anomalous point

by discordiansamba

Summary

AU. When disgraced former pilot Takashi Shirogane stumbles across the case of two missing Galaxy Garrison cadets, he can't stay out of it. Not when Keith Kogane, the now former cadet he used to mentor back in his days with the Garrison, seems tied up in it, as a person of interest, no less.

What he doesn't expect is the scale of the mystery, nor the potentially dire consequences that are tied to breaking the secrets of the valley- and of Keith.

Notes

Oh look, it's a brand new fic! Welcome to Anomalous Point, a fic idea that I've been tinkering with for some time now, that I'm glad to finally be able to share with everyone! The setting for this one should stay pretty much on Earth, but have no fear, there's plenty of alien goodness to go around. Hopefully what I've got in store should be interesting, so stay tuned, I guess!
If he closed his eyes, sometimes he could still see where it all went wrong.

The mission had been a success- they had been able to make it to Kerberos and obtain the ice samples without issue. They had just as successfully left the frozen moon, and made the months long journey back to Earth with no problems other than the usual bit of boredom.

Reentry.

Reentry had been where everything had gone to hell.

He'd been kept shut off from news feeds of any kind while he'd been in recovery, but he still heard the whispers. *Pilot error*, they had called it- but he knew that was a load of garbage. It wasn't his own confidence in his skills talking- but the mere fact that he'd been there. He'd seen, with his own eyes, parts fail- parts that *should not* have failed.

And now, it seemed, the Galaxy Garrison was covering that up. Pinning the blame on the Kerberos disaster on him.

They were calling it that- a disaster. That he couldn't dispute. He'd landed the craft, against all odds, but he couldn't save everyone.

Zero casualties on the ground, a small handful injured. One casualty among the crew. One too many.

He'd never forgive himself for the loss of Samuel Holt. The loss of his own right arm seemed insignificant in comparison.

At least Matt had made it out okay- he was out of the hospital long before Shiro was. Might not have, if he hadn't thought so quickly, if he hadn't managed to come to some semblance of a landing. He couldn't take any pride in it- not good enough, not if even one life had been lost. That was one too many.

He wouldn't blame the Holts if they never forgave him.

The first thing he'd done upon leaving the hospital was to turn in his resignation to the Galaxy Garrison. Even if he *wanted* to stay, there was no way he could go back to being a pilot, not now that he only had one arm. A prosthetic was an option, they'd advanced in the past few years, but there was no way that he'd be able to have anything close to a normal reaction time with it.

Besides, they were expensive, and he was now unemployed.

Finding work when you were a fallen hero was a hard sell, as it turned out, even more so when looking for it town that had such deep ties to the Galaxy Garrison. It was a string of rejections, before he'd landed himself a job at a small bakery. Not where he'd expected to find himself, but a job was a job, and there were worse ones out there. At least he got to be greeted every morning by the smell of baked goods.

What time he didn't put into work and recovery, he put into finding answers.

*Something* had gone wrong with those parts, and whatever that *something* was, the Galaxy Garrison didn't want anyone to know about it. If there was a chance that whatever had happened in
that crash could happen again, then the public needed to know about it.

It... probably would have been easier to conduct an investigation if he'd stayed with the Garrison, but his moral backbone didn't allow him to.

Was the Garrison using faulty parts? Parts for space exploration vehicles didn't come cheap, it was possible that they'd been cutting corners here and there, where they thought people wouldn't notice. But cheap parts came with a risk- and a grave that had been filled too early was the consequence.

He didn't expect to have contact with the Holts ever again.

He certainly didn't expect Matt to come into the bakery one day, a serious expression on his face. The scar on his cheek was the only visible sign of what he'd been through- seems his luck had held out, when no one else's had.

He had his own fair share of scars- but he hid most of them, wearing long sleeves no matter what the weather, tying off the right at the stump. The scars on it were... not pretty, to say the least, and he didn't want to make anyone uncomfortable by making them look at them. The only one he couldn't hide was the one on his face- split across his nose, dead center.

He'd stopped trying to dye the white lock of his hair, right at his forehead. It quickly proved to be more trouble than it was worth.

"It's bullshit." Matt told him. "What they're saying. It's bullshit."

He almost had half a mind to chide him for language but- yeah, he was right. It was pretty much bullshit.

"I get off shift in an hour." Shiro told him. "Why don't you help yourself to something in the meantime, and we can talk after. My treat."

"You don't need to treat me, Shiro." Matt told him. "But I think I will take up that offer of pastries regardless. Man, this stuff smells good."

He couldn't help but crack a smile at that, watching as Matt selected himself a pair of pastries- and then paused, picking out a third. A peanut butter donut- had to be for Katie.

"She still loves peanut butter?" Shiro asked as he rung him up. Everything was a bit harder with just one hand now, but he made do.

He hadn't spoken to Katie since the launch, but he'd seen her face a few times. In papers, on news reports- though for her part, she largely tried to avoid the limelight, wanting nothing to do with it. He couldn't blame her- she likely just wanted to grieve in peace, not be part of some kind of media circus.

"Always." Matt told him. "She's... doing okay, you know. Not perfect. But okay."

"She's a tough girl." Shiro said, handing Matt his receipt.

"She thinks it's bullshit too, you know." Matt told him- and very visibly smiled at his surprise. "Spends most of her time these days on these crazy conspiracy theory boards. Apparently made herself a pal on one of them. We're not the only ones out there who think the pilot error thing is a load of crap, Shiro."

That was... good to know, if he had to be honest.
"We'll talk more after my shift." Shiro told him. "We've got some catching up to do. You stuck with the Garrison?"

"Had to." Matt told him with a shrug. "It still pays well. With dad gone..."

He stopped there, shaking his head. "I don't, you know. Blame you. You did everything you could to bring us to safety."

Shiro could only give him a rueful smile. He was right- he had done everything in his power- but it just hadn't been enough.

Not nearly enough.

"Shift over?"

"No, I just felt like slacking off." Shiro joked. "You want to come back to my place? It's not far from here."

"You don't want to talk about it in public, do you." Matt noted, arching his brows.

"Something like that." Shiro told him. "Look, the owner of this place is a nice lady and all, but her son is a cadet at the Garrison. I'm not sure how well she'd take me speaking ill of it. And I kind of need this job."

"I take it job hunting wasn't easy, then." Matt observed, tossing away his garbage, tucking the bag with the peanut butter donut in it under his arm. "You could always move."

He knew what he meant- this was a town that the Garrison had basically built. Not literally, maybe- but it wouldn't exist if the Galaxy Garrison didn't. Most people around here had some kind of connection to it- maybe their family worked as part of the staff, or they had a child who was a cadet. Either way, it wasn't the sort of place where you wanted to get on the bad side of the Garrison.

And Shiro... he wasn't on the Garrison's bad side, not exactly. Pilot error or not, they hadn't entirely disavowed him, not even after he'd resigned. But he'd fallen from grace, and that was hard for people to ignore.

"I wanted to stay close to the Garrison." Shiro told him. "And you know the west town doesn't take too kindly to Garrison folk, even former Garrison folk, so I figured staying put for now was my best bet."

"Fair enough." Matt said, opening up the door, propping it open with his body. "Lead the way, oh fearless leader."

"Don't expect too much." Shiro told him.

"Expectations suitably lowered." Matt said, falling into step behind him. "So... bakery, huh?"

"Bakery." Shiro repeated. "Ms Garrett is a nice lady, like I said. Good pay, good hours... can be a little tricky restocking with the one arm, but I manage to get by."

"Does it... does it still hurt?" Matt asked.

"Sometimes." Shiro admitted. "But it's not as bad as it was before. It'll take some time, but I'll get used to it."
"You shouldn't have to." Matt told him. "And I know I shouldn't, but sometimes... sometimes I feel bad about being okay, you know? What with you and dad."

"Well, don't." Shiro told him simply. "Trust me, you walking away from that crash was the one good thing that happened that day. Nobody's holding your survival against you, Matt."

"I know." Matt told him. "I just... it's hard sometimes, you know?"

"I know." Shiro said. He knew all too well. There was silence between them then, each lost in their own thoughts. They didn't have long to walk- the apartment building he lived in was just a few scant blocks from the bakery. It wasn't much to look at, but the rent was cheap, and the size of the room was decent for one person.

"I should probably apologize in advance for there only being one chair, but I haven't had much time to shop for furniture." Shiro told him, stepping aside to let Matt in. "Didn't expect to have guests."

"Hey, it's cool." Matt told him, glancing around the apartment as he stepped inside. Setting the donut bag down on the kitchen counter, he gave him something of a strained smile. "So. Bullshit."

"Bullshit." Shiro said with a nod. "You can take the chair. You're the guest, after all."

"Then I will take you up on that kind offer." Matt told him, flopping down in the chair. "The mood at the Garrison since you resigned is... it's been interesting, I'll tell you that, Shiro. If there's some kind of conspiracy going on, I don't think everyone in the chain of command knows about it."

"I figured as much." Shiro said, leaning against the wall. It was probably for the best. If the Galaxy Garrison collapsed, it would cost a lot of good folks their jobs- so if there were people in the chain of command uninvolved in whatever was going on there, then that was a good sign. "I take it Katie decided against becoming a cadet?"

"Oh no, she's still thinking about it." Matt told him. "But she may have been caught hacking into their computer systems, so... well, there's that."

"...and when was this?" Shiro asked, raising his brows.

"While you were still in a coma." Matt said. "Like I said, she thinks the pilot error is bullshit too. She knows you, Shiro."

"Hm." Shiro couldn't help but smile a little at that, in spite of himself. "She find anything?"

"Not much. She wasn't there long before someone found her." Matt told him. "I'm amazed they still let me stick around after that. But I guess she swore up and down that I had nothing to do with it, and is kind of pretending to be in some sort of feud with me? So... yeah. Still at the Garrison."

"So what, you're her man on the inside?" Shiro asked, almost amused at the idea.

"Yeah, her man on the inside with like, zero security clearance." Matt told him, letting out a faint snort. "But listen Shiro- the whole pilot error thing? That's not the only weird thing that's been going on at the Garrison."

"I'm listening." Shiro said, his brow furrowing.

"Okay, one quick question." Matt said. "Have you spoken with Keith?"
"Keith?" Shiro asked, before shaking his head. "No, I haven't heard from him. Is... is there something wrong with Keith?"

If he had to be honest, that had been bothering him too. He wouldn't have thought Keith of all people would be the type to abandon him, yet he hadn't heard so much as a peep from him since he'd woken from the coma. Maybe they just weren't as close as he'd thought they'd been, though it pained him to think that.

"Huh. I thought for sure if he was going to contact someone, it'd be you." Matt said. "I- Keith's gone, Shiro."

"Gone." Shiro repeated, feeling the color drain from his face. "Gone as in...?"

"Oh! No, not that kind of gone!" Matt said quickly. "He pulled a Commander Kogane."

Commander Kogane. Keith's father. The one who'd turned in his resignation to the Garrison out of the blue one day, and then had vanished off the face of the Earth. The one who had only turned up again over a decade later, with a boy he claimed was his son in tow.

Keith Kogane, the Galaxy Garrison's new ace pilot prodigy. If there had been any doubt that the two were related, his skills in the cockpit had cleared everything right up.

"...he eloped with a mysterious woman of unknown nationality and went back to her country to marry her?" Shiro ventured. "Because that doesn't sound like Keith. It barely even sounds like Commander Kogane."

"More like he dropped out of the Garrison and became a desert cryptid." Matt told him.

"...that sounds more like Keith." Shiro admitted.

"Yeah well, apparently the Garrison's not too happy about it." Matt said. "And by not happy, I mean, like, really weird about it. Cadets are expected to report sightings of him."

"Sightings." Shiro repeated. "Christ, he really did become some kind of cryptid. I thought you were kidding."

"Shiro, I'll have you know that I've never made a joke in my life." Matt joked.

"So the Garrison is trying to find Keith." Shiro said. "That's... not really too unusual, Matt. We both know how talented he is. They already lost a huge talent when his father went AWOL, I can only imagine they're not too thrilled now that his son's gone and done the same thing."

"Yeah, but here's the thing about that." Matt told her. "Remember how I said Katie hacked into their systems?"

Seeing Shiro give him a nod of his head, he continued. "So she didn't get too far, but when she was going through personnel records, she noticed something weird. Like. Really weird."

"Don't leave me in suspense here, Matt." Shiro told him.

"Keith and Commander Kogane's records? They're classified now." Matt told him. "Like, top secret classified."

Now that caught his attention. "They're... why would they be classified, Matt? I mean, sure, Commander Kogane's, maybe, but why Keith's? He's just a cadet."
"No idea." Matt said, shaking his head. "Katie wasn't able to get a good look at them."

"And you're saying that you haven't tried?" Shiro asked, now sounding truly incredulous.

"Oh, I've tried." Matt told him. "But they're flagged. If I try and get in, I alert the whole system. Kind of ruins the point of the whole inside man thing."

"True." Shiro admitted. "Okay so... on top of the chance that the Garrison might be using faulty, substandard parts, there's also something weird going on with Keith. You said his records had already been sealed by the time Katie hacked into their systems?"

Matt nodded his head, and Shiro's brow furrowed in thought. "So I'm guessing that Keith pulled his little vanishing act before Kerberos."

"Maybe around five months after we left." Matt told him. "So, probably about the time we reached Kerberos."

"Okay, so... odds are, he didn't decide to leave because of the pilot error." Shiro said. That would have been exactly the sort of stunt that Keith would pull, he thought. Knowing that he'd left before it, though... that complicated things. "Did you talk to anyone who might know?"

"Shiro, I'm pretty sure the only people at the Garrison that Keith talked to were us." Matt told him. "And we were both, you know... gone."

"What about that one cargo pilot?" Shiro asked.

"Like, ninety percent of their interactions consisted of the guy yelling at Keith." Matt pointed out. "I'm pretty sure if he was going to confide in anyone about where he was going, it wouldn't be the guy who kept getting in his face."

"Fair point." Shiro admitted. "So the... sightings?"

"Like any proper cryptid, there have been reported Keith sightings." Matt told him. "Even a grainy photograph or two. Best as anyone can tell, he's living out in the desert somewhere."

"So in other words, he's sticking around the general area of the Garrison." Shiro said.

"Maybe he has the same idea as you." Matt told him.

"Could be." Shiro mused. "Is there anything else weird going on at the Garrison that I should know about?"

"Oh, you know, just the usual mystery of how food in the commissary can taste so bland, when their freeze dried peas are so good." Matt told him- his expression almost faltering even as he cracked a joke. His father loved those peas, Shiro remembered. "But I think that's one conspiracy that can wait to be solved."

"We'll put it on the agenda with the rest." Shiro told him, a faint smile on his face. "Do you know where Keith's been... lord help him,...sighted?"

"Over in yonder west town, from time to time." Matt told him. "Any chance you'll need yourself a driver to get out there?"

"I might." Shiro admitted. "Why don't we exchange contact details for now, and I'll get back to you
"And then we can go cryptid hunting." Matt said, springing to his feet. "Or well, Keith hunting. But same thing."

"We are not going hunting for Keith." Shiro told him. "We're just... looking for him, that's all."

"Sure Shiro." Matt said, a cheeky grin on his face. "If you say so."

Getting time off hadn't been a challenge.

As it turned out, Ms Garrett had actually been worried because he had never asked for it before- so when he did, she was more than happy to give him two days off, even though he'd only asked for the one. With the date set, he contacted Matt, making arrangements to meet him at the Holt household bright and early.

Matt wasn't the only one waiting for him.

There she was, hair pulled up, hands on her hips, a grin on her face that told him that he was not going to be able to convince her against whatever it was that she had decided she was doing.

"Katie."

"Shiro."

Oh how he wished he had both arms right now- how could he properly express his displeasure if he couldn't do the disappointed older brother arm fold? Katie, by all rights, should not be here- today was Tuesday, and thus, she, like any other sixteen year old girl, should be in school.

"I'm coming." She told him, eyes daring him to challenge her. "You're taking me with you."

"And if I say no?" Shiro asked.

"Doesn't matter, not your car." She pointed out- and damn, she had him there.

Which meant she was coming for sure, because if there was one thing he knew about Matt, it was how much of a pushover he could be when it came to his baby sister. "And school?"

"I have a cold." She cheerfully reported, ignoring the fact that she was very much cold free and was thus, lying through her teeth. "Also, I call shotgun."

And that was how Shiro ended up in the back of Matt's car. A classic design, painted a vivid green, that he had salvaged from a scrapyard just before they had left for Kerberos. He didn't have to ask to know that he'd been burying himself in it's repairs since they'd gotten back, likely trying to distract himself from his own grief.

"Matt's teaching me to drive, you know." Pidge told him, glancing back. "Says this baby'll be mine someday."

"You're already the age to learn, huh?" Shiro asked. "Time really does fly."

"I still remember when you were in diapers like it was yesterday." Matt said, his tone rueful. "Even smaller than you are now."

"Oh shut up." Glaring at her brother, Katie folded her arms in front of her chest. "What's this west
town like, anyways? I've heard of it, but I've never been there before. What kind of name is west town anyways?"

"It's not really it's name, not really." Shiro told her. "I don't even think it's a real town. More like a central gathering point for folk who live out in the desert. It's just kind of always been there, even before the Galaxy Garrison built it's facility here."

"They've been trying to buy the land up from under them ever since." Matt told her. "So... yeah. The people who live there pretty much hate anyone who has anything to do with Garrison, so don't expect a warm welcome."

"Expectations suitably lowered." She said, in an echo of her brother. "So it's what? A place where people who don't want to be found gather? That sounds pretty contradictory to me."

"Well, I don't know if it's so much that they don't want to be found..." Shiro said, trailing off. "Shiro, they live out in the middle of the desert." Katie pointed out. "That sounds a lot like they don't want to be found to me."

"...okay, you might have something there, actually." Shiro admitted. "And you're sure Keith's there, Matt?"

"Sure? No." Matt told him. "But sometimes the cadets sneak out there, and a few of them claim to have seen Keith there every so often. If we talk to the locals, we might learn more."

"If they'll be willing to talk to us." Katie observed. "Though from the sound of it, I'm just surprised that they tolerate Keith. I mean, dropout or not, he's still former Garrison, right?"

It was a fair point, Shiro had to admit. If he really was out there, it was strange that the locals hadn't tried to force him out yet. Perhaps it was just because it was Keith- he'd always been the type to keep to himself. Matt had been right- he really didn't talk to too many people back at the Garrison, and the two of them were probably the closest thing that he had to friends.

Well, there was Katie too, but they'd only met a handful of times. Still, they did seem to get along well together, which was probably the reason she'd decided to come out here with them.

That, or she was just curious about how someone she knew had managed to pull off becoming a desert cryptid. She was into that sort of thing.

Keith was too.

And as for himself? Well, he was just plain worried about Keith. He knew the kid could handle himself when it came down to it, which was also sort of the problem- he didn't seem to know how to ask for help when he actually needed it. If Keith had managed to get into some kind of trouble with the Galaxy Garrison... well, he just didn't want him to face it alone.

He wasn't sure how much help he could give him, disabled as he now was, but he couldn't exactly abandon the kid either. He'd been his mentor, and that mentorship wasn't over yet, not in his eyes.

Of course, there was a chance that Keith wasn't alone out there. Maybe he was with his father, and the mother that no one had ever met, only heard about. Shiro didn't even so much as know her name- she truly was a mysterious figure, all told.

He hoped he was with them. Better together with family, than apart from it.
Especially if the Garrison was hunting you.

Most of the buildings, such as they were, in west town were located up on a plateau. Not only did it have sweeping views of the surrounding desert, but it also had a bird's eye view of the Galaxy Garrison in the distance- as well as the only road leading into town.

Which, incidentally, was not paved. It hadn't been when Shiro last had cause to visit the outpost- and it really was more of an outpost than a town- years ago, before Keith even first enrolled in the Garrison, and it still wasn't now.

"I thought I was going to die." Matt whispered, clearly fighting the urge to get out and kiss the ground once they'd arrived. "Shiro, you've been here before, right? Why didn't you warn me?"

"I... kind of forgot about it, actually." Shiro admitted, an almost sheepish expression on his face. "Sorry. The drive back down isn't as bad though."

And judging from the way Matt paled, it was clear that it hadn't occurred to him that they'd have to get back down again. It almost would have been funny, if it hadn't cost them so very much- that after surviving a spaceship crash that, by all means, should have been fatal, that a drive up a rocky desert road was still a source of terror for him.

"It's sure quiet here, though." Katie observed. "Are there really people here?"

"They probably all saw us coming, and decided to stay inside." Shiro told her. "Like I said, they aren't that fond of outsiders. Especially ones from the Garrison."

"I'm amazed that people can actually live out here, though." Matt observed, seeming to recollect himself. "Where should we start, Shiro?"

"There's a general store here. We should start from there." Shiro told him. "If Keith has been here, then odds are, the owner would probably recognize him."

"The eighties mullet does stand out." Katie muttered, half under her breath.

"Oh, you better not tell Keith that." Matt told her. "He hates it when people call his hair a mullet. I mean, it totally is a mullet, but-"

"Okay people, we didn't come out all this way just to discuss Keith's hair." Shiro interjected, glancing between them. "Let's focus on the mission."

"Mission, huh?" Arching his brows, Matt grinned. "I like the sound of that."

Shaking his head, faintly grinned in amusement, Shiro took the lead. Katie was right- it was awfully quiet here. But there were people here, that much he could tell- even if he couldn't see them, he could feel eyes on him, making his skin crawl. Casting his own gaze over the ramshackle assortment of buildings that hadn't changed in the least since his last visit here, he paused, his gaze lingering on something in the distance.

There had always been a valley just over the horizon of the west town, one that he knew was filled with rocky outcroppings and old caves. He'd explored the area once, back when he had been a cadet, and nearly had gotten himself lost because of it. Not one of his finer moments, he'd readily admit.

It was hard to tell from this distance, but he could have sworn that there was a large rocky
outcropping that hadn't been there before. The massive chunks of earth jutted up into the sky, like five great pillars, with the central pillar towering above the rest.

Strange. Something like that didn't just develop overnight, or even over the course of several years-decades, maybe, even centuries. Maybe it was just his imagination, though. He considered himself to have a pretty good memory, but it wasn't like it was infallible, and it had been several years since he'd had cause to come out this way.

That he was mistaken was a lot more likely an option.

"So, you've been here before, Shiro." Matt spoke up, breaking into his thoughts, "Any etiquette tips that we should know about?"

"Other than not volunteering that you're Garrison?" Shiro told him. "Just... try and keep your head down. And if they act like they want us to leave, we leave."

"Just like that?" Katie asked with a frown.

"Just like that." Shiro nodded. "Come on, let's go. We should probably buy something while we're here, all three of us. Might make the owner more willing to talk. Katie, you brought some money?"

"Yeah." Katie told him, patting the large messenger bag that she'd brought with her. "That kind of place, huh?"

"That kind of place." Shiro said simply.

The general store was almost entirely as he remembered it- but he got the feeling that things didn't change out here too much. If anything did, it was the residents- he recognized the owner of the general store, but not the only customer- a man with almost startlingly bright red hair, and one hell of a mustache.

"Pretty early in the day to be seeing Garrison folk." The owner observed, no sooner than had his eyes fallen upon him. "Though you look like you've been through quite the ride, son, since you last showed up around these parts."

So he recognized him. Briefly, he couldn't help but wonder if he'd heard or not. He knew information traveled a little differently out here.

"You could say that." Shiro said. "We're not here looking for any trouble. We just have some questions."

"Questions can lead to trouble." The owner observed.

"Well, hopefully these won't." Shiro told him. "We're looking for someone."

"Oh, those kind of questions always lead to trouble." The owner said, and Shiro could swear that he almost looked amused at the prospect. "But I'll bite. Yer lookin fer the Kogane kid."

Well, that caught him off guard. "Uh... actually, yes. How did you...?"

"Not the first Garrison fellow to come round askin bout him." The owner told him. "But you don't sound like yer with em."

"I'm not." Shiro told him. "Not anymore."

"Keith's a friend of ours." Katie piped in, setting down several candy bars on the counter, which
the owner did not waste any time in ringing up. "We just want to make sure he's not dead out in the
desert somewhere."

"Oh, I reckon you don't have to worry about that." The owner observed. "The Kogane kid comes by
here sometimes, sure enough. Doesn't do no more than stock up on supplies. He don't ask
questions, and we don't either. Pretty lady comes round with him sometimes too."

Shiro was pretty sure he caught Matt muttering something about Keith having pulled a
Commander Kogane after all, but somehow, he didn't buy it.

"Pretty lady got a name?" Katie asked.

"If she got one, I don't know it." The owner told her. "Just not the sort of type you usually find
round here."

"Any clue where he might live?" Shiro asked.

Somewhere, in the back of his mind, it registered with him that the mustached man had left,
slipping out without their notice.

"Oh no, son, you don't want to be asking that question." The owner told him. "Them Garrison folk
that came to look fer him awhile back- they went out to the valley, and they ain't never come
back."

"Well, that sounds ominous." Matt noted. "Maybe probably we shouldn't go there."

"I'd advise it." The man said. "Nobody round here goes out there no more. You get far enough that
yer car and all yer other little devices don't work no more, you listen to me, and you just turn
yerselves right around. Push yer car back the way you came, and it'll start workin again, right as
rain."

"We'll keep that in mind." Shiro told him, unable to help but frown. "What does that have to do
with Keith, though?"

The owner seemed to ponder the question- before he shrugged his shoulders. "I'll tell you folk this,
only because you don't seem to be with them others, but that Kogane kid? I don't know if yer
friends or not, but if yer lookin fer him, you'd best stay away."

"Cause son," the owner told him, looking Shiro dead in his eyes, "-right round when that kid first
showed up here, that's when people stopped comin back from the valley."
the valley

Chapter Summary

He might have entertained exploring the valley on foot, at least at first. But now that they were actually here, he couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched.

And not by the people from west town.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone, back again with the second chapter! The investigation continues! This is another one of those days when I don't have anything too much of not to say here, so I'll just let everyone get right into the story! I hope you enjoy this new chapter!

"Alright so, based upon our investigation, we can conclude two things."

Watching as Matt stood in front of the car, indicating the number two with his fingers, Shiro merely arched a brow. He had a feeling he knew where he was going with this, but he'd let him continue.

None of the other locals had been willing to talk to them, no matter how many they had asked. Some of them just seemed wary, distrustful- but he'd expected that much. Others, however, just looked downright apprehensive, almost fearful- and he'd caught one crossing himself just out of the corner of his eye at least once.

Whatever was going on here, he didn't think it was just because of their Garrison ties that the local population was being rather mum on the subject. If he didn't know any better, it almost seemed as if they were afraid to talk about it.

"First, we seem to have stumbled onto a truly amazing outpost of Southern accents." Matt said. "And second, that Keith is apparently a far more advanced level cryptid than we first gave him credit for."

"Okay, I think we need to get off the whole cryptid thing already." Shiro told him. "This is serious."

"You don't think Keith actually has anything to do with that person from the Garrison vanishing, do you?" Katie asked him, glancing up at him with a frown. "Because I might not know him as well as the two of you do, but that doesn't sound like Keith."

"No, I don't." Shiro told her. "But I don't think it's coincidence either. There's clearly something going on here, some kind of big picture that we're just not getting."

"Yeah like, what's up with this pretty lady that the guy mentioned?" Matt chimed in. "I mean... maybe Keith really did go and pull a full Commander Kogane."
"Matt, I think we both know that's way more unlikely than Keith becoming some kind of malevolent cryptid." Katie told him. "The pretty lady is obviously involved in this in some fashion, but I don't think she and Keith are fucking."

"Katie!" Matt squawked, eyes going wide. "When we get home, I'm telling mom to wash your mouth out with soap."

"Matt, I'm sixteen, I'm legally allowed to swear now." She told him, before turning her attention to Shiro. "Well? If you don't think it's a coincidence, then what do you think is going on Shiro? Because I have to admit, while I don't think Keith would do something like this, or even have the means to do something like this, the timing does seem a little suspicious."

"I'm not sure." Shiro admitted, shaking his head. "From the sound of it, Keith's been coming and going pretty freely, so I don't think this is a matter of him being held captive, but..."

Letting out a long sigh, he turned on his heel, casting his gaze out towards the valley looming in the horizon. "We just don't have enough information."

"...you're not thinking of going to check it out, are you?" Matt ventured. "Because I'm pretty sure the cryptic general store owner just said that was a bad idea."

"I'm not saying we should actually go into the valley." Shiro told them. "I'm just... All I'm saying is, that this phenomena is worth checking out."

"I'm with Shiro on this one." Katie chimed in. "I mean, some kind of weird phenomena that just causes all electronics to cease functioning? You can't tell me that you're at least not a little curious, Matt."

"...I am." Matt admitted. "But I am also apparently in charge of having a level head on my shoulders. Shiro, did your brain get shaken around by the crash or something? Because normally you would not be telling us to go into some kind of weird technological dead zone in which people vanish."

"Like I said, I'm not saying that we actually go into the valley." Shiro repeated. "The store owner was very specific when he told us that we should turn around when our car stops working, which means there's actually a chance to do that before the whole supposed vanishing part."

"Yeah, but like... how much of a window are we talking about here?" Matt asked. "A minute? Two? Because tonight's pasta night, and I am not missing pasta night."

"I mean, I'm not going to force you to do it if you don't want to, but..." Shiro trailed off.

Matt held his gaze for a long moment, before he finally let out a long sigh. "You're really worried about Keith, huh?"

"You aren't, after hearing all that?" Shiro asked.

"I- yeah, no, I'm worried about Keith too." Matt admitted. "If he's gotten himself mixed up in something weird, then we can't exactly sit around and do nothing about it."

"So what's the plan?" Katie asked. "We go in, try to get a reading, then leave?"

"Try to get a reading with what?" Matt asked. "Like I said, technological dead zone."

"Good point." She admitted, her lips twisting into a frown. "Maybe we could get a soil sample?"
"Do we even have anything to take a soil-" Shiro began asking, pausing midsentence as Katie silently opened her bag, pulling out a small petri dish- and then another, just for good measure. "Of course we do. Good job, Katie."

"Always thinking two steps ahead." Katie told them, slipping the petri dishes back into her bag. "So, we doing this?"

Giving her a firm nod, Shiro fixed his gaze on the horizon once more. Keith was out there somewhere, and whatever it was that he had gotten himself mixed up in, he wasn't going to leave him to deal with it alone.

"We're doing this."

Sure enough, just as they had been warned, once they drew closer to the valley, their car lurched to a sudden stop, the engine sputtering before it died completely.

It was hard to judge distance in the desert, but if he had to guess, the valley was probably still a good ten or so miles out. He found himself searching for those strange, spire-like outcroppings, and though they were harder to see from this perspective than they had been on the plateau, he could just barely make them out.

Gaze fixed on them, he found himself blinking before long, rubbing his eyes. Maybe it was just the desert, but they almost seemed to shimmer in the horizon, as if they were about to give way to something else. As curious a sensation as that was, it also kind of gave him a headache, and he took that as a warning he was doing something he probably shouldn't.

He didn't know what to make of the cryptic warning they had gotten, but caution was never a bad thing. If he were alone out here, he might be making some different choices, but with the Holt siblings here, things were different. If some part of him was telling him he'd better stop looking, then that's exactly what he would do.

He might have entertained exploring the valley on foot, at least at first. But now that they were actually here, he couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched.

And not by the people from west town.

The only reason he didn't rush them out of there right now was because the gaze didn't feel hostile. At least, not yet.

It was as if they were waiting to see what they would do first.

Getting out of the car, Matt threw open the engine, trying to determine what went wrong. "I don't know what to tell you, Shiro," he said, casting a glance over in his direction, "$\text{-by all means, everything should still be working like a charm. There's nothing wrong with the engine, other than the obvious fact that it just won't turn on.}$"

"Did you check the-?" Katie piped up.

"Yes, I checked that. It was like the first thing I checked!" Matt cut her off, watching her through narrowed eyes. "Need I remind you who it was that built this engine in the first place? I think I know how it works, Katie."

She gave him a shrug of her shoulders. "Just making sure."
"Alright, it's obvious that we can't stay here." Shiro told them, glancing between the pair of Holt siblings. He'd brought them out this far, but he wouldn't put either of them at any further risk, not if the general store owner's warning had any merit- and he was starting to suspect that it did. "Matt, help me push the car out of this dead zone. Katie, you get those soil samples."

"Already on it!" She told him, and he couldn't help but smile. "I'll get a control sample from outside of the dead zone too, so we can have something to compare it to."

"Good idea." Shiro nodded. "Alright Matt, on the count of three, we push the car back. You ready?"

"My bulging muscles are always ready for such fine, manly activities." Matt told him with a grin. "Sure you'll be okay?"

"You don't have to worry about me." Shiro reassured him. "I've been keeping up with my rehab. Plus I've got a job that has me on my feet all day."

"What, you mean to tell me that you never snack on any of the pastries?" Matt asked, arching his brows. "No man alive has that much willpower, Shiro, not even you. You can't fool me."

Unable to help himself, Shiro let out a faint laugh. "Okay, you got me. Maybe every so often, I might snack on a danish or two. Now come on, let's move this car."

It took a bit more effort than he would have liked, but they got the car moved. Once he confirmed that the engine was working again, Matt gave him the all clear signal.

"Katie, you done?" Shiro called out.

"Just about!" She called back, holding up a hand. After a moment, she popped back into view, already tucking a petri dish back into her bag. "Okay, samples collected. We can head back now."

"Good." With a curt nod of his head, he waited until she was safely back in the car before he got inside himself. "Alright, let's head back to town."

Casting one last wary look out the window, he could have sworn that he almost felt whoever was watching them seemingly lose interest. The faster they got out of here, the better.

"To the west town?" Matt asked, peering back at him.

"Home." Shiro told him, shaking his head. "They probably saw us drive out to the valley, so it might be best to give them a wide berth on the way back."

"Don't have to tell me twice." Matt told him, backing the car up. "You want to stay for dinner? I know I said this earlier, but mom's making pasta tonight."

"I'd... like that, actually." Shiro told him, almost hesitating for a moment. He didn't want to intrude upon their family dinner, but he got the feeling that none of them would consider it as such. "It's been awhile since I had a home cooked meal."

Cooking... well, it wasn't his strong suit, to say the least. He'd been trying to learn, now that he was living on his own, but it was slow going. Having only one hand now did nothing to help speed up that process.

"Maybe you should have mom give you some cooking lessons." Katie offered. "She's been trying to teach me, but I'm afraid I'm a lost cause at this point."
"Aw, don't be so hard on yourself, Pidge." Matt told her, ignoring the faint grumble the use of that nickname earned him. "At least you're better at it than Keith. Knowing that he's out there somewhere, possibly in charge of cooking for himself... that might be the most horrifying thing of all."

"Don't be so hard on him, it only happened once." Shiro noted.

Sure, even he knew better than to try and make a grilled cheese sandwich in the toaster, but nobody was perfect.

"Yeah, because they never let him back in the kitchen ever again." Matt observed, glancing back at him. "That once is all we have to go off of, Shiro."

"...that's fair." Shiro was forced to admit.

Watching as the valley faded from view, Shiro couldn't help but frown. He didn't know what he'd expected to find here, but he'd been hoping that if not Keith himself, that it would at least be answers, not even more mysteries. Had someone from the Garrison really disappeared after heading into the valley? The fact that they had been looking for Keith was not a thought that rested easy with him.

Did... did Keith know about it?

What was he even doing out here?

He had a million questions, and none of them, it seemed, had any answers.

It wasn't that he didn't know where to start looking for them- he did, and they were currently driving away from it. But for the time being, he would put that idea aside. Mrs. Holt had already lost a husband because he hadn't been able to act fast enough to save him, he couldn't allow her to lose her two children as well. He had a responsibility to bring them back home, safe and sound.

If he wanted to go into the valley, he'd do it alone.

Just not yet.

From the sound of it, Keith was coming and going as he pleased, so at the moment, he wasn't too worried about him. Like he said before, it didn't seem like he was any kind of captive. Wherever he was right now, he was likely there willingly- and though he couldn't shake the feeling that he had gotten himself mixed up in something worrisome, he'd just have to trust that he knew what he was doing.

Still.

Even so, he couldn't help but be concerned. Knowing that he was out there, somewhere, in the desert... as much as he tried to reassure himself, it didn't sit right with him.

"Actually, Matt?" Shiro spoke up, peering up at him. "Do you think we can swing by the west town one more time? There's something I need to do."

"I see you came back."

Gaze flickering towards the owner, Shiro gave him a wry smile. "I did."

"Decided not to go after yer friend?" The man asked.
"Not today." Shiro told him. "Could I ask you to keep something here for him, in case he comes back?"

"Don't see why not." The man said, giving him a shrug of his shoulder. "You seem like a decent enough fellow, even if ya do associate with them Garrison folk."

"You know, Keith's Garrison too." Shiro couldn't help but observe.

"Nah, that boy ain't Garrison." The man said with a snort. "Oh, I don't doubt he was there once, likely where ya got so close to him in the first place. But he ain't Garrison."

He really couldn't argue with that, not really. It was true that Keith had never really fit in at the Galaxy Garrison. He never really made much of an effort to, preferring to remain on the sidelines, as an outsider. Not only did he not make an effort to get along with his fellow cadets, he didn't make much of one to appeal to his instructors, either. The military discipline that they tried to ingrain in every cadet had never really taken hold in Keith- were it not for his talent, he'd probably have been kicked out long ago.

Though somehow, he didn't think that was quite what this man was referring to.

"Well, if you do see Keith again, please give him this." Shiro told him, sliding a small white envelope across the counter, Keith's name scrawled on the front. There wasn't much inside but his address, but he hoped that it would serve its purpose.

An olive branch, if you would.

In truth, he wanted to write more- much more- but the hand he'd lost was his dominant one. Suffice to say, that although he had been putting effort into it learning to write with it, his handwriting was still a complete mess. It had taken all the effort he'd had just to make it legible.

Some people, he thought, unable to help but think fondly of Keith himself in that moment, didn't have the advantage of being ambidextrous.

"Tell him it's from Shiro."

No sooner than had he entered, did he find himself swept up in a warm embrace, putting to rest any worries that he might have about Colleen Holt not wanting him here. "Oh Shiro, it's so good to see you again!"

"It's nice to see you too, Mrs. Holt." Returning her embrace with a smile, Shiro forced himself to push aside the surge of guilt that rose up in him. Maybe nobody here blamed him for Samuel Holt's death- but that didn't change the fact that he did.

Still, he wasn't going to let his own guilt spoil the evening.

"I'm sorry that I couldn't greet you when you came by this morning." Colleen told him, drawing away from the embrace, a soft smile on her face. "I had to take a sudden shift at the library."

"It's alright, I understand how it can be." Shiro told her. "I hear you're making pasta tonight?"

"That I am!" Colleen told him. "It should be done in just a few minutes. Why don't you take a seat in the meantime? I hear you've been trooping around in the desert today."

"Are you sure?" Shiro asked. "Because if you need any help in the kitchen, I can-"
"No, no, it's fine." Colleen told him. "You're our guest tonight, Shiro, and it's been so long since
we've had you at our table. You brought my son home safe to me, the least I can do is not make
you work."

"I-" Quickly shutting his mouth, Shiro swallowed back his own guilt anew. He should have
brought home more than just her son. "Alright, if you insist. I just feel bad, not helping out."

"I do. Now, off with you." She said, with a wave of her hand. "Katie, make sure he stays put!"

Exchanging a glance with Katie, Shiro gave her a helpless shrug of his shoulders. If it were anyone
else, he'd worry that he was being treated like some kind of invalid, but Colleen Holt was not that
type of person.

"So you really think Keith's out there, in the desert somewhere?" Katie asked, walking backwards
ahead of him into the dining room.

"Sounds to me like that's pretty much it." Shiro told her. "All I can do now is hope that he decides
to accept my invitation."

"Maybe he knows something." Katie ventured. "I mean, he had to have left the Garrison for some
reason, right? Maybe he found out about the faulty parts before we even knew about them."

"Maybe." Shiro said. "But I know about the faulty parts, and so does Matt, but the Garrison isn't
exactly trying to chase us down."

"True." Katie admitted, pulling out a chair. "You can sit across from me, next to Matt."

"Don't mind if I do." Shiro told her, pulling out a chair for himself, taking a seat. "It just feels like
there's something more to this whole thing than we're getting."

"Well I haven't gotten a chance to look at those soil samples yet, but I can tell you what the
Internet chatter is." Katie told him- and judging from the expression on her face, he got the feeling
it was going to be a hell of a story.

He thought she'd been pretty quiet on the way back- so she'd been browsing the Internet.

"By Internet chatter, do you mean those conspiracy boards you hang out on?" Shiro asked, arching
a brow. "Matt told me you made a friend on one."

"Who, Red?" She asked, flashing him a quick grin. "Yeah, he's pretty cool. Totally thinks the
whole pilot error thing is a load of crap. Says he's looking for solid proof, but hasn't been able to
find it just yet."

"Glad to hear it." Shiro said. "So?"

"Oh right, the chatter." Katie blinked. "Well to be honest with you, there's not actually a whole lot
of it. It's pretty remote out there, so it kind of figures. Most of it comes from Garrison cadets, you
know, using their one hour of allocated Internet usage wisely, as one does. I looked into things, and
according to rumor, the area's supposedly off limits."

"Off limits." Shiro repeated, arching a brow. "But the Garrison doesn't own that land. How could
they make it off limits?"

"Well, it's not officially off limits." She told him. "More like a very stern warning to all cadets to
stay away."
"How stern?" Shiro asked.

"Expulsion stern." Katie told him.

"Yeah, that's pretty stern." Shiro admitted. "Matt, did you know about this?"

Looking more than a little spooked at being caught entering the room, Matt flinched. "It's the first I've heard of it, but they don't have me working with the cadets."

"Well I don't think they'd make it up for no reason." Shiro said, leaning back in his chair. "If they did send someone out there after Keith, and they didn't come back, I could understand why they would want to keep any cadets out of the area. The west town is still a popular dare spot for them, isn't it?"

"Popular as ever." Matt told him, setting down a plate in front of him. "Probably even more so after Keith went and became a cryptid. They're all hoping to catch a glimpse of the ace pilot that just up and vanished."

"I'm just amazed none of them have ever tried to confront Keith." Katie said.

"That's... actually pretty normal." Shiro told her. "Keith kind of held himself at a distance from the other cadets, and almost all of them seemed to return the favor. It's not too much of a surprise that none of them would actually try to approach him."

"Except for that one cargo pilot." Matt noted.

"Yeah, but you were right about that. I wouldn't really call those two friends." Shiro said with a frown.

"Rivals." Matt noted, giving them a sage nod. "Or at least, that was- what was his name again, Lance?" Frowning, he shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, pretty sure it was Lance. Anyways, he liked to think so. I don't think Keith really saw it the same way."

"He definitely did not see it the same way." Shiro told him. "I don't think he even remembered his name more than half the time, even before they got divided into different classes. Almost enough for me to feel kind of bad for the guy."

Almost. There were obviously some underlying issues there, but it still didn't change the fact that he got into Keith's face on the regular, generally in disregard of his personal space. Something Keith tended to value. Honestly, sometimes Shiro had to wonder if he was just not trying to learn the guy's name out of pure spite.

Except Keith wasn't actually that petty- at least, not usually. He probably genuinely didn't remember his name, and had likely since forgotten all about him.

"But we're getting a bit away from the main point here. What were you trying to tell me, Katie?" Shiro asked.

"Aliens." She told him, folding her hands in front of her, almost seeming to smirk. "The Internet thinks it's aliens."

"Aliens." Shiro repeated. "No offense Katie, but last I checked, the Internet thinks everything is aliens."

"Fair and true." She admitted. "But that's what the chatter is saying."
"So what, is Keith being brainwashed by aliens or something?" Matt asked.

"Nobody's being brainwashed by aliens." Shiro said, rolling his eyes. "Sorry Katie, but I think maybe the Internet is a bit off base on this one."

"Eh." Shrugging her shoulders, Katie took it in stride. "Never said I bought it myself."

"Yeah, but how cool would it be if it was really aliens?" Matt asked, taking a seat. "I mean, just imagine. What if Keith's out there right now, making first contact?"

"Technically if it was true, Keith would have made first contact quite some time ago." Katie pointed out.

"Alright you two, that's enough about aliens." Shiro told them. "Besides," glancing up, catching Colleen's faint smile, "-it looks like dinner's ready."

If he caught the way her gaze lingered on the empty chair at the head of the table, he didn't say anything.

Dinner with the Holts had turned out to be just what he needed.

He had very much been keeping up with the physical side of his recovery, just as he'd told Matt, but if he had to be completely honest, when it came to the emotional side of it... that was where he was lacking. He kept coming back, again and again, to how he'd let a man die- how he'd done everything in his power to bring them all home safe, but it just hadn't been enough.

Shiro never considered himself a hero, even before Kerberos.

At least the rest of the world was now seeing him in that same light.

But the Holts... they forgave him. It baffled him. Even if they didn't believe that the crash was the result of pilot error, they still should have held at least a little enmity in their hearts for him- and yet, not a single ounce of that had surfaced, not even once.

Maybe they once had, but it had been given time to pass. He'd never know.

But being back together with the family he had gotten to know so well during the preparations for the Kerberos mission... it had been good. It made him feel whole, in a way that he didn't fully realize he hadn't up until that very moment.

Not completely whole, though. Sam Holt was still gone, his right arm was still lost, and there was still an important person missing from his life.

But Keith, at least, was alive. And whatever it was that the Garrison wanted from him, whatever it was that he had gotten mixed up in... he was going to get the answers to those questions too.

Making his way up to his apartment, Shiro dug into his pocket, pulling out his keys- before he froze, his blood running cold. In the low light of the hallway, it was difficult to make out- but he'd always had good eyesight.

There were scratch marks on the lock.

Someone had broken into his apartment.

Drawing in a long breath, he reached a tentative hand out, testing the knob. It opened at the
slightest touch- and he wasted no time in shoving his keys back into his pocket, bracing himself for the chance of a fight. He didn't think that he had much of value that a robber would want, and there was a chance that they had already left, but he wasn't about to let his guard down.

One armed or not, he still knew how to defend himself.

Someone, as it turned out, was very much still in his apartment.

But it was no robber.

Letting out his breath, Shiro felt his shoulders slump, a look of visible relief crossing his face. He'd been hoping it would work, but he didn't think his olive branch would work this fast.

"Hey Keith." Shiro spoke first, for the brief span of a moment, almost worried that he would vanish like a mirage once he did. "I see you learned how to pick locks."

"Hey Shiro." Keith responded. "You have shitty locks."
He really didn't resemble his father, Shiro dimly thought. He had only met Commander Kogane once, when he'd first brought Keith to the Galaxy Garrison, but aside from the color of their hair, the two of them barely resembled each other. The shape of his face, his body type, the strange color of his eyes... those all must have come from his mother.

Unable to help himself, Shiro let out a snort. "You break into my apartment, and the first thing you do is complain that my locks are bad?"

