definitely better than the standard human baseline. He first discovered this when once, after a late-night movie marathon, the power to their home had suddenly cut out. Navigating their townhouse in the dark had been a struggle for Shiro, and it had puzzled Keith a first. He’d gotten to the stairway easily, though Shiro kept stumbling and running into furniture. How did his older brother trip over a footrest that was literally right in front of him?

“How do you that?” Shiro had said, awed, as Keith moved through their messy basement without a stumble. “I can’t see a thing in here.”

“You can’t?” Keith asked, frowning. Was this a joke? Or, Shiro really couldn’t see... shit. Fucking shit.

“Keith, it’s pitch black in here,” Shiro explained, slowly, as if speaking to a small child. Keith had blinked at him in confusion, his mind still processing the fact that Shiro couldn't see their living room. Sure, wasn’t nearly as detailed as during the day, and the colors were severely muted, but at least the outline of everything was still visible for Keith. But... apparently not, for Shiro.

“Luck, I guess...” Keith had muttered, turning away, mind still reeling over the fact that Shiro couldn't see in the dark?

Further research showed that humans couldn't see in the dark. It was just Keith, again. He theorized that he could do this because his eyes had an underdeveloped tapetum lucidum - a retroreflective layer behind the retina that reflected light back through the retina, increasing the light available for the photoreceptors to pick up. It was what let animals see in the dark, and wasn't something that was found in regular human eyes. It also gave Keith horrible lens flare, so he did his best to avoid cameras as much as possible. No need to give the government evidence to lock me up, he figured.

All these little quirks brought together made another fact perfectly clear: one time could be written off as chance, twice might be a coincidence, but three times? That was a conspiracy. His abilities proved that he was different, and perhaps even not human. To Keith, the prospect was both thrilling and terrifying.

Sometime in the middle of his first year at the Garrison, he came to the conclusion that the most reasonable answer was that he was part cat, or something of the like. It sounded ludicrous at first, but after pouring over his biology textbooks and comparing his body to what a human body should have been, he discovered that his extra traits were uncannily similar to those of cats - the inability to taste sweet things, the teeth, the enhanced hearing, the seeing in the dark, etc. Therefore, he was part cat and must have been a participant of some government gene splicing experiment.

But then... further research proved that technology had not progressed far enough to safely transplant an animal transgene in a human subject. So Keith couldn’t have been a government experiment. It was for the best, too, since they probably wouldn’t have let him escape if he was.

The next option was that Keith wasn’t human at all, but there were no records of another creature on earth like him. None that had been scientifically proven to exist, anyway. The closest he could
find with were the various different cryptids that conspiracy theorists believed in, hidden from human discovery.

Although... both of Keith’s parents had been human, right? Even though he'd never met his mom, he was pretty sure his Dad - from what little he could remember - wasn't the kind of person who was interested in bestiality. Ewww. The very thought made Keith shudder in disgust. Eventually he settled for considering himself a very odd human, and that was that.

No more searching for answers that probably didn't exist, he told himself.

When Shiro disappeared during the disaster that was supposed to be the Kerberos mission, Keith threw himself into his classwork. He figured the least he could do was get top marks in his classes like Shiro had, in Shiro's honour. In his honour, not his memory, because Shiro was alive and Keith knew it.

It was easy to get lost in his work, to forget that Shiro wasn't there anymore. It made the sense of guilt that clawed at Keith's heart easier to ignore.

He knew that it wasn't the best coping method. But it worked, and that was that.

On the other side of things, biology soon became Keith's second favourite subject, aside from weapons training, because it gave Keith more answers (read: more questions) as to what he was.

Yes, he'd resolved to leave the problem alone, but he needed something to chase so he'd stop thinking about Shiro, lost in space, alone.

He soon found interest in learning how the human body worked, mainly because it made fighting so much easier. He learned where joints were weakest or what tendons to cut to immobilize a opponent the fastest. The best place to punch a person was probably the nose - easy access, easy to break, bleeds a lot, gets in the eyes, and hurts like a bitch - or the temple, which knocked people out right away if hit hard enough. He learned how to manipulate a simple arm-bar so he could hyperextend and pop someone's elbow joint out of the socket entirely, and with little effort.

It sometimes scared Keith - how fragile the human body was, and how some of those things didn't work on him: certain locks, especially wrist locks, had no effect because of his near-unnatural flexibility. Just added more evidence to the theory that he wasn’t human.

On the topic of the human body though: it really was amazing!

Nature was a genius when it came to creating new forms of life. The brain - it baffled Keith that a lump of grey mush was what operated him body, and was literally all of him - could fire electric pulses containing information and instructions faster than a millisecond. There was zero lag time between when someone thought to move their hand and when their hand moved. It was the most complicated machine ever created, and - in Keith's opinion - robotics was so far behind that it wasn’t even funny.

Who was he kidding? it was ridiculous

He once got in an argument - a very, very heated argument - with another cadet on how human brain would always be superior to AI, and robotics could go suck it. Anyone else who disagreed could fight him. Later, he'd realize that said cadet had been Katie - no, Pidge - and that they'd cut their hair to sneak back in. Looks like he owed his childhood friend an apology. Damn.

Okay… so maybe, maybe, Keith was a bit of a closet bio nerd. And yeah, he knew it fit his outward image zero percent.
In his defense, learning how the body worked was *extremely* interesting, and proved useful many times - treating wounds, how to ration food so he didn't starve when he was living in the shack in the middle of the dessert, what his limits were (or should have been) - and, well, he was also kinda proud about how much he knew. He knew that if it wasn't for the Galaxy Garrison, he'd have probably grown up to be a doctor. Or a surgeon, because that combined two of Keith's favourite things - bio and knives, and it let him save lives.

It was also becoming harder to keep his interest in science to himself. And yes, he *had to* keep this a secret.

Keith had a image to maintain, okay? And he was pretty sure whatever little respect Lance had for him would go flying out the window if he told them. Currently, he occupied the 'tall (alright, that was debatable) dark and broody' slot in their little crew, and he wanted to keep it that way. He was pretty sure that 'biology' and 'delinquent' didn't go together, at all, and they (especially Lance) wouldn't really buy the "*leave me alone or I'll kill you*" act once he'd outed himself as a nerd. *Oh well.*

And when Keith found out that he was part alien, part *Galra,* it wasn't the huge, explosive, existential crisis he might have expected. Once he'd stop being pissed at the Blade of Marmora - *why the quiznack did that 'trial' have to be so brutal?* - It was more like, "Oh, well, that answers those questions," and Keith was perfectly willing to ignore it until he was ready to deal with it. It wasn’t the healthiest way of coping, true, but it worked until Keith’s initial fear gave way to… something almost like curiosity.

There was one thing that still confused him though - no matter how much he trained as a Cadet, a Paladin, or a Blade of Marmora member, he never seemed to get over his less than stellar sense of balance.

The balance thing wasn’t new. Keith figured that, for someone who seemed to be part cat, he *should* have had a superior sense of balance. Instead he was, frankly speaking, a klutz. But it wasn’t like he didn't know how to balance! It was... more like something was missing. It was like someone wearing high heels all their life, unaware that they could walk with their feet flat on the ground.

Keith couldn’t *fix* it either, because he didn’t know what the problem was. He just figured that it was how he was - and he *hated* it - so he worked extra hard to get over it. But his worse than shit sense of balance still came back to bite him in the ass sometimes when he wasn’t paying attention.

And *that's* what landed him in this mess in the first place:

It happened during a trial mission for the Blade of Marmora, after he'd taken a break from Voltron since that last battle. Keith still wasn’t cleared for duty yet, since he’d only started taking his Marmora training seriously after Shiro disappeared, so they Blade had sent him on several "clean up" missions so they could asses his progress and determine when he was ready for a full mission. Unlike Voltron, the Blade was an organization with much more at stake. The tiniest mistake could prove fatal, and there was no teleporting Castle-ship to fall back to.

Thankfully, the Galran Empire had backed off after the final battle between Voltron and Zarkon, and there was a sense of peace amongst the fringe worlds that Voltron had liberated. Shiro was... still missing. He wasn't in the Castle, he wasn't in Kuro, he wasn't on any of Voltron's allied planets. He wasn't *anywhere,* and it was driving Keith nuts because that only left three options - Shiro was really far away, maybe even on earth, or Zarkon had gotten to him, or... he was dead. Keith *refused* to even consider the last one, because like last time, Shiro wasn't dead. He was sure
of it. He just had to find Shiro first.

Allura - thankfully! - had understood, and given Keith permission to train as a Blade member because she also knew that Keith’s best chance of finding Shiro was probably through the Blade of Marmora and their infiltration missions into the Galra Empire.

That had been a month ago. Now, Keith and Regris - a Galra with light blue-purple fur, dual ear ‘flaps’ and a prehensile, lizard-like tail - had been sent on a simple info-gathering mission to a known Druid storage facility. The problem was that this was a Druid facility, and while Keith would be forever thankful that they didn’t run into an actual Druid during the mission (they shouldn’t have - Thace’s cohort had hit the base earlier and cleared it, Keith was just picking up the leftovers, and Regris was babysitting him) he would end up cursing his crap sense of balance for a while following the… incident.

After all the battle training he’d done as a paladin, and the month he’d spent with the Blades of Marmora, Keith’s balance was barely a handicap anymore. He’d grown to be a formidable warrior already, even though many blade members had taken to calling him Kit, even Regris - who was only a few years older than him. Even still, Keith often found himself outclassed. He had a lot of cultural catching-up to do.

Keith and Regris were still considered junior members, and often got sent on missions together so either Thace or Ulaz could watch their progress. Keith had wanted to bang his head on something when he learned that even though he’d passed their hellish trial, he was still basically a baby agent. Regris had patted his shoulder sympathetically and pointed out that even though he had ‘graduated,’ he was still stuck ‘babysitting’ (there really wasn’t any other word for it) Keith. Keith figured it wasn’t so bad on Regris’ side since the older warrior had basically adopted Keith the second week in, and Keith had to grudgingly admit that Regris had moved up to ‘friend’ status at this point.

One of the last sectors of the base they had to get through could only be crossed by using a set of narrow catwalks, and under them were several containers of pure liquid quintessence. The entire Galra empire run on quintessence, which was farmed from the core of occupied planets using slavery. It was painfully reminiscent of WWII and Hitler and the Nazis he’d learned about in history, and it made Keith sick. The chamber they were crossing was utilitarian and simple, grey metal walls illuminated by the electric blue quintessence and occasional red light. Darker metal footpaths and catwalks with barely any railing crisscrossed across the expanse, connecting the various doors along the sides.

At one point, Regris had to push past Keith to open the exit, and Keith tripped. Those catwalks were meant to be for one person at a time, dammit! But alas, Keith tripped, and fell, and landed in a vat of something liquid.

Keith screamed the moment his skin touched the quintessence.

It was like lightning through his veins, burning him, setting him on fire.

Pan pain pain pain pain pain pain pain pain pain!

That fucking HURT.

Keith fought. He thrashed. He tried to scramble out, but like molten lava the quintessence pulled him back under.

It was too bright. Too much. Was this the end?
Keith couldn’t feel. His body was numb, or frozen, or on fire. He couldn’t tell.

It shattered his mask and flooded his open mouth. Choking him. Burning him from the inside.

Destroying him. Getting rid of the old.

Making way for the new.

It felt like the end.

Kind of a shitty way to go, really.

Oh well.

He closed his eyes, and let the darkness welcome him.

When he awoke again, it was in one of the Blade’s bases, in the medical ward. Keith flinched as his senses returned to functioning - sounds, scents and the cool material of the clinical robe on his skin. He tentatively opened one eye, then immediately shut it. Too bright. Way to bright. Wait, he was alive? How?

When he felt sure enough that his eyes had adjusted, he opened them to see a blurry purple shape hunched over on his left. Keith blinked, wrinkling his nose as his eyes adjusted and Antok (a wolfish, tall, muscled Galra with light lilac fur, a scar across his lip, and a whip-like tail with a flat ‘blade’ at the end) came into focus, watching him with a worried expression.

“You okay, kit?” Antok asked, looking up from the device he’d been cleaning.

“I think so?” Keith mumbled. He felt fine, anyways, for someone who was pretty sure they’d just died. ‘What happened?’

Antok’s lips twisted in a wry smile. “You passed out. Regris had to carry you back to the ship.”

“Oh.” Keith blinked. “Huh. Okay. But we got the info, right?” He asked. He remembered retrieving the data chip pretty clearly, even if the rest of the mission’s details got fuzzy in the end.

Antok nodded. “Yes. Good job on that.”

“What was on there?” Keith said, and moved to sit up. “Is Regris okay-” He cut himself off when he caught a glimpse of his hand. His clawed, purple hand.

Keith blinked. Looks like I’m still dreaming.

He shook his head and blinked again. The purple didn’t go away. Nevermind. not dreaming. What the hell?

Keith turned to Antok, his newly golden eyes wide and face carefully blank. The unspoken question hung heavily in the silence.

What the quiznack happened to me?

Wait. The quintessence...

Oh...
Oh.

SHIT.

Fucking shit, no way. Not me. Please, no!

“Keith, I need you to calm down…” Antok began, his tone gentle. Keith ignored him.

But he couldn't ignore the evidence right in front of him.

“I’m purple.” Keith stated, his face blank and emotions on lockdown. The tightness in his throat left him unable to say anything else. Keith wouldn't panic. He would not.

Even if I've somehow magically turned fully Galra.

“You fell into a pool of pure quintessence, Kit.” Antok said, looking at him with a sorry expression and tapped a claw on the metal bedside table. Keith wanted to snarl—he didn't need anyone to feel sorry for him, he needed answers.

"What happened?" Keith repeated, a low growl lacing his words. He felt his ears - holy quiznack, they moved now? - slowly tilt back, the tips brushing his hair. Antok cleared his throat, gently setting aside the medical device he had been holding. Keith narrowed his eyes—he wasn't stupid, and he'd figured out what had happened right after seeing his hand. He just... needed to hear it out loud. Needed confirmation. Who knows? This could still be some elaborate fever dream.

"During the last trial mission you were on, you fell into a storage crate containing liquid quintessence," Antok said, tone cold and professional. "Your human body could not handle it. It had to adapt." Then the elder Galra's face softened, brows wrinkling and voice carrying and undercurrent of guilt. "We were foolish sending you to a Druid facility. I am very sorry, kit. I should have stopped it." Keith laughed, slightly hysterical.

"Don't be." He muttered. "I was the one who tripped." He grit his teeth and took several deep breaths, pushing away the panic attack that threatened to take over when his mind registered the true implications of Antok's words. Eventually Keith composed himself enough to look up an ask, "I thought quintessence was supposed to heal?" Antok sighed.

“Quintessence is energy. Pure, undiluted energy. When it heals, it heals like fire - burning away what was there to make way for the new. In a sense, it saw your other form as a… liability.” Antok explained, his voice gentle.

"So I'm not human anymore." Keith whispered, feeling numb. He looked down and studied the slender claws that now tipped his lightly furred hands.

He should have expected it. Ever since he had learned of his mixed parentage, Keith has always wondered why he'd looked (almost) fully human. He should have had a few more visible Galra traits, not just slightly sharper teeth. He dreaded it as well, because somewhere deep inside, a part of him had known that something would have to give.

Looks like it finally had.

Keith was one of them now. A Galra. A member of a cruel and harsh race whose leader had enslaved thousands of lives and killed countless others. A tyrant. A monster. Everything Voltron stood against.
Was Keith a monster now, too?

What will the others say?

Antok’s sharp forefinger flicked Keith on the forehead, making him blink and drag himself away from the dark thoughts eating a his mind. Right. Here and now, don’t get lost. Focus on the present.

“You have always been part Galra, just like a part of you will always be human. It’s not something you should be afraid of. Your Galran heritage is a just bit more visible now.” The senior warrior rumbled reassuringly.

“I- I don’t…” Keith stuttered, unsure what to say. Then something occurred to him. Maybe...

He looked up, ears flicking forwards. “Is it reversible?” He asked.

Antok shook his head, and Keith felt his spirits plummet again. “No. You were asleep for almost a week.” Antok murmured. “We weren’t sure you were going to wake up, Kit. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be… I…” Keith broke off, ears folding back as the true weight of what had happened finally hit him. He was Galra now, permanently. He would never be human again. No more hiding from it. Keith curled in on himself and let out an instinctive keen. “I don’t know what to do…”

Antok looked at him with a shocked expression that quickly morphed to understanding, and his hand gently stroked between Keith’s ears (his ears - did he have cat ears now?) and for some reason Keith found the contact reassuring.

“Do you want a mirror?” Antok asked once the moment had passe, and Keith nodded, unable to stop his frightened purring (purring? Yeah, he was pretty sure that rumbling sound coming from his chest was purring. Somewhere in his mind he remembered that cats purr when they were both happy and scared. Made sense - he was pretty quizznacking terrified right now).

Antok returned quickly, handing the simple reflective surface to Keith. Keith took a deep breath, willing his heart to stop beating so goddamn fast, and slowly looked back at his reflection. He grimaced.

Yeah, he was purple. And fluffy. His face shape hadn’t changed much, though his skin was now pale violet and there were angular red tattoos (tatoos? Facial markings?) across each cheek, beginning about two centimetres under his eyes, moving towards his nose and bending down when they reached the middle of his cheek and trailing to a point about three centimeters above his jawline. His eyes were the same shape, although a faintly glowing golden color with no pupil (and that would take some getting used to) and he was glad to see that his eyebrows remained unchanged. His ears had moved upwards, and looked like a mix between cat and bat ears, but covered in fur, the underside fading to near-white and the tops the same colour as his skin, though the tips had marking that were the same red as the ones on his cheeks. His hair was still dark, although even that had a purple- Ish tint to it. Oh, and he had fangs now.

He moved a clawed hand (claws! Were they retractable? How did the tendons connect?) and gently touched his cheek to make sure that yeah, that being in the mirror was really him.

“This is going to take some getting used to.” He murmured, and Antok laughed as his rather quick acceptance.

“You’re taking this better than I expected.” He admitted. Keith gave a half-smile.

“I kinda expected some kind of change, I guess.” He answered cryptically, one of his ears flicking
to the side. “I knew I was different from the others, even on earth. Um.. do Galra purr?”

“Purr?” Antok asked, tilting his head. Keith blinked, ears tilting back, then tapped his chest self-consciously.

“Oh. Um, the rumbling sound I’m making. It’s something cats do.” He explained.

“I do not know what a cat is,” Antok admitted, “but what you did was something Galra kits do. Either when they are content, or afraid.”

Keith wrinkled his nose. “Something a kit does?” he echoed. Also, aliens can recognise lions but not cats? Maybe a translation error...

“Yes. By our standards, you are still a kit. Nobody taught you our culture, have they?” Antok asked.

“I grew up on Earth.” Keith deadpanned. “I didn’t know Galra were a thing until I was seventeen.” Antok rolled his eyes fondly.

“Your innocence is understandable.” He amended. "Come, Kolivian wanted to see you once you awoke. Watch your tail.”

...did he say tail?

“My WHAT?” Keith squeaked, and Antok snickered again. “Oh, shut up! This is a little new to me!” Keith glowered, and he felt his ears press back against his head. He turned around, and holy quiznack there's a tail.

“Yes, kit, you have a tail.” Antok murmured, Then gently pulled said appendage away from where it was thrashing against the sheets. “Here.”

“Wha-? Oh.” Keith blinked, gently examining the new limb. It was long - at least three feet - and slender, the same purple as his ears. It ended in a lighter, more heavily furred tip fading to the same near-white color as his ear tips. The most amazing part of this? Keith could feel it. He could feel his fingers as they gently moved across the furred surface. He could control it. He had a freaking tail, and it felt completely natural. Keith looked at it with both wonder and shock. “It looks a bit like a lion's tail…” He murmured.

“A lion?” Antok echoed. Keith nodded, letting go of the limb and swinging his feet over the edge of the bed.

“It’s an earth animal. Like the lions of Voltron.” He explained, standing up. His tail swished in a lazy arc behind him. “Oh!”

Antok turned around. “What is it?”

Keith shook his head. “No.. well, I don’t feel like I’m going to trip? It’s nice.” Really nice. Like I'm not compensating for anything.

Antok frowned, still watching Keith as he opened opened the exit door.

“Why would you feel like you would trip?” He asked.

Keith shrugged. “My balance has always been kinda off.” He explained. “I tried to train to centre myself better, but now that feeling is gone.” So it turns out my whole balance issue was because I
grew up without a tail. Nice to know.

Antok froze, watching Keith as he moved past him and into the hallway. “You mean to tell me that you have been fighting with a handicap all this time?” He asked, incredulous. Keith looked back at him.

“Kinda? It wasn’t even a handicap in the end. I was used it it. It’s better now anyways.” His tail moved in lazy ‘S’ shapes, as if proving the point.

Antok shook his head fondly. “You really are one of a kind, kit. Come, Kolivian is waiting.”

Thankfully, they had enough time to pass by Keith’s room and let him change out of the medical robe, but they still reached the doors to the meeting chamber way sooner than Keith would have liked. To say he was nervous would be like the understatement of the century, and Keith was definitely stalling as paced in front of the plain, grey doors with their purple geometric veins. Antok solved Keith’s dilemma by literally shoving him into the main meeting room, and then shutting the doors behind them before Keith could scramble back out into the hall. Everyone looked up at the quiet ‘click’ noise of the airlock, and Keith felt his ears twitch at all the gazes directed his way.

“Keith!” A voice called, and Keith automatically turned in that direction. It was Regris, and the other Blade member immediately glomped Keith. “You’re awake! Look at you-! Oh quiznak, I am so sorry.” Keith wriggled, trying to get free. He needed air, dammit!

“It’s fine, Reg. I’m fine.” Keith gasped. “Let me go now?”

“Oh. Sure.” Regris stepped away, a light blush on his cheeks. “Sorry.”

Kolivian (a grizzled Galra with light fur, white and red markings, a scar across one eye and his ‘hair’ in a long braid down his back) cleared his throat, and all Galra present turned to face him.

“Keith. It’s good to see that you have recovered. How are you… adapting?” He asked, and undertone of worry lacing his words.

“It’s going to take some getting used to, but I’m okay. I think.” Keith smiled, and he was surprised to find that he meant it. The room seemed to let out a collective relieved breath at that, and Keith had to smother a snicker as he glanced at all the worried faces. Regris, Antok, Kolivian, Thace and Ulaz. More like the Mother Hens of Marmora. Thace nodded from where he was seated across the black, hexagonal table in the center of the room.

“You have a lot to learn, though.” He pointed out.

Antok snorted. “Did any of you realize that Keith was fighting with a handicap this entire time?” Kolivian blinked in surprise.

“He was?”

“Hmm. He didn’t have a tail.” Antok explained, and Regris gasped.

“Really?” He asked, moving so he could pet Keith’s ears again. Keith scowled - what was it with his ears? Ah, well… it did kinda feel nice, though he’d never admit it. Regris purred “You’re pretty amazing, you know. I could barely walk if my tail was docked. Is that why you tripped? I am so sorry about that.” Keith rolled his eyes.
“Humans don’t have tails. It’s just something I’ve had to get used to.” He explained, then frowned when his octopus of a partner didn’t move away. "Regris, stop touching my ears!"

“Sorry. It’s like having a little brother again.” Regris murmured, then reluctantly stepped back.

“That is still an admirable feat.” Ulaz added. "I am interested to see how much you will improve from this point onward.”

Thace nodded in agreement, though he still remained silent.

Kollivian cleared his throat once more. “Everyone, please take a seat.” He waited until the others had settled before continuing. “The data Keith and Regris brought back was - as you know - only a confirmation of what we had already determined. However, due to Keith’s recent… awakening, I have decided that it is in out best interests to teach him more about Galran culture and etiquette, a field previously forgone in lieu of his primarily human appearance and upbringing. As that is not the case anymore, the requirements for a regular blade member will apply to Keith as well. Thace, Ulaz, Antok - this will fall under your responsibility. You were among the first to accept Keith, and as such, you will now teach him what it means to be Galra. Find time in your schedules to do so.”

He shot a loaded look in Antoks direction, effectively shutting up whatever point Antok was about to protest. “Regris,” Kolivian continued, and the younger warrior perked up at the mention of his name. “You will continue with Keith’s combat training.”

“Yes!” Regris cheered. Ulaz - who’d been Regris’ mentor - sighed at the display.

“Noooooo.” Keith groaned and let his head fall onto the surface of the table. “Ouch.”


Keith and Regris eventually found their way to the training hall. It was a large room, easily thrice the size of the training room at the Castle. The floor was covered in mats for sparring, and a few weapon racks were neatly stationed at the side. A few other Blade members were already in the middle of their matches, but there were plenty of open ‘rings.’

“Alright!” Regris began, his cheerful smile making Keith want to run away because Regris was positively vicious in a duel. “How about you come at me, and then I’ll tell you what to fix, yeah?”

“That’s what we always do.” Keith muttered, knowing that he’d end up a literal punching bag for the next couple hours.

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“But it works.” Regris said, shrugging. Keith reluctantly nodded, because as much as he complained, Regris was a good teacher - despite all the bruises Keith got during their sessions.

Galra didn’t have katas or forms or different styles of fighting like on Earth. Each individual created their own unique style, suited to them specifically. Until Keith had come, none of them had even known what a kata was. But, to Keith’s advantage, sometimes drilling the ‘universal' basics, however out of place they seemed here, had given him an upper hand in other matches, especially when his opponent underestimated him.

However, a major disadvantage was that Galra were such a diverse species and - while most of them were humanoid - joint, muscle systems and pressure points were sometimes very different from what he had become accustomed to when sparring against his fellow Paladins. Keith had lost several times by trying a lock or a hold only to find that it had no effect whatsoever.
Alright. Focus. Know your enemy, know yourself. Keith took a deep breath, studying Regris’ stance. He knew the other warrior left his lower left side intentionally open - it was a clever trap, luring the attacker in and then whacking them with his tail. Keith had fallen for it one too many times. This time, Keith figured he’d go for the center. See if a hit to the solar plexus worked as well on Galra as it did humans.

It helped that they weren’t wearing armor, just skin tight black jumpsuits made of a kevlar-like material. Remember that everyone has a plan, until they get punched in the nose. Keith readied his dagger, steeled his resolve, and rushed at his opponent.

He was back on the mat less than forty-five seconds later. And there goes my plan...

Like he'd said before - Regris was vicious. Keith actually felt like a baby agent when compare to him.

He’d also seen Thace and Ulaz and other senior blade members spar. They were ridiculously skilled at what they did. They had to be - the Blade were few when compared to the Galra empire, and losing an operative wasn’t something they could afford.

Rather than deter him, it actually made Keith all the more determined to reach their level. He wondered how Shiro would do against them… Shiro..

Keith blinked and shook his head, willing himself to focus on the present. He looked up to see Regris smirking down at him.

The other Galra nodded approvingly. “Mm-hmm. Not bad. That was the best you've done yet, but you need to fight with your new senses, not against them. Try not to almost cut your tail in half this time, ‘kay?”

“Right.” Keith muttered, then winced at the pain in his side (Regris' tail, again). He got up again, settling into his favoured fighting stance, his knife held in a reverse grip. Regris gave him a look that was part amusement and part pride.

“You’ll get there. Eventually. Again!”

Keith ran at him once more, deciding to go with a slash to the side and hopefully get an opening to trip him. Up, down, back, parry, dodge - fuck, he's behind me! - kneecap... shit, that didn't work. Ow! No you don't, damn it... and on it went, Keith mentally cursing as his attacks were given the slip. But, it wasn't practice without improvement, either - he managed to outlast Regris for a full minute. The elder Galra nodded appreciatively.

“Much better. Again!”

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“Much better. Again!”

Keith rolled his eyes. Here we go. He readied himself, then recalled what he'd already figured out about Regris's fighting style...

Regris... well, he fought using his tail as an extension of himself, like one would use an extra arm. His style was flowing and changing, like water, but coupled with several extremely hard hits that had gotten Keith by surprise the first few times. Keith tried to do that at first - move his tail like he would his arm - but then ended up dropping the strategy after he hit too hard with his tail and goddam that hurt. It didn’t help that Regris just found it funny, damn him. Keith had hissed at him in retaliation and decided to go hunting in the weapons box. While there, and taking an impromptu break, Regris suggested that Keith try attaching something to the end of his tail.

“Try this.” The other had said, holding out a simple device - three thin, knife-like blades attached
firmly to a leather hinge with an armored cap, a half-foot sleeve extended from the main circlet, with laces running down the side. Keith frowned. It looked dangerous, which he could respect, but...

“What is it?” He asked.

“You put it on your tail. Like this.” Regris explained, gently taking Keith’s tail and fitting the device to the end. The cap covered the fluffy tip, and the sleeve went on the part leading up to the end. The apparatus laced up snugly and seemed to be stable enough that it wouldn’t go flying off. Keith swished his tail back and forth, getting a feel for the new weight. It was odd... but not exactly unpleasant. *Huh. Not bad, I think.* Regris grinned.

“Now you can make those slashing motions without ramming your tail against my side.” He pointed out. *Oh, I see,* Keith realized, his earlier mistake becoming embarrassingly clear. *Yeah,* he thought, *this might work.*

To say it worked well would be an understatement. Keith already moved his tail like a whip, a reflection of the slashing motions he’d trained with his knife. The addition of the bladed tail-weapon - *“It’s called a sikarr, Keith.”* - simply gave those movements a purpose. And with this new addition - that, by the end of the training session, truly felt like an extension of himself - Keith actually managed to last a full two minutes before Regris finally pinned him.

The senior warrior had smiled at Keith, pride in his eyes, and said, “Let’s call it a day. You did really well.”

Keith simply nodded, body aching from the countless bruises he’d managed to accumulate.

Later, when they were wrapping their wounds - because Altean healing pods weren’t commonplace - and sitting in the bean bag-like chairs (the first time Keith saw those, he’d had to do a double take because apparently space had *bean bags*)

Regris ruffled his hair and said, “You’re going to be terrifying one day, you know.” Keith unwillingly purred at the praise, then blushed when he realized.

“Thanks.” He mumbled, mentally scolded himself for having so many new emotional tells. He still hadn’t learned how to control the purring. *At this rate, I probably never will.*

"So," Regris said, gently tending to his shoulder where Keith had managed to land a solid - painful - strike. “How was your first training session as a full Galra?” Keith shrugged, his tail swaying in lazy, content “S” shapes.


“Yeah, it would. You know, my little brother was a lot like you.” He admitted. “Maybe a bit quieter. You remind me of him.” Keith’s ears twitched forwards in interest.

“You’ve said that before. You had a brother?” he asked. Regris smiled fondly.

“Yes. His name was Rhukka. He would have been just a little younger than you, I think.”

“What happened to him?” Keith questioned, and Regris’ tail stilled. Keith grimaced; he knew that look. *Please don’t be...*
“He was killed.” He said flatly. “On Zarkon’s orders.” Keith scowled and bit his lip, turning away. Of course he was. I’m such a moron; why did i even ask!?

“I’m sorry.” He muttered, mentally cursing himself for ruining the previously companionable mood. Regris just shook his head in response.

“Don’t be. You couldn’t have done anything.” He assured Keith, yet despite his nonchalant tone, his tail remained unmoving, showing how deeply it must have affected him. Right now? Keith felt like a class A asshole.

“Do you want to head back?” He asked tentatively, hoping to end the conversation before he screwed it up even more.

Regriss nodded. “Yeah, okay. See you tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

Keith’s next ‘lesson’ of sorts was about Galra culture, with Thace and Ulaz. Ulaz (a tall, slender Galra with pale fur and white facial markings, a mohawk of sorts and elven ears) was the one who spoke, while Thace seemed content to sit to the side and look uncomfortable.

It wasn’t actually much different from human culture, in the sense that Galra lived in family units consisting of the parents and the kits. However, instead of two parents most Galran kits had three - A ‘mom’ a ‘dad’ and an aunt or uncle who’d be like a stand-in parent when the others weren’t there. The Galran word for mother was marre and father was asarre, both rather soft compared to the other, harsher, sounds of the Galran language. The third parent’s title was thorre or tharre, depending on the gender, and fitting with the pattern for the other two. Apparently the ‘e’ at the end was not silent, so it was pronounced ‘marr-e,’ ‘a-sarr-e’ and ‘thorr-e.’

Ulaz actually laughed the first time Keith tried to pronounce said words, because Keith assumed it was like French and said ‘mére’ instead.