"You were out. Didn't want to wait." Keith told him, giving him a shrug of his shoulders, as if the perfectly logical next step in finding someone you came to meet wasn't home was to pick their lock and invite yourself in.

...which, based upon what he knew about Keith, probably wasn't actually all that far off. He might have talent, but he tended to be a little lacking when it came to common sense.

"I didn't think you'd come this quickly." Shiro admitted, closing the door behind him.

He really hadn't. The fact that he had turned up so soon... there were only two possibilities. Either he had just missed him, or-

-or someone had told him.

Trying not to let it show on his face, his thoughts flashed back to the strange mustached man he'd spotted in the general store when they'd first entered. When exactly had he left? Was it before or after Keith's name had been brought up?

"Well, I did." Pushing himself up to his feet, Keith gave him an awkward smile, spreading out his hands. "Thought you wanted to see me."

He took this as a chance to give the boy a quick study. Not much had changed since he'd left for Kerberos- his hair had gotten a bit longer, but that was pretty much it. He would have thought that what with living out in the desert and all, he would have gotten a bit of sun, but he was still as pale as ever.
He really didn't resemble his father, Shiro dimly thought. He had only met Commander Kogane once, when he'd first brought Keith to the Galaxy Garrison, but aside from the color of their hair, the two of them barely resembled each other. The shape of his face, his body type, the strange color of his eyes... those all must have come from his mother.

The borderline too sharp teeth, and the definitely too sharp nails... maybe those came from her as well.

It was no wonder Iverson had doubted Keith really was the Commander's son, right up until he'd proven himself in the pilot's seat. There had been no denying that.

"I did." Shiro told him. "Believe me Keith, I definitely wanted to see you."

He seemed to smile at that- and if Shiro caught the way his gaze lingered on his missing arm for a moment, well, he just decided not to say anything.

"I came to see you, you know. When you were in the hospital." His surprise must have shown on his face- because Keith arched a brow, looking vaguely bemused. "You were still in a coma."

He had admittedly no way to corroborate that story, but he believed him.

"So... I hear you've been living in the desert?" Shiro asked, nearly kicking himself. He wanted answers, sure, but that was probably not the most subtle of opening questions. Keith was evasive at best even under normal circumstances, he doubted that he'd open up readily, even to him.

"Heard right." Keith told him with a shrug, folding his arms in front of him. "It's nice there. Quiet."

"No Iverson barking orders at you?" Shiro asked, a hint of a grin on his face. Keith not automatically changing the topic was always a good sign.

"No Iverson." Keith agreed, apparently not fighting the urge to grimace at the man's name. "You know I don't believe it, right? What the Garrison says about the pilot error. I know you, Shiro, and I know that's a bunch of crap."

"Glad to hear it." Shiro told him, his smile growing.

He really had missed Keith, he realized. He didn't know how it was that he'd managed to worm his way under his skin like this, but at some point, he'd become pretty darn fond of the kid.

"Hear you've had your own troubles with the Garrison." Shiro observed, treading the topic with caution. "Something about dropping out?"

"Wasn't my style." Keith told him. "With you and Matt gone... I didn't see much of a point in sticking around."

That was... fair enough, actually. It sounded so much like something that Keith would do, that were it not for the fact that he knew his personnel files had been classified, he wouldn't have even questioned the explanation.

"So instead you've been living in the desert, spooking the local cadets." Shiro observed, arching a brow.

And the locals, but he'd leave that part out.
Keith let out a snort. "I'm not spooking them."

"Matt referred to you as a cryptid." Shiro pointed out. "You have sightings."

"Just trying to live my life." Keith protested. "Not my fault."

"Didn't say it was." Shiro told him. "Do you want anything? It's a bit late, and I... admittedly don't have too much in the way of actual groceries sitting around, but I can manage."

Shaking his head, Keith dropped his hands back down to his sides. "I'm fine, Shiro. I wasn't planning on staying very long anyways."

Shiro couldn't help but frown at that- while he hadn't exactly expected Keith to stick around, from the sound of it, he was already planning on cutting his visit short. He'd barely gleaned anything from him yet, didn't know if he was actually even really safe or not.

"I- Keith, you know you can talk to me about anything, right?" Shiro asked, deciding to just come right out with it. "Just because neither of us are involved with the Garrison anymore, doesn't mean that I've stopped being your mentor. If you need a helping hand with anything..."

He gave him something of a rueful smile. "Well, I've only got the one now, but I'll gladly lend it out to you any time you need it."

Keith, for his part, almost looked as if he had been expecting this. "How much did you hear from Matt?"

"Just that your Garrison files are classified now." Shiro told him. "You and your father's."

He didn't look the least bit surprised by this information, taking it in with a shrug of his shoulders. "Guessing you haven't read them."

"No Keith, I have not read top secret classified files." Shiro told him, unable to keep his voice from sounding dry. "But I worry about you. I just... I want to be sure that you're alright, that's all. From the sound of it, the Garrison's kind of looking for you."

Keith almost seemed to scoff. "Trust me, I don't have anything to fear from the Garrison. I'm fine, Shiro- really."

He sounded confident, though for the life of him, he couldn't figure out where he was drawing that confidence from. He wished it reassured him more, but there were still so many unknowns complicating the situation, that he couldn't take Keith's assurances at face value.

It wouldn't be the first time that he undersold a troublesome situation.

It wasn't like he didn't know how to protect himself- flight simulation wasn't the only thing he had scored highly in. Self defense courses were mandatory at the Galaxy Garrison, and Keith had excelled at those too. He didn't use any kind of martial art that Shiro recognized, instead adopting some strange, almost instinctive fighting style that proved the utmost effective.

And that wasn't touching on the knife.

Which yeah, a quick glance down at his belt revealed that he very much still had it with him. He didn't know what the deal was with Keith and that knife, but he never seemed to be separated from it for very long.
"Just- just know that the offer's on the table." Shiro told him.

"I'll keep it in mind." He told him, his expression almost seeming to falter. "I should probably get going, though."

"You sure?" Shiro asked, not wanting him to leave just yet. "Because I don't mind if you stay longer. Catch up on old times."

"Sounds nice." Keith said. "But I really can't stay."

"But you'll come around again, right?" Shiro asked. "There's a bakery just a few blocks from here- I've got a job there, so if you're ever in town again, you could swing by, and I could treat you to something."

There was a pause there- one long enough that he could feel his heart nearly drop in his chest. Keith... he had zero intentions of ever showing his face again.


And he wanted to push, wanted to insist that he come back, didn't want Keith to just drop out of his life, not when he knew that in spite of his assurances, he had to be involved in something dangerous- but Shiro knew that wasn't how Keith worked. The more he pushed, the less he'd get.

"Then I guess I'll see you later." He told him, forcing a smile that he didn't feel onto his face.

"Yeah." Keith told him. "Later."

Reaching for the door, Keith paused, almost seeming to hover there for a moment. His brow furrowing in thought, he turned back to face him, his expression taking a turn for the grim.

"Shiro?"

"Yeah?" Shiro asked, wondering if maybe he'd changed his mind.

"Don't try to go into the valley again."

"Okay Shiro, I'm going to have to stop you right there."

Closing his mouth, Shiro merely arched a brow at Matt. After last night's encounter- and god, that did qualify as an encounter, didn't it- with Keith, he knew that he had to discuss it with Matt, so he decided to make good use of his second day off and pay him a house call.

At least Katie had decided to actually go to school today.

"Did he- did Keith seriously warn you to stay out of the valley? How did he even know that we-?" Matt asked, leaning back in his chair. "Oh my god, this kid's cryptid levels are going off the charts."

"Cryptid levels?" Shiro asked. "Really, Matt?"

"No, you listen to me, Shiro." Matt told him, sitting straight, pointing towards him with what was almost accusation- though of what, he couldn't even begin to imagine. "Keith Kogane is officially a cryptid now. It's over, a done deal."

"I'll be sure to notify cryptozoologists everywhere." Shiro noted.
"Your sarcasm wounds me, Shiro." Matt told him. "It wounds me deeply."

"Duly noted." Shiro told him. "But that's what he said, almost word for word."

"Well I, for one, say we heed his advice." Matt told him. "It's common wisdom to pay heed to cryptic advice given by mysterious desert dwellers."

"Believe me, I have no intention of going back there if I don't have to." Shiro told him. "Keith seemed pretty adamant that he was safe, but... I don't know, Matt. I almost felt like he doesn't plan on coming back."

"So what, did he pay you a visit just so he could cut ties with you? Say one final farewell?" Matt asked, frowning. "Or was it just to warn you?"

Honestly, he didn't know, though he wished he did. He just couldn't shake the feeling of finality that their meeting had involved, as if he planned to never see him again.

"Maybe both?" Shiro ventured. "Any chance Katie came back with anything on those soil samples?"

He said he'd stay out of the valley, not that he'd completely give up looking into the matter. Sorry, Keith- but he couldn't just butt out of this entirely, not when it involved the Galaxy Garrison.

Not when it involved Keith.

"She did, but she'd kill me if I explained it for her." Matt told him.

"That sounds like her." Shiro remarked, letting out a faint laugh in spite of himself. "Guess I'll have to wait until school lets out, then."

"We could roll in once it's over, pick her up, embarrassing older brother style." Matt suggested, the impish grin on his face enough for him to guess that even if he said no, he'd still go himself anyways. "C'mon, it'll be fun."

"Not for Katie, it won't be." Shiro observed.

"Pssh, Katie." Matt said, giving him a wave of his hand. "You know deep down, she loves it. Besides, as her official older brother, it is my duty to embarrass her in front of her peers like, at least once a week. And you sir, have been derelict in your duties as of late."

"Didn't even know that I qualified." Shiro told him.

"Of course you qualify, Shiro." Matt told him. "Now, what are we sitting around here for? We've got a little sister to embarrass!"

Arching a brow, Shiro remained seated even as Matt sprung to his feet, ready and rearing to go. "Matt, it's not even noon yet."

"Oh." Matt paused, frowning as he sat back down. "Right. I knew that."

To the surprise of no one but Matt, the first thing Katie did upon spotting her brother waving to her from his car was to turn around and keep walking.

The fact that she stopped and came back upon realizing that Shiro was with him was something that had Matt sulking for the rest of the ride back to their home. By the time they had stepped in
the front door, however, the grievous offense had been completely forgotten.

"So Matt tells me you got some results from those soil samples." Shiro said, trailing behind them.

"That I did! C'mon and I'll show you!" Katie told him, grabbing his arm, and all but hauling him up the stairs to her room. An impressive feat for a girl he was pretty confident he could lift up with just his remaining hand.

"You two do that, I'll prepare some snacks!" Matt called out after them. "Shiro, you still like black tea?"

"Yeah, black tea's fine!" Shiro called back, barely having the chance to do so before Katie shuffled him into her room. The room that she usually kept so neat was currently in a state of disarray-something which he had come to know was a sign that she was currently working on some kind of a project.

He could hazard a guess as to what.

"So, which explanation do you want?" Katie told him, turning on her heel, almost vibrating with excitement, eager to share her findings. "The technical, wordy one, or the easy to understand one?"

"Easy to understand, please." Shiro told her, amused at her blunt honesty.

"Fair enough." She told him. "The soil samples are mostly the same, but for a few minor differences. It's these differences where things start to get really interesting."

There was a sparkle in her eyes that Shiro didn't miss, watching as she scampered over to her laptop, booting it up and wasting no time in bringing up images of what appeared to be the contents of the two petri dishes, only magnified.

"This one is the soil sample taken from outside the dead zone." Katie told him, humming to herself as she projected the image on the back wall of her room. "And this one is from the sample taken inside of it."

Staring at the two samples for a moment longer, Shiro merely cast her something of a helpless glance. "Think you could tell me just what it is that I'm supposed to be looking at, Katie?"

"Getting to that." She told him. "Now, as you can see, there are compounds present in the soil sample from within the dead zone that don't exist in the one from outside of it."

He could... sort of see that, yes.

"And here's where things get really interesting, Shiro." She continued, the gleam in her eyes likely visible from space. "Because these compounds? They don't exist on Earth."

And that was... more than Shiro had been expecting. Blinking for a moment, he stared at the two images, as if they were somehow supposed to make more sense to him than they had before. "So what you're saying is...?"

"That maybe the Internet might not be so off base this time after all." Katie told him.

And they were back to aliens again.

"Katie, you and I both know there are ways for compounds foreign to Earth to get here." Shiro began.
"No reported meteor strikes in the area." Katie informed him. "I checked, going back for years. The last time one came anywhere near the area was over twenty three years ago, and it hit thirty miles out, due south of the valley. According to the reporting officer, there wasn't anything left to find at the impact site, so it must have been destroyed when it crashed to Earth."

"Wait until you hear who the officer in charge of the report was, Shiro." Matt observed, ignoring the pointed glower of his sister as he entered the room.

Accepting the mug of black tea from him, Shiro had a sneaking suspicion that he might be able to make a guess, but he'd humor them. "Alright, I'll bite. Who?"

"Commander Kogane."

Yeah, that was pretty much who he expected.

"Keith's father." Shiro said, taking a light sip of his tea. "So you're saying you think his dad made first contact."

"I'm just throwing it out there." Katie told him. "I mean, come on- if the Galaxy Garrison knew about the existence of extraterrestrial life this whole time, and was covering it up, wouldn't that be a huge story?"

"And where does Commander Kogane going AWOL fit into this story?" Shiro asked her, unable to keep the skepticism out of his voice. "Not to mention Keith."

"We're admittedly still working on that part." Matt said.

"Matt here seems to have the hair brained idea that Commander Kogane's mystery wife is an alien that he ran off with, and that Keith is their hybrid child." Katie told him, rolling her eyes. "Which is absurd. The odds that any alien life out there would be genetically compatible enough with us to produce children is so low, it's not even worth considering."

Turning his gaze towards Matt, Shiro arched his brows. "You think Keith's half alien."

"Hey, I'm just laying it out there on the table." Matt told him.

"If Keith were half alien, why would Commander Kogane even let him enroll at the Galaxy Garrison in the first place, much less bring him there himself?" Katie asked. "Assuming the reason that he left with his hypothetical alien wife was to avoid capture, why would he come back here after all this time, and stick his hybrid son in the middle of a military institution?"

"She's got a point." Shiro told him, taking another sip of his tea.

"Oh sure, take her side." Matt grumbled. "I see how it is."

"Look, I think we're all getting ahead of ourselves." Shiro told them. "I know how much you two want to meet aliens," and he had to fight to keep his expression from faltering here, because he knew that their father was the same way, "-but let's not rush to conclusions just because some weird compounds showed up in the soil."

"I mean, if we could go back, get a few more samples-" Katie began.

"I don't think that's a good idea." Shiro cut her off, shaking his head. "Keith made it pretty clear we should stay away from the valley."
"Wait." Narrowing her eyes, Katie stormed up to him, standing on her toes to glare at him all the better. "You talked to Keith?"

"I-" Shiro blinked, glancing over towards Matt, who to his credit, looked properly sheepish. "Matt didn't tell you?"

He thought she'd been awfully quiet about that development in the car.

And now she whirled on her heel, turning that same glare on her brother. "No, he seems to have left that part out."

"I just-" Matt began, before wisely realizing that any excuse he could think of would not be sufficient in the eyes of his little sister. "Apparently Keith broke into Shiro's apartment?"

Turning back to face Shiro now, Katie cast him an incredulous look. "He broke into your apartment?"

"He broke into my apartment." Shiro repeated. "Was there waiting for me when I got back from dinner last night."

"Alright, so, just so I can be sure I'm on the same page here." Katie began, "Keith, Keith Kogane, broke into your apartment, and gave you a cryptic warning to stay out of the valley?"

"Are there any other Keiths?" Matt ventured.

Glancing back towards him, Katie shot her brother a baffled expression. "...yes?"

Narrowing his eyes, Matt retreated back into his own mug of tea. "...okay fair point."

"Well, there was a little more to it than that, but yeah, that's the gist of it." Shiro told her.

"You know what this means, right?" She asked, glancing between the two of them.

"That we stay away from the valley?" Matt ventured.

"Uh, no?" Katie blinked. "It obviously means that we have to go back."

"Sis, I love you with all of my heart, but if this were a horror movie, you would have just signed your own death warrant." Matt told her.

"This isn't a horror movie, Matt." Katie told him, rolling her eyes. "Besides, it's Keith. We're like, the closest thing he has to friends. If he's involved in all of this, why would he not try to help us?"

"Maybe it's not his choice?" Matt suggested.

"Matt's right." Shiro said. "Whatever is going on here, Keith went out of his way to visit me to tell me to stay away from the valley- and that's exactly what we're going to do."

"Even if Keith might be in danger?" Katie asked, not looking the least bit satisfied with that answer.

"He seemed pretty insistent that he wasn't." Shiro told her. "He'd know best."

"And you bought that?" She asked. "I mean, this is Keith we're talking about here."

"I believed that he didn't have any reason to lie to me about his own safety." Shiro said. "Look, if
anything comes up, then I'll reconsider it. But for now, the valley is off limits."

Grumbling at that, Katie let out a long sigh, her shoulders slumping in defeat. "Fine. I'll see what I can do with the soil samples I have in the meantime. Maybe talk to Red, and see what he can come up with."

"Thanks, Katie." Setting down his mug, Shiro patted her on the head. "I can always count on you."

"And me?" Matt ventured.

"And you."

Dragging himself to work the next morning after the events of the past two days was... strange, to say the least. There was something about the routine of preparing for another day of work that nearly made him forget his strange encounter with Keith, about the rumors and the soil samples.

Until his fingers touched the scratch marks on his lock, and he recalled the whole thing had been real.

Still, if he didn't work, he didn't eat. So off he went.

He had opening shift that morning, with the owner. He didn't mind too much- he'd always been an early riser, and everyone, from the Commanders to the cadets, rose early back at the Garrison.

It was nice, heading into the bakery to be greeted by the smell of freshly baked goods- *therapeutic* even, if he was going to be a bit on the sappy side. Except today... today something seemed off.

It quickly became apparent that the owner was not her usually cheerful self. She normally greeted him with a broad smile, and an insistence that he help himself to at least one freshly baked bagel, but today she seemed... quiet. Withdrawn, almost, as if there was something weighing on her mind.

"Is everything alright, Ms. Garrett?"

The question seemed to take her aback- and for the span of a moment, she chewed on her lip, as if wondering if she should answer. "My son, he's- I've told you before that he's a cadet at the Garrison, right?"

She had. "He's an engineer, right?"

There was a glow of pride to her face when he asked that, but it was quickly overshadowed by whatever it was that was on her mind. "It's just... oh you might think it's silly, but..."

"I won't think it's silly." Shiro promised her.

"He didn't call last night." She told him. "He *always* calls, every night."

Frowning a bit, Shiro's brow furrowed. "I thought the cadets weren't allowed to have cellphones."

"Not officially, no." Ms. Garrett admitted. "But I might have... given him one to keep in secret. It might sound silly since he's just a bus ride away, but a mother can't help but worry, you know."

"Nothing silly about that." Shiro told her. "So he didn't call you last night?"

"No." She said. "I tried calling him, of course, but whenever I do, I just get a message that his phone is out of service."
"Maybe it was confiscated by one of the officers?" Shiro suggested- even though in the back of his mind, he knew that they likely would have contacted her about the contraband cellphone already.

"Maybe." Ms. Garrett frowned. "But it's not like him not to call."

"I still have a friend who works at the Garrison." Shiro told her. "I can have him check, if you want."

She seemed to brighten at the offer- it wasn't that easy for civilians, even for the parents of the cadets, to walk right into the Galaxy Garrison whenever they wanted. It was a military institution, after all.

"If... if it wouldn't be too much trouble, I would be grateful." She told him.

"No trouble at all." Shiro told her. "It was Hunk, right? Your son's name?"

"That's right." She said, giving him a nod of her head. "Thank you, Shiro. You know, they might say bad things about you after that awful crash, but my son's best friend- he still thinks of you as his hero."

Blinking at that, Shiro couldn't help but smile. That was... honestly nice to hear.

"I don't know about hero, but I'll definitely do my best to help you out." He told her. "Let me just make a quick call, and see if I can't sort out what's going on."

Granted, he didn't know if Matt would actually be of much help- he didn't work with the cadets, as he'd said. Still, better to ask than to do nothing.

Excusing himself from the kitchen, Shiro made his way out into the main storefront, still empty at this time of morning. Matt hated waking up early, but he was on call at the Galaxy Garrison today, so he was probably already up and on his way over there, if not there already.

"Shiro?"

There was something to his tone that struck him, giving him cause to frown. "Matt? You okay? You sound a little stressed."

"Stressed is a good word." Matt told him. "Is this important? Because I love you man, but now isn't really the greatest time."

"I-" Frowning, he glanced back towards the kitchen, thinking of the deep crease in Ms. Garrett's brow. "I'll try to make it quick. Do you know a Garrison cadet by the name of Hunk Garrett, by any chance?"

There was a long pause, long enough to prompt him to check to ensure that his call hadn't been dropped. It hadn't.

"Not personally, but he's kind of one half of the reason we're all hands on deck right now." Matt finally spoke- and at those words, Shiro's blood froze in his veins.

That... that did not sound good.

"Can you tell me what happened?" He asked. "Because his mother is my boss, and he didn't call last night to talk to her. He usually does."

"I'm not one hundred percent on the story, but two cadets didn't show up for roll call this morning."
Matt told him. "One of them was Hunk Garrett, and the other..."

"...the other?"

the cadets

Chapter Summary

"Welp, that's what we're doing now." Lance said. "Keith, out in the desert with a pretty girl? Come on Hunk, don't tell me you're not curious as to what they're doing out there. They could be... they could be sitting in a tree, for all we know!"

Chapter Notes

Hello all, here it is, chapter four! And here they are, Lance and Hunk, on the scene, already making terrible decisions out of the starting gate. Or well, Lance is. Hunk's just going along with him because that's just what friends do, and also because it is his tragic lot in life. It's okay, big guy, it's okay.

Let no one say that Lance McClain was a coward.

Going to the west town? Pssh, piece of cake. He couldn't even believe that there were cadets who were even scared of this ramshackle, rundown place.

"See, Hunk?" Turning on his heel, Lance spread his arms out. "I told you there was nothing to be scared of. There's like, nobody even here."

"That doesn't really make it any better." Hunk supplied, eyes darting nervously around the town. "Are you getting that kind of ghost town vibe? Is it just me? Because I'm getting that kind of ghost town vibe."

"It's not a ghost town, Hunk." Lance said, rolling his eyes. "It's just a bunch of cranky old people living out in the desert, that's all. You worry too much."

"I think I worry just enough, considering this place is like, technically off limits and all." Hunk pointed out. "We could seriously get in trouble if one of the Commanders catches us out here."

"Relax, they won't." Patting his friend on the shoulder, Lance beamed up at him. "Now come on, if you're so nervous about this whole trip, why don't we hurry up and get it over with? All we have to do is buy something from the general store, take a picture, and we're done."

Easy-peasy. He could barely even call it a dare. He was going to make Greg eat his words before the day was out.

"Besides, if you didn't want to come, you could have just stayed back at the Garrison." Lance pointed out. "You didn't have to come with me, dude."

"Uh, and leave you here alone?" Hunk asked, shaking his head. "Un-uh, no way man. That's not what friends do."

And that touched his heart, truly it did. Hunk, buddy, pal... you really were one of a kind. Even if
like, seriously, there was *totally* nothing to worry about.

"You're a real rock, Hunk." Lance told him. "Now come on, let's go get us some of that sweet, sweet *street cred.*"

"Yeah, okay, just- just give me a moment." Drawing in a long breath, Hunk placed a hand over his heart, as if to steady his nerves. "Okay. Okay, I think I'm good now. Let's do this thing."

"That's the spirit!" Lance told him. "I'm thinking maybe we take a few nice selfies in front of the general store, you know, make sure we get our good sides."

"I really don't think we should loiter." Hunk advised him, still clearly more than a little nervous. "I mean... maybe it's just me, but I kind of feel like we're being watched."

"Pretty sure that's just you, dude." Lance assured him. "More importantly, who do you think owns that kick ass hoverbike we just passed?"

"The red and white one?" Hunk asked, casting a glance back in that direction with a shrug. "I don't know man, but it is pretty cool."

"I wonder if they'd let us look at it if we asked." Lance mused, before shrugging his shoulders. "Guess there maybe is more than just cranky old people living out here. Well," crinkling his nose, "-cranky old people and *Keith.*"

God, Keith.

Keith fucking Kogane.

He never would have guessed that the kid the entire Galaxy Garrison was trumpeting as a once in a generation talent, the next *Takashi Shirogane*, would just up and leave like that. Like sure, he'd heard some things about his father- like how he'd once been a brilliant pilot, a shining star of the Galaxy Garrison, until he'd just decided to up and leave one day.

But who would have guessed that Keith would do the same damn thing? Guess it was true what they said- like father, like son.

"You think he's really out here?" Hunk asked.

"Jenny says she saw him." Lance said with a shrug.

"Which Jenny? Because if it's the *other* Jenny, then-"

"It's not the other Jenny." Lance said, rolling his eyes. "Give me some credit, Hunk. I know better than to trust anything the other Jenny says."

"Okay, okay, just making sure." Hunk told him, holding up his hands. "Still, I just can't believe he'd just... leave like that."

"Maybe he couldn't handle the pressure." Lance said with a shrug. "Who cares? At least I don't have to see his ugly mullet ever again."

And look- it was the honest truth. He could go his entire life without ever feeling the desire to see Keith ever again. He'd never gotten along with the guy, and believe him- he'd *tried*. He really had!

It wasn't *his* fault if the guy had all the social skills of wet paper bag.
But if there was one thing that he couldn't stand, it was losing. And he couldn't help but feel like he'd lost to Keith- he'd come in like a storm and had left just like one too. And now he'd never have the chance to break his record.

The fact that he was still the hot topic around the Galaxy Garrison even after he'd left... now that really grated on Lance's nerves. Almost as much as his instructors constantly reminding him that the only reason he'd been promoted to fighter class was because Keith had dropped out.

Way to fucking rub it in.

At least if he was living out in the middle of fucking nowhere, he couldn't have too much going on for him. He'd take some smug satisfaction in that.

"I mean, yeah, but like... aren't you curious?" Hunk asked.

"No." Lance replied, before heaving a sigh, his shoulders slumping. "...yeah, okay. Maybe just a little."

He was, damnit. Screw you, Keith.

I mean... he had basically just up and vanished into the blue? And now he was living as some kind of weird desert hermit slash cryptid out in the middle of nowhere? How the hell could he not be at least a little bit curious as to what the hell the guy was even doing?

"Hey, it's cool, dude." Hunk told him. "I get it."

"Yeah, yeah, let's just get this whole dare over with."

"Okay, what the hell, Kogane."

Was this like... was this like one of those things where you say their name, and they show up? Because if so, then honestly, what the fuck.

Because there he was, in the flesh. The moment he'd spotted that disaster of a mullet, he'd known it was him- he almost didn't need that criminally unfashionable red and white jacket and the fucking knife to help him put two and two together.

Red and white? He should have known. C'mon, how had he not realized? That hoverbike was totally Keith's- he couldn't believe he'd called it cool!

And for the record, he wasn't hiding. Sure, he was peering out at the guy from behind the safety of a post, but he definitely wasn't hiding. He was just... keeping his distance. Observing.

"Oh man, it really is Keith." Hunk whispered, peering out from behind him- again, not hiding! "Should- do you think we should go and say hi?"

Blowing out his breath, Lance rolled his eyes. "And what, just have to listen to him ask who I am again? No way, forget about it."

Keith, for his part, hadn't noticed them in the least. Which really didn't come as a surprise, given how little attention he paid to him even when they had been in the same class at the Garrison. Some part of him had always known that he was the only one who considered them rivals, but like hell he was ever going to admit that out loud.

"What do you think he's doing?" Hunk whispered. "He's not getting on his bike."
"It looks like he's... waiting for someone?" Lance ventured.

Which was weird because like, there were two people whose presence Keith tolerated, in so far as he could tell. Matthew Holt and Takashi Shirogane- and the latter never stopped chafing at him.

How the hell had he managed to get Shiro as his mentor? Shiro! The guy was a living legend! His idol!

And sure, sure, ever since the pilot error thing, he seemed to have fallen out of favor, both with the Garrison and with the general public alike, but Lance? He never bought a damn word of it. Something had happened that day, but it damn well couldn't have been any kind of pilot error.

Shiro- Shiro the hero- would never screw up like that. No way.

"Maybe it's his dad?" Hunk suggested.

"Maybe?" Lance shrugged. It was as good a guess as any.

"So do you... do you want to just go, or are we like going to stick around to find out who it is?" Hunk asked. "Because you know... I'm cool with either one, but I am also getting kind of hungry, and I don't think general store jerky is going to be enough to feed the beast."

"Though man," Hunk muttered, half to himself, "...is it ever good jerky."

"We wait." Lance told him. "Hey, you've got that cellphone your mom gave you, right?"

"What cellphone, I don't have a-" Hunk began, before heaving a long sigh, reaching into one of his pouches. "Okay, fine- but just for the record, if anyone asks, I don't actually have one. I don't want to get into trouble."

"Oh please, the worst that will happen if the Garrison finds your phone is that they'll take it." Lance told him, taking the cellphone. "But scouts honor, Hunk, I won't tell anyone about your phone."

"Lance, you and I both know you were never a scout." Hunk told him. "What are you going to do with it anyways?"

"Uh, document?" Lance told him. "Our very own encounter with the local desert cryptid."

Using the camera's zoom function, he used it to get a closer look at Keith. Ugh, his nails were as awful as ever. What was even with those things?

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Hunk asked. "I mean... it kind of feels like a violation of privacy."

"Public land." Lance told him with a shrug.

"Uh, no, I'm pretty sure it's not?" Hunk said. "I mean... that's kind of what the whole bad blood thing between the Garrison and the west town is all about, that they can't just like... buy it up."

"Meh, technicalities." Lance shrugged. "Oh hey, I think someone's coming."

Honestly? He didn't know who to expect. Maybe his dad, like Hunk had said- hell, maybe even the Holt guy or Shiro, since Keith seemed to be buddy buddy with the two.

Definitely not a beautiful lady.
"Oh man," Hunk whispered, "...oh man, he really did pull a Commander Kogane."

No. No way! He refused to believe it!

Look, okay- he wasn't dumb, he'd totally noticed how popular Keith was with girls. It was kind of hard to miss. And maybe, just maybe, he could sort of understand where they were coming from- if one ignored the bad fashion, ugly mullet, weird nails and awful teeth, he had the whole mysterious bad boy thing going for him. Being an ace pilot was just like, the icing on the cake.

But Keith? Keith no socials skills Kogane? Scoring a girl like that? Nope, no way, had to be something else going on here.

Because holy shit- holy shit.

Did this girl seriously live out in the desert? Because like, she did not look like it. What even was her skin care routine? It had taken him ages to figure out a way to take care of his skin properly out here, so that it wouldn't dry out in the blink of an eye, but this girl didn't look as if that had ever been a problem.

The only imperfection- if he could even call it that (he really couldn't)- that he could see were the two patches of lighter skin just underneath her eyes, almost like inverted triangles. Other than that? Totally flawless skin, total contrast to Keith and his weird ass skin texture.

Seriously, what was up with that? He'd heard of people having thick skin, but that was supposed to be like, a metaphor. Keith's was literal.

"No, she can't be- she can't be who Keith was waiting for, I mean, look at her, Hunk." Lance protested. "She's like... gorgeous. And I'm not even sure if Keith even washes his hair!"

And oh man, her hair. Her hair! Thick locks of dark brown piled high on her head, in a bun that totally suited her. It looked regal, almost.

"Well, I mean... she is going up to him." Hunk pointed out. "And kind of getting on his bike with him?"

Lance barely even heard his friend, too busy internally screaming. She was wrapping his hands around his waist! And okay, maybe that was just kind of the best way to double up on that stupid, totally not cool hoverbike, but the logical part of his brain had kind of stopped working like, the moment the pretty girl turned up.

Seriously, who was this girl, and what was she doing out in the middle of the desert? And with Keith!? Jolting upright, startling Hunk, Lance shoved his friend's cellphone back at him. Oh no- no, no, no- he was not going to let this go without some kind of explanation. No way, no how, no!

"We're following them."

"I- Lance, what?" Hunk asked, as if he hadn't heard him right.

"You heard me." Lance told him. "Come on, let's get to our bike."

"Lance, I don't think this is a good idea." Hunk told him, even as he scurried after him, struggling to keep up in spite of his longer legs.
"It'll be fine, Hunk." Lance told him, swinging his legs onto their (not stolen, requisitioned) Garrison hoverbike, making sure to keep Keith's in his sight at all times. "You're the one who was bugging me about being curious before."

"Uh, yeah, but I didn't think we'd end up seeing him, much less following him." Hunk pointed out, even as he got on the bike with him- he'd taken a two seater, because some people thought things through.

"Welp, that's what we're doing now." Lance said. "Keith, out in the desert with a pretty girl? Come on Hunk, don't tell me you're not curious as to what they're doing out there. They could be... they could be sitting in a tree, for all we know!"

"Oh wow, you're really set on this, aren't you?" Hunk asked.

"Yep." Lance told him. "Now hang on. If Keith's driving is anything like his crazy piloting, we could be in for a wild ride."

"Oh come on!"

Letting out a grunt, Lance fought with the controls of the hoverbike, trying and failing to get it going again. In the distance, he could just make out Keith's fading away over the horizon- working perfectly fine, as if it were mocking him.

Groaning, finally coming to terms with the fact that he clearly wasn't going to get it started again, Lance swung his feet off the bike. "God, of all the luck, we had to steal the faulty one. Hunk, do you think you can give me a hand here?"

"Maybe... maybe this is a good thing?" Hunk ventured, getting off the hoverbike just the same. "We really shouldn't have been following Keith in the first place."

"How is our hoverbike breaking down a good thing?" Lance asked. "Unless you want to hike through miles of desert to get back to the Garrison."

"...on second thought yeah, this is definitely a bad thing." Hunk said, popping the engine's access panel open. "Let me take a look. Maybe I can get it working again."

"Hope so." Plopping down on a nearby rock, Lance stretched out his legs in front of him. At least watching Hunk tinker was a familiar, comforting sight.

"Well that's weird."

Oh no, that was never good.

Pulling his head away from the engine, Hunk frowned at him. "I can't... Lance, there's nothing actually wrong with this bike."

"So... what? It just stopped working all of a sudden?" Lance asked, getting to his feet, peering at the engine himself as if it would somehow tell him something Hunk had missed. Fat chance of that, he didn't know shit about bikes or engines.

"Pretty much?" Hunk almost seemed to hesitate, closing the engine panel. "Try it again."

"I'm not sure if anything will change, but I'll try." Lance said, shrugging his shoulders. Sure enough, the engine still wouldn't switch on. "Crap."
"Crap is right." Hunk noted. "Stealing a hoverbike was bad enough. The Garrison is not going to be happy that we went and broke it."

"We didn't break it!" Lance protested. "It just stopped working!"

"I'm... not sure they're going to buy that, Lance." Hunk told him, a tight frown. "Maybe I can call for a tow."

Pulling out his cellphone, Hunk frowned, staring at the screen. He fuddled with it for several seconds, before he looked back up at Lance, brows furrowed. "Uh... I don't suppose you have a cellphone?"

"Would I have asked for yours if I did?" Lance pointed out.

"Fair point." Hunk said. "But... yeah, I don't know what to tell you. My cellphone's dead. Can't even get it to switch on."

"What, seriously?" Lance asked. "I thought it had plenty of battery left."

"Yeah, yeah, it did." Hunk told him. "What do you... what do you think we should do? Go back to the west town? They probably have a phone there we can use."

"What, and climb up that plateau on foot? In this heat?" Lance asked, his brows shooting up. "No thank you."

"Well I hate to be the bearer of bad news, as always, but I get the feeling that not too many people come out this way." Hunk told him. "If we wait for someone to come, we might be out here for awhile."

Grimacing, Lance's gaze flicked skyward, feeling the hot sun scorching into his back. That... didn't sound like that great of an option either.

Shielding his eyes from the sun's rays with his hand, Lance squinted, peering out across the desert. In the distance, he thought he picked something out, but he couldn't be sure. "Is that- is that a house?"

"What?" Hunk asked. "Where?"

"There, over there." Lance told him, pointing in the direction he'd spotted it in.

Squinting, Hunk shielded his own eyes. "I think... maybe? It's kind of hard to tell. It might be a mirage."

"I thought mirages were like, water and stuff." Lance said. "I mean... do you think we should go check it out? If it's a house, someone might live there, and maybe they can give us a lift."

"I don't know, Lance..." Hunk trailed off, biting his lip. "Isn't the valley out in the same direction? You know, the one that's off limits? Like, to the tune of expulsion off limits?"

"Yeah, but like... not for several miles." Lance told him. "We'll be fine."

Hunk didn't look convinced, but it also seemed like he couldn't think of a better idea. "If you say so."

"I do." Lance told him. "Now come on, the faster we get to that building, the faster we get out of this desert sun."
So the scene was this.

Keith was here.

He hadn't been here when they had found the place, abandoned and disused, but he was here now.

In hindsight, maybe they shouldn't have invited themselves in. In hindsight, maybe he should have questioned why a place that looked as if it had been abandoned since before he was born still had running water. In hindsight, maybe they shouldn't have let themselves doze off.

In hindsight, maybe he should have never followed Keith into the desert at all.

But right now? Right now he couldn't afford to think about hindsight.

Because the scene was this- Keith was here, too sharp teeth bared in a snarl, the collar of his shirt clenched tight in his fist as he hoisted him to his feet with it.

"So, what?" Keith almost seemed to hiss. "They're sending cadets after me now?"

"Hey, whoa!" Hunk tried to interject, flinching as a silver gleam caught his eye. Because the scene was also this- the hand that didn't have Lance's collar in a vice grip was holding his knife, blade pointed towards Hunk, a silent, unspoken warning to keep his distance.

One that he was very much heeding.

Holding up his hands, trying to make himself look as harmless as possible, no doubt, Hunk did his best, bless him. "Nobody- nobody sent us after you, Keith."

At the sound of his name, Keith's eyes narrowed- but he didn't lower his knife- or Lance, for that matter.

Christ, how strong was this guy? Like yeah, Lance knew he wasn't the heaviest guy around- light as a feather, really, more limbs than anything else- but it still should not be this easy to lift him off the ground with one hand.

"Do I know you?" Keith asked.

And god help him, in spite of everything, Lance couldn't help but groan.

"You have got to be kidding me."

Because the worst part was?

Keith was serious.

How many times? How many times had he talked to him back at the Galaxy Garrison? And sure, Lance had been the one to do most of the talking- Keith had always kept his responses curt, clipped. Hell, he was pretty sure that sentence from before, was like, the longest one he'd ever spoken to him.

But seriously. Seriously? After all that, he still couldn't remember his name?

"I'm Lance!" He said. "We were in the same class back at the Garrison!"
Keith narrowed his eyes, regarding him with suspicion. "And you, big man?"

"Uh, it's uh- I'm Hunk." Hunk stammered, seeming to realize that he was asking for his name. "Can- can you put Lance down, maybe?"

"Depends." Keith said. "Garrison send you?"

"No!" Lance sputtered. "I swear to God, no!"

Keith frowned, holding his gaze for a long moment—before he tossed him one handed back into the couch, sending up a mess of dust and sand as he did so. Hacking up a storm, he barely noticed it as Keith sheathed his knife.

"If the Garrison didn't send you, what are you doing out here?" Keith asked.

"Uh, we kind of-" Hunk stammered, shifting on his feet. There was no easy way to say *we followed you*, especially not to someone who had just been threatening them with a knife mere seconds ago.

"It was a dare." Lance told him. "That's- that's all. We're out here on a dare."

Keith seemed to scoff at that. "What, you daring each other to go into the valley now? That's stupid."

"No, what's stupid is the guy who treats us as *hostiles*, that's what's stupid!" Lance sprung up, feeling properly indignant now that he was sort of sure that Keith wasn't planning on killing them. "Why the hell would the Garrison be after you anyways, *mullet?""

"Mullet?" Keith mouthed, his brow furrowing—and lord help him, it was only then that the faintest spark of recognition came across those odd eyes. "You're that cargo pilot."

"Yeah, well not anymore." Lance told him, narrowing his eyes. "I'm fighter class now, thanks to you washing out."

"Hm." Taking a step back, Keith regarded them with what for a split second, almost seemed like pity. "Shame."

"What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?" Lance demanded, taking a step forward.

"Look, all we want to do is to get back to the Garrison, so-" Hunk cut himself off, chewing anxiously on his own lip. "So maybe you can just... give us a ride back into town?"

"Can't." Keith told them, his tone curt.

"What do you mean, you *can't*?" Lance asked.

"Can't let you go back." Keith told them with a shrug, as if it was so simple.

"What do you mean, *you can't let us go back?*" Lance asked—no, *demanded*. The hell he couldn't let them go back! What the fuck was his deal?

"Literally just what I said." Keith told them. "We can't just have Garrison cadets wandering out here on dares."

"So," tilting his head, there was something... almost not human in his eyes, "-we can either do this the easy way, or the hard way. Your choice."
Lance chose the hard way.

It proved to be a mistake.
"We need to speak to you about a cadet formerly under your mentorship." The man told him, his voice monotone, giving nothing away. Less human, more like a robot, he thought dryly. "A Keith Kogane."

Getting through his shift that day had been difficult, to say the least.

Not only could he not provide his boss the reassurances that she wanted- and needed, but he also couldn't shake the feeling that this was all connected. The mysterious valley, the cadets' disappearance, Keith... that these things were linked, somehow.

He had always possessed a strong intuition. Back at the Garrison, they had told him it was what made him such a great leader.

But now that same intuition was telling him something he didn't like.

Lance McClain. The cargo pilot.

The one cadet who might possibly call out to Keith if he saw him. That he was one of the two missing was... significant, to say the least.

He didn't have all the details. Hell, from the sound of it, Matt didn't have all the details. They hadn't spoken much after that- they were on lockdown, it was impressive he'd managed to connect to him at all. They had arranged to meet later that evening, when he'd hopefully be released from the Garrison, to discuss exactly what had happened.

All he knew for now was that two cadets were missing, and that one had a connection to Keith. A tenuous connection, but a connection nonetheless.

And that was a thought that bothered him more than he wanted to admit.

Because while he didn't want to think that Keith could have anything to do with his disappearance... the timing of it did not reflect well.
The bakery closed early that day, and Shiro couldn't help but be grateful for it. Letting out a long breath as he hung his apron up, he cast a glance towards Ms. Garrett, wondering if he should say something to her.

"I'm sure they'll find him soon."

She merely nodded, her face pale. The Garrison had called her halfway through the morning, and informed her that her son was missing, that he hadn't showed up for roll call, and that he was nowhere to be found on campus. It was news that would shake any mother.

He hoped his words were true. He didn't like giving out false reassurances, but he needed to say something in this situation.

There wasn't much else he could do until the evening, so he simply made his way back to his apartment. Part of him hoped that his intuition was wrong, that there was some other explanation for the missing cadets- but it was rarely mistaken.

So when he took notice of the black car parked out front of his apartment complex, he couldn't shake the feeling that it was there for him. Steeling himself, he made his way up to his third floor apartment, wondering just what it was that the Garrison wanted with him after all this time.

"Mister Takashi Shirogane?"

The man waiting in front of his door was not anyone he recognized, but he knew from the way they were dressed that they were with the Garrison.

"That's me." Shiro said, wary. "Can I help you?"

It vaguely amused him that while they had the decency to wait outside, Keith had merely just broken in. Figures.

"We need to speak to you about a cadet formerly under your mentorship." The man told him, his voice monotone, giving nothing away. Less human, more like a robot, he thought dryly. "A Keith Kogane."

"Keith?" Shiro asked, feigning surprise. "I haven't seen Keith since I left for the Kerberos mission. Is he in some kind of trouble?"

It was a bold faced lie, but somehow, he didn't think it was a good idea to tell this man that Keith had been in this very apartment just two evenings ago.

The man seemed to assess him for the span of a moment, but Shiro didn't so much as blink. He had landed a failing space shuttle, he could handle this much pressure.

"We believe he might have a connection with the recent disappearance of two cadets." The man told him, and Shiro did stiffen at that. He knew better now than to trust the word of the Garrison, but that was the kind of confirmation he'd been dreading. "A Lance McClain and a Hunk Garrett."

"I believe your current employer," and there was a flicker of something human in those eyes then, "...is Hunk Garrett's mother, is she not?"

"She is." Shiro nodded. "She was so upset, she closed the bakery early."

"We intend to find her son as quickly as possible." The man told him- and it struck Shiro in that instant that he still hadn't given him his name. "Which is why we need to ask you a few questions."
"About Keith?" Shiro asked. "Like I said, I haven't seen Keith since the launch."

"Strange. According to our records, the two of you were quite close." The man observed.

"Look, why don't you just cut to the chase, and tell me what this is all about?" Shiro asked him, tone growing impatient.

The man paused, lips set in a tight frown. "As I said before, we believe he has a connection to the recent disappearance of two cadets."

"You did say that, but why Keith?" Shiro asked. If they were going to ask him questions, it was only fair that he got to ask a few back. "Because maybe I'm wrong, but it sounds a lot like you're accusing him of kidnapping."

"We are not accusing him of anything." The man stated- and Shiro knew bullshit when he heard it. "We simply believe that he is a person of interest in this case."

"Alright, so why is he a person of interest?" Shiro asked, stressing the repeated phrase.

"We are not at the liberty to disclose that to you."

He'd expected that, he just hadn't expected him to be so open about it. Guess they must have assumed a fallen hero really had no power at all.

Which was probably fair. They had done a pretty thorough job of trashing his reputation while he'd been in a coma.

"So you want me to talk to you about Keith, but you won't tell me why." He observed.

"The lives of two cadets may depend upon it."

And that was his limit- whatever secrets he was keeping be damned, he knew that Keith wasn't that kind of person. He was not going to just stand here and continue to listen to this man, this man who hadn't even bothered to so much as introduce himself, hurl accusations at Keith as he pleased.

"Look, I don't know what's going on between the Garrison and Keith," he began, taking a step forward, drawing up to his full height, "-but I know for a fact that he wouldn't do anything to endanger the lives of two of his fellow cadets."

And for all that, the man barely so much as blinked. "Keith Kogane has not been affiliated with the Galaxy Garrison for some time now."

Drawing away from him, Shiro could only frown. It was probably a good thing that they didn't know he already knew that. "Since when? Or are you not at the liberty to tell me that either?"

He already knew, but he wanted to hear it straight from the horse's mouth.

"Five months after you launched for Kerberos, former Cadet Kogane left the Galaxy Garrison of his own volition." The man informed him, his tone curt. "We have had no contact with him since then."

Something about that didn't quite sit right with him, but he didn't know what it was.

"And yet you suspect that nearly a year later, that he has something to do with the disappearance of two cadets?" Shiro questioned. "Why?"
"As I have said, you are not at the liberty to know that."

Narrowing his eyes, Shiro finally let out a long sigh, exasperated by this whole conversation, and wanting nothing more than to chase this Garrison man off his doorstep. He was starting to understand how the people living out in the west town felt.

"And like I said, I haven't spoken with Keith since I left." Shiro told him, reaching into his pocket and getting out his keys. "Now is there anything else, or will you let me access my apartment?"

The man studied him for a moment longer, before he wordlessly stepped aside. Planting himself in front of his door before he had the chance to block it again, Shiro jammed his key in the lock, barely so much as sparing him a look.

"If you do get into contact with him," the man said, reaching into his jacket, pulling out a simple card with a single number on it- and no name, he didn't fail to note, "-please contact us."

Locking eyes with him for a long moment, Shiro left his keys in the lock, taking the card from him. He half wanted to crumple it up and toss it aside, but he didn't want to do anything to earn their suspicions, not if he hadn't already.

Instead, he jammed the card into his pocket, never once breaking eye contact with the man.

"Well then," the man took that as his cue to depart, "-good day, Mr. Shirogane."

He watched, wordlessly, as the man made his way down the stairs. It wasn't until he was out of sight, that Shiro unlocked his apartment. Pulling his keys out, he paused for a moment, fixing his gaze on the rest of his apartment.

Closing his door behind him, he tossed his keys on the table. Narrowing his eyes, he shifted on his feet, waiting the span of a moment before he set about doing what he'd been itching to do from the very moment he saw the Garrison agent in front of his apartment.

Check for bugs.

And boy, did he find them.

Letting out a breath, Shiro rested where he knelt, contemplating if he should destroy them or not. They had definitely not been here before he'd left for work, so the bugging of his apartment must have been a recent thing.

He didn't care for the idea of the Galaxy Garrison listening in on him, but as much as he wanted to destroy them, he knew that he couldn't. He didn't want to give them any reason to suspect that he knew they were on to him, or that he knew more than he was saying. So instead, he set about to screwing the outlet cover back into place.

He doubted Keith would come back here anyways.

It made sense, he thought. Aside from his father, who the Garrison probably couldn't trace either, he was the only other person that Keith really knew.

So of course they would come to him.

The fact that they had done nothing more than ask him a few simple questions suggested that they didn't know he'd been looking into him the past few days. They suspected that he might have something to do with Keith, but only in so far as his past history with him suggested and nothing
Either way, he could tell they were serious.

If they wanted to, they could have bugged his apartment much sooner—*if* their goal was finding Keith. The fact that they had only moved to do this *now*... it seemed to indicate that there was something *more* at play here.

What that something was, like a lot of other things, Shiro had no idea.

But he was going to find out.

Honestly, at this point, he wasn't even surprised that he was being followed.

It was clear that the Garrison had marked him as a person of interest in this case, solely due to his past connection with Keith. He didn't know how it was that they had come to the conclusion that he was involved with this—*but* they were obviously convinced of it.

Either that, or they were just using this as an excuse.

He'd like to think it was the latter—but his gut told him that this accusation didn't come out of nowhere. If the Garrison thought that Keith had some kind of connection the disappearance of those two cadets, then odds were, they were probably right.

It wasn't a thought that sat easily with him.

He *knew* Keith—*he* did.

He just... didn't know that much *about* him. If there was one thing these past few days had shown, it was that. But he knew him as a person, and he was confident that the impression he had of the sometimes (okay, *often*) awkward teen was the correct one.

Gaze flickering behind him, he tried to act like he didn't pay too much notice to the man who had been following him for the past three blocks. He'd need to shake him, but in a way that wouldn't rouse their suspicions.

Odds were, the Garrison was keeping tabs on him because they were desperate. In other words, they had just as little idea as how to get to Keith as he did.

He suspected they knew where to find him—*same* as he did. Which confirmed one thing for him—the agent they had sent into the valley after Keith really hadn't returned. They weren't about to send their men into an uncertain situation, not when their lives could very well be in danger.

Their lives. It was a sobering phrase.

Whatever Keith was involved with, he hoped it didn't go that far.

But the other alternative was imprisonment, which... scrunching up his nose, Shiro frowned. Better than being dead, but still, not that great.

Seeing his chance, Shiro turned a corner. There was a shortcut this way that could get downright *labyrinthine*—if one didn't know which way they were already going, it was incredibly easy to get lost.

Come to think of it, *Keith* had been the one to show him it. It had always been a weird quirk of his-
it was like he memorized off beaten paths and odd trails, shortcuts that hardly anyone used- cat paths, one might call them. At the time, he had just passed it off as being the end result of how much exploring he did, but maybe there was some other meaning behind it.

Sure enough, he lost his pursuer with ease. Breathing a little easier, he didn't give them time to catch up, heading to the Holt household with a quick pace.

Slowing his pace as he drew closer to it, he kept a wary eye out. There was a chance that the Holts might have been placed under surveillance as well, which would make this whole trip a gamble. Sure, there was nothing strange about him paying them a visit- he'd been on good terms with the family for the longest time now, but who knew if the Garrison would think that?

And well... technically, they wouldn't be wrong, either.

Either they were being a lot less obvious about it, or they had decided that the Holts weren't half as likely to come into contact with Keith as he was, because he couldn't make out any signs that someone was watching their place. Letting out a long breath, he made his way to the front door, giving it a firm knock.

Katie answered the door, squinting at him for the span of a second, then all but dragged him inside.

"Did you know you have a car in front of your apartment?" She asked, in hushed tones. "Like, watching your place in front of apartment?"

"I'm aware." Shiro noted, arching his brows. "But you know this because...?"

"Bus takes me past your place on my way home." Katie told him.

And he blinked at that, then inwardly winced, because for a moment, he'd been under the impression that she had hacked a traffic camera, or something along those lines.

"What, did you think I was spying on you?" She asked, letting out an amused snort. "Ye of little faith."

"Sorry." Quirking a grin, Shiro followed her into the house proper. "Matt home yet?"

"He's home." Katie told him. "Checked him for bugs."

"And did you find any?" Shiro asked.

"One." She told him. "In his collar. We've sealed it."

Jerking with her head, he arched a brow, following where she pointed. He'd been wondering about the overturned pitcher, but it would seem they'd treated the bug as if it were a literal bug- by sticking it underneath something big and heavy until they could get around to getting rid of it.

"You didn't just destroy it?" He asked.

"What, and waste my chance to dismantle one of the Garrison's bugs?" Katie asked, cocking a brow. "Wow Shiro, it's like you don't know me at all."

Of course. Shaking his head, he merely ruffled her hair. "There's more where that came from in my apartment, if you're interested. I haven't touched them just yet."

"You know what this means, right?" She asked.
"That the Galaxy Garrison is breaching my right to privacy?" Shiro ventured.

"Well that, yes." She said, nodding her head. "But also that we've gotten ourselves involved in a full blown conspiracy here."

There was a gleeful note to her voice- it was easy to forget just how into conspiracies she could get. Being in the middle of an actual one... must have been like Christmas come early.

At least it gave her something to focus on, though he worried about getting her deeply involved in this. She was barely even sixteen- and this was shaping up to be more serious than he'd first anticipated.

Not that he could get her out of it now if he tried. The best he could do was try to keep an eye on her, so she didn't do something reckless, like borrow (steal) her brother's car and drive out to the valley herself.

Teaching Katie to drive? Possibly a mistake.

"Anyways, come on." Grabbing him by his one arm, she dragged him up the stairs. "Matt's waiting to get started. We've got peanut butter cookies and everything."

"Got any coffee to go with that?" Shiro asked.

"Wow Shiro, it really is like you don't even know me." Katie noted. "What did you do, get replaced by a clone?"

"Yes. You've caught me." Shiro told her in his most deadpan tone, and she let out a faint snort, dragging him by his one arm into her room.

(There was a coffee maker in her room. She'd built it out of spare parts and an Internet blueprint one night after, in perhaps a fit of poetic irony, she'd had too much coffee to sleep.)

"Shiro, you made it!" Matt chirped.

"No, this is Shiro's clone." Katie continued the joke, shoving him into a chair that had clearly been dredged up from some other part of the house. "We're calling him Nega-Shiro."

"Don't you mean, Kuro?" Matt asked, waggling his brow.

"Okay, enough with the bad puns." Shiro told them, holding up a hand.

"I only like, made one bad pun." Matt pointed out.

"Yes, and that was enough." Shiro told him. "So, missing cadets. That's the most pressing issue, so let's start from there. Where are we with that?"

"You mean aside from the Garrison obviously thinking Keith's behind it?" Katie asked, flopping back in her chair.

"Aside from that." Shiro told her, before pausing. "Actually, no, I kind of want to know more about that too. Matt, any chance you know why they think Keith's involved?"

"Kind of?" Matt frowned. "Garrison command is being pretty tightlipped on the whole thing, but from what I could gather, there was some kind of dare involved."

"The west town dare." Shiro observed, leaning back in his chair.
"Had to be." Matt told him. "From the sound of it, they stole a Garrison bike."

"I'm going to assume that was probably Lance's work." Shiro noted, arching a brow. "You manage to hear anything else?"

"Once they made the connection to the west town, they were real quick to keep me out of the loop." Matt told him, shaking his head. "The only other thing I can tell you is that both cadets faked a stomachache to get out of class."

"Pretty sure we could have guessed that much." Katie remarked. "So what, they think they went to the west town, spotted Keith, and decided to follow him? There have been plenty of cadets who have seen Keith out there now, and nothing happened to them. Why would these two be any different?"

"I hate it to say it but," his lips set in a tight frown, Shiro's brow furrowed, "...if it's Lance McClain, then it's not impossible."

"He was always kind of on Keith's case." Matt recalled.

"So what, you think he spotted Keith, decided to follow him?" Katie asked, narrowing her eyes. "Shiro, you can't really think that Keith's behind this."

"I can't deny that it's a possibility, Katie." He told her. "I don't like it either, but we may have to consider that the Garrison's actually right about this one."

Locking eyes with him, she held his gaze for a long moment, before letting out a long sigh. "Okay, so let's imagine they're right. Why would Keith want to kidnap a pair of cadets?"

"I don't know." Shaking his head, Shiro heaved a sigh of his own. "But if the west town is involved, then odds are, so is the valley."

The silence that hung in the room was a heavy one - the valley very much was still a lingering mystery that none of them had been able to figure out.

"Keith did pretty explicitly warn you to stay out of it." Matt said. "So maybe... maybe the cadets followed him in."

"Maybe they went too far." Katie said.

"It's a possibility." Shiro said. "From the way the Garrison's reacting, it sounds like what the owner told us is legitimate." "I agree." Matt said. "But what do we do now? It's not like we can just go into the valley."

"I don't know." Shiro admitted, leaning back in his chair. "Going in would be the fastest way to get answers, but once in, there's no guarantee we'd be able to get back out."

"Not even you?" Katie asked.

"I don't think Keith would have bothered warning me otherwise." Shiro pointed out.

"So basically we're right back to where we were before, only now two cadets are missing," Katie told them, making a frustrated sound. "Great."

"I'm guessing staking out the west town and waiting for Keith to swing by isn't an option." Matt ventured.
"Probably not." Shiro told him, giving him a faint smile. "Somehow I don't think they'd take kindly to that."

"We could go back and try to beat the answers out of them." Katie mumbled, apparently willfully ignoring her own petite stature. "They knew something."

She wasn't wrong about that- he sensed that the people living there did know something more than they had said.

"I don't think we're going to get them to talk that easily." Shiro told her. "Whatever is going on out there, I think a lot of them are scared."

"And if a bunch of people living out in the desert are scared of something, it's probably a hell of a thing." Matt said. "Like, you know... aliens?"

And they were back to that again.

"Look, I know what you're thinking Shiro, that it sounds like a bad Internet conspiracy theory." Matt interjected before he could even say anything, holding up his hands.

"But listen- we've got mysterious disappearances out in the middle of nowhere, an actual confirmed cryptid, albeit one who I love and care for deeply and value as my good friend," he was quick to add, "...and the Garrison is sticking their noses into it? The Galaxy Garrison?"

"Not to mention a dead zone that disables all electronics, and mysterious elements in the soil not found anywhere on Earth." Katie chimed in.

"Right, yes, thank you, Katie." Matt said. "So- basically, we've got all that, so I'm just saying... maybe we shouldn't be so quick to dismiss the aliens."

Letting out a long sigh, Shiro reached up, rubbing his forehead. He hated to admit it, but when they presented it like that, it almost made a certain kind of sense. It wasn't that he doubted that alien life existed- the odds that they were actually alone in the universe seemed more off than the odds that they weren't, but...

...well, he never exactly expected alien life to be like something out of a science fiction novel.

Alien plants? Alien animals? Sure, made sense.

Sentient aliens, with deep space faring technology? That was a little harder for him to swallow.

They had spent countless generations developing the technology just to travel to the edge of their own solar system and back. The idea that there might be some kind of alien civilization out there with the kind of technology that would allow them to easily traverse from their own system to another... that was a little harder for him to grasp.

"Fine." Shiro said, dropping his hand away from his forehead. "You're right. Let's consider the aliens."

He didn't miss the look the Holt siblings exchanged with each other, nor mistook it for anything but the victory it was. He was just amazed that Matt fought the urge to whoop.

"So, first question." Katie began. "If there are aliens here on Earth, why?"

"And why in the middle of the desert?" Matt asked.
"Good place to hide." Shiro answered, still unable to believe he was actually having this conversation. "You said it yourself, Katie."

"True." Katie noted. "So, why the middle of the dessert, so near to the Galaxy Garrison?"

"To keep an eye on it?" Matt ventured. "Sounds kinda risky, though."

"Keith didn't seem all that intimidated by the Garrison." Shiro shrugged. "Sounded pretty confident about it too."

"Yeah, but Keith was also confident about his ability to make a grilled cheese sandwich, and we all remember how that turned out." Matt pointed out.

Unable to help himself, Shiro winced. Sorry Keith, but he kind of had a point there.

"Maybe I could build some kind of drone." Katie suggested. "If I can just figure out how they're knocking out electronics in the area, maybe I can figure out a way around it."

Glancing over towards her, he gave the girl an assessing look. "You think you can do it?"

"Can't say until I try." Katie admitted. "I've already got a few long range drones in the works. I can try to modify them so that they work in the dead zone."

"...dare I ask why you were working on long range drones to begin with, Katie?" Shiro asked.

Giving him a shrug, not looking the least bit guilty, she merely grabbed a peanut butter cookie for herself, taking a bite. "Was going to use them to spy on the Garrison."

And that was exactly what he had suspected, God help him.

Reaching for a mug of coffee, Shiro poured himself a cup, taking it straight black. He'd need it, what with what he was about to assent to.

Whatever the case, they needed to find those cadets.

"Alright," he said, hoping that this wouldn't be a mistake, "...drones it is."
"You lost something."

It would have been an innocent enough statement were the words not spoken by one Keith Kogane, local cryptid and now wanted man, who, incidentally, had broken into her house.

Chapter Notes

Hello, welcome to the latest installment of teens making questionable decisions the fanfic! In which keeps breaking into people's houses, as you do. I spent the entire day waiting for a delivery that never came, how was everyone else's day? Hopefully better than that! As always, thanks for reading, and a special shout out to those of you who take the time to review! Y'all are great!

Until next time!

"-wanted in connection with the recent disappearance of two Galaxy Garrison cadets-"

Suffice to say, she nearly choked on her cereal.

If she had to be honest, her only real question was what had taken the Garrison nearly three days to pull something like this. They might have been able to cover up the disappearance of one of their own agents, but two cadets?

The news had spread like wildfire. There were missing persons posters plastered all over town- it was like she couldn't turn a corner without running into one or both of their faces.

Which was helpful, she'd admit. At least she knew what she was looking for now.

And since passing the buck on to one former ace pilot had worked so well the last time, why not do it again? Granted, they were probably actually right this time, loathe as she was to admit it.

And God, did she hate to admit it.

That Keith, Keith Kogane, the awkward, yet strangely endearing teen, could have anything to do with something as dire as kidnapping did not sit easy with her. But odds were, he did.

But man, seeing Keith's face on TV like that... they sure had gone out of their way to choose a hell of a picture of him. Which granted, wasn't hard- for such an attractive guy, he'd never exactly been the most photogenic. She didn't know where they had dug up this picture, but it made him look half-feral- sharp teeth bared in what she knew was just a lousy attempt at a forced smile, offset by the intensity of those violet eyes.
It made him look dangerous.

Which was stupid.

Keith wasn't dangerous—sure, he carried around a knife like, twenty four seven, but if anything, he was just awkward. Painfully, painfully awkward.

Seriously, the guy had the social skills of a walnut. He practically made her look like some kind of social butterfly in comparison.

From the look of it, the Garrison was dead set on villainizing Keith.

From cryptid to wanted man... God, Keith's life seemed to keep taking wilder and wilder turns.

And okay, so technically he wasn't actually a wanted man, not yet— he was just a person of interest, at the moment, but listen- the implication was there.

Cramming the rest of her cereal in her mouth, she washed it down with the rest of her milk. Grabbing her dirty dishes and dumping them in the sink to get around to later, she hurried up to her room. If that was how it was going to be, then that just gave her the motivation to work even harder.

Sliding into her chair, letting her weight carry her across the room, Katie brought her laptop out of sleep mode. Maybe it had taken the Garrison three days to get around to smearing Keith, but while they dragged their feet, she'd been busy.

Five drones, nearly ready to go. All that was left were some final adjustments, and then hopefully she'd be able to get a bird's eye view of just what was going on in that valley.

She'd just have to...

"Oh hey, Red's on."

Sparing a quick grin at the name in her contact list, she quickly brought up a channel.

Hey Red, you there?

It was a stupid question, since Red had never quite figured out the whole invisible thing, but hey, maybe he'd pick it up one day. As far as she could tell, the guy didn't use the Internet much, aside from haunting conspiracy theory forums and blasting the Galaxy Garrison whenever he got the chance.

i'm here

Grinning, she pulled herself a bit closer to her laptop. He hadn't been on at all in the past few days, and she had to take the chance to talk to him now that he was.

Near as she could figure, he lived in like, the middle of nowhere. His Internet connection was spotty at best and disastrous at worst- sometimes he would just randomly drop from a conversation only to come back hours later saying that he'd gotten cut off.

Did you hear the news?

you're going to have to be a little more specific

lots of news
Okay, fair. Arching her brows, Katie felt her grin grow. He was going to love what she had to tell him. A conspiracy involving the Galaxy Garrison? That was like, totally up his alley.

*C'mon, don't tell me you haven't heard what the Garrison is up to? Or I guess it would be more fair to say what the Garrison is involved in, this time.*

*oh that*

Arching a brow, Pidge drummed her fingers against her desk, waiting for him to finish his reply. He did that too, sometimes.

*yeah i heard about that*

So what do you think, man? Missing cadets! Which is bad, obviously, but the Garrison *has* to be covering something up here.

*when is the garrison ever not covering something up*

Letting out a faint snort, she couldn't help but grin. He was right about that.

*Well I'm going to get to the bottom of it. You remember those drones I was building?*

Okay, okay, so maybe she shouldn't be telling him this- but if there was anyone on the Internet that she trusted, it was Red. He could be a bit of a weirdo, but when it came to the Galaxy Garrison, there was no one who hated them more.

They had stolen her father from her, for which she would never forgive them, and even *she* didn't have the depth of hatred that Red possessed towards them.

*yeah*

*I'm nearly finished with them.*

*show me*

Spinning in her chair, she grabbed her phone, shooting a picture of the nearly completed drones, sending it off to Red. His download speed was shit, no surprise, so she'd have to wait awhile before she got a response from him.

*thought you were only going to build two*

*Yeah, plans kind of changed. Have you heard of the dead zone? Out in the valley, couple miles out from the west town?*

There was a long pause then, and Katie frowned, wondering if he'd gotten cut off again- though his status light was still a bright green. Groaning, she leaned back in her chair, near about ready to get back to work when he finally pinged again.

*yeah*

*wait*

*you're going to use these drones for that*

*Like I said, change of plans. Those two missing cadets? I'm betting money that they're somewhere in the dead zone right now.*
wait what bet

Figure of speech, Red.

oh

won't they break

Maybe? Hope not. I've tried to rig them up with some possible workarounds, hoping at least one makes it through. There's something going on in there, and I am going to find out what.

be careful

Giving the screen a faint smile, she couldn't help but be a little touched. Aw, he was worried about her.

Oh come on, Red, who do you think I am here, some kind of amateur? Anyways, you want me to send you pics if I manage to break through?

yes

what do you expect to find

aside from cadets

Aliens.

why aliens

Why else would the Galaxy Garrison be interested in the place? Besides, wouldn't it be so cool? Just think! By the end of the day, I could have conclusive proof of life outside of Earth!

And okay, sure, she didn't know one hundred percent that it was aliens. But honestly?

It was totally aliens.

God, she couldn't believe that Keith had initiated first contact without her. Sure, sure, they had never been that close, but she would have liked to think that they were at least friends. Close enough to know that she was interested in the possibility of extraterrestrial life, at least.

(There was a painful twinge in her chest at that thought. Her father had been the same.)

Which... come to think of it, when she'd first mentioned that to him, she could have sworn he'd almost smirked. She hadn't made anything of it at the time, just thought it was Keith being Keith, but what if...

But if that was true, then it meant that Keith had been in contact with aliens since long before the Kerberos mission. That this wasn't a recent development.

Frowning, her brows knitted together in thought, working out what to make of this line of thought. If her theory was right, and the supposed meteor that his father had found had actually been a crashed alien ship, then for all she knew, this whole thing might very well extend back well before he was even born.

Matt's theory of him being half alien was still total cock and bull though.
Even if she was willing to admit that some of Keith's features were... well, not normal. She wasn't blind- they had caught her eye more than once.

But half alien? Even if there were other humanoid aliens out there, what were the odds that they could reproduce with them? Maybe if Keith was some kind of test tube baby, but she knew for a fact that he had a belly button, so unless he had been implanted in his mother's womb after the fact...

It was really unlikely.

Him being raised in space, and his odd features being an adaptive mutation as a result of that, seemed much more likely.

Shaking off such thoughts, she pushed them aside. It was no use thinking about all that right now- her main objective at the moment was to get a drone into the dead zone.

Besides, Keith was her friend- or at least, she thought of him as one, and she didn't like the idea of speculating about him behind his back.

Letting out a faint sigh, she frowned, realizing that she hadn't heard back from Red in awhile now. Gaze flickering over towards his status box, she let out a faint huff, the red that marked him as offline feeling vaguely ironic.

(Her literature teacher would probably scold her on how that wasn't how that word was used but hey, she was a science whiz, not a literature geek.)

Next thing she tackled after these drones would be making a router for Red that actually worked. There was no excuse for shoddy Internet when they could send humans to the edge of their solar system and back.

Well, whatever. Maybe when he managed to get back online, she'd have something to show for it.

Turning her focus back on the drones, Katie grinned from ear to ear. Today, one way or another, she was going to make the name Katie Holt known.

Or well... not literally, not exactly. She didn't want her name known, not in connection with this, not when people vanished for just going into the valley. Whatever was in there, she didn't want them to trace the drones back to her.

Which was why she had rigged them all with a rudimentary device, designed to self destruct should they lose power. It had made powering them down a risky game, but it wasn't like she could just go to the valley herself and bring them back.

If she could do that, she wouldn't need to build drones in the first place.

Shiro's desire for caution was not lost on her, if anything, it was stronger than before, now that two cadets had gone missing. It had made all of this real, in a way it hadn't been before- given the whole thing stakes, risks. As excited as she was to be at the dead center of a conspiracy, she wasn't about to let herself get caught.

Not by the Garrison, and not by whatever was living in the valley.

And for good measure, not by Keith, either.
"Peanut butter donut?"

Barely even sparing him so much as a glance, Katie glowered at the tempting treat placed before her. "I don't want your pity donut, Shiro."

"Not pity." Shiro told her, taking the seat across from her. "Reward."

"For what, failing?" Pulling her head off the table, Katie gave him a sour look. "I don't get it, Shiro- I tried everything I could think of, and nothing worked!"

"You built five long range drones in three days." Shiro pointed out. "That's not exactly something to sneeze at, Katie."

"Yeah, five long range drones that didn't even do what they were built for." Katie grumbled, taking the donut in spite of her earlier words. There was a slight chance that she may have gotten so involved with her work that she might have forgotten to eat anything since breakfast.

_Slight._

"Giving up?" Shiro asked.

"Hell no." Katie told him, narrowing her eyes. "Katie Holt does not give up that easily."

Inwardly though, she grumbled- because that was exactly what Shiro had _wanted_ her to say. Even if it was the truth- sure, all five of her attempts today had failed, but that didn't mean that she couldn't try again.

"That's the spirit." Flashing her a smile- one that did not come as easy as it used to, she thought- Shiro reached out, giving her hair an affectionate ruffle.

Shooting him another sour look, he let out a faint laugh, pulling his hand away. Sometimes she swore Shiro thought she was still a baby- it wasn't _her_ fault that she hadn't hit her growth spurt yet.

(It didn't help at all that Matt had another while in space, damn him. That traitor.)

At least the fail safe had worked, she thought, glumly taking a bite out of her donut. The bakery at which Shiro worked had become something of a meeting spot. The Garrison was still keeping tabs on his apartment, but it would seem that their surveillance hadn't yet extended to his workplace.

Probably didn't think Keith would come out in the open like this.

Probably right, she thought. Even before he decided to turn into some kind of desert cryptid, he'd never been a fan of public spaces.

"Why do you think he's working with them anyways?" She asked. "Keith, I mean."

"I wish I could tell you." Shiro told her, lips curling into a frown and she almost wished she hadn't asked. "I thought Keith and I were close, but maybe I was wrong."

"I mean, he _did_ come to see you." Katie pointed out, a twinge of guilt at having caused Shiro to look that way. "That's more than we can say for anyone else. I've been here on Earth the whole time, and he hasn't tried to contact me once, so... maybe it's just a Keith thing."

"That's true." Shiro admitted- but she couldn't tell if she'd convinced him, or if he was just trying to be polite.
Taking another bite out of her donut, she pondered if she should share with Shiro her theory that maybe Keith had been involved with this for longer than they thought. If her theory was correct, and it had been his father who had made first contact...

(And that was all she really had to go on right now, a bunch of half baked theories.)

If her theory was correct, then what had Keith's presence at the Garrison meant? Had he been some kind of spy? What for? Who for? If that was true, the reason that he left... maybe his cover had been blown.

That would explain why the Garrison was so interested in finding him- not to mention the classified personnel file.

God, she was itching to get a good look at those files right about now. If she could just sneak back into the Garrison somehow, then...

She'd tried getting into them from the outside, but they were kept on an internal network. If she wanted them, she'd have to get them from a Garrison computer, which meant she'd have actually physically be at the Garrison. And sure, there was Matt, but they needed to keep him on the inside, for what it was worth.

And judging from the bug, they were probably keeping their eyes on him.

That the Garrison knew something they didn't, she was almost sure of.

"Katie?" Perking up at the sound of her name, she flinched, realizing that Shiro had probably been trying to talk to her for awhile now. "You in there?"

"Nope." She told him. "I've shed this mortal form and have ascended to a new plane of reality."

"Awfully chatty for an empty husk." Shiro observed, arching a brow.

"I came back once I realized they didn't have peanut butter." Katie told him with a shrug.

Giving her a faint laugh, Shiro leaned back in his chair. "You do know you can't keep skipping school to build drones though, right?"

"Well it's not like I can work at them at school." Katie pointed out. "Besides, you were the one who said that time was of the essence. We don't even know if those missing cadets are alive or dead."

"They're alive." Shiro told her.

Arching a brow, she couldn't help but frown. "You sound pretty sure of that."

"I don't think Keith would be willing to work with anyone who'd kill a pair of kids so easily." Shiro told her. "I have faith in him."

"You saw the news, right?" She asked, leaning forward.

"Pretty hard to miss." He told her, flashing a rueful smile. "Guess the Garrison is pretty serious about finding him."

"I'm pretty sure we established that back when they decided to bug your place." Katie pointed out.

This would all be so much easier if Keith would cut the cryptid act, and just let them help him. But if there was one thing she knew about Keith Kogane, it was that he wasn't the type to ask for help.
"If they've resorted to spying on me, I think it's safe to say they're pretty desperate. Keith's pretty good at staying hidden." Shiro said, lips quirking in a grin. "You still think it's aliens, huh?"

"You got any better ideas?" She asked.

"Honestly? No, not really." Shiro admitted. "But the idea that there could be some kind of advanced alien civilization here, on Earth..."

Shaking his head, he gave her a strained smile. "It's a little hard to grasp."

That was... fair, she guessed. When he put it like that, it did sound a little farfetched.

But the evidence was there- as fragmented as it was.

"But just think about it Shiro- if they have the kind of tech to create a technological dead zone, just imagine what else they have." She told him, eyes sparkling at the mere thought of it.

"You just want to play with their tech, don't you?" Shiro asked, his smile a bit less strained, more fond.

She was glad to have him back- she could understand why he had kept his distance, but she didn't blame him for it- really, she didn't. She knew Shiro, didn't even have to ask to know that he had done everything in his power to bring that shuttle down safely.

His missing arm was testament to that.

If there was anyone to blame for the death of her father, it was the Galaxy Garrison, not him. And if she could use this as a chance to bring them down, to expose them for what they really were... well, she wasn't about to let it go.

It was lonely enough without Keith, but without Keith and Shiro? She'd come to think of the latter as family, and the former as a friend- which just made his current behavior all the more infuriating.

Let us help you, you damn cryptid.

"You've got me there." Katie admitted, getting to her feet. "I'd better get back. Thanks for the pity donut, Shiro."

"Reward donut." Shiro corrected, picking up the paper plate. "Call me if anything comes up."

"Copy that."

The heavy thud of the sack tossed at her feet jolted her back to reality.

"You lost something."

It would have been an innocent enough statement were the words not spoken by one Keith Kogane, local cryptid and now wanted man, who, incidentally, had broken into her house.

Dragging her gaze slowly away from him, Katie peered down at the sack. She didn't even need to open it up to know what was inside, but she did so anyways- ruined remains of the drones she had spent the past three days building tumbling out.

She swore that she felt something in her stomach drop.
"Keith."

Lifting a hand, acting as if for all the world he belonged here, Keith flashed her a lazy grin from his perch on the stairs. She wondered how long he had been there, one leg bent, the other stretched out, an elbow resting on the step just behind him.

"You broke into my house."

"You sent drones after me." Keith pointed out.

Jerking her head up at that, she narrowed her eyes. How did he know? She hadn't told anyone other than her brother and Shiro, and they...

"How did you even-"

Cutting herself short, she fought the urge to groan. She had told someone. Someone other than her brother and Shiro.

"Red." She said, her voice barely above a whisper. "You're Red."

Of course. She should have seen it earlier. How had she not?

Red was Keith. Keith was Red.

Keith was Red, and she had told him, flat out, that she expected to find aliens in the valley. This was bad. This was beyond bad.

Because now Keith was here, in her house. More importantly, she was alone with Keith- her mother was working a late shift, and Matt wouldn't be back from the Garrison for another hour.

"You're the one who told me." Keith said, as if that somehow made it okay- it wasn't like she had known it was him at the time! "Thought you might want the parts back."

"Why, so you can rub my failure into my face?" She asked, glowering at him. "Or have you come to make me disappear too?"

"Eh." Shrugging his shoulders, Keith frowned. "Can't say I didn't consider it."

Taking a step back, Katie watched him through narrowed eyes. "So the cadets?"

"The cadets are fine." He told her, rising to his feet.

There was a grace to his movements, something she had noticed from the first time they had met. Everything he did was silent, subdued- he'd always reminded her of a cat.

"That was you." It was a statement, not a question.

God, the Garrison had been right.

"That was me." Keith told her, folding his arms in front of his chest. "Didn't have a choice."

Keith was her friend, she had to remind herself, even as she felt herself take a step back, away from him. Cats, she recalled dimly, were predators- and right now, she couldn't help but feel a little like the prey.

"Couldn't you have just let them go?" She asked. "I don't know if you know this, but Shiro's new
boss? One of those two cadets is her son."

There was a twinge of guilt in his eyes, something which she almost felt relief at seeing. "Can't."

"You can't?" She asked. "Keith what's- you know everyone's worried about you, right? First you drop totally off the radar, and now you're kidnapping cadets? Just- what's going on with you?"

"Nothing is going on with me, Katie." Keith told her, taking a step forward. "Look- just- I know what you think you're doing is helping, but I've got this situation under control."

"Do you?" She asked. "Because missing cadets suggest otherwise."

"Look, they went into the valley on a dare." Keith told her. "What else was I supposed to go? Let them go? You and I both know if I did something like that, it would only invite more trouble."

"What in the valley is so damn bad that you can't let people find it anyways!?" She half shouted the question, jerking her head up so that she could lock gazes with him.

To his credit, Keith held it, unwavering. "I can't tell you."

And she was not about to have that- maybe Shiro was willing to put up with his cryptic bullshit, but she wasn't Shiro.

"I'm right, aren't I." She told him, standing her ground. "It's aliens."

If he was going to kidnap her, she might as well get some damn answers out of it.

He jerked his gaze away from her, muscles tensing. That was good enough a confirmation as any.

"That's why the Galaxy Garrison is so interested in it." She said. "But it doesn't answer the question of why you're involved with them."

"It doesn't matter why I am." Keith told her, jerking his head back in her direction. "What matters is that you stay out of it."

She had seen Keith intimidate men twice his size, but if he thought that was going to work on her, he had another thing coming. This damn stubborn asshole cryptid.

"We're trying to help you." She told him.

"I didn't ask for your help." He hissed, eyes narrowing.

"We're your friends, Keith." Katie told him. "You don't have to ask, that's just what we do."

And for a split second, he actually looked surprised by that declaration. As if he hadn't even considered it.

But it only lasted a moment.

"Well I don't want it." Keith told her, narrowing his eyes. "You don't know what you're getting yourselves into."

"Of course we don't!" Rolling her eyes, she fought the urge to shake him. "Because you won't tell us anything!"

"I am trying to protect you!"
And apparently now it was her turn to be caught off guard.

It must have shown on her face too, because Keith drew back a step, running a hand through his hair. "Why are you just- why are the three of you making this so hard?"

She'd figured Keith was keeping them out of this on purpose- but she'd thought it was just Keith being Keith, not knowing how to ask for help. She'd never once stopped to consider that maybe he was keeping them out because he was worried about them.

Sensing that he was waiting for some kind of answer, she gave him one. "Because we care about you, asshole."

Keith merely gave her a blank look. "If you care, stay out of it."

"Kind of not how friendship works there, Keith." She told him. "Come on man, we're all worried about you. You can't just vanish off the radar and expect us not to care."

Keith let out a long breath- and then almost in an instant, there was something in his demeanor that seemed to shift. Spine stiff, gaze cold, he held himself in a posture that reminded her of a soldier.

"I don't have friends."

And she was not having that. Because whoever, whatever Keith Kogane was, he wouldn't be worried about protecting them if he didn't think of them as his friends.

(Though she wouldn't put it past him not to realize that.)

"Bullshit you don't have friends." She challenged, leveling her gaze with his own. "You didn't have to warn Shiro about the valley, but you did."

That seemed to earn her a flash of something almost human, and she couldn't help but feel a little smug about it. "That was-"

"That was what, Keith?" She pressed.

Keith held her gaze for a moment longer- before he let his shoulders slump. Muttering something underneath his breath- kolivan was the only piece she caught, whatever a kolivan was- he shifted on the balls of his feet.

"Look," he began, "-if I worried you, I'm sorry."

She didn't expect an apology, but she'd take it.

"But this isn't a game." He told her. "I can promise you that those cadets are safe, and that once all of this is over, we'll release them, but you can't get yourselves involved."

And they were back to that again. "Why not?"

"It's dangerous." Keith told her.

"You told Shiro you weren't in danger." Katie pointed out.

Letting out a faint snort, a hint of amusement flashed on Keith's face. "I'm not."

"But we are?" Katie asked, arching her brows.
"Yes." He said frankly. "You will be."

Narrowing her eyes, Katie frowned. "Is that a threat?"

"Only if you make it one."

Keith wasn't dangerous, she had told herself earlier.

But right now, looming over her, a glint of something not quite human in his eyes- she found that hard to believe.

And then it slipped, a crack slipping through, something vulnerable, human. "Please don't make me do this, Katie."

"Do what?" She asked. "Take me?"

"Yes."

He was serious- she recognized that in an instant. But in that instant, she realized one more thing.

That what Keith wanted to protect them from? If he was going to take her to the valley, it meant that whatever it was, it wasn't in the valley. And if it wasn't the Garrison, and if it wasn't the valley... that could only mean one thing.

There was a third party.

That's what Keith was afraid of. That's what Keith wanted to protect them from.

"Fine then." Thrusting her hands forward, she locked eyes with him. "Take me."

Judging from his double take, that wasn't a reaction he'd been anticipating. He blinked, cocked his head to one side, and stared down at her in visible confusion. ":-uh?"

"Take me." Katie repeated. "I meant what I said, Keith."

He wasn't bluffing- and neither was she.

He muttered something underneath his breath again- she was pretty sure she heard the words reverse psychology- before glancing down at her, uncertain. "If I take you, I don't know when I can bring you back home again."

"Eh, who needs high school." She said with a shrug. "You came here to take me, so take me."

"I didn't come here to-" Cutting himself off, Keith rubbed his forehead, uncertain gaze turning outright incredulous. "You're actually asking me to abduct you."

Curious choice of words, given what they were dealing with, but she'd let it slide for now. "I'm not going to stop, Keith."

And for a moment, he merely held her gaze, before heaving a long sigh. She was pretty sure he muttered something along the lines of wasn't trained for this under his breath.

"You do know I'll have to knock you out, right?" Keith asked her.

That she did wince at. "Any chance you could just blindfold me?"
Keith's look told her more than his words could. "No, huh?"

"Nope."
Because according to this, all of Keith's records were fake. Everything from his birth certificate to his school records to his social security number—every bit of his paper trial was fake. If what this file said was true, then no person such as Keith Kogane had ever existed.

Here it is, chapter seven! This one was a fun one to write, especially in certain places. I'm definitely excited to write all that comes after this point, which, ideally, will be just as good as I hope it'll be. So hold on to your horses, folks!

Also prayer circle that season six will reveal the name of Keith's father... please Dreamworks, if you give us those Keith flashbacks but somehow don't mention the dude's name I will personally come into your studio and challenge you to a fist fight.

"Any sign of her?"

"No!" Matt's tone was more than a little frantic, not that he couldn't understand it. "I can't find her anywhere!"

Matt's call to his burner cell had come no sooner than he'd left work, and he'd only waited long enough to be sure he wasn't being followed to head over to the Holt household. He'd made good time, but not nearly good enough to keep Matt from nearly tearing the house apart looking for his sister.

In any other situation, he would have cracked a joke about him looking for her in the cabinets (though she could, admittedly, fit in there), but this was not the time for jokes. Not when it was very clear that Katie was missing.

And not when he had a sinking feeling that he knew who was behind it.

This was exactly what he had been afraid of when Katie suggested building drones. He shouldn't have let her, he knew that now. Why hadn't he stopped her?

It was easy to say that now. Hindsight was 20/20, easy to determine the cause when the remains of drones were scattered on the floor of the main entrance.

Sensing that Matt was on the cusp of a full blown panic attack, Shiro placed his hand on his shoulder, giving it a firm squeeze. "We'll find her, Matt. I promise."

"But what if-?" Matt began, before letting out a long breath, his shoulders slumping. "We shouldn't have let her make the drones. We should have-"
"I know." Shiro told him. "This was our mistake. But we'll fix it."

"How?" Matt asked. "We don't even know where to start looking."

They both knew that wasn't true. If Katie had been taken, then there was only one place that she could be right now- the valley.

"Keith is with her." Shiro told him.

"Keith probably took her." Matt pointed out.

He couldn't help but wince at the statement, knowing it was likely true. He hadn't thought it would come to this, that Keith wouldn't do something like this- but clearly he'd been naive. He'd thought... he didn't know, that if he'd gone out of his way to warn him, that he'd overlook something like failed drones.

How did he know they were Katie's anyways?

"I know." Shiro said finally, letting his hand slip from Matt's shoulder. "But Keith wouldn't hurt her. We both know that."

"Yeah." Matt said, taking in and letting out a long, if not shaky, breath. "Yeah, I know that, it's just- I don't get it, Shiro. I thought we were friends. I mean, I don't know how close I was with Keith, but you and him..."

"And now he- he took Katie, Shiro. She- she's gone. Just-" Matt told him, looking up at him, something despairing in his gaze. "First dad, and now..."

"We'll get her back." Shiro promised him. "I'll get her back."

Even if it meant that he had to go into the valley himself.

He didn't say that part out loud, but Matt seemed to realize it for himself anyways. Narrowing his eyes, his lips set themselves in a tight frown. "Shiro, you can't. If you go-"

"I know." Shiro said, letting out a long sigh. "I know, Matt. I don't know if I'll be able to get back. But at least I'll be able to figure out what's going on here, and keep an eye on Katie. I can't just leave her there."

"You're the one who said that going into the valley was a terrible idea." Matt pointed out.

"I know what I said, but that was before." Shiro frowned. "I don't know if I'll be able to get back. But at least I'll be able to figure out what's going on here, and keep an eye on Katie. I can't just leave her there."

Holding his gaze, Matt finally let out a sigh of his own. "You're right, I know you're right but... what if we're wrong about this? I hate to say it, but what if Keith's not who we think he is?"

It wasn't as if he hadn't considered it. There was so much that Keith kept to himself, that it wasn't impossible that he might have been fooling them all along. Still, no matter much he turned that question over, he couldn't figure out why he would do such a thing- nor why he would have even bothered warning him about the valley if that were true.

Maybe there were things he didn't know about Keith, but Keith knew him well enough to know that he would heed any warnings given.

"Do you really think that?" Shiro asked.
Frowning, Matt shook his head. "No. Keith's a lot of things, but you're right- he's not a bad guy."
"...even if he did kidnap my sister." Matt added, frown turning into a glower.

Unable to help himself, Shiro let out a snort. "I'll need your help with this, Matt. I can't get to the valley on my own."

"Oh, I'm not letting you go alone." Matt told him, arching a brow. "I'm going with you."

He couldn't say the he hadn't entirely been expecting that, but that didn't mean he liked the idea. "If you go, you might not be able to come back. Your mother-"

"I know, I know!" Matt told him, stepping back, letting out an exasperated sigh. "I don't like the idea of leaving mom all alone either. But Katie's my sister, Shiro. I'm supposed to be her older brother, I'm supposed to protect her. I can't just- I can't just leave her there, wherever she's been taken to."

Opening and closing his mouth, he knew he had no right to try and convince him otherwise. After losing his father, he could understand where Matt was coming from. But still...

"You have to talk to your mother about it." He told him. "She deserves to know."

"I know." Matt said. "I mean, we gotta tell her why Katie's not coming to dinner anyways, don't we?"

"Fair point." Shiro admitted. "I know you're worried about her, but let's not race into this. Keith's with her, and we don't know for sure if she's actually in danger."

"Yeah, it's the for sure part I'm not so hot about." Matt admitted. "But you're right, I can't really picture Keith letting her get hurt."

Nodding his head, Shiro gave Matt's shoulder a firm squeeze. "We'll pack tonight. I'd stick to clothes and basic essentials, seeing as we don't know who it is we're dealing with here. We don't want to bring anything that might arouse suspicion."

"Or what." Matt observed.

"Or what." Shiro admitted.

Leaving his apartment with a bag would definitely arouse suspicion from the Garrison, but if he was just going to disappear into the valley anyways, he supposed it didn't really matter. He'd have to turn in a letter of resignation at the bakery- his boss had enough on her plate, he didn't want to leave her at a loss when he didn't show up for work the next day.

If all went well, maybe he'd even get her son back.

"Okay. I'll pack some things." Matt told him. "For Katie, too. I mean, she'll hate me going through her stuff, but she'd probably also care for like, clean underwear."

"There is," he added, "-one thing I'd like to do before we go, though."

Arching a brow, Shiro got a feeling he knew what it was. "You want to hack the Garrison."

"I'm going to hack the Garrison." Matt said. "Keith seemed pretty interested as to whether or not you read those personnel files, so I'm betting there's something pretty interesting in there."
"Can you get them without getting caught?" Shiro asked. "I thought you said they were rigged."

"Oh, they are." Matt told him, giving him a faint smirk. "But do you honestly think I haven't been thinking of a way around that?"

Letting out another snort, Shiro merely shook his head. "I know you better than that."

"Good." Matt said, nodding his head. "Then you know that I have a plan."

"The question is," Shiro began, "is it a good plan?"

Because he knew about Matt's plans, and they all tended to fall under two categories - very bad and marginally better. Which, considering that he planned at all, still put him one step above Keith, who had a plan maybe only ten percent of the time.

Squinting, Matt merely frowned. "It's decent."

"It better be." Shiro told him. "Because I don't know if you've noticed but," reaching out, he patted his stump, "I'm only half the man I used to be."

"Don't sell yourself so short, Shiro." Matt said. "I'd say you're more like three fourths the man you used to be, if anything."

Maybe the bark of laughter that escaped him wasn't quite situation appropriate but that - that was a damn fair assessment.

He'd be lying if he said there was part of him that almost expected to see Keith waiting for him in his apartment that evening, fresh pick marks on the lock.

But he wasn't there, leaving him alone with the Garrison's bugs, and not much else.

Slumping back in his only chair, Shiro let out a long sigh, burying his face in his hand. The action was far more effective with two hands, but beggars couldn't be choosers. Closing his eyes, he tried to sort out his thoughts, which had been running in circles since Matt called him.

No, if he was going to be honest, they had been running in circles for a long time now. Even before he learned about Keith, the valley, and the vast conspiracy that involved both.

They'd been running in circles ever since he had woken from his coma, only to learn that he had lost his right arm, with the blood of a man he deeply respected on his hands. Maybe it was true that the accident never would have happened if the Garrison had not resorted to using substandard parts to build the Kerberos shuttle - but the fact remained that he hadn't been able to perform his duties as pilot without fail.

Without fail meant getting everyone back safely, after all.

And now he'd let his daughter be taken.

Realistically he knew he hadn't let it happen - but he should have nixed the drone idea. Should have realized it was dangerous.

But then Katie might have just made them on her own anyways - in fact, he knew that she would. Rather than Matt coming home to find her missing and knowing why, he would have simply come home to find her missing and having not a clue as to how it could have happened.
It still didn't change the fact that someone should have been with her. If she hadn't been alone...

Shaking his head, he leaned back in his chair, blowing out a long breath. Would it have done any good? The one thing he knew for sure about Keith was that he was talented– flying, fighting... the kid was skilled, like he had been training all his life.

And here he was, one armed and disabled. Fat lot of good he would have done.

But he still wanted to believe in Keith– that he hadn't done this by choice. That he'd keep her safe. That there was a reason behind his actions, a good one.