Moving on - kits stayed with their parents until they were old enough to fend for themselves, and it was their parent’s responsibility to care for their kits during this time. There were also several instinctual sounds that Galra used, along with body language, to ‘speak.’ Purring and that keening noise Keith had made earlier fell into this category. Apparently that had been a kit’s ‘help-call.’

“I’m a kit?” Keith had asked once again when Ulaz had told him about it.

Ulaz had laughed and shaken his head, explaining that Keith wasn’t a kit, but he’d act like one for a while because his body and mind were still getting used to their new form.

Keith had flat out glared for a good fifteen minutes after that. He was not a kit, desite what Thace and Ulaz had said.

There was also a chuffing noise that was used to reassure or in greeting (like a tiger’s) but made with the throat and not the nose. Growling was a sign of aggression, a warning to back away.

The purring was called coherr, the keen was cahnek, the chuff was killaht, and the growling simply translated as a growl, though the Galran word sounded something like grrahl. 

Tail etiquette was a whole other lesson, too. Touching one’s tail to another’s shoulder was both a greeting and a sign of affection. When speaking to a senior officer or a superior, one’s tail should
be unmoving. Tails were also a clear indicator of mood, though one could train to be less expressive. No all Galra had tails, or had them docked when they went into the military.

It was both a liability and a weapon, Keith learned. Tails were sensitive, and pulling on your opponent's tail was usually enough to make them surrender. Keith also learned that the chances of getting your tail pulled lessened considerably if you stuck a blade on the end.

That was all the lesson for that day had covered, and Keith was fully prepared to beat up a punching bag by the end. Sitting still… was not Keith’s strong suit. In fact, he’d never been officially diagnosed, but Keith was pretty sure he had some kind of minor hyperactivity disorder. Either that, or Galra had a lot of energy.

He thanked Ulaz (who seemed to be enjoying this way more than he should) and Thace (who seemed quite uncomfortable) and rushed to the training deck as fast as he could.

Keith’s daily sparring matches with Regris continued, and Keith eventually became comfortable enough to ditch his blade and actually use his teeth and claws, as per Regris’ insistence.

“You need to learn to protects yourself either way.” He’d said, “What if you lose your knife mid battle?” And Keith conceded because, well, fair point.

He had to change his fighting style quite a bit to accommodate his new features. The claws on his hand were - unfortunately - not retractable, though they could be filed down or clipped. Not too much though, because they had nerve endings in them, like cat’s claws, and they hurt when cut too close.

At this point, Keith had simply given up and admitted that Galra were probably just giant space cats, even if said species had no idea of what a cat actually was.

He still couldn’t beat Regris yet, but the older warrior had agreed to not ‘go easy on him’ anymore. Keith just really, really wanted to claw that grin off Regris’ smirking face.

Antok - who's bedside manner needed improvement in Keith's mildly irritated opinion (from Antok's perspective, Keith was the worst patient possible - the kit never sat still!) - was the chief medical officer of that Marmora facility, and he was in charge of giving Keith the talk.

It was a pain - but for Antok, not for Keith. Keith honestly didn't care either way. Though he had changed down there as well, he was pretty sure he'd figured out how his dick worked by now. It was still biology, and still science, so he could deal. Although, he thought, Pidge is gonna have a field day with this info...

Antok was rather blunt and to the point. He got the big stuff out of the way first, then sat back and let Keith ask his questions. That was mistake - on Antok's part - because Keith had a lot of questions. Nearly and hour and a half later, Keith was satisfied and Antok was done. So very done. He'd given Keith a medical textbook in the end and Keith had almost - almost - squealed in glee.

The gist of it was that yes, Keith had a knot, though his dick itself remained mostly the same. The knot worked much like a dog’s did - the main purpose was to hold the semen in. His dick didn’t have barbs on it like a cat’s did, thank god for that, and Antok’s eyes had nearly bugged out of his head when Keith explained it to him.
Galra, in general, were actually intersexed - so that meant Keith now had a vagina (though they called it a ch'ren, pronounced chi-ren) along with his dick (the Galra word was thol'lh, pronounced thol-ith, but Keith was content to keep calling it a penis). Female Galra just had a smaller version of a thol'lh. After some... less than comfortable inner thoughts, Keith figured that this was because gender to the Galra was different than gender as humans defined it: for them, gender was a way of classifying between roles, just not sexual ones. Depending on how they were born, a Galra may identify as male, female or neither. This was influenced by personal preference, as well as general body mechanics - for example, a slim, elegant Galra may identify as female because that's how they know they were meant to be. Like an innate sense, they just knew.

Furthermore, "Galra" was actually an umbrella term for countless different subspecies as well, so 'male' and 'female' simply didn't fit for all. It had awed Keith, and made his head hurt all at the same time.

When it came down to explaining how humans worked, Antok had called them 'inefficient,' then remedied that statement by explain that their species was still young, and subject to change. Then he'd laughed at Keith's embarrassment when Keith had complained that his was all new to him because humans were only born with one sex. For the Galra, it had eventually evolved to be like this so all Galra had an opportunity to create children (kits) - new life - regardless of the 'sex' of their partner.

This also meant that around twice a year, Keith would probably end up experiencing something akin to a period... and could probably get pregnant, too.

He'd almost had another panic attack when he'd realized this, not because it was weird to him (okay, maybe a little weird to him but that was fine, he could adapt) but because he was terrified of what others would think. What would his partner think, if he ever decided to get romantically involved with anyone? What would the others say, if they ever found out? Not that Keith would ever tell them but still... He sighed and leaned his head against the cool, steel-like wall. My anxiety really isn't helping here, at all. Damn.

Antok (and most other Galra) actually seemed to have very little respect for human gender stereotypes. He had a feeling that Pidge would love this: an entire race where gender stereotypes - and the subsequent issues that came with - were without value. If a female Galra wanted to be a warrior, they could. If a male Galra wanted to be a tailor, they wouldn't be questioned.

At some point in ancient Galran history, dresses that looked like a kimono had a run in with wizard robes, and were worn by both genders had been actually considered the height of fashion. Keith hadn't been able to keep the giggles contained when Ulaz had first shown him the pictures, and then lost it again with how serious Ulaz had been about the subject. Thace had grumbled something about 'stupid human customs' and how they would train Keith out of them, eventually.

There were (thankfully!) no weird A/B/O dynamics like the stuff Keith had stumbled upon once when browsing the internet (the internet was a dark, dark place, after all, and some crevices were best left unexplored for the sake of one's own sanity). Antok had been mildly repulsed when Keith had mentioned it, and explained how while most partnerships did have a dominant and a submissive, it wasn’t expected. In terms of partnerships and gender, Keith was surprised to find that it didn’t much matter to the Galra. As mentioned before, the Galra viewed gender as a social construct - and only a social construct, for identification purposes - so if you liked a guy, then you liked a guy and hopefully he liked you back and that was that. If you liked girls, then that was fine too. Antok had shaken his head in disbelief when Keith explained to him what homophobia was. Another point for the aliens, then, Keith mused, and when did Earth turn into the backwards place?
Keith also sorely missed the internet. Apparently, space had no version of it, and Antok, Regris, Thace and Ulaz had all been amazed when Keith explained to him what it was. A place where one could ‘Google’ a question and find countless answers, without having to actually ask a real person! For a natural introvert like Keith, it was paradise. Most of the time, anyways. Some things he and Pidge - back when they were Katie - had discovered deserved to be incinerated in the pits of hell.

The old memories made him smile, fondly, but he shook his head and turned back to his notes, determination written in the lines of his frown. Right, physical characteristics next...

The skeletal, muscle, organ and respiratory systems of Galra varied a great amount because Galra were compatible with countless other species - mostly thanks to the intersexed thing - and there were actually a lot of half-breeds. Keith's own skeleton didn't differ much from his original human one, though his bones were denser, and his spine curved out instead to form his tail, and his skull was a slightly different shape to accommodate his ears. Keith’s organs remained mostly the same, though Antok had been puzzled that he still had his appendix. It was a useless organ, and Galra didn’t have them. It was simply a human thing.

Galran blood was blue-ish as well, not red. This was because Galra blood contained hemocyanin, not hemoglobin. Hemocyanin is a respiratory protein that contains copper instead of iron, and is more effective in colder and low oxygen areas. The Galran subtype seemed to have evolved to compensate for almost no oxygen. This also meant that Galra didn't bruise.

Keith's blood was still red, meaning it contained Hemoglobin, the iron-based respiratory protein found in human blood, and that meant Keith would still die without oxygen. It was nice that some parts of him were still human, even if they were seen as a disadvantage by some. Antok and Kolivian had actually panicked when Keith casually mentioned that humans need oxygen to survive because apparently oxygen was considered a waste gas in space? They made sure that the filters were fixed almost immediately to allow oxygen through, then they spent the rest of the day hovering over Keith's shoulder to make sure he didn't pass out or something. Keith's lips quirked up at the memory. Mother Hens of Marmora, indeed.

As he got more comfortable with his changed body, Keith found that he actually really, really liked his tail. One, it was a tail. A freaking tail. As a biology fan and someone who'd grown up human, having a tail was a bit of a novelty - it was fun, and new, and stopped him from being overly clumsy, so it was a definite win. Keith had experimented with what exactly his tail could do in his free time. Results? The limb was surprisingly strong and prehensile, and he had good enough control over his tail that he could pick things up with it now. Two, it had gotten rid of his balance problem. The balance problem that caused him his humanity in the first place. Lastly, it made him feel whole, and more secure, especially when he placed the sikarr on the end. His tail meant that his back had some form of defense, and he eventually stopped jumping at every moving shadow.

His ears helped too - it was nice being able to hear people approaching even if you couldn't see them, and his hearing had improved to the point that he could faintly hear people's heartbeats. He was thrilled to discover that it was like having a portable lie detector, because most heart's skipped a beat or 'blipped' when a person lied. It also confused the shit out of Keith when Antok had informed him that certain Galra actually had two hearts.

The night vision had improved considerably as well - no more hazy images when he forgot where the light sensor was because space didn't have light switches; it was all motion sensor technology. Keith took great pride in the fact that it was near impossible to actually sneak up on him anymore, and the only person who actually still succeeded was Kolivian. Although Regris kept trying, every single chance he got.
Before he knew it, Keith had looked in the mirror and *not* flinched at his reflection. He’d stared at himself in shock, realizing that he'd come to accept that this being he saw, with the fuzzy ears, lilac skin and tail was... him. It was a bit of revelation for Keith, and he briefly lamented the loss of his mental ‘human’ image.

But it wasn't all bad, at all. In fact, it was way better than Keith had expected. Once he'd gotten over the fact that he was purple, Keith found that nobody really treated him any different. If anything, they accepted him more now because he looked like one of them.

It was nearly time for his 'monthly' - Pidge had been insistent on keeping it monthly, because they needed someone to rant to when *that time of month* came around - call with the Voltron crew. Keith and Pidge had always been rather close friends; he just hadn't recognized that Pidge and Katie were actually the same person, at first, and thus sparked that ridiculous argument about robot intelligence and viability... and then bonded over their mutual love for science and learning new things ever since Pidge caught him reading a textbook at 2 AM during a sleepover. Shiro and Matt were inseparable, so what’s to say their younger siblings didn't know each other?

Unfortunately, Keith had never been good with people, so he'd never actually met Hunk before the Garrison. Or Lance. Though, the chances had always been there. But, he knew Pidge, so when he'd turned purple, the first person he'd called - and sent his preliminary report to - had been his favourite Gremlin.

Pidge had replied immediately, at first berating him for turning what should have been a mid-life crisis into a science experiment with him as the subject, then demanded that Keith forward them *everything* he had learned immediately. Pidge had also promised to keep his closet-nerd status a secret from the others - yeah, Keith had walked into a trap with that one; Pidge had too much blackmail material on him - but in return Keith had to join Pidge's horror movie marathons once he got back. The ones with the extremely disturbing movies (beyond uncanny valley creepy) that the others refused to even look at. Keith didn't mind - horror movies were his shit.

Once Keith had confided in Pidge about how he didn't look human anymore, they had been extremely supportive in convincing Keith to fully accept his almost-fully-Galra status and that it was *okay* to be different, especially since they had gone though something similar with their gender. Keith had sent several reports back, and Pidge had always answered with even more questions. They were especially excited to examine Keith's tail, and Keith - while he loved Pidge like a sibling at this point, and knew they wouldn't hurt him - couldn't help but feel the teeniest sense of dread for all the scans he'd be stuck sitting through. Pidge had assured Keith that, when he returned to Voltron, the others wouldn't see him any differently. They warned him that, if anything, Lance would be all over Keith's fluffy ears.

If they could, Keith knew that his friends at the Castle-ship would call him every chance they had, but calls had to be limited to once a month because that was what Pidge had said their encryptions were secure enough for. There were no restrictions the messaging system Pidge had set up because they had coded it using their own, original encryption based off a science-fi novel. It was something that the Galra would have never seen before, and without a detailed understanding of earth mythology (Keith had helped with this part) they would have no chance in cracking the code.

The same couldn't be done with audio calls because they were using *Marmora* tech. *Oh well.*

Closing his book, Keith made his way to the communications room, eager anticipating the next call, only to have Kolivian intercept him in the halls. Suspicious at fist, Keith had simply raised an eyebrow at the elder Galra before Kolivian explained how Keith’s next assignment would be *as the*
liaison between Marmora and Voltron. Keith had just stood there, kinda shocked and fighting a gleeful purr, because that meant that he was going back! He was jolted out of it when Regris had hugged him out of nowhere - Keith mentally scowled because no, he had not seen that one coming, and that meant Reg had succeeded in sneaking up on him. Damn. - and knocked him to the ground.

And it turned out Regris was coming as well, still as Keith's 'babysitter,' though Keith could care less about his 'baby agent' status now. As they celebrated with drinks - more like mocktails, because Regris was perfectly fine with being responsible when it came to the god stuff - in the rec room, Keith didn't even bother trying to stifle his purring.

He was going to see his friends - his Space Family, as Shiro had put it - again! He hadn't even realise how much he'd missed them at first, but they'd somehow managed to worm their way into his heart, and then stayed there. Lance, with his optimism and rivalry - yeah, Keith even missed their arguments at this point, Pidge and their brilliant use of sarcasm even better than Keith's own - and he respected them greatly for it, and the science-tech babble that he only half understood, and Hunk with his heavenly cooking, caring nature and fierce protectiveness. Even Allura and Coran, with their odd little quirks and - rather hilarious - misinterpretations of earth customs.

As he went to sleep that night, with his bag already packed at the foot of his bed, Keith’s final thought made him almost want to rethink the decision of accepting this mission. Almost.

He'd forgotten to factor Red. His very, very, overprotective lion. But, Red wouldn’t really kill him for being gone for such a long time, would she? He'd been gone... about three months now... and, yeah, he was screwed. Red was the biggest mother hen of them all.
EDIT: I re-drew (like, some parts) of Keith's image. (GUYS I FREAKING FOUND MY PEN ! ! ! Wanna guess where it was? That's right - on my desk, under the homework that was due several weeks ago but our teacher forgot about it so it never got handed in so it was just left there and I didn't bother picking it up... welp, I'm a such an i d i o t )
Changing of the Guard I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Castle-ship of Voltron was parked in the middle of a dusty clearing, just slightly east of Verrankhurra market. Talos was a backwater planet, more of a trading hub that a habitable place. It was located halfway between the extent of the Galra empire’s previous reign and the core planets that still remained under Zarkon’s rule.

Oh, and apparently Zarkon wasn’t dead. That was… juuuuust great. Wonderful. Shiro was missing, Zarkon survived and Keith was purple. It seemed like Voltron had taken one step forward and two steps back.

Keith hugged the parka-like shawl, pulling the hood tightly over his ears to protect them from the sand, his eyes taking in the bustling scene below. No wonder nobody actually wanted to settle here - Talos was, literally, the real-life equivalent to Tatooine. Hot, dry, dusty and desolate.

Verrankhurra was a flea market of sorts, with vendors setting up shop on the sides of the main (unpaved) road. Various other spaceships were docked behind the main complex - if you could even call it one. It was really just a very large, elaborate tent. Aliens of many different races walked in between the scattered individual stalls, bartering and haggling their next exchange. Keith spotted several Balmerans, a few Olikari, a couple Galra, even a species that looked like land-octopuses. There were so many others, ones Keith couldn’t put a name to.

The stalls were square-ish tents with one open side that faced the road. They were multicoloured, some plain, and had various bobbles and knick-knacks hanging from the roofs and sitting on makeshift shelves. Talos was an open planet - in the sense that it had no alliance, to either Voltron or the Galra Empire. It was situated right on a trans-galactic travel hotspot, with all the main routes converging to this point eventually. One would think that, with Talos being such a visited planet, the Galran Empire should have occupied this as well, but they hadn't. When Keith had asked, Regris explained that it was something along the lines that is any real government ever set up here, the market and it's residents would simply move to another habitable but abandoned planet. Keith didn't know the exact details of it because he was only half paying attention, the rest of his focus was on not getting cooked.

Did Keith say that it was hot? Scratch that - it was scorching. He was just standing on a ridge, conveniently placed so the shade from Regris’ figure fell right onto him, doing nothing, and still sweating buckets. The fact that the Marmora armour was meant as insulation didn't help either. Keith and Regris had been fully prepared to troop out there in cargo shorts and a tank top, but Antok had firmly pointed out that, as the representatives of the Blade of Marmora, they had to be professional. Keith suspected that Antok just wanted them to suffer, probably as payback for the glue incident that is not to be spoken of. The first thing he’d do once they got onto the Castle was take a shower. Or go jump in that upside down Altean pool.

But finally, Regris gave the signal to move, and the duo made their way through Verrankhurra and to the Castle-ship. They were allowed entrance without resistance, having already alerted Allura the they’d be coming. The halls were just like Keith remembered, reminding him of fond memories as he led Regris toward the main meeting room, or the bridge. Voices echoed down to them as they neared their destination.

As much as he wanted to see Pidge, Hunk, Lance, Allura and even Coran again, Keith still found
himself pausing before pressing the ‘open’ button on the Altean control panel. It wasn’t much different from the neon purple ones at the Blade of Marmora facility, the only noticeable change being the color and the now curved buttons, but Keith didn’t notice any of that. He was too busy convincing himself not to back out.

Just get it over with, he told himself. They’re your space family.

Monster… another voice whispered, a sickening croon that made Keith’s fur prickle. What if they only see a Galra? Keith’s ears flickered back with unease -he had opted to remove his Marmora mask - and his tail lashed in anxious little zig-zags.

Keith pulled his hand back. Logically, he knew that they would probably accept his new appearance (Pidge already had) but doubt still held him back.

“You okay, Keith?” A voice murmured, right at his ear.

Keith nearly jumped out of his skin. “Gah!” He failed, sidestepping and facing the one who’d spoken. “Regris! Don’t fucking do that!”

Regris looked at Keith with amusement in his eyes. “Don’t worry, baby agent.” He teased. “You’ll be fine. It’s best to just get it over with.”

Keith scowled, opting to ignore the ‘baby agent’ jab for the time being. He faced the door once more, firmly placing his hand on the controls.

“Just like ripping of a bandaid.” He murmured.

The doors opened with a smooth hiss, sliding away to reveal the familiar common room. Keith stepped in.

…

“Holy quiznack, you are purple!” Lance squealed, the first to recover. Keith frowned - Lance’s heart was beating unnaturally fast. Was he okay? Lance seemed fine, bonding up to him an gently poking one of Keith's ears. They flickered back at the touch. Lance's eyes widened. “Oh my god, they move! Keith, dude, you look so pretty~ ” he continued, beaming at Keith with one of those adorable smiles, and hello crush Keith still hadn’t gotten over with.

Keith’s eyes widened and he turned away, facing the others so Lance wouldn’t see his quickly reddening face. The paladins and Allura (Coran was nowhere to be seen) were lounging on the semi-circular couch-like thing with the grey seats they'd adopted as their impromptu meeting place, forgoing the coolly professional control room. This was more familiar, and far more comfortable. The others were all wearing ther casual clothes, and Pidge seemed to be holding a huge mug full of something that smelled like coffee. Keith’s brain short circuited, and he sniffed the air once more to make sure. No mistaking it - that was the smell of coffee.

“Huh. Lance is right. That’s kind of a good look for you,” Hunk said, smiling encouragingly, and Keith felt another wave of gratitude for Hunk’s gentle acceptance. “I like the tail.”

“TAIL?” Lance did a double-take, eyes wide as he registered the long, snake-like object swaying behind Keith. Keith looked at him with concern - the Blue Paladin’s heart rate had just skyrocketed. Lance made grabby hands at Keith's tail, and he reluctantly moved it over so Lance could see. The Blue Paladin's hands were gentle on Keith's fur, and he held the limb with a sense of awe that made Keith's cheeks heat up again. Then that amazing coffee-scent hit him again and he turned back to Pidge.
“Is that coffee?” Keith asked once he finally found his voice (don’t think about the fact that Lance called you pretty. Or that he’s currently petting you. Do not), and weakly pointed to the mug of dark, liquid goodness. His ears flicked forwards in interest, and he was pretty sure Lance just squealed again.

Pidge, completely unruffled, grinned impishly. “Oh, yes. Hunk finally discovered the right combination of ingredients. It’s not real coffee, but it’s pretty damn close. I made you a cup,” they offered, pulling another mug from somewhere behind them.

Keith gladly accepted the beverage and took a long sip, savouring everything that was coffee. “Pidgeon, you are my favourite.” He stated, not even bothering to fight the purr that rumbled form his chest.

Pidge raised an eyebrow as she moved to the side so Keith had room to sit. “I thought Shiro was your favourite?” They teased.

Keith rolled his eyes. “Second favourite.” He amended, then took another sip of the dark ambrosia, and marvelled of how coffee-like the synthetic stuff tasted. Oh how he had missed this.

“...Dude, are you purring?” Lance questioned, eyes shining.

Keith blushed, ears folding back in embarrassment. “Shut up. I haven’t had coffee in forever. Just let me enjoy this moment, please.” Also please quit looking at me like that, you’re making my heart do backflips. Stop.

Hunk snickered. “Pidge told us you were basically a giant purple space cat, but I didn’t believe it until now.”


“I thought it’s be best to give them enough of a heads-up so Lance wouldn’t faint on the spot when he saw you.” Pidge leaned in, whispering the next bit in Keith's ear. “And no, I haven’t told Lance about your stupid crush.”

“Ah.” Keith nodded, feigning nonchalance, though his heart was racing. “Thank you.” Pidge was such a gremlin... Why, of all others, had he chosen Pidge to confide in...?

“Um, Keith,” Lance cut in, “Not to interrupt your freaky coffee bonding moment, but whose the other dude standing in the hallway?”

Keith's right ear flicked to the side. Right, he'd forgotten about Regris. “You can come in, you know.” He called.

“Wouldn’t want to interrupt you, ahem, bonding moment,” Regris teased as he sauntered in. “My name is Regris. I am Keith’s senior offi-”

“ ‘He’s my babysitter.’ Keith interjected, taking another wonderful sip. “Senior officer my ass - you’re more of a kit than I am!”

Regris dramatically feigned being shot in the heart. “My reputation destroyed before it even began! Why do you do this to me, Keith?”

Keith wrinkled his nose, looking forlornly at the now empty mug. “You’re a bad influence.” He muttered.
“I like him.” Lance countered.

Keith rolled his eyes. “You would. He’s like your twin.”

Regris looked at Lance with interest in his eyes. “Is that so?” He smirked.

Lance grinned back. “I have the feeling this is the start of a be-a-u-tiful friendship.”

“Oh my god there are two of them!” Pidge groaned, tossing their head back so it hit the back of the couch.

Keith grimaced and patted Pidge’s shoulder reassuringly. “I think I created a monster.” He admitted.

Allura cleared her throat, drawing everyone’s gazes back to her. “It’s good to have you back, Keith.” She smiled, her eyes proud.

Keith felt the tension drain from his shoulders. “It’s good to be back, Princess.” He answered, blinking back the tears that suddenly threatened to fall. *Quiznack, he had missed these people...*

Just then, the left corridor door opened and Coran came sliding in. “Hello, everyone! I am back-Oh, number four!” He abruptly changed course so he came to a stop right in front of Keith, then leaned in, examining Keith’s features. Keith felt his ears cant back in discomfort. This was ridiculous - Coran’s nose was almost touching his own! “Hmm. Not a bad look.” Coran stated, nodding, then righted himself and turned to Allura. “You owe me twenty galactic credits!”

Keith blinked, then turned to Allura with an incredulous expression. “You bet on this?” He asked.

Allura had a sheepish smile on her face. “There was always a chance this could happen to you, sooner or later. We bet on when. I just can’t believe Coran won!” She (reluctantly) handed over the owed credits.

“And that, Paladins, is why you *never* bet against the Coranic!” Coran informed them, pulling at his moustache.

“Are all Alteans like him?” Regris - who had migrated so he was sitting next to Keith - asked.

Keith shrugged. “Coran’s… unique.” He offered.

Pidge snorted. “You can say that again.”

“Um, Keith.” Hunk spoke up, “If you don’t mind me asking, how *did* you end up looking like a Galra? I mean, you don’t have to answer if it’s too personal or anything, but uh...”

“Inquiring minds need to know.” Pidge finished.

Keith frowned, poking them with his tail. “I thought I told you already?”

“Whoa, whoa, WHOA!” Lance interrupting, his hands in the classic time-out gesture. “When did you two,” he frowned at Keith and Pidge, “Get so buddy-buddy?”

“When Keith became a literal walking science experiment.” Pidge countered, not even really lying. They pushed up their glasses in a perfect imitation of a movie villain. Keith let out a relieved breath at their quick save. Lance paled and looked at Keith with a sorry expression.

“I pity you, bro.” He sympathized. Keith rolled his eyes.
“That being said,” Allura interjected, “I would also like to know how Keith lost his human appearance.”

“I fell into a crate of quintessence.” He said bluntly. Regris face-palmed, another gesture he’d picked up from Keith. The others leaned forward in interest.

“Quintessence?” Allura prodded.

Regris stood, placing a comforting hand on Keith’s shoulder. “It happened during a routine recon mission at a druid facility. The empire stored refined, and slightly volatile, quintessence there. The crate Keith fell into contained undiluted liquid quintessence. It was too much for his human body to handle so…” Regris reported, ending with a shrug. “Keith fell in ‘cause he tripped.”

“Only because you pushed me!” Keith countered, glaring.

“By accident!”

“Wait, actually?” Lance cut in, a gleeful smile on his face. “Keith, mister-I’m-perfect-at-everything-I-do-especially-fighting, tripped?”

“Shut up, Lance.” Keith grumbled, trying not to notice how pretty Lance’s eyes had just been. Stupid, stupid crush...

“But, pure quintessence, right?” Pidge asked. “How did that feel?”

Keith grimaced as all thoughts of Lance evaporated from his mind. “Like I was being pulled apart.” He admitted, shivering at the memory. "I thought I was going to die. Regris had to get me back because I passed out.”

“Don’t make me do that again, ever.” Regris warned, one hand gently stroking Keith’s ears. “Kollivian nearly skinned me alive for getting you hurt.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that.” Hunk added sympathetically. The others nodding in agreement.

“Whas this change a direct result of quintessence exposure?” Allura questioned.

“Keith had turned purple by the time I pulled him out.” Regris offered. “Why?”

“I have a theory.” She murmured.

Coran nodded. “So do I, Princess.”

“What is it?” Keith asked, trying to ignore how Pidge had stolen his tail and was now stroking it, occasionally murmuring “fascinating.”

Allura looked at Coran, who nodded, indicating that she should go first. “I think,” She began, “That you may be part Altean.”

Wait, WHAT?

Keith-Kogane.exe has stopped working. Please wait for system reboot. This will only take a minute.

“Part Altean?” Keith echoed when he finally found his voice again.
Pidge looked up, glassed shining. “Oooh, go on.”

Lance looked at Allura, then at Keith, then Coran, and shook his head. “Wait, you’re serious?” He asked, voice cracking. Hunk just watched the show with wide, excited eyes, sipping a juice box and handing another to Regris, who accepted it with a similar intrigued expression. Who’d have thought his little Blade trainee had such a unique heritage?

Coran nodded “I think so, Princess,” He added. “For Keith to have shifted his appearance so drastically, he must have some Altean blood. Mmm, at least a quarter or so.”

“Actually?” Keith asked, shock now morphing into interest and excitement. Pidge’s expression mirrored his.

Allura nodded, eyes bright. “Yes. Somewhere along the line, you must have had an Altean ancestor. Alteans are shapeshifters, and quintessence triggers the change back to their true forms. I will double check with the Castle records later, but I suspect that you are about a quarter human, a quarter Altean and a half Galra.” Her expression darkened. “If you didn’t have any Altean blood in your veins, Keith, you would have died. Quintessence is energy in its purest form, similar to lightning, and destructive to human bodies because your species has gone millenia without any quintessence exposure. I am so thankful that we didn’t lose you.” She finished, her voice soft.

A contemplative silence had settled over the room following Allura’s lecture, each processing the information, understanding just how close they had been to losing Keith. If it hadn’t been for the off-chance that he was part Altean, Keith would have died. Died.

Regris’ wide, frightful eyes met Keith’s own. “I am so thankful for your halfbreed status right now, Kit.” He whispered.

Keith shivered, still reeling from Allura’s revelation. “I know.”

and the open void of space, dotted with millions of glittering stars, offered the perfect environment.

Keith sighed, leaning back into the pilot’s chair. “What am I, Red?” He asked, feeling lost.

[My cub.] Was her reply, full of pride and reassurance. [Mine to protect. Mine to nurture. You are Keith.] Keith closed his eyes and purred as he let Red’s thoughts wash over him. [And now you purr as well.] Red added. [Seems like an improvement to me.] She let out a comforting rumble of her own, and Keith their bond sing.

Keith smiled, “Thanks, Red.” His lion really was the best.

[And don’t you forget it, Kit]

Keith eventually found himself in another unexplored corner of the universe, with only the cold light of the stars and Red for company, searching for Shiro.

Shiro, who was still missing. Keith’s time with the Blade had yielded very few leads, and the ones they had found were based on little more than speculation. Shiro had vanished without a trace from the cockpit of the black lion - Kuro - and Keith had been powerless to stop it. Disappeared was sounding more like taken these days. Keith refused to give up, especially if there was a chance Shiro was back in Galra custody. Shiro had been the only one who hadn’t given up on him.

[I do not think he is out here, Kit.] Red murmured in the back of his mind, her ‘voice’ a gentle
balance to his darker thoughts. [I’m sorry.]

“Y-yeah.” Keith muttered, swallowing and wiping away unshed tears. Damn it. Where the hell was Shiro when Keith needed him?

[Shall we head back?] Red prodded. Keith sniffed, blinking to clear his eyes.

“Okay.” He mumbled, cursing the fact that seemed to always end up crying nowadays. He was stronger than this, damn it!

[We will find him, Kit.] Red purred and Keith sighed, infinitely grateful for the ancient lioness’ grounding presence. When he was certain that he wouldn’t start crying again, Keith pressed the button on the control panel that would open communications back to the castle. Coran’s worried face appeared in the viewscreen.

“There’s nothing out here, Coran.” Keith reported, and Coran’s face fell at the devastation in the Red Paladin’s tone. They were all grieving, but Keith had taken it the hardest.

“I’m sorry, Keith.” Coran said softly. Keith eyes pricked again, and he blinked and shook his head. When he looked up, the lost expression from before had been replaced by his usual frow.

“We’re coming back.” Keith stated. Coran, thankfully, didn’t comment on the tear streaks that surely marred Keith’s face.

“Alright.” The Advisor acknowledged. “Stay safe.” Then the viewscreen blinked out.

[We will find him.] Red rumbled. Keith leaned back, for once hating the void, inky blackness of space illuminated only by the cold light of the stars. The sheer size of the universe had never felt so intimidating until them.

But what if I don’t find Shiro, Red? What then?

Allura, Princess of Altea and stand-in leader of Voltron was nervous.

She paced the length of her room, fingerling the skirt of her dress anxiously.

On one hand, it is wonderful that Keith has returned to Voltron, and then for it to be revealed that he is pert Altean! Coran and I are not the only ones anymore, and perhaps, somewhere else in the universe, we may find others like Keith. Her thoughts turned to the Blade of Marmora, and the other agent they had sent alongside Keith.