He wanted to believe that the awkward teenager who had gradually warmed up to him back at the Garrison hadn't been a lie. Thoughts flickering back to the first time they had been introduced, he let out a silent laugh, recalling the way he had grasped his forearm when he'd offered it for a handshake, after puzzling over it for several moments.

He now questioned the memory– how was it that Keith hadn't known what a handshake was?

Out of the corner of his eye, his father had flinched, but he hadn't thought much of it at the time. It wasn't like he had never noticed that Keith was odd– but he'd assumed that most of it was just due to culture shock. He had been raised in his mother's home country– though thinking back on it, he'd never once been told what country that was.

Maybe he should have asked.

Aliens. The idea was... he still didn't know what to think about it. But Katie had been right– he really couldn't think of anything better.

Opening his eyes, he held out his arm in front of him, studying his own nails. The first thing he'd ever noticed about the kid was his nails. Hard not to, what with the way they had pricked his skin during their greeting, leaving behind tiny red marks. They weren't round, tapering off instead into points.

But bad nails were a thing, so he'd never given it any thought.

He hadn't noticed his teeth until the first time he'd sat with him in a flight simulator, Keith baring them in a savage grin as he pulled a hairpin turn that would have gotten anyone else killed. They'd caught his eye just as much as the move– like someone had molded them all wrong, forgotten that human teeth were supposed to be round.

But he'd chalked it up to bad teeth– Keith was usually so cautious about not showing them in mixed company, that it was easy to think so.

At times, it felt like the longer he looked at Keith, the more out of place aspects he noticed. The texture of his skin, rough and thick, the proportion of his arms just a bit off kilter with the rest of him, too long, his hands half a size too large– the violet glint of his gaze, eyes like he's never seen before.

He'd thought of it as odd, but he'd never once thought of it as alien. Why would he? Why would anyone?

He'd ignored it all before– who was he to comment on someone's appearance like that? Though he'd since grown past it, Keith had always seemed so self conscious of his own appearance when he first met him, constantly ducking his head and trying to obscure his face, folding his arms to obscure their proportions. He'd probably been hassled about his odd looks in the past, he
determined, and vowed not to say anything.

Beyond all of that, Keith was perfectly normal. Awkward, constantly missing social cues and perpetually curious about near everything, but still a normal kid, especially once he warmed up to him. He cracked jokes, made conversation, even smiled- as far as he could tell, there was nothing about him that was fundamentally different from the other cadets.

But for the first time, he found himself questioning who, exactly, Keith Kogane was.

A talented pilot, once in a generation.

A good kid with a quick wit, but poor social skills.

A friend. Someone he thought of fondly, someone he trusted to have his back. One whom he grew to care for, sometimes affectionately thinking of him as a younger brother.

A cryptid, of all fucking things, living out in the middle of the desert, involved with a conspiracy that was vaster than perhaps any of them could have imagined.

Maybe he hadn't come here just to warn him to stay out of the valley.

Maybe he'd really come here to warn him to stay out of it- to stay out of everything.

"Well," keeping his voice low, not safe to speak freely even in his own apartment, "-no chance of that now."

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Patience yields focus, Shiro reminded himself, but it's never been harder for him to abide by that than it was now.

Mostly because there was nothing he could do but wait, not at this moment. This part was all Matt. He'd just have to hope that his plan worked out.

Everything was set. He had packed a bag, submitted his resignation to the bakery, and shook his Garrison pursuers. He knew that Matt had spoken with his mother- it was something he had left him to do by himself, sensing that it was a private affair. He was close to the family, but he wasn't a part of the family.

The evening sun had not yet set, turning the sky a vivid pink. It was beautiful, and were the circumstances not what they were, he'd appreciate it a lot more.

Finally, Matt's car pulled up, and he felt himself exhale. At the mockery of a salute the now presumably former Garrison employee gave him, Shiro couldn't help but let out a laugh.

"Get the files?" He asked, sliding into the passenger seat.

"Sure did." Matt told him. "And now the Garrison has a lovely virus to sort out, so it'll be awhile before they notice anyone's been looking at things they shouldn't."

Arching a brow at that, he bit back a comment, wondering how his life had come to... well, he was exactly encouraging those younger than him to commit crimes, but he wasn't doing much to convince them to not commit crimes.

"Good." Nodding his head, Shiro took the data pad that Matt offered him. "Get a chance to look at any of it yet?"
"I pretty much made for the door as soon as it finished downloading, so no." Matt told him. "I'll leave that honor to you. We heading for the valley?"

"Unless you've changed your mind." Shiro told him.

"Not a chance." Matt said, shaking his head. "Password is Iverson's a dickbag, by the way."

"...charming." Shiro said, his tone dry.

He found himself wishing he hadn't lost his dominant hand, navigating through the touch screen not quite as intuitive as he felt it should be. Still, he managed to find the files without much of a fuss, bringing the pair of them up.

He hesitated for the span of a moment, fingers hovering over the pair. After some thought, he went for Commander Kogane's files first- there was still some part of him that felt like this was prying, and he didn't want to do that to Keith.

But on the other hand, Keith had basically kidnapped Katie, so fair's fair.

At first, there wasn't too much of interest. It wasn't until he recalled Katie's mention of a meteor strike, that it occurred to him what he should be looking for.

There it was, Commander Kogane's report on the matter. It was cut and dry, stating that although the meteor had left a crater upon impact, it had been destroyed by the force of it. What was more interesting was the report refuting that- and how recently the report had been put together.

Keith had vanished from the Garrison five months after the launch of the Kerberos mission. This report had been filed just one month after that.

He didn't think the timing was a coincidence.

The report itself was cut and dry, just as the first one had been- but it included witness testimony, namely testimony that something had fallen from the sky that evening- as well as reports that something had been moved from the site.

He couldn't believe he was saying this, but maybe Katie had been right about the aliens after all.

There was one other interesting piece of information that he gleaned from the initial report- Commander Kogane's supervising officer.

Samuel Holt.

Gaze flickering over towards Matt, he showed the data pad to him, tapping his father's name, the gesture awkward with just one hand. "You know about this?"

"I'm driving, Shiro." Matt lightly reminded him, but spared a look anyways. "I- huh, no. Dad never mentioned that. I didn't even know he knew Keith's father."

"Apparently he did." Shiro noted, browsing through the rest of the file. There wasn't too much to it after that- it wasn't even a year later that Commander Kogane left the Galaxy Garrison behind, vanishing into thin air.

Which left him with Keith's file.

Letting out a long breath, Shiro brought it up before he could change his mind.
Unlike with his father's, he could tell something was wrong with Keith's right away.

*Kogane, Keith (presumed alias, real name unknown)*

Real name unknown. *Real name unknown.*

Just three words, and he was already cycling them through his head, over and over. He barely registered the *presumed* before it, too focused on what came after.

But that? That was just the start.

Because according to this, *all* of Keith's records were fake. Everything from his birth certificate to his school records to his *social security number*- every bit of his paper trial was *fake*. If what this file said was true, then no person such as Keith Kogane had ever existed.

Which was... well, way more than he had been prepared for, to say the least.

It must have shown on his face, because Matt leaned over to peer at the data pad for himself, letting out a low whistle. "Guess we really *didn't* know Keith."

It was a haunting thought.

"*If* this is true," Shiro said. "Remember, it's coming from the Garrison."

"I mean, I get it, but this is coming from their internal server, Shiro." Matt pointed out. "I like Keith too, I'm not saying any of this makes him a bad dude, but why would the Garrison need to lie to *itself*?"

He frowned. He had a point.

"I don't know," Shiro said. "But whatever this is about, we can ask Keith about it when we see him."

"Provided he decides to *tell* us." Matt observed. "That might be the hard part."

That was true too. His frown deepening, Shiro scanned the rest of the file. This might be from the Garrison's internal server, but there were massive chunks of the file that were redacted, which was suspicious enough in and of itself.

"Whose computer did you access this from?" Shiro asked.

"Iverson's," Matt told him, sparing the data pad a glance, grimacing. "Guessing I should have gone for someone higher on the food chain, huh?"

"Looks like it," Shiro told him. "Near as I can tell, it looks like Keith has been interfering in official Garrison activities since we- since he- left. But aside from telling me that he's the one responsible for Iverson's missing eye, this isn't telling me much."

It did also inform him that Keith apparently had *special forces training*, which was yet another idea he was struggling to wrap his head around. Sure, he knew Keith was talented, but *special forces?* What special forces, and from *where*?

He was starting to get the impression that *from where* was the big question here.

"Oh man, *Keith's* the one who socked Iverson?" Matt asked. "I mean, I'd heard the rumor going around, but I didn't know it was *Keith*."

"*Keith's* the one who socked Iverson?" Matt asked. "I mean, I'd heard the rumor going around, but I didn't know it was *Keith*."
"So it would seem." Shiro observed. "That explains Iverson's vested interest in locating him, if nothing else."

"He always was one to hold a grudge." Matt said, drumming his fingers against the wheel. "So. Keith's a fake."

"Possibly." Shiro stressed, eyeing Matt. "And it doesn't mean he's half alien."

There were still other explanations for this than well... that.

"I'm just saying..." Matt trailed off. "It does probably mean that he's been involved with them for like, a lot longer than we first thought, though."

He was right about that. Letting out a sigh, Shiro closed out of the file, leaning back in his car seat, trying to sort his own thoughts. He didn't know what he'd expected to find, just... a little- a lot- less than this, at least.

Come to think of it, the general store owner had never once specified how long people had been vanishing into the valley. He'd just naturally assumed that it had started once Keith left the Garrison, but what if it was before that?

He had half a mind to tell Matt to turn the car around, to head to the west town so they could ask- but from the look of the sun, sinking low into the horizon, they'd probably missed their window of opportunity. He wanted to start their trek before the heat of the day vanished entirely.

When the car jerked violently to a stop, he took it as a sign that they'd made it.

"Welp," Matt said, "-that's as far as this old girl can take us. Hate to leave her behind."

"Don't have much of a choice." Shiro told him, already opening the car door. "Unless you want to push it through the desert."

"Don't love it that much." Matt said, getting out himself. "We sure about this?"

"I'm sure about this." Shiro told him. "You can still turn back."

"I just hacked into the Garrison." Matt pointed out. "Pretty sure I can't turn back."

"Good point." Shiro admitted, swinging his pack over his shoulder, gazing out beyond the horizon. "Let's get going."

Slamming the car door shut behind him, Matt shouldered his own pack- and Katie's, though he grunted a little under their combined weight. They'd take shifts with it.

"So," gaze flickering over towards him, Matt gave him an almost rueful smile, "-let's go get abducted by aliens."

By the time the moon was high overhead, they'd switched shifts. Matt had to help him sling Katie's pack over his right shoulder, but he was able to brace it there even without the use of his hand. Thankfully, it turned out that whatever was causing electronics to short out in the area didn't apply to something as low tech as a flashlight.

"Is it just me, or is the desert super creepy at night?" Matt asked, sticking close behind him.

"You're not wrong." Shiro said.
Especially not since he'd been feeling eyes on them for awhile now.

The further they got, the more intense the gazes became. He might not be able to pinpoint the direction they were coming from, but he could tell that much. If someone was going to come and greet them, he imagined it wouldn't be much longer now.

He'd always had good intuition.

Before they even realized it, they were surrounded. The three figures seemed to meld into the darkness, illuminated only by a faint purple glow, like burning eyes in the dark. He could feel Matt's hand dig into his shoulder, the older Holt having drawn closer the second he'd realized they were no longer alone out here.

Gaze flickering between the three figures, he tried to make out their shapes in the dark. He didn't dare shine his flashlight on them- and in fact lowered it, pointing it so that it faced the ground.

Clad in black, the three figures were all hooded- and in fact, all seemed to be wearing matching armor. It was like nothing he had ever seen before, but that wasn't the key point that he found himself focusing on.

Behind him and to the front- two of the figures were impossibly tall, towering well over him. Only the figure to his right was of a human height- and one he recognized, at that.

"...Keith?"

The figure to his right took a step forward, holding up a hand- out of the corner of his eye, he didn't miss the way the one who had flanked his left had advanced just the same. Fixing his gaze back towards the small one, he watched as they lifted a hand, pressing it against the side of their face.

There was a flicker, giving way to a face that was at once familiar, and yet in places, not.

Matt's whisper of holy shit was not lost on him.

The glowing purple orbs- eye holes of a mask of some kind, he now realized- might have vanished, but Keith's violet eyes nevertheless still glowed in the darkness, their color more intense than he had ever seen it. It was faint in comparison, but still unmistakable. Each cheek was marred by a notch of color, like some kind of marking, though in the dark of night, he couldn't tell what color.

Suddenly, Matt's theory of Keith being an alien didn't sound so crazy anymore.


"Hey Keith." Matt said meekly, lifting a hand. "Cool outfit."

Keith cracked a smile, the familiar expression at odds with the strange situation.

"Keith," Shiro pressed, ",-you know why we're here."

The smile vanished, replaced by a tight frown. "I know. I didn't- I didn't want it to come to this. And just for the record," he began, pressing the side of his face, mask flickering back into place, ",- I'm sorry about this."

He barely had time to question what he meant, before blackness claimed him.
"Allow me to introduce myself again," she said, and he watched in awe as her very form changed before him, dark brown hair turning snow white, the light brown splotches of color under her eyes turning pink, her ears elongating, tipping off into points, "I am Princess Allura, of planet Altea."

Chapter Notes

Haha, wow you guys have no idea how much time I spent writing and rewriting this chapter. I couldn't decide from what angle I wanted to take it from the longest time so I kept redoing everything I had written, until I ended up with this! We flash back in time this chapter, both to right after Lance and Hunk were taken, and to right after Katie was taken in the second part. Dual perspectives this chapter, in other words!

And finally, we get to meet some familiar faces! But there's still more aliens to come, just around the corner, so get excited for that! Most of all, I wanted to avoid the dreaded mass exposition dump, which is why I decided to slide back in time a bit to fill in some of the gaps without having to dump everything all at once because trust me, there's like, no smooth way to do that, I tried.

Until next time!

The hard way.

Why did he have to choose the hard way?

Groaning, he rolled over onto his side, before finally pushing himself up into a sitting position. Rubbing the back of his neck, he tried to stop his head from swimming, trying to string his thoughts together long enough to come up with something coherent.

"Lance?"

He knew that voice.

"Lance, you're awake!"

Yep, he thought, as two hefty arms wrapped themselves around him, nearly crushing him- he definitely knew that voice.

"Hunk, you're crushing me." He muttered, patting his friend on the back. "Good to see you too, buddy."

"Oh man, I was so worried!" Hunk told him. "Cause I don't know if you remember this or not, probably not, what with the head trauma and all, but you kind of picked a fight with Keith, and-"
And okay, he was gonna have to stop him right there.

"Wait, Keith?"

"-then he basically just- uh," Hunk pulled away from him, his vision came back just in time to make out the worried expression on his friend's face, ",-do you- do you not remember?"

Groaning, Lance rubbed his head, feeling a distinct bump there. He definitely hadn't had that when he'd woke up this morning.

"I remember the west town, and the dare." Lance told him, trying to piece things together. "And then... Keith was there! Him and that stupid, totally not cool hoverbike!"

"Yeah, yeah." Hunk said, nodding his head. "It all coming back to you now?"

"Yeah, it's-" Lance began, before narrowing his eyes, jolting to his feet so fast that it took his friend by surprise. "Wait- am I remembering wrong, or did Keith basically kidnap us?"

"No, you're definitely not remembering that part wrong." Hunk told him, shifting on his feet. "That- that totally did happen."

"Okay, first of all, what the fuck. And second of all," Lance began, before frowning, ",-actually second of all is also what the fuck, because seriously, what the fuck."

And shouting did not help his headache, whoops. Groaning, Lance collapsed back down on what seemed to be some kind of bed. From the look of it, they seemed to be in some kind of a bedroom- or maybe it was a cell. Could have been a cell.

"Where are we?" Lance asked.

"I don't know." Hunk said. "I only woke up just a little bit ago myself."

"What, Keith knocked you out too?" Lance asked, letting out a disgruntled snort.

"Yeah, pretty much." Hunk admitted. "In case you were wondering, I already checked the door, and it's uh, locked. And weird."

So they were in a cell then, that settled it. "Weird?"

"Yeah, uh, it's-" Hunk stammered, "-it's like some kind of scanner? But not any kind I've ever seen before."

Frowning, Lance got to his feet, making his way over towards the door himself. Leaning down so that he could get a better look at the thing, he wrapped it with his knuckles. Hunk was right about one thing- he'd never seen anything like it before.

Actually, this whole room was weird.

"I don't suppose you've still got your phone with you." Lance said, glancing back towards Hunk.

"Nope. All that was in my pockets was beef jerky," Hunk told him. "...which I might have eaten."

"Well there go our rations." Lance remarked.

"I know, I'm sorry! You know I just get hungry when I'm nervous." Hunk told him. "But I mean... you don't think that Keith's like, going to let us starve, right?"
“Well considering that Keith just kidnapped us, I’m not ready to rule anything out.” Lance told him. He’d started to pace without realizing it, but dammit, he couldn't help it. This was bad, man, seriously bad.

And here he thought things in his life were looking up for a change.

Yeah, sure, he was still crashing the simulator, but at least he was fighter class now! And okay, sure, he'd only gotten that rank because Keith had washed out, but hey, his loss, right?

"Okay." Coming to a dead stop, Lance turned to Hunk. "Here's the plan. Keith's going to have to come to check up on us at some point, right? When he does, we'll both spring at him."

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea." Hunk frowned. "I mean, he does have a knife."

"Well yeah, but there's like, two of us and one of him." Lance said. "I'm pretty sure if we joined forces, we could overpower him, no problem."

"I'm not so sure about that." Hunk said. "I mean... he moved me. While I was unconscious. Dead weight."

"Yeah well, we might be dead weight if we don't think of a way out of this." Lance told him, collapsing back on the bed, holding his head in his hands. "If we get out of this, I am so kicking Greg's butt."

"Don't you think it's a little too early to decide Keith wants to kill us?" Hunk ventured. "I mean... don't you think if he was going to, he would have like, done it already?"

"Fair point." Lance admitted. "But why kidnap us?"

"I don't know." Hunk said, sinking down next to him. "I'm just trying to stay positive."

"And you're doing a great job of it buddy, thank you." Lance told him, patting his knee. "So, no rushing Keith when he comes through the door. Got it. You think maybe you can dismantle the scanner thingy, maybe like, reverse engineer it?"

"I can't even get the thing to budge." Hunk told him. "Whatever it's made out of it, it's pretty solid."

"Great." Grumbling, Lance slumped back, regretting it instantly as touching the wall caused the bump on his head to throb. "So we're stuck here."

"Wherever here is." He added, almost as an afterthought.

Letting out a loud groan, Lance collapsed on the bed, closing his eyes. All of this because he'd seen Keith with some pretty girl. How pathetic was he, to get so worked up over some guy who lived out in the middle of the fucking desert?

Guess he hadn't got past that stupid rivalry of his- which he realized with pain had apparently been one-sided on his part the whole time. Sure, maybe it was just because he had spent the past year living in the desert, but would it kill the guy to remember his name?

"Uh, Lance, do you hear that?" Hunk asked, his voice dropping to a whisper.

"Hear what?" Lance grumbled, cracking one eye open.

"I think... I think someone's coming." Hunk told him.
Frowning, Lance strained his ears. Pushing himself up, he narrowed his eyes—Hunk was right, that
did sound an awful lot like footsteps.

Two pairs of them, at that.

Which was great. Turns out their crazy desert hermit kidnapper wasn't alone.

There was a beep, before the door slid open. In hindsight, maybe it should have occurred to him,
but he still somehow didn't expect to see the girl who had gotten onto Keith's hoverbike here. Up
close, she looked just as amazing as she had from a distance, and for a moment, Lance felt his jaw
drop.

And then Keith strode into the room behind her.

He shut his mouth.

Springing to his feet, Lance narrowed his eyes, aiming to close the gap between them. "Keith, you
goddamn bastard, if you don't-!

Right. Knife. Keith had drawn it in such a flash, he'd barely registered the movement. Just a second
ago, he had been behind the mysterious girl, and now he was out in front, flanking her in what
almost seemed to be a defensive stance.

"Keith, enough."

Keith's freaky purple gaze darted back behind him, before he gave the girl a curt nod of his head,
lowering his stance and sheathing his knife. And now he was left with a new question— who the
hell was this girl to make Keith just comply like that?

"I am sorry for all of this." The girl spoke, her voice prim and proper, accented in a way that Lance
couldn't quite place. "I am afraid that my- that Keith has made a rather rash choice on my behalf."

"Yeah, I'd say kidnapping is pretty damn rash." Lance noted, sending a glower in Keith's direction.
Bastard didn't even react—it was like he was wearing a mask or something.

"So uh, is everything okay now?" Hunk asked, shifting on his feet. "Can- can we go?"

Oh no. Whoever this girl was, she controlled her emotions pretty well, but he caught that flinch,
that moment of hesitation.

"We're not going anywhere, are we?" Lance asked.

"I must apologize." The girl spoke. "If Keith had only just consulted me."

"They came here on a dare." Keith cut in, folding his arms in front of him. "If I let them leave, who
knows how long it would take before cadets are coming here on the regular? If one of them gets
too close-

"If one of them gets too close, then we will deal with it." The girl said. "The scout from before was
one thing, but these are simply children, Keith."

"Hey!" Lance protested. "I'm seventeen, I'm nobody's child!"

(Oof. He swore he could feel his mother's anger from all the way over here. Sorry, mom.)

"Look, all I did was do my job." Keith told her. "If you've got a problem with that, princess, you
"You and I both know-"

"Wait, whoa, hold up!" Lance interjected. "Princess? Did you just say princess?" He asked, jabbing a finger towards Keith, before quickly jerking it back, his too sharp teeth bared in a silent snarl.

"I heard princess." Hunk chimed in. "Are- are you a princess?"

Heaving a long sigh, the girl merely shot Keith a look- who simply shrugged his shoulders, looking impassive. Her gaze lingered on him for only a moment longer, before she turned to face them again.

"Yes." Placing a hand on her chest, she gave them a polite smile. "Please forgive me for not introducing myself thus far. I am Princess Allura."

Okay, whoa. He knew the girl had been like, out of this world, but a princess? She was either the most beautiful crazy person Lance had ever met, or she was the real deal.

"What's a princess doing all the way out in the desert?" Hunk asked, having crept a bit closer to them, now that it was clear that Keith didn't seem intent on stabbing them.

"Hiding." Keith grumbled. "Which is why the two of you aren't going anywhere."

"Okay, so just to recap." Hunk said, holding up his hands. "You're a princess, who is hiding in the desert for some unknown reason, probably bad guys, I mean, it's always bad guys, and you're," he said, turning his gaze towards Keith, "-you're like, helping her?"

"Yeah, let's go with that." Keith said.

"Okay, whenever someone says that, they're always hiding things." Lance pointed out, narrowing his eyes. "So what is it? Just tell me you two aren't like, eloping because I don't think I could handle that."

"What is... eloping?" Allura asked, tilting her head.

"Okay, you know what, I'm not answering that." Lance said, holding up his hands. "Let's just pretend, as a group, that I never said that."

Allura almost seemed to pout, and Lance couldn't help but feel like he'd just dodged a fucking bullet there. Well, at least there was no way she could be eloping with Keith if she didn't even know what eloping was.

Probably?

"What else is going on is something you don't need to know." Keith told him, tone curt.

"Keith, they are likely to figure it out on their own at some point. We cannot keep them confined to this room the whole time." Allura told him, her lips set in a tight frown. "It is better that we tell them, as a show of trust."

"You can't seriously mean to tell me that you're planning on letting them wander the Castle." Keith told her, narrowing his eyes. "Look princess, I might be your bodyguard, but that doesn't mean that I can't-"
Okay, wait, hold up- hold up just one second there.

"Wait, bodyguard?" Lance sputtered. "You're her- you're like eighteen! And a dropout!"

"Yeah, and?" Keith asked, giving him the same kind of blank look that had pissed him off so much back at the Garrison, like he was just looking through him, rather than at him.

"Lance, maybe you should stop picking fights with the guy with the knife?" Hunk suggested, nervous gaze flickering over towards Keith.

Clearing her throat, Allura instantly drew attention to herself. "This is my ship, and I am the one who makes the calls here. I say we tell them."

Keith held her gaze for a long moment, before he let out a disgruntled sigh. "Fine. But I get to choose what areas of the ship they have access to. And you're the one who has to explain all this to Kolivan."

"Wait, ship?" Hunk asked. "I thought we were in the desert."

"Yeah, what's a ship doing in the desert?" Lance asked, cocking a brow.

"It's not a-" Keith began, "it's not that kind of ship."

"What Keith means to say is, that this is not a sailing vessel." Allura interjected. "And very well, I will consent to some restricted access. It would be unwise to allow them to wander where they might get hurt. But I fail to see why I should be the one briefing your leader."

God, he so wished they would stop saying stuff, just so he had a minute to catch up and process it all. Castle? Not a sailing ship? Kolivan? Leader?

"Wait, so if this isn't a ship, then what...?" Lance trailed off, because that left him with literally only one other possibility. "...no."

No, no, no. That couldn't be, right? That was nuts, right?

Allura seemed to catch his drift, for she smiled at him. Taking a small step back, she drew in a long breath.

"Allow me to introduce myself again," she said, and he watched in awe as her very form changed before him, dark brown hair turning snow white, the light brown splotches of color under her eyes turning pink, her ears elongating, tipping off into points, "-I am Princess Allura, of planet Altea."

Behind him, he could hear Hunk let out a loud gasp, one hand gripping onto his shoulder. It was a bit on the hard side, but man, he couldn't blame him in the least, because... planet? Planet?

"Wait, so you're-"

Keith, damn him, gave them the cheekiest fucking grin.

"We're aliens."

She woke to a stranger.

Jolting up, she regretted it quickly, the sudden shift into movement sending a wave of dizziness through her. She could barely make out the faint squawk the strange man who had been hovering
over her made, her only impression of him being a flash of bright orange.

"Easy there," he seemed to say, "-our young Blade did quite the number on you."

Head still spinning, Katie groaned, trying to steady her thoughts. For a moment, she couldn't recall how she had gotten here, nor who this man was.

When it came to her, it came back in a flash.

Keith had broken into her house, confronted her about the drones, and then...

...oh god, she'd asked him to take her.

That... in hindsight, that had been an almost *painfully* spur of the moment decision on her part, and with her head reeling the way it was, one that she was already having cause to regret.

Pressing a hand up against her forehead, she blinked, trying to steady her vision, now that her thoughts had complied. It took a few tries, but eventually everything stopped swimming, finally allowing her to properly gauge her surroundings.

Which didn't really help. She had no idea where she was. All she could see were vaulted ceilings, white walls, and glowing blue lights, as far as the eye could see. She was in... maybe some kind of medical ward?

Pulling her hand away, she blinked a final time. Right, she wasn't alone here- there was a strange man she didn't know here. But if Keith was the one who brought her here, she kind of doubted he'd leave her with anyone dangerous.

Besides, the guy just sounded concerned, mostly.

"Where's-" she opened her mouth to speak, turning her head to face the man- and shut it instantly, having to rub her eyes again just to be sure her vision was really clear.

Because this man? Not human.

No way, no how.

Humans didn't have pointy ears, nor strange markings underneath their eyes, which upon a closer look, almost seemed to be made up of tiny scales. A human's pupils were black- but this man's were a vibrant purple.

"...you're an alien."

The man, to his credit, merely looked amused. "Quite right you are! *Altean*, to be exact."

"Holy shit, you're an *alien.*" Katie repeated, her eyes going wide, and she was almost certain that they were glittering. "You're a- Matt is going to *freak* when he hears about this!"

Except... oh. Her face fell as the realization sunk in.

She wasn't going back home, was she?

"Ah yes," as if he were reading her thoughts, the man frowned, sympathy clear in his voice, "-I must apologize. I do wish that we could have met under more fortuitous circumstances for the both of us, but sometimes life doesn't hand us what we want."
Drawing in a breath, Katie steeled herself. It helped a little that from the sound of it, one of the people who might have been behind all this didn't even seem to want to be doing this. And to be fair, she had asked for this- she couldn't exactly complain about it now.

Well, she could, nothing could really stop her from complaining, but eh, she'd save it for Keith. Speaking of which...

"Where's Keith?"

"Briefing Allura on the situation. He should be along shortly to check up on you." The man told her simply. "Now, I believe some introductions are in order! You can call me Coran, on account of that's my name."

Feeling the edge of a smile, Katie let herself relax a bit. "I'm-

"Katie!"

Clicking her teeth, she let out a faint sigh. "Yeah, that. Katie Holt."

"Coran, I thought I told you to come get me when she woke up." Breaking into her line of vision, she didn't miss the faint frantic edge to Keith's voice. "Is she okay? She's okay, right?"

"Easy there now, young one." Coran told him. "She only just woke up a moment ago. She seemed a tad disorientated, but other than that, just fine."

Keith's shoulders slumped in relief, and she couldn't help but arch a brow at that. "What did you do, drop me?"

Bristling at the remark, Keith frowned. "No, I just- pressure point. Used too much force."

"Should have used the gas." Coran remarked. "It's formulated just right to lull humans into a peaceful slumber, no harm done."

"I didn't have my armor with me, Coran." Keith told him. "So no mask. That stuff effects me too, remember?"

"Ah yes, I'd nearly forgotten." Coran frowned.

Tilting her head at the flow of the conversation, Katie wondered if she should cut in. On one hand, she hated feeling forgotten when she was like, right here, but on the other hand, she got the feeling if she kept quiet, some enlightening details might come her way.

Unfortunately, Keith turned his attention back to her.

"Can you stand?" He asked, holding out a hand. "I can give you a tour, if you're feeling up to it."

On the other hand, a tour sounded good too.

"I think so." Katie told him, nevertheless taking his hand as she slipped off the- well, it was more of a cot than a bed, now that she thought about it. She stumbled a little at first, but soon found her feet again.

"There, see?" Coran said. "All is well."

Keith flashed the man a smile, one that was so earnest, that it nearly took her by surprise. She was
so used to seeing Keith be closed off to other people, that it was jarring to see otherwise.

"So uh, how do you and Coran know each other?" She ventured.

"Oh, I've known Keith since he was a young lad!" Coran remarked, cutting off any reply Keith himself might have made. "Altean tradition, you know!"

"Uh," Katie blinked, unable to help but frown, "...no?"

"Ah well, it's a grand old tradition." Coran remarked, completely unfazed by her lack of knowledge. "You see, on Altea, it's believed that the bonds formed while one is still young are some of the strongest. Therefore it is part of our royal tradition to partner the heir apparent with a peer of their own age group- someone to watch their back, to keep them safe. Usually it's another Altean, but circumstances were a bit different."

"Still, I must say," he added, "-young Keith was far less purple than I imagined he'd be."

Wait.

*Purple?*

"Okay, Coran, that's enough!" Keith cut in- she didn't even realize he had gotten behind her, until she felt a light push on her shoulders, like he was trying to wheel her out of the room. "If I don't start that tour now, it'll be dinner before we know it."

"Oh yes, of course." Coran blinked. "I'll save the story for another time then."

She didn't miss the way Keith exhaled, nor the very obvious way in which he was trying to hurry her out of there. Narrowing her eyes, she pursed her lips in thought- she had considered the idea that Keith might not have been raised on Earth, but...

"Keith," she began, and she didn't miss the way he seemed to flinch at her voice, "-where did you say it was that you were born again?"

"Why, that would be-!"

"Not helping, Coran." Keith cut him off.

Coran blinked, glancing towards her, before looking back towards Keith, a contemplative look on his face. "What, you mean she doesn't know? I thought you would have told her by now, seeing as you brought her all the way out here."

"Told me?" Katie asked, turning around, peering up to meet Keith eye to eye- as much as he seemed to be avoiding her gaze. "Told me what?"

"Why, that young Keith here is-!"

"*Coran!*" Keith cut him off again, glowering at the man.

To which the man merely frowned. "You know you can't keep it from her forever, right? And you were so free with the information to those two cadets! Why, I would have thought you would have been happy to finally have the chance to be honest with your friend."

"*Friend, huh?*" Katie observed, lifting both her brows. "That's funny, I seem to recall you saying that you had no friends."
Maybe not to strangers, but to people he knew, Keith tended to be pretty expressive- but this was still the first time she had ever seen him blush. The flushed color itself was faint, but stood out against his pale skin. If she didn't know any better, she could have sworn it was purple.

"Oh did he now? What a strange thing for him to say." Coran arched his brows much the same. "Yes, I seem to recall a certain someone putting our entire mission here at jeopardy just to-"

"Okay, Coran!" Keith cut him off for a third time, folding his arms in front of him, probably desperate to get back some form of dignity. "I- fine, I'll tell her. But you have to leave."

Holding up his hands, Coran merely gave him an indulgent smile. "If that is what you wish, than I shall bid you farewell. I wish that your stay here at the Castle of Lions was under better circumstances, young Katie, but just know that if you need anything while you are here, then I will be more than happy to do everything I can to provide you with it."

Keith's face set into a glower, he didn't let it relax until Coran left the room, at which point he exhaled, letting his shoulders slump. "Look, I was planning on telling you at some point- all of you- just... I didn't want it to be this way."

"That's fair." Katie told him. "But I'm here now, so you might as well. I mean, from the sound of it, my other option is to hear it from someone else, so..."

If she had to choose, she preferred to hear it from Keith.

"Daibazaal."

Blinking, she peered up at him. "...come again?"

"That's the-" Keith began, brows knitting together, "-that's the name of my home planet."

Home planet.

...home planet!?

"Wha- home planet!?" Oh snap, she said that out loud.

"Yeah," giving her a bit of a sheepish smile, Keith shrugged his shoulders, "-I'm not from Earth, Katie. I'm an alien."

"Okay, time out!" She told him, this close to just clamping her hand over his mouth to keep him from saying anything else. "I thought- I don't know, I thought maybe you had been abducted from Earth at a young age or something, but you're telling me you're not even from Earth?"

Which meant... an alien. Keith was an alien.

Keith was... all this time, he had been from another planet? But how? He was- he was human, right?

Right?

Studying his features like it was the first time she'd ever seen him, she suddenly found herself doubting that. The closer he looked at him, the less human he got- as if that missing piece of information was all it took to comprehend that Keith had been square in the middle of the uncanny valley the whole time.

He was an odd sight to behold sure, but she'd never thought too much of it. But now?
Now she couldn't help but see alien everywhere she looked.

Keith seemed to sense this, because he gave her a faint smile. "Wait here a second."

As if she had any choice. That revelation had her practically rooted to the ground.

Turning his back to her, Keith yanked open a drawer, fiddling with it's contents. Some kind of wipe, she thought, catching a flash of purple at the base of his neck as he lifted his hair.

When he turned back around, it sunk into her that she had been friends with an alien the whole time.

"I- can I touch them?" She blurted out, having half already raised a hand.

Keith blinked, before he shrugged his shoulders. Seizing the chance before he changed his mind, she lightly touched the violet color that smeared both of his cheeks, pausing to check her fingers, as if she half expected it to wipe away.

It didn't.

Not a smear then- but markings. A vibrant purple, that extended down to his neck, before vanishing into his hair. She wondered just how far down his back they went, or if the two points met on the back of his neck and stopped there. They felt no different from the rest of him, simply just flesh of a different color.

Which wasn't even touching on his eyes.

The violet color of them had always been striking- but now his sclera were a pale yellow, his irises shrunken, pupils slit.

"Holy shit," she whispered, "-you are an alien."

"Technically, to me, you're the alien." Keith pointed out.

"Nope." She said, holding up her hands. "We're on Earth, so you're the alien."

"Who says we're on Earth?" Keith asked, arching a brow.

Her thoughts nearly reeled, before Keith quirked a grin, a glint of mischief still apparent in those alien eyes, just the same as it had ever been. "I'm kidding, we're still on Earth."

And she felt her shoulders slump, glowering up at him. "Oh fuck you, Keith- wait, is your name even Keith?"

"It's Keith." He told her with a shrug. "My dad's human, he named me. Mom thought that since I was being raised in her culture, he should at least get to- Katie?"

"You," she began, "-you're half-alien?"

"...yeah?" Keith frowned, tilting his head. "Part human, on my dad's side."

So, two things- not only did Keith consider his human half as being his alien half, but also?

Oh god, Matt had been right.

"Matt," she began, "-is going to be insufferable when he finds out."
the aliens

Chapter Summary

Galra. A name to put to the alien features. He wondered if the other two aliens he'd seen last night were also Galra.

Chapter Notes

Hello all, back at it with chapter nine! Time for (some) answers, which hopefully will be worth the wait! Of course, there's still more to come, because where would be the fun in that? Hope everyone enjoys!

His head was killing him.

Groaning, Shiro's eyes flickered open for half a second, before squeezing shut again. The light was too bright, which did nothing to help his headache. Dimly, he thought he could hear a strange rumbling in the back of his head, but it passed the moment he noticed it.

"Shiro?"

He knew that voice. Frowning, Shiro reached out with his right hand, or tried to, at any rate. It didn't seem to be working the way he wanted it to.

It was at that, that his eyes snapped open. Waking with a jolt, his eyes darted down to his right arm, heart hammering in his chest as he realized that it ended in a stump.

And then he let out a long breath, calming himself down. That's right. He'd lost that arm months ago. This was nothing new.

Keith worriedly hovering over him was.

"...keith?"

His expression seemed to grow less worried at the sound of his name. Feeling Keith's hand on his back, he let him help him up into a sitting position, the pounding of his head slowly starting to abate. Memories of the past night started coming back to him, starting with the glowing glint of purple that he caught at Keith's chest.

That's right. Last night, they had entered the dead zone.

Now very awake, Shiro's gaze trailed upwards, lingering on Keith's face. In daylight, he determined that the notches of color on Keith's face were purple- a deep violet that matched his eyes.

Which were... different. In the light, they didn't glow as they had last night, but his sclera were now a pale yellow color, and his pupils shrunken, thin, like a cat's.
"Not human."

"...so last night wasn't a dream, huh?"

Keith cracked a smile, halfway between rueful and amused, shaking his head. "No."

"Yeah, didn't think so." Using his left hand- his only hand- Shiro brushed back his bangs, fingers digging into the shock of white hair at his scalp. "Where are we, exactly?"

"In the valley." Keith told him, slowly pulling his hand away, but not before making sure he could sit upright by himself. Whatever he had doused him with, it must have knocked him out good- now that his headache was gone, he felt like he'd slept better than he had in months.

"That much I gathered." Shiro told him, glancing around the room. "I was asking more about this place."

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Matt, still out like a light. The steady rise and fall of his chest told him that there was nothing to worry about.

"The Castle of Lions." Keith was quick to supply.

Cocking a brow, wondering if there was further explanation coming, Shiro quickly determined that there wasn't. Okay- for the moment he would just accept that answer at face value.

Instead, his gaze fell on Keith. In the light, he could tell that what he wore was indeed some kind of armor- sleek, like nothing he had ever quite seen before. Even the belt he wore with it was different from his usual one. It made his odd features pop, at the same time as it made them seem almost natural, as if some part of his brain was now supplying him with new context.

The other two had been dressed the same way, he recalled. He had a good memory, and an even better head for detail, so he was able to dredge their images up without too much of a problem. With Keith's arms hanging lax by his side, it was easy for him to connect the dots, realizing that the pair of them were proportioned very much in the same manner Keith was, just more so.

To his credit, Keith did not wilt under his gaze- though some part of him looked as if he wished to.

"I wanted to tell you."

It was Keith who broke the silence first, one that he hadn't even realized had settled between them.

"Planned on it, even." Keith told him. "But circumstances changed."

Frowning, Shiro's brows drew together. "Kerberos?"

Keith gave him a curt nod of his head. "There was more to the Kerberos mission than you're aware of, Shiro."

He'd had a creeping suspicion that might be the case, ever since he'd seen Sam's name in Commander Kogane's file. But to hear it out loud sent a chill down his spine.

"So I'm guessing you didn't drop out of the Garrison just because you were bored, then." Shiro remarked. It earned him a grin- a proper one- from Keith, so as far as he was concerned, his work here was done.

There was the kid he knew.
"No." Keith told him, shaking his head. "I'll tell you about it, Shiro, just- not yet."

"I've got time." Shiro told him. "Speaking of time, I think it's about time to wake Sleeping Beauty over there."

Keith frowned at that, tilting his head like he was trying to place the reference. *Culture shock*, some part of his brain supplied- and he guessed that was still technically true.

It was just that the culture that he had been raised in wasn't one from Earth.

Which, admittedly, was still an idea he was trying to wrap his head around. He wanted to ask, but at the same time, he couldn't bring himself to do it. He'd already forced Keith's hand once, he didn't want to have to do it again, not so soon.

"It means Matt." Shiro told him. "It's a movie reference."

Okay, so it was more complex than that, but he wasn't sure if Keith knew what a fairy tale was or not, and he didn't really feel like trying to explain it to him. He knew he knew what a movie was though- movie nights were a bi-weekly tradition back at the Galaxy Garrison, and even Keith had been to a few.

Mostly movies about aliens. That explained the laughter.

Blinking, Keith gave him a curt nod of his head. Watching as he leaned over Matt's cot, he lifted his head, peering over his shoulder as Keith flicked him on the forehead, causing Matt to let out a yelp.

"Wha- Keith?!"

In jolting up, Matt nearly fell out of his cot- if not for Keith catching him, he probably would have landed flat on his face.

"Wow, and I didn't even have to buy you dinner first."

He didn't even have to see Keith's face to know what kind of expression he wore, fighting back the urge to snort as he simply dropped Matt on the floor.

Groaning, Matt pushed himself up, rubbing his head. "Yup, that's Keith."

"Who else would I be?" Keith asked, folding his arms in front of him, taking a step back, so that he wasn't blocking their view of each other.

"I dunno, some weird bodysnatcher?" Matt told him, pulling himself to his feet.

"What's a bodysnatcher?" Keith asked, tilting his head.

"...man, we have got to catch you up on Earth pop culture." Matt remarked, taking the chance to look him up and down, just as he had not too long ago. He'd been a bit more subtle about it, though.

He hoped.

"Alright, so just for the record," Matt began, "-you're an alien, aren't you?"

Right to the chase. Yeah, that was the Matt he knew.

Keith merely shrugged. "I mean, I'm half-human, but yeah."
Letting out a loud *whoop* of victory, Matt pumped his fist in the air. "Aw yeah, I knew it! Score one for Matt!"

Catching Keith's eye, Shiro gave him a small smile, swinging his legs out of his own cot, getting to his feet. Being the only one lying around made him feel like a lazy old man, and while he might have the white patch of hair now, that didn't make him a geezer.

So. Keith was half-alien.

That was a thing.

He didn't quite know what to make of it yet, but that was a thing.

"I take it you're not from here, then." Shiro cracked.

Shaking his head, Keith returned his smile, though his own was a bit awkward. Not strained, just awkward. "No. I was born on a planet called Daibazaal. Mom's idea. Thought it better."

"Good call, our healthcare sucks." Matt remarked.

Keith's smile grew a bit at that, before he ducked his head, shifting on his feet. "You want to see Katie, right? I can take you to her."

"Yes, yes, I would love to see Katie." Matt told him. "She's fine, right?"

Glancing up at him, Keith nodded his head. "She's fine. Last I checked, Coran was showing her how the invisible maze worked. She's probably still there."

Exchanging a glance with Matt, he bit back precisely two questions- namely, who was *Coran*, and what was an *invisible maze*?

Reaching up to press the side of his armor, the mask that they had seen Keith wear last night flickered back into place. It was less eerie in the light, but raised no less questions. When he spoke, his voice was distorted, as if through some kind of filter.

"Follow me."

Exchanging another glance with Matt, Shiro gave him a shrug of his shoulders. Falling into step behind Keith, he let him lead them out of... well, wherever they were. All around them were white walls and glowing blue lights, which should have felt stark and impersonal, yet somehow did not.

Keith was silent as they traversed the halls. It wasn't just that he didn't speak- he simply didn't make any noise at all.

Reflecting back on it, it was nothing new. He had just never really paid that much attention to it before. But in this setting, his face hidden by a mask, it really brought home to him just how little he actually knew about Keith.

"So, uh," Matt broke the silence, shifting on his heels as the elevator they had entered took them up, "is Keith your real name?"

"Mom wanted to name me Yorak." Keith remarked. "But yeah, it's Keith."

*Yorak.* Shiro couldn't help but mouth the name. Keith was... Keith was definitely better.

"I take it your father was the one who named you, then." Shiro said, as the elevator came to a stop,
depositing them on a hall that looked very much like the last, making him briefly wonder if they'd actually gone anywhere.

"He wanted me to have some connection to Earth." Keith told him, turning to look back at him, his expression impossible to read under his mask. "This way."

Falling into step behind him, Keith lead them into a wide open chamber. It was easy to spot the two figures in the middle of it, the smaller of the pair instantly familiar to him.

"Katie!"

Turning on her heel at the sound of her brother's voice, Katie's mouth split into a wide grin. "Matt!"

The two were running towards each other before he even knew it, Katie all but throwing herself into her brother's arms. Letting out a faint chuckle, he couldn't help but think that it seemed like they had been apart for two years, rather than about two days.

Listening with one ear as they caught up with each other, Shiro turned his gaze to the other occupant of the room. He looked familiar, but it took him a moment to place where he'd seen him before.

Ah. The man from the general store.

The pointed ears were new. As were the markings under his eyes. But the mustache was hard to miss.

Keith must have caught his gaze, because he motioned towards the man with his hand. "Shiro, this is Coran. Coran, this is Shiro."

"Ah, so you're the pilot from the Galaxy Garrison!" Coran remarked, sticking out his hand, broad grin on his face. "Well met. I hear you've been looking after our young Blade here!"

Arching a brow at that, Shiro took the man's hand, giving it a firm shake. "I guess you could say that. Sorry to drop in like this unannounced."

"Oh, think nothing of it!" Coran told him, drawing back his hand. "Keith warned us the two of you might show up at some point, looking for the young lass over there. Looks like he was right!"

"Matt, this is Coran," he caught Katie say, the two siblings more or less off in their own world at the moment, "-his grandfather was the one who built this ship."

"Yeah, well, Katie's pretty important to both of us." Shiro told him, fixing his attention back on the man, who he could only assume was some kind of alien. He'd freak out a little more about making first contact, were it not for the fact that he'd apparently made it a few years back, when he'd first offered his hand to shake to an awkward young cadet. "I trust she's been looked after."

"Oh, no worries about that!" Coran told him. "Why, you could say she's one of our honored guests!"

"Unlike some people."

He was pretty sure that Keith hadn't meant for him to catch that, but he did. Cocking a brow, he glanced down towards Keith. "Are you talking about the cadets?"
Keith shifted, but didn't look up at him. If anything, he looked down, mask vanishing underneath his hood. "Hunk is fine," he finally said, "-it's Lance who's the problem."

"Did he challenge you again today?" Coran asked. "Well, you were the one who put the idea in his head in the first place, so you can't really blame the lad."

The low grumble that Keith let out was so familiar, for half a second, Shiro almost forgot about the mask. "I didn't think he'd take to it."

"Challenge?" Shiro asked.

"Bit of a Galra tradition, really!" Coran supplied, as if that explained everything.

"Galra?" Shiro asked.

"I'm Galra." Keith told him, finally pressing the side of his mask to release it again. His features, once they emerged from behind the mask, were scrunched up in displeasure. The alien tint to his eyes did nothing to change the familiarity of it. "I know what I said, but I wasn't being serious. I thought he'd give up after the first time."

Galra. A name to put to the alien features. He wondered if the other two aliens he'd seen last night were also Galra.

"So the cadets are here?" Shiro asked.

"They're here." Keith told him, though he didn't sound too happy about it.

He'd guessed that much, but having some confirmation was nice.

Keith caught his eye, lips twisting into a frown. "They said they came here on a dare, Shiro. What was I supposed to do, let them go?"

Part of him wanted to answer yes, but he bit it back. He didn't know what the full story was here, and he didn't doubt that Keith had a valid reason for his choice. Still, hearing that abducting them had been his call was... a bit unexpected, if he had to be honest.

"Can you take me to them?" Shiro asked.

Looking up at him, Keith frowned. "Why?"

"You remember how I mentioned working at a bakery, right?" Shiro asked, to which Keith nodded. "Hunk Garrett is the son of my boss. I just want to make sure he's okay."

Keith held his gaze for a moment longer, before giving him a curt nod of his head. "Fine. We can do that. Coran!"

"Yes, Keith?" Coran asked, peering over towards him.

"Show Matt around. Take Katie with you." Keith told him. "I'll take charge of Shiro."

"Can do." Coran said, giving him a curt nod of his head.

Watching with one eye as Keith slipped his mask back in place, Shiro frowned. He held his tongue, however, until they left the large room- he'd heard Katie mention something about a training deck, so he assumed that's what it was.
"Why the mask?"

The question seemed to catch Keith off guard, judging from the way his shoulders flinched. Subconsciously, the half-alien touched the mask, confirming that it was very real, and not some kind of hologram like he had assumed. He wondered how it worked.

He recalled the way Keith had taken to ducking his head, obscuring his features with his bangs during his early time at the Garrison. At first he’d thought it was because he was shy, or because he had a complex about his more unusual features, but now he knew neither of those things held true.

Was it cultural, maybe? Maybe showing his face was a taboo. Or a trust thing. Walking around with it exposed must have made him feel like he was naked.

"Not everyone who comes through the Castle knows what I look like." Keith told him, drawing his hand away from the mask. "We're trained to keep a certain level of anonymity."

"We?" Shiro blinked. "Who's we?"

Keith paused, glancing up towards him, blazing orbs that made up the eyeholes of his mask resting on his face. For a moment, he thought he might not get an answer, before he turned his head away. "We're called the Blade of Marmora."

In the back of his mind, something clicked.

Special forces training.

But also...

"What do you mean, not everyone who comes through here knows what you look like?" Shiro asked, brow furrowing. "Exactly how many people are there here?"

Even with the mask, he could have sworn that Keith flashed him a quick grin. Pressing something on his gauntlet, a screen flickered into life from it, displaying a pair of blue and yellow dots. It was gone as soon as it had come, as if he’d merely needed it to confirm something. "Looks like I'll have the chance to show you."

"Show me?" Shiro asked, trailing a bit after Keith.

Keith said nothing, merely leading him back into the elevator. Following behind him, Shiro watched him with a slight frown, wondering what exactly he was planning.

The elevator once more deposited them in a white hallway, lined by glowing blue lights. He was starting to sense that was the theme of this place. Falling into step behind Keith, he lead him to the end of the hallway, and had to squint, for a moment blinded by bright light.

There was a large window spread out before him, overlooking the desert. For a second, he didn't even notice the two figures standing in front of it, his eyes catching something else. Walking forward as if he were in a daze, he felt the gears in his head try to turn, and fail, unable to fully comprehend what he was seeing.

"Is that a-

"-a town." Keith finished, taking up the spot next to him, dismissing his mask.

It was. Though he could only see from this vantage point, it seemed as if it spread out in a circle
around the Castle of Lions, a strange town, a mishmash of architecture, much the likes that he had never seen before.

Even from up here, he could tell that its residents weren't human.

Opening his mouth to ask, he quickly shut it, catching a flash of something out of the corner of his eye. Stepping back just in time to avoid Keith backing into him, his brows nearly shot up into his hair as one of the missing cadets all but shoved himself up into Keith's face.

"If you think that for one second, I'm gonna accept-!"

It was only then that he seemed to notice him, Lance's mouth snapping shut, eyes darting upwards. Staring at Shiro with wide eyes, he looked back down at Keith, then back up at Shiro, before settling back on Keith. "Wha- is that Takashi Shirogane!??"

"The pilot from the Kerberos mission?" The other cadet- who he could easily tell was Hunk, given the resemblance between him and his mother- joined his friend. "Oh wow, it really is him."

Keith merely spared him a glance, shrugging his shoulders. "You wanted to see the cadets."

Ah. Killing two birds with one stone, then.

Holding out his hand, he gave Lance a smile, briefly wondering if this was the friend that Hunk's mother had spoken about. "You can call me Shiro."

Taking his hand with a strange mixture of trepidation and excitement, Lance held it in a firm grip. "Lance. Lance McClain. The big guy's Hunk."

Only now did he seem to realize something about this meeting was off, his brows furrowing, even as he didn't release his grip on his hand. "...wait. What are you doing here?"

"Same as you, just about." Shiro told him, eyes darting down to Keith.

Eyes darting down to Keith, Lance's brows furrowed. "You kidnapped your own mentor."

"He entered the valley of his own free will." Keith told him with another shrug. "He knew what he was getting into. Technically that doesn't qualify as kidnapping."

"It's true." Shiro admitted, as Lance released his hand. "I heard the two of you went missing from Matt. I take it you've been treated well?"

"Yeah, if you mean not being allowed to leave by treated well." Lance quipped, shooting a glower towards Keith, one that he brushed off with an impressive amount of indifference. "I take it you're not here to get us out of here."

"Sorry, afraid not." Shiro told him, giving him something of a rueful smile. "Not unless Keith lets me."

"Not my call." Keith told him.

"Yeah well, it sure was your call that got us here in the first place." Lance frowned.

"I mean, he was just doing his job." Hunk chimed in, Lance glaring at his friend like he'd committed the deepest betrayal possible. "We were the ones that followed him."

"Honestly, if you had just told me that in the first place, I would have let you go." Keith told them.
"Following me was stupid. Lying about it was stupider."

"You were holding Hunk at knife point!" Lance protested, to which Shiro looked down at Keith, more than a little shocked at that admission. He done what now? "And me by the collar! You asked if the Garrison sent us! Who in their right mind would tell you that they followed you in that situation?!

"Hm," frowning, Keith arched a brow, "-good point."

"Keith, please tell me you didn't hold someone at knife point." Shiro said, rubbing his forehead.

"I mean, he kinda did." Hunk offered. "From a distance, but yeah, that was a thing that happened."

"I didn't know if the Garrison had sent them or not." Keith said, making it sound so easy. "Wouldn't put it past them to send cadets. Besides," and he wasn't sure if this was meant to comfort him or not, "-I could have done a lot worse."

He stated it in such a matter of fact tone, that for a moment, all Shiro could do was stare at him. Different culture, some part of him supplied, and sure, that was true, but that was... that was a lot to take in.

What kind of people were these Galra? This Blade of Marmora?

He really didn't know a whole lot about Keith, did he.

"Yeah well, I don't accept it." Lance said. "I'm getting out of here, mark my words, Kogane."

"Suit yourself." Keith said with a shrug. "The terms and conditions of the challenge haven't changed."

And there it was again. Challenge.

"Challenge?" Shiro asked. "Coran mentioned something about it before, but what's this about a challenge?"

"He lays one hit on me, he can leave." Keith told him, matter of fact.

That sounded like a generous offer on the surface, but something told him that laying a hit on Keith wasn't nearly as easy as it sounded. "Coran said it was some kind of tradition."

Keith spared him a look, the pale yellow of his sclera making the violet of his eyes pop all the more. "We're a warrior race. Challenges are in our blood."

...ah. That explained some things.

"You act like I'm not going to get that one hit." Lance said, narrowing his eyes.

"Pretty sure the war will be over by the time you manage, Lance." Keith noted dryly.

"Wait- war?" Shiro questioned. "What's this about a war?"

"He hasn't told you yet?" Hunk asked, first looking towards him, before his gaze flickered back towards Keith. "You haven't told him yet?"

"He just woke up awhile ago." Keith told him. "Was going to leave it to Allura."
Brows knitting together, Shiro couldn't help but frown. Because while he wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, any answer involving an outright *war* wasn't among them. "So the people out there are-?"

"Refugees." Keith supplied.

Refugees. A whole town's worth.

"Keith," leveling his gaze with him, Shiro felt the skin on the back of his neck crawl, recalling the way he had spoken of the Kerberos mission, "-what's going on here?"

Holding his gaze for a long moment, Keith let out a long sigh, his expression somber. "Come on. We should find Allura."

---

Princess Allura of Altea.

Dimly, he recalled the general store owner mentioning something about Keith being spotted with a beautiful woman. Not the kind of girl you'd see around here indeed, he thought to himself, as he took in the princess.

So that was why this place was called a castle.

Flanking her side was one of the masked figures from last night, the taller of the pair. Behind their mask, they seemed to exchange glances with Keith, before reaching up, banishing their own mask. So this was a Galra.

Like Keith, his sclera were yellow, but unlike him, the color was much brighter. They had no pupils that Shiro could see, and were covered in a light lavender fur, with a white crest of it down the center of their head.

This was the alien half of Keith's heritage. Gaze briefly flickering over towards the half-alien in question, he caught Keith's faint smile.

"I am Ulaz." The Galra introduced himself, extending an arm. "It is to my understanding that you looked after Keith while he was undercover at the Galaxy Garrison."

"I guess you could say that." Shiro told him, nearly reaching for his hand- before he recalled what Keith had done the first day they had met, and grasped his forearm instead.

Ulaz arched his brows, ever so slightly, but did not hesitate to return the gesture. Guess that was one mystery solved.

"Come, do sit." Allura offered, already taking a seat herself. He suspected that the room they were currently in was likely one meant for diplomacy, with Allura taking the seat at the head of the table. He took one close to her, though not within arm's reach. He didn't know much about alien decorum, but that seemed right.

Even as he sat down, he caught Ulaz resuming his position at the princess' side, flanking her left. It shouldn't have surprised him when Keith took up a post at her right, both remaining standing.

"I must apologize for your current situation." Allura spoke, every bit the diplomat he expected a princess to be. "Though it is not ideal, I hope we can at least make your stay here as pleasant as possible."
"I'm the one who came here of his own free will." Shiro told her, cracking a small smile. "So you're not about to hear me complain. Is Matt- is my companion not coming?"

"I already discussed matters with his sister not so long ago." Allura told him. "I would suspect that she and Coran are filling him in as we speak."

Fair enough.

"Keith mentioned something about a war." Shiro told her, cutting right to the chase.

At that, Allura's face fell. "Yes, I am afraid so. The matter is a complicated one, but to give you the short summary of events, my home planet, Altea, is currently at war with the forces of the new Galra Empire."

Jerking his head up, Shiro's eyes fell on Keith and Ulaz alike- and while the latter did not so much as flinch, the former couldn't quite look him in the eye.

Allura caught it, along with its meaning. "I see that Keith has spoken to you of his people. I can understand your confusion, but while the Galra Empire is the enemy that we fight, the Blade of Marmora is one of our most valuable allies in this war."

"We are with the Blade of Marmora." Ulaz spoke. "Our leader sensed there was darkness brewing within our leadership, and took steps to ensure that when it broke, we would be on the right side of this war."

"We owe many thanks to Kolivan." Allura said, her words directed more towards Ulaz than towards him. "Without his efforts, countless lives would have been lost."

Sinking back into his chair, Shiro's gaze lingered on Keith for a moment longer. He finally returned it, cracking a faint smile, one that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"So this Galra Empire," Shiro began, "-what does it want?"

"Conquest." Allura told him. "They seek quintessence. It is to my understanding that your kind has not yet unlocked its secrets, so I will be brief. Simply put, merely a single drop of it can provide power the likes of which has never been achieved before, for a length of time previously unheard of."

"Sounds like powerful stuff." Shiro observed. There had been countless wars here fought over oil, so he could see where she was coming from.

"Indeed." Allura said, narrowing her eyes. "But it is also dangerous. My father sealed off the rift from which Emperor Zarkon- the leader of the Galra Empire- gathered it from, and he has remained furious about it ever since."

"Sealed off?" Shiro asked.

"It was on Daibazaal." For some reason, he didn't expect Keith to speak, so hearing his voice took him by surprise. "Zarkon would sacrifice our home world for just a few more drops of power. The rift was tearing our planet apart."

*Home world.*

He didn't know why- he'd admitted as much himself, but it wasn't until he heard those words from his mouth that it truly struck him that Keith was an alien.
Allura nodded her head, her expression grave. "King Alfor made the decision without Zarkon's consent, that I acknowledge, but he feared that his mind had been clouded by the power of the quintessence, and that he could no longer think clearly. He could not idly stand by and watch as innocents suffered because of it."

"I can understand why that might have made him angry." Shiro admitted, to which the princess did not move to deny. "So that's the reason for this war?"

"Part of it, at least." Allura told him. "I must apologize, for there are things that I cannot discuss with you, at least not yet. You should be safe, so long as you remain here, but the Galra Empire has in its possession those who can read minds. The less you know about certain subjects, the better."

That almost sounded convenient, and were this not a cause that Keith seemed to have sworn his loyalty to, he'd have cause to doubt it. But he had, and so for the moment, he would choose to believe in the princess, and her words.

She sounded earnest, at least.

"I understand." Shiro told her. "What brings you to Earth?"

"I believe I should let Keith answer that one." Allura said, glancing up towards him.

Giving him a faint smile, Keith folded his arms in front of him. "My mother was sent here searching for worlds far from the reach of any space faring races. She may have slightly miscalculated her entry into the atmosphere, and crashed."

The meteor.

"That's how she met your father?" Shiro asked.

"Pretty much." Keith told him. "Dad helped her gather intelligence about the area. The part where they ended up having me wasn't exactly part of the plan."

"I still remember the look on Kolivan's face when she returned to base months pregnant, and with her human partner in tow." Ulaz interjected, a faint trace of mirth to his voice. "And then she had the audacity to ask him to wed the two of them."

Giving a snort, Keith finally cracked a proper smile. "Thace recorded it. I know."

"Yes, quite amusing," Allura interjected, "-but hardly what we gathered here to talk about."

Clearing his throat, Keith's expression shifted back into a neutral one. "Kolivan was seeking a habitable planet that could be hidden from Zarkon's eyes."

"And that was Earth?" Shiro ventured.

Giving him a curt nod of his head, Keith continued. "Once the war broke out, he knew that Allura would become a target, and that King Alfor would do anything in his power to get her back, should she be taken."

"So you hid her here." Shiro said.

He got the strange feeling that something was being left out, but if he wasn't being told, he suspected there was good reason for it.

"That is the gist of it, yes. Keith's alien ancestry was kept hidden, even from Zarkon, and Earth's
existence alongside it." Allura told him. "Though I am not much of one for hiding. Still, at least this way, we could create a place for refugees to live in peace."

Frowning, Shiro glanced between the three of them. He could sort of understand why the secrecy had been necessary. What he didn't understand was-

"So how is the Galaxy Garrison involved with this?"

It was a loaded question, he recognized that the moment he asked. Still, he hadn't expected their expressions to turn *this* grim.

"The Galaxy Garrison," he could have sworn that Keith *growled*, his voice taking a turn for the dangerous, "-set you up."
the mission

Chapter Summary

His father had told him no fights to the death while he was here. No fights at all, actually. He had been very stern on the matter.

Chapter Notes

We're back, and we're back with a flashback chapter! Time to fall back in the timeline, to when Keith left the Garrison, and left behind one hell of an impression of himself while doing so. Good job Keith, good job. Also hi Trugg, bye Trugg, I guess this is just sort of your fate in every universe you are in ever. As always, thanks for reading, and see you next time!

Lockdown drills at the Galaxy Garrison meant either one of two things- either it was an actual lockdown drill, or it was cover for something else. His father had told him as much when he'd first gotten his mission, and it had proven to be very true.

They were also the best times to gather intelligence.

Sheathing his knife, Keith tugged on his jacket, grabbing his com link and tucking it away in one of his belt pouches. During times like this, he wished he had his armor, but he hadn't been allowed to bring it with him to the Garrison. Too much of a risk, he'd been told.

His civilian clothes stood out, but they did so a little less than the garish orange of the cadet uniform. Besides, on the off chance he got caught, he would need to flee immediately, so better to have everything he needed with him- and he kind of liked this jacket.

Personalized clothing wasn't exactly something he had much experience with. Before coming to Earth, he hadn't worn it since he was small, before he started his training in earnest. After that, he'd worn the uniform of an acolyte, before passing his trials and getting armor of his own.

Even on Altea, he didn't have many chances to wear it. Hiding his face was a necessity, one that he had not fully understood until after he'd joined the order. All members of the Blade of Marmora concealed their faces in the public eye, but his instructions had been even more stringent. Even the princess hadn't known what he looked like until Kolivan had approached her father with the information that Zarkon was planning to betray the Alliance.

Earth had been their trump card, and Kolivan had taken every measure to keep its existence hidden from Zarkon. A planet far from his reach, one that even the Alteans had no knowledge of, before King Alfor had been expressly told. The perfect hiding spot.

The only downside was that when dealing with pre-warp species, their lot tended to make a huge stink when finding out they weren't alone in the universe. Better to hide and wait out the war, than to reveal their presence here to the Earthlings, and risk exposing themselves to more than just
curious onlookers.

Once the war was over, Princess Allura fully intended to announce herself, to thank them for hosting her, however unwittingly. They were to be made part of the Alliance, with all that would entail.

Or that had been the plan, until he'd confirmed that the Galaxy Garrison had been in contact with the Galra Empire. Zarkon had wasted no time in searching the universe for his prize, reaching out to all possible pre-war species that he came across in his path, on the chance that they might be where the Altean princesses had hidden herself.

He'd intercepted several long range transmissions, which only confirmed the fact that the Empire was in the process of courting the Earthlings. As far as he knew, they had no reason to suspect that what Zarkon sought was hidden on this planet, and as long as it stayed that way, they had no reason to worry.

They had taken every precaution to ensure that they remained hidden- which was why he was here. Kolivan had told him that this mission was vital, and that he was the only one equipped to carry it out. He'd have been proud, but he knew the only reason he had been chosen was because of the blood he shared with the Earthlings.

Humans, rather. They liked to be called humans.

He hadn't even known his father was one until he had passed his second trial. Before that, he'd been under the impression that his father was some kind of anomaly- perhaps a mutated Altean, who had passed such traits down to him. The peach color of his skin had never been an issue growing up, proudly bearing Galra markings from his mother's lineage, but he'd always been conscious of his round ears, and the lackluster hearing that came with them.

But no, his father had been human. A pre-war species from the distant planet Earth, the only planet with life found in the Sol system. Humans were the dominant species on the planet, and had only just barely begun to make a dent into exploring their own system. They were so far out on the fringes, that with their current tech, just getting to another habitable planet would likely take an entire lifetime for them.

The Galaxy Garrison would likely court any offers the Galra Empire presented them. If they could claim to be the ones who made first contact with alien life, they would give up near anything. He had seen with his own eyes just how corrupt the Garrison could be, though he would admit, he didn't really have a head for Earth politics.

He didn't see why humans had to make everything so complicated. Couldn't they just settle things with a fight to the death?

(His father had told him no fights to the death while he was here. No fights at all, actually. He had been very stern on the matter.)

To reach out this far, Zarkon had to be growing desperate. As long as they kept him from discovering that what he sought was on Earth, it would be their victory. He doubted that he would expend much effort on Earth- they had no resources that would prove useful to the Galra Empire, not even the most base understanding of what quintessence was.

In this case, backwater was good.

Bypassing the lock on his window was simple. The mechanism it used was so rudimentary, he
could do it in his sleep. He roomed alone- a privilege afforded to fighter class cadets, so there would be no worry about any roommate noticing he was missing. There were cameras out in the halls, but not in the rooms- privacy laws, or something like that.

Grabbing the ledge above his window, he hoisted himself up on top of it, flipping onto the roof. Reaching down, he shut the window behind him, leaving a thin string attached to it so that he could get back in later. He didn't need to worry about any cameras picking him up- there was a jammer installed in the heel of his boot.

Where he was going, there would be no cameras.

Tonight's lockdown drill was different, he knew. He had intercepted communications indicating that a member of Galra command would pay a visit tonight- and he intended to be there when they did.

This was his best chance to learn what the Galra Empire wanted on Earth, and he wasn't about to let it go.

Making his way across the rooftop, he darted from building to building, making his way to his destination. There was an old, disused hangar to the far west of the campus, separate from the rest of it. That was where the Garrison command took its less public guests, and it would be where they would greet the Empire's commander tonight.

Slipping in through one of the vents, Keith landed on one of the upper support beams. Making his way to a location from which he couldn't be seen, he was silent in his steps. There were three members of the Garrison command here- none of whom he recognized.

Whoever these three were, they must have come here from elsewhere- while not all members of the command interacted with the cadets, he'd been around the campus long enough to be familiar on some level with every member of it. This was the Galaxy Garrison's main campus, but they had four others scattered across the country. To draw members of the command from other locations- this was clearly a big deal to them.

If only they knew they were courting a monster.

*Three* monsters, he should say. Empress Honerva and her son, Prince Lotor, were just as vile. If they were going to win this war, than all three of them needed to be taken out. The bloodline that had ruled Daibazaal for so long was no longer fit for the throne. Wipe them all out, and start anew- that was the Galra way.

Concealing his presence, Keith fixed his gaze downwards. The three humans were talking in low tones, just barely loud enough for him to make out- he only got so much as every other word. He could practically smell their doubt from here, though.

Whatever deal they had made, they were clearly at least a little hesitant to go through with it. They would in the end, he knew. Humans were no less susceptible to greed and corruption as any other species, but those two traits were exactly what had *started* this war in the first place, so he wasn't about to dismiss all of humanity as bad because of the actions of a few.

He knew better than that.

Some of them, like Shiro and the Holts, like his father, couldn't have been more *good*.

The alarms in this section had long since been disabled, but he could still hear them blare from the way he'd come. The lockout drill had begun in earnest now, meaning all non-essential personnel
should be off base, and all cadets should be secure in their rooms. Now would be when the ship
would land, using the sound of the alarms as a cover.

It was a single Galra fighter that landed in the hangar. The sight of the alien ship alone sent the
humans into a small frenzy, as if realizing that they hadn't been pulled into some kind of a hoax.

Little did they know, they'd had an alien on campus for some time now. His father had been right-
so long as he kept his markings covered, and camouflaged his eyes with contacts, no one would
suspect him of being anything other than human. He had doubted it when he'd told him that, but it
was amazing what humans were willing to overlook when it came to one of their own.

In his own mind, he was clearly Galra, but to these humans, he was one of them.

He recognized the commander that disembarked- Commander Trugg. She was known for thinking
herself clever, but her fleet, once so impressive, had taken several hits in recent battles. Zarkon
must have gotten fed up with her results, and had ordered her out here to the wastes as punishment.

He had been introduced to her before, in the past. She didn't know his face, no Galra outside of the
Blade of Marmora did, but she did know he was his mother's son. He'd never liked her, and she'd
never liked him. Zarkon had been filling his command with her type- thirsty for power, and willing
to do whatever she could to get it.

There were still those who were unhappy with the terms that brought them into the Alliance. That
thought the Galra Empire should once more claim its right, to expand its might to galaxies beyond,
as it once had, before Zarkon's grandfather had put an end to it with the treaty. It had been
generations since they had been an empire proper, but sentiments like that didn't just die out
overnight.

Honerva whispered them in Zarkon's ear, and to her, he listened.

Trugg was flanked on either side by a pair of sentries, but they seemed to carry no weapons. Not
that they would need them- humans were fragile.

They exchanged pleasantries at first, names exchanged. Trugg wanted to dive straight into
business, so whoever had briefed her on human behavior obviously hadn't told her about their
compulsive need for small talk.

Now he could hear them quite clearly. Trugg's voice was especially loud, carrying in the empty
space of the hangar.

As he thought, it would seem that the Galra Empire had approached the Galaxy Garrison under the
pretense of making an alliance. They did not seem to understand that the Garrison was not a ruling
power, likely having seen the research colonies that they had built on the moon of this planet, and
on their neighboring planet, Mars, and drawn conclusions from there.

He suspected the Garrison wanted to keep it that way.

Which was really stupid of them. The Galra Empire would find out eventually, and Zarkon did not
take kindly to being tricked, not for any reason. But no doubt the Empire had been painting itself as
benevolent, which was a laugh.

Benevolent emperors did not nearly destroy their own planets for the sake of greed. Not only had
Zarkon gone against the treaty that had been drawn up when the Galra Empire joined the Alliance,
he'd nearly ruined their own home. If Alfor hadn't been able to create Voltron, then Daibazaal
would have been destroyed before he was even born.
Even after the creature had been defeated, the rift had worsened, its effects felt almost across the planet. The Daibazaal he had grown up on was a pale shadow of its former self, that he would only know from his mother's stories. Even if they toppled Zarkon's regime, it would never go back to the way it once was, not for thousands of years.

He had seen the ruins of the rift himself. The first trial they undertook was to descend down into them, to spend a week there, unaided. Once it had been to survive in the harsh climate of the Huxian mountains, but Kolivan had changed it. He wanted all of those who were to join them to see, with their own eyes, the destruction Zarkon had nearly wrought on them all.

When they finally got down to business, Keith gave them his full attention. Trugg started off exactly like she thought he would—expressing that there was an enemy commander who was rumored to have been spotted in this area—likely a lie, and asking them if they had seen anyone matching their description.

She was describing Allura.

Quirking a grin, he let out a silent laugh. Enemy commander she might not be, but there was no doubt that given the chance, she would raise hell to put a stop to Zarkon. The Altean princess was not to be underestimated, and if the task that had sent them out here wasn't so important, he would say that she was being wasted out here, on the fringes of the universe.

The next thing she described was the Castle of Lions. Again, the humans had no idea.

As for the third...

"The enemy has stolen something of great value to our emperor," Trugg told them, "-we have been scouring the known universe to find it."

The black lion.

Narrowing his eyes, Keith felt the hair on the back of his neck raise. If Zarkon ever managed to find it, the tide of this war could change in an instant. The black lion was the most powerful of all the Voltron lions, and should it find its way back into his hands, he could use it to destroy the other four.

Or even worse—take them for himself.

That they could not allow to happen. Which was why Kolivan had risked everything in order to steal it, right from under Zarkon's nose. With that action, the Blade of Marmora had gone into full revolt, and were now hunted throughout the Empire.

But Kolivan had also destroyed all files pertaining to the Blade, which meant protecting the identities of hundreds of agents. Those whose faces that Zarkon had not personally seen could still serve as spies within their ranks, waiting for the right time to strike.

Since the black lion had arrived here on Earth, it had gone silent, raising its particle barrier, allowing no one in. Nobody knew what it meant, not even King Alfor.

Keith thought it was waiting.

But of course, the Garrison command had never heard of the black lion either. Trugg accepted their words at face value, seeing as there was nothing for them to gain by lying.

The discussion then shifted to that of some bargain that they had struck—he had heard it mentioned
once or twice in the communications he had managed to intercept, but he'd never heard the details of it.

"Our end of the deal is being delivered to you as we speak," one of the humans assured her, "-the best pilot we have to offer, and our brightest scientific mind. And his son, as a bonus."

That's when Keith's blood ran cold.

The Kerberos mission.

They were going to sacrifice the Kerberos mission.

The arrangements had to have been made under the table, without the knowledge of the crew- his father counted Sam Holt as an ally, and it was with his influence that Keith had even cleared the medical tests. He didn't exactly bleed red, among other things, so they had needed someone on the inside to conceal any abnormalities that should arise.

If he had known that such a deal was being brokered, he would have told one of them. There was no way Sam would have flipped on them. No way he willingly would have sold out both his son and Shiro to the Galra Empire, much less himself.

Pilots and scientists. Keys to winning a war. With Honerva at his side, mental manipulation wasn't out of the question.

"Good." Trugg had the nerve to sound pleased. "We'll arrange for a ship to meet them. The Galra Empire thanks you, and shall uphold our end of the bargain as soon as they are secure."

Kolivan had once told him that he couldn't let his emotions cloud his judgement. He had before, unable to fully detach himself from a situation, to make impassive, impartial judgements on how best to proceed.

It was a weakness.

His father had once told him that was a very human trait. That it was nothing to be ashamed of, and no weakness. That it meant he had a big heart, that he cared.

Keith's vision went red.

He was moving before he knew it. The drop was two stories, easy, but it was no problem for him- his joint structure was more human than Galra, save for his arms, but his bones were denser, able to handle both shock and force alike better than even the most fit humans. His knife was drawn, sunk into the chest of the first sentry before anyone on the ground even so much as knew what hit them.

Taking advantage of that moment of shock, he transformed his blade, yanking it out of the first sentry, and making quick work on the second one. Pivoting on his heel, he raised it towards Trugg, locking eyes with her.

"What ship?"

Trugg, to her credit, took one look at the blade, and connected the dots. She had never seen his face, but she had seen his blade. "Krolia's whelp."

"Trugg." Keith said, switching to his mother tongue, just as she had. "What ship?"
He kept the humans in his peripheral, but for the moment, the three of them seemed too shocked to do much. Since they came from another campus, there was a chance they might not recognize him, but it was only a matter of time before the dots were connected.

He wouldn't be able to stay here any longer. His cover was as good as blown.

"As if I would tell a traitorous halfbreed like you." Trugg sneered. "Kolivan was a fool to send you here."

"Zarkon was a fool to send you here." Keith shot back. "You'll die on some backwater planet where they still bury their dead in the dirt."

She didn't back down at his threat, but he didn't expect her to. Instead, she went for her weapons - the pair of twin axes that she was so proud of. The sentries had been unarmed, but she wasn't. "You're a fool to think you could kill me."

"Says the fool who is stuck dealing with primitives for being fooled." Keith retorted.

"Better to deal with them, than to have it in your blood." Trugg hissed, but he did not let her words rile him - he saw no shame in being tied by blood to his father, to the same people that Shiro and the Holts belonged to. "Now I see it. I'm sure Emperor Zarkon will be pleased to hear that I've found the planet you've been hiding the Altean princess on."

Narrowing his eyes at that, he stepped into her guard, low and fast. She barely had the chance to retaliate, deflecting his blow, a stalemate that he broke as quickly as he entered it, jumping away from her.

She wore armor, and he did not, which was to her advantage. But that same armor was bulky, meant to menace, and thus slowed her down. He, on the other hand, was fast, light on his feet, and had been expressly trained to kill opponents bigger than him.

And Trugg didn't expect anything from him.

The humans, to their credit, sensed that interfering with this would be a very bad idea, instead choosing to give them space. Smart call. Smarter to run away, alert the guards. But they couldn't risk that, not without exposing what they had been doing under the table.

The clash of blades continued, with Trugg losing one early on, knocked away from her, out of her reach. She made a move to go for it, but he blocked her path, slamming a kick into her side, sending her on the defensive.

She wouldn't be the first to underestimate his power because of his size, and he doubted that she would be the last.

Pinning Trugg down, Keith used his body weight to hold her, tip of his blade resting against her throat. "Last chance, Trugg. What ship?"

Sneering at him, Trugg spat in his face. "Victory or death."

"Death, then."

Luxite cut through metal and bone alike cleanly. It was why they used it, as hard as it was to come by, passing down blades from generation to generation. His own had come from his grandmother, whom he'd never had the chance to meet.
Withdrawing his blade from Trugg's neck, Keith flicked it outwards, ridding it of blood. Shifting it back into knife form, he sheathed it, turning towards the three humans and leveling a glare at them, baring teeth.

He'd do the same to them, for what they had done. But his father had told him that was something called *murder* on this planet, and that it was apparently a crime. So instead, he turned sharply on his heel, seizing Trugg's fighter for his own.

He needed to try and stop that ship.

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He did not expect his return to go unnoticed.

Of course not. He'd only shown up in a stolen Galra fighter, his clothes still stained with Trugg's blood. He had tried to wipe off the cosmetics covering his markings on the way, but the stuff didn't come off that easily, so it just looked smeared on his face.

His mother was already waiting for him in the hangar bay.

"Keith," she kept her voice level, calm, but it was clear a storm was brewing in her eyes, "-what happened?"

"Trugg happened." He told her. "Blew my cover."

"Commander Trugg did?" Krolia asked.

"No, that part was me." Keith told her.

Before she got a chance to ask anything further, Allura swept into the hangar bay, Coran trailing behind her. Taking one look at him, she set her lips in a tight frown. "Please tell me that is not your blood."

"It's not." Keith told her, not missing the faint hint of concern that touched her voice. "But we've got a bigger problem on our hands."

"Bigger?" Allura asked. "Tell me that Zarkon has not located us."

"No." Keith told her, watching her shoulders slump in relief. "Not yet. The Galaxy Garrison struck some kind of deal with the Galra Empire, like we thought. Three of their best and brightest in exchange for," he paused, "-I don't actually know. I didn't get to that part. For something."

Krolia's brow furrowed, putting two and two together. "...the Kerberos mission?"

Nodding his head, Keith clenched his fists, trying to calm down. It had taken everything in him to not just fly straight off into space, but however impulsive he could be, even he wasn't stupid enough to try that without any kind of protective gear.

His mother sensed this, sympathy flashing in her eyes. They spoke when they could, and he would often tell her about the humans he had befriended. She'd fallen in love with one, so he knew she would listen to him without judgement, even if it hadn't been part of the mission.

Allura visibly recoiled at the statement. "You mean to tell me that they sold out three of their own? To Zarkon?"

"Yes," Keith told her, locking eyes with the princess, "-and I'm going to stop them."
"Keith, you can't." Krolia told him. "I know that the crew of that mission is important to you, but we can't risk our position here."

"Our position is already blown." Keith told her, squaring his shoulders. "I kind of killed Trugg. Somebody's going to wonder where she is when she doesn't check in, and I really doubt the Galaxy Garrison is going to want to bring the wrath of a bunch of aliens on them."

"He's right about that." Coran said. "In that case, better to stop the ship before it has the chance to take them, rather than rescue them after the fact. If they make the jump into hyperspace after abducting them, we might never find them."

"I'm not going to take no for an answer, mom." Keith told her. "Even if it's an order from Kolivan. I can't abandon Shiro, or the Holts. I'm going after them."

Frowning, Krolia weighed her options, before heaving a long sigh. "Alright. But I'm coming with you."

Cracking a smile, Keith glanced towards Allura, who merely heaved a sigh. "It would hardly serve us well in the future, were the people of this planet to learn that we had a chance to aid their own in a time of need, but refused to do so. We can talk about the consequences later."

"And believe me," she added, tone stern, "we will talk."

Giving her a curt nod of his head, Keith wasted no further time. Dismissing himself, he made for his quarters, wiping the cosmetics from his cheeks and removing his contacts, before he donned his armor. Pulling up the hood, he activated the mask, pausing only to grab his knife before he returned to the hangar.

By the time he returned, his father was waiting for him.

The only surprise was that he hadn't come sooner. He must have come in from the far end of town, judging by the sweat that lined his brow. He'd been exchanging a few words with his mother, before taking notice of him, stopping short.

"Keith," he called out to him, meeting his eyes across the hangar, "-you're sure about this?"

He knew his father wasn't thrilled whenever he left on what might be a dangerous mission. To him, he was still a child- a novel concept, that the Galra did not truly posses. One ceased to be a child once they reached their fourth cycle of life, in which they began to move from play fights with their peers, to real training.

"I can't leave them." Keith told him. "I have to."

His father, who to Keith, was always the alien, could sometimes be hard to gauge. Here, he cracked a smile, resting his hand on his shoulder, giving it a squeeze that he recognized as affectionate. It wasn't a gesture common among the Galra, but it seemed to be a human thing, given how often his father and Shiro alike did it.

It wasn't a gesture he disliked.

"Do what you need to, son." His father told him. "Just come back safe. Try listening to your mother for once."
Behind them, Krolia snorted, the sound distorted by her mask. "He gets that independent streak from you."

"That's not what I've heard." His father merely noted, gaze flickering back towards his wife. "Ulaz tells me you were just as much trouble, back in the day."

It was easy to visualize his mother's frown behind her mask, the furrow of her brows. Instead of addressing it, she merely changed the topic. "Come, we've much to do. I don't suppose you got the location of this ship."

"Trugg wouldn't talk." Keith told her.

"Typical." Krolia muttered. "Well, thankfully something of that size shouldn't be too hard to find. Let's go."

Giving her a curt nod of his head, he drew in a long breath. Stopping an entire cruiser with just two agents and little intelligence was a risky operation, but not an impossible one. They could call on Ulaz, but that would leave the princess without a guard.

More concerning was the fact that the death of Trugg, and the disappearance of one of their cruisers combined would lead Zarkon to study this quadrant of space more closely. It put them in danger- but so long as they kept up the ruse that princess and lion had been separated, it should at least keep him from coming to Earth directly.

_Lotor_ would be the bigger problem.

But that was a worry for the future- right now, he had one goal.

Save his friends.

---

He'd miscalculated.

In hindsight, it should have been so obvious. Why would the Galaxy Garrison waste money on a reentry system that they knew would never be used? There had been _one_, of course, anyone in their right mind would have been able to tell that something was off if there hadn't been. But they'd cut corners, used cheap parts.

It was a miracle it worked at all.

No, no miracle, he knew. That was all Shiro.

And now here he was, hooked up to life support and lying in a coma. From what he had managed to gather, he'd recover, but at what cost?

They'd taken his arm.

It had gotten so mangled, that even the healing pods that Alteans were so proud of would have had a tough time healing it cleanly. For humans, there was no choice but to amputate.

He should have known. He'd thought that once they entered into the range of the Mars research colony, that there wouldn't be any more attempts to abduct them. He'd been right about that- but had been careless to think that was the only threat.

Shiro's arm was gone, and Sam Holt was dead. If there was one small mercy, it was the fact that Matt was already back on his feet and out of the hospital, but his memories of the actual crash were
shaky at best, from what he had been able to gather.

He'd thought about approaching him, to explain- but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Just visiting Shiro like this had been a risk- the Galaxy Garrison was keeping watch, waiting to see if he would approach any of them. He hadn't even been able to visit Katie once since he'd returned to Earth.

No, the best thing for him now was to keep them as far away from all this as possible. It would be the best way to keep them safe.

He knew this wasn't his fault- the Galaxy Garrison hadn't known about him back then, when they had made their selections. But he still couldn't help but blame himself, feeling that there was something more he could have done.

He should have taken them back to Earth himself, but then what? They would have to disappear. At least now they had a chance to get back to their normal lives.

Almost.

Nothing would ever be normal again, for them.

Staring down at Shiro, Keith grit his teeth, drawing in a long breath. Things were more complicated than ever- the Galra Empire now knew that Princess Allura was hidden somewhere on Earth, and while they still didn't know about the black lion, that was more than enough.

He needed to keep both of them safe.

Exhaling, Keith felt his shoulders slump. The best way to do that was to disappear. Shiro would probably start asking questions about him eventually, and the last thing he wanted to do was draw him into this.

He had been the first human, outside of his father, that he had ever taken an interest in. A friend- he was willing to admit that, at least privately. And he hadn't even been able to protect him.

Now he would.

"Guess this is goodbye for now, Shiro."
Above him, stars glimmered. Below, a surface, polished like a mirror, that reflected his image. Everything here possessed a purple tint to it- himself included. And something was calling to him.

Good evening, it's time for chapter eleven! We're back to the main timeline, moving right along! I did want to finish this up yesterday, but it was pretty late by the time I'd finished writing the second to last scene, so I just decided to wait until today to finish everything up. Because a healthy sleep schedule is important, in spite of what the Internet might tell you. Express self love by taking a nap every once in awhile.

Until next time!

Silence followed Keith's story.

Sold out. If what Keith was saying was true- and he had no reason to doubt that it was- then the truth behind the Kerberos mission was far worse than he realized.

They were meant to be sacrifices. Even if the Galaxy Garrison hadn't known what they were dealing with, it didn't change the fact that they had allowed three of their own to nearly be abducted by an alien race, all for the sake of what? Power? Acclaim? He didn't know what the Galra Empire could have promised them, but whatever it was, it wasn't worth it.

And Keith? Keith had saved them.

"Shiro?"

Glancing up, Shiro tried to force himself to smile, if only to reassure Keith. He'd spaced out there a bit, he knew, but he didn't think anyone was about to blame him, not given the gravity of what he'd just been told.

"It's a lot to take in." Shiro confessed. "But from the sound of it, we owe you our thanks."

Keith frowned. "I don't deserve it."

"No, you do." Shiro insisted. "You did everything you could to keep us safe. You couldn't have known about the faulty parts."

"I should have-!"

"Keith." Shiro cut him off. "It's not your fault."
It wasn't. No part of the crash was Keith's fault. If it hadn't been for him, the three of them would be prisoners by now. He couldn't imagine what fate would have been in store for them, had the Galra Empire successfully taken them. They wouldn't be on Earth now, that was for sure.

Which did bring up another question.

"Do you know why they wanted us?" Shiro asked. "Scientists I can understand, but pilots?"

"We suspect that Zarkon was searching for pilots with special qualities." Allura answered. "My father built a weapon that he seeks to claim for himself. For that, he needs pilots."

He got the sense that there was more to that answer than she was actually telling him, but it sufficed for now. "I take it he hasn't been able to then."

"No." Allura told him. "Thankfully not."

Nodding his head, Shiro looked back towards Keith. He still didn't look convinced, but it wasn't like he could fault him for it. Not when he felt the same way. If anything, he understood.

Living with that kind of blame wasn't easy. He wished he could take it away from him, but he didn't even know what to say. He could think of a million platitudes, but none of them would do the job.

"I guess this explains why the Garrison's been looking for you, huh?" Shiro asked.

Blinking at the change of topic, Keith let out a faint chuckle. "You could say that."

He'd left one hell of an impression, that was for sure. Just hearing his account of the events, cut and dry as it was, was enough to give him that impression. He couldn't imagine how it had played out from the Garrison's perspective.

He tried not to think too much on the fact that Keith had killed someone. His own sense of morality told him that it was wrong, but Keith hadn't been raised human. He'd been raised Galra, and from what little he had learned of them thus far, he doubted that a warrior race had the same qualms about killing.

All the more so during a war.

From that perspective, Keith had taken out an enemy commander. He couldn't say it was the wrong move to make, even with how little he grasped at the moment.

"You didn't think to explain?" Shiro inquired.

"Didn't have the time." Keith told him, shrugging his shoulders. "By the time I got back to Earth, the Galra Empire had plenty of time to smear the Blade of Marmora to the Garrison. I didn't exactly do a whole lot to endear myself to them while I was there either."

That much was true. In hindsight, Keith's combative nature made so much more sense when filtered through the lens of him being from a warrior people, but to a human, it would mark him as violent, uncooperative. Had, in fact. When one added the fact that Keith hadn't come to the Garrison to make friends, but to spy on them, he could kind of understand why it had been so hard for him to get along with everyone else.

It also kind of made the fact that he'd earned his trust that much more heartwarming.
Which did bring up another question.

"How much did Commander Holt know?" Shiro asked. "You said he was helping you."

Nodding his head, Keith dropped his gaze a bit. "Commander Holt was a friend of my father's, back in the day. When mom crashed, he went to him for advice. He helped him hide her ship, and get it back in working order."

"When we came back, dad asked him to cover for me." Keith told him. "Faked some blood tests, that sort of thing. Always kept encouraging me to meet his kids. Didn't think I'd actually do it, though."

At that, Shiro let out a faint laugh. "Funny how life works sometimes."

"If we could get back to the topic at hand," Allura interjected, "we need your word that you will not mention what has been said here to anyone."

Blinking, Shiro turned back to her. "I don't suppose this means that you plan on letting me go?"

"No, I am afraid not." She told him honestly. "But just as a precaution, it is best to ask."

Nodding his head, Shiro could understand. "It's fine. I won't talk. You've given me some pretty good reasons not to."

"Thought you might want revenge against the Garrison." Keith noted.

"Oh, believe me, I do," Shiro told him. "But I'll leave that sort of thing to you and Katie. You were Red, right? Katie's Internet buddy?"

Letting out a snort, Keith nodded. "Yeah, that was me. Using it to spy on you wasn't exactly part of the plan- mostly I was just trying to keep tabs on her and make sure she didn't do anything stupid."

"Like breaking into the Garrison?" Shiro asked, arching a brow.

"...okay, yeah, I didn't see that one coming." Keith admitted.

"Once all this is over, we will be more than willing to help you expose the Galaxy Garrison's lies." Allura told him, rising to her feet. "With any luck, it should be within this year. Zarkon locating us is a setback, but we have certain plans that are already in motion. This may even work out in our favor."

"Thank you." Shiro told her, sensing that was his cue to get up. "So how is it that you know Keith, if you don't mind me asking?"

Allura gave him a soft smile, exchanging a look with the half-alien in question. "We were raised together, in a sense. After he cleared his first trial, he was assigned to me. That was part of Zarkon's plot as well, but he was unaware at the time that the Blade of Marmora was already acting against him."

"Assigned?" Shiro asked, looking over towards Keith.

"Bodyguard." Keith said with a shrug. "That's how they do things on Altea."

As a child? He wanted to ask that, but he stopped himself. Cultural differences, he reminded himself. Just because something was normal over here, didn't mean the same held true for out in distant space, where Keith had been raised. Maybe the Galra didn't have the same view on
childhood as humans did.

Which truthfully was still a concept he was trying to wrap his head around.

"I will admit, I was not thrilled about it at first." Allura confessed. "Being followed twenty four seven by someone whose face I did not know? Not exactly my idea of fun."

"You just say that because I kept catching you trying to sneak out." Keith pointed out. "You nearly had Romelle pulling out her hair on a weekly basis."

"Yes well," coughing into her hand, Allura turned a faint shade of pink, "-how was I supposed to know my future people if I stayed cooped up in the castle all the time? Besides, you say that as if you did not help me."

Keith just shrugged. "Thought it was easier than stopping you."

"Yes well," Ulaz interjected, breaking his silence, "-you caused Kolivan quite a bit of stress on your own, Keith. Let us not forget."

Now it was Keith's turn to flush- a faint shade of purple- to Shiro's surprise. Guess that was what he meant by needing Sam's help with his blood work.

"I take it you knew Keith growing up, then." Shiro commented.

"I helped train him." Ulaz observed. "His antics were well known around our base. I have many stories."

To that, Keith reacted like any other teenager his age would- flushing an even deeper shade of purple, and letting the faintest of nervous laughs escape him. "If we're done here, I should finish showing Shiro around. He still needs to see his quarters."