Regris… he seems like a trustworthy person, and the other Paladins have already taken to him. If anything, I can trust that he will place Keith’s safety above the mission. He has already done so once. We may have been given a useful ally. Allura twirled on her heel, changing directions to walk back towards her vanity.

On the other hand, there have been no leads as to where the Black Paladin had disappeared to. Shiro was still missing, and Voltron was without it’s true leader. The Red Paladin - Keith - had been hit by their loss the hardest, though the others were grieving as well. How will we even form Voltron without a Back Paladin? Allura was drawn back to reality when the telltale swish of a door opening alerted her to Coran’s presence.

“Are you ready to go, Princess?” Coran asked.
“I don’t know, Coran.” Allura murmured. “This is the first diplomatic assembly we’ve been to in a long time.”

Coran nodded. “True, but you’ll be fine, Princess. Just remember to greet each delegate with respect, not forget any names, let the others speak first, be firm with what we need to accomplish…”

Allura shook her head fondly at her Advisor’s antics as she followed him out. Coran was right - she was Allura, Princess of Altea, and stand-in leader of Voltron. She could do this. She had to do this. It was her duty to the universe.

When Allura stepped out, she was ready. Calm and collected, the very image of a diplomat, not a trace of the anxious girl from before. *Time to take the next step towards a universe free from Zarkon’s reign.*

影

Regris entered the lion’s hangar - a large, airy room with cubicles for each individual mecha. The particle barriers were up for every lion… except for Red. The red lion’s hangar was empty, and both Keith and Red were nowhere to be seen. Regris sighed. He should have expected this. Keith was a loner, and after that reveal earlier, it was understandable that he wanted some time alone. Well then, Regris supposed he’d just have to wait here until they got back.

The Paladins of Voltron… were not what Regris had expected. They were children, like Keith, and had been dragged into a war beyond their jurisdiction by pure chance. He did like them, though. They were unlike any other beings he’d come upon before. Regris supposed that came with their species: human. Such adaptable creatures, capable of carrying out missions with admirable success rates while grieving for one of their own, even though they were not even adults.

Regris wondered whether Kolivian would have put Keith through the Trials of Marmora is he had known the Red Paladin was not even an adolescent by human standards. Probably not. Regardless of the fact that these kids were sorely unprepared for fighting a war, they were doing a good job of it. Regris felt drawn to their little haphazard family, and how accepting they had all been.

It probably helped that Regris chose to have more of a personality than most other blade members. Sticks in the mud, the whole lot of them. Except for Uaz. His mentor was fine, though his partner, Thace, could definitely smile more. But Keith was his favorite now - the little Blade had such fire in him, and shared Regris’ dislike for controlling authority figures. Fight the system indeed.

Except neither of the even bothered ‘fighting’ Kolivian. Despite all outward appearances, their commander had a devious streak, and Regris knew from personal experiences, that Kolivian’s punishments were literal hell (the Galran word was *dsai’vak*). He would never forget the week he spent manually washing everyone’s clothes. Moral of the story? Don’t get on Kolivian’s bad side.

Aaaaand Keith still hadn’t returned. Sighing, Regris pulled out his blade and examined it, then took a black microfiber cloth from his pocket and began to clean it. It sucked that he’d left his maintenance kit back at the room they’d given him. Come to think of it, the Castle-ship was huge. How the others didn’t get lost in the maze-like halls he’d never know. At least the biolight system connecting the main rooms was useful…

[Hello, Star-child.] A deep, but female-sounding, voice rumbled. Regris’s head shot up, his grip on the blade changing to a fighting one. He scanned the hangar, looking for the one who had spoken, but… he was alone?
[You are different.] The voice continued, [You are not him. But yes, I think you can learn.]

Regris blinked. Oh, so he hadn’t imagined that. “Hello?” He asked tentatively, only half expecting an answer. “Who are you?”

[My name is Kuro, Star-child.]

“Kuro?” Regris echoed, scanning the room once more. His eyes widened when he saw that the black lion’s eyes were glowing. All the others had powered down. “Wait, are you the black lion?”

[Yes, kit.] The voice - Kuro - answered, sounding amused. [Now come here.]

Wordlessly, and somewhat shocked - because nobody bothered to tell him that the lions were sentient - Regris made his way to Kuro, stopping in front of the particle barrier. The lion moved, shaking its head, then slowly crouching so its huge mouth was right in front of him. Then, to Regris’ surprise, the lower jaw opened, revealing a ramp inside. An invitation.

[Tell me, how do you feel about becoming a Paladin of Voltron?]

Meanwhile, down at Puig, (an allied planet comprised of oceans and forest an badlands, mainly badlands like the ones Lance had seen in his Dad’s pictures from when his Dad took a business trip to Alberta) Lance wasn’t having the best day.

For Lance, the day had started of wonderfully. He woke up, after actually having a good night sleep, Hunk made parfaits for breakfast (they got the almost-yogurt from Kaltnecker), and then Keith came back. Keith, who had somehow gotten even prettier (in an exotic kinda way that Lance could totally get with), and it was revealed that Keith was part Altean (Lance had not seen that coming, but damn), their little space family was almost complete. Except for Shiro. They were still missing Shiro.

Regardless of the lack of Black Paladin, Allura had still sent them missions to aid allied planets, so that’s why Lance and Hunk were currently on Puig getting shot at. Damn Galra inquest fighters…

[Behind you!] Azul - the blue lion - warned, and Lance instinctively jerked the controls. Left arm back to cut power and right arm forwards to turn, executing a tight barrel roll and dodging the incoming enemy fire.

“Can you - urrk! - not?” Kollivian grumbled, gripping the side of the cockpit like a vice. As grateful as he was for the Blue Paladin offering to drop them off planetside, he could have gone without Lance’s crazy flying. Not that Keith was much better, but still…

The Blade of Marmora members who’d volunteered to help defend Puig from a mini-invasion of sorts were currently in Azul with Lance, and the Blue Paladin’s stunts were making several of them regret their decision. Lance mentally rolled his eyes, dodging right then turning around to return fire. Why couldn’t the other blade member be more like Keith, and actually enjoy flying? Lance guided Azul upwards to clear the area and swooped low to catch another Galra ship from behind, sharply turning to the left right after to avoid a cliff face. Aside from Kollivian, all the Blade members remained fully masked, and hadn’t spoken at all. Space ninjas indeed.

He slowed Azul down as they neared the ground. “Alright people,” Lance announced. “Here’s where I drop you off. Good luck!” He opened the exit and watched as the Blade of Marmora members immediately exited, not making a single sound.
Kollivian was the last to leave, and he stopped at the door to look back at the Blue Paladin. “Thank you, Lance.”

“Yeah, no problem.” Lance said, watching as the Galra warrior left. Finally! It was just him and Azul and those moronic Galra Empire fighters who’d decided they could take him and Azul. Lance tightened his grip on the controls. Time to prove them wrong!

“You ready?” He asked, a wild grin on his face. Blue rumbled in anticipation.

[Oh, absolutely.] She agreed, and together they took off once more, but this time without their stoic passengers.

The battle didn’t last much longer after that, Lance and Azul demolishing the fighters now that they were on their own. Hunk, who was down on Puig with them, was in charge of protecting the city and defending the city.

Once they were sure the Empire’s spaceships had left, Lance and Hunk landed their lions, climbing out to see the excited cheering of the Puigans. They mayor of the city thanked the Paladins for protecting Puig, and it wasn’t long before the crowd started to chant in celebration. Voltron! Voltron! Voltron!

Lance looked to Kollivian, “Why are they…?”

Kolivian shrugged. “The universe has heard of Voltron’s greatness. You are the first to openly stand against Zarkons regime. Voltron brings the universe hope again.”

Lance sighed tiredly, watching as Hunk was offered a flower crown by a group of children. “But we can’t form Voltron anymore.”

Kollivian looked at Lance in alarm. “You can’t?”

Lance frowned. “Yeah, Shiro - our leader - is missing. Keith actually went with the Blade of Marmora because he thought you guys might have a better chance of finding Shiro. He didn’t tell you?”

Kolivian shook his head. “Unfortunately not. Keith doesn’t… open up very easily. If he had told anyone, it would probably be Regris.”

“Regris? The Galra who came back with Keith?” Lance asked, interested.

Kolivian nodded. “Yes. They were partners for missions up until Keith’s accident. Regris was the one who was closest to Keith.”

“Huh..” Lance murmured, thinking about it. Well now we’ve gotta give the new guy a chance, especially if he’s got Keith’s seal of approval.

“This cannot stand.” Kolivian murmured.

“What can’t stand?” Hunk asked, finally escaping the clutches of Voltron’s fans.

“Voltron is needed, now more than ever. You need to find a new Black Paladin.” Kollivian warned. “Do not give the universe a reason to lose the hope they have just been given.”

Hunk and Lance traded a look, then Lance turned to Kolivian with weary eyes. “We know.”
Pidge Gunderson sat in their lair - a secret room in the Castle they’d found that was only accessible through the vents, the perfect place to set up their private lab and for when they needed some time alone (Keith was the only other person who knew how to get here) - computer screen illuminating their face. The room was pitch black, the only light source being the grainy security video currently on replay. The video showed several Galra sentries escorting two ragged prisoners through a hallway. One of the prisoners was an alien Pidge hadn’t seen before. The other prisoner was human, a young man with tawny brown hair and a cut on his right cheek. Matt. Pidge hugged the beanbag they were leaning on even tighter.

A light chime alerted Pidge to an incoming video call. They pressed the green ‘accept call’ button on their communicator, and a holoscreen (holographic viewscreen) opened with Coran’s face in it.

“How was the mission, number five?” Coran asked gently. Pidge sighed.

“I went to Kyrtha, got a couple of video logs.” Pidge reported. Kyrtha was an icy, hostile planet. Several abandoned Galra science labs, refineries and prisons were scattered throughout. The planet was cold, small and fairly unknown. It was perfect, Pidge thought, because if anything happened there it would be easy for Zarkon to turn a blind eye. Let Haggar and her damn druids do whatever. Fucking witch.

“Find anything interesting?” Coran prodded.

“Y-yeah. One of the videos had Matt in it.” Pidge answered. “I.. I kinda want to be left alone right now.” They admitted in a small voice.

“Oh. Alright.” Coran said, understanding exactly what Pidge meant. “See you soon, then. Take care.” The holoscreen fizzled out, leaving Pidge alone again.

I will find you, Matt. I promise.

Keith slumped into the couch-thing of their living room, his tail swishing wearily. Allura had called them all together for a meeting, but so far he was the only one to arrive. He’d been sitting there for about a minute when Allura entered, followed by Pidge, then Regris, then Lance and Hunk. Once they were all settled, Allura began.

“Paladins,” She greeted, then looked at Regris. “And esteemed guest. Thank you for coming.”

“Sure, Allura.” Hunk said, “But what’s this about?” He placed a tray of biscuits on the center table. The snacks were immediately claimed by the others, followed by several murmured ‘thank yous.’ Keith purred in delight. Hunk's cooking was magic - he could take weird space ingredients and make them taste just like earth food.

Allura’s expression dampened. “A check-in, if you would. But first, how did it go with the Puigans?”

“Not bad.” Lance reported, words muffled around a mouthful of biscuit. “The Galra left once we secured the city. They thanked us and everything, but they, er, they wanted to see Voltron.” He finished, grimacing. The others exchanged several glances, each knowing all too well that they couldn't form Voltron anymore. Not until Shiro was found.

“It may be difficult for all of us to accept it at this time,” Allura continued, her tone gentle, “But it may be time to think about finding a new pilot for the black lion. Maybe even one of you.”
"What!"

"No!"

"No way!"

"You can’t be serious!"

Allura sighed wearily at the negative responses. Earthlings could be so stubborn sometimes. “Just think about it, please.” She murmured.

“Actually,” Regris interjected. “Um, you might not have to.”

Keith turned to his fellow blade member in surprise. “What do you mean?” He asked. Regris’ tail swished side to side in nervous little strokes, and he looked searchingly at the others’ expectant faces before he spoke.

“The black lion - Kuro - spoke to me. Kinda.” He admitted.

Pidge’s eyes widened. “Seriously?” Regris looked at Keith, unsure of whether or not he should continue. He wasn’t exactly a member of Voltron yet. Keith smiled encouragingly.

“What did Kuro say?” Keith asked. He had a pretty good idea of why the black lion had spoken to Regris, and had to admit that he wasn’t actually against the idea. Unlike finding some random pilot for the Black Lion, Keith knew the person he’d trained with, gone on missions with, and eventually become friends with. Regris was a competent leader, and a lot like Shiro in the sense that he valued people over the mission’s objective.

"Kuro called me 'Star-child.'" Regris said. “She told me I was different, that I was not 'him,' but that she thought I could learn. She told me to go to her, and when I did the particle barrier came down and she opened her mouth for me to enter. It was kinda surreal, to be honest, but wasn’t going to say no to the black lion.” He finished with a shrug.

“Star-child?” Allura asked, looking lost.

“Oh, it must be the nickname the lions gave him.” Hunk explained. “Like how Keith is Fierce one, Pidge is Smart one, Lance is Water-child, and Shiro is Champion.”

"The lions speak to you?” Allura mumbled. "Incredible. It often takes years for the bond between Paladin and lion to develop to that extent.”

Regris looked at the yellow Paladin curiously. “And what do the lions call you?” He asked. Hunk blushed a little and turned away. Regris raised an eyebrow-ridge. Clearly, this nickname was something embarrassing.

“Cinnamon-child.” Keith answered instead, grinning. “The lions wanted to know what we thought of each other. When they asked about Hunk, Pidge, Shiro and I said that he was a kinda like a cinnamon roll. The name stuck.”

“Cinnamon roll?” Regris asked, now confused.

“It’s an Earth food.” Lance clarified, shrugging. “It’s sweet and wonderful and and also a meme. Hunk’s a total cinnamon roll.”

Regris tilted his head to the side. “What’s a meme?”
“Don’t ask.” Pidge and Keith chorused, shooting Lance looks that promised painful death if he dragged Regris into his memelord depths. There were some things from earth that had no place in space. The thought of Blade of Marmora + memes or just even Aliens + Youtube made Keith shudder. Regular internet was often bad enough and Keith reluctantly had to admit that though he missed it sorely, he didn't want to deal with explaining it to uneducated, but well-meaning, aliens. There were so many ways that could go wrong...

“No respect for true earth culture.” Lance gasped, dramatically growing his hands in the air.

“More like shitty internet culture.” Pidge countered.

“Hunk, my man, explain to these heathens that memes are a gift!” Lance cried, hugging Hunk in mock despair.

“Sorry bro.” Hunk said, bringing his hands up and prying Lance off him. “I’m on their side for this one.”

“BETRAYAL!” Lance shouted, then proceeded to die, in a very exaggerated fashion, strategically collapsing in Keith’s lap. Keith (after pulling himself back together because his mind had short circuited because Lance was right there, with his head in Keith's lap, and what the fuck was he supposed to do?) settled for gently petting the Blue Paladin’s hair and sarcastically murmuring, “there, there, you big wuss.” Pidge and Hunk were outright giggling at this point. Regris just looked lost. Allura sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Excuse me,” She cut in, turning to Regris, and determined to angle the conversation back to the important topic. “But did you say that Kuro spoke to you?”

Regris nodded. “Yeah.”

“And invited him to be the new Black Paladin, apparently.” Keith said, thinking about what the lions clearly wanted to pull.

“This could work.” Pidge murmured, also thinking along the same wavelength, and Hunk and Lance nodded in agreement. They all had a fairly clear idea of what the lions thought. Regris was to be the new Black paladin, though not exactly the new leader of Voltron. Now that they had another suitable candidate, none of the other lions were willing to give up their Paladins anymore, despite what the Princess asked.

“I don’t want to impose.” Regris started, uncertain.

“You’re not.” Pidge assured, cutting him off. “None of us want to leave our lions, and you're an okay person.”

“Oh.” Regris blinked. “Alright. Just, I hope none of you feel like I’m replacing your Shiro, because I’m not. From what Keith has told me about him, I don’t think I can. He seems like a wonderful person.”

“He is.” Keith muttered, leaning his shoulder against Lance, then he blushed as he realized exactly who he was leaning against. Bad Keith. Don't think about that. This is a completely platonic gesture. Lance isn't even gay!

“If you are willing to accept me, then I will gladly pilot the black lion.” Regris continued, side-eyeing Keith with a knowing look. Oh yeah. Regris wasn’t blind, He could clearly see that Keith had a crush.
“For the record,” Keith added, self-consciously turning away from Lance and ignoring Pidge’s snickers. “Red does not want to let me go.”

“Neither does blue.” Lance agreed. “Y’know, I’m getting the feeling the lions set this up.”

“Same.” Hunk said, nodding. They looked at Pidge, waiting on their input. Pidge blinked.

“Don’t look at me.” They said. “I’m fine as long as I don’t leave Green.”

Allura frowned, taken aback. “Well, I was going to suggest that Keith pilot the Black Lion, Lance pilot Red and I could take Blue, but if you’re all okay with this…”

“I’m okay with Regris being our stand-in Paladin until we get Shiro back.” Keith said.

“Thank you, Kit.” Regris said, smiling fondly. Then he turned to the others. “And you?”

“What Keith said.” Pidge agreed. “It’s better than having us all switch lions.”

“I’m fine with it.” Hunk added.

“I’m willing to give it a try.” Lance said, watching Regris with narrowed eyes from his place beside Keith. “You have one job, purple space cat senior. Don’t screw up.”

“Are you sure?” Allura asked. The others nodded, and Coran (who’d entered sometime halfway through) finally spoke up.

“Mmm, if you ask me, Princess, this is better than the alternative. Sometimes the lions take matters into their own hands.” He explained.

Allura sighed, then gave in. “Alright. If you are all in agreement, Regris will be the new Black Paladin.”

“Though not the leader of Voltron.” Keith interjected. “Well, not fully.”

Allura turned to him. “Explain.” She demanded.

“We came up with a system. It’s what we’ve been using since Shiro went missing. Lance and I usually make the plans, and I call the shots in the field if it’s needed.” Keith said, and Lance nodded in agreement.

“Are you sure about that? You and Lance do not exactly get along.” Allura pointed out, frowning.

“It’s more like a democracy.” Pidge cut in. “Nobody makes decisions on their own. At least one other person has to agree before taking action.”

“Clever.” Regris murmured, looking at the other Paladins proudly. “It’s similar to what the Blade of Marmora uses. Nobody ever goes on missions alone.”

“It’s worked so far.” Hunk added. “And now that Regris is the new Black Paladin, he could give orders mid battle?”

Lance nodded. “Yeah, but we still gotta keep the ‘no making decisions on their own’ rule.”

“Agreed.” Keith stated. This… had turned out better than Keith had hoped, actually. Shiro had told him to lead Voltron, but Keith wasn’t ready for that. Keith knew he wasn’t ready for that. Hell, the others knew being leader wasn’t his best position. Red purred in assurance in the back of his mind.
She agreed that Keith wasn’t ready to stop being the Red Paladin.

“I feel like I’ve been replaced.” Alura said dryly, though they could hear the amusement in her tone. “Alright. We’ll go with that plan.”

“But first,” Coran interjected. “How about some team-building exercises to welcome our new Black Paladin?”

“Yes!” Pidge cheered. “I vote electric maze.” They made a break for the training room, calling: “Last one there has to go first!”

“Seconded.” Keith agreed, shoving Lance off him and running after Pidge.

“Hey!” Lance complained, “Rude!” Then he, too, followed the others.

“Team-building?” Regris questioned. “The electric maze?” He turned to Hunk, the one Paladin who hadn’t left yet. “They’re joking, right?”

Hunk patted Regris’ shoulder sympathetically. “Welcome to Voltron.”

Team building, Regris decided, had to be a codeword for torture. He winced as he ran into another wall of the invisible electric maze. Why did nobody mention that the karking (a Galran swear word) maze was invisible?

"Sorry!" Lance, the one who was supposed to be guiding him through the maze, said. "Um, take four steps right. Then two steps left. I think I got your stride length down." Keith and the Green Paladin, Pidge, were flat out laughing at his plight, while Hunk looked on sympathetically. He supposed it was fair, though, considering the others had to go through this as well. He just wished Lance gave slightly better directions, and remembered that his right didn't always mean Regris' right.

"Don't give up, Paladins! You're almost there!" Coran, the eccentric royal Advisor ("He's basically our space uncle." Keith had explained. "Cooks for us, checks in on us, that kinda stuff. Kinda like Antok, but weirder.") called, waving enthusiastically. Regris sighed and followed Lances instructions, thanking the stars above when he didn't run into another wall.

"Two steps to the left - err, - my left, your right. I think. Then straight ahead and you should be out." Lance instructed. Regris felt his eye twitch. Oh, how he wished this could be over. He followed the directions silently, and sighed in relief when the telltale buzz of the maze disappeared. On the bright side, when he checked in with Ulaz, he'd tell how the Paladins of Voltron trained in a gruelling trust exercise that involved an electric maze with painful shock levels. It wasn't a lie, technically.

"It's done, right?" He called. "Someone please tell me we passed."

"It's done." Keith confirmed, and Regris could tell that the Kit was still laughing. Damn him.

When he got back up to the 'control room,' Lance had patted his shoulder awkwardly and apologized. Regis had shrugged and said he probably deserved it for beating the shit out of Keith during their sparring sessions. This had led to a grinning Pidge asking Coran if they could go to the training deck next, and of course the orange-haired Altean had agreed.

Keith offered to go first against the gladiator - a cleverly built Altean training machine similar to
Galran sentries, but far more sophisticated - so Regris could catch a break. Apparently there were levels assigned to these training exercises, including the electric maze. The electric maze had a running record of who'd completed it the fastest, with Keith and Lance being in first place, followed by Keith and Shiro. For the gladiator, there were a total of fifteen levels. Keith's previous level had been seven. Lance's six. Pidge and Hunk tied for five. Now, Keith was steadily climbing, currently at level nine and beating the drone easily. Regris felt proud of the kit. He'd come so far in such a short time.

At level ten, Keith caved and fastened the *sikarr* to the end of his tail before starting the next level. Keith fought with three blades, using his Bayard (the traditional weapon of the paladins of Voltron, something based on each individual's fighting style), Marmoran blade and the *sikarr* in turn. He incorporated some earth moves, some moves he'd picked up from Regris, and others Keith had come up on his own. Keith fought like fire - wild and highly unpredictable.

Level ten ended up being Keith's match, and he quit after a very close defeat to let one of the others try. Lance offered to go next, and Regris watched in awe as the composition of the room changed from a flat-surfaced cube to one with ridges and rock-like formations. This made sense, he realized, because Lance fought with a shotgun. The Blue Paladin was a crack shot too, and managed to hold his own up until level nine. An impressive feat for an exercise where a gun was at a disadvantage.

The Green and Yellow Paladins went next, and Regris could clearly see that fighting was not wither of their wrong suits. However, Hunk could hold their own decently with their gun, making it to level seven before quitting. Pidge, however small, was vicious with their grappling hook/blade. They managed to outlast the gladiator until level eight, where they only lost because they tripped. For one so small (and seemingly so young) it was an impressive feat.

Regris was struck again by how unprepared these children must have been for life as Paladins, and then humbled by how quickly and willingly each of them adapted. It was clear they all had something, or someone, to fight for.

Soon, the time had come for him to take a shot at the Gladiator.

"Set me up at level nine." He said, and Keith had nodded in agreement.

"Regris is better than I am." He explained, slightly embarrassed. "He's the one who taught me."

Lance had brightened up at this. "Really?" He asked, grinning. Regris had half-shrugged, and Lance had taken that as an affirmative. "Okay, this is one battle I don't wanna miss."

"Same." The others had chorused, and eagerly moved to get a better view. Regris just took a fighting stance in the centre, facing the Gladiator and twirling his Blade in an invitation. *Come at me."

Level nine was simple, really. About as good as Keith had been when he first started training after the quintessence incident. When level ten came around, Regris saw what had made Keith lose. *Damn.* The Gladiator adopted a whole new fighting style, moving to parry rather than outright block. Only moving when necessary. It was infuriating, and Regris eventually beat the bot after a good fifteen minutes. He had to hand it to the Alteans - whoever had created this training Gladiator, they were a genius.

Level eleven was ridiculously hard. The gladiator followed the same fighting style as from level ten, but *faster.* Just halfway through the battle, Regris could tell this level was his limit. It was a challenge just to keep up, let alone counterattack. Regris finally lost when he'd gone for a kick with his tail following up with a hidden strike, but the Gladiator somehow sensed this, moved
inhumanly fast to dodge the kick, grabbed Regris by the tail and whipped him across the room and into a wall. *Ouch.*

The others had been quick to reach him, Keith slipping an arm under Regris' shoulder so he could lean against Keith and take the weight off his bad foot, and congratulate him. Apparently Shiro - the Champion - had been the only other person to make it to level eleven. Regris had been briefly worried that the others would see this as him 'replacing' Shiro, but they seemed to not think of it like that at all, even Keith.

Pidge explained that having Regris be the stand-in Black Paladin, while it wasn't ideal (because ideal would mean having Shiro back) was better than the alternative, so they were all willing to give him a chance.

Regris had felt an immense gratitude for these children and how accepting they were, of both Keith (and his Galran heritage) and himself. He found himself grinning as he listened to the others, Pidge and Lance both begging him for lessons while Keith had clung to him and hissed that Regris was his teacher. The Paladins had, amongst themselves, a sense of family that Regris, as an orphan, had never really felt, not even amongst the Blade of Marmora. It was nice, and Regris vowed that he would never betray the fragile trust the others had placed in him by accepting him as their new Black Paladin.
Chapter End Notes

For all you early readers, I ran out of my allotted 'screen time' (damn parents) so the first version of this chapter might be kinda short, and maybe has a couple spelling errors (I'm sorryyyyyy). I hope you still enjoy, though!

Comments/reviews are my energy source for more chapters. Thx.
Haggar, Head Druid of the Galra empire watched dismissively as Zarkon entered the revival chamber. Those *srek* (another Galran swear word) Paladins, no more than mere children, had somehow gotten the upper hand. Zarkon should have made a mockery of them! Infuriating, and a mockery of Haggar’s powers - she was a Druid, for *Thaalak’s* sake! She should have *won*, and won *easily*. So why hadn’t it worked out that way?

*(Galran culture doesn’t have gods, per se, but more like malevolent and benign spirits. Thaalak, of darkness and the unknown. Hasaehya, of the sky. Sokotarh of fire and passion. Caeldarh of water (the ‘rh’ sound ends in a growl) and calm. Kassekah of earth and protection. Sarva’ini of light and knowledge. Galra and Altean Druids are ‘disciples’ of each spirit, modeling their life’s work after their chosen spirits’ virtue. In turn, the Druid is said to receive powers based on their chosen spirits’ affinity. But without a sacrifice, the spirits remain silent. No loss, no gain.*

Followers of Thaalak (like Haggar) are those with an unfulfilled thirst for knowledge and discovery. They spend their lives searching, though rarely finding what they seek. however, when they do, the reward is more than worth it. Thaalak is a player in the shadows, often opting to stay out of direct fights and manipulate pawns instead. Thaalak’s powers relate to chaos, passion and sacrifice. Intelligent, resilient, desire, determined.

Followers of Sarva’ini, by contrast, are those who prefer to teach. To nurture the new generation, and honor the discoveries of those before. It is the path with the least consequences, but one must have a selfless heart to find true happiness. Sarva’ini is not a fighter, but rather a diplomat. Sarva’ini’s powers relate to light control. Scrying and healing. Compassionate, controlling, pacifist, perceptive.

Hasaehya is a free one. Those who follow the spirit of the sky love to wander, to travel and to rediscover. They are sharp and quick, both in weapon and in mind, and do not much like to ‘settle down.’ They help others, albeit in their own quirky way. Hasaehya’s powers relate to technology, storms and wind control. Eccentric, outgoing, resolute, traveller.

Sokotarh is a fierce one. This spirit follows instinct and emotions before logic (usually) and have an unpredictable personality. They are fierce, a single blade capable of cleaving armies aside, all to protect the ones they love. Sokotarh’s powers relate to fire control, speed and temperature control. Passionate, strong-willed, independent, protective.

Caeldarh is a calm one, who chooses words over actions when they can, but will fight with a fierceness rivaling Sokotarh when it comes to protecting the ones important to them. They are perceptive and work well with others, not the leader but the one who stops everything from spiralling into chaos. Caeldarh’s powers relate to water control, Ice control and invisibility. Intuitive, calm, unique, adaptable.

Kassakah is the defensive one. Not a fighter, but a protector. Often an overlooked spirit, ones who follow Kassekah will learn that sometimes defense really is the best offense. They are, unlike Hasaehya, a stationary spirit. Not alone, but rather one drawing strength from the bonds amongst comrades. Kassekah’s powers relate to earth/clay control, superhuman strength and magnetic fields.

Ten thousand years ago, Druid was a title that could be worn by any race, Galra or Altean, and one to revered. Druids were powerful, but also known to be wise. If Voltron was the Defender of the Universe, then the Druids were it’s guides, watching from the shadows to ensure everything
stays in balance.

After Zarkon’s take-over of that once peaceful universe, Druidic culture had become tainted. With Haggar in power, the only real path was to follow Thaalak. To her deciples, all the others are weaker spirits, with the only exception maybe - maybe - being Sokotarh. The balance became tilted because the nature of the remaining druids and the nature of the universe’s natural state (which druids were supposed to enhance and draw from) were at odds. Too much darkness, without a light to balance it out. Too much darkness, and no Voltron to bring the light)

Haggar snarled silently, vowing to the spirits that Voltron would pay. They would pay, and they would die. Zarkon’s empire had been undefeated, for ten thousand years, and it would stay that way. No rag-tag group run by mere children would ever get away from her again. They would all die, though a select few... a select few, she had plans for. There were many fates worse than death, and oh, to test exactly how much the human species could take before they broke was such a delicious prospect... Oh yes, she had plans for those Paladins.

Haggar turned as she heard the harsh footsteps - tak tak tak tak - of polished leather and metal, indicating the approach of a high-level officer. She looked up, narrowing her stained eyes behind her cowl. Ah, Throk Kesht’avaar. Not the worst, a bit dull, but fairly simple to manipulate. What did he want?

She waited as Commander Throk (though that title meant nothing to someone of her stature) made his way to the doors of the revival chamber. Then she stepped in front, inwardly smiling as Throk visibly flinched at her presence. Good.

“I have urgent news.” Throk said, fighting to hide how his instincts screamed at him to flee. “We have lost another planet to the rebellion. Something must be done immediately.” Haggar’s lip curled. Oh, it was this again. How troublesome..

“Zarkon is fully briefed on all imperial matters.” She hissed, “He certainly does not need your input.” Throk narrowed his eyes, but refused to back down. Foolish peasant.

“Then I hope Zarkon understands the need for immediate action.” He growled. “I wish to speak with him.”

“Denied.” Haggar drawled, mentally grimacing at the impudence of this lowly creature. He had to learn that his place was on the ground, snivelling at her feet. “Lotor has arrived at headquarters as Zarkon's request to take command of the Empire. Under Zarkon's guidance, of course.” Throk actually looked surprised - uneducated grunt, indeed - raising an eyebrow ridge in interest before remembering exactly who he was talking to and schooling his expression. Too late, kit. I saw that.

"Lotor? Why is he not at his father's bedside?” Throk questioned. Haggar wanted to tear his throat out (feel the rich blood drip from her claws, the soft convulses of a vulnerable windpipe as they struggle to draw another breath, the enchanting, wild, terrified look as her victim realizes that this was the end, the delectable hiss as this waste of space breaths his final breath) but she held herself back, opting to snarl at the kassekhrr (the word ends in a guttural snarl, literally meaning worthless, drawn from name of the ‘useless’ spirit of protection) instead.

“Zarkon needs no one by his bedside, whelp!” Haggar snarled, lunging at Throk, who backed away with wide eyes. At that moment, she looked more shadowbeast than person, and it terrified him. “Least of all you! Leave, now, or there will be little you can do to save yourself from a painful demise.” It was equal parts a command and a promise, and Throk immediately - smartly - turned tail and left. Haggar entered the revival chamber soon after. The following silence spoke volumes.
Meanwhile, hidden behind a geometric wall and stealthily listening in on the conversation, a female half-galra smiled to herself. She teleported to where Haggar and Throk had been standing moments ago, grunting once in approval before teleporting away. The discourse spreading through the upper ranks would make way for such opportunities.

A new era, indeed.

Keith wasn’t one for celebrations. In fact, at this very moment, he might as well say that he hated them.

No, that wasn’t right… he didn’t flat out hate them, because he understood the need for diplomacy, public displays, conferences and the like, but that didn’t mean that he wanted to be a part of it. Communicating was more Lance’s thing, not his. The tip of his tail flicked side to side in irritation as he watched another delegate praise Voltron with increasingly flowery words and a plastic smile. Earth or not, politicians would always be the same.

The way Keith understood it, the various individual systems in the galaxy (Arus, Balmera, Olkarion, Piug, etc.) had their own governments and operating systems, mostly following some form of democracy. For these ‘free’ planets, Voltron represented something akin to a militia, a defender, because the Galra didn’t allow others to build defense systems so they were currently without any major weapons. Voltron was the universe’s only challenger against Zarkon’s empire. This meant that, in a nutshell, the ones who sucked up to Voltron were the ones who’d stay safe.

There was a nagging thought in the back of his mind on whether or not these planets would still remain allied once they figured out Voltron had lost their leader. Furthermore, they hadn’t even formed Voltron since that last battle, so Keith was more than a little unsure on whether they even could at this point. Regris seemed to be settling in well, which was good, though they’d come to the consensus that they’d let the public assume Shiro was still piloting Kuro. That could… potentially end really badly, but seemed to be holding for the time being.

The elegant chime of a bell signaled the beginning of the conference, indicating that all participating members should move to take a seat at the oblong table. Keith reluctantly left his post against the wall and slumped into the vacant seat next to Lance. Did Keith mention that he was tired? Because he was, ridiculously so. More tired than every final exam week he’d ever lived through, and that was about as close to literal hell as he was willing to get at this point.

As a Paladin of Voltron and a liaison for Marmora, Keith had an active role in figuring out what Voltron (and the free universe, by extension) would do next. It also didn’t help that Allura decided that the Paladins should learn both the Altean and Galra languages as well as basic history of the universe and current planetary relations. Which meant that Keith had homework, and that was an infuriating thought in itself because what good was running of into space if he still couldn’t get away from school?

Lance, who’d looked at Keith with a sympathetic expression and gently patted his shoulder, didn’t look much better than Keith felt. None of the Paladins looked particularly alert, even Regris, because they’d been cramming to make sure they knew their stuff before the conference. Voltron needed to show a united front, even if several of them were still grieving and none of them grew up even remotely prepared for an intergalactic war. Except for Shiro, who’d do better than all of us right now.

“You okay?” Lance asked gently, and Keith cursed under his breath. His mask must be slipping...
damn these ridiculously emotive ears.

“Mmmh.” Keith grunted. “...kinda. Getting there.” He offered. Lance sighed, dragging a slender hand across his ridiculously handsome face. *Damnit Keith, you’re at a goddamn conference so keep your quiznacking crush under control for fuck’s sake!*

“I wish we were back at the castle.” Lance said, sounding worn, which... didn't fit Lance, *at all.* This was concerning.

“Same. Are you okay?”

“Didn’t get much sleep.” Lance admitted, rubbing his nose. “Nightmares, y’know? But it’s fine. I’ll be fine.”

“You better be.” Keith said, letting a purr lace his words so Lance could get the point. Nightmares weren’t something to brush off like that, but Keith wouldn’t call him on that because then he’d be a hypocrite. He had his fair share of unhealthy coping mechanisms, too. “Voltron needs you.” He continued, “I need you.”


Then Lance smiled, a genuine smile (not his usual joker smile) and Keith’s heart promptly skipped a beat. It had to be illegal for someone to look that beautiful.

*Nevermind, I’ll say anything as long as it makes that boy smile again*

“Really?” Lance asked, sounding strangely vulnerable. “You mean that?”

“Of course.” Keith said, frowning at the other’s tone. “You’re important.”


“No problem.” He stuttered, then turned away so Lance wouldn’t notice how red his face was getting. *Shit. Shit shit shit shit shit. I am such an idiot. Why did I say that? But wait - was that flirting? Did Lance think that was flirting? No, nope, nada, no way. That was purely platonic. Bros being bros. Absolutely.* Keith sighed as one thing became very, very clear: *I have no idea what I’m doing*

Moving his attention back to the events of the conference, Keith watched as Allura spoke about how honored she, the Paladins, and Coran were to have the delegates visit the castle. The first two Olkari respond in turn, commenting on what a technological marvel the Castle-ship is, and how it was a huge honor to be invited to such a beautiful place. They were such suck-ups, Keith wanted to gag. Even Allura’s right eyebrow began twitching as the room dissolved into chaos, with the delegates bugging her and the Paladins either zoned out or poking a Galra communicator (a Blade member had given it to Pidge as a present, and the Green Paladin had been thrilled). Kolivian, who was brooding near the projector, seemed to be the only person (other than Allura) who was ready for the conference to commence.

Then Hunk strolled in, followed by Coran, and both of them had trays that held some sort of… holy quiznack were those tarts? Keith’s nose twitched as the lemony (and how the fuck had Hunk gotten lemons in space?) sent wafted over. Oh, those smelled good ~

As expected, everyone’s attention immediately turned to the food. Keith snagged one for himself, and bit into it with a delighted purr. Hunk had somehow managed to make lemon tarts, in *space,*
and they tasted incredible. He glanced at Lance and saw that the Blue Paladin was happily snacking on a strawberry-looking tart, a delighted grin on his face. Keith’s heart skipped a beat at the sight. Fucking. I am so fucking screwed. Shiro would be having a field day.

Once they’d all gotten a tart or two (or several, because let’s be honest, Hunk’s food is the literal best), Kolivian stood up and Allura activated the projector in the center. It lit up and spread to show a basic 3D map of their current inhabited sector of the known universe, with several points of importance highlighted in teal, neon purple and orange. A purple tint remained over the Galra-controlled sections, while the free planets and travel routes were drawn in blue.

"The Blade of Marmora has gathered this intelligence. As you can see, the Galra Empire is still the most massive ruling force the universe has ever seen. The sheer size of it is almost incomprehensible. It seems like it could rule another 10,000 years." Kolivian explained. Keith sighed. Kolivian: straight to the point, regardless of how daunting that point was. To his right, Lance leaned over and whispered to Pidge.

"Not the way I would've started this pep-talk, but okay." He hissed, an annoyed expression on his face. Keith’s ear flicked in their direction as he picked up their conversation, and he had to muffle a snicker at how Lance’s tone literally dripped with sarcasm.

"However, we are beginning to see signs of increased rebel activity from within the Empire." Kolivian continued. Keith, along with several others leaned forwards in interest. He’d known about the scattered rebel cells before, but maybe they’d gotten new info?

Allura, the very image of a rebel princess - Keith couldn’t help but compare her to Leia from Star Wars - stood to address the crowd.

"We have a strategy to bring these forces together. Free more planets, grow our numbers, and accumulate and army that can defeat the Galra in major battles." She said, her eyes glinting with determination. She paused to press a button on her controller, and the map disappeared. “But without your help, it will be impossible.”

"The forces will fight behind Voltron, right?" An aquatic-looking alien asked.

"Yes, where is Voltron?" Another chimed in, and Keith inwardly grimaced. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. Allura pressed another button, this time opening a holo-screen that depicted Voltron’s last team photo. Lance and Hunk had their arms around each other, Allura and Pidge sat together in the front, and Keith had leaned against Shiro, who’d decided to mess up Keith’s hair. Coran had been the photographer, and one could even see the space mice dashing out of the camera frame. Keith’s chest hurt (with longing, grief or anger, he didn’t know) at the sight of Shiro’s grinning face. Fucking.

"These people are the Paladins of Voltron.” Allura said, smile in place. “Together, they pilot the mighty lions that form the great warrior.."

“Voltron was damaged. Badly.” Keith said, cutting Allura off. The aliens gasped, and Allura shot Keith a confused look. Keith hoped she’d trust him on this… “During the last battle, Zarkon’s warship landed a near-critical hit.” He continued. Regris’ eyes widened as he realized exactly what Keith was trying to do.

“What he means is that Voltron will need some time to recover.” Regris added, and Keith nodded in relief. They needed time to heal, and grow, and re-learn how to form Voltron. This gave them an excuse to do so, without revealing that Shiro was gone. Zarkon had, metaphorically, landed a near-critical hit after all. Voltron remained incomplete without Shiro.
“We can fly the individual lions.” Keith continued, “But you might not see Voltron for a while.”

“But what will we do?” An arusian asked. “Our people have heard the legend of Voltron, how HE defeated Zarkon. That is what gave them hope. What are we supposed to tell them now?”

“The truth.” Kolivian interjected. “Voltron will need some time, but the Lions and their Paladins are a force to be reckoned with. The Castle-ship also has considerable fire power. They may not see Voltron for a while, but that does not mean that Voltron isn’t with them.”

“Exactly.” Allura agreed, giving Keith a thankful smile. “Voltron is with you, but we need your support. Now, more than ever, we have a real chance at taking down Zarkon, but we cannot do it alone.”

“So that’s where you guys come in,” Lance said, catching onto the plan. “Gather your resources, free who you can, and tell them that Voltron will kick Zarkon’s ass when they return!” He stood, one hand in a fist. “You’re going to have to stand up for yourselves, and I know you can. Voltron needs you to hold base because we’ve had a minor setback. But that’s all it is: a minor setback. We can still do this. We’re still going to demolish Zarkon, and free the universe!” Lance raised his fist to the sky. “For Voltron!” He cheered, and the crowd (including Keith) echoed his call.

“FOR VOLTRON!”

The arena rumbled with the sound of murmured conversation, the seated Galra citizens talking amongst themselves before the procession began. The room was high-ceilinged and vast, equally freeing and intimidating. The varied indigo tones and acid-like pink energy lines adorning the architecture added to the dangerous, yet familiar, atmosphere. In the center of this spacious room was an arena, with seats spreading evenly around, each row higher than the last. At this time, the event hadn’t begun, yet, and Throk anxiously scratched behind his ear.

I have better things to do than this…

He turned to the paler skinned warrior beside him.

“You know, Haggar is a real bitch sometimes.” Throk growled, a single fang gnawing on his lip. Sa’ar’hak, who had endured basic with the surly general only sighed. Throk didn’t know when to stop, did he?

“Not that I disagree, but you are the one who usually asks for it.” He murmured, clearly understanding that his friend needed to vent. “What happened this time?”

“Stopped me from seeing Zarkon.” Throk sighed. “This has gone on for too long - Lotor this, Lotor that, Zarkon is fine…” He grumbled, drawing out the last word. “Well where the frakk is our esteemed prince, anyways!?”

Sa’ar’hak rolled his eyes. “By Sokoth, with the way you speak, it’s almost as if you’re jealous of him.” (“By Sokoth” - a derivative of Sokotarh, the warrior spirit. Literally the equivalent of saying “Oh my god!”)

“I am not jealous of that brat.” Throk snarled, and Sa’ar’hak only hummed in amusement. Suuure he wasn’t. Throk’s expression flattened at his friend’s mirth, and jabbed Sa’ar’hak in the side in recompense before continuing, “I just don’t see why I wasn’t allowed to meet with Zarkon. Galra are dying, Sa’ar, my men are dying! And more will die because our Thaalak-damned orders aren’t going to change!?”

Sa’ar’hak pressed a tired hand to his forehead. “I know, my friend. You of all people know that I
understand. Still, all we can do right now is play it safe and hope for the best.”

“I hate this. This war only takes. Perhaps if our leader-in-standing wasn’t snekk-shit insane it might’ve turned out different.” (“Snekk-shit” - Snekk are like a cross between a bat and a fly, and live in damp, humid, caves near sea level. The Galra equivalent of calling someone batshit)

“Haggar has been around longer than all of us.” Sa’arhak pointed out. “Who knows her motivations anymore? They’re playing a longer game than we can see.”

“Of course they are. Just wish we’d get a little more clarification.”

“But think of it this way - the less they tell us, the more us common folk can get away with.”

“Yeah, but are we still going to come out on top?”

“That, I cannot answer. Now shush, it’s starting.” Sa’arhak nudged his fellow general, eyes tracking the movement in the arena.

“Finally.” Throk huffed. “Let’s see what the princeling is made out of. 20 credits says he’s gonna lose.”

“Oh, I think you’re in for a surprise. I raise you 30 against.”

“Deal. Be prepared to pay for drinks, later.”

“Whatever you say.”

The pair of them fell silent as a lean, armour-clad figure strode to the center of the harshly lit pit. Even from afar, one could tell this being was of noble standing. Just not… fully pure in heritage. The figure was tall and build like a fighter - but a duelist, not a tank. Someone who had dangerous skills and also respected the skills of others. His skin was an attractive shade of lilac, hair a brilliant silver, pulled back from his face. Sharp golden eyes with exotic violet irises glared at the spectators. This was Prince Lotor. The son of Haggar and Zarkon, and rightful heir to the throne.

As if told by an unseen signal, the prince raised his sword to the lights above, vicious in the action, and the crowd burst into applause. This time, their Prince - returning from an exile surrounded by conspiracies and rumour - was here to prove himself to his future subjects. No sane Galra would follow a weak commander, after all. Today, Lotor was the challenger.

“So that’s him…” Throk murmured. “He’s gotta be Altean, at least in part.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Sa’arhak nodded. “Yeah, Haggar is his mother. She was an Altean druid.”

Throk snorted. “Oh yeah? What the Thaal is she now?” (“Thaal” - from Thaalak, spirit of darkness. The equivalent of hell.)

“I don’t really want to find out.” Sa’arhak admitted, ears twitching back. Throk grimaced. Yeah, sometimes ignorance was best.

A long horn signalled the beginning of the match, a massive gate opening to reveal the rabid, dog-like, rock creature on the other side. The crowd’s cheers increased in volume, spectators on the edge of their seats as Lotor dodged the first of the beast’s charges.

The creature, puzzled that it’s prey had evaded it, turned and dashed at the prince once more. This time, Lotor didn’t hesitate. In the timespan of a second, at most, he’d swung his weapon in an
upwards arc, cleanly cleaving off the Hoelthargh’s foreleg, and followed with an elegant vault over the mess, landing cleanly on the other side. The creature whimpered, shaking somewhat from the pain, the shock, and the realization it could lose, and that would mean death.

Sa’arhak grimaced as the opponents went back to circling one another. Poor thing, it had probably been starved before this. The life of an arena slave, because there really wasn’t any other word for it, was the literal worst, topped only by maybe - maybe - the life of an exile. Only the strong survive, huh?

A hush had fallen over the crowd and a few Galra - those who were open minded enough to see the future consequences - felt a chill settle in their souls, Sa’arhak amongst them. This fight, he realized, with painful clarity as Lotor grinned, wild and ruthless, was over the moment Lotor became a variable. He watched with wide eyes as the prince toyed with the life of the Hoelthargh. By Hasehya, Haggar’s created a monster!

The fight continued, the crowd lapping up the display like starved animals as Lotor gladly made example out of the desperate rock-lion. First, he severed the left hind leg, then cut it down the middle, then finally, as it lay panting and bleeding, gripping onto the last dradges of life, he sank his blade into it’s skull and twisted.

Sa’arhak felt sick, to both his body and soul. He wasn’t a pacifist; he understood the need for blood, for a fight, for vengeance, but this… this was too far. The Galra weren’t a peaceful race, there was no denying that, but a leader who showed compassion would be more than refreshing in times like these. Unfortunately for them, it seemed like they’d been sent the exact opposite.

Lotor was charming, no doubt. Charismatic and noble, a leader people wanted to follow, and yet… he saw others under him. Perhaps they were, considering the hundred years the Prince had been gone, doing who knows what, but a life shouldn’t be. Life was precious - all Galra were taught this. Life was to be protected. When it came between the mission and saving one’s crew, your crew was always more important. And still, most seem to have forgotten this once obvious teaching. The war changed people, twisted them, until what was left was only a shadow of what once was.

He sighed, turning away from the bloodied arena floor. We are at war, he mused, sacrifices must be made. If Lotor is the one who ultimately leads us to victory, who am I to complain? And still, something feels wrong.


“You know, they say his top generals aren’t even full Galra.” Throk continued. “They say he has no honor. There’s a rumor that he allows the planets he captures to rule themselves but after seeing that.. I don’t know.”

Sa’arhak frowned. “Perhaps he does, and maybe this is only an act. Who knows, anymore.”

“I think..” Throk began, then paused as if gathering his courage. “I think I’m going to go for the throne.”

“WHAT!?” Sa’arhak hissed, eyes wide. “Are you mad!? It would be suicide!”

“Yes, but leaving the position open for him,” Throk snarled, and jabbed a clawed hand at the arena, “Might be suicide for our people! Lotor doesn’t know the ground situation here; he’s an outsider, he’s different, he’s got no semblance of control. Didn't you see? He basically lives for the chaos!”
Yes, Sa’arhak did see. But still, “It’s suicide.” He repeated, firm in his belief and willed his friend to understand. Lotor was on a completely different level… now, maybe Voltron was the only thing that could stop him. And that’s a terrifying thought, isn’t it?

“I’ve talked to the other generals in our districts. They’ve agreed to back me up.” Throk continued.

“I still don’t approve.”

“I’m not asking for your approval, I just want you to know that I’m going to try. At the very least, take care of my men when I’m gone.”

“Don’t do this.” Sa’arhak growled, “Don’t. There are other ways.”

“I don’t want to argue with you. Our army needs control. We need a proper leader, not some unhinged prince!”

“Then I cannot stop you.” Sa’arhak conceded, “But you will regret this.”

“Throk.” A new voice commanded, cool and haughty. “You wish to challenge me?”

Sa’arhak froze. Oh no, not now. How had he heard?

Lotor smirked, already certain of the outcome. His sword pointing directly at Throk. “Then come down and claim your crown. True Galra do not take the throne by stirring up insurrection in darkened chambers.” The blade lowered. “Defeat me, right here, and the throne is yours.”

“Quiznack.” Sa’arhak hissed. “Don’t do it.”

“Do I have a choice?” Throk shot back, voice as dry as their ruined planet. Sa’arhak didn’t reply. How could he, when refusing a blatant - honorable - challenge like that meant a permanent black stain on your social image? Throk would be branded a coward.

“Wish me luck.” Throk muttered, standing and making his way to the stairs down. Sa’arhak watched with a torn expression. Here I go, he thought, losing another friend to an unnecessary bid for power.

Throk refused to let this princeling get to him. He was a warrior, a general. He had seen more than his fair share of battles. This would be nothing. He wasn’t a simple rock-lion. He’d show this brat some real competition.

“I have fought thousands of battles and left many enemies, more fearsome than yourself, wasting on the battlefield.” Throk declared, once he was facing the prince on the red-stained pit floor. This was his promise to his men - Lotor would be defeated.

And so it began.

The two clashed, trading blows like lightning in a thunderstorm, quick and deadly. The sheer power in each blow - though whose power, Sa'arhak was uncertain - sent them back every time, only for them to regroup and clash again, all within seconds. Throk was the earth, power and fortitude, attacking straight on with sheer intimidating force. Any lesser warrior would have cowered, but not Lotor, no... Prince Lotor, he flowed like water, adapting to each minor disturbance and reflecting it back as if it was a strength, passively conserving energy and not above taking quick, short slices whenever possible. By a certain perspective of 'honourable duelling,' this wasn't a preferred technique, and yet... it was devastatingly effective against a larger opponent. Lotor’s slim blade against Throk’s greatsword, neither giving ground. Or, wait…
Sa’ahrak’s eyes widened. By Sokoth, he realized, It’s already over!

It wasn’t obvious, not to an untrained eye, but Lotor was - again - playing with his prey. Neither seemed winded, but Throk had a myriad of miniscule cuts littering his forearms, and Lotor... remained as immaculate as ever. Ever the trickster, the Prince suddenly paused, vaulted over Throk by using the flat of the greatsword as a springboard, rolled and then righted himself gracefully - only to then compliment his stunned opponent's technique, but then insult his monotonous blows immediately afterwards. Throk just snarled, fed up with Lotor's mind games, and charged again. This game of cat and mouse continued until Lotor decided he was done - and oh yeah, Sa’arhak could tell the moment the Prince decided he was bored, because that coy little smirk disappeared - and cleanly sliced Throk’s blade in half.

Throk fell, partly from the shock, only to find the razor edge of Lotor’s sword grazing his throat.

Back in the stands, Sa’arhak winced, trying to calm his racing heart. He knew that what came next. He’s dead. There’s no way...

“I.. concede.” Throk grit out, painfully clear to all that he was beaten. Lotor, his expression unreadable, lowered the blade and then helped Throk back up. The crowd went wild at this show of 'sportsmanship.'

Sa’arhak froze, but then sighed in relief. It’s all a crowd pleasing trick, He realized, but I”m still glad Throk didn’t die. More glad than I feel comfortable admitting...

The Prince raised his arms to the lights above, a gesture of absolute victory, and crowd began to chant his name in tandem until the sound echoed in the chamber, loud enough to make anyone’s ears throb. Sa’arhak frowned… This boy, this Prince, was dangerous indeed. One of the most essential ploys of any successful ruler is understanding how to play a crowd, and Lotor had it down to a fine art.

“The universe,” Lotor began, and a hush fell upon the masses as their new ruler spoke, “Can no longer doubt our strength. Each ally gained makes us stronger. While those who continue to stand against…” He paused, savouring the silence, “Will be crushed.”

Throk finally bowed, and with his left arm across his chest, fist where his heart lay, a pledge of his unwavering devotion. It was law, after all, to owe the one who spared your life a debt of equal servitude.

Then four figures, seemingly appearing out of nowhere (though Sa’arhak suspected these women were Lotor’s generals, and had definitely been there the entire time) echoed the gesture, followed by Lotor, then the rest of the arena (Sa’arhak included, however grudgingly) - sealing the deal. A promise of leadership for the next short while… and beyond, if Lotor's plan - whatever it was - succeeded. Never forget, Sa’arhak reminded himself, They play the long game.

And as the crowd still chanted their mantra, He grimly reflected back on the transpired events. On the one claw, it was miraculous that Throk hadn’t been killed. On the other, Lotor - the mad prince - was their new leader, and at this point Sa’arhak didn’t know what was worse - Lotor, or a comatose Zarkon (he strongly suspects this is the case) with Haggar pulling the strings? If anything, these next few vargas were going to be interesting, and not necessarily in a good way...

Lotor sighed, running a slender hand through his sweat-slicked hair. That had been, simply put, exhausting. Thrilling, yes, but exhausting all the same. He offered his generals - loyal to a fault,
every one of them - a small, genuine smile as he approached, as nasty as his motivations were.

“That went well.” Axca murmured.

“The crowds are easily manipulated. Have Throk transferred out to the Ulippa System immediately.” He walked past them, before pausing and glancing back, a vengeful smirk on his lips. “Let him rot with the ice worms.” he added, “A little humility would do him good.”

Zethrid and Ezor shared a glance as their commander walked off, while Axca simply rolled her eyes. *Only you, commander,* she mused, *can put on a mask as easily as you breath, and then have everyone believe it is the absolute truth.*

Keith glanced at Kuro again, for what had to be the thousandth time, and prayed that the lion would give him the answers he so desperately searched for. Kuro, ever the enigma, remained silent. Her little cubs already had the answers, they simply needed to figure it out for themselves.

The others gathered around their co-leaders, and the unanswered “What do we do next?” Hung in the air, tension so palpable you could slice it with a knife.

“We miss Shiro too, y’know.” Lance murmured, making Keith blink in surprise. “When I first saw him, I was so excited because - well, he's *Shiro,* the Garrison’s Golden Boy. The star. The one cadet that we all looked up to.”

“And then we met him, and he was wayyyyy more amazing in real life, and you’re not alone, okay? We all miss him too, Keith. You’re *never* alone.”

And that was it, floodgates opened as Keith let out a sob, then another, and then limply collapsed in Lance’s arms, clinging to the Blue Paladin like a lifeline. Lance, eyes watery as well, held back just as tight, and soon the others - because Pidge had known Shiro nearly as long as Matt had, and Hunk was an emotional crier, and Allura was hurting as much as Keith was because she and Shiro had been close, and Coran was grieving because they had lost one of their own - eventually found their way over, collapsing in a crying heap at Kuro’s paws.

Eventually the bawling subsided to sniffles, and then stubborn hiccups as the Paladins pieced themselves back together again. And as if on cue, they broke apart, all watery smiles and fragile hope, chests light as they finally let it all out.

“*sniff* We make kinda shitty defenders, don’t we?” Keith joked weakly. “We’re a mess.”

“A *hot mess.*” Lance giggled, wiping tears away.

“Sorry about your dress, Allura.” Hunk muttered, noticing the tear stains on the blue satin (or, satin-like) fabric.

“Don’t be.” She said, laughing lightly as she noticed for the first time. “We needed that.”

“We *definitely* needed that.” Pidge added. “Feels good to let it all out, huh?”

“Surprisingly, yeah.” Keith agreed.
"According to the Castle database, crying is actually a healthy coping mechanism." Coran informed them, once he’d wiped his nose for the umpteenth time, immune to the multiple eye-rolls.

“Are… are you all okay?” Regris asked, finally making his way over (yes he got lost, but it’s his first time in a very giant castle so cut him some slack). “I mean, are you going to be okay, at least?”

“Yeah, man.” Lance grinned, sharing a glance with Keith, who smiled reassuringly, unable to smother the purrs rumbling from his chest. “Yeah, we’ll be fine.”

“So,” Pidge began, resolve in place once more, moment of weakness passed. “What do we do next?”

“We all miss Shiro…” Allura began tentatively, “But, the galaxy needs Voltron as well.” Keith sighed, disliking the point but also understanding her logic. *Damn logic.*

“We can always look for any clues in whatever star systems we end up visiting.” Regris offered, and yeah, that didn’t sound to bad, did it?

“We’ll find him, Keith.” Lance added.

“Or, knowing Shiro, he might find us instead.” Pidge pointed out.

Keith closed his eyes, took a deep breath - inhale, hold, exhale, calm - and when he opened them again, that inner fire had returned, burning as bright as ever.

“Alright team,” He stated, “It’s time to figure out how to re-form Voltron!”

“YEAH!”
The New Voltron

“So... forming Voltron,” Regin began, and it was uncomfortably clear to everyone that the Blade member was the odd man out. “What do we do?”

The veteran Paladins just shared a perplexed glance. How to explain everything that was Voltron to a newbie? At the very least, they were determined to do a better job than Coran had. Those first few weeks were chaos... Keith internally shuddered as the memories of Coran's 'team building' exercises came to mind.

“We just... do?” Lance offered, shrugging. Regin blinked, clearly lost while Hunk sighed, Pidge rolled their eyes and Keith facepalmed. As eloquent as ever, Lance.

All of the Castle-Ship's inhabitants were lazing about in the common area with that super-comfortable horseshoe shaped couch - that, in retrospect, probably wasn't actually called a couch at all, but Keith wasn't going to ask Coran for the real (and probably ridiculous) name.

He and Lance were seated near the center, with Pidge on Keith's other side and Hunk opposite to Lance. Regin and Allura were on Pidge’s other side and Coran had stolen the only single seat in the room.

A blueprint of Voltron's mechanics were projected in each lion’s respective colors above the minimalist table in the centre, though Regin looked like he understood only half of that, at most. Keith's tail-tip twitched with irritation when he realized it was up to him to take charge and offer a more cohesive explanation.

“No, Lance - it's not exactly like that. It's like..." The Galra hybrid paused, trying to find the right words for such an abstract concept. "It's like trusting someone so deeply that you can feel their next moves as if they were your own," He eventually explained. “Everyone’s neurosignals would need to be in sync, or it would fall apart. The quintessence in the lions picks up on the chemical transferences in our brains - and yes, those electric and chemical pulses are our thoughts and actions - and somehow the lions read those signals, and we... connect. Yeah.” He finished, slightly out of breath at the end of his rant, and tilted his head as he thought about what Lance's description had been. "I guess you got that part right."

“That’s one theory, anyways.” Pidge added, amused, and it was then that Keith realized that the sneaky gremlin had somehow managed to steal his tail and was idly petting the fluff on the end. He didn’t mind, if the soft purrs - why was that so hard to control? - coming from his chest were anything to go by. Pidge paused in their stroking to push up their too-big glasses, which had slipped down, again. “But don’t ask me how Alfor managed to tune to quintessence to each of us, or how it manages to be so precise. I'm still working on that.”

“But, wouldn't it need to be some sort of auto-tune because Paladins change, right?” Hunk added, following the conversation as he tinkered with what looked to be a new type of communicator.

“Oh, damn…” Keith frowned. I forgot about that... but wait... he turned to Pidge, ears flicking forwards as another theory came to him. “Or, our neural signals and patterns are similar enough to their previous Paladins and that is why the lions picked specific people as their Paladins!”

“And there we have theory number two.” Pidge agreed, nodding.
“Coran?” Allura asked, poking their resident mechanic - who had fallen asleep - for an answer. “What do you think?”


"Could you elaborate on how the Lions and Paladins manage to sync?" Allura asked, "It seems all we have are theories, unfortunately, and perhaps understanding the mechanics may help our newest member feel a little less lost."

The orange-haired advisor fell silent, idly fingering his moustache, deep in thought.

"To be frank, your highness," He said, "I have no idea. This technology was a closely guarded secret, even on Altea, and far above my payroll from the time. However, I suspect both the Paladins and the lions have a core role. You can speak to them, yes?"

“Yeah.” Lance agreed. Keith and Hunk nodded as well.

“It's getting them to shut up that's difficult.” Pidge added, snickering, and Keith rolled his eyes as Red made another mental remark about eating their smallest Paladin for breakfast.

“Rather surprising, to be honest,” Regris said, mouth quirking up into a smile, "but yes."

“Then why don’t you ask them?” He said, hands out in an unknown Altean gesture. Keith was pretty sure Coran had forgotten that the meaning was lost on everyone except Allura.

“We did.” Pidge said, then rolled their eyes and slumped dramatically in their seat.

“And?” Regris prodded, more than a little interested. Voltron was a thing of legends, and to be able to be a part of something so… monumental was incredible. Even if the Paladins were total goofs who were stumbling through this saviour thing metaphorically blind.

“They just said it doesn’t matter.” Keith elaborated, ears flicking with the mild irritation he felt at Red's silence. “Only that we have to trust the bond.” An amused rumble settled at the back of his mind and he fought the urge to groan - of course his lion found the whole thing funny. Of course.

“Which makes no sense to the scientific mind.” Pidge continued, understanding exactly what Keith was feeling because Green hadn't been any help, either. “We need answers.”

“Whoa, hold up,” Lance interjected, making the time-out “T” with his hands. “How does Keith know all the sciency mumbo-jumbo, Huh? When did this happen?” He flailed his arms at the Red Paladin, immune to Keith's glare.

Keith, meanwhile, was mentally kicking himself because there just had to be something he had forgotten - and Lance's unintentional hostility had him ruffled. Sure, he thought, pointedly ignoring Red's laughter, I think I love this boy - but he's so... so... Lance at times that it makes it hard not to punch his stupidly pretty face!

Once, this would have been cause for another argument, but Keith now understood that each Paladin (himself included) had their individual quirks and Lance’s was that he hated when people kept things from him. Lance said it was nothing - which it wasn't - but psychologically speaking, Keith suspected that this was because Lance felt unneeded when people left him out of the loop - maybe a side-effect of having a big family, where communication might end up being a problem, good intentions be damned - and that it hurt Lance when that happened. Therefore, a new, unspoken, rule was to keep everyone caught up. Keith had just... forgotten about this.
“I uh, read.” He stammered, mentally kicking himself for getting complacent and letting his guard down. “And um, science is interesting? Especially biology. And textbooks were the only reading material allowed during detention, so...” He trailed off with a shrug. There were a few seconds of shocked (in Lance’s case) silence, before:

“Oh. OH. Oh my god, guys - Keith’s a nerd.” Lance grinned, and Keith cringed, because oh no, here comes the teasing... “That’s so freaking cool!”

Wait, what!?

“Huh?” Was all Keith managed to say, his brain momentarily frozen in shock because this was the exact opposite reaction to what he’d expected.