He had half a mind to tell him that he wanted to hear Ulaz's stories, but he decided to spare him instead. Maybe some other time. "That would be nice, thanks Keith. This place is so big, I'm pretty sure I'd get lost on my own."

He had to wonder if it was designed that way- to confuse any potential intruders. Every hallway looked the same, it was impossible to tell one from the other.

Allura inclined her head, resting her hands in front of her. "Yes, that would be fine. Do be sure to join us for lunch, Shiro. You will not want to miss what Coran is making."

"As long as it's not the paladin lunch." Keith quipped, making a face.

"Yes, that one did not go over so well, did it?" Allura observed. "Sometimes I wonder if Zarkon really started this war just so he would not have to eat another bite of it. But... let us not tell Coran I just said that, shall we?"

"My lips are sealed." Shiro promised her. "Besides, it can't be any worse than what they serve up at the Garrison."

"Oh trust me." Keith told him. "It is."

"Shiro?"

Looking down at Keith, Shiro blinked. He hadn't even realized that he'd spaced out again, but he
must have, given the expression on Keith's face. Considering the fact that he hadn't even realized he'd banished his mask, he must have been more out of it than he'd thought.

Giving him a smile, Shiro quickly moved to reassuring mode. "It's nothing, Keith. Just thought I heard something, that's all."

Letting out a snort, Keith leaned back against the wall of the elevator. "Shiro, if you can hear it, so can I. I'm pretty sure whatever you thought you heard, it was just your imagination."

He might be right about that, he thought, trying to put the low rumble out of his thoughts. It was strange- only coming to the forefront every now and again, and each time, he was never quite sure he was actually hearing it. At first he thought it was some part of the ship, but if Keith couldn't hear it, then he guessed maybe he really was imagining it.

"Could be." Shiro admitted, curiously studying the half-alien. He looked more relaxed now than he had been, probably because of the easy way he'd accepted the truth- or what parts of it he had been told, at the very least. "How's your hearing?"

"Better than yours." Keith replied frankly, cupping his hands around his ears. They were round, unlike those of the aliens that he had met thus far, including the one full blooded Galra he'd met. "But worse than any other Galra. I don't even hear as well as an Altean. Got dad to thank for that one, I guess."

"Is he here?" Shiro asked. "Your father, I mean."

Dropping his hands, Keith nodded his head. "Yeah. I wouldn't be surprised if we find him in the central hangar with Matt. He's got a thing for classic cars."

Accepting that answer, Shiro tried not to dwell too much on the idea of meeting Keith's father-again. This was a man who had not only rescued an alien, but then proceeded to fall in love and have a child together with her- and if that wasn't enough, he then left his own home planet so that she could carry their child to term on hers.

He couldn't even imagine what he would be like.

Which was weird, because he had actually met him, but their introduction had been rather brief. He'd seemed pretty normal, but there wasn't a single part of what he had just described that was normal.

He wondered what he thought, about having a half-alien son. About having a son that thought of him as the alien. Had he tried to teach him about Earth culture? Based on what he'd heard, Keith hadn't even known what his father was until he was older. It certainly served to explain Keith's rampant curiosity about well... everything, really.

"What about your mom?" Shiro ventured.

"She's here." Keith told him. "You met her last night."

Thoughts flickering back, Shiro recalled the one masked figure who had advanced when Keith did. That was probably her, he figured. She hadn't been as tall as the other one- who he now realized was Ulaz- but she'd been pretty sizable. He wondered what she looked like under the mask.

Keith must have taken after her, in a lot of ways. But he guessed he'd also taken more after his father than he had first suspected- given that he wasn't purple, markings aside, or covered in fur. Granted, he didn't know if Keith's mother was either of those things, but Ulaz had left a pretty
strong impression on him.

For a brief moment, he caught himself wondering if the hair on Keith's head was actually fur. It had always been pretty soft...

"Probably not the greatest first impression." Shiro remarked.

Keith laughed- honest to god laughed at that. "Passing out in my arms? Being hauled across the desert on my back? Yeah, definitely not your best impression."

Ducking his head, Shiro was grateful that the elevator came to a stop when it did. Maybe Keith was way stronger than anyone his size should be- at least by human terms- but that didn't make the mental image of him being carried piggyback by him any less embarrassing. He was never going to live that one down.

Keith had shown him around the castle-ship, as promised. They had stopped by his quarters briefly, which he'd been able to access via handprint- something about being in the system now, he'd been told. The bag that he had brought with him was already there, presumably having been searched beforehand. It was right next to Matt's room, and one door away from Katie's- the two cadets were on another floor of the ship, just beneath them.

Keith's quarters were located right across the hall from the princess', on a floor far away from the guest residences. He'd shown him the inside of it, but it had been pretty Spartan, all told. If it was anything like back at the Garrison, then he probably didn't actually spend a whole lot of time there.

From the sound of it, they would have mostly free reign of the castle-ship. There were restricted areas, of course- the bridge, the engine room, the particle barrier generator- any place that could be potentially dangerous. They did have access to the central hangar, but he didn't have to ask to know that they'd probably been locked out of any of the ships stored there.

They weren't allowed to leave the ship- not without an escort. Keith told him that he'd introduce him to her later- she was kind of held up with something at the moment. Something about Hunk and a Balmeran, whatever that was. Some kind of alien, he guessed.

There were other hangars on the ship- five, in fact. But when Shiro had asked about them, Keith merely shook his head, giving him the kind of look that told him that he couldn't answer that.

But the central hangar, it seemed, was where he would catch up to Matt and Katie.

Sure enough, there they were. So was Matt's pride and joy- the green car that he had taken so many pains to restore. There were also a pair of Garrison issued hoverbikes, and what he could only assume was the Galran fighter that Keith had stolen from Commander Trugg. It stood out in the hangar, a certain menace to its appearance.

His gaze was mostly fixed on the second Garrison hoverbike.

The scout. He'd nearly forgotten, with everything else going on.

"Where is-?" Shiro opened his mouth to ask, looking down at Keith.

"Cryofreeze." Keith supplied, following his gaze. "Don't look at me like that Shiro. If he got out, and got back to the Garrison, they could tell the Galra Empire exactly where we are. There was no other option."

Shiro frowned at that- there was something cold to Keith's gaze as he said that, as if he had an
alternative solution in mind. He tried to put it aside, tried not to think about it- but while the knowledge that Keith was half-alien hadn't created much of a gap between them, it wasn't like he couldn't pretend one wasn't there.

Thankfully, he found a distraction. Or to be more precise, it found him.

"Shiro!" Matt called out to him. "Oh man, you have got to see these ships."

"Hey Matt." Cracking a grin, Shiro nodded at him. "Where's Katie?"

"She found Dog." Matt told him, as if that somehow answered everything.

"...dog?" Shiro asked, arching a brow, glancing down towards Keith. There was a dog here? Come to think of it, there had been a small bed on the floor of Keith's quarters- did he have a pet?

Huh. That was actually pretty normal.

"She's been down here the entire time?" Keith asked, lowering his hood. "I was wondering where she ran off to."

"Ugh, not only are you half-alien super spy, but you also get a cool space pet. Who let you be so cool?" Matt said- which okay, guess the dog was actually a space dog. At least he was right about it being Keith's. "And then you name it Dog. That's a word, Keith, not a name."

"I'm from space. What other kind of pet am I supposed to have?" Keith asked. "And in my defense, I named her while I was still back on Altea. It passed just fine as a name there."

Matt frowned, eyeing Keith with suspicion. "Hm. Those are fair points, I will admit that. But seriously," he told him, "-you might want to save your teleporting space wolf before Katie gets too carried away."

Shiro nearly choked. "Teleporting space wolf!?"

Keith just shrugged. "Mom found him while she was in the quantum abyss. Where are they?"

He didn't even get a chance to ask what that even was, before Matt pointed Keith in a direction, the half-alien trotting off towards it. Left speechless, he glanced down at Matt, arching a brow. "You're handling this well."

"What can I say?" Matt said, waggling a brow. "I'm adaptable. Besides, this is like, my dream, aliens? The tech they have is amazing!"

"I just," shoulders slumping, Matt's face fell, "-I just wish dad could see it."

"If it's any consolation," a third voice spoke up- and it took him a second to place that gruff tone, "-he's seen it."

Turning on his heel, Shiro came face to face with a man he instantly recognized as being Keith's father. His was a face that was hard to forget, if only because of the scar that notched one of his brows.

"He has?" Matt asked, then frowned. "Wait. You're human."

"Last I checked." Commander Kogane observed. "Take it you're the Holt boy. Your father told me about you."
The realization dawned on Matt then. "You're Keith's father."

"Sure am." The man told him, extending his hand. "Pleasure. From the sound of it, the two of you have been looking after my son fer awhile. I'd say I hope he didn't cause the two of you too many problems, but seeing as you're here, guess that's kind of moot."

Awkwardly glancing up towards Shiro, he merely shrugged his shoulders. Taking Commander Kogane's hand after a moment, he could pinpoint the exact moment he realized what a firm grip the former Garrison pilot had.

"I'm Matt." Matt told him. "Matt Holt. My sister's around here somewhere, but I'm betting you've probably already met her."

"I have." Kogane said with a nod, releasing Matt's hand. "And I believe I've already met you as well. Takashi Shirogane, right? Keith talked about you a lot."

"That's me." Shiro told him, holding out his hand, watching as Kogane switched hands in order to take it. "It's nice to see you again, sir."

"No need fer all that now." Kogane told him. "Kogane's fine."

"Did you really go into space?" Matt blurted out.

"Sure did." Kogane told him, letting go of Shiro's hand. "Can't say I got out much though, being top secret and all that. Keith probably has more stories than I do. He go to rescue Dog from that sister of yours?"

"Just a second ago." Matt told him, glancing back in the direction Keith had run off in. "And Dog? Really?"

Kogane let out a chuckle, shaking his head. "Tried to talk him out of it, but he wouldn't have it. His mother's just as bad though. Heard me say something about having a dog when I was his age, and next thing I know, she comes back home with a cosmic wolf in tow. She doesn't do things by halves, that woman."

For someone he hadn't even met yet, he was starting to get a pretty clear picture of Keith's mother.

"You knew Commander Holt?" Shiro asked, trying to get the subject back on track. He already knew that the answer was yes, but he wasn't sure how much Katie- and thus Matt- had been told.

"Sure did." Kogane told him with a nod. "He was my commanding officer, back in the day. Helped out a lot with Krolia and me. Wish we could have done more for him."

Matt's face fell at that. "But he got to see this, right?"

"Sure did." Kogane told him. "Called him up when we first landed this castle-ship here. Said he was going to bring his wife and kids once the war was over."

His words were followed with silence, knowing that he had never gotten the chance to. Judging from the way Matt clenched and unclenched his fists, it looked like he'd heard the same story he had.

"I can't believe the Garrison tried to sell us out like that." Matt whispered. "We trusted them."

Resting his hand on Matt's shoulder, Shiro turned towards Keith's father. "Did you know? Is that
"Why you didn't report the crash to the Garrison?"

"Didn't know fer sure, not back then." Kogane told him, shaking his head. "Knew they were doing some shady business under the table, that's all. But that was enough for me."

"But you trusted my father." Matt said.

"Commander Holt was a good man." Kogane told him. "I'd trust him with my life."

The words seemed to bring Matt some sense of ease, his fists unclenching. "He was."

"Dad?"

Keith's voice broke the somber mood, causing Shiro to turn on his heel again. The second he did, he froze. He didn't know what he expected from a cosmic wolf, but the animal trotting by Keith's side was well... out of this world, if he was going to go for the easy pun.

The fact that Katie was riding on it did little to alter that impression.

"Hey kiddo." Kogane inclined his head in greeting. "Still on duty?"

"Mostly I'm just playing tour guide right now." Keith told him, cracking a small smile. "Ulaz is on guard duty right now."

"Good," his father told him, reaching out to ruffle his son's hair, ignoring his protests, "-you haven't had a break fer awhile. Kolivan's working you too hard."

"I'm fine, dad." Keith promised him. "I'm a lot sturdier than you."

It sounded absurd, hearing Keith say that. If anything, he looked the more fragile- thin and slight where his father was muscular and large. But he knew that small frame of his held a lot more power than it looked, so odds were, Keith was probably right.

Guess Keith's father wasn't too wild on the whole special forces thing, though. At an age where Keith should have still been in elementary school, he'd been put to work as a bodyguard, made to clear dangerous trials- but that was the cultural norm of the society he'd opted to raise his son in, so he imagined it was pretty hard to complain.

"Oh, I know. I've still got the bite marks to prove it, so believe me, I'm not about to forget that anytime soon." Kogane told him- and Shiro couldn't help but arch a brow.

Bite marks? "But you're my son. I'm sort of contractually obliged to worry about you."

Rolling his eyes, Keith folded his arms in front of him. "In front of my friends?"

_Friends._ Come to think of it, that felt like it was the first time he'd heard Keith refer to him as such.

"Especially in front of your friends, kiddo." Kogane told him. "That's how it works here on Earth."

"Aw, friends!" Matt said, holding his hands over his heart. "You do care!"

"Of course I care." Keith said, giving him a baffled look. "I wouldn't have blown my cover if I didn't."

"Oh so now he's honest about it." Katie said, letting out a snort. "You know what he told me when he came for me? That he had no friends. Like anyone's going to believe _that._"
Flushing a faint purple color, Keith twitched, clearly fighting the urge to tug his hood back up. He was embarrassed, Shiro realized- it was kind of nice to see that in some respects, Keith wasn't any different from a normal teenager. "I was trying to convince you not to send any more drones, that's all. You don't have to keep bringing it back up."

"I will, and you can't stop me." Katie told him. "Isn't that right, Dog?"

The cosmic wolf let out a sharp bark at her words, and briefly, he couldn't help but wonder if it actually understood her or not.

"Wow sure, take her side." Keith said, sounding betrayed. "I only raised you since you were a pup, that's all."

"Us girls gotta stick together." Katie told him.

Muttering something underneath his breath in a foreign tongue, Keith's shoulders slumped in defeat. "Yeah, fine, okay, maybe that wasn't my best move. Now can we just move on?"

Something in the glimmer of Katie's eyes told him that no, they would not.

Some part of him knew he was dreaming.

The low rumble was back, louder than it had been before. But no matter which direction he turned, he couldn't discern the source of it- nor could he find the end to this strange place.

Above him, stars glimmered. Below, a surface, polished like a mirror, that reflected his image. Everything here possessed a purple tint to it- himself included. Yet strangely, for all that, he did not find himself ill at ease here.

It was peaceful, almost.

Something was calling to him.

Taking a step forward, and then another, he found his feet carrying him forward. The low rumble remained a constant, almost like a familiar companion, as if he had known it all his life. His steps grew sure as he advanced, following its thread.

Faintly, he thought he could hear a voice.

At first, he tried to ignore it. He was still being called, the voice could wait. But then it came again, more insistent this time- and some part of him found it familiar. Not in the same sense as the low rumble, so comforting in its presence, but familiar nonetheless.

It came again, and he realized that it was calling his name.

"Shiro!"

Snapping his eyes open with a gasp, Shiro felt his breath hitch in his throat. Cold sweat clung to the back of his neck, and he barely registered the pressure of someone's hand on his shoulder, nor the violet eyes staring up at him, set in pale yellow sclera, that seemed to faintly glow in the dark.

Keith, he thought numbly, brain taking a second to place the alien features. This was Keith.

But what was Keith doing in his room?
Except he wasn't in his room.

He knew he wasn't in his apartment, that much he remembered. What he didn't remember was when he had left his room, the one that he had been given on the Castle of Lions. Trying to get his bearings, he found himself in an unfamiliar hallway.

Keith was hovering beside him, worry clear in his features- both the familiar and the unfamiliar. He was still clad in his armor, but his mask was gone, hood lowered, revealing his face.

"...keith?"

Letting out a sigh of relief, Keith's shoulders slumped. "You awake?"

"I- yeah." Frowning, Shiro placed a hand on his head, trying to sort his thoughts. "What was I-?"

"Sleepwalking." Keith told him.

Shiro frowned. That didn't sound right. "I don't sleepwalk."

"You're in a totally new environment." Keith told him. "And you had a big shock today. I'm told that's a thing."

That... sounded fair enough, but something about it still didn't sit right with him. "I was having a dream."

"Yeah?" Keith asked. "What kind?"

Opening his mouth to respond, Shiro quickly shut it, furrowing his brow. "I don't- I can't seem to remember. Just that something was calling me."

For a split second, Keith seemed to react to his words- before it vanished, too quick for him to place just what kind of reaction it was. "It was just a dream."

"Yeah," frowning, he got the sense that once again, there was something here that was being left out, ",you're probably right."

"Come on," Keith told him, ",let's get you back to your room."

"That- yeah, that sounds good." Shiro told him. "How did you know to come find me?"

Keith winced a little, and this time he could make out clear guilt playing out on his features. "Your doors are set to trigger an alarm if they're opened during the night."

"Ah." Merely lifting his brows, Shiro somehow didn't find himself all that surprised. "I take it late night snacks are out, then."

"Sorry," Keith told him, ",Kolivan's orders."

Kolivan. The leader of the Blade of Marmora.

"I thought the princess was in charge of this ship." Shiro observed.

"She is." Keith told him. "She just doesn't know."

He wasn't sure what to make of that, to be honest. They were friends- Keith had said as much himself, but apparently he didn't trust them enough to ignore the alarm when it went off in the
middle of the night. It wasn't that he was suspicious of Keith, it was just- he thought he would have trusted him a bit more.

But Keith also hadn't trusted him enough to tell him about anything, not until he'd backed him into a corner. What did he have to do to gain that trust, then?

"Shouldn't you be asleep?" Shiro asked.

"I'm Galra, Shiro." Keith told him. "We don't need as much sleep as humans do."

Arching a brow at that, Shiro couldn't help but frown. "But you're also part human."

Frowning, Keith looked up at him. His eyes, especially in the dark, were his most alien feature, but he found nothing to fear there. This was still the same Keith that he knew, he told himself- just because he knew him a little better now, didn't mean anything had changed.

Even if he was capable of killing people.

"Maybe. But culturally, I'm Galra. I didn't even know about my human heritage until I was twelve." Keith said- and then, as if sensing what was on his mind, "Does that- does that bother you?"

Closing his eyes, Shiro considered the question for a long moment. To do anything less would be a disservice. "It's different." He admitted after a moment. "But back at the Garrison- it's not like you were acting, right?"

"Well... no." Keith admitted. "But I was lying."

"To be fair," cracking an eye open, Shiro grinned, "-nobody exactly asked you if you were human."

"I'd be pretty surprised if they did." Keith told him. "No offense Shiro, but I'm pretty sure the only thing keeping people from suspecting I was an alien was the fact that your planet is so backwater, you actually have people who think humans are alone in the universe."

"You know, I almost want to take offense to that, but you're right." Shiro admitted.

"I'm just surprised you never said anything. It's not like I don't look weird for a human." Keith told him, glancing down at one of his hands. In the dark, covered in armor, his sharp nails nearly looked like claws. He wondered if that was what they were supposed to be.

"I mean, I did notice." Shiro told him. "But you always seemed so self-conscious, that I didn't feel right bringing it up."

"Not the word I would have picked." Keith noted. "But I guess you're right. I'm not- before coming to the Garrison, showing my face around that many people just wasn't something I did. The Blade of Marmora is built on anonymity."

"Yeah, I sort of guessed as much." Shiro said. "Guess being here really pushed you out of your comfort zone, huh?"

"It's not all bad." Keith told him. "The food's nice. Being able to pick my own clothes is fun. And the people," looking up at him, he gave him a smile, "...the people are good. Mostly."

"Not such a bad heritage to have, huh?" Shiro asked.

"Eh, it could be worse." Keith said with a shrug.
Letting out a faint chuckle, Shiro gave Keith a smile. "Glad to hear it."

Nodding his head, Keith abruptly came to a halt. It took Shiro a moment to realize they were in front of his room. "I can program the door not to open until the morning, if you're worried you'll start sleepwalking again."

"That... might be a good idea." Shiro said. He couldn't say for sure if that would happen again or not, but sleepwalking around a spaceship didn't exactly sound safe, even if he was locked out of the more dangerous parts of it. "Sorry for the trouble."

"I'm basically locking you in." Keith told him. "I'm the one who should apologize."

It didn't take a huge leap to get what Keith was implying. "It's not keeping me prisoner if I agree to it."

Keith frowned, looking unconvinced. "If you say so."

"I do." Shiro told him. "Goodnight, Keith. Maybe humor me and try to get some sleep."

It earned him a faint laugh, Keith nodding his head. "I'll try. No promises, though."

"Good enough for me." Shiro told him. "See you in the morning."

"Yeah," giving him a weak smile, Keith rested his hand against the door panel, "-see you."

Letting the door close behind him, Shiro sank back down on the bed. Closing his eyes, he didn't lay down just yet. He didn't know if he was afraid of going back to sleep or not, but he couldn't help but wonder what that had been about.

And why he couldn't shake the feeling that Keith was lying to him about something.

Keith didn't linger.

He made quick work of locking Shiro's door- just until morning, when the lock would override itself. He wasn't lying about feeling guilty about doing this, but it was better than letting him wander the halls of the castle-ship in an unconscious state.

He knew he would have to bring it up to Allura, but he didn't like it. There was always the fear that the druids could sneak a spy in here, under the guise of a refugee. They took caution to prevent that, but there was no telling what lengths they would go to in order to get a person inside.

Especially not since Lotor had turned his attention to Earth.

And Lotor had Narti.

But he didn't think that was what this was. Not based off what Shiro had told him. Frowning, he raised his hood, switching his mask back on. He wasn't sure what he'd find, but he needed to go check for himself.

Aside from the Alteans, he was the only person here who had access to this part of ship. Kolivan did as well, but he was rarely present, too busy with the war effort to afford the time to come out to the fringes himself. Even his mother and Ulaz didn't have access- a security feature, reducing the number of people who had clearance to small handful.

He was in the unique position of having grown up in the shadow of two lions- which had made
him a bit sensitive to their energies. Not to the extent the princess was- but no one could match the
princess in that regard, not even her father. It was her power they used to hide the black lion from
Zarkon's eyes, severing the bond that he once held with it.

Empress Honerva envied that ability, that potential.

Prince Lotor wanted it for himself.

So it was fitting that she was already there when he arrived at the black lion's hangar.

"Princess."

Turning on her heel, she frowned at the sight of him. He didn't question how she had slipped past
her guard- he hadn't spent a significant portion of his life as her shadow to not know how good she
was at that.

"I take it you are not here to escort me back to my room." Allura observed.

Folding his arms in front of him, Keith stared up at the black lion. It slept, surrounded by its
particle barrier, keeping all out. Kolivan had hoped to find a new paladin for it, but thus far, it had
responded to no one.

Until now.

Though he hadn't answered her, he didn't need to. She knew him well enough to read him, with
little more than his body language to go off of. It was an odd friendship, one that neither of them
acknowledged, aware of their respective positions. There were boundaries that simply couldn't be
crossed.

"I heard it." Allura told him, gazing up at the black lion herself. "It was calling."

Turning on her heel, she looked back at him. "You know to who."

Inclining his head, Keith didn't tear his gaze away from the black lion.

"Shiro."
Chapter Summary

What they were hiding here wasn’t the princess.

It was this.

Chapter Notes

Hello, I rewrote the start of this chapter many, many times, but it is finally finished, so I hope that everyone enjoys! I actually finished the bulk of the work yesterday, but it was pretty late so I decided to save editing it until today. In this chapter, Shiro gets his very own cat!

Thankfully, he had no more strange dreams that night.

Or any dreams at all, really. If anything, he woke feeling more refreshed than he had in ages-mentally, at least. Physically, his muscles were a little sore- guess that was from all the midnight exercise he had been getting.

Laughing at his own joke, he filed that one away for later. At the moment, his main focus was getting something to eat- he could worry about everything else after that. There was a main dining hall, which was what they had used for their meals yesterday, but the guest quarters had their own kitchen, which Keith had assured him was stocked with Earth foods.

He wasn't going to lie, he was grateful for it. Altean cooking was... well, it was interesting. According to Keith, the cooking roster was changed regularly, but right now the one in charge was Coran, who had a very traditional approach to Altean dishes.

He had assured him that Romelle's cooking was better, but when he'd asked about Galran cuisine, he'd gotten a bit of a distant look in his eyes, before telling him that it probably wouldn't be suited to his tastes.

He'd just take him at his word.

He thought he'd be alone in the kitchen at this hour, early riser that he was- but no, looks like he wasn't.

He just didn't expect it to be Keith.

It felt like ages since he had seen him, which was absurd, since he'd literally seen him last night. But Keith had been avoiding him for the better part of a year, so just running into him so casually was nothing short of surreal. The fact that he still wore his Blade armor only made it even more so, making him look out of place in what was otherwise a fairly mundane setting, all told.

The gauntlets of his armor had been set aside, the under layer peeled back. Without the armor, it
became clear that his sharp nails really were just that. Not claws. Just nails.

He was also eating raw bacon, tearing strips of it off with his teeth. So. That was a thing.

Catching his eye, Keith quirked a grin. "I'd offer you a bite, but..."

"Yeah, I think I'll pass." Shiro told him, holding up a hand. Just the sight of it made his stomach churn, but Keith wouldn't be eating it if his own stomach couldn't handle it. "Thanks, though. Guess I should have cut you a bit more slack back at the Garrison."

He had spent so much time back at the Garrison trying to get Keith to eat his vegetables. Fruits were fine, but the only vegetable he could actually get him to eat willingly were potatoes, and those barely even counted.

He'd just thought Keith had been a picky eater. That his father had spoiled him up until now. Turned out, Galra were carnivorous.

The sharp teeth made a lot more sense now.

"It's not that I can't eat them, it's just," scrunching up his nose, Keith furrowed his brow, "technically, I'm an omnivore. I just don't have all the right taste buds, so even though I need it, none of it tastes good. Hybrid genetics are kind of like playing Russian Roulette."

"I'm just surprised you even know what that is." Shiro remarked.

Rolling his eyes, Keith flashed him a grin. "I'm not totally clueless, Shiro."

He'd just keep it to himself that wasn't generally the context in which that phrase was used. The lottery would have been a more apt comparison.

Reaching for a bowl, he set it down so that he could grab the cereal, and set that down so he could get the milk. He'd never fully realized how convenient it was to have two hands until he'd lost one.

"So I take the gagging wasn't just you being overdramatic."

"No, it was." Keith admitted.

"Guess this also explains the grilled cheese incident." Shiro noted.

"Okay, can we just stop bringing that one up?" Keith frowned. "I said I was sorry."

"You nearly set the Garrison kitchen on fire. They had to buy a new toaster." Shiro told him. "And here I thought you were supposed to be from some kind of advanced culture."

Keith shot him a glare and Shiro let out a laugh, dropping the subject. Hey, as far as he was concerned, he was still on mentor duty, which meant he still got to tease him.

"So," taking a seat across from Keith, Shiro placed down his bowl in front of him, "-I take it you have something you want to talk to me about."

Keith nearly choked. Guess his special forces training hadn't prepared him for that.

"I- what gives you that idea?" He asked.

"You mean aside from you going out of your way to eat breakfast in the guest kitchen?" Shiro asked.
Keith winced, hurriedly averting his eyes. "Aside from that, yeah."

Letting out a faint laugh, Shiro took the chance to make a quick study of Keith. Whatever this was about, he was willing to bet that it was connected to last night. He might have tried to convince him otherwise, but they both knew that sleepwalking wasn't like him.

As if on cue, the low rumble momentarily filled his thoughts, making its presence known. He tried to keep it from showing on his face, but he must have not done a good job of it, Keith quickly catching his eye.

"You hear something?"

He sounded, Shiro thought, like he knew.

Closing his eyes, Shiro let out a long sigh. So this was about last night.

Maybe he couldn't recall the content of his dream, but he was willing to bet that it, and the low rumble were somehow connected. How, he didn't know- just that they had to be.

"I'm guessing you didn't." Shiro said finally.

Shaking his head, Keith frowned. "It's- there's something I- we need to show you."

Nodding his head, Shiro accepted his words with ease, only briefly wondering at the we. "Any chance it can wait until after breakfast?"

"Shiro, if I wasn't going to let you eat, I would have just ambushed you outside your bedroom."

Keith pointed out, arching a brow.

Letting out a faint laugh, Shiro smiled. "Fair point. I'll try not to take too long."

Giving him a curt nod of his head, Keith finished off his own breakfast, pausing to lick his fingers. He'd always pegged it as a bad habit of his, but he was willing to bet that it, and the low rumble were somehow connected. How, he didn't know- just that they had to be.

Or it could still just be a bad habit.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched as Keith fixed the under layer of his armor back into place, before reattaching the gauntlets. He was clearly at home in it, in a way that he had never been in either the cadet uniform, or even his own casual clothes, and it struck him that he must have been raised wearing it.

He still didn't know what to think of that. From what little he'd heard about Keith's childhood, it didn't sound like he'd had much of one. Likewise, it didn't seem to bother Keith, either- though he did seem to fret that he'd think less of him for it, but that was less not having a childhood, and more being raised in a culture that to him, was alien.

To Keith, it was his father's culture that was the alien one.

"So," Shiro spoke up, halfway through his cereal, "-any chance I'll get to meet your mother soon?"

Blinking at the question, Keith tilted his head. "You already met her."

"I don't think that really counts." Shiro told him, giving him a faint grin.
Keith shrugged. "She's on border duty a lot."

Fair enough. He did kind of want to meet her, but the urge wasn't that pressing. From what he had been able to glean about her, she sounded like an interesting woman—any alien that crash landed on a distant planet and ended up taking a partner there had to be. "Her name's Krolia, right?"

Nodding his head, Keith frowned. "Dad tell you?"

"He mentioned it." Shiro told him. "I take it she's a member of this Blade of Marmora too."

"It's our family's duty." Keith told him. "Ever since the time of our ancestors."

"Duty?" Shiro asked.

There was so much he didn't know about Keith, about where he came from. He couldn't help but be curious, if only because he wanted to know him a little better. He'd never been able to talk about this side of himself back at the Garrison, so now that he had a chance to be open about it, he wanted to encourage him to take it.

He wanted to know—even if all of it wouldn't be easy for him to hear.

Giving him another curt nod of his head, Keith folded his arms in front of him. "Many of those who are a part of the Blade of Marmora can trace back their ancestry to the ones first chosen by Brodar the First. Not all, but many. Others joined when our ranks swelled under Vrig the Great, during the first large scale expansion of the empire."

He recited it like a history lesson, drilled into him. Keith had always been a quick study, and though his academic grades had been poor when he'd first joined the Garrison, he'd rapidly improved them, soon becoming the top of his class.

When he put in the effort—sometimes he didn't.

In hindsight, it made sense. History, science, literature—even math was bound to be a bit different when he was raised on an entirely different planet. That he could catch up as quick as he had, especially in math and science, was testament to just how smart Keith was.

"Since Kolivan became leader, things have changed." Keith recounted. "He purged the Blade of Marmora of any who held anti-Alliance sentiments, and brought in new members. But there are still many who can trace their ancestry back."

"Sounds like he's been preparing for this for a long time." Shiro observed.

Brows knitting together, Keith frowned. "Ever since the rift first opened, he was afraid that the change it might bring would rekindle the desire to reestablish the Empire as it once was. Turns out, he was right."

Nodding his head, Shiro set down his spoon. He had a lot of questions, but he'd settle for just one. "You've mentioned this rift before. What is it, exactly? You said something about it being where Emperor Zarkon sourced quintessence from."

Keith's frown deepened at his question. "That's part of it."

"And the other part?" Shiro asked.

For a long time, Keith merely held his gaze, before his shoulders slumped. "Before Allura and I
were born, there was a comet that crashed into the surface of Daibazaal. King Alfor happened to be there at the time, and brought it back to Altea to study- when it was removed, they uncovered the rift."

"The rift," Keith said, locking eyes with him, "is a portal, to another reality."

"...another reality." Shiro repeated.

He must have sounded as dumbfounded as he felt, because Keith let out a soft laugh. "I know how that sounds, but it's true. King Alfor tasked Honerva, one of Altea's most skilled alchemists, to study the rift. It was to be a joint effort, with Zarkon's own scientists."

"Honerva," Shiro repeated, "as in, Empress Honerva? Zarkon's wife?"

Keith nodded. "That's her."

"I- she's Altean?" Shiro asked. "Why would she- you're telling me that she was willing to go to war against her own people?"

Narrowing his eyes, Keith bit the inside of his lip. "While researching the rift, she was exposed to untold amounts of quintessence. It... did things, to her mind. To both their minds. There were signs of it as early as a year in, when her personality gradually began to change, growing colder, more closed off."

"...sounds like King Alfor might have made the right call, then." Shiro noted.

"He did." Keith told him, anger visible on his features, in the tight set of his lip, the furrow of his brow. "If the rift had been allowed to grow, it could have destroyed Daibazaal. Our entire home planet, sacrificed in the name of greed. Zarkon even wanted to expand it."

"And that was after the creature attacked."

Blinking, Shiro frowned, his own brows knotting together. "Creature?"

Nodding his head, Keith got to his feet, pushing back his chair. "Come on. If you're done, there really is something that I need to show you."

"I- yeah, I'm done." Shiro told him, gathering up his bowl, placing it in the sink. He'd clean it later- he could sense that whatever it was that Keith wanted to show him, it had waited long enough.

In the back of his mind, he could hear that low rumble again.

It almost, he thought, sounded like a purr.

Falling into step behind Keith, he let him lead him through the halls of the Castle of Lions. Stepping into the elevator behind him, he arched his brow slightly as Keith pressed his hand against a panel, something he hadn't done yesterday. It didn't take him long to guess that whatever he was about to be shown, it wasn't part of the general tour.

"What I'm about to show you," Keith began, "you can't tell anyone about. Not even Matt and Katie."

While he didn't like the idea of keeping secrets from them, he sensed there was good reason for it. "Not a word."

Accepting him at his word, Keith pressed his hand against the panel again. The doors to the
elevator opened, leading them out into a hallway that Shiro was certain that he hadn't seen before. There was a grand door that loomed just beyond them, decorated with an emblem that he hadn't seen anywhere else on the ship- a low, swooping V.

In the back of his mind, the low rumble turned into a roar.

"Allura," Keith began, "-I've brought him."

Blinking the sound away, Shiro focused his gaze on the princess. He was surprised to find her here alone, with no escort in sight- and from the look of it, she'd clearly been waiting for them.

"Thank you, Keith." Allura told him. "It is good to see you again, Shiro."

"Good to see you again too, princess." Shiro told her, a slight frown on his face. "What is this place?"

"That I will answer in a moment." Allura told him, leveling her gaze with him. In that instant, she was impossible to read. "But first, I have a question for you. What can you hear?"

No sooner than had she asked that, could he hear it again. A roar.

It almost felt like words.

"I- there's been this low rumble, in the back of my head, ever since I first got here." Shiro quickly told her, sensing that it was best not to lie. Whatever was going on here, the princess knew what it was.

"And since coming here?" Allura questioned.

"Since coming here," Shiro began, brow furrowing, "-since coming here, it's been a roar."

At that, the princess merely exhaled.

"Go to it, then."

Her words puzzled him for only a moment- before he heard the roar again. This time, he felt it in his bones, in the very core of his being- and at once, his dream from last night, forgotten until this moment, came back to him.

Something was calling him.

Stepping forward, the doors that had been closed until now slid open. There was another roar, and this time, he knew it wasn't just in his head, for it shook the room itself, commanding a might that was nearly too much for him to contain.

But he did.

Inside, there was a lion.

It was the first word that came to mind upon viewing the beast. Huge, made of metal, it seemed to stare at him with gleaming yellow eyes. It was surrounded by some kind of force field, casting a purple light on the white Castle walls.

Slowly but surely, he took a step forward, and then another, as if he was being drawn in. Strangely, he wasn't afraid- whatever this lion was, he sensed that it wasn't going to hurt him.
He barely even noticed Allura and Keith falling into step behind him, flanking him on either side. Didn't look back to notice the knowing look that they exchanged with each other, filled with apprehension, excitement- and regret.

He only knew because the lion told him later.

Resting his only hand on the force field, he felt it give way underneath it, dissolving at his touch. Only then, did he hesitate, thinking to question just what was going on here.

The lion itself moved now. Lowering its head, its jaw opened, revealing a ramp- it was then that he realized that whatever this thing was, it was some kind of ship.

"My father built a weapon that he seeks to claim for himself."

"Shiro," Keith's voice was soft, hand just faintly brushing his shoulder, "-go."

He didn't hesitate this time. The second he stepped onto the ramp, he felt the lion in his head, almost like it had always been there. A familiar companion, like he had known it all his life, even though he knew that wasn't true.

This was what had been calling out to him.

*Paladin*.

Following the lion's guidance, he let it lead him into its cockpit. For a moment, he found himself overcome by emotion- after the Kerberos disaster, he never thought he'd have a chance to be in one again. Thought that part of his life was behind him.

Ever since he was young, he'd dreamed of being a pilot, of going to space. When he had first been accepted into the Galaxy Garrison, he remembers that it was like floating on air- that nothing could drag him down, nothing could ruin this.

He'd been wrong. The reality was harsh, painful. His dream had been snatched from him, taking an innocent life with it, something that he could never replace, all because of what- greed? Ambition? A war that was happening so far away, the he had no comprehension of it?

His missing arm had never given him any pain before, but now it *screamed*.

Until it didn't, his thoughts filled instead with the lion's purr. *Paladin*, it said again, and he didn't know how he knew that- it wasn't speaking words, more like impressions. Some were so faint, that he couldn't even begin to make out what they were, but others- others were stronger.

What they were hiding here wasn't the princess.

It was this.

People had given their lives to keep this out of Zarkon's hands. The lion mourned them.

It mourned Zarkon too.

Drawing in a long breath to steady himself, Shiro squared his shoulders, stepping forward. It felt so strange, sitting in the pilot's seat again. With his left hand, he lightly brushed the lion's controls, feeling them pulse underneath his hand, the entire cockpit flickering to life, dousing it in a glowing violet hue.

He had never felt energy like this before.
He must have sat there for what felt like ages, drinking it all in. Listening to the lion. There wasn't much of what it told him that he could understand, but he could tell enough. It had once belonged to Zarkon, but it had watched as he had changed, no longer the person that he once was.

No longer the paladin it chose.

So when people had come to take it, it had not refused.

But it would not open up for them.

He didn't expect to see Keith in the lion's impressions, but he did- twice, in fact. Once when he was small, cradled in his mother's arms. She was a more vibrant purple than Ulaz, but had no fur- right away, he could tell that Keith had gotten his eyes from her, though the yellow of her sclera was more vibrant than her son's. Keith must have still been a babe, but his cheeks were not chubby like he would expect from a human infant's, and sharp teeth glittered when he opened his mouth to laugh.

The lion had sensed a spark from him, but no, it seemed to say- this one belonged to red. Would one day belong. Time seemed to be an amorphous concept to the lion, one that it understood, but did not entirely exist within.

He saw Keith again, older now, about the age he had been when he first joined the Garrison. He was alone, looking up at the lion, saying something- what it was, he didn't know. He couldn't quite catch it.

He saw the princess too.

As an infant, a toddler, a young child- many times, as she grew into a young woman. It struck him, then, that likely right up until Zarkon had betrayed them, they had continued to view him as a friend and an ally.

After what felt like an eternity, Shiro opened his eyes.

And nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Oh, he's back."

Exhaling, he placed his hand over his heart, feeling it pound in his chest. He hadn't expected to find Keith, right up in his face, peering down at him with a curious stare- and he definitely hadn't expected to find the princess doing the exact same thing. Their expressions had been mirrors of each other, and remained as such as they exchanged a glance with the other, thankfully choosing to give him some personal space.

"Keith," Shiro said, carefully eyeing the both of them, "-princess."

"Shiro," they both said at once.

Right, he recalled in that instant, they'd been raised together. A companionship, Coran had called it. Bodyguard was just Keith's formal title.

Letting out a sigh, Shiro arched a brow, looking up at the both of them. "Okay. Who wants to talk first?"

Keith and Allura exchanged another glance, communicating silently with one another. They seemed to come to some sort of agreement, Keith shrugging his shoulders, folding his arms in front
of him as he leaned back against the cockpit, content to allow Allura to explain.

Stepping forward, Allura straightened her back, the regal air that had briefly slipped from her returning. "As you can see, we have not been entirely truthful with you."

"So I've guessed." Shiro observed.

"You must forgive us for that." Allura told him. "Only know that we had our reasons. If Zarkon were to locate the black lion, there is no doubt that he would do everything in his power to reclaim it."

"It used to be his." Shiro stated.

To her credit, the princess barely looked surprised. "I assume the black lion told you as much."

"It did." Shiro said. "Didn't know it was called the black lion, though. Don't you think that's a little on the nose?"

"You would have to ask my father about that one." Allura told him, bristling only ever so slightly. "He is the one who named them."

"Fair enough." Nodding his head, Shiro rested his hand on the pilot's seat. "This is the weapon you mentioned. The one your father built."

Inclining her head, Allura frowned. "Part of it, at least. The black lion, one of five lions of Voltron, which my father constructed from the comet that tore open the rift on Daibazaal."

Glancing over towards Keith, the half-alien merely gave him a nod of his head. This was the other part of the story he had been told before, the one that he hadn't gotten.

"My father, like Honerva, was a talented alchemist, but his was a gift that had not been seen in generations." Allura began. "Using the ore from the comet, he was able to create five ships, the lions of Voltron, as I mentioned before- which were like nothing else built before."

"And just in the nick of time, too." Allura told him, her expression grave. "During her experiments, Honerva sent out a call beyond the rift- to which a single creature responded. It was able to make it through the rift, where no other creature survived- and unfortunately, it then called for companions."

"They were able to contain it, but not for long." She told him. "Meanwhile, my father did everything in his power to finish what he had started. He knew that the only chance they had of beating that thing was finishing his project, and he was right."

"The black lion mentioned something about paladins." Shiro ventured.

Allura nodded. "Yes. In order to pilot the lions that he had built, my father called on Zarkon, and three other alliance leaders- Blaytz, Trigel, and Gyrgan. They had fought many battles together, forging a strong bond between them over time."

There was a sense of bitterness to her voice, that spoke to the depth of Zarkon's betrayal. Clearly, it had been personal for her.

Keith was harder to read.

"Together, they flew the lions into battle, and emerged victorious." Allura told him. "And together,
they combined their powers in order to form the greatest warrior that the universe has ever known—its defender, Voltron."

He didn't need to ask what Voltron was. The black lion told him.

A giant robot.

It sounded like something out of the cartoons he used to watch as a kid, but he didn't question the reality of it. After all, he was currently sitting inside of an alien warship with two aliens, one of whom was half human, which was located inside an even larger alien spaceship. He was past the point of questioning things.

"My father wanted to seal the rift afterwards, but Zarkon would not let him." Allura told him. "I fear that is where things truly began."

"Voltron wasn't enough." Keith spoke, his nails digging into the material of his armor. "Not for Zarkon. He wanted more."

Turning on her heel, Allura gazed sadly back at him. "Even so, there was still a time when my father fought side by side with the Zarkon, leading the rest of the paladins into countless battles with Voltron. Together, they did much good, but perhaps because of that, we were blind to what was truly going on, just underneath the surface."

"Kolivan advised Zarkon to seal the rift." Keith told him. "But he refused."

"It was only when Daibazaal's structural integrity began to fail, that my father knew he could not let the situation lie. Daibazaal was under Zarkon's direct rule, but it was still a member of the Alliance that our ancestors began. He could not simply abandon it, nor its people," Allura told him. "He used the knowledge that he had gained in creating Voltron to seal the rift, infuriating both Honerva and Zarkon alike."

"Our planet was falling apart." Keith said, his voice barely above a whisper, yet there was anger in it, that he was barely holding back. "People were dying. Yet Zarkon turned a blind eye to it all. Turned his back on his own people, all because he thought they were too weak to survive."

Ah.

Allura hadn't been the only one who had been betrayed.

"I was assigned as Allura's bodyguard right after Alfor sealed the rift." Keith told him, locking eyes with him, his expression serious. "What do you think the Blade of Marmora is, Shiro?"

Opening his mouth, Shiro quickly closed it, realizing that he didn't know. Up until now, he had assumed they were some kind of special forces, but Keith's question made him question that.

"We are whatever the Galra Emperor needs us to be. Spies. Bodyguards. Warriors." Keith told him, not once dropping his gaze. "Assassins."

Shiro's stomach lurched.

"That was part of Zarkon's plot as well."

Keith had been planted.

"If this Kolivan knew about all of this, why didn't he do something sooner?" Shiro asked.
"After he advised Zarkon to seal off the rift, Kolivan fell out of his favor- though not enough that Zarkon deemed him worthy of replacement." Keith explained. "If he were to attempt to assassinate Zarkon and fail, he would expose the Blade of Marmora's treachery."

"And the black lion would still be in Zarkon's hands." Allura finished. "He made a choice."

Likely not an easy one.

"Right now, we have a chance to take Zarkon out." Keith spoke up- and for a moment, he found himself taken aback by the frankness in his tone. "We have an agent that has worked his way up his chain of command. Soon- maybe within the next few days, he will angle his blade at him."

Something told him that this mission was not one they would come back from.

"Somehow I don't think just taking out Zarkon is going to put an end to this war." Shiro observed.

"I am afraid not, though I wish it were that simple." Allura told him, shaking her head. "The Galra will never accept Honerva as their true ruler- they are too proud for that. Unfortunately, she and Zarkon had a son."

"Lotor." Keith hissed.

"And he," Allura began, "-is much harder to find than his father. But thankfully, we now have a chance."

"Lotor's here." Keith told him. "On Earth."

Absolutely no part of that sounded good.

"Just to make sure I heard you right," Shiro began, rubbing his forehead, feeling the inklings of a headache coming on, "-the prince of the Galra Empire is here, right now, on Earth."

"Unfortunately, yes." Allura told him. "There is no one in Zarkon's high command that does not know that Keith is my bodyguard. When the Galaxy Garrison informed them of his presence here, doubtlessly, they realized that I had to be likewise hidden somewhere within this system, if not on Earth itself."

"My fault." Keith said, tone curt. "Sorry."

He couldn't say anything to that- not when the reason their position had been compromised was because of him. If he had never gotten so close to Keith, then the Galra Empire might have never known that they were here.

And he, along with Matt and Sam, would be a prisoner.

"So this Prince Lotor," Shiro began, "-any chance we know what he wants?"

"My hand in marriage, most likely." Allura said, seeming to bristle at the idea. "He made several attempts to court me back on Altea, before the war began. I believe he was more interested in the fact that I was Altean, than he was in me."

Keith muttered something underneath his breath- judging from Allura's reaction, he was pretty sure it had been some kind of alien swear. "Keith!"

"What?" Keith looked up at her, locking eyes with the princess. "It's true."
"Yes, but you cannot simply say that in mixed company!" Allura told him.

"Shiro doesn't even speak Galran!" Keith protested.

"Language, Keith." Shiro chided him.