“What, you think i’m one of those people? Come on, Space Cat, I’m best friends with the biggest nerds in the history of nerdship” Lance said, smiling reassuringly, and Keith felt like he could die because oh my god my heart just flip-flopped. “Wait. Is nerdship even a thing? Whatever. It’s totally a thing now. I’m making it a thing.” Lance continued, oblivious to Keith's dilemma. "Anyways what I’m trying to say..." He paused for dramatic effect, still grinning adorably. "Is that nerds are certified badasses!"

“Amen to that.” Pidge added, nodding in approval.

“Oh. Wow, um, thanks?” Keith tried, unsure of how to react because his face was definitely heating up and the fact that Lance was right there wasn't helping, at all.

“No problem!” Lance grinned, shooting those goddamn finger guns. “We’re best friends, aren’t we?”

“Okay, but now we need to drag Keith to our science binges.” Hunk added.

Pidge grinned. “Oh, absolutely.”

...aaand shoot, Keith thought, I think I just got friend-zoned. Pidge elbowed him.

“No, you didn’t.” They assured. Once, Keith would have been surprised at their perceptiveness, but they'd gotten to the point he was just willing to roll with the fact that Pidge could read him like an open book typed in Comic Sans.

“No you didn’t what?” Lance asked, accidentally overhearing.

“I, um, don’t understand any of this conversation.” Regris interrupted. "At all. Explanation, please?" The earth-born Paladins shared a collective grimace.

“You… um, it’s probably best we explain earth weirdness later. Much later.” Keith explained. "There's a certain level of... stuff you need to know before we get into slang."

“Seconded.” Pidge added.

“Same.” Lance agreed.

“That’s probably the smart thing to do,” Hunk said, nodding. "We'll set up an introduction to earth course sometime."

“Can we get back to topic, then?” Regris huffed, irked that he’d been left out.

“That’s right!” Allura added, glad to be back on a topic she could actually follow (regardless of
how long she’d known them, humans were just weird), “We need to get to your lions and practice.”

“Riiiight.” Lance drawled, eying Coran - who was napping, again. Kieth frowned - just what had he done the other night, to have made their usually energetic advisor so sleepy? Probably fixing the older systems, he mused. Or updating firewalls, cataloguing new data points, Integrating earth tech... jeez, that is a lot. No wonder he's tired.

"Alright." Pidge stated, dropping Keith's tail and placing their hands on the table with a determined slap. “First one there gets to pick the game!” They declared, then darted towards the door, quick like the gremlin Keith knew they secretly were, and was out of the room before any of the others could react. Lance - not one to be beaten - chased after them immediately.

“Come on, guys!” Hunk complained, but followed nonetheless, leaving Keith, Allura, Coran and a confused Regris in the room.

“Trust your instincts,” Keith offered, clapping Regris’s shoulder as he passed him. “It’ll be fine.” He paused, once again thinking of their first days and the infamous lion pyramid. "I think.”

“That’s reassuring.” Regris said, voice dry, and the trio (it was unanimously agreed to let Coran nap, it looked like he needed the rest) headed to the hangar.

Regris studied the inside of Kuro’s cockpit. The seat was ridiculously comfortable, seemingly molded perfectly to fit his figure. To his left were the navigational and communication controls, as well as the panel for altering the system’s UI. To his right were additional action controls - and power output per statistic (speed, power, defense, etc.) field - and it was changeable! Sweet! - oh, and a space for… his bayard? Yes, that seemed about right. The center was left clear for the HUD, but the manual movement controls - two levers with horizontal grips - were directly under, perfectly placed for his hands. One moved forward/back, the other left/right. Moving together created diagonals, and allowed full 3D maneuverability. He grinned, unable to smother the excitement. Incredible.

[You are impressed far too easily, cub.] Kuro rumbled, and Regris got a sense of content amusement from the ancient being.

“What can I say?” He grinned, “You’re a beautiful lioness who deserves her fair share of flattery.”

[Snarky one, aren’t you? Come, let’s fly.]

Unable to keep his tail from swishing side-to-side in excitement, Regris eagerly booted up the UI, watching in awe as sleek neon violet flowed across the systems. It was… extremely galra-esque, and surprisingly comforting. Like a Blade ship, but much, much, more amazing. He’d already been on his first flight, yes, but it seemed just as amazing every time.

“Hey, can you hear?” Keith’s voice came in, clear and static-free.

“Yes. We are both ready.” Regris said.

“Alright everyone, we’re in a clear, asteroid-free area so you should be able to, what was the Earth term? Right. Go wild!” Allura said. She was back at the castle, but even she seemed to be feeling this energy - this hum, full of anticipation and excitement, grief and togetherness and it felt like home. Was this what they meant by bond?
[Almost there, cub.] Kuro added, picking up on Regris’s thoughts.

“Time to leave you all in the dust!” Lance crowed.

“Uh, no. Sorry, but that’s my line.” Keith countered.

“Whoa, guys - I won that race, meaning I get to pick the game, and it’s gonna be…TAG!” Pidge interjected. "Also, not it!"

“Not it!” Said Hunk.

“Not it!” Keith and Lance chorused.

“Not what?” Regris asked, lost again.

“Oh, sorry.” Pidge said, paused, “Or not sorry, actually, but that - as in, you didn't say 'not it' - means you’re ‘it.’”

"And what," Regris said, "does 'it' mean?"

“The fact that you're 'it' means you have to tag us.” Keith said. “Just tap a paw on another person’s lion to tag. And, um, and do it gently. The lions don't like it when they get dented.”

“Yeah, the lions know the game.” Lance added. “Don’t worry.”

“I’m not.” Regris grinned, because this seemed remarkably similar to a game Galran kits played, then moving together, they (Kuro and Regris, because now, they were one) gently tapped the yellow lion’s flank with their paw. “Hunk, you’re ‘it!’”

“WHAAT?! No fair, man!” The Yellow Paladin groaned, turning Yellow around to see Kuro dart away. “Lance, you're next!”

“If you can get me!” Lance teased, already speeding out of range.

And on and on it went, going from Hunk, who got Pidge via summersault, to Lance, who wasn’t paying attention just then, to Regris again, because he wanted to catch Keith… and then to Pidge, because Keith was a demon in the sky. Jeez, kit. Regris thought, watching as Red nimbly dodged ‘attacks’ like they were child’s play. You’re something else.

Eventually, the game devolved into a free for all - which was absolute chaos; wonderful, organized, chaos - and then everyone against Keith, who finally got caught once Allura intervened with the Castle-Ship’s tractor beam.

“Alright, my turn to pick the game.” Lance started, once they’d unanimously decided that tag had become boring. “Listen up! We’re gonna have a race,” He stated, and Regris literally felt when the competitive spirit of everyone, even Allura, rose together. Apparently, races were a big thing. Oh Sokoth… I feel like I’m gonna regret this… “Let’s see…” Lance murmured, probably to himself but the audio still caught. “What’s our destination?”

“Anywhere.” Answered Keith, who seemed to be itching for more of a challenge.

“How about… back to Puig? It’s not too far away.” Allura suggested, already inputting the coordinates and sending them to the lions.

“Alright.” Keith agreed.
“That’s perfectly fine.” Pidge grinned, fingers drumming the controls in anticipation.

“Let’s go, guys!” Hunk cheered, moving Yellow so the lions lined up.

“I’m gonna leave you all in the dust!” Lance teased.

“Not, If I win.” Regris interjected, finally feeling comfortable enough to get in on the banter.

“Oh no, don’t pull another Keith!” Pidge groaned.

“Paladins.” Allura said - and was ignored.

“Don’t worry, guys - my babysitter,” Keith said, drawing out the last word, tone laced with sass, “Lowkey sucks.”

“I do not!” Regris mock-gasped, “Excuse you, I am a very formidable Blade operative!”

“With no directional sense, whatsoever.” Keith deadpanned.

“That’s not…” Regris began, but then paused because yeah, that was kinda true, “Okay, low blow.” He growled.

“Paladins!” Allura tried, only to be steamrolled, again. Plachu had probably turned down the Castle’s volume output. Hmm, how to fix that…

“All’s fair in love and war.” Keith quipped.

“So it’s a war, now?” Pidge snickered.

“When was it not?” Lance said, smothering giggles.

“If it’s a war I want Keith on my team.” Hunk added.

“PALADINS!” Allura yelled, finally shocking them into silence. Regris winced, because now his ears were ringing. Great. “Thank you,” Allura added, eyeing each of them with a worryingly arched eyebrow. “Everyone get to the starting line - that perfectly round asteroid over there, please.”

“Wow, it really is round.” Lance murmured as they (Blue and Lance) nudged the space rock gently with their snout.

“I’ve seen weirder.” Regris offered. “There’s one around a Blade base that’s perfectly square, you know.”

“Like, naturally?” Pidge asked.

“I think so?” Regris said, then shrugged. He wasn't exactly the one to ask... but, maybe Antok would know.

"You have to show me that when we go back." Keith demanded, eyes narrowed. "I need proof, or this'll be marked as another tall tale."

“On your mark…” Allura began, and the Lions immediately fell silent. “Get set….” Regris could see Red’s tail thrashing in anticipation, and felt his stomach drop as he realized that speed was Keith's element. “GO!”
And like speeding comets, they were off.

The racecourse wasn’t too long, per se, but it was in the middle of an asteroid minefield, so it became more a test of agility than pure speed - and thank Sokoth for that, because it wouldn't be much of a race, otherwise. Surprisingly, Lance was the who’d taken the clear lead, racing just behind Keith. Regris's lion… well….

“No offense to you, Kuro, but you are a bit… big.” Regris muttered, grimacing as they accidentally knocked into another asteroid. Kuro was amazing, yes, but also not what Regris was accustomed to. Blade ships were much smaller, and not as intuitive. He grimaced as he realized that it might take a while before he got back to optimal proficiency.

[No need to sugarcoat it, cub. Power is my strong suit, not agility.] She hummed, not the least bit offended.

“You’re… enjoying this, aren’t you?” He asked, glancing up (even though there was only the ceiling).

[Yes. I already lost a cub to my former partner, ] She said, that last word becoming a guttural mental snarl. A cursed word, if you would. [To find another so fast is… humbling. It makes the loss easier to bear.]

“Could you tell me about him?” Regris asked. “Shiro, I mean.”

[Later. We have a race to win now, don’t we?]

Regris grinned. Being a Paladin - this living bond, between his lion and the others - was incredible, and amazing, and awe inspiring and a lot of things, and also so unique that he’d probably never find the right word to describe it, especially since it was different each time, but always felt like home.

With a grin, he focused on the slim, green lion seconds ahead of him. Pidge was going down.

Keith felt… free. Yes, free. There was no other way to describe it, because right now he was Red and Red was him and they were ONE. Together, they raced through the stars, unmatched by any other.

Well, Lance was pretty close behind, almost keeping up with Keith, and why does that make Lance so hot? Damn it. He felt his face heat up, ad could definitely hear Red laughing in the back of his mind. Mentally flipping her the bird, he turned back to the inky space ahead. Bad kitty.

And despite their banter, the bond remained as strong as ever. Like living fire; pulsing, warm, fierce and theirs. No other pair would have what they had, just like they wouldn’t experience their bond any other way. It was… the best thing that had happened to Keith since Shiro, and maybe Lance.

[You flatter me, kitten. Already on par with your crush, I see.]

“Shut up, you.” Keith grumbled, blushing slightly. “We have a race to win!”

[Already won.] Red chuffed, and Keith blinked, returning to his own eyes, and realized that yeah,
they’d totally killed that asteroid course.

“We,” He stated, even as Lance pulled in a close second. “Are totally awesome.”

[Only because we understand each other.] Red mentally smirked. [That, and you’re pretty much a cat yourself.]

“Ugh, bad kitty.” Keith groaned, even as his tail curled in contentment, betraying his true emotions. “I should never have linked up long enough for you to go through all my memories.”

[It worked, didn’t it?]

“At the expense of my dignity.” Keith sighed, and waited for the others to reach them. Space really is incredible - so many stars, so many places to explore, places you could go where no one was… around? Wait a sec…

“Hey, guys.” Keith hissed into the comm. “Someone do a sonar check for other ships in the area.”

“On it.” Pidge murmured, “…aaaand confirmed, one small, individual vessel, straight ahead of Keith’s position.

“No way,” Echoed Lance, squinting. “Or yeah, yes way. I see it too. Who else would be out here?”

“Galra.” Keith answered, not willing to take any chances. Already, the beginnings of an attack plan were falling into place.

“Keith…” Regris warned, knowing exactly what his charge was about to do. “Don’t risk yourself.”

“I’m not.” Keith countered. “Just a flyby. I want to see who’s in that ship, maybe they’re friendly.”

“Doubtful.” Pidge snarked.

“I know. I’m still gonna do it.” Keith continued.

"It's not a bad idea." Lance added. "I mean, it's better than going in blind, and Red is fast." Smiling, Keith felt his lion preen under the Blue Paladin's praise. Yeah, they were the fastest.

“Fine. But be safe.” Regris growled, and Keith - not willing to wait - took off.

They (Keith and Red) flew faster than they’d done during the race, because all they needed was a glimpse. Red could parallel - and go beyond - lightspeed if they pushed it. Come on…

Halfway there (really, only a couple seconds later, more like) Keith switched to Lion Vision, and through Red's eyes… yeah, he could see the figure. Definitely Galra in skin tone, but the facial structure and ears were… Altean. Whoa. Like him. Telling Red to take a snapshot, Keith turned back and returned to the others. The whole trip had taken ten seconds, at most. Ten seconds too long… Keith mused. He’s probably seen us. Regardless… He sent out the image to his fellow Paladins, ears twitching as he saw Regris silently snarl in surprise.

“Reg - do you know him?” Keith asked.

“Yes, actually.” Regris hissed in response, the same tone of voice he used for missions. Keith felt the playful atmosphere dissolve. Uh-oh, this is serious.

“Who is he?” Lance asked, nose scrunched up as he studied the picture. Regris sighed.
“Prince Lotor, son of Zarkon and Haggar.” He explained.

“Prince?” Hunk squeaked.

“Zarkon had a kid?” Lance gaped.

“Haggar had a kid?” Pidge echoed, equally as disgusted.

“He is part Altean, then?” Keith asked, feeling his eye twitch, because he already knew he didn't want to have anything in relation to this dude. He was Haggar's spawn, for fuck's sake! Haggar, as in the witch that was probably directly responsible for Shiro's disappearance. Next time, that bitch won't get away, he thought darkly, and felt Red echo the sentiment. Sure, revenge might be a tad self-destructive and psychologically a poison for the mind.. but some creatures really did deserve what was coming to them.

“Yes, yes, yes, and definitely.” Regris answered. “If he’s here… that means his exile is over.” Taking a deep breath, he began his explanation: "For whatever reason, a hundred years ago, Lotor was exiled - well, the official document said he was on a mission but at that point everyone classified it as exile - and was sent to do something for Haggar. If he’s back, it means he’s either completed his task, or was recalled to take over for Zarkon. None of those are good for us.”

“Okay, but why?” Lance asked.

“I think I get why.” Keith interjected, feeling the pit in his gut drop lower. "Reg, he's a monster, isn't he? Bad enough that you're terrified." He asked softly, and Regris offered a curt nod in return. Turning to the others, Keith asked, “You all know how Shiro’s tactical analogies were brilliant, right? He was a prodigy in that sense.”

“Yeah.” Lance murmured. "Like, nobody could beat his scores." Pidge nodded, and Keith knew that they'd already guessed, at least partially, what he was trying to say.

"Yes, but why..." Hunk asked, then, "Oh. Ohhhhh yeah. That's not good."

"Exactly." Keith said, "Imagine that the other side has someone like that, but evil." He watched how Regris's expression had reverted to that blank, emotionless state they were taught for missions. Yeah, his mentor was scared, and Keith had never seen him this unsettled about anything. It was worrying. "And probably a latent psychopath," he added softly, glaring at the HUD and the speck of a Galra ship displayed on there. Once again meeting the eyes of the others, he shrugged. "At least, that’s what I think."

"Keith is right." Regris echoed, and the hollow tone of his voice sent chills down Keith's spine. "This is perhaps the most dangerous individual in the entire Galra nation. Blade protocol is to flee on sight. He has been known to take down entire armadas single-handedly, and has a record of toppling governments on once-peaceful planets and throwing them into chaos." He closed his eyes, remembering the destruction he had seen on certain holoscreens. "Once the local military is scattered, taking over a planet is simple."

“Oh shit.” Pidge breathed.

“That’s terrifying.” Lance agreed.

“Y-yeah,” Hunk said. "He's basically Zarkon's right-hand man."

"Pretty sure he's the one who does Haggar's dirty work." Keith murmured, thinking back to Earth's
“That’s… quite accurate, actually.” Regris confirmed, expression grim. None of them had expecting this encounter, especially not this early in. Keith almost wished they had stayed in the castle. How had Lotor even found them? An uneasy silence descended, each Paladin occupied by their own thoughts.

“Now what?” Keith asked, still glaring at the blip on the radar.

“Do we go see what he wants?” Asked Lance, fingers dancing nervously across the controls.

“How about no, because he might attack us?” Keith countered.

“Gotta agree with Space Cat on that one, buddy.” Hunk added.

"But we still need to learn more." Pidge argued. "Remember - knowledge is power."

"Which would be true," Regris agreed, "But while we may learn things about him, he is a master at reading others."

"So we find a way to stalk him without letting him learn about us.” Keith stated, arms crossed and tail lashing with irritation. It didn't help that Lotor appeared to be content to sit there, simply observing them like he didn't think they were a threat.

“Wait- actually... GUYS!” Lance interrupted, grinning, “I have an idea: how about we go there, and if he starts attacking, we dodge - but also act like total idiots. Keith rolled his eyes. Of all the infernal things he could think of, it had to be this. He was fully about to shut this plan down but... well, it wasn't a bad plan. Unconventional, sure, but they had tried something like this at the Galaxy Garrison, when Pidge was trying to sneak in.

“That’s… that might actually work, you know.” Keith agreed, one ear tilting to the side as he thought about it. “Remember the drunk-flying sim?”

“Ohhh, oh yeah.” Pidge nodded, finally getting it and grinning dangerously. “Yes, let’s totally do that. Absolutely.”

“Wait, so,” Hunk cut in, “We’re going to fake the drunk flying sim with our lions, go over there, and make it looks like we have no clue what we're doing so Lotor completely underestimate us?”

“Yes!” The other two chorused.

"Wait, wait, wait - what's the drunk-flying sim?” Lance interrupted, scowling.

"It's what you said," Keith explained. "When Pidge was trying to sneak into the Garrison, they thought it'd be better if the higher-ups underestimated them."

"Yeah. Hunk and I practiced flying like we were drunk - but without crashing, so it was really much harder than we thought it'd be." Pidge continued. "It got Iverson off my ass and landed us with you, so I'd call it a success. Keith knows because he's a stickler for gossip."

"I am not!" Keith retorted.

"Sure you aren't." Pidge snickered.

“This is madness, you know.” Regris pointed out. “I like it.”
“Did you get all of that, Allura?” Keith asked.

“Yes, I think.” Allura answered. “Are you sure this is going to work?”

“No,” Lance answered, “But that’s half the fun, right?”

“I guess.” Allura sighed. “Be safe, all of you.”

“Will do.” Hunk assured.

“Aren’t we always?” Pidge snarked.

“Don’t make me answer that.” Allura warned, eyebrow twitching dangerously. Keith snickered, because there was probably a mile-long list at this point.

“Right, ready team?” Keith asked, and couldn’t help but grin at the responding chorus of “Yes!” variants. Shiro was gone, true, but even without him, their team was going to be alright. “Let’s go!”

Lotor watched with mild interest as the Lions haphazardly made their way over.

“So these are the famed Paladins of Voltron, hmm? He mused, distinctly unimpressed. Pathetic.

He was hunting for a fight, that he wouldn’t deny, and maybe it wasn’t the healthiest thing to do, but… When one ends up as damaged, or as broken as Lotor had been before Axca’s little gang had taken him in, healthy became overrated. Who cared about society’s views on healthy when you could have power?

Thaalak, what was wrong with these people? It looked like they’d never had a flying lesson in their life! Yes, he knew the Paladins were children, but to think these imbeciles had taken down mother? She must be losing her touch… and if she was… Well, I suppose it’s almost my turn to reign supreme… But first, I’m going to have so much fun breaking those lions…

Smirking like a wild maisma-spirit, Lotor thumbed the controls for the forward mounted guns.

Come, little Paladins. Time for you to learn your place - broken, and in a trophy room, where all can see and learn of the supreme POWER of the Galra Empire!

And quiznack, he was shooting at them. Red, up! He mentally commanded. Really though, Keith shouldn’t have expected anything else. This was the Galra Prince after all. But attacking an unknown first, without reason, wasn’t that considered disgraceful? Hmm… Lotor wasn’t giving up, and his ship seemed more than capable of keeping up with Red. That’s a disturbing thought. The others are gonna get hit... He looked around, searching for cover… There!

“Guys, dive for the planet! There are rock formations down there. Hunker down, but don’t lose the idiot facade until absolutely necessary!” Keith ordered, because it hadn’t become to serious, yet. Lotor was still playing with them. Heart racing, they lazily dive bombed the fighter - only for Lotor to evade, again. Damn, he’s good.

“Roger!” Echoed Lance.

“Roger Roger!” Added Pidge, as they disappeared into the hazy red atmosphere.

“Not Star Wars time!” Keith yelled, but even still, the grin hadn’t left his face. Lotor was a pain,
yes, but he'd always loved a good challenged. Red hummed in agreement... this was gonna be fun.

“We hear you, boss.” Hunk piped up, as Yellow descended into the stony hideout (or death trap, depending on how you look at it).

“Regris, defend the others!” Keith called, once more gearing up for another run at this goddamn infuriating Galra Prince.

“Go- It!” Came the broken reply.

“Reg?!” Keith growled, worried. What now?

“I thi-nk we’re b--eaking up!” Lance answered.

“Arlight.” Keith snarled. Damn. It must be that red haze - iron, maybe - messing with the radio communications. “You know the drill - stay safe, give this guy hell, don’t let him see you, and get back to the castle if you’re done. We can take him. Think all against one in manhunt.”

“G...-kzzzt-...it..”

“Ri...-kchzzz-t…”

Silently praying to whatever lion god was up there that the others heard, Keith set out to get a better read on Lotor.

“You with me, Red?” He asked, ears pressed flat against his head in concentration, tail lashing.

[Always.] Came the rumbled reply.

Alright, let’s do this… Keith growled. The atmosphere was tense as they descended into the heart of the stone maze. Visibility... was low. Very low. Just red, and more red, everywhere. For once, the vibrant colour was the very opposite of comforting.

K-tik! Keith whipped around as something grazed Red’s flank. Hardened plasma round, and there, the tail of Lotor's ship. Gritting his teeth in a feral grin, he sped up after it, firing multiple low-energy scatter shots and missing a few to keep up the act. They duked behind a spire as Lotor shot back, and watched with glee as Lance took the advantage from behind and took several good shots... and still, the hull seemed undamaged. What the hell is this spacecraft make? I almost want one now. Red mentally cuffed him for that comment.

"What? Can't I admire enemy ships?" Keith snarked.

[Now when I'm here... wait, this is payback, isn't it?] Red asked.

"Heh, maybe."

They fell silent again as they scattered, leaving Pidge and Hunk and Regris to get their share. But then... then Lotor changed it up. He went from dangerous to downright lethal, lashing out whenever and proving more than a match for the others. Grimacing, Keith decided to circle back and catch him from behind, readying a full-power shot with Lotor’s name on it. When he got there though... the others, they were gone. he had only been away for ten seconds. Ten seconds too long. Keith felt a uneasy chill settle in his bones. Had Lotor... defeated the others that easily? No way...

Keith pushed the outgoing comm. button once more, praying that someone would pick up. The
others had to be okay, they had to be safe.

A sudden flashing light made Keith blink. The comm. Signal was blinking again. Hopefully, it’s Pidge, he mused as he pressed the indicator, only for that hope to fizzle out as the surprising clear two-way video window that fizzled into existence in front of him showed none other than Lotor, the very person he’d been trying to shoot down. Keith swallowed uneasily. Or not. Shit.

For a moment, all they could do was stare at one another, spacecraft frozen amongst the cold and distant stars. A standoff.

“You’re… Galra.” Lotor finally said, clearly not expecting one of his species with Voltron, let alone as a Paladin.

“And you’re Altean.” Keith shot back, taking his helmet off. Lotor wasn’t wearing one anyways, and by Galran honor customs, if one removes their helmet, then you do the same. It’s only fair, after all, to be able to see your enemy’s face as you crush them.

“And so are you.” Lotor mused, eying Keith’s markings. “We are two of a kind, I suppose.”

“What do you want?” Keith asked, bluntly. He knew Lotor’s type - the one to whom manipulation came as easily as child's play. He’d read about them, studied them - well, maybe not explicitly, but he had read those articles in passing. That, and he liked to watch BBC’s Sherlock - and that show was impossible to watch without learning a few things. From what he understood, Lotor’s forte was getting in his opponent's mind and twisting their perspective. Make the bad guys seem like the heroes. Keith's experience with mind games consisted of trying to out-prank Matt Holt, but he knew about the kind of games Lotor played, and that offered Keith some protection.

“To play a game.” Lotor answered, just like Keith had suspected he would. After seeing that Keith wouldn't take the initiative, Lotor took the opening move. “You are… different, from what I expected.” He offered. Keith didn’t respond right away, because the game had just started. Every answer was a clue, and the person who had the most clues would win.

"Everything I say, He remembered, from when Matt had tried to teach him the art of trolling someone, can and will be used against me. Wait - Slowly, an idea became clear to him. A crazy, foolish idea that could have serious repercussions if he screwed up - but it was all he had. Keith looked at Lotor. Yeah, Pretend he's Matt, but evil. This, I can do.

“I don’t think anyone was expecting you to pop up either.” Keith replied, trying to keep a straight face. "Must have been a nasty surprise." And yes, that was absolutely a jab at Lotor’s birth. From the miniscule twitch of his left eye - catalogue that as a tell, Red - Lotor had gotten the message.

[Got it, kit.] Red answered, mental voice barely a whisper.

“Feisty, aren’t you, kit?” Lotor snarked, and that was clearly a jab at Keith’s age - not yet an adult by Galra or human standards. "Was it so hard to find a true Paladin? Unfortunate that Voltron had to settle for the pint-sized version." Well then, Keith thought wryly, time to go after his honour.

“Fiesty to those who shoot first without giving others a chance.” Keith scowled. What Lotor had done right then, at the very beginning of the fight, was a taboo in Galran war customs. Every enemy would get one chance to surrender or negotiate peace. One chance - no more, no less. Lotor hadn’t offered the Paladins that chance, yet.

“I never meant to negotiate peace on your terms.” Lotor drawled. Keith frowned, ears folding back, because that translated to: my way or the highway - also known as death, which meant Lotor
had no intention of having Voltron as an ally. If he had come with a full armada, Voltron would
have been fired upon without mercy.

“Well then it seems like we’re at an impasse, Prince.” Keith countered, then went ahead because
he had to make move and finish this now before Lotor figured too much out from his body
language. “Tell me, why didn’t you come before - if Voltron are the villains in this - when your
people needed you?” Outwardly, he was just as collected as the prince appeared. Inwardly, he felt
like a ball of pure anxiety, aching to get back to his friends - no, his family - and make sure that
they were safe. Drawing strength from the anger he felt towards Zarkon, Keith pushed on.

“Or was that mission more like an exile? Did they throw you away under a lie, simply to spare you
from the truth? That you were useless. That nobody wanted you? Tell me, Prince, what role does a
broken tool have in this game?” He ended his tirade with a snarl, feeling a small flicker of
satisfaction when Lotor visibly flinched. The tension in Keith's frame let out, just a little. A small
victory for him, however ugly it made Keith feel on the inside. I just might win this...

Hurting people had always come easily to Keith, no matter how much he hated it. Emotions were
tricky for him, because he felt them all too strongly. It wasn't hard to direct that ball of negative
feelings onto someone else. It was letting it all go, and not harming someone he cared about, that
was the real challenge.

“And what about you, Paladin?” Lotor hissed. "A deserter to your own race. What would your
parents think? I highly doubt they'd be proud to see what you've become - a traitor to your own
kind, a nobody with less worth than me, chasing a pipe dream and pretending that Voltron actually
needs you. Please tell me, do you actually believe the lies they’ve fed you?” Lotor asked, ever so
charismatic. The tone of his demands flipped from razor sharp to honey sweet in an instant. Keith
felt like he'd just experienced mental whiplash.

I can see why people are drawn to him, he realized, But Lotor's got it all wrong. I'm no Galra
defector. I wasn't part of the empire to begin with... That’s good - no, that’s great! He doesn't
realize I was born on earth, and since I’m not going to correct his assumption, none of what he
says can actually hurt me. It's all lies. Slowly, another truth became clear to Keith, and that
revelation brought a warm feeling to his chest. Nothing he says applies to me, he thought, resolve
strengthening. Lotor doesn't know me, or Voltron. He's guessing.

“Says you, Lotor.” Keith said, his smile deadly, “But out of us both, who here is the one that’s
alone?”

And as if bidden through their bond, the others decided that then was the perfect time to line up in
formation beside Keith, and Keith felt like the coming pressure on his chest had just been cut in
half. His friends were okay. And what he'd said - it was true; he wasn’t alone, and as long as he had
the other’s support, Lotor alone wouldn’t defeat him.

At the sight of the others, Lotor’s golden eyes narrowed, and he knew he’d lost. With all five
components of Voltron pointing basters at him, all within point blank range, it was probably
time for a strategic retreat. Lotor grimaced - he’d learned that the Red Paladin - Thaal, I didn’t even get
his name! - was strong willed, familiar with mindgames, was of Galran and Altean heritage. He
showed no response when parents were mentioned, so he must have been an orphan... and maybe
he had a few issues with friends, self worth and abandonment, though none of that showed so he’d
have to dismiss it as theory. That was... a pitiful performance, at best, by Lotor’s standards. I
underestimate them... and it cost me this victory, he realized, then mentally shook himself. Never
mind, I will win the war. Of that, there is no doubt.

On the other hand, Keith had learned - well, he couldn't be certain, but the prince seemed to fit
the classic villain profile - that Lotor was a latent psychopath, sociopath, had abandonment, trust, self worth, honor and control issues (amongst others) and had definitely been exiled 100 yrs ago, not just sent away. Also, he seemed the kind of person who’d do anything for power. These - and Keith knew this because he’d read about it - were weapons, things they could use against the prince. Weapons that, possibly, would ensure Voltron’s success the next time they’d meet.

Even so, it was only by luck Keith had gotten the upper hand this time. Lotor was a master manipulator. On even ground, Keith would have been demolished - or broken - and Keith, well, he didn’t want to end up like that either. Lotor terrified him. Not because Lotor was a dick - which also was true - but because Keith himself might’ve turned out that way if Shiro hadn’t been there for him. And that, he thought, is something I don’t want to think of ever again. I'm not like Lotor. I'm NOT.

“Well done, little Paladin.” Lotor praised, still with an air of indifferent amusement. In a single nod that spoke volumes, he acknowledged Keith as a rival. They were on equal footing now, and next time they met, Keith knew Lotor wouldn’t make the same mistake again. “I shall take my leave.”

“And don’t come back!” Keith snarled. If he ever saw the prince's smug face in this lifetime, it would be too soon. Slowly - or not, Keith wasn’t paying attention at this point - the Galran starcraft turned and shot off, not a single trace left behind.

And then it was over, finally.

Keith collapsed bonelessly into the chair, letting the tension flow out of him. So I won? And Lotor... he just left?

[Well done, little one.] Red purred, surrounding her charge in a cocoon of warmth and love. [Are you ok?]

“I will be." He murmured. "That was exhausting. The others, are they-?”

“We're fine, Space Cat,” Lance’s voice drifted in over the comm. and Keith felt himself sag in relief. “Don’t worry! He used an EMP earlier and we had to land for a while, but you, that was totally awesome! We heard everything, by the way. Lotor got burned!” The Blue Paladin grinned, and despite how his limbs felt like jelly, Keith found himself laughing as well. It was a comfort, to know that his family had been there, with him, every step of the way - even if he hadn’t know it at the time. Red must’ve turned on all comm. connections once the others had gotten out of the redd haze. Good kitty.

“Is it okay, though, that I... did that?” Keith asked, voice wavering and suddenly insecure, because that was cruel, incessantly so. A shadow of the very person Keith never wanted to be.