Letting out a low growl, Keith bared his teeth at him. He'd be intimidated, but he was pretty sure there was no actual bite behind that bark.

Clearing her throat, clearly desiring to get things back on track, Allura straightened her back. "Yes, well- while I perhaps would not go so far as to describe Prince Lotor as... that, I will admit that there has always been something about him that has struck me the wrong way."

"He's a jackass." Keith supplied, this time using a swear he did understand.

"Keith!" Whirling on her heel, Allura glared at him. "If you are not going to approach this discussion like a mature adult, I will be forced to send you away."

Narrowing his eyes, Keith returned her glower. "Make me."

"Princess, it's fine, really." Shiro interjected, shooting Keith a look. He caught it, but merely shrugged, not looking the least bit apologetic for his choice of words. "I've known for awhile now that Keith is a bit of a pottymouth."

Keith just snorted.

Heaving a sigh, Allura turned back towards him. "You will have to forgive Keith. I am afraid he has issues of his own with Lotor."

Arching a brow, Shiro looked back towards Keith. "Yeah?"

Grumbling, Keith locked eyes with him. "When he's not angling for Allura, he's angling for me. Wants to recruit me to be one of his generals."

"He must have heard that Keith was a hybrid from somewhere." Allura mused. "He tends to surround himself with them."

"So basically, what this Lotor wants is you, princess." Shiro stated. "...and Keith."

Though he sensed Keith was more of an afterthought.

Inclining her head, Allura turned back towards him. "Based on what intelligence Kolivan has managed to gather, we believe he means to sue for peace by using my hand."

"I'm guessing that's not as genuine an offer as it sounds." Shiro observed, cocking a brow.

"Not if Narti's here, it isn't." Keith remarked.

"Narti?" Shiro asked.

"One of Lotor's generals." Keith told him. "She can manipulate minds."

Aliens, giant robots, and now, apparently, psychics. For a split second, Shiro caught himself wondering if this wasn't all just some strange dream- maybe he was still in that coma.

"If Lotor's offering peace, it's just so that he can get a shot at the Altean throne." Keith said. "I
don't trust him."

"Nor do I." Allura admitted. "But him being here gives us a chance."

"Take out Lotor, and we'll be one step closer to winning this war." Keith said.

Nodding his head, Shiro figured it would take him awhile to process all this information- but he was glad that they were trusting him with it.

But from the sound of it, he was a part of this now.

"So now that the black lion has chosen me," Shiro began, listening to the black lion's assenting purr in the back of his mind as he said it, "-what does that mean for me? I don't know if either of you have noticed, but I'm not exactly in the condition to pilot anything right now. I'm a bit-

"-Shiro, if you're going to say you're a bit short on hands, I'm going to leave," Keith cut him off.

Shutting his mouth, Shiro frowned. Some people just had no appreciation for good puns.

"We may," Allura interjected, a soft smile on her face, "-be able to help you with that."
the arm

Chapter Summary

Ulaz, to his credit, didn't even blink. "It is not uncommon for Galra who lose their limbs to replace them with ones that can also double as a weapon. I designed many during my time as palace technician. So yes," and he could have sworn there was just the faintest hint of amusement in his voice, "-I could add lasers."

Chapter Notes

So how about that season seven, eh? First of all, please stop burying your gays, Voltron staff, that's bad. That's my stance on that. There's a lot to unpack from season seven, but if there's one thing I think that really stands out to me it's my deep relief that Kolivan is still alive. If there's a single character in this series that deserves to go on a nice, long vacation more than Shiro, it's Kolivan. Listen, the dude's been through a lot, okay? Let him take a break, kick his feet up.

Also Hunk, my baby boy... you finally got to shine. It took like, way longer than it should have, but you got there. I'm so proud of you. You did so good.

Anyways, this chapter's a bit of a breather! There's a short time skip involved, but it's noted, so no worries about that.

"Alright, why don't you give it a try?"

Frowning, Shiro stared down at his right arm. Or rather, what would become his right arm, provided they could work all the kinks out. Ulaz and Coran had been working on it together for two weeks now, trying to produce something that would work well with his human physiology.

The end product was nothing short of amazing. Prosthetics had advanced in recent years, but even the most sophisticated ones on the market couldn't come anywhere close to this. And this was just the trial run.

Willing the fingers of his new right arm to move, he watched as they curled into the palm of his new hand. He could actually feel it- the arm was sending signals straight to his brain, acting for all the world like he'd never lost it in the first place.

If he ignored the fact that it was made of metal, it was easy to forget that he had.

"Oh man," Katie whispered, almost reverently, "-that is so cool."

"Yeah," Shiro cracked a smile, glancing up at her, "-it is pretty cool."

"I trust that it works, then." Ulaz observed. "If I am understanding your human phraseology correctly."
Looking up at Ulaz, Shiro gave him a firm nod of his head. "It's great, Ulaz. Everything is working just like it should. I can't thank you and Coran enough for this. After the crash..."

Shaking his head, Shiro watched as his fingers moved in tandem with each other at his command, balling into a fist over and over again. "But are you sure this is fine? I can't exactly give you anything in return."

"Oh think nothing of it, Number One!" Coran all but chirped. "I'm not about to deny one of the princess' personal requests."

Giving the Altean man a faint smile, he turned his new arm over to Katie to poke and prod. If Matt hadn't already made other plans, he'd doubtlessly be right here next to her. But he had- since they'd arrived here, he had started building no shortage of connections with the refugees, including a former Alliance fighter by the name of Te-Osh, who had been sent out here in order to coordinate efforts with the Castle of Lions after her injuries took her out of the fight.

The amount of alien life contained within this one tiny patch of Earth never ceased to amaze him. Matt and Hunk had gotten the closest to the refugees- Hunk was on friendly terms with a Balmeran by the name of Shay, and her grumpy brother Rax. And Lance? Well, he'd seemed to make it his mission to introduce himself to what felt like every available alien lady he could find- when he wasn't trying to challenge Keith to fights to win his freedom.

He'd taken a particular interest in an alien by the name of Nyma- but Katie just seemed more interested in her cyber unit, a droid named Beezer.

He'd stuck mostly to the Castle of Lions, but that wasn't to say that he hadn't gotten to meet his fair share of alien life. Most notable was Keith's mother, Krolia. He hadn't exactly expected her to thank him for looking after Keith while he was at the Garrison, but in hindsight, maybe he should have. Even from their first meeting, it was clear that she cared for her half-human son deeply.

Two weeks had flown by like they were nothing.

"This arm," Katie declared, "is a masterpiece of engineering. I've never seen anything like it! I mean, to be fair, I've only been here like, two weeks, and I've kind of been saying that a lot lately, but this time, I actually mean it."

"Wait," Coran squinted, "so all the times you've said before, you were lying?"

"No, no." Katie said quickly- maybe a little too quickly for Coran's tastes. "Just you know. It's a thing we say."

"I think what she means is," Shiro cut in, "is that we keep getting introduced to tech that's decades beyond anything we've managed to achieve for ourselves. It can get pretty overwhelming at times."

It was almost depressing, seeing how much more advanced so many of these alien societies were. Not all of them- from the sound of it, the Alteans and the Galra were at the forefront of the technological revolution, so it was to be expected that everything they had would blow them completely out of the water, but even some of the less advanced cultures had tech that put the stuff they had on Earth to shame.

And Keith had grown up with all of this?

No wonder he barely took the Galaxy Garrison seriously.

It also made it crystal clear that should the war come to Earth's doorstep, that they would all be
hopelessly outgunned. The only things they had that would be able to stand in the Galra's way weren't even of Earth- the Castle of Lions itself, and of course, the black lion.

That he would pilot.

It wasn't certain yet. He was its paladin, there was no doubt about that, but according to Allura, before he could even think of piloting the black lion, he needed to bond with it first. It had responded to him well enough, but she couldn't say for sure or not if Zarkon's bond with it was truly gone- it was even possible, she said, that Honerva could try and force it.

Even now, corrupted as she was by quintessence, she was still a formidable alchemist.

Not to mention, she didn't want to tip their hand if they didn't have to. So for now, the black lion would be staying here, on Earth, hidden.

He knew that they had a Blade within Zarkon's ranks, poised to take him out any day now. There was no sense in throwing in a cog that didn't need to be there, not when they were this close to taking out one of three targets they would need, in order to bring an end to this war.

Beyond that, he didn't know much.

Keith hadn't shared any real details with him- if he didn't know any better, it was like he didn't want him to be a part of this war. And he'd admit- he wasn't hot on the thought of it either, but if push came to shove, he'd do it. If he really had the power to pilot the black lion, then he didn't just want to sit here while others fought in his stead.

Earth might not have any direct involvement with this war, but that didn't mean he didn't want to help. Somewhere out there, innocent people were risking their lives to fight against injustice- and if he had the power to change that, then he should use it.

What he did know, and what Keith did share, was that should Zarkon fall, Lotor would be crowned Emperor in his place. And if that happened, whatever he had come to this planet to do, he would take as his cue to start.

Provided he hadn't already.

They knew he was somewhere on Earth, in contact with the Galaxy Garrison- the only problem was that they didn't know where. Keith had been able to confirm that he wasn't hiding in the Galaxy Garrison itself- at least, not on their nearest base.

How he knew that, he didn't know. He suspected that maybe they still had someone on the inside, but he couldn't say for sure. Keith wasn't exactly volunteering that information.

What he did know was that Keith periodically left the valley. Sometimes he would take Allura with him- but more often than not, he went alone. He didn't know what it was he was doing out there, but he never told him when he left. The only reason he knew that he'd gone today was because he'd caught him on the way out, while he had been doing his morning jog around the Castle of Lions.

Their conversation had been brief, but he'd made sure to remind Keith to be careful. Maybe he'd been trained to do this, but that didn't mean he liked the idea of Keith putting himself at risk.

He was still just eighteen. Maybe he was an adult even by Earth standards, but as far as Shiro was concerned, he was still just a teenager. Maybe things were different for the Galra, but while he understood that, it didn't make it easier for him to swallow.
Besides, he was also kind of currently wanted for kidnapping.

Which Keith, incidentally, found hilarious.

So did his father, for that matter. Guess he couldn't blame Keith's sense of humor on being an alien.

Keith, being half human, was one of few who could pass as one. Allura, Coran, and Romelle could all do it- all Alteans possessed the ability to change their form to some degree, but all Keith needed to blend in were some contacts and a bit of cosmetics. He used the latter to hide his markings- which explained the jar of face cream that he always kept on the sink in his dorm room back at the Garrison.

He hadn't wanted to say anything, but it was just... well, with Keith's skin texture being the way it was, he couldn't help but wonder. He was guessing that the rough skin was because of his Galra half, a theory which Keith's father had confirmed.

There were three kinds of Galra- those with fur, those with scales, and those who had neither. Both Keith and his mother fell into the latter category, but their kind had developed thick skin in order to compensate. It felt naturally rough to the touch, which explained why Keith always felt like he was in dire need of some good moisturizer.

At least, that was how Lance put it.

He... couldn't exactly disagree.

The more he learned about Keith, the more surprised he was that he had been able to pass for (completely) human for so long. Part of that had been with Sam's help- but the other part had simply been Keith taking refuge in the idea that there couldn't possibly be an alien walking around the Galaxy Garrison. Surely if there was, somebody would notice, right?

Well, apparently not.

"Ah well," Coran said, "-you shouldn't sell your planet short. I must say, you've come up with some rather ingenious culinary concoctions, and these movies of yours- well, I'll just put it like this- I think Altean cinema could stand to learn a thing or two from you all."

"Honestly? I'd rather have the tech." Katie told them.

Letting out a faint laugh, Shiro couldn't help but smile. Looking down at his right arm, he bent it at the elbow, listening to the sound as its gears worked in tandem with his thoughts. It really was an incredible piece of tech- just something like this alone would revolutionize treatment for amputees the world over.

It was enough to make him feel bad about keeping it to himself.

"Let us know if you feel any discomfort." Ulaz advised. "If all goes well, we should have a finished version ready by the end of one of your Earth months."

"I'll make sure to keep that mind." Shiro promised.

"If this is just the trial run, then I can't wait to see the finished version." Katie said. "Do you think you could add in like, lasers?"

"I don't think I need to fire lasers from my hand, Katie." Shiro told her.
"Well, I mean, sure, but like- could you?" Katie asked.

Ulaz, to his credit, didn't even blink. "It is not uncommon for Galra who lose their limbs to replace them with ones that can also double as a weapon. I designed many during my time as palace technician. So yes," and he could have sworn there was just the faintest hint of amusement in his voice, "-I could add lasers."

"Thanks, but I don't think I'll be needing those." Shiro told him, choosing to ignore the whine Katie let out. "All I need is a solid, functional arm."

Just because Earth wasn't involved directly in this war, didn't mean it would stay that way. And while he hoped it wouldn't come to that, if it did, he wanted to be ready. As the new paladin of the black lion, he would be one of the few things standing between Earth and total annihilation. It was a big burden to shoulder, but if he'd been chosen for this, then he was willing to take it on.

And with the Galaxy Garrison working together with the Galra Empire, they'd need everything they had.

No matter how many times he saw it, the black lion never got any less impressive.

And he'd been seeing it a lot, lately.

Now that he'd been chosen as the black lion's new paladin, that meant he'd had to make some changes in his life. Which was fine by him- his past year had just been one change after another, so he'd learned how to roll with the punches, more or less. Heck, he'd barely even had the time to settle into a schedule at the Castle of Lions, before it got upended by this new development.

Taking an hour or two out of his day to bond with a giant mechanical cat was at least better than physical therapy. More entertaining, too. The black lion, it seemed, always had something to share with him. Through it, he was getting glimpses into different worlds, far distant from his own.

Through the black lion's eyes, he'd seen the other paladins- including Allura's father, King Alfor. But it wasn't just them that he saw- he also saw Zarkon, alongside his wife, the Empress Honerva. He watched through the black lion's eyes as they changed before them, showing him the story that he had only been told before. He could feel the lion's pain, like it was his own.

It did not take the loss of its original paladin easily. But it had seen what Zarkon had done, had sensed his thoughts changing, growing darker- until the point came when it knew that he was no longer the man he once was, when it had chosen him as its paladin, all those years ago. It mourned for a man not yet dead.

He almost never saw Lotor.

The few glimpses he'd had of him were... he didn't know. It left him with an unpleasant feeling, one that he recognized as coming from the black lion. According to Allura, by the time Lotor was born, Honerva's mind had already begun to become corrupted by quintessence poisoning- and that it was highly likely that had some kind of an effect on her son.

He had a commanding presence.
Not unlike his father, that way.

He saw Krolia, Keith's mother, more often than he thought. Once she returned to Daibazaal, Kolivan had her assigned to palace duty, so that she could be close by. Her duty was to map out every inch of the palace, and to determine the best way to steal the black lion should it become necessary. Though she had been involved in planning the operation, she hadn't participated in it- instead, as the only Blade who had been to Earth before, she had been sent there alongside her son and Ulaz.

It was only because of that, that she survived.

He saw through the black lion's eyes as not all who came to steal it made it out of there alive. A number were killed- others, who sensed that they were cornered and would likely otherwise be captured, made to speak, instead chose to take their own lives.

This was the world in which Keith had grown up in.

He tried not to think on it.

He saw Keith, too.

He'd been eight, in Keith's own words, the last time he'd been alone with the black lion in the royal hangar on Daibazaal. If he hadn't told him that, he wouldn't have thought so- eight year old Keith was nearly as tall as eighteen year old Keith.

That was normal, he'd been told. If anything, his growth rate was slower than usual- probably because of his human half. There had apparently been a massive amount of miscommunication in regards to how human and Galra babies worked, resulting in Keith's father panicking when his child had been born after three months, and his mother panicking when he had been born nearly half the size of a normal Galra infant.

It had been touch and go for awhile, but Keith had proven himself to be more Galra than he looked. In spite of being smaller, he'd had no trouble keeping up with the other children in his play group- at least, he was pretty sure that was what Krolia had called it.

Keith, who had come in during the middle of that conversation, had very quickly cut it short.

Being able to see Keith grow with his own eyes was... something else. It made him feel connected to him, but at the same time, part of him felt like he was intruding. Whenever he expressed that thought to the black lion, he could have sworn that it laughed it off.

Through Keith, he learned something important- that as Zarkon grew less fit to become the black paladin, the more he became afraid of losing it. There was a memory that stuck out- one of Zarkon watching through narrowed as Keith left the black lion's hangar. There was something in the way he watched him as he left- like he was ill at ease, even afraid.

A bud of paranoia.

Keith was sent away after that.

When he saw Keith again, it was in the company of the princess. At first, he would follow her like a shadow, but over time, he began to grow closer to her.

He didn't fail to notice that the older the princess grew, the less the black lion saw of her. In fact, once it reached a certain point, he stopped seeing either her or Keith- it wasn't until the black lion
was here, in its hangar in the Castle of Lions, that he saw the pair of them again.

He didn't have to ask why the black lion was showing him all this. He already knew the answer. It wanted him to see for himself the history that had lead it to this point- bereft of its paladin, seeking another, even as it was afraid to do so.

Afraid to trust for a second time.

When Keith had first returned from the Galaxy Garrison during a routine visit back to the Castle of Lions, it had *sensed* something on him. He remembered that- Keith had told him that he was going back home for the weekend, and he'd seen him off.

What the black lion had sensed was *him*.

At first, it was hesitant. Things had gone so poorly with its last choice, that it didn't want to risk into forging a bond with someone who might just end up the same way. He could understand why it felt that way- after seeing Zarkon change through its eyes, he was surprised that it had chosen to let him in at all.

But it had.

When he had been brought to the Castle of Lions, it knew that he was someone that it could take a chance on. He only hoped that he could meet that trust.

Even if the war ended without him ever needing to step into the pilot's seat, from the sound of it, the universe would still need Voltron. It would need to see the black lion in the hands of a new paladin, someone who *wasn't* Zarkon- to send a message that the lion had made its choice, and had chosen to reject what Zarkon had become.

He was more than willing to be that person.

"Looks like you're getting the hang of that."

Exhaling, Shiro turned on his heel, giving Keith a smile. He hadn't heard him come in, but that didn't really surprise him. He'd heard Lance grumble to himself about him being a ninja, and honestly? He probably wasn't too far off.

Then again, he'd been pretty focused. While he wasn't able to use any of the functions of the training deck, it was still a wide open space, perfect for a wide variety of exercises. Just what he needed to get used to his new arm.

"Just thought I'd try to get the feel for it." Shiro told him, flexing the robot arm. "Not that there's much to get a feel for. It moves almost like... well, like my own."

It was faint, but Keith managed to return his smile. He had been lingering outside of the training deck, but now he moved to come in, closing the distance between the two of them. He hadn't changed, but he'd removed his contacts and had wiped away the cosmetics. It was strange, seeing his more alien features set against human clothing.

But this was also Keith.

"Doesn't surprise me." Keith told him. "Ulaz is one of our best technicians. And for all his eccentricities, Coran's pretty good too."
High praise, coming from Keith.

"You should have seen Katie and Matt." Shiro told him. "Matt especially. I nearly thought he was going to try and dismantle it himself."

Letting out a laugh, Keith's smile became a little more natural. "That sounds like Matt."

"So," Shiro began, "how was your trip?"

Narrowing his eyes, Keith's smile quickly turned into a frown. "Not very productive. I know Lotor has to be somewhere within the vicinity, but wherever he is, he's well hidden."

"He'll have to show himself eventually." Shiro told him. "You just have to be patient."

"I don't like waiting around." Keith told him. "And I don't like the idea of letting Lotor make the first move. He's been on Earth for a few months now- whatever he's planning, he's probably already started to make the arrangements for it."

He couldn't blame him for being worried.

*Nothing* he'd heard about this Prince Lotor was any good. What little he'd seen through the black lion's eyes seemed to support that.

"You said what Lotor was interested in was the princess, right?" Shiro asked.

Nodding his head, Keith's brows furrowed. "Yeah, but there's no telling what he'll do in order to get her. We know he brought Narti with him, so we can assume he's going to use her."

"This Narti- is she really that dangerous?" Shiro asked. "I know you said she can control minds, but-"

"She's dangerous alright." Keith told him with a frown. "And loyal. All of Lotor's generals are. Halfbreeds aren't always treated well within the Galra Empire."

It sounded like a contradiction. Their own prince was of mixed race, but apparently, that wasn't enough to wipe out the anti-hybrid sentiment among them. Keith didn't speak of it often, but it had been mentioned in passing enough times for him to sort of get the picture. From the sound of it, a lot of it had to do with the resurgence of anti-Alliance sentiments, that had begun when Zarkon first took the throne, and had only steadily been getting worse.

Halfbreeds were viewed as a byproduct of the Galra Empire's treaty with the Alliance, and were therefore viewed as inherently lesser. The fact that said treaty had lead to the dismantlement of a significant portion of the Galra Empire's colonies didn't help matters. Generations later, there were still those who bore a grudge.

Two weeks had given him plenty of time to brush up on his history. If he was going to be a part of this conflict, then he needed to understand it.

He couldn't help but frown at that. "What about you?"

Blinking, Keith looked up at him, like the question had caught him off guard. "What about me?"

"Well, you're half-human." Shiro told him. "I just- you sounded like it was a bit personal."

"I- things were easier for me." Keith confessed, dropping his gaze. There was an undercurrent of guilt in his tone, one that was hard not to pick up on. "The Blade of Marmora... it's *different* from a
"Honestly," Keith added, "I'm not even sure how Lotor found out."

"And that's why he wants you?" Shiro asked.

Nodding his head, Keith frowned. "I've told him before that my allegiance is to the Blade of Marmora, to Kolivan, but he's not the kind of person who takes no for an answer. Just on the surface."

"He's probably got his own plans for this war," Keith added. "Lotor was never satisfied being in his father's shadow. Once he falls, he won't hesitate to seize power. That's why it's so important we take him down while we have the chance."

He doesn't question that.

What he does wonder about is what the plan is to take care of what would doubtlessly be an ensuing power vacuum left in the wake of the demise of both the emperor and his heir. With the empress being unable to claim the throne for herself, he had to wonder what would happen next.

He didn't doubt that there was a plan in place to deal with that- everything he had been told about this Kolivan indicated that he probably had one. But whatever it was, he hadn't been informed.

If he wasn't being kept in the loop, then he'd just have to trust that there was a good reason for it. After all, he was essentially still an outsider in this war- just because the black lion had chosen him, didn't mean he expected that to change.

He also knew Keith didn't like keeping things from him.

Considering he'd been trained specifically to withhold information, he found it touching.

"If there's anything-"

"Ah-ha! There you are!"

Shutting his mouth, Shiro turned his gaze towards Lance- and Hunk, who lingered just behind him. The latter caught his eye, casting him an apologetic smile, as if he'd realized that they had interrupted something.

Keith, for his part, simply heaved a long sigh. "Lance," he began, turning on his heel to face him, ",-come here for another challenge?"

Shiro simply took that as his cue to step away, giving the two of them some space. He caught Hunk's eye again, who simply gave him a shrug of his shoulders, his expression set in a way that read what can you do.

Keith just looked like he was regretting all his life choices. Or at the very least, issuing the challenge in the first place. He'd done it to shut Lance up, so in that regard- yeah, if he was going to be honest, Shiro would have to say that it backfired on him.

"You bet I have." Lance told him.

"It's been two weeks." Keith told him. "You haven't come close to touching me even once. What makes you think anything will be different this time?"
"Oh no, don't give me that." Lance told him. "I'm not giving up."

Sensing that there was no reasoning with him, Keith just let out another sigh. "Fine. Same terms and conditions as usual."

Taking off his jacket, Keith tied it around his waist. Pausing for a moment, he spared Hunk a glance, giving him a nod of his head, which Hunk returned with a small wave.

As far as he could tell, Keith had a less rocky relationship with Hunk than he did with Lance. It wasn't like Hunk didn't want to get out of here, to go back to his family- but if there was one thing that he'd learned about the cadet since coming here, it was that he was the type to place the needs of others above his own.

Also, that he wasn't about to blame Keith for just doing his job.

Lance probably did understand the gravity of the situation he'd landed himself in- but he was also stubborn. And likely worried- he apparently had a family member who worked for the Galaxy Garrison, so the news that they had been working together with an evil alien empire all this time probably didn't sit well with him.

He'd never had too many chances to speak with Veronica McClain before. He knew who she was, but they didn't work in the same sector, so their paths didn't often cross.

In so far as he knew, she was just a communications officer, so he doubted she had any involvement with what was going on. As far as Keith knew, all communications with the Galra Empire were routed through Admiral Sanda, who had taken charge of the base ever since the Kerberos mission.

Sanda he knew.

Not very well- he wouldn't say they were on personal terms. But she was strict, by the book. She expected absolute loyalty from those who served under her, and if she didn't get it, then she wasn't afraid to pull rank and have them removed.

She'd also been the one to cut the deal with the Galra Empire.

It put her visit to him in the hospital in a whole new light.

Odds were, whatever the Galra Empire had told her had probably lead her to believe that what she was doing, she was doing for the sake of Earth. The Galaxy Garrison had sold him, Sam, and Matt out, and he wouldn't forgive them for that in a hurry- but they'd been fed nothing but lies this entire time.

They didn't know what side of this war they were on.

"Hey," Hunk spoke up, concern in his voice, "-you okay?"

"Nothing, just- just a little lost in thought." Shiro reassured him.

"No yeah, I get that." Hunk told him. "Lots to think about lately."

That was one way of putting it. The cadets, Katie and Matt- none of the other humans knew the full story like he did, but they knew enough. Enough to tell them that should something go wrong, Earth itself could be put at risk.
He was sure that wasn't what the princess wanted- nor was it what Kolivan wanted, when he'd chosen to hide the black lion here. If the Galaxy Garrison had never cut the deal they had, they might still be safely hiding, the Galra Empire unaware of the princess’ presence on this planet.

He couldn't help but feel a little responsible for that.

Keith had weighed his life, and the lives of Sam and Matt, and had deemed them worth the risk. He didn't know what it was that he had done to inspire such loyalty, but whatever it was, he could only hope that he was actually worth it.

"Lance, he," Hunk began, "-he does this I think so he doesn't have to think."

"Worried about his sister?" Shiro asked.

"He wouldn't admit it, but yeah." Hunk told him. "Are you sure there's no way we can contact her, like maybe warn her about the whole corrupt Garrison thing?"

Blinking, Shiro frowned. "You're asking me?"

"Well I mean, you seem pretty close with Keith, so-" Hunk began, before letting his shoulders slump. "Guess not, huh?"

"I mean, I can talk to him, but I can't make any promises." Shiro told him. "Keith can be pretty stubborn."

Not to mention surprisingly strict about following orders. For someone who had impulsively chosen to do battle with Commander Trugg, and then rescue him and the rest of the Kerberos crew from their fate of being captured, he was more obedient than he would have thought. Whatever loyalty that he'd earned from Keith, it clearly wasn't as great as his loyalty to the Blade of Marmora.

He was starting to wonder what this Kolivan was like.

He knew that Keith had briefed him on the situation, but he'd never actually spoken to him. It was clear that Keith held him in great respect, as did Ulaz and Krolia. Even Keith's father seemed to have a healthy amount of respect for the man.

"Thanks." Hunk told him- and he didn't exactly miss the way his gaze inched slowly downwards. "So. Robot arm, huh?"

"Yup." Shiro told him, bending it at the elbow, balling his right hand into a fist. "Robot arm."

"Pretty cool." Hunk told him.

Giving him a faint smile, Shiro let a faint laugh escape him. "You know... it is pretty cool."
"We've received a report from Thace."

Chapter Notes

Back with chapter fourteen! Remember how I said last chapter was a breather? Yeah, I meant that. Boy oh boy did I ever mean that. That said, I hope everyone enjoys the chapter, I was actually adjusting my plans for this one up until the literal last minute, lol, but I think it turned out pretty well in spite of that.

Until next time!

"No."

Yeah. He'd kind of been expecting that answer.

"Look, if they hadn't lied to me, they wouldn't be in this situation." Keith told him, his voice firm. "If they want to blame someone, they can just look in a mirror."

Well, no could blame him for trying.

Lance's challenge to Keith had ended without him being able to land a single blow on him, as expected. Not through any lack of effort on Lance's part, but he knew from experience that some hurdles were just hard to clear. Once it was over, Keith had excused himself from the training deck. He'd meant to follow after him right away, but Lance had caught him before he could leave. He'd asked him for tips on winning against Keith. He had a few, but none of them he thought Lance could actually *use*- he'd have to go over them first, adjust them a bit. He didn't doubt Lance would hold him to his word, but that was fine- he meant to keep it.

By the time he caught up with Keith again, he'd already changed back out of his Earth clothes, and back into his Marmora armor. He caught him just as he was about to leave his quarters. He'd looked surprised to see him at first, but now he just looked vaguely annoyed.

"Alright," holding up his hands- *hands*- Shiro just gave Keith a faint grin, "-I get it."

Frowning, Keith narrowed his eyes at him for a moment, like he half expected him to push the subject anyways- before giving him a curt nod of his head. "Good."

"But you can at least understand where he's coming from, right?" Shiro asked. "I don't think she's involved, but-"

"Yeah Shiro, I get it." Keith told him, face set in a deadpan expression. "He's been challenging me to a fight every single day for the past two weeks. I'm not that oblivious."
Heaving a sigh, Keith's frown returned. He must have looked like he doubted it. "While I was on Altea, I couldn't contact my father at all. I know what it's like to be separated from family, Shiro."

That... kind of made sense, now that he thought about it. His father had been a secret within the Blade of Marmora, and from what he understood, he rarely, if ever, left their base. That he wouldn't be able to contact him once he'd left... somehow it had never occurred to him, but yeah- it made sense.

"That was when you were eight, right?" Shiro asked.

Keith gave him a curt nod of his head. "Yeah. Why?"

"Just trying to get my timeline straight." Shiro told him. "It's... young."

Keith just shrugged. "Not really. Most acolytes have passed their first trial by eight cycles. It's normal."

Frowning, Shiro had to bite back a protest that no, it wasn't. By Galra standards, Keith was already an adult, and had been for some time. From the time they reached their fourth cycle, they were no longer considered children. When they reached their first major growth spurt, they were considered young adults.

Said major growth spurt happened at around seven.

From his perspective, Keith's childhood had been stolen from him, replaced by strict military training that would make even some Earth warlords blanch.

Except for the Galra, that was normal.

Fighting was a way of life for them- he'd learn that much by going over their history. The entire reason they dominated Daibazaal was because they were such great warriors- they'd gone from a small nation tribe to one of the domineering forces of the universe. It was why they developed out of childhood so quickly, leftover from when every day had been a fight for their existence against other tribes.

Galra history was... violent, as to be expected.

"I guess I'm just having a tough time wrapping my head around it." Shiro admitted.

"Yeah," Keith said, "-dad was never a big fan."

"So I've gathered." Shiro said.

He... actually didn't get that many chances to speak with Keith's parents. It wasn't like he never did, but the two were often so busy, that he rarely saw them. Krolia spent most of her time on border patrol, and Commander Kogane spent most of his time assisting the refugees.

But yeah- he had gathered that much from Keith's father.

He didn't seem to regret letting Keith be raised Galra, but he'd admitted more than once that he'd wished he'd been able to teach him a little bit more about Earth while he was young. He'd been hoping that now that they were on Earth, he'd be able to soak up some of the culture that he had been missing.

In a sense, he had.
But Keith was right. Culturally, he was Galra.

Even if he looked largely human.

"Look, Shiro-

Whatever Keith was going to say, he didn't get to finish. His gauntlet let out a loud beep, causing him to frown. Holding up his arm, he pressed down on it, a small screen flickering to life. Even from behind, he could recognize Ulaz's mask, his uniform distinct from that of Keith's.

He wondered if it meant something.

"Keith," Ulaz began, with no preamble, "-you are needed on the bridge."

Narrowing his eyes, Keith frowned. "Is there a problem?"

"No." Ulaz stated simply. "But there is news."

Giving him a curt nod of his head, Keith's expression turned grave. "Understood. I'm on my way."

"Duty calls?" Shiro asked, watching as Keith switched off the screen.

"Yeah," reaching up a hand, Keith's mask flickered to life, "-sorry."

Keith left without so much as another word. He took that to mean that whatever was going on, he wasn't invited. Frowning, he watched as Keith's figure disappeared down the hall, wondering what was going on.

He didn't think anyone had breached the perimeter. They had all been run through drills on what to do if someone had, so he knew that whatever this was about, it wasn't that.

Maybe he'd find out from Keith later.

Or maybe he wouldn't.

Frustrating as it was, there was nothing he could do but wait. He might be the black paladin, but this still wasn't his war.

When he arrived at the bridge, Ulaz wasn't the only one waiting for him there.

He hadn't been expecting him to be.

He let his mask melt away as he studied each one of them- his mother and Ulaz, as well as Allura and Coran. Only Romelle wasn't present, possibly still accompanying one of the humans. His father was nowhere to be seen, which likely meant he had taken over his mother's border patrol duties for the time being.

From the look of it, he was either the last one to be summoned or the last one to make it. Exchanging a brief glance with his mother, she nodded her head, before looking up towards the screen spread out in front of them, Kolivan's image flickering on it. The reception that they got on Earth had never been great, not when it came to getting transmissions from as far away as Altea.

Straightening his back, Keith stared up at his leader. He was always difficult to read, trained to be that way, but today, his expression seemed more grave than usual.
"We've received a report from Thace."

He'd never quite mastered the art of schooling his expression, not like other Blades, so he was pretty sure he let his reaction show on his face. They had all been waiting for Thace to report in, for weeks now-if he finally had, it could mean only one of two things.

Either he'd failed, or he'd succeeded.

Either way, odds were, he was dead.

He could almost feel the room collectively hold its breath. Everyone wanted to ask, but nobody wanted to be the one to do it. It wasn't an exaggeration to say the fate of the war rested on Thace's mission.

"Zarkon is dead."

Swallowing, Keith couldn't deny the relief that washed through him. Zarkon was dead. The tyrant that had started this whole war in the first place was gone. The fear that the black lion would be seized, used against them, had now disappeared.

But he forced the relief back.

Zarkon was dead, but the war wasn't over.

"And Honerva?" Allura asked. "What of her?"

"Honerva lives." Kolivan informed them. "Thace was able to confirm Zarkon's death, but it seems he was dealt a critical blow by the empress."

He felt something in his heart clench at that. "Is he-?"

"He passed, half a varga ago." Kolivan's tone was curt, informative. To anyone who didn't know him, it would seem like he didn't care at all, like Thace's death was just a cog in the overall plan, only important for what it accomplished.

But he knew Kolivan, and he knew that wasn't true.

"Did my father not-?" Allura asked.

"He tried." Kolivan said. "Unfortunately, the damage was too severe. Making it back to us took all the strength he had."

"I understand." Allura said, drawing in a long breath. "I am sure that father will see to it that he receives the proper honors."

It was a small consolation, for those who usually died in silence.

"What of the black bayard?" Allura then inquired.

"Thace was able to obtain it." Kolivan stated. "I can arrange for it to be transported to you at once, so that the new black paladin can use it."

"Let us hope that he does not have to." Allura remarked.

"How far has news of Zarkon's death gotten?" Krolia asked.
"Not fair." Kolivan told her. "Our spies in the lower ranks have not yet been informed of it. It's possible the empress is waiting to make contact with Lotor before she chooses to go public with the information."

"She knows that her grip on the throne is tenuous." Allura observed, brows furrowing. "Likely, if she wants to hold on to any form of power, she needs Lotor as her bargaining chip."

"Do we know if she has made contact?" Ulaz asked.

"With Thace gone, we currently have no spies within the inner circle." Kolivan informed them. "Likely, this will only serve to make her more suspicious."

"We can't risk those agents we do have in place being exposed." Krolia said, a frown set deep on his mother's face. "If we try and rush their promotion to a higher rank, we may only risk exposing them."

"In other words, we have no way of knowing what Honerva is up to." Allura stated.

Looking back towards her, Krolia cast a sympathetic look. "We knew that would be a risk when we began this plan."

"I know." Allura said. "But now that it has actually come about, I can only feel ill at ease with the idea. If not Lotor, it is possible she might attempt to recruit another commander to her cause, to lead the war effort in Zarkon's stead."

Folding his arms in front of him, Keith felt his brow furrow. "Sendak."

Catching his eyes, Allura slowly nodded her head. "Yes, Sendak is the most likely candidate."

"It could also be Ranveig." Krolia noted.

"Gnov." Ulaz added.

"Well, I think we can all be certain that it won't be Morvok." Coran chimed in, merely arching a brow at the looks his interjection earned him. "What? It's true."

"Commander Ladnok is also a strong possibility." Allura observed.

"The Galra will not fall in line behind a ruler that has not been sanctified by the Kral Zera." Kolivan stated. "Not unless they carry the blood of the emperor. Lotor is the most likely choice."

"If Lotor ascends to the throne, it is possible that there will be factions that will split from the Galra Empire." Krolia observed, catching his eye as she spoke, a glint of something apologetic in it. "There are those who consider his Altean blood a weakness."

"Not enough." Allura frowned, but otherwise barely so much as flinched at the statement. "And I doubt they will simply choose to surrender to the Alliance. Even if we send the lions to pick them off, we still put ourselves at risk of splitting our forces, making ourselves vulnerable to attack."

"We've already discussed this." Keith cut in, narrowing his eyes. "What we should be talking about is what we're going to be doing with Lotor. He's here, on Earth. We have a chance to take him out, before he can become a problem."

"Keith's right." Krolia said. "We have every reason to believe that Lotor intends to act."

Kolivan's gaze now fell squarely on him. "Have you been able to locate him?"
To his credit, he didn't even flinch. "No. A- our spy in the Galaxy Garrison hasn't been able to turn anything up."

"I'm afraid his rank is too low to provide us with any relevant information." Krolia added. "Not without putting himself at risk."

He couldn't help but flinch. The only reason they had to rely on an outside source for information was because he'd screwed up. He would do it again, without question, if given the chance, but that didn't mean he wasn't aware of the consequences of his own actions.

"He may have to," Kolivan said.

At that, Allura flinched, narrowing her eyes. "I cannot ask-"

"Fine," Keith cut her off, "I'll ask him."

Turning on her heel, Allura stared at him with wide eyes. "Keith, you cannot mean to-"

"I'm not saying that I'll force him." Keith told her, meeting her gaze. "Just ask."

She held his gaze for a long moment, before she let out a sigh, defeated. "Very well. But I do not like this plan."

He didn't like it much either. But right now, they didn't have much of a choice. They needed to know where Lotor was, preferably before he decided to act.

Narti was bad enough, but if Ezor was with him...

Looking up at Kolivan, Keith steeled himself. "How soon do I need to contact him?"

"Now."

_Tearing across the desert, Keith pumped the controls of his hoverbike, giving it more throttle. Narrowing his eyes beneath his goggles, he grit his teeth- he couldn't argue with the urgency, but making contact with Adam twice in one day wasn't that easy._

He usually laughed it off, but the Garrison pinning him for Lance and Hunk's kidnapping had made moving around more difficult. Which, yeah, he was actually guilty of that, but it wasn't like he intended to do it, or even intended to keep them there forever. As soon as this war was over, and it was safe to come out in the open, he'd let them go.

If it weren't for Lotor, he could do that right now. Zarkon was the biggest threat to the black lion, and now that he was gone, they didn't have to fear him tracking it down anymore. Plus, it had a new paladin now- which meant that any Galra Honerva might send to try and claim it in her husband's stead would fail.

But there was still Lotor.

And Lotor's ambition wasn't the black lion. He might try and claim it as a bonus, as a means to provide himself further credibility in the eyes of a skeptical empire, but no- Lotor had arrived without knowing about the black lion.

Just Allura.
In some ways, he was more dangerous than either of his parents. Zarkon and Honerva were predictable to a degree, but Lotor had been keeping such a low profile since the war began, that it was impossible to say what his motivations were.

It wasn’t to end it. If he truly wanted to do that, then he had a fleet of his own, and several loyal generals under his command. He could have joined the war on the Alliance's side at any time, but he’d chosen not to. As far as anyone knew, he hadn't done anything to aid refugees either- which meant even if he tried to claim peace and unity, he didn't mean it.

Allura was right- if Lotor wanted anything, it was her father's throne.

And the best way to get that was the same way he'd been trying to get it all along- through Allura. The war hadn't changed that.

But it might have changed his exact plans.

Because Narti was here.

Her abilities were well known throughout the Galra Empire. Every time Lotor had visited Altea in the past, he'd purposefully left Narti behind. As if to signal that he intended to win Allura's hand through honest courtship and fair play- which didn't mean he wouldn't use her after getting it.

But she was here.

He'd confirmed that.

Given the fact that he'd yet to confirm the presence of any of Lotor's other generals, he was pretty sure he'd let them do that on purpose. Either to let them believe that she was the only one he'd brought with him, or for some other reason- to mislead them.

Hence, why they'd had Coran update the Castle of Lion's sensors.

The risk that Ezor could break through while they fixed all of their attention on Lotor and Narti was a real one. With her ability to blend in with her surroundings, she’d be able to get onto the Castle of Lions without anyone noticing. Finding it wouldn't be easy, not with the traps they had set in place, but if she managed to do that...

It was also why even within the Castle, Allura was guarded twenty-four seven. She could protect herself, that was much true, but having an extra pair of hands never hurt.

Lotor being here was his fault. If he hadn't made that choice...

He'd done what was right, so he just had to accept the consequences that came with it. He knew Kolivan wasn't happy with his choice, but he'd be lying if he didn't think his leader would have expected it from him.

It was the human part of him, his father would say.

Not like he had planned to get attached to any humans. When he'd first arrived here, the only thing he had been focused on was the mission.

Yet somehow, he'd ended up with friends.

Weird.

Weird, but now that he had them, he'd do anything to keep them safe. Out of harm's way. Maybe
bringing them to the Castle of Lions had been the best idea all along.

Pulling his hoverbike to a stop, Keith removed his goggles. The west town was considered neutral territory, without any Garrison eyes around, so they met there often. They didn't like having Adam-who was Garrison- around, but they didn't say anything to him either.

He got the impression that they were all afraid of him.

Figures. He'd been the one to spread the rumor that people had been vanishing into the valley, never to return for that exact reason. The people around here were a superstitious lot, just like his father had said, so it had worked like a charm. Truthfully, the only humans they had abducted before Lance and Hunk showed up was the scout that the Garrison sent out into the desert.

Getting off his hoverbike, he frowned. The sun was setting low over the horizon, so it was a good thing he'd taken the time to put in his contacts.

Human eyes didn't glow.

They didn't have yellow sclera either- usually, but the glowing would have been the real giveaway.

"Adam."

When they had first arrived on Earth, there had only been two humans, aside from his father, who had been involved with them- Sam Holt, and Adam Warner.

Sam had been the one to bring Adam in, vouching for him. When he enrolled at the Galaxy Garrison, he would become his flight instructor, and was in a position to cover for him where Sam couldn't. He hadn't been happy with the arrangement at first- but after suddenly being told to live out in the open after a lifetime of secrecy, he hadn't been happy with a lot of things.

Adam had been doing his own internal investigation of the Galaxy Garrison, transferring in from another branch earlier that year, so he already understood that the organization was corrupt and rotting in places. The existence of alien life had surprised him, but he'd agreed to help.

Taking down the Galaxy Garrison had become even more important to him after Kerberos.

Looking up at him, Adam frowned. "Keith. You said it was urgent."

"It is." Keith said. "Circumstances have changed."

At that, Adam's frown only deepened. "...for the worse?"

"No." Keith told him. "But we need to know more than ever where Lotor is hiding."

Adam was sharp, so he caught his drift. "You want me to dig deeper. Beyond what my rank allows."

"Yeah." Keith said. "Can you?"

He didn't need to tell him the risks- he already knew them. The stakes might be higher, but even before they met, he'd been planning to dig deep into the Garrison, and at the end of the day, even with Lotor involved, the risks then were the same as the risks now.

"I can't just lay low forever." Adam said. "This wasn't how I was planning to do it, but I'll see what I can do. Now's probably the best time. Things are still in a bit of a mess after that Holt kid's virus."
Exhaling, Keith felt his shoulders slump. It would have to do. They didn't have anyone else in the Garrison that he knew they could trust.

"So," clearing his throat, he sensed the shift in Adam's mood instantly, and fought the urge to groan, "-how's Shiro?"

Mentioning Shiro had been a goddamn mistake.

He wasn't oblivious, he'd known there was something going on between the two of them just before Shiro left for Kerberos. But given the way Shiro never asked about him, he was pretty sure he'd decided all on his own that whatever they'd had before was gone now.

His father had to be some kind of mutant, because as far as he could tell, humans weren't direct about anything.

"He's fine." Keith told him, tone probably more deadpan than he actually meant it to be. "Just like he was this morning."

"Right. Just- just making sure." Adam said.

"...you know you could have talked to him at any time while he was working at the bakery, right?" Keith pointed out, arching a brow. "You didn't have to avoid him."

Adam merely frowned. "I don't recall asking to be sassed by a teenager."

"I don't recall asking to be involved in human courtship problems." Keith replied. "And yet-"

"Alright, I get it." Holding up his hands, Adam gave him a half-smile. "Any chance you can tell him I said hi?"

Folding his arms in front of him, Keith's other brow shot up. "And leak the identity of our spy?"

"...yeah, that's what I thought you'd say."

Biting back a comment to the tune of then why did you even ask, Keith just pushed the topic aside. He hadn't come to Earth to make friends, and he sure as heck hadn't come to Earth to get involved with their romantic entanglements.

Maybe if he didn't have bigger worries at the moment, he might indulge Adam. But he did- and he just had to hoped they'd moved fast enough to get a running head start on Lotor.

Knowing Lotor, he doubted it.

________________________________________________________________________

When the alarms went off, he knew he was right to doubt.

________________________________________________________________________

He was jolted from dreamless sleep by blaring alarms.

For a moment, he was thrown back to the Kerberos mission, the smell of smoke filling his nostrils as the fire spread to the main cabin. Clutching at his chest, it was the feel of cool metal where his right arm should be that dragged him back to reality, slowly but surely pulling him out of his panic.

The smoke wasn't real.

The alarms were.
Getting out of bed, Shiro tossed the covers off. Pressing his hand against the access panel by the door, it flashed red, making a buzzing sound loud enough to hear even over the alarms.

Locked in.

Whatever was going on, he got the feeling this wasn't a drill.

Not when he was locked in his room. That was intruder protocol- in the case of a breech, the entire castle-ship would lock down for all non-essential personnel. It was meant to keep them safe, out of harm's way- they were guests- sort of- here, not combatants.

Didn't mean that he didn't like not knowing what was going on.

Because Keith was a combatant.

Did this have anything to do with Keith being called away earlier today? He hadn't seen him since then, although Matt had told him he'd spotted him leaving a few hours ago. Hunk had reported seeing him return, maybe an hour after that, and when he'd called out to him, he'd been so lost in thought, that he hadn't even heard him.

Something was clearly going on.