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Pidge countered, understanding exactly what Keith was trying to say. “You aren’t like that. We know you aren't like that. But that was some damn impressive acting.” They squinted at the now open video screen. “Have you been taking lessons from Matt or something?” At this, Keith couldn’t help the grin that came over his face.

“You got me.” He teased. “Matt’s shown me a few things, so I don’t have to fight with my fists every time.”

“I approve. 100%.” Pidge said, crossing their arms and nodding in approval.

“Are you okay, though?” Hunk asked, concerned for how Keith was feeling right now.

“I think so.” Keith replied, and that was mostly the truth. I will be okay. I always am.
“Good.” Hunk nodded.

"I... am impressed, kit." Regris added softly, smiling as Keith's nose wrinkled at the 'Kit' endearment. "The others back at Marmora would be proud. Let's just hope he doesn't come back."

"Ditto." Pidge agreed.

"Same." Lance groaned. "As awesome as that was, I was fucking terrified for you, Keith. Don't take the insane Galra prince on alone ever again."

"But I wasn't alone," He pointed out, grinning. "You were there, sharpshooter." Lance huffed, crossing his arms and looking away. Holy quiznak, is Lance blushing? Wow. Okay, that's adorable.

"I'm afraid to be the bearer of bad news, but..." Allura's worried voice came on, and Keith grimaced, pulling himself away from his inner Lance musings. He had to get that crush under control - or make a move - or Pidge's teasing - and look at that, said gremlin was already smirking - would be the death of him.

"What now?" Keith asked, pulling the window with Allura's face to the centre. With our luck, it's probably another Galra ship...

"Galra warcraft approaching, fast. Unlike any of the other models we've dealt with." Allura informed them, voice grim. "We're going to need Voltron for this."

"Fuck." Keith cursed. Looks like I jinxed it. Oh well. "Everyone ready?" The resounding chorus of 'Yes!' that followed chased away any lingering doubts. That's right. We're Voltron, we can do this. Keith gunned red into high gear, flying in formation near Kuro's shoulder. Pidge mirrored his action on the other side, and Lance and Hunk took their places as well. Here goes... He thought, then met the eyes of his teammates once before saying the words they all know by heart, "Form Voltron!"

And all of a sudden, the world became a blur of colour, then white, black, and...

... a boy and his brother, exploring the desert together // searching for seashells on the beach with his family around him, he looks up and // receives a birthday present from their older brother, turning to show their friend // sitting with his moms and his younger sister at dinner, candlelight soft and warm // a Galran kit finally - finally! - unlocking his blade, running to show his mentor and basking in the wonder of this accomplishment...

"Whoa." Keith muttered as he came back to himself, blinking as Red's altered cockpit came back into focus. He felt the faint impressions of the others, four other minds and five ancient lions, linking to his. It all seemed to be in order. "Everyone good?"

"Mm-hmm." Hunk nodded.

"Golden." Lance grinned.

"Shut up Lance, you're Blue." Pidge countered. Keith smiled. Yeah, they'd be fine.

"Regris?" He asked, mildly worried about their newest Paladin, who'd remained silent.

"Is it always... that intense?" Regris huffed, "Those memories, they were not mine."

"Yeah, there's a bit of a crossover. Usually just one memory that's been at the top of your head for a
while.” Pidge explained.

"So those children... those memories were yours?"

"Yeah." Keith confirmed. The mind meld... well, it took some getting used to but honestly? They wouldn't have Voltron if it was any other way.

"Earth... well, you have to tell me more, Keith - all of you - when we get back." Regris said, and Keith felt his wonder as the elder Galra settled into the bond a little more, completing the circuit. Kuro was the lead lion, and Keith was the lead Paladin. Therefore, the wellbeing of the others was now his responsibility, and he was going to keep every last one of them alive and safe. At least, until Shiro returned. Keith figured, Then he can take over.

"Sure." Keith answered, regarding Regris's earth question. Voltron was coming up within firing range of the Galra warcraft. Time to focus. "But right now, we have some Galra ass to kick! Shield, go!" Pidge and Hunk moved together, bringing up the energy shield, just in time to block the first plasma cannon shot.

"How are we for damage, Pidge?" Keith asked, and Regris instinctively adjusted the back thrusters to accommodate the pushback from the shot velocity.

"That was about 2%." Pidge informed them. "We'll be fine. I think."

"Alright." Keith nodded, eyeing the rather unprotected engines on the left side. "Sword, go!" He called, and Keith moved, feeling Regris mirror his actions as if it had come as easily as breathing. Of course it would - while they were Voltron they were one. One whole, cohesive unit. A team.

Sword came up, sliced cleanly through the ships hull. They were careful to only damage thrusters - but only so they wouldn't explode later. Even if they were Galra soldiers, they were also people, and Voltron saved lives, not let them be blown apart by their own warcraft.

"Back!" Keith called, and Voltron shot back, narrowly avoiding a very high power plasma beam. He narrowed his eyes. "Those are going to be a problem. If you see one, yell back!"

"Got it!"

"Right"

"Sword again - one more set of engines to go!" He commanded, and once again, Keith and Regris - backed by the others, moved in sync and soon, the thrusters - save one, because even the enemy needed a way to get away, right? They weren't trying to kill them - were done for. The Galra craft finally did the smart thing and turned away, though they kept firing at Voltron as they ran away.

"Back!" Yelled Pidge, and Voltron moved back again, dodging another beam, though significantly weaker considering the distance between them and the Galra ship. At this stage, it was best to give a few parting shots - just to make sure they'd leave for good.

"Lance, it's all yours." Keith called, amusement bubbling throughout the bond when he saw the mischievous grin on Lance's face. "Give them hell!"

"Roger roger, captain Space Cat!" The Blue Paladin confirmed, already minuting a certain sequence into the targeting computer. Then, Lance and Regris, with Pidge moving as the handler of the gun, sent some perfectly aimed scatter shots at the retreating ship. Keith squinted, then briefly switched to Lion Sight just to make sure he wasn't seeing things.
"Did you... is that a smiley face?" He asked, unable to keep the exasperation out of his tone. *Jeez, Lance.*

"Yep." Lance answered, like making a dotted smiley-face using charred plasma marks on a Galra warcraft hull was a perfectly normal thing to do. Knowing Lance, it probably was, at this point.

“Haggar's gonna love that.” Regris added, sarcasm game on point.

“Actually, I think it might have been Lotor in charge of this one,” Pidge interjected. “We did just piss him off. Who wants to bet he had backup a quick wormhole away?”

“True.” Keith sighed, because Lotor was *exactly* the kind to have backup at hand. *Never one to go into an unknown situation unprepared.*

Content with the relatively loss-free victory, Voltron basked in the wonder of a first-time bond (in Regris's case) and the exhilaration that came with being able to *fight as one* again. Until, of course, someone decided to be the voice of reason.

“Um guys, shouldn’t we, you know, go back?” Hunk said, and it was only then that the rest of them seemed to realize that Voltron had been floating lazily in space for more than a few minutes. A rather… unprofessional sight.

“Right.” Keith muttered, ears flicking in only mild embarrassment, to happy riding the high to care much. “Back to the castle.”

Lotor... was *not* a happy creature. In fact, he was *positively seething.*

*How* had they won? It should have been impossible!

No.

Not impossible. Improbable, yes, yet it had *still* happened, and Lotor had still lost, all because he underestimated that *Thaalak-damned Red Paladin.*

*Well,* he thought savagely, *That is not a mistake I will make again. Ever.*

The irritated prince sped towards his rented Command Vessel - yes, rented. Of course that dingy, subpar-model warcraft wasn’t *his* ship; he simply needed test subjects, to see how Voltron operated. He maneuvered his personal ship over the exit hatch, ready to dock. *If,* Lotor grimaced, *the morons running this place actually opened the gate.*

Of course, this type of ship had been perfect for his purpose: not to weak that the lions could take it on without forming Voltron, but not to strong that the ship would be marked too great a threat and it - and the lives currently on said ship - would be decimated. It was a gamble, playing on Voltron’s soft mercies, and it had worked. Lotor had the information he wanted, Voltron thought him less of a threat than he was (though, that incident with the Red Paladin could have been handled better...) and the ship’s crew was none the wiser, believing that Lotor was a *benevolent* leader that *didn’t* send men off to slaughter. He wanted to laugh at the irony of it all.

*Oh, how naive they were. Any sacrifice can - and will - be paid, as long as the ends justify the means...* Lotor tapped an elegant claw on the dark grey dashboard. *Still, the Paladins have done a decent job, as inexperienced as they are. They are nothing compared to the Paladins of old, but they might actually get there... in a hundred years - and that is an overstatement. Really, those
children are pathetic.

How exactly that ragtag group of kassekhrr defeat Haggar? Head druid or not, mother was a dangerous person. I learned from the best, after all... the thought made him pause. Unless, of course, mother has gotten senile in her old age. Rolling his eyes, he glared at the command window. The stupid crew hadn't opened the gate yet. Wouldn't be a surprise. It's about time the crone lost it.

But nevermind that, Lotor frowned, now is not the time to dwell on past mistakes, no matter how embarrassing. Just how had that kit gotten the upper hand!? Ugh. Mistakes are to be learned from, yes, but not dwelled on, because obsession would only lead to insanity. He sighed, slumping in his seat, And insanity would turn me into Haggar, and that would be the worst case scenario. He shuddered as memories of experiments his mother had conducted surfaced. Disgusting witch. I am not a good person. I do not claim to be a good person. But, at the very least, I have some semblance of morality.

Lotor wasn’t stable - he knew that, he accepted it, and he moved on. Too much had happened, and self-pity wasn’t a luxury someone in his position could afford. He had a revolution to plan, an empire to topple, a galaxy to conquer and a dream that, once complete, would ensure that the galaxy would never be the same again. The Galra empire was a spectacularly complex toy, the galaxy was his playground, and when Lotor became bored with his toys, he threw them away... or changed them just so, enough that they would be interesting enough for the next decade or so. Always play the long game, Haggar had said, during a less twisted time, when he had allowed himself to believe that love was real. The universe has plans for you, my son. You are our legacy. Never give up.

And Lotor would not. He would survive, clinging to those precious memories and whispered words from a time when life didn’t hurt him at every turn.

But back to the Paladins... he thought, burying those faint emotions once more, because they were a weakness. That coy little smirk returned to his lips, They will provide ample entertainment for the time being. It is my right to destroy them, and when I'm done, the universe will be waiting.

He glanced up as the HUD pinged with another alert, this time… directly from Haggar. What does that wretch want? Supressing a groan, he opened the net-message slowly, brows furrowing as he read the contents. What's this? Project Kuron? Oh Thaal, she's started another experiment... what poor creature do I need to go claim now?
Here's my re-write of the 'Hole in the Sky’ episode. Mainly because I couldn't find a transcript and I figured you guys might want something new, and then the characters took off and... yeah. So I hope you enjoy, and tell me what you think in the comments. On a less happy note, my parents banned us (me and my sibs) from using our electronics for the month of August. It SUCKED. 10/10 do not recommend. I just got my computer back, and cranked this out as quickly as I could. Never have I been happier to pull an all-nighter.

The infernal blaring of an alarm startled Keith. Startled him right of his chair, in fact. Glaring at the speaker from his place on the floor, he set the report he had been studying aside.

“Alright. What’s going on?” Keith asked, feeling the fur on his shoulders fluff in irritation. He saw Pidge eye the ceiling in apprehension.

“Yeah, these have never gone off before.” They muttered, pushing up their glasses.

Keith and Pidge had been cross-referencing galran slave records, that Regris had stolen, in hopes that some ship might have logged someone with a description that matched Matt’s or Pidge’s Dad’s, or even Shiro’s. Until, of course, the alarm had gone off. Grrr… it’ so loud. I think my ears are going to start bleeding...

The hiss of an airlock opening signalled Allura and Coran’s entry into the bridge, with Lance and Hunk following behind.

“Allura, what is it?” The Blue Paladin asked, taking his usual seat, a concerned expression on his face.

“Looks like you guys saw a ghost.” Hunk remarked. Once he’d peeled himself of the floor and back into his chair, Keith could see that Hunk had a point. Both Allura and Coran were pale and wide-eyed, glancing around nervously.

“That’s just the thing,” Coran remarked, moving to the screen with the radar readings. “It’s an old Altean distress code. One used by King Alfor’s ships.”

“Could it be?” Allura murmured, clutching the locket she always wore, “Are we not the last Alteans alive?”

“Unlikely, Princess.” Regris said, watching the main viewscreen for signs of movement. The vast, inky expanse and twinkling stars stared back, but there were no ships in sight. “Someone might be cloning the signal to lure us in.”

“I agree.” Keith added. The Alteans had been gone for over ten thousand years, but most of their technology had been assimilated into the Galra empire. It would be easy enough to replicate a signal. “Allura, it’s probably a trap.” His words fell on deaf ears - from Allura’s expression, Keith could tell that she had already made up her mind.
“The signal is from an Altean ship,” She stated firmly, with an authority to her voice that silenced any arguments. “And we are going to find it.” Moving so she stood at the center of the quintessence control station, she studied the readings from the external scanners. “That looks like a Tel-Galax exploration shuttle. One of my father’s deep space vessels.” She expanded the hard-light hologram of the ship with a wave, maneuvering it to the front so they could all see.

It was a oblong vessel that reminded Keith of an Earth blimp, with three engines and a central channel that the quintessence flowed through. From what he could tell, the ship had minimal weapons systems, though the armor was impressive and effectively placed. It seemed like the Alteans hadn’t expected to find much opposition where they were headed. The blueprint didn’t show color, but a symbol similar to one on the Castle-Ship was proudly emblazoned on the side. *It must be like a flag,* Keith realized, marginally surprised by how unlike an Earth flag it was. *Or some other kind of identifying marking. The Galra have something similar, though theirs is Zarkon’s ruling crest.*

“According to the ship’s identification code, it’s Commodora Trayling’s ship.” Coran said, “But I don’t see any records of it’s destination or mission.”

“It’s a traaaaaaaaaaap.” Regris sang from where he was sitting at his control station - sideways, with his feet in the air and reptilian tail draped over the arm of the chair, one hand manipulating the holoscreen. “If Karka shit hits the fan I absolutely get to say ‘I told you so.’”

“He’s got a point.” Pidge added, immune to the glare Allura sent their way. “I mean, do you even know this Commodora Trayling personally?”

“Once, though it was before Zarkon attacked. We lost contact with them soon after departure - deep-space ships are equipped with the fastest engines of any Altean vessel, and they were soon out of communication range.” Coran answered, eyes downcast. An alert on his holoscreen had the advisor look to the main screen again, then let out a startled gasp. “Oh my…”

Following his line of sight, Keith’s own eyes widened as he took in the scene before him. It was an Altean ship, identical in make to the blueprint they had seen earlier, though this ship was quite real. It appeared to be trapped in a wormhole, in the middle of a dormant asteroid field. It was an odd sight.

“What happened to it?” Lance questioned, squinting at his holoscreen.

“Is it stuck in a wormhole?” Hunk asked.

“That’s unlike any wormhole I’ve ever seen.” Coran murmured, brows furrowing.

“But it’s a wormhole, right?” Keith felt obliged to ask, “And not a black hole?”

“There is a massive amount of energy emanating from it,” Pidge reported, “Centered right where the ship is stuck.”

“We have to see if anyone is on board,” Allura stated. “They may need our help.”

Her insistence to get near that wormhole troubled Keith. Mainly because he didn’t want to Voltron to end up in the same scenario as the Altean spaceship. Also, they had no idea of knowing what was on the other side of the wormhole - it might lead straight to Galra central command!

Pidge’s grim smile showed that they also had reservations about charging into this head-first.

“We could send a probe over to it, see if we can get some kind of idea what this thing is?” They
offered. Keith let out a breath he didn’t know he had been holding in. *Trust Pidge to come up with the smartest way to do things*, he thought with a smile.

“Do it.” Regris agreed. “Bad idea or not, this is the weirdest wormhole I have ever seen. It might be dangerous if left alone.”

In silence, they watched as the tiny, disc-shaped probe detached from the Castle-Ship and made its way to the wormhole. *The weirdest things about this*, Keith observed, *is that everything looks frozen in time. Not even the space junk is moving, and it should be moving towards the wormhole because a wormhole is a tear in space-time. The gravitational force generated should have the asteroids move towards the center, or at least remain in orbit.* He shivered as a chill ran down his spine. *Something’s off about this place…*

“The energy shows no signs of radioactive decay, and it’s not thermal.” Pidge said, eyes on their holoscreen.

“It’s not gravitational, either.” Hunk added. “Our probe is steady on course, and the light is radiating out, not in, like it would in a black hole.”

“But out from where?” Pidge wondered.

“And that’s what bothers me the most.” Keith said, grimacing. “It feels wrong.”

“That energy signature, I know it. It’s radiating quintessence!” Coran said, perking up.

Suddenly, their probe began to veer sharply off course, speeding up at an alarming rate. It was destroyed as it came into contact with the visible energy from the wormhole. *I knew it*, Keith thought, *Bad idea. That could have been us…*

“Ooh! That’s weird.” Hunk remarked, eyes on the now destroyed probe.

“Okay,” Lance said, crossing his arms in an “x”. “Let’s not go anywhere near there.”

Allura shook her head. “We must.”

“Hold on, didn’t you see what happened?” Hunk argued, gesturing to the probe’s debris.

“Voltron’s compositional strength far exceeds anything else in this universe,” She assured. “We received an Altean distress call, which must mean that someone is alive on the ship. As Paladins of Voltron, it is our duty to help.”

“Princess, I still think this is a trap.” Regris pointed out, and Keith had to agree. *We could end up stuck - or worse! Even though Allura seems convinced otherwise.*

“Even if it’s not a trap,” Coran added, “It’s far too dangerous to go in there.”

Allura eyed them all, steel in her gaze. Keith felt his ears tilt back in apprehension - Allura was a force to be reckoned with, and it looked like there was no chance she’d be giving up.

“I will do it myself if I have to.” She stated, daring them to argue.

The Paladins of Voltron were brave and had faced countless Galra warriors in battle, they had liberated entire planets and gone head-to-head with Zarkon, but when faced with a viciously determined Altean Princess with superhuman strength that refused to take ‘no’ for an answer, they surrendered. They had their lions, but Allura commanded the Castle-Ship - she’d make their lives
hell if she wanted to. There was no point fighting a battle they’d already lost.

“This isn’t a democracy. It’s a dictatorship.” Pidge grumbled as they followed Keith to the lion’s hangar. Keith rolled his eyes, tail brushing the walls as it lashed in frustration. He wasn’t the happiest about the way things had turned out, either, but he wasn’t going to challenge Allura’s authority when she was in this kind of mood.

“You’re just figuring this out?” He said, tone flat. “I’m not going to fight her on this.”

“See, this complacency is why it’s a dictatorship in the first place!” Pidge cried, throwing their arms up.

“I didn’t see you saying anything against her, either.”

“Ugh… Okay, yeah. You have a point and I hate it.”

In the end, Allura got her way. Voltron was formed, and the Paladins were moving slowly - as slowly as they could without the resident Princess getting suspicious - towards the wormhole.

“Alright,” Regris’s voice came through the comm. “I know you all have reservations about this - myself included - so let’s just be very, very careful around the unknown wormhole of considerable power.” From his tone, Keith could tell that the elder Galra was not looking forwards to this. That’s fine; Keith wasn’t either. Through the bond, there was a unanimous agreement that Allura would pay for this… eventually.

But in truth, nobody wanted to be the sole recipient of her anger. So that ‘eventually’ was looking to be more like a ‘never.’

“Pidge,” Keith called, “Any chance you can explain what we’re seeing?”

“The Euclidian space around the ship is obviously some kind of anomaly. But the energy source doesn't originate from anything that registers with my understanding of how reality works.” They reported. Keith sighed.

“Guess I’ll take it as a ‘no,’ then.” He said.

“I can scan the ship for biorhythms?” Hunk offered.

“Do that.” Regris said, “And check thermal as well.”

“Thermal wouldn’t work.” Pidge countered. “The wormhole is generating too much heat energy. It’d look like a big red blob.”

They waited in silence as the metronomic beeping signalled that as scan was taking place. The resulting information was sent to all Paladins, and… well, it didn’t look promising.

“Pidge is right. All I see is a big red blob.” Lance said, and from the live feed Keith could see him poke at the holoscreen with an adorably confused expression. Upon registering the thought, Keith mentally kicked himself and quickly turned back to the center viewscreen. Most Galra didn’t visibly blush, but Keith's cheeks were definetly pink. *Focus on the wormhole, idiot. Not Lance. Absolutely not Lance.*

“That’s strange,” Hunk murmured. “I’m not getting any signs of life from this ship.”
“Maybe not on this area,” Allura explained, “But there is more to the ship than we are seeing. We need to go through there.” Not willing to stay behind this time, the Princess was riding with Lance in Blue.

“Uh,” Lance grimaced, “The glowy, explode-y area?”

“Are we sure this is a good idea?” Regris asked. Keith looked at Allura, taking in the determined glint in her eyes and that almost predatory smile. Yeah, now was not the time to argue. Look on the bright side, He thought wryly, I’s an adventure. Maybe it won’t be an imminent death situation.

“Nope,” Keith said, a touch of excitement creeping into his voice at the prospect of some action. “But it looks like we’re doing it anyways. Pidge, keep and eye on Voltron’s vitals. Everyone, be ready to abort if things get hairy.”

“Roger that.” Hunk agreed. “Ready to abort immediately.”

As they got closer to the giant mass of energy, one of the sensor’s in Kuro’s cockpit started beeping relentlessly. Keith’s ears went flat against his skull, and his tail-tip was twitching in anticipation.

[This is an odd idea, Kit.] Red whispered in his mind, her mental voice sharp with... an emotion Keith had trouble deciphering. [I’d suggest getting out of here immediately, but that Princess of yours is difficult to deter, hmm?]

“Guys, my sensors are going crazy,” Pidge said, “Technically, we should be torn apart that same way the probe was. But somehow Voltron is completely unaffected by the stress of the spatial distortion.”

“I told you Voltron could handle it.” Allura said, a determined smile on her face.

“Oh yeah? What’s that beeping, then?” Lance countered, glaring at the Princess, for once.

“Keith, do we abort?” Regris asked. By now, the wormhole was a scant distance in front of them. Soon, they’d have passed through.

“I don’t know. Allura?” Keith said, wanting to look at the live feed, but the light from the wormhole had gotten too bright. “Allura?” He asked again, bracing himself against the dash as his world spun.

Ugh... dizzy. Stay focused! Closing his eyes, and trying to push out the harsh beeping from the pressure gauge, he fought another wave of dizziness. Had the others gone radio silent, or was he simply not paying attention? Keith didn’t know. He did know, however, that Red’s cockpit wasn’t supposed to be spinning. He curled into the back of the pilot’s chair, pulling his knees to his chest, wishing the assault on his senses would just end...

[Kit! Stay awake!]

Make it stop...

[Don’t you faint on me, kit.]

...

[Keith!]
Back at the Castle-Ship, the Coran watched with increasing worry as Voltron neared the wormhole. Even worse, the live feed from all Paladin cockpits fizzled and shut down soon after.

“Hello?” He asked, turning the volume on the audio-only comm. to max. “What are you seeing? I'm losing visual. Hello?”

The response was garbled static, and the advisor could only watch helplessly as Voltron disappeared into the quintessence.

“No!”

When Keith came to, Voltron had passed over onto the side with the other side of the Altean shuttle.

“...think we’re on the other side...” Pidge’s voice came from the comm. unit, thought Keith only caught the end half of what they’d been saying. His ears were still ringing, through the damn alarm had - thankfully! - stopped.

[You scared me, Kit.] Red scolded, though the words had no real bite. [...]I’ll try to adjust the alarms next time.]

_We should have done that in the first place, _Keith thought blearily, moving to a more upright position. Blinking as his eyes adjusted to the perpetual darkness of space, Keith turned to survey the area, noting that the harsh light of the wormhole was now _behind_ Voltron. _Looks like we passed through safely_, he thought, taking stock of the stable vital readings from the other lions. _Good._

“Is everyone alright?” He called, and sighed in relief when a series of affirmatives answered.

“My eyes hurt, my ears hurt, and I still say this is a bad idea.” Regris complained, tone dry. “Can I say ‘I told you so,’ yet?”

“No, not yet.” Allura said, dismissive. Her gaze was locked firmly on the Altean spacecraft. “Hunk, scan the ship for life signs once more.” Rolling his eyes, Keith linked a private comm. channel to Pidge, and muted his connection to the general one.

“It’s nice to see someone else has contracted the crazy, for once,” he whispered, giving the Princess a _look_.

“It’s contagious.” Pidge whispered back, trying - and failing - to hide their giggles. “Too much exposure to you and we’ll all get it.”

“Guys,” Hunk said, frantically pressing something on his holoscreen. “I’m getting active life signatures now.”

“Who wants to bet it’s the Galra?” Lance asked.

“Probably.” Keith agreed, nodding.

“It could be Alteans!” Allura hissed, eyes narrowed. “We have to go down to investigate. They
probably need our help.”

And so they went, detaching from Voltron and setting down on the spacecraft in their individual lions. Keith engaged the air-tight locks on Red’s feet, tethering the lion to the surface of the shadowed side of the ship, then turned off all outgoing communications - the Galra had tracked them by tracing signals more than once, and Keith wasn’t eager for a repeat. As an afterthought, he also engaged the antigravs - anti-gravity energy fields that could increase or decrease the gravity of the selected object depending on the settings they were on - on Red’s paws so the lion’s weight wouldn’t affect the hull of the ship. Who knows what kind of damage the ship’s structure might have sustained over time, or battle? It had been 10 000 years, after all.

After double-checking that Red could move away if someone started firing at them, Keith put on his helmet and left through his lion’s mouth. The others had already gathered at a exhaust vent, and Pidge was busy burning a hole through with their lazer.

“Nice of you to join us, Kit.” Regris greeted, surprisingly cheerful. From Allura’s fed-up expression, Keith could guess that the substitute Paladin (Regris’s new title, coined by Lance) was doing it on purpose. Keith wasn’t going to stop him; any payback was good payback, in this case. Also, He knew that if Allura really had a problem with it, she would have stopped Regris by now. This was just a bit of petty revenge.

“I can’t contact Coran,” Pidge warned, “So we’re probably not going to have backup if there’s a fight.”


“Are you sure we’re all going to fit in that?” Hunk asked, gesturing to the almost complete circle. “It looks kinda small.” Keith looked at Hunk, then at the hole. It wasn’t small. Hunk was probably just nervous, as they all were. Except Allura, maybe. Or… she was probably just hiding her nerves under a mask of determination.

“You’ll fit.” He said simply. The words weren’t overly encouraging, but Hunk looked relieved. Keith decided to count it as a win.

“Aaaaand we’re in.” Pidge announced, kicking at the cut circle, which gave way into a rather gloomy empty hallway.

As quickly as they could, the members of Voltron entered the spaceship. It was old, Keith realized. Cobwebs - did space even have spiders? - hung from the corners, and the walls looked like they hadn’t been cleaned in, well, 10 000 years. The colors were faded, though the customary grey and white were present. Unlike the castle, the lights and trim on this ship were an eerie green. Eying the scene, Keith moved his tail closer to his legs. He had no intention of touching any cobwebs or cobweb-like formations. Did he mention spiders irked him? Because they did.

“This looks wayyyyyy to much like a horror movie,” Lance whispered, and Keith had to agree. This whole ‘ghost town’ vibe wasn’t helping, either.

“What’s a horror movie?” Allura asked.

“Don’t worry, I think we’re in one.” Hunk said, shivering.

“Do we split up?” Regris asked, then ignored how half of them vigorously shook their heads ‘no’ and continued “If so, then we should have me and Keith on seperate teams. We can hear better than most of you.”
“Splitting up feels wrong,” Keith said, frowning, “But we’ll cover more ground that way.”

“I call the vents!” Pidge said, “And Allura. The rest of you won’t fit.”

“Then I get Keith.” Lance called, latching onto Keith’s arm. Keith, meanwhile, tried to keep his heart from beating out of his chest because Lance was essentially hugging him. This is a bad idea, a part of him hissed, but Keith ignored it. Lance had suggested their pairing in the first place, and it’d be rude to say no, right?

“Oh, alright.” He agreed, pointedly ignoring the sly look Pidge sent his way. Telling them anything was a mistake, he grumbled, directing the thought at Red. They’re worse than Matt!

His lion’s answer was a mix between amusement and exasperation, and Keith got the distinct impression Red was telling him to make a move, or complain about something else. She also mentioned that there was still no activity in the area around the spaceship, and she’d let him know when there was. You’re the best, Red.

“And I guess you and I are partners.” Regris said to Hunk, who nodded in agreement.

They decided that, if Allura and Pidge were to take the vents, they’d also take the centermost route. Keith and lance would get the left wing, while Regris and Hunk would head towards the back. Communications wise, they were using a isolated form of radio with a wavelength similar to Earth systems. The reception might not have been as fast as their other channels, but Pidge soon explained that that was exactly the point.

“Everything in space is so fast and advanced,” They said, “That nobody bothers to check any older systems, especially radio that’s Earth-speed. I’m pretty sure most of the universe has forgotten that radio is even a thing. These should go right over the heads of whatever Galra are trying to spy on us.”

“Clever.” Lance had remarked, giving them an encouraging thumbs up.

Exploring the ship was, unfortunately, quite boring. Increasingly creepy, sure, but also without any action. There was only so many times one could anticipate enemies around the corner - that turned out to be not actually there - before even that excitement began to feel like a chore.

“Y’know, when Hunk said there were life signs I was kinda expecting to actually meet someone.” Lance said, trying to start a conversation. The Blue Paladin was using the flashlight on the scope on his gun (Keith wanted to call it a rifle, but it looked too much like a water gun - which, of course, he’d never tell Lance - for the label to stick). Keith didn’t need a flashlight - he could see in the dark perfectly fine.

“I think the others have a better chance of running into any Alteans,” Keith whispered, wrinkling his nose at the dust that was displaced by their movements. “Look at the scorch marks. It looks like a fight took place.”

This area of the ship was littered with laser damage to the walls, and several doors were permanently jammed open. The green lights were dimmer here, thought the cobwebs-things had thankfully disappeared. A cool draft of air ruffled his ears as he stuck his head in yet another empty hall, identical to the ones they’d just been through. The air was musty and stale, but for some reason… Keith frowned, taking another deep sniff. Why do I smell something newly burnt?

“Is that wire supposed to be sparking?” Lance asked, gesturing at an control panel that appeared to
be ripped open. Keith studied the wires - which were arranged suspiciously like one of Pidge’s hack jobs. He stifled a gasp when it occurred to him that the keys and mechanics inside the panel weren’t covered in dust. In fact, they almost looked new.

“No,” He said, turning to Lance. “Someone else is here.”

“What!? How do you know?” Lance questioned, but turned off his scope’s flashlight, just in case.

“Those wires don’t look old. Whoever forced this door open, they did it recently.” Keith explained, taking point and walking through the open airlock. It led to… another nearly identical hallway. He could tell his ears were moving in every direction, trying to pick up sounds of an intruder that wasn’t them, but the ship was dead silent, save for the slight crackle from the wire.

“Ohhhhhh boy. We’re gonna follow them, aren’t we?” Lance muttered.

“Come on,” Keith said, picking up the pace. “They aren’t near. I would have heard.”

“Jeez! Don’t stab me with your tail blade thingy, I’m coming!” Lance yelped, followed by hasty footsteps. Keith paused, only then realizing that his tail had been moving in lazy arcs.

“Sorry,” Keith said, embarrassed. He had meant to keep the appendage still. “It’s got a mind of its own…?” He offered, shrugging helplessly.

“Yeah, I get it. Just… keep it away from the face, maybe?” Lance asked. “You don’t want to ruin this masterpiece.”

“Sorry.” Keith repeated, trying his hardest not to meet Lance’s eyes. Great. It hasn’t been an hour yet and I’ve manage to nearly disfigure the guy I secretly like.

“Aw, come on.” Lance murmured, finally catching up to him. “You’re upset. I’ve upset you.”

“It’s nothing.” Keith walked faster.

“Aaaaand now I know for sure that it’s not nothing. You know you can talk to me, right?” Lance added, tone soft. It made Keith stop, because - for some reason - there was a part of him that actually wanted to open up to Lance. The feeling was new, and… not entirely unpleasant. Fuck it, he thought, It’s not like you’re confessing your undying love to him. Yet.

“Sometimes… “ He began, wincing inwardly at how harsh his voice sounded. He swallowed and started again. “I wish I was still human. The claws, the teeth, the creepy glowing eyes - It’s all…” He trailed off, unsure of how say what he felt.

“It’s all what?” Lance asked, and it warmed Keith that the Blue Paladin genuinely looked concerned, for him.

“Too much.” He hissed, glaring at the claws on his fingertips. Yes, he understood that the change had been necessary. Yes, he was coming to terms with it, but incidents like that, when his control wavered and someone was almost hurt… they scared him. He hated it.

It hadn’t been this way with the Blade of Marmora. Perhaps… because they weren’t human? Maybe being back amongst people from Earth was reminding him of what he had lost. Damn it, Keith thought, I’m supposed to be over this. He noticed Lance studying his hands, and quickly balled them into fists.

“Why don’t you just file them down?” Lance said, sounding genuinely curious. “The claws, I
“Claws have blood vessels, Lance.” Keith explained, extending his index finger so the Blue Paladin could see it better. “And since these don’t retract, those nerves go further. If I clip them, it’d be a bloody mess.”

“Oh.” Lance murmured, taking Keith’s hand in his own and examining it gently. “Not like human nails, huh? But that’s cool.”

“That’s cool?” Keith echoed hollowly, fighting the urge to jerk his hand back. Accidentally scratching Lance would be the icing on this shitty emotional cake. Sighing, Lance flicked him in the forehead. Keith hissed.

“When are you going to get it through your head that we don’t care that your Galra?!” Lance said, “We like you because you’re you, Space Cat, human or not.”

“I almost hurt you!” Keith said weakly, but Lance’s words had him feeling fuzzy inside. It was a rare feeling. A nice feeling.

“By accident!” Lance cried, throwing his hands up. “Accidents happen. It’s normal. not your fault.” The Blue Paladin paused, watching Keith with an unreadable expression. “Why do I get the feeling you have no idea how this family thing works?”

“I never knew my Mom, and Dad died when I was eight. Shiro found me when I was twelve. I was in the foster system between then.” Keith said, tone flat. “Before you guys and the Blade of Marmora, Shiro was the only family I had.”

“Jeez. You don’t know how this family thing works, do you?” Lance said, sounding… really sad. Keith almost wanted to ask why. There was no reason to be sad about his life, right? Anyways, he had Voltron now. They were his family, and he was… learning. Slowly.

“Back then, Shiro seemed to be the only one who cared.” He explained, shrugging. And Shiro was gone. Keith’s ear flicked as bayard clattered to the ground, and he stiffened when a pair of arms wrapped around his shoulders. Was Lance… hugging him?

“First lesson of being a part of this family,” Lance stated, voice cracking, his cheek gently brushing Keith’s ear. “Is hugs. Lots of hugs. We’re making up for all those years you missed. Second lesson is that accidents are okay, got it?” He squeezed Keith tighter, and Keith found himself - surprisingly - leaning into the contact. “Third lesson is communication. You can talk to us, you know? Let us help.”

“Lots of hugs, accidents are okay, and communication.” Keith repeated dutifully. Reluctantly, he stepped away from the Blue Paladin’s embrace, tail flicking in embarrassment. Lance was still watching him, and there were tear tracks on his cheeks. Keith blinked, and all of a sudden he felt like he might cry too. Stupid emotions.

“You sometimes hate yourself, don’t you?” The Blue Paladin murmured after a while, still watching Keith.

Keith froze. That was a fact that he had told nobody, not even Shiro. There were many reasons, but he deserved that hate. He wasn’t good enough. He was never good enough. He had to be better, and maybe one day, nobody else would be hurt because of him. As if, Keith thought darkly. All I seem to be is trouble.

“Yes.” He admitted, voice barely a whisper.
“Yeah, I hate myself too sometimes,” Lance agreed, nodding. Keith looked up in shock. “But that’s normal, I think.” The Blue Paladin continued quietly, “You just have to forgive yourself and move on.”

“What if I can’t?” Keith asked brokenly, thinking about Shiro and his kindness and how Keith never got to repay that and now Shiro is gone…

“That’s why we’re here, Space Cat.” Lance explained, placing his hands on Keith’s shoulders. “Family helps, okay? You’re not alone. None of us are alone.”

He drew the Red Paladin into another hug, and when it ended, the world seemed to make a bit more sense. This was uncharted and dangerous territory for Keith, and usually a topic he avoided at all costs with anyone who wasn’t Pidge but… he felt like that that conversation needed to happen. No wonder Shiro kept telling me to talk to someone.

“Better?” Lance asked, wiping his cheeks.

“Beter.” Keith said, and there was a small smile on his lips. Hugs aren’t so bad, I guess.

Just then, their comm. units beeped with an unread message. It was from Pidge, telling them to get to their location, now. It also said something about finding Slav and a Shiro lookalike named Sven, and apparently the wormhole had sent them to an alternate dimension. What the actual Quiznack?

“Huh. Well, at least it’s not the Galra.” Lance snickered. “But a guy named Sven? Really?”

“I feel like this is a joke.” Keith muttered, but they changed course and sprinted to reconvene with the others anyways.

It wasn’t a joke.

There really was a version of Slav (that was no less annoying than their original) and someone that made Keith feel like he’d seen a living ghost. Sven looked like Shiro from before Kerberos. A Shiro with black hair and no scar, and longer hair. Funny, he thought, how Pidge hadn’t bothered to mention that…

“How Pidge hadn’t bothered to mention that…

“Do I get to say, “I told you so,” yet?” Keith heard Regris snicker as they neared the group. Allura simply huffed and turned away.

“I don’t even know what’s happening anymore,” Hunk was saying. “Maybe we should have stayed in the Castle.”

“Hey, Keith and Lance are back.” Pidge announced, looking up from their forearm-mounted datapad.

“Nice to see you too, Gremlin.” Keith said flatly.

“You are Galra.” Sven stated, and Keith almost tripped in surprise. Wow, he thought, That’s definitely not the same accent Shiro has. At all. Scandinavian, maybe?

“Yeah, he is. Is that gonna be a problem?” Lance said, moving himself in front of Keith.

“I have not met many.” Sven explained. “Two here, and working with an Altean? It is… odd.”

“Not as much of a problem as the Altean is.” Slav added, “Pidge, was it?” The genius waited for
Pidge’s nod before continuing, “And I believe you are from a different reality than our own. Here, it is the Alteans that won the war.”

“Really?” Allura said, eyes lighting up. “That’s wonderful!”

“Ehhh, Princess,” Regris murmured, pulling her back. “The Galra won in our universe. The Alteans won here. Think, for a moment, exactly what they might have needed to do to win.” An icky feeling settled in Keith’s gut at the new Black Paladin’s words. As usual, Regris brought up a valid point. Allura, too, seemed to be considering this.

“Oh no!” Slav exclaimed, looking down at his datapad. It had begun to beep in an alarming manner. “More Alteans are coming.”

“Wait, more Alteans?” Allura questioned.

“Their scanners must have picked up your arrival. Quick, let’s go.” Slav nodded to Sven, who leapt up into an open air vent above them. Slav followed quickly after, but paused to turn back to Voltron one last time. “If I were you, I would run.”

And then they were gone.

“Okay. Do we run?” Hunk asked. “I mean, they seemed pretty intent on getting out of here. Maybe we should do the same.”

“I still want to meet these Alteans.” Allura said firmly, turning to face the rest of them. There was a touch of desperation in her fierce blue gaze. “I want to know what happened.”

“On one condition,” Regris countered. “We don’t tell anything about Voltron.”

Keith nodded. “I agree.”

“Same,” Lance muttered. “What if they’re as bad as the Galra? Or worse?”

“But they’re Alteans!” Allura cried.

“And we don’t know them!” Regris snarled. His gaze softened before he continued. “Princess, please. We don’t know anything about this place. Voltron is an intergalactic superweapon - it can’t fall into anyone else’s hands except our own.”

“Regris has a point.” Pidge agreed. “Slav’s a renowned genius. An annoying one, sure, but I don’t think he’d warn anyone without a reason.”

“A little caution can go a long way.” Hunk nodded sagely.

“Alright, fine!” Allura yelled. “I get your point. Voltron remains a secret.”

“Hey,” Lance said softly, placing a hand on Allura’s shoulder. “We understand. You thought your people had died, and then all of a sudden you’re not alone. It’s just…”

“This isn’t our universe.” Keith finished. “These aren’t your people. We have to be careful.”

“Thank you for reminding me.” Allura grimaced. She gave them a wry smile. “Shall we be explorers, then?”

“Better than pirates.” Pidge snickered.
As one, Team Voltron set off in the direction that Pidge’s sensor indicated a second vessel was approaching from. They moved quickly, but carefully. Weapons drawn and powered, senses on high alert. Under the excitement there was an underlying current of wariness. Wary is good, Keith thought, wary means we act carefully. Careful keeps us from getting killed.

[There is something wrong with this place.] Red murmured in his mind, and Keith got the faint sense that the ancient lion was searching for something.

You think? He rolled his eyes.

[You know what I mean.] She huffed, but there was a prickle of fear coming from her side of their bond.

Should we get out of here? Keith asked. They'd reached a larger corridor, still empty. The lights flickered, ominous as ever, and the only sounds were their footsteps and a distant mechanical hum. Regris made the hand signal for ‘safe,’ followed by ‘keep moving.’

[No. I am not sure.] Red growled softly. [Kuro had us move into the shadow of the ship now. The approaching vessel will not detect us. Let’s hope I don’t have to rescue you again.]

With my luck, Keith thought darkly. You probably will. Keep an eye out on things outside, Red.

[Already am, Kitten.] She chuffed. Keith rolled his eyes at the nickname.

Thanks, he sent, before turning his full attention back to reality.

They had reached the location of the second ship. The area was littered with guards - Altean guard drones that looked a lot like their training bot - and various storage and shipping containers. Guns had been pointed in Voltron's direction at first, but the droids let them through once they saw Allura. The guns, however, remained charged in their direction. As Team Voltron climbed up onto the hull of Commodora Trayling’s ship and got their first look at the new ship, Keith’s eyes widened at the sight.

This new ship was huge - almost the size of the Castle of Lions. It towered over the makeshift docking bay like a colossal sentinel. It consisted of a giant mechanical ring made up of two distinct parts, an inner and an outer, with an oval-shaped structure in the middle. Another diamond-shaped component acted almost like a clip, connecting the oval to the ring. From the diamond, whose distance spanned the width of the ring, extended eight wing-like structures: three on top, three on the bottom, and two jutting out from the side. The trailing edge of each wing (which looked a lot like the 'wings' on Kuro's back) glowed yellow, much like the spinning inner ring did. Keith suspected the wings were the thrusters, or engines, and that the diamond held the powering crystal. The oval in the centre must be the bridge and command deck.

The entire thing was decked out in the customary Altean whites and greys, but unlike the Castle, the lights and decals on this ship shone golden. On one side, the name ‘Solstice’ was written in Altean script. Keith had never seen a ship like this before, and was briefly reminded of some of the mecha anime Shiro had shown him once. Stuff like Evangelion or Aldnoah.Zero. Keith wasn't a spaceship person, but Pidge looked like they might start drooling any minute now so he figured this ship must be something extraordinary. That, or all Altean ships were of a higher standard than everything else and Coran had been right...

Allura led them to a young, blonde-haired Altean man with sharp features and a clipboard. He was directing some of the other workers, and appeared to be someone who was fairly important.
"Excuse me," Allura said. "Are you in charge here?"

"Ah, what?" The man startled, taking in the image of Team Voltron and a gaggle of droids with blasters charged with a perplexed expression. "No. I'm just a technician. My name's Bolin. Uh, who are you?"

"I am Allura." She stated. "My comrades and I arrived here through that wormhole. Could you take us to see your leader?"

"You said you came here through that wormhole?" He echoed, frowning. "But that's impossible."

"Well it happened." Keith cut in. "Just take us to whose in charge."

"Whoa," Bolin stepped back. "You're Galra. Uh..." He glanced around, seemingly realizing for the first time that, other than Voltron, he was the only non-droid being around. "Oh, that's just unfair. Here, I can take you guys to Admiral Rahna, and maybe we can swap stories along the way?" He offered.

"Thank you." Allura smiled. "That would be wonderful."

Admiral Rahna turned out to be a sour-faced, gray haired Altean woman with steely blue eyes. More oddly, once she saw Allura, she dropped onto one knee and called her ‘Empress,’” as did her contingent of drones.

“But how can this be,” She murmured when Allura asked her to stand. “Empress Allura wiped out the Galra empire and established peace 10 000 years ago.”

“Where we’re from,” Keith explained. “The Alteans were all wiped out by Zarkon 10 000 years ago. Allura survived because King Alfor placed her in stasis.”

“They say they’re from the other side of the wormhole.” Bolin added, then muttered to himself. “She didn’t say she was royalty! What the actual Quiznack...”

After taking a fair amount of time convincing Rahna that they were all trustworthy, she agreed to take them to the bridge and explain what had happened in greater depth. Accompanying them were Ismer, a Altean man that reminded Keith of Iverson, and a hulking creature whose name they weren’t given.

Admiral Rahna spoke for a long and excruciating amount of time. Her voice, which was weathered and rough from both age and yelling commands in battle, grated on Keith’s ears. Paying only the faintest bit of attention to her words, he zoned out and decided to plan escape routes instead. Kolivian once said that a person’s freedom was determined by how quickly they could escape a room when needed.

In essence, the main difference between this world and their own was that King Alfor had died before he could create Voltron. Voltron remained a child’s tale, and Alfor’s death was attributed to ‘unknown reasons.’ Therefore, Princess Allura inherited the throne at a much younger age. She was a far more ‘passionate’ leader, and wasn’t deterred by Zarkon’s manipulations. When intelligence came that the Galra Empire was planning an invasion, she ordered the Alteans to strike first, and strike hard. The casualties were enormous, but the Galra were wiped out.

Since Empress Allura’s time, countless other Altean leaders had come and gone. The most notable was Novan, whose reign brought the beginning of the expansion of the Altean Empire. By sharing
what they knew with other, less advanced, cultures, the Altean Empire brought peace and prosperity to these worlds. Eventually, a galactic council was formed in Altea’s name. There was no war here.

In Keith’s opinion, this sounded like complete and utter bullshit. The words Rahna used to justify Altean colonies on other planets sounded eerily similar to Zarkon’s propaganda on Galra occupied worlds: promises of wealth and prosperity, at the price of signing away your freedom. However… Allura looked so happy, like someone had just handed her the world, so he stamped down his gut sensation of run and kept his mouth shut. It would be cruel for him to speak up now and dampen Allura's reunion with her own kind. He’d tell the others of his suspicions later.

Then, Rahna introduced them to Zwei, the head scientist. Apparently, this ship was a research vessel, and they had been studying this odd wormhole for ages. Rahna asked Allura to come with her, along with Zwei and Ismer, to discuss ‘sensitive matters,’ while the others (Keith included) would be led to a lounge where they could wait for her return.

Again, Keith wanted to speak up and call Allura an idiot because she was leaving, alone, in the company of potential enemies! But he didn’t. None of them did. Voltron was outnumbered and outgunned, and could only follow silently as their guards led them to a lavishly furnished room and closed the door.

Immediately after, Regris tried to open the door. It clicked, but remained firmly shut.

“It’s locked.” He announced.

“I fucking knew it!” Keith snarled, tail lashing. These Alteans weren’t the good guys. Or, if they were, they were doing a piss poor job of it. “We need to get out of here.”

“Wait, what do you mean?” Lance asked. “I thought they were nice.”

“Lance, would nice people lock their guests in? This lounge, if you take away the couches and furniture, looks suspiciously like a prison cell.” Regris said flatly.

The Blue Paladin paled. “Oh.”

“So then we’re trapped?” Hunk said, frowning.

“Looks like it.” Regris sighed. “I’m going to try the vent.”

“That’s a small vent.” Hunk observed.

“That’s why we’re gonna send Lance through.” Regris grunted, trying to pull the grate from the wall. “He’s the skinniest.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “First of all, this,” he gestured to his body, “Is all muscle. Secondly, I kinda suck at sneaking. Keith should go.”

“Wait,” Keith called, eyes widening in realization. The others paused in their bickering to stare at him curiously. Smirking, he asked, “Where’s Pidge?”

Sitting amongst his generals, Lotor observed the three dimensional render of the wormhole. The energy emanating from the source - which remained unknown - was enormous. Enough, perhaps, to build a weapon similar in scale to Voltron. Enough to destroy Voltron. Unfortunately, the
Paladins had gotten there first. But that was easily remedied: let them do the work, and steal it once they come back out of that wormhole. Call him a coward, but Lotor wasn't an idiot. Going through a dimensional transition with zero regulation, unknown destination, and with a portal with an energy reading so high was near impossible? No thanks.

"A-amazing," Ezor, a pink-skinned Galra with yellow, blue, teal and green stripe-like patterns said. Her eyes were bright and lively, emerald pupils with yellow sclera. Among Lotor's generals, Ezor was the acrobat. "Your theory about Voltron was finally correct!"

"I was hoping to see more fireworks when it hit that energy swirl." Zethrid a muscular Galra with light skin, large ears with pink underfur and a purple 'scar' down her left eye snickered. She was tall and powerful, and her purple eyes gleamed orange with vindictive mirth. "I guess all the previous attempts to get it out were more enjoyable to watch." She paused, smile turning into a grimace. "For me. Not for your pirates."

Amongst them were also Axca and Narti, both of whom remained silent. Acxa was a slender, more humanoid Galra with pale skin and delicate features. Her eyes were cold and unforgiving. She was the weapons expert of their group. Narti - who was born both mute and blind - communicated through Kova, Haggar's old cat. Narti was shorter, and of a reptilian subtype. She was blue skinned, had a thick prehensile tail, and no eyes. Lotor could see that her fanged mouth quirked into a smile at Zethrid's words.

"Voltron made it through because it is of the same material as that comet King Alfor tried to hide from my father." Lotor explained. He was lounging on his 'throne,' which was actually the chair of a druid. As a gift, his generals had... disposed of the druid, then dragged the chair into the briefing room. Lotor was the only one who sat, lazily resting his cheek on a fist, while the others all stood. "Now let's see if the new Paladins bring it back to us."

Allura frowned as she followed Admiral Rahna through the winding hallways of the Solstice. It was wonderful to see her people again. More than wonderful, actually. She felt as though her heart would burst with joy but... but under all that happiness, she couldn't help but feel that she wasn't being told the full story. It was understandable, of course, that these Alteans wouldn't share their secrets with a group of explorers. She knew it was lucky that Rahna recognized her as royalty, and that she should be thankful Rahna was willing to explain so much. However, Allura couldn't help but feel like she had just missed something. Something crucial.

Once they made it to the science division, Admiral Rahna excused herself citing that her crew would need her to oversee operations back at the bridge. It would be a lie if Allura said she was sad to see her go. However, the Head of Research and Development, Zwei - who had been tasked with giving Allura a tour - was decidedly worse. Not... that he was a bad person, because Allura couldn't place that label without getting to know him, but as Lance would say: he gave off bad vibes. Very bad vibes.

The Science Division itself was very impressive. Labs filled with advanced technology, perhaps even more advanced than the castle, extended from a series of hexagonal corridors. Scientists and technicians in white spacesuits bustled about, observing, manipulating and taking notes. Because the glass was opaque, Allura was unable to see exactly what they were creating behind sealed doors. It didn't bother her... much. This wasn't her ship, and it wasn't her place to know.

Somewhere in the distance, there was an explosion. Followed by an alarm, several frantic voices, and the sound of an airlock opening. The alarm stopped once the airlock shut again. Zwei snickered, and Allura looked at him in alarm. That had sounded serious, people could have been
hurt, and he was laughing?

"And this, your highness, is the pride of our research trip." The wraith-like man said, completely ignoring the accident from earlier. He led her through a set of heavily constructed doors, and the sight that met her on the other side almost took her breath away. "The crystal was extracted from the very epicentre of that wormhole you just came through. We believe that it powers the wormhole still, even at a distance and without direct contact. It's all very fascinating. The first of it's kind that I've had the pleasure of dissecting. A true anomaly."

"It's beautiful." Allura said softly, gazing at jewel. She tried to ignore how Zwei's words - or rather, his intonation and manner of speaking - made her want to take a shower. The crystal itself was huge, and hummed with a massive store of untapped energy. It would look almost identical to the crystal that powered the Castle of Lions if one substituted the regal gold with sparkling blue. The thought did not ease Allura's nerves. In fact, it put her more on edge.

"Out scientists have been trying to emulate the crystals abilities, but have been - for the most part - unsuccessful. As you can surely tell, there is a remarkable amount of energy stored within the crystal. If we could harness it, the options would be limitless. Integrating this power source with our technology would help the Altean Empire immensely. That is our mission. Perhaps..." He paused his tirade, turning to look at Allura with a hungry expression. "You can help us. Admiral Rahna certainly thinks so. In our history, Empress Allura was said to have a great talent in manipulating and integrating Quintessence into technology."

"I'm sorry, but this is beyond my knowledge." Allura said coldly. "Perhaps one of my companions might know more."

"Are you sure?" Zwei questioned, raising an eyebrow. The gesture made Allura feel uncomfortable and patronized. "Is there nothing you can do?"

"Yes." Allura stated firmly, all of a sudden wanting to be away from this place. "Excuse me."

"What a shame." He murmured, but didn't stop her as she stalked towards the exit.

Zwei... There was something wrong with that man. Something missing. Furthermore, the Quintessence in the room felt sickly and thick, reminding her of a rank bog or weedy swamp. It was nothing like the the crystal-clear streams that flowed through the Castle-Ship.

Most Alteans could sense Quintessence, with varying degrees of sensitivity. Zwei wasn't wrong in what he'd asked of her - Allura, being royalty, and with a talent of the highest degree, could actually manipulate Quintessence. It was how she operated the Castle's wormhole system, and commanded the ancient ship to fly. Quintessence is the life force that flows through them all, and is directly affected by the aura (and intent) of each person. Around a healthy mind, the Quintessence was clear. Around a sick one, it became hazy and dull.

The Quintessence in that room, along with the towering golden crystal, alarmed Allura. Whatever was happening in there, it was wrong and she wanted no part in it.

She didn't turn back, and only paused once she felt like she could breathe again. So invested in her thoughts, Allura didn't notice Bolin following her.

"Hey."

Startled, she turned to see the technician from earlier. He quickly pulled her behind a wall as a drone patrol came by.
"What are you doing?" She questioned.

"Sorry," He admitted shyly. "I listened in on what Zwei said. I need to talk to you."

"Speak, then." Allura said, raising an eyebrow. Hopefully, it wasn't anything tedious. She really, really needed to find the others and get out of here.

"Not here." Bolin whispered, glancing around. "Follow me."

He led her through a series of maze-like halls, skillfully dodging the guards. Eventually, they reached an empty storage locker. Once they'd entered, Bolin quickly shut the door and sat down behind a crate, gesturing for Allura to do the same.

"Most places are bugged." He explained. "And I don't want to get Erased. Now we can talk."

"Why were you listening in?" Allura asked, trying not to think of what Bolin might have meant when he said, 'get Erased.' The worried expression on his face was making her nervous.

"Maybe it's because I'm at the bottom of the command chain," He began, talking in a hushed tone. "But that's the first I've ever heard of the crystal."

"What do you mean?"

"This ship is a research vessel, yes. But as far as most of the crew was told, our mission was to salvage parts from that ancient wreck before the wormhole destroyed it." He explained. "It was actually quite boring before you came."

"It's not unusual for superiors to withhold information from their subordinates." Allura countered. "What bothers you?"

"The fact that the other part of our mission was to use that salvage to create weapons." He whispered, grimacing.

Allura drew a panicked breath as the puzzle pieces finally clicked into place. If one applied 'crystal' in the place of 'salvage,' then a truly frightening scene became clear. Any weapons created from the crystal would be devastating. And why would one need weapons of that scale, unless it was to go to war? No wonder the Quintessence in that place felt so rotten.

"You think they would weaponize the crystal." Allura said, feeling broken. Her Paladins had been right - these were not her people. Not at all.

"I think it's a very real possibility," Bolin admitted. "Especially since Zwei's the one in charge."

"Zwei? The Head of Science?"

"Don't you feel it?" He asked. "There's something wrong with him. There are stories, too, about things he's made. Scary stories. He's a bit of a legend around here, all for the wrong reasons."

"I'll admit that he makes me feel uncomfortable." Allura said, thinking back. He made her feel sick, if she was being honest.

"He makes everyone feel uncomfortable." Bolin snickered, then his eyes became haunted. "Stars, I'm terrified of him. Of what he can do. Only an idiot wouldn't be scared."

"We should tell Admiral Rahna." Allura said, moving to stand from where she had been crouched on the floor. However, a hand on her shoulder made her stop. When she looked up, Bolin's face
had a pained expression on it. "We - no, I - don't have any proof." He said softly. "Quiznack, I'm so lucky you actually listened. Thank you for doing that, and trying to understand. But... well, I think Admiral Rahna was the one who authorized the whole project. You don't know her, but she's ruthless. She's had to be. She cares only for the greater good. There's a lot they're not telling you," He continued, "But it's not nice. Not at all. A lot of it makes me wish I wasn't Altean."

"Thank you for confiding in me." Allura said eventually, mind in turmoil over what she'd been told. Getting out of here would be top priority, but something told her that leaving the crystal behind would be a very bad move. She met Bolin's eyes with her own, a determined frown finding its way onto her features. "You know this world better than I do, and you have a kind heart. What would you do, if you were in my place?"

He blinked in surprise. "You're asking me?"

"Well, yes."

"Alright." He murmured, brows furrowing. "Alright. If I could, I think I'd steal the crystal. Take it away, far away, and hide it somewhere they wouldn't find it. That much power in a Warlord like Rahna's hands is dangerous, and the Empire is bad enough as it is." He paused, "Of course, that's just a plan. No idea how you'd actually manage to accomplish that."

"Well," Allura said lightly, a dangerous glint in her eyes. "Let me tell you about Voltron, the Defender of the Universe."

One of the only perks about being tiny, Pidge thought as they shifted in the cramped air vent. Is that nobody notices when you disappear. Once the echoing 'clank' of drone footsteps had passed, Pidge counted to 100 before they crawled from their hiding spot. Admittedly, hiding in the vents would be a pain without their Bayard - the grates were bolted shut, and some quick laser-cutting was the only thing that saved them from being caught.

Moving quietly, and using their datapad as a guide, Pidge made their way through the unfamiliar hallways. They needed to get to the others, stat. Allura's tracker showed she was somewhere east of Pidge's current location. The others - Keith, Lance, Hunk and Rregis - were clustered together far north of here. Some 'lounge,' Pidge thought. Probably more like a holding cell. I better go save their asses, but first...

They turned left, skirting another group of drones. Once they'd tapped into the wavelength that the drone ID signals were broadcasted on, it was easy enough to program their scanner to alert them when a gaggle of droids got near. I feel like I'm in Star Wars, they snickered, invading a separatist ship. Gotta go find a computer terminal. Or even better, one of the data ports in a lab. They have a lab, right? Hunk would a copy of this ship's semantics.

[Need my help?] Green asked, and through the bond Pidge could tell he was bored. Very, very, bored. Bored enough to consider biting Kuro's tail, just to see what would happen.

Nah, I got this. Pidge sent back. Just need to find out what these Alteans are hiding. Fuck!

The Green Paladin froze as chattering voices drew close, then passed the wall Pidge was hiding behind and turned down the hall. Some of the phrases, namely 'classified,' 'secret objective,' and
'the Princess is being uncooperative,' got their attention. *Oh yeah, they're definitely hiding something. That was - er, Admiral Rahna, right? The Bitch in charge. Damn. Time to go hack into their servers.*

[Have fun.] Green drawled, amused.

Finding a computer terminal was easy enough. This area - labelled 'Communications Centre' on several doors - had plenty. Finding an unused and unobserved terminal, while remaining unseen, was a pain in the ass. Eventually they did, but it was far from the centre of the ship and almost in the storage bay. It was probably the one used to take inventory of all the items brought from the other ship.

The room was dark and dusty, cluttered boxes galore, and clearly unmaintained. *Someone hasn't been doing their job,* Pidge observed. However, there was a serviceable command screen and computer dock located to the side that would suit their purpose just fine. *This, can use,* Pidge smirked, *And from the looks of things, no one's coming in here anytime soon. Sweet!*

A few specific taps of the dark screen and the console hummed to life, holoscreens glowing a warm orange. Pushing up their glasses, Pidge grinned. It was time to do what they did best.

Altean coding was beautiful and flowed incredibly smoothly, not a single glitch in sight. It was similar to the coding of the Castle-Ship, although less autonomous and more constrained. Their firewalls were impressive, but none had been coded to defend against a Paladin of Voltron, and Pidge was the *king* of hacking into alien systems. One localized EMP and a specialized trojan virus later, Pidge was in. What they found on there, hidden behind the final firewall, made Pidge's stomach lurch.

*What the hell,* they thought, eyes rapidly scanning the information, *I thought it'd be bad but this is so much worse. Quantum bombs? Zaiforge cannons that are half-sized but have double the power? What the actual fuck, these are planet killers!* They connected their personal data-chip, sending a command to download all. *The others need to see this. "There is no war," my ass. Why would any race have weapons of mass destruction at this scale unless it was for war? I don't care what Allura thinks. These are not the good guys anymore. We need to get out of here... oh, gods.*

Pidge fought the urge to vomit as the final few files popped up. This one, which was untitled, was meticulously put together - every detail accounted for and augmented with a slew of images, crisply formatted and easy-to-read. But the content... *Fuck. Just fuck.*

These Alteans were using their own people as power sources. Living people, instead of crystals. These 'Tributes' were in constant pain, and more of them died than survived. The process would suck away each victim's inner Quintessence, using that energy to power bioweapons. Devastating biological weapons, requiring power of an unimaginable scale, built solely for war. Those who ended up surviving often went mad in the aftermath. Losing their memory, cut away from their 'life-force,' bearing horrible scars - physically and mentally. For these people, dying would be a mercy.

The people who wrote the file tried to justify it by saying they only used criminals. That it was a fitting sacrifice if you were an enemy to the Empire. That it was needed, and sacrificing ten lives to save thousands was a small price to pay. But it wasn't just ten. It was *hundreds,* and this program - this cruel, horrible, *inhumane* program - showed no signs of being shut down.

Another file followed that one, this time titled, 'Peace Promotion Methods.' It was just as bad as the last, if not worse. The most common thing to do if someone was treasonous, or an upstart, or tried to spread the *truth,* was to send them in to get Erased. 'Erased' meant that they were reconditioned -
rewired into being a completely different person. A puppet. A pawn. A good and upstanding galactic citizen. There was no war here.

Erased indeed, Pidge thought hollowly, unable to read more. They shut down the screen, grabbing their data-chip on the way out. Their sense of self, their personality, their being - all gone. Erased. I think I hate that word now. Fuck, these people are monsters. Screw Star Wars, this is a horror movie. I need to find Allura. We need to save the others. Then we're getting out of here.

Trying not to cry, Pidge headed towards where Allura’s tracker signal blinked reassuringly on their datapad’s map.
Keith wanted to die. Just a little.

Going through the wormhole had been a horrible idea, and Allura was absolutely going on his shit list. All of this could have been avoided if they’d just stayed in the damn Castle-Ship. But here they were, captured by the enemy.

Alright. So maybe dying was an exaggeration. He just hated that, at the moment, there was nothing he could do. At all.

“I’m bored.” Lance complained, rolling his helmet with his foot. The Blue Paladin dragged a hand through his hair, sighing. “So, so, bored.”

Keith rolled his eyes. “We’re waiting for Pidge,” he pointed out. But he had to agree - being in prison, even if said prison was a luxurious, pillow-infested lounge, was boring.

“What’s stopping us from escaping now?”

“The six-inch adurinium doors, maybe?” Regris said dryly, looking up from where he was cleaning his Marmora blade. “Or the guards posted outside? Gah, I hate this place. They bolted the vents shut.”

“You wouldn’t have fit, anyways.” Keith snickered, thinking about Regris’s powerful - but also rather thick - tail, and tall build. Regris smacked him with said reptilian tail in retaliation. “That hurt,” Keith growled, flipping him the bird.

“Don’t call me fat, Mr. shorter-than-average.” Regris countered. “I work very hard to maintain my manly figure.” At this, Lance erupted into giggles, and even Keith had to crack a smile.