Closing his eyes, he tried to steady his breathing, in spite of the blaring alarms. *Patience yields focus,* he reminded himself, stretching out with his thoughts. He'd never tried this before, but now was as good a time as any.

He didn't know what was going on, but maybe the black lion did.

He felt their bond, and reached for it. Its presence was now a constant companion, as if it were an old friend, but when he called on it like this, it became stronger. This was the first time he'd done it while he wasn't either in the black lion itself, or at the very least, in his hangar.

But he connected.

*Intruder,* it seemed to rumble, *hurt.*

Frowning, he felt his brows furrow. Hurt? *Who* was hurt? The intruder? Keith? Someone else? He tried to press the black lion for answers, but it had none.

*Paladin,* gone.

His frown deepened, not understanding. He was right here. He hadn't gone anywhere, so what did it-

-oh.

Zarkon.

*Zarkon* was gone.

Snapping his eyes open with a gasp, he felt his breath come back to him in a rush. Zarkon was gone, and now they had moved into their next phase of the plan- finding and defeating Lotor.

Intruder.

Had Lotor struck first? How did he even find them?
Swallowing, he pressed his hand against the access panel again, but it still flashed red, rejecting him. Dimly, he became aware that the alarms had died down. Had the intruder been neutralized? If so, why were they still locked in their rooms?

*Calm down,* he told himself. He didn't even know if that meant Keith. There were other targets, other combatants. It didn't have to be Keith.

A flash of something brilliant out of the corner of his eye snapped himself from his spiral of thoughts. He thought he'd gotten used to Keith's teleporting space wolf, and maybe he had- he just hadn't expected it to show up *in his room,* especially not under these circumstances.

It let out a low whine, pushing its face into his waist, nuzzling against it. Frowning, he rested his hand on its head without a second thought.

The next thing he knew, he was in the med bay.

And from the look of it, everyone was as surprised by this development as he was.

Had the wolf...?

"...I didn't-"

"-shiro?"

Keith. Snapping out of his momentary stupor, his gaze fixed on him. He was up on a table, a hand pressed against his right side, putting pressure on it. The top half of his armor had been peeled away, soaked in a purple-red color that he dimly realized had to be blood.

*Keith's* blood.

His face looked flushed, taking on a pale purple shade. He was looking straight at him, but he almost didn't seem to be, his eyes glassy. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Coran, who was holding some kind of syringe, but for the life of him, he couldn't read the label on the bottle he'd stuck it in, drawing out its contents.

Krolia and Commander Kogane were there- along with a Blade that he *didn't* recognize.

Allura, Romelle, and Ulaz weren't.

Something had happened.

Intruder.

Hurt.

"Keith," he found his voice, taking a step forward, "-what happened?"

Leveling unfocused eyes on him, Keith's expression was more grim than pained.

"Lotor."
Chapter Summary

In the split second as she watched her son go down, she wished that she had remained on Earth, raised him there. Let him grow up as a human, though in her eyes, she knew he was not.

The other half of the second was filled with fury.

Chapter Notes

Chapter fifteen! Big mood for this fic is constantly bringing up Romelle but never actually getting the chance to introduce her in the fic yet. Romelle: the true cryptid of this story? Maybe so! Anyways, I decided not to retcon anything I already wrote about the cosmic wolf in this fic- I mean, I could, but it would be a pain and I don't want to, so I won't. Anyways, as always, thanks for reading!

She was still a mother.

She might not be an expert on human society, but she knew enough to understand that most would recoil at the way her son had been raised. She saw nothing wrong with it- it was how she had been raised, and Keith was as Galra as she was.

But she was still a mother.

In the split second as she watched her son go down, she wished that she had remained on Earth, raised him there. Let him grow up as a human, though in her eyes, she knew he was not.

The other half of the second was filled with fury.

The only thing that stopped her from breaking Ezor's neck was that they might need her. Otherwise she would have ended her life right there.

The heat of her anger had not yet cooled as she carried Keith to the med bay, over his protests. He insisted that he was fine, that he could make it on his own, but she knew that wasn't true. He had a penchant for lying about his condition, one that she knew all too well. If he thought he could fool her, then clearly, he didn't know her half as well.

She knew that wasn't true.

Regris trailed behind her, as if he were uncertain what to do. She should have known that Kolivan would have chosen to send him, out of all the possible Blades. Transporting the black bayard was an important mission, yes, but given the circumstances, she doubted he was going to spare a senior member for it.

Regris, who was young but talented was the most logical choice. Though a year older, he had been
in the same play group as her son, and had trained together with him once they were both old enough. She had cause to know him well.

She'd barely even set Keith down by the time her husband came bursting into the med bay, sweat clinging to his brow. They hadn't even given the all clear yet, but she didn't doubt that he'd picked the lock on their shared quarters and come here in a rush.

It wasn't from her that Keith got his sharp instincts from.

She had never met a man quite like Heath Kogane. She doubted she ever would again. If there were such a thing as fate, then it had clearly guided her to this planet, out of all the possible ones that she could have been sent to scout.

"What happened?" He demanded, breathless, wasting no time in joining her by his son's side.

"Lotor."

Keith should not be speaking, he knew that, but she also knew it wasn't going to stop him. He cracked one eye open, and she decided right away that she doesn't like the glassy look of it, nor the way his breath is coming out in short puffs. She was willing to bet anything that the blade Ezor used was poisoned.

Keith had been trained to handle poisons, as they all were, but his hybrid physiology had always made it difficult. Sometimes better, sometimes worse- only time would tell which of the two categories he fell into now.

The expression on her husband's face turned instantly grave.

"He found us?"

"Ezor did." Krolia informed him. "She's been secured."

Unconscious and thrown into a cell, the likes of which she would not be able to escape from so easily. She doubted she'd be waking up anytime soon, not after the blow she'd delivered.

Giving her a curt nod, his grim expression didn't change. "You already call for Coran?"

"He's on his way." Krolia told him. "Ulaz is seeing to the princess. Romelle was with her, so she should be fine."

"Good, that's good." Her husband stated, though she knew some part of him was still trying to process all this. "We need to tend to Keith. How you feeling, kiddo?"

Glancing towards him, Keith let out a grunt. "Bad."

"Yeah, figured." He said, ruffling his hair over Keith's admittedly weak objection. "Think you can give us a hand, Regris? We need to get his armor off."

"I can-"

"No you can't." Krolia cut him off, firmly. Now was not the time for him to be stubborn. "What you need to do is move as little as possible, so that you don't make things worse."

If he lost too much blood, they wouldn't be able to do a transfusion, not easily. Keith was the only human/Galra hybrid to exist, which could sometimes make medical care rather tricky.
"I'll help." Regris agreed, already starting the process of ridding Keith of his chest plate. He left the more delicate task of peeling back the underlayer of the Blade armor to Heath- there were some benefits to not possessing claws.

Grunting, Keith pulled his hand away from his side long enough to allow his father to peel away the underlayer from his torso. At once, she sucked in her breath- it was already starting to turn a color that she didn't like.

Galra, by and large, were supposed to be purple. Except when they weren't.

Like Keith. So the vivid violet that painted the area around the deep cut, already starting to spread, was cause for concern.

Definitely poisoned.

"Get the disinfectant." Heath instructed Regris, not even looking up. "What happened?"

"She targeted the handoff." Krolia informed him, already recounting the events in her head. She had shown up essentially out of nowhere- if Dog hadn't been there, things might have gone much worse. "We think she was going for the black bayard, but we don't know why."

"Why didn't she trip the alarm?" Heath asked. "Coran got it working, right?"

She didn't know. She wished she did.

"We don't know." Krolia replied. The alarm had gone off- but it had been tripped manually, as opposed to automatically. "Ulaz said he would look into it."

The possibility that they might have a spy within their midst was not a pleasant one. It couldn't have been anyone on the castle-ship, that much she was sure of, which meant it had to be one of the refugees.

When she had been on Earth the first time, Heath had explained to her in passing the concept of a witch hunt. They had no corresponding phrase in Galran, but it was a concept she was nevertheless familiar with.

She did not want to start a witch hunt. But if there truly was a spy in their midst, she might have to.

"I didn't react in time. He protected me." Regris said, treating it as if it were some deep confession, and not the most predictable answer, given her son. "This is my fault."

Grunting, Keith used his free hand to tap against Regris armor, mustering as much of a glower as he could manage. He was apparently taking her advice and not talking now, which was not an encouraging sign.

Whenever Keith was compliant, it usually wasn't.

To her great relief, Coran showed up not a moment later. He took one look at the discoloration of her son's wound and set to work. They had already lost time- worst case scenario, Keith would have to be put in one of the healing pods.

Briefly, she caught herself wondering where Dog had gone to in all the chaos. She had been with them in the hangar during the handoff, but she had disappeared at some point afterwards. She thought it strange, knowing just how faithful she could be.
It was only a second later that her question was answered.

No amount of training could have prepared her for her son's friend being teleported into the middle of the room. And from the look on his face, he was just as surprised by this turn of events as she was.

"I didn't-"

"...shiro?"

She saw the way he looked at Keith, the way he paled at the sight of him. She didn't blame him- she knew that Keith's condition was not good.

She could only lay the blame at her own feet, in spite of what Regris might say. It had been her role, before things changed, to train their young- but she had not only failed to protect two of their number, but she had also failed to protect her own son.

It stung.

As both a Blade and a mother.

Logically, she knew that once an acolyte passed their final trial, that protection was no longer needed. Every full fledged Blade was expected to be able to hold their own in battle, and to furthermore know the risk that their actions bore. But she had also fallen in love while on what was supposed to be a mission, so she had never quite been the ideal Blade to begin with.

Kolivan would call her sentimental.

She saw nothing wrong with that.

"Keith," Shiro began, clearly trying to fight off a wave of panic, "-what happened?"

"Lotor."

No sooner than had he said that, did Keith wince, sucking in a breath. Resting a hand on his shoulder, Krolia jerked her head up. "Coran!"

To his credit, the Altean man wasted no time in seeing to Keith. He was precise about his injection, making quick and clean work of it. "This should stem the tide of the poison."

"Wha- poison?" Shiro blurted out.

Glancing up towards her husband, he nodded his head. She wasn't sure why Dog had brought him here, but the last thing they needed was for another factor to be involved. The situation was chaotic enough already.

Lightly squeezing Keith's shoulder, pausing only for so long as it took to give his son a reassuring smile, Heath turned on his heel, looking towards Shiro. "Come on with me now. Could use a hand checking up on our guests."

Shiro looked like he wanted to protest, but fought it down. She had been told that while he had been at the Galaxy Garrison, this man had served as her son's mentor. She saw that clearly now.

He was a good man.

The right fit for the black lion. Perhaps more so than Zarkon had ever been.
Once Shiro was gone, Keith let out a breath. Coran had already moved on to the actual injury itself, assessing the damage.

"You may need to spend some time in a healing pod." Coran informed him. "In fact, I think you likely will."

Letting out a grunt, Keith narrowed his eyes. It was obvious that wasn't what he wanted to hear. Being in the healing pod meant that he would be out of action, and now that Lotor had found them, they couldn't afford that.

But he also couldn't afford not to.

"Someone has to warn Adam."

Placing a hand on her son's shoulder, Krolia looked him in the eyes. "We'll take care of it."

"Ezor-"

"Like I said," Krolia said, "-we'll take care of it. Right now, you need to listen to Coran."

That was that. He had fire, her son, but even he knew when it was time to shut up and accept what people told him. Giving Coran some space so that he could finish his work, she tried not to look too grim as she watched him escort her son into one of the healing pods. Dog was hot on their heels, curling herself protectively around the pod.

She didn't care for them that much herself. She knew how efficient they were, but it was the same as being effectively trapped for the duration of the healing process. Vulnerable.

And Lotor already knew where they were.

They could move the ship, but not easily. And with the humans on board, they would effectively be abducting them, something which could potentially be used against them. Especially now that they knew there was a chance that there was a spy among the refugees.

Regris, to his great credit, sensed her mood.

"I can stay," he told her, "-watch over him until he comes out."

No doubt he felt some sense of responsibility, she thought. He had always been on good terms with her son, since the time they were both young. She could still fondly recall the way they had tussled, learning each others boundaries in play fights, while her husband fretted off to the side about how violent the whole affair was.

Which was also why Keith had chosen the course of action he did.

Others might blame his humanity, but Krolia suspected that the culprit was herself.

Placing a hand on Regris' shoulder, she gave him a curt nod of her head. "See to it that you do. I have to report this all to Kolivan."

It was not something she looked forward to.

He knew when he was being effectively shooed.

Krolia hadn't said it in so many words- or even any words at all- but he recognized that she hadn't
wanted him there. Which might actually be too strong of a phrase- it wasn't specifically his presence that she seemed to take issue with, but rather, simply the presence of anyone at all.

"She means well," Commander Kogane began, as if reading his mind, "-don't read too much into it."

"It's okay." Shiro told him. "I understand."

He did, actually. She was Keith's mother, in the end. No matter how strange their culture seemed to him, he didn't doubt that she loved her son just as any human mother would.

"Keith said something about Prince Lotor." Shiro began, brows knitting together. "Exactly what happened?"

"Had an intruder." Kogane's tone was curt. "One of Lotor's generals, from the sound of it. Wasn't there myself. Just the active Blades."

He could tell that plagued him, and that he understood too.

He also knew that one of Lotor's generals finding them was a bad thing. Especially when from the sound of it, they still didn't know where he was.

"Are they-?"

"Neutralized." Kogane told him. "For the time being."

So not dead then, in other words.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Shiro asked.

"What you're doing right now." Kogane said. "Helping me check up on everyone."

Fair enough. By the time they got up to the guest quarters, everyone had already gathered in the common area. During intruder drills, the floor was locked down from other sections of the ship, meaning not only could the residents not get out, but nothing else could get in. It was a security measure, meant to keep them safe.

It also didn't give them very many places to gather, which made things easy. Doing a quick head count, he confirmed that everyone was present and accounted for.

"Shiro?" Spotting him, Katie made her way over towards him. "What's going on?"

"This was just a drill, right?" Hunk asked, visibly nervous and likely already knowing the answer to his own question. "Just a poorly thought out one in the middle of the night, right?"

"'fraid not." Kogane answered for him. "We had an intruder."

There was a low murmur that filled the room, and he could have sworn that Hunk turned several shades paler. "Is- is everyone okay? The refugees?"

"Yeah, and what about the princess?" Lance piped up.

"And where did the intruder even come from?" Matt added.

"One at a time." Shiro told them, though it wasn't like he didn't understand the barrage of questions. He'd been half tempted to do so himself. "Commander Kogane knows more than I do
about what happened, so you should probably direct your questions to him."

"Don't know about the situation down in the town just yet." Kogane began. "But don't worry, we'll check on it soon. The Castle of Lions was their main target, so I'd imagine they're all fine down there."

"Okay," Hunk said, "-okay, good."

"Worried about your rock girlfriend?" Lance asked, somehow managing to tease his friend even in this tense situation. He didn't know if that was just how Lance was, or if it was some kind of coping mechanism- or even a bit of both.

"She's not my girlfriend, she's just a rock that I admire very much." Hunk said. "And it's not just Shay I'm worried about. Everyone here is like, trying to run away from this whole crazy space war."

Letting out a faint chuckle in spite of himself, Kogane shook his head. "The princess is fine. Ulaz went to verify it for himself, but she had Romelle with her, so I'm willing to bet she's safe."

"Wait, Romelle?" Lance asked. "I thought she was just Allura's maid."

"Yeah, I thought Keith was her bodyguard." Hunk said, before frowning. "I- where is he anyways? I thought it was his job to check on us."

To his credit, he tried not to let what he knew show on his face. It was just that he did a bad job of it.

"...shiro?" Katie asked, a thread of tension in her voice. "Where's Keith?"

Thankfully, he didn't have to answer.

"He's in the med bay." Commander Kogane informed them, tone curt enough that it might have fooled anyone else into thinking that he didn't care. He did- he'd seen that much for himself. "Should be fine, though. Coran's already treating him."

"Treating...?" Matt's voice trailed off. "I- Shiro, what happened?"

"I don't know." Shiro confessed.

He really didn't. All he knew was that Keith had been hurt, and that there was somehow poison involved. One of Lotor's generals had done it, but he didn't even know which one it was.

They were both worried, he knew. Of course they were- Keith was just as much their friend as he was his. He'd even say the three of them had gotten even closer over these past two weeks, now that there were no secrets between them.

Or at least, now that there was only one secret between them. Which for Keith, was a big step up.

"You said had, right?" Hunk asked. "As in, past tense? As in, there's not an intruder in the Castle at this very moment?"

"Don't you worry about that." Kogane said. "Krolia took care of her."

He didn't go into any further specifics, he noticed.

"Yeah, but what exactly happened?" Katie asked. "I thought nobody knew where the Castle of
Lions was."

"We don't know yet." Kogane admitted. "We'll have a full briefing first thing in the morning, when hopefully, we'll know more than we do right now. For the time being, you all should try to get back to sleep."

"Uh, after being told there was an intruder?" Lance cut in, narrowing his eyes. "Are you sure you're not just holding out on us? How do we know it wasn't actually some kind of Garrison rescue party?"

"It wasn't." Shiro said. "Trust me."

Coming from anyone but him, he didn't think Lance would have believed it. But since he'd been the one to say it, he simply relented.

"We trust you, Shiro." Matt told him. "But Keith... he'll be fine, right?"

"Wouldn't lie to you about that." Kogane replied. "He's my son."

The hushed silence that fell over the room served as a reminder to all of them.

"Look," Shiro began, "-I'm sure come morning, they'll tell us exactly what happened. We just have to give them time to wrap the situation up."

He'd really like to know too.

"Right," giving them a curt nod of his head, Kogane looked towards him, "-you can choose to go back to sleep or not, but I want all of you to stay on this floor fer now. Officer Shirogane, I can trust you to keep things under control here, right?"

He'd dispute the use of his old title from the Garrison, but he did the same thing with the (ex) commander, so he didn't exactly have a leg to stand on. "Yes sir."

Keith had already gotten hurt. Even if he knew there was nothing he could have done to stop it, the last thing he was going to do was let it happen to anyone else.

Lotor.

If he didn't have a problem with him before, he did now.

"The princess?"

"Secure."

Nodding her head, she took Ulaz at his word. If Kolivan hadn't accepted command of the Blade of Marmora, then Ulaz would have been next in line to lead. And if his cover hadn't been blown, he would still be a part of this war.

Maybe it would even already be over by now.

She had to give Kolivan credit- he was always thinking two steps ahead. Even before they knew that the rift would create the problems it did, he'd still had the foresight to get Ulaz in on the inside.

The mere existence of an energy source as powerful as quintessence had drawn rumblings from the anti-Alliance crowd, and that was more than enough for Kolivan. Since the source of it was on
their planet, there were many among them who thought that the Galra should control it. They treated it as if it were just another resource, no different from ore. What they didn't understand was just how dangerous quintessence could be.

Ulaz had watched firsthand as Honerva's mind began to deteriorate. As her reason began to fade, replaced instead with paranoia.

It was that paranoia that lead to him being exposed as a spy. They had managed to avoid him being connected to the Blade of Marmora at the time, but in the end, it didn't matter. Zarkon declared war only a month later.

By that time, their plans were already in full swing.

"Kolivan?" Ulaz asked.

"Unhappy."

"Yes," lifting his brows, Ulaz had the audacity to look vaguely amused, "-I imagine he would be."

"He's instructed for Regris to remain." Krolia told him. "Now that our position has been potentially compromised, we'll need all the help we can get."

There was even talk of sending one of the lions.

Given that his daughter was now at risk, she was surprised that Alfor himself was not taking the nearest wormhole to get to them. But although he could be impulsive in his own right, the trait that had shone in his youth had become tempered with experience, and the weight of his own crown.

He could no longer afford to move carelessly.

If they sent anyone, it would either be Blaytz or Trigel. Last she recalled, Gyrgan was pinned down by Ranveig's forces, and it was unlikely his situation would change any time soon. Perhaps with the news of Zarkon's death, there would be enough impact on their morale to allow Gyrgan to break their current stalemate.

Either way, the presence of a second Voltron lion would do little to root out Prince Lotor. She had successfully been able to get in touch with Keith's contact, Adam, informing him in no uncertain terms to pull back.

She could only hope he listened.

Humans, she noted, had a knack for not doing that.

"...and Keith?"

Closing her eyes, Krolia let herself sigh. "He'll recover. Regris and Dog are standing guard, though it's possible Heath might have relieved them."

It went without saying that he was in a healing pod.

"...the prisoner?"

"Still unconscious. Secure." Ulaz informed her- and of course she was. She hadn't held back. "I did discover something of interest."

Brows knitting together, Krolia looked up at him. "A transmitter?"
If she was sending out her location...

"There was one, but I already destroyed it. It didn't appear to be active." Ulaz reported. She wished she could find more relief in those words, but she couldn't. "But that wasn't what I was referring to."

Retrieving a small device from his armor, Krolia frowned, recognizing it. "A recording device?"

"With one message recorded."

She felt herself stiffen. "He sent us a message."

"It's encrypted." Ulaz told her. "It may take some time for me to break it."

"Doesn't like to make things easy for us, does he?" Krolia noted. "As soon as you break the encryption, contact me."

If Lotor wanted to open up a line of communication with them, there were other ways to do it. No, he'd sent Ezor here for a reason- one that she had been willing to kill for.

Except knowing Lotor, it was possible that was all an act. He would be more than willing to sacrifice one of his generals to get what he wanted- but even knowing that, she doubted she could use that knowledge to turn Ezor. She wasn't as blindly loyal as Acxa and Narti were, but that presented it's own problem.

Even worse, if she was here, then Zethrid couldn't be far behind.

It was a good thing Regris was here. They could use that extra hand.

Her interactions with Lotor were few, given his strained relationship with his father. Keith probably knew him better than she did- but she'd had her fair number of interactions with his generals. He would often send them in his place, to report on territories that he oversaw.

When they had signed the treaty with the Alliance, generations ago, the bulk of the Galra Empire had been dissolved. It didn't mean they didn't maintain a number of colonies still- but it was a far cry from the former might of the Empire.

One of Zarkon's chief goals, once the war began, was to reclaim that territory. As for Prince Lotor... no one could be sure.

Only that regardless of what his claims might be, he was no ally.

"You have my word." Ulaz told her. "Now go. Be with your son."

Opening her mouth to protest, that there was still more work to be done, Krolia quickly shut it. If her superior officer was giving her an order, who was she to refuse? Instead she allowed her shoulders to slump, flashing Ulaz a grateful smile. "Thank you."

She couldn't return to the med bay fast enough.

Keith.

"Coran said he'll be in there until tomorrow."

Maybe he hadn't been trained by some elite organization of spies, but live with someone long
enough, and you tend to pick up on their presence- even if they had specifically been trained to erase it. It was how he knew, even without looking up, that the person who entered was his wife.

(By galactic standards, at least. Under human law, he guessed he was still technically a swinging single, something he'd fix as soon as they were able.)

Krolia said nothing, instead making her way to his side. He knew he didn't need to be so close to Keith's pod, but he was anyways. Dog briefly lifted her head, before lowering it again, curled protectively around her owner's healing pod.

He never liked the things. Made it look like the people in them were dead.

"Where's Regris?"

"Sent him to secure things in town." He told her. "Looked like he needed work."

"He's close to Keith." She said simply.

Glancing over at his wife, he gave her a faint smile, though it wasn't one that came from a happy place. "I know."

When Keith was born, he'd tried, at first, to raise him like a human. It just hadn't worked out. Kid was more Galra than he looked.

Didn't mean he didn't still watch over him. By virtue of being the only human that far out in space, he was now the expert, so if anything went wrong, he wanted to be close by. Even if that did mean having to watch the frenzied biting and clawing that the Blades had the audacity to call playfighting.

He'd heard of playing rough, but that? That was something else.

But he'd watched over him. He'd known from the moment that Krolia announced she was pregnant that Keith wasn't going to be a normal kid. If that meant his son was born with a full set of razor sharp teeth, which he then tried to use to gnaw his arms off, then that was just what it was.

He loved his son, alien quirks and all. He could have been born just as purple as his mother, and it wouldn't have changed a damn thing.

So suffice to say, yeah, he knew all Keith's friends.

(He took a small degree of pride in being his embarrassing alien dad.)

"He's staying." Krolia informed him. "Kolivan's orders."

"Good to hear it." He said, meaning every word of it. Regris was a good kid, in so far as the term good kid applied to the Galra, who tended to try to solve near every problem with a hearty dose of murder- his wife and son included. "Keith'll like that."

"When he's conscious enough to know it." Krolia remarked.

Letting out a faint sigh, he studied his wife. Her expression was stoic, collected- but over the years, he'd learned to read what she was feeling underneath it. Wrapping his arm around her shoulder, he pulled her closer. "He's a tough kid. He'll pull through."

Krolia merely let out a faint hum, gaze still fixed on the healing pod. "How are the humans?"
"As expected." He told her. "Left Shirogane in charge."

"Good call." Krolia said. "He's fairly reliable. He'll make a good black paladin."

He was no stranger to long silences between the two of them. There was nothing uncomfortable about them- it was just how they both were. Neither of them were big on small talk, so when there was nothing to say, they just didn't say it.

Now though, it was clear something was on Krolia's mind.

"It should have been me."

"Glad it wasn't. Shouldn't have been either of ya." Heath remarked. "I don't like seeing Keith hurt just as much as you, but I don't want to see you getting hurt either."

"It's part of the job." Krolia said, her tone curt. "I know the risks."

"I know that." He told her. "But Keith knows that too."

Closing her eyes, Krolia finally let out a long breath. She knew, even better than he did, what they would be getting into when they had decided to raise Keith on her home planet. "Was Coran able to identify the poison?"

"You think I'd be this calm if he didn't?" He asked, lifting his brows.

"Fair point." Krolia admitted. "I'm guessing he already set the pod to cycle it out then."

"That he did." Heath said. "Just gotta give it time to do its work. You'd think all that training would make you better at waiting."

That earned a pearl of laughter from her, the sound of it filling the room. "Kolivan would agree with you."

"Guessin' he wasn't happy about all this." He observed.

"Not in the least." Krolia said, shaking her head. "You realize what this means, don't you?"

Oh, he did. Hard not to.

They had a spy.

Whoever they were- he wasn't about to forgive them quick. Keith'd pull through alright, but he wasn't about to forgive the person who had lead him to getting hurt. Maybe they hadn't been the one to swing the knife, but damned if that changed anything for him.

He'd leave Ezor for Krolia.

The spy? He'd deal with them himself.

And he thought he had a pretty good idea as to how to find them.
Chapter Summary

Letting out a faint laugh, Shiro shook his head. He didn't know if Keith could hear them or not, or if he even had anything resembling consciousness while in the pod, but he got the feeling he'd appreciate the company. When he'd first enrolled at the Garrison, he'd looked so out of place- which, he realized now was because he was an alien, but still.

Chapter Notes

Hello, back again, with the next chapter! Just a head's up, that starting next Monday and going on through next Saturday, I will be on vacation! So, naturally, updates might be delayed in general during that time period. I should probably get the next chapter of cosmic dust out before then, but I can't say for sure about anything else.

True to Commander Kogane's word, early the next morning, they were all gathered in the castle-ship's main common area. From the look of it, Allura had been awaiting them for some time, wearing what looked to be more like some kind of pressure suit rather than her traditional gown. She was flanked on both sides by the unfamiliar Blade from the night before, and Romelle.

It made the whole situation feel more tense than it already did.

Krolia was absent. Keith's father was not. Also missing were Ulaz and Coran, presumably busy with other tasks. There was no trace of Dog, but he was willing to bet she was by Keith's side right now.

Keith, of course, was also absent.

"I have gathered all of you here today to discuss the events of last night." Allura began. "As you may have already heard, last night an intruder broke into the Castle of Lions. They have since been apprehended."

Apprehended. So they weren't dead.

He'd been pretty sure that they weren't, but he couldn't entirely be certain.

"I am sure there are any number of questions that you would like to ask of me, but let me begin with a confession of my own." Allura said, her brows furrowing. "I have not been entirely honest with you all."

There was a low murmur among those gathered, and he caught the edge of Katie's gaze on him. He tried not to flinch at it, especially not since she turned to look towards Matt a second later. It had been questioning, not accusatory, but it didn't change the fact that he'd known the truth that Allura was about to reveal all along, and hadn't said anything.
He couldn't help but feel a little guilty about it.

"When you were all brought here, you were told that the reason the Castle of Lion's location needed to remain secret was because of me." Allura stated. "While that was not a lie, the truth of the matter is that I am not the only thing we have been hiding from the Galra Empire."

Lifting a hand, Katie decided to take the initiative. "You mentioned something about a weapon before. Does this have anything to do with that?"

Nodding her head, Allura's mouth was set in a stern line. "Yes."

"When Zarkon first declared war, he did so under the impression that he would have the backing of part of one of the most powerful weapons the universe has ever known." Allura continued. "What he did not know was that the Blade of Marmora, lead by Kolivan, already had plans to ensure that he would *not* have access to it. Together, they stole the black lion of Voltron before Zarkon so much as had a chance to use it in the war."

"The what of what now?" Lance asked.

Giving him a faint smile, Allura didn't appear the least bit bothered by his question, rather, she'd been expecting it. "The black lion of Voltron."

Taking that as her cue, Romelle brought up a screen, bringing up an image that he recognized- the black lion, in its hangar. For a second, Shiro swore he heard its low rumble, now a constant presence in the back of his head, grow just a bit louder.

The low rumble of awe from those in the room, on the other hand, was almost predictable.

"So why are you telling us this now?" Matt asked. "I mean, you were keeping it a secret before, so what changed?"

"Zarkon is dead." Allura stated, in no uncertain terms, confirming what Shiro already knew from the black lion. "We have been hatching a plan to assassinate him for deca-phoebs now, which was successfully carried out yesterday."

"Wait, so does that mean we can all go home?" Hunk asked. "I mean, if this Zarkon's dead, the war's over right? Right?"

"I wish that were the case." Allura admitted, face falling. "But I am afraid we cannot release you just yet, if only for your own safety."

"So this is about Prince Lotor." Shiro stated.

Gazing at him from across the room, Allura locked eyes with him. "Yes."

"Prince Lotor?" Katie asked. "You mean Zarkon's son?"

Inclining her head, Allura looked towards them all. "Yes. We have had reason to believe that he has been here, on Earth, for weeks now, and last night we received solid confirmation of that when one of his generals raided the Castle of Lions. In so far as we can tell, she was attempting to steal the black bayard, a... *component* of the black lion."

Component? Arching a brow, Shiro's thoughts flickered back to what Keith had told him once before. That there was a weapon that came along with being a paladin, that each one possessed- but that Zarkon still held the one for the black lion.
He guessed that was this black bayard.

The black lion rumbled in confirmation. He briefly wondered where it had gone in all this chaos, but assumed it still had to be somewhere on the ship.

"Wait, so... he's on Earth?" Hunk asked. "Does- does that mean he wants this... this black lion? That's... bad, right?"

"I am unsure." Allura admitted. "He cannot fly the black lion, of that we are certain. It may be that he wanted the black bayard simply for the status it would grant him."

Or that maybe the general had an ulterior motive for being here, Shiro caught himself thinking. Either way, not good.

"It may be the princess he wants." Romelle remarked, an edge of clear distaste to her voice. "He always did have an interest in her."

Crinkling her nose, making clear her displeasure, Allura frowned. "Yes. It may be that."

"...so creepy prince dude wants to like, kidnap Allura or something?" Lance asked, arching a brow. "I mean yeah, that's bad, but what does that have to do with us?"

"If we were to return you now, there is a chance that Prince Lotor might attempt to use you as something of a bargaining chip." Allura stated. "Or for the sake of spreading propaganda. I am afraid that we cannot allow that."

"One of his generals can control minds." The unknown Blade so cheerfully provided.

"...yeah. That's definitely bad." Hunk agreed, even as he visibly frowned at Regris. "Also, who is this?"

Blinking, Allura glanced down at Regris- and for the span of a second, he could have sworn a pinkish tint touched her cheeks. She'd forgotten, he realized. "Oh yes, right. I suppose I have not introduced you yet. This is Regris, he arrived last night."

From the back, Commander Kogane finally decided to chime in. "He's Keith's old playmate!"

Lance snorted the loudest, but he didn't miss the faint chuckle that got out of both Matt and Katie. Hunk kind of looked like he wanted to, but likely thought better of it. Allura just looked vaguely miffed at the interruption, casting a vaguely annoyed glance over in the ex-commander's direction.

"...yes, well," Allura continued, choosing instead to press on, "-the general in question has not yet woken up, so we have been unable to question her as to her intentions. But as you are all now residents on the Castle of Lions, I felt that you were entitled to this information, for your own safety, if nothing else."

"But not before?" Katie asked.

Resolute, Allura did not back down. "No."

"Well, at least you're honest about it." Katie admitted, shrugging her shoulders. "But what about Keith? Shiro said something about him getting hurt."

At that, Allura did frown. Unbidden, the way they had been so in sync back when he'd first been shown the black lion came to mind. It was obvious that the two of them were close, beyond just
their respective positions as princess and bodyguard. "Yes, I am afraid so. I was not present at the exchange myself, but according to Coran, he sustained a deep laceration to the side from a poisoned blade."

He stiffened at that. So he *had* been poisoned.

"However, he is expected to recover." Allura was quick to assure them. "He is in one of our healing pods as we speak."

Letting out a long sigh at that, Shiro felt his shoulders slump. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Matt and Katie visibly relax as well. He didn't doubt that they had both been extremely worried about Keith, so to hear that he was going to pull through was a huge relief.

"There is another reason that I am telling all of you this." Allura began. "We believe that there might be a spy amongst the refugees. We believe that is how Lotor was able to discover our location, as well as disable the castle-ship's automatic alarm system. Which we have since fixed, I might add."

"From the sound of it, it kind of seems like you don't know who the spy is." Matt observed.

"No, not at the current moment, I am afraid." Allura admitted. "But trust me when I say that we are looking into the matter."

"I bet it's Rolo." Lance said, narrowing his eyes. "He always seemed kind of shifty."

"Pretty sure you're just saying that because you want to smooch Nyma." Hunk observed.

"Uh, no, of course not." Lance insisted, a bit on the hurried side. "That would imply that I have an ulterior motive, which I do not."

Allura merely arched her brow, taking Lance's suggestion with a grain of salt. "We will be conducting our own investigation, but I do ask that you all stay on your guard."

"So... we still get to leave the Castle, right?" Lance asked.

Allura nodded. "Until we have reason to believe otherwise, then yes. Provided that you stick close to Romelle at all times."

"So, I can go and check on Shay, right?" Hunk asked.

Allura cracked a smile at that. "Yes, if you wish to."

"I can escort you there now, if you wish." Romelle added. "We haven't received any word of any damage done to the town, nor to those who live there."

"Actually, hold on there a second Romelle," Commander Kogane cut in. "I want to have a chat with these two before they go anywhere else."

Blinking, Shiro frowned, glancing up towards Keith's father. He recognized that twinkle in his eyes- not from the man himself, but from Keith. The spark of an idea, which in Keith's case, usually meant trouble.

He... didn't quite know what it meant when it came to his father, though.

Romelle merely glanced between Kogane and Hunk, before lifting her brows and shrugging her shoulders. "Well, if you insist. In that case, I'll be waiting outside."
"Right," Allura said, "-well, I believe that is everything that needs to be said, at least for right now. You are all welcome to go and visit Keith if you are worried about him."

For Matt and Katie, that seemed to be all the incentive they needed. Before he could stop her, the latter had already taken his hand- his human hand- and was halfway dragging him out of the common area before he could so much as protest.

Not that he would. He hadn't seen Keith since late last night, so it wasn't like he'd pass up on the chance to check up on him. Even if he was asleep in a healing pod at the moment, just being able to see him and confirm that he was okay would definitely help.

Speaking of Keith, though...

Out of the corner of his eye, he didn't miss the way Commander Kogane approached both Lance and Hunk, a broad grin on his face. He could sort of guess what that was about, when he thought about it, but the cadets? Not so much.

If anything, from the pleading way Hunk caught his eye just before he left, he got the feeling they thought they were in trouble.

"...so uh," Hunk stammered, shifting on his feet, "-are we like, in trouble?"

Frowning, Lance shot a look towards his best friend. Okay, sure, maybe Keith's dad could be a bit on the imposing side, probably from spending the past decade living with literal murder aliens, but did he have to make it so obvious?

But seriously. Were they in trouble? Because he couldn't recall for the life of him whether or not they'd done anything wrong, and he'd given it a lot of thought.

"No, no trouble." Commander Kogane stated, holding up his hands. "Just thought I'd ask you boys for a bit of a favor."

"A favor." Lance repeated.

He was being asked a favor by the father of his rival. His half-alien, raised in space rival.

...who granted, he was pretty sure did not actually consider him to be his rival. He didn't know if the recent revelation that he was literally from out of this world made the sting of that better, or if it just managed to make things worse.

Because of course humans couldn't compare to aliens, who had achieved deep space flight like, eons ago or something. And of course the guy who'd joined the Garrison for the sole purpose of spying on them wouldn't bother to remember the name of some kid from his class.

Look. It just sucked that it turned out Keith had been thinking way less about him than he'd thought of him.

(On the plus side, it probably meant he hadn't been thinking that much about that Griffin kid either, so well- there was that. Guy practically made Keith look like the patron saint of niceness, which given mullet's tendency of sullen brooding was like, a feat.)

Letting out a low hum, the ex-commander folded his arms in front of him. Lance had to wonder if that was like, a family thing or something, since Keith did it too. Or maybe it was a Galra thing. It could be a Galra thing- he'd seen Keith's mom- his alien mom- do it a lot too. Maybe the
commander had just picked it up while he was in space.

Or maybe they were just both like that. He didn't know. He only knew like, one other Galra besides her and Keith, so he wasn't exactly an expert on them.

Other than the fact that they were, in fact, murder aliens. That he was pretty sure of. Even if Ulaz did seem like... way more calm and placid than Keith.

In hindsight, knowing what he knew now about the Galra and their whole obsession with fighting to the death, he was pretty glad someone had taken the time to inform Keith that like... wasn't a thing humans did.

...yeah. He might be regretting just a handful of those challenges from their cadet days.

(Just a few. The others? Totally called for.)

"How do you boys feel about being spies?" Kogane asked.

For a second, Lance almost thought he hadn't heard him right. "Did you say spies?"

"Did I stutter?" Kogane asked.

"Uh," exchanging a glance with Lance, Hunk frowned, "-no, but... are you saying you want us to help you look for the spy?"

"That's what I'm saying exactly." Kogane said.

"No offense but like, are you sure you want to be asking us?" Hunk asked. "You've got like, literal trained spies here."

He hated to admit it, but Hunk was right. He was about the furthest thing from a trained spy you could find.

It still blew his mind that Keith was one though. Ugh. And he thought he'd been obnoxious enough when he was just a prodigy ace pilot. Clearly, he'd been wrong.

"That all the refugees know about. And the only one they don't is recovering in a pod right now." Kogane pointed out. "All they know about you is that you're a pair of humans who got caught snooping where they shouldn't, and ended up dragged here. If this spy is going to let down their guard for anyone, it'll be the two of you."

"Isn't that you know... dangerous?" Hunk asked.

"I'm not askin' the two of you to do anything dangerous." Kogane told them. "Just to keep an extra eye out. See if there's anyone actin' a little on the nervous side."

"So no confronting them." Hunk said.

"No confronting anyone." Kogane told them. "You see anything funny, you just tell Romelle, or you come tell me. Actually, come tell me first. Then you can go tell Romelle."

And he did not miss the glint in his eyes when he said that. It didn't take a genius to figure out that he had plans of his own for the spy, which... yeah, he got. This was Keith's father they were talking about here.

Heck, if anything happened to his family, he'd probably feel the same way.
...and that just made him think about Veronica. And *that* made him think about how she was a part of the Galaxy Garrison. When he'd first enrolled as a cadet, he'd been thrilled to follow in his older sister's footsteps- or well, almost. She was a communications officer, and he was banking on pilot, no matter what.

Now? Now he kind of wished she had like, literally any other job.

Did he find it kind of hard to believe that the Garrison had sold out three of their own to literal aliens? Honestly yeah, kind of- but it made sense, sort of. At least, it made more sense than Takashi Shirogane making the kind of error in judgement that they expected people to believe he'd made.

He was pretty sure Veronica had no part in that. No way. Maybe the upper command were letting themselves be fooled by a literal evil alien empire, but Veronica? No way would she buy any of that, not for a second. He knew his sister, and she was like, ten times smarter than he was.

And not to boast, but he was pretty smart himself.

Still didn't mean she wasn't possibly in danger. Especially with this *Lotor* dude in the picture. He'd barely even *heard* anything about the guy before now, but the son of tyrannical emperor *probably* wasn't a good dude.

Although... if he found the spy, wouldn't they be one step closer to finding him? One step closer to getting out of here, to going back home.

Yeah. Yeah, that sounded good. Heck, that sounded great!

"Okay, yeah," Lance began, "-we can do that."

Hunk just looked at him like he was crazy.

Patting them both on the shoulder, Kogane nodded his head. "Glad y'all agreed."

With that said, he departed, pretty abruptly, all things considered. At first he'd thought that maybe Keith was like that because he'd been, you know, raised by aliens, but huh- maybe it was just in the blood.

"Lance, no offense," Hunk began, the moment Keith's father had left, "-but are you *out of your mind*? There's no way we can find this spy!"

"Uh, no, I'm thinking perfectly rationally," Lance told him. "And I thought you were worried about Shay."

"I am!" Hunk said. "But this is *dangerous*, Lance. What if- what if they realize what we're doing and like, try to take us as a hostage?"

"Pssh, they won't realize." Lance said, dismissing the thought with a wave of his hand. "You heard Commander Kogane. We're like, the least likely people to keep an eye on. Besides, it's not like we even have to *confront* them or anything like that. We just have to keep an eye out. Easy peasy."

"I don't know, Lance," Hunk frowned, "-this still sounds awfully risky."

"It'll be fine." Lance assured him. "When have I ever let you down?"

Hunk just gave him a blank look.
...okay, so maybe he'd let him down a few times. But hey, he'd learned from those experiences.

Besides, if he found the spy, that'd totally give him an edge on Keith. Then who would be the cool, elite super spy?

(Okay, it’d still be Keith, but at least he'd have done something he hadn't, so there.)

Heaving a sigh, sensing he wasn't going to be able to talk him out of this, Hunk threw up his hands. "Okay, fine. But if we find them, we're doing exactly what Commander Kogane told us to do, and reporting it to him."

"Promise."

Keith's mother barely even looked up when they entered.

Given her absence during the briefing, he'd sort of expected to find her here. She wasn't alone, either- Dog lifted her head as they came in, ears flicking as she assessed whether or not they were a threat, before settling back down. She was curled around one of the healing pods, making it easy to guess which one Keith was in.

"Come to check on Keith?"

"That was the plan, yes." Shiro told her. "Is now a good time?"

"Now's fine." Kroli said, her tone curt.

Her back was against the wall, arms folded in front of her. It was a very Keith posture, some part of him noted. It was easy to see that she was his mother, even if she did appear a lot more alien than he did.

At least, at first glance, she did.

"So how long is he going to be in there?" Katie asked. "Allura didn't say."

"For at least the rest of today." Kroli replied. "Should be out in time for dinner."

"But he's gonna be okay, right?" Matt asked.

"He should be." Kroli told him. "Altean healing pods are nothing if not efficient."

"Kinda creepy though." Katie remarked, peering up at the pod. "I've never seen Keith this still."

She was right about that. He'd never seen him like this either- he'd expected him to look peaceful, but instead, the whole thing just felt kind of eerie. Still, it was an improvement over last night, when he'd been grasping at his side, fighting just to breathe. Already, his color was looking better- he wasn't as pale as he had been.

"So... what happened, exactly?" Matt asked. "Allura said something about an attack."

Giving him a curt nod of her head, Kroli's lips remained set in a tight frown. "He acted to protect one of his fellow Blades."

"You mean Regris?" Katie guessed. "His father said something about him being his old playmate."

Kroli cracked a faint smile at that. "I suppose in Earth terms, yes, that would be correct. As
Blades, we raise our children together in groups, depending on their age. Regris and Keith were both part of the same group."

"So... like, childhood friends?" Matt asked.

"I suppose you could say that." Krolia told him.

Letting out a snort, Katie arched a brow. "Can't believe he tried to say he had no friends. I knew that wasn't true."

Putting himself in harm's way to protect a childhood friend. Yeah- that sounded a lot like the Keith he knew. If there was one thing he understood about him, it was that he deeply valued the people he considered important to him. He wouldn't be here if it weren't for that trait.

Still, he could stand to be a little less reckless.

"He can be a bit... dramatic." Krolia admitted. "I believe he gets it from his father."

"To be fair, you can be pretty stubborn, Katie." Matt noted. "Sometimes it takes a bit of drama to get through to you. I should know."

"I'm pretty sure you just like being dramatic." Katie observed.

"Guilty as charged." Matt admitted, placing a hand over his chest.

Letting out a faint laugh, Shiro shook his head. He didn't know if Keith could hear them or not, or if he even had anything resembling consciousness while in the pod, but he got the feeling he'd appreciate the company. When he'd first enrolled at the Garrison, he'd looked so out of place—which, he realized now was because he was an alien, but still.

Frowning, his brows knit together. The Garrison.

He'd been trying not to think about it, but he couldn't help but worry about Adam. Sure, maybe things had cooled between them after the Kerberos mission, but that didn't mean he still couldn't be worried about him.

(At least, he just sort of assumed they had. He... hadn't made much of an effort to see him. The last thing he wanted was to drag Adam down because of his own sullied reputation, not when he still had a chance to do great things with the Galaxy Garrison.)

Then again, he was just a teacher. He doubted he had much of a chance of getting involved with this whole mess.

For the best, really.

It was bad enough that Keith had gotten hurt- he didn't want to see anything happen to Adam either. Though... he guessed being stuck here, he wouldn't actually see it, but irregardless, he still didn't want it to happen.

Honestly? He didn't want to see anyone get hurt.

He knew this was a war, and that wars came with a cost. He just... even with the talk of Lotor being here on Earth, everything had been so distant up until now, that it was easy to think of it that way. As something distant, far away- nothing that could hurt him, or those he cared about.

And now it had.
One might argue that being Galra, being a part of the Blade of Marmora, Keith had been involved with this war since the start— even before that, really, but even so... to him, he was still just that awkward, out of place kid he'd been introduced to back the Garrison.

That hadn't changed.

Heaving a sigh, Krolia pushed herself off from the wall. "I should check on our prisoner."

"We'll stay here." Shiro told her.

Somehow, he got the feeling that she didn't want Keith left alone right now. Not that he could blame her— he didn't like the idea much either. Right now, Keith had no way of defending himself— there was no doubt that he was at his most vulnerable. If something else were to happen...

...he wouldn't let it. Maybe he hadn't been able to keep Keith safe before, but he wouldn't fail him again— even if he'd never exactly asked him to protect him.

Keith had saved him. The least he could do was watch over him for a couple