“Hey, guys,” Hunk interjected, looking up from the pillow he’d stuffed his face in. “Can we play a game? Napping isn’t working for me.”

“You know what? Sure.” Keith said, considering it. A game couldn’t hurt, right? They were supposed to be fun and, and at the very least, it would pass the time.

“Make it an Earth game,” Regris added. “You guys come up with the weirdest things.”

Alright,” Hunk grinned. “So I was thinking about this one we did at the Garrison. Basically, you challenge someone to rock-paper-scissors, and the winner gets to tell the group an embarrassing story about the loser.”

“NOOOoooo.” Lance groaned, flopping dramatically. “I hate that one. Hunk, you know I suck at rock-paper-scissors.”

“Sounds perfect, then.” Regris said, grinning. “But can someone explain to me what-”

He cut himself off as, all of a sudden, the door hissed open. The Paladins watched in silence as a hunched figure stepped inside, dragging something that looked like a storage container attached to a flamethrower along with them.
They didn’t look very powerful, but whatever they were carrying look a lot like a weapon.

“Oh, sorry,” the figure rasped when they - no, she - realized the Paladins were still staring. “Don’t mind me. I’m just the cleaning lady.”

“Oh, you opened the door.” Hunk pointed out, baffled.

“So I did.” She agreed, smiling dangerously. “All rooms must be cleaned. However… if you were to leave, I suppose I couldn’t stop you.”

“What happened to the guards?” Keith asked, manifesting his bayard.

“What guards?” She snorted, shuffling along.

“Wait, you’re letting us go?” Lance said, staring at the now clear exit. He, too, had activated his bayard. ‘Cleaning lady’ seemed unconcerned with the blaster pointed at her face.

“No, of course not. I’m asking you to get out so I can do my job.” She cackled. “But if you happened to disappear while my back was turned, well…”

Taking the invitation for what it was, they scrambled out of the lounge. Before leaving with the others, Keith paused at the exit, turning to look at the odd figure with her grey jumpsuit and numbered cloak. 96642, huh? They had already begun working.

“Wait,” he called. “What’s your name?”

At this, the figure paused in their vacuuming, looking up at Keith for the first time. Keith’s eyes widened in surprise, tail falling still. She wasn’t old, as he’d first suspected, but rather a middle-aged Altean woman with dark skin and teal eyescales. If one ignored the jagged scar running through one milky eye, she was actually quite beautiful.

However, her remaining violet eye had a haunted look to it, and a scarred mouth was turned down in a grimace.

“I suppose I had one, once.” She murmured, half to herself. “But no more. I am 96642, stationed to this ship. Names have no meaning to the erased.”

For some reason, the term ‘Erased’ made Keith’s fur crawl. There was more to this than what he understood, but asking this woman would probably do more harm than good. There was an anger to her, a deep, soul-tainting rage directed at at some unknown assailant. As frail and as broken as she outwardly appeared, the steel in her one-eyed gaze made even Keith wary.

“I’m sorry,” Keith said. He felt like he had failed to prevent something horrible. “I’m Keith. Thanks for letting us out.”

“Keith.” She repeated, smiling wryly. “A strong name. Don’t lose it. Now, go - before those blasted drones come back to investigate.”

And he did, leaving that odd little woman and jogging to catch up with the others.

“What was that about?” Lance asked.

“Nothing.” Keith shook his head. “Let’s just get out of here.”

“We need to find Allura and Pidge first.” Regris pointed out, scanning the hallway for any lifeforms. Or drones. Those didn’t count as lifeforms.
“No need,” a voice called out, and they turned to see Allura, followed by Pidge, sprinting towards them from behind. “I’m so relieved that you all are alright.” She said as they arrived, then turned to Regris. “You spoke the truth - this place is rotten.”

“How did you get out?” Pidge asked, frowning.

“Cleaning lady.” Keith said simply. Lance snickered.

“Huh.” Pidge narrowed their eyes. “If you say so.”

“There is a giant crystal on this ship,” Allura said, a frantic edge to her voice. “With an unprecedented amount of power. We cannot leave it in the hands of those monsters.” That last word was a snarl.

“Woah, monsters?” Hunk said. “Isn’t that kinda harsh?”

“I’ll tell you all later,” Pidge promised, a pained expression on their face. “But monsters is right. These people are worse than the Galra.”

“Damn.” Lance muttered. “What are we gonna do?”

“Steal that crystal.” Allura revealed, eyes glinting dangerously.

“Okay, but… are you sure about this, Princess?” Regris asked. “That’s a bold move.”

“Positive. Now, come with me and listen.” She ordered, taking the lead with long, determined strides. “First, we are going to get to the lions. Then, this is what I want each of you to do…”

Allura’s plan was a good one. Regris, as Black Paladin, had the lion that was largest and had the greatest thruster power. He would be in charge of grabbing and securing the crystal, which - according to Allura - was about double the size of a lion’s head.

Lance and Pidge would go with him, to provide cover. Lance, because as their best gunman, cover fire was his thing, and Pidge, because someone had to throw the enemy’s communications into turmoil. If the Alteans figured out their moves at the beginning, the whole purpose of a diversion. Even so, Pidge warned them to keep chatter to a minimum, just in case.

Keith and Hunk were assigned to be the diversion, distracting the Alteans upfront. Do as much damage as they could without harming the lives of workers and personnel who weren’t in on Rahna and Zwei’s plot. This meant that they’d attack the ship’s outer ring and the engines, leaving the center oval and Trayling’s ship clear.

Keith, because red could dodge nearly all damaging enemy fire, and Hunk, because yellow had the Strongest shielding of them all. Seriously, Yellow was a tank. Together, they could keep the Solstice occupied long enough for the others to do their job, while taking the least damage.

Bolin, who’d agreed to be their man on the inside, would tip off an evacuation alarm and then override the central controls so all airlocks (which were all the doors on a spaceship) would be jammed open. This included the giant hangar door that functioned as the back wall of the science division - and, the room were the crystal was held. He’d then disappear into the river of personnel fleeing the ship.

Once the door was open, Regris would swoop in and grab the crystal, fly back out, and
immediately give the signal to form Voltron. When Voltron was formed, they’d go back to their own universe and - by Pidge’s calculations - the accursed wormhole would collapse on itself and shut down.

“Are you ready, Hunk?” Keith asked, double checking the power gauges on Red’s holoscreens. All systems go. It was time to show these Alteans what Voltron was made of.

“All set.” The Yellow Paladin confirmed. “Do you want to take the left side or the right side?”

“I’ll take right.”

“We’re in position.” Regris informed. There was an eager expression on the blue-toned Galra’s face. “Whenever you’re ready, start attacking.”

“Enemy communications scrambled.” Pidge added. “All they’re getting is static.”

“Stay safe, guys.” Hunk said, then he and Yellow jetted away.

“Good luck.” Keith murmured, stealing one more glance at Lance - in case it was his last chance - and followed Hunk.

Maneuvering from under Commodora Trayling’s ship, Keith positioned Red so they’d be able to execute a hit-and-run type attack. It was one of Keith’s favourites - fly as fast as they could towards a target, bomb the target, and break away before the enemy realized they’d been attacked. Simple, and very, very, effective.

Shkk-BOOOM!

Keith grinned ferally as their first strike hit home on the northeast portion of the ring. Dive bombing the enemy was fun . Red echoed the sentiment, and they looped around to deliver another blow, this time to the south. Hunk had Yellow’s tail-lazer up, and was carving away at one of the engines. Keith watched with glee as the thruster’s wing detached and drifted away, pushed by the shockwave of the resultant explosion.

Pidge had told them a rough version of what they’d discovered, and forwarded the files from their data-chip. Team Voltron had read them in silence, too shocked and disgusted to comment. A round of cursing and ‘I can’t believe this’ had followed, and it was unanimously decided that Admiral Rahna wouldn’t receive any mercy from them.

Keith swerved to the side, dodging a golden blaster bolt.

So they’d begun to fire back. Cool. Come and get me, assholes! He thought, firing Red’s mouth-cannon and racing up the right side of the ring. Red roared in agreement, the area behind them going up in flames and smoke.

Keith dove backwards, targeting another engine. Red’s lazer-covered claws scored deep, ragged, welts in the white metal of the thruster’s wing. A follow-up blast from their mouth-cannon had the structure explode. It was beautiful.

Breaking away into open space, Keith began to hear a low, dangerous, hum. Swiveling his ears to locate the noise, he urged Red through a barrage of enemy fire. Then he saw the source. Shit.

That hum - it was from an ion cannon. A giant ion cannon mounted on the inner ring, crackling with amber energy. Heart racing, he urged Red to the outer edge of the battlefield, ducking behind a sizeable asteroid as the hum became a high-pitched whine. Fuck!
It had only taken one supercharged ion blast to make that asteroid disappear.

“Did you see that?” Keith called, flying up to a relatively blast-free zone above the Altean ship. *Looks like those cannons can only fire to the side…*

“See what?” Hunk asked, emerging from behind the ring with half of a thruster’s wing in yellows jaws. They’d damaged the engines, but five out of the six still continued to function.

“Their ion cannon,” Keith growled. “It’s a vaporizer. Don’t let it hit you.”

Hunk nodded, warily eying said cannon. “Got it.”

“How’s it going over there?” Pidge’s voice crackled over the comm.

“We’re good.” Keith replied, dodging more blaster fire and retaliating with Red’s tail lazer. So far, they’d only taken minimal damage from a couple stray bolts. “What about you?”

“Almost got it,” Regris said, referring to the crystal. There was a look of intense concentration on his face. Keith felt like now wasn’t the right time to make a constipation joke, so he kept his mouth shut. Red had no limitations, laughing uproariously through their bond.

“Be ready to form Voltron when we get clear.” Allura added. For this battle, she was riding in Kuro with Regris.

“Just tell us when.” Keith said, then dove to execute another bombing maneuver. By now, the Alteans had scrambled a contingent of single-pilot fighters, manned by drones. These were a pain to deal with, but nothing serious. Those ion cannons were more of a threat.

[There are three on our tail.] Red warned, referring to the white and gold annoyances. The AI for these seemed to be more advanced than their Galra counterparts, or maybe they had different battle programs. Either way, they were certainly tougher to shake.

*I see them,* Keith acknowledged, veering upwards into a sharp spiral. He crossed under the northern part of the Solstice’s outer ring, missing the colossal ship by a hair, and watched with satisfaction as two of the diamond-shaped fighters crashed into one another. The third, blinded by the explosion, spun out of control and crashed into the inner ring.

“We have the crystal!” Lance’s voice suddenly cheered. Below him, Keith saw Blue, Green and Kuro emerge from the center oval of the Solstice. The golden crystal was secured firmly between Kuro’s giant front paws.

“Let’s form Voltron!” Regris commanded.

“No time!” Keith countered, hearing the hum of one - no, multiple - ion cannons charging up. He spun around, alarmed, and saw that there were now six cannons mounted at even intervals on the outer ring. “Get out of there - those ion cannons vapourize matter!”

“Shit,” Pidge cursed as the three of them scattered, orange cannon blasts slicing through the space they’d just occupied. Commodora Trayling’s ship now had a giant, smoking, hole punched through it.

“That’s just great.” Regris groaned sarcastically. “More ways to die.”

“Damn… “ Lance murmured as he and Blue paused for a moment to scan the damage. “I don’t think the Galra even have cannons that can vaporize stuff.”
“They can only shoot sideways, not up.” Keith explained. “Get above them and we should be able to form Voltron.”

“Got it!” Several voices chorused.

Together, they raced upwards, falling into formation around Kuro and the crystal. The stars began to blur as they gained speed, becoming just a speeding line of color to an observer.

“Alright, team,” Regris ordered. “Form Voltron!”

... learning to fix a car with his uncle, hands covered in motor grease // watching Mulan with his sisters, Marcos laughing in the background then // putting together their first robot, immediately running to show Matt with a smile // moving to a new apartment with Shiro, climbing the stairs with boxes in both their hands and // being taught how to use a blaster on a familiar icy planet...

With a jolt, Keith found himself back in his own mind, sitting in Red’s altered cockpit. Blinking, he tried to sort out the unfamiliar memories. His tail swayed amusedly when he found Lance’s. So, Keith snickered to Red, He’s got three sisters? Cute.

“Whoa,” Lance’s voice came in. He was grinning now that the rush of memories had subsided.

“You and Shiro lived together?”

“Shiro… actually ended up as my legal guardian.” Keith admitted.

“Shiro’s the one who taught you to fly!” Lance realized, eyes lighting up. “That’s why you’re such an awesome pilot.”

Keith felt his cheeks heat up at the compliment. “Yeah.”

“What was that ice planet?” He heard Pidge ask Regris. “I haven’t seen anything like that on our charts.”

“Oh, that’s Sollun. It is… gone now.” Regris replied, and a sense of sadness and longing thumped through the bond. Whatever this place was, the former Blade member missed it, a lot.

“Just a mass of space junk, now. Zarkon got to it.”

“Sorry.” Pidge murmured.

“Is the crystal secure?” Allura questioned tentatively.

“Yeah,” Keith reported, He and Red - now an arm - were wrapped around the oval-ish crystal, making Voltron look like it was holding a glowing, golden football.

“Oh good,” Hunk said, relieved. “For a moment I thought we lost it.”

“Same, actually.” Regris admitted, looking sheepish.

“Let’s get out of here, then.” Allura ordered.

Voltron gladly obeyed, moving together towards the swirling portal. The Alteans were dead-set on seeing them decimated, firing several coordinated ion beams and sending countless fighters after them. Before, Keith and Hunk weren’t much of a threat, but with Voltron, the enemy was bringing
out the big guns. Literally.

Dodging wasn’t too difficult - Voltron could be fast when it needed to be - but against that vicious barrage? Yeah, a few of those shots hit. Unfortunately, one of those shots ended up being a direct beam from an ion cannon.

The blast jarred Voltron forwards, struggling to keep a hold of the crystal. Keith’s ears were faintly ringing from the shockwave.

Shaking it off, the called to the others. “Everyone okay?”

“Managing.” Allura answered, speaking for both Regris and herself. Kuro had taken the brunt of the attack.

“I’m good.” Lance added.

“Same.” Hunk said.

“I’m fine, but shields at at 52%” Pidge informed, checking the gauges. Keith bit his lip nervously. One more hit like that and we’d be done for.

“Hold steady,” he commanded. “We’re almost there.”

Another devastating amber beam almost took out the crystal, but Regris managed to swerve away in time. And then they were at the foot of the wormhole, the swirling expanse of light filling Keith’s viewscreen.

[Finally.] Red grumbled.

“Ready?” Regris asked as they were pulled closer. The others voiced an affirmative, and he grimly pushed Kuro’s controls forwards. Keith grit his teeth. Into the abyss we go.

Like last time, all he could see was bright white streaked with pale beige. Again, Keith closed his sensitive eyes and wished it would be over. Thankfully, Red had muted the alarms this time around, so it was only his eyes and his sense of balance that screamed for mercy. In another moment, they were through, the blinding light giving way to an expanse of darkness dotted with tiny glowing pinpricks. The frozen asteroid field remained eerie and unchanged, and the Castle-Ship shone in his peripheral.

Most thankfully, unlike last time, Keith didn’t faint. It was good to be back in their own universe.

“Crystal secure.” Allura confirmed. “Where should we-”

She didn’t get to finish that sentence. Behind them, the air seemed to shudder and warp as the wormhole collapsed in on itself, swirling light winding tighter and tighter until that great thing became smaller than Voltron. In another second, it was gone, sucked into that twisted other dimension and leaving only a ripple of shimmering particles as evidence of its existence.

“Wow,” Lance whispered, speaking for all of them. There was nothing else they could say, really. The sight had been magical, an once-in-a-lifetime thing, and now it was gone, taking Commodora Trayling’s ship along with it.

“The asteroids are moving again.” Keith observed, watching a particularly odd one begin to drift gently. Seriously, it was shaped like Kraft Dinner. How could he not look?
“Odd.” Pidge said. “But then again we have no idea how these-”

They didn’t get to finish their sentence either, for at that moment, Lotor’s ship wormholed into existence and shot Voltron in the back.

Destabilized, and flailing somewhat to regain balance, they could do nothing as the crystal slipped free… and straight into an awaiting tractor beam.

“That fucking snake!” Keith snarled as his world stopped spinning. “He was waiting for us!”

“Damn it!” Lance cursed.

[When I get near enough to blast his head off…] Red growled, ferocious determination to finish him flooding through their bond.

“Pull up!” Hunk called sharply, and they did. Voltron righted itself, then turned to watch as their stolen crystal followed obediently behind Lotor’s cruiser. It was damn infuriating, and in that moment, Keith wanted to kill Lotor more than he’d wanted to kill anyone else.

“Can I kill him?” Pidge asked, glaring fiercely.

“Revenge is bad?” Lance said weakly, “Though he is a total asshole.”

“For once, I disagree,” Allura countered, “Lotor is not our priority. That crystal is far too powerful to fall into the Galra Empire’s hands.”

“Then I guess we destroy it.” Keith concluded, then turned to their Black Paladin, who had fallen silent. “Reg?”

“Just being reminded why I became an enemy to my own race.” He said bitterly, “I’m fine. Lead the way, kit. What’s one more battle?”

“Alright.” Keith murmured, resolving to talk to the elder Galra later. Then he ordered, “Break apart! We have a better shot at the crystal as five lions!”

Voltron disassembled, becoming five colorful blurs speeding towards the Prince’s spacecraft. The fight was more serious this time. They were tired, and hungry, and pissed - Voltron would finish this as fast as possible.

Unfortunately, Lotor and his ilk proved to be formidable fighters. Once the lions were within firing range of the Galran cruiser, five smaller fighter ships jetted out to meet them. Like Lotor’s ship, these were different from the generic diamond-shaped ones piloted by drones.

“There are actual pilots in these,” Keith warned, “They’ll be tougher to shake than the drones.”

“Much tougher, actually,” Regris added, expression grim. “I have a feeling that those are Lotor’s generals - elite warriors he picked personally to make up his inner circle.”

“This day just keeps getting worse.” Hunk muttered. “Who jinxed it?”

“Not me.” Lance protested, barrel-rolling to doge purple laser blasts.

“We just need to hit the crystal at the same time,” Pidge informed, fingers flying across their holoscreens.

“Great.” Keith grumbled. A coordinated attack is much harder than a single shot…
“Actually, wait,” Hunk spoke up, “That’s a battle cruiser, right? The big ship?”

“Yes.” Regris confirmed.

“So it has an ion cannon?” Hunk asked, just barely missing one of the Galra fighters with Yellow’s jawblade.

“Oh!” Pidge exclaimed, catching onto Hunk’s idea. “An ion cannon would totally shatter that crystal - we just need to make them fire at themselves!”

“That’s… not much better.” Lance pointed out. “Allura, you got anything?”

“I don’t know what else we can do.” She said, frowning. “Those seem to be our only option.”

“The Castle’s cannon beam is more powerful than an ion cannon,” Keith said, chasing after Lotor’s fighter. “We just need to get the crystal first.”

The Crystal was still tethered to the small ship, and Red was fast, so they caught up soon enough. A good shove had the crystal hurtling freely through space again in one direction, and Lotor’s ship in the other. Red veered to chase the crystal, but a barrage from another fighter had them ducking away.

“Yeah, easier said than done,” Pidge hissed, maneuvering Green in a figure-eight to dodge purple beams. Then their tail lazer was up and firing at the enemy, who looped away gracefully.

“We can take the others,” Regris suggested, “Keith, you go for the crystal.”

“Might wanna hurry,” Lance said, dropping in from above Keith and attacking the fighter that had been tailing Red. “Lotor’s going for the crystal too.”

“Yeah,” Hunk added, as Yellow’s shoulder-mounted bazooka blasted one of the fighters into the Galran cruiser. One down, four more to go. “We got this.”

“Thank you.” Keith said, then turned Red around so they could fly after Lotor’s ship.

[Trust them to watch your back] Red whispered. [Ignore the rest. We have one foe. Do not lose him.]

I know, Keith thought. He bit his lip in concentration, pushing the speed gauge to the max.

Lotor was a brilliant pilot. Perhaps better than Keith, though it pained him to admit that. The Prince was managing to out-maneuver a Voltron lion in a tiny one-manned fighter, dodging space junk with graceful efficiency and getting that much closer to the crystal.

Keith and Red were only seconds behind, mouth-cannon open and firing. Then they were witness to a nasty surprise - Lotor’s ship could fire backwards. Momentarily blinded, Keith cut speed and veered away, in case Lotor decided to press the advantage and attack them. There was no attack, but the Prince had snagged the crystal in those few seconds. Snarling, Keith urged Red to follow, slowly gaining on them since the crystal was weighing Lotor down.

This time, Red came from below, triumphantly grabbing the crystal with elongated claws and spinning back in the direction of the Castle-Ship. They were in and gone before Lotor could react, but when he did, the following cannon fire was vicious. He wasn’t a bad marksman, either, and several of those blasts hit. Red’s self-repair was covering the damage, but their right shoulder shield was sputtering and the armor plate was chipped.
Keith grit his teeth as Red’s pain infiltrated the bond. The lions were sentient and could move on their own. Of course they could feel pain.

You okay? Keith asked, pushing the thrusters on Red’s hindquarters to max. The stars blurred as they sped towards the Castle-Ship.

[Neer better.] His lion replied. Red wasn’t one to show weakness, though healing various blaster burns and repairing broken energy shields on the fly was taking its toll. Voltron’s self-repair mechanisms were a thing of miracles, but even that took time. Time they didn’t have.

Lotor fired again, and Keith braced himself against the dashboard as Red’s frame shook from the shockwave. Immediately after, they had to roll right as a crackling pink beam cut through the sky.

“Ion cannon!” Pidge called in warning, though a moment late. “Shit!”

“It missed us,” Keith reported, “I’ve got the crystal.”

“Oh good,” Lance said, sounding relieved. “Now we just gotta blow it up.”

“We’ll cover you, Kit.” Regris added. “The rest of you - don’t get hit by that cannon.”

Keith focused away from his team’s voices and back to the battlefield. At the speed they were going at, details became blurred, but the others seemed to be handling Lotor’s generals well enough. Hunk and Pidge had teamed up on one of the fighters, while Lance and Regris were giving the other two hell. Lotor, predictably, was tailing Keith, firing almost nonstop.

He looped upside-down to dodge an ion blast, then ducked through Lance’s dogfight and delivered a point-blank cannon shot at an unsuspecting Galra fighter. It spun away from the force, and Lance immediately pounced on the opportunity, Blue’s ice breath already blinding the pilot inside.

“Thanks!” The Blue Paladin called.

“Just returning the favour,” Keith explained, then dodged right as one of Lotor’s blasts came too close to the crystal. They were almost at the Castle-Ship, and communications seemed to be clear again because Coran had the weapons systems up and ready.

“All set, number three.” The advisor sent in text. “Let go, and I’ll fire on your order.”

That order never came. Only a few seconds from reaching home base, and they were jumped by a contingent of drone-operated Galra fighter craft. A large contingent of drone-operated fighter craft. Unprepared for the sudden attack, Keith had Red drop and speed away, heading once again to the center.

“Did they send out any drone ships?” Keith asked, spinning out of the way of another ion shot. He would have noticed if they’d shot out of the Galra cruiser, but these just appeared out of nowhere. Between the cruiser’s cannon, Lotor, and that drone squad, it was becoming trickier to keep the crystal away.

“No, actually,” Pidge responded, coming in from the left to fly in formation beside Keith. Green’s tail-lazer sliced through three of the diamond-shaped hindrances as they arrived, and explosions soon followed. “I think it was a backup plan.”

“Are there more?” Keith growled, executing a quick flip-and-hit to take out another two.

Pidge grimaced. “Shit. Yeah, a lot more. He’s planned for this, too.”
“Fuck.”

“Ion cannon!” Hunk warned. Keith and Pidge scattered in response, the cannon blast slicing through where they’d just been and taking out about five Galra fighters.

“Another general down.” Regris announced, Kuro spinning and throwing the captured craft into a set of following fighters.

“I have an idea,” Keith said, eying the cruiser’s cannon, which was preparing for another shot. “They’re firing at me, right? What if it hits the crystal instead.”

“But that was the plane from the beginning…” Allura frowned, then her eyes widened. “No, you’re going to be holding the crystal when it fires!”

“That’s suicide!” Pidge cried. “The explosion will kill you!”

“We’ll be fine.” Keith countered. “Voltron managed to go through that freak wormhole okay, right?”

“Keith…” Lance said, but cut himself off before he said anything else. “Are you sure?” He asked instead.

“It has to be done.” Keith murmured, and Red roared in agreement. “You guys can’t take much more of this, and we can’t lose the crystal.”

“Let me,” Regris said. “Kuro is more durable, and we’ve taken the least damage overall.”

“Don’t bullshit me, Reg!” Keith growled. “You took the full blast from the Altean ion cannon!”

“Heh. Nothing escapes you, Kit.” Regris conceded, then completely ignored why he volunteered when he had the lowest chance of survival. “But it can’t be you, either! Lotor is ruthless, and you’ve got the most burn damage out of all of us!”

“Fuck.” Keith hissed, but didn’t argue. Regris was right - Red’s plating was streaked with soot and burnt metal. Two major battles in a row had been trying on both of them.

“I think Yellow’s out,” Hunk said, “Our energy shielding is completely down. We got hit by their ion cannon.”

“Green’s weapons are on low power,” Pidge muttered grimly. “And our armor is shot. I don’t think we’d survive either.”

“Then it’ll have to be me.” Lance said. “Blue’s energy shields are at 87%, which is a ton higher than all of yours. We’ve got the best chance.”

“Lance, no!” Keith snarled. Lance’s life was not up to bargain.


“Lance…” Keith whispered, to shocked from the outburst. “Don’t. Please don’t.”

Lance smiled, though it was more of a grimace. “Trust me, Space Cat. We’ll be fine.”

“Blue is the best option.” Pidge said softly. “Damn it all. Don’t die, Lance. We need you with us.”
“Yeah bro,” Hunk added. “You made a promise to go back to Earth, remember?”

“I know. I’ll be fine.” The Blue Paladin assured, though the words felt empty.

“You better be, Sharpshooter.” Keith said, feeling hollow. *Fuck you, Lance. How the hell am I supposed to live with both you and Shiro gone?*

“I don’t like this,” Allura stated, expression pained. “At all. But I suppose it’s the only way. Keith, pass over the crystal.”

Grimly, Keith dodged the latest ion blast and veered left, skirting a series of drone fighters and looping around to fly in above over Lance.

“Dropping crystal.” Keith announced, disengaging Red’s claws. It floated easily, as if beckoned, into Blue’s reach.

“Got it.” Lance confirmed, latching onto the glowing structure.

Keith turned away, maneuvering Red back towards Lotor’s ship. At the very least, they could make sure Prince Asshole didn’t shoot at Lance. Attacking now, and with a viciousness that only came with the realization that a loved one might die, Red and Keith pushed Lotor away, clawing and biting at the ship between cannon blasts. Keith heard the ion cannon charge up, but he didn’t look back. He didn’t want to see Lance in that position. *He didn’t want to see Lance die.*

Lotor, faced with a much more vicious opponent, did the smart thing and blasted away, veering across the battlefield. Keith gave chase, fully planning on killing the Galra Prince. The cannon’s hum became a screeching whine, then it fired. A note, strangely beautiful, rang through space before a horrible splintering, cracking, *dying* noise followed. Then came the blinding light, then the noise, then nothing.

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“K- kzzt!- Come in!”

Keith blinked. Ow. His ears hurt. He felt them press against his skull in an attempt to block out the sudden ringing.

“--Keith?? Keith, can you hear us?”

*Oh, that was Pidge’s voice. Right. He better respond.*

Blearily, Keith forced his sore arm to push the comm. unit’s response key. “I’m here,” He groaned. “Is everyone okay?”

“We’re fine,” Allura informed him, “But we’re more worried about you. It seems the lions were spontaneously wormholed away in response to the energy blast from that crystal.”

“Oh.” Keith echoed numbly, prior events tricking back to the forefront of his memory. From what he could tell, he hadn’t been out of it for too long. The other Paladins were still in their lions.

[Five of your Earth minutes, cub.] Red said, mildly concerned. [Stop with these life-threatening stunts!]
I’ll try, Keith thought back dryly, but no promises. Being a Paladin is dangerous business.

Red gave an impression of an irritated huff, but her mental voice settled back to a quiet, reassuring purr in the back of his mind.

“You were the last to check in, dude.” Lance was saying, drawing Keith back to reality. “We thought something seriously bad happened.”

He shook his head, ears flicking. “I’m fine, only bruised. Can you get a lock on my position?”

Hunk’s face popped up on his viewscreen. “Working on that right now, buddy. Almost got it.”

“Thanks.” Keith smiled wearily, trying not to grimace at the pain from his bruised bicep.

“Hey, fearless leader, let’s try not to pull any life-threatening stunts next time, okay?” Regris said, fixing Keith with a look. “You’re not expendable.”

The Red Paladin’s tail swished behind him in amusement, tip lightly brushing the dash. “You’re late,” he teased, “Since Red already gave me this lecture.”

“Red’s got good instincts.” Regris shot back, but he was also smiling, eyes soft with relief.

Keith took a moment to examine his surroundings. It was… unfamiliar space. He didn’t recognise these constellations, though there was a faint light on the horizon that Keith suspected might be a solar system. Other than that, it was void of any activity.

Wait.

There, floating in and out of the left quadrant of his viewscreen, something that looked a lot like an escape pod?

“Guys,” Keith began, already turning Red towards the suspicious object. “There’s something out here. I’m gonna go check it out.”

“Keith!” Chorused at least four exasperated voices, but he shushed them. He got the sense that this was far too important to not investigate.

“I trust me, I’ll be fine. It looks like an escape pod,” He reassured the others, “I can almost see who’s inside. Wait, it’s spinning back around. Oh god—”

Keith abruptly forgot how to breathe. That face, there was no way. Absolutely no way but- but he was there, right in front of him. Fragile hope began to flutter in his chest and Keith spurred Red forwards, picking up speed.

It couldn’t be, but it was: inside the escape pod was Shiro. A rugged version of him with stubble and long hair but still unmistakably Shiro. Keith felt himself having to blink back tears.

He couldn’t believe it. They’d found Shiro - who seemed to have escaped on his own, as expected.

“Guys,” He said, pressing the comm. “You won’t believe this.”


“It’s a good thing, I promise,” he said, a lighter edge to his voice. He switched feed from audio to video, then picked “external” as the input. Now he’d be transmitting what Red saw.
“Oh my god,” Pidge gasped, the first to identify the footage he was sending them. “Keith. Keith, that’s Shiro. You found Shiro.”

Keith could only grin and nod back, blinking through the tears that threatened to fall. He was purring in relief, he could feel it, and Red echoed his sentiment. They had found their leader, and it was time to bring him home. With a grace only a lioness could posses, Red opened her jaws and picked up Shiro’s pod.

“No way,” Lance was muttering. “No quizinaking way.”

“That’s not how you use that word but same.” Hunk added. Allura was watching with wide, hopeful eyes, hands clasped over her mouth. Pidge had their face buried in their arm, clearly hiding tears of relief, but no one cared. They’d gotten one of their own back, and that was what mattered.

“Allright number four,” Coran said, a note of pride in his voice, “We’re ready to wormhole you back. It’s about time Shiro got to a proper healing pod.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi. Guess who's not dead, simply nerfed by schoolwork? That's right-- me! But hey, managed to get this churned out. Enjoy!

End Notes

- is 'fire' for Keith.
- is 'water' for Lance.
嘘 - is 'liar' for Lotor.
灰 - is 'ash' for Sa’arhak.
姫 - is 'princess' for Allura.
影 - is 'shadow' for Regris.
葉 - is 'leaf' for Pidge.
岩 - is 'rock' for Hunk.
黒 - is 'black' for Shiro.
橙 - is 'orange' for Coran.

Note: Not all characters have had a POV yet, this is just a guide. It will be added to as the story progresses.

The art is mine, I... do them whenever I have free time, lol. Which should be more often, come summer.

I'm also open to ideas on how the main plot for this should go, keeping in mind that I'm planning to hit all the main plot points from the show regardless... but some things are gone get swapped (insert evil laugh here). I just want it to be as enjoyable for you as it is for me,
so feel free to speak up. Thanks!

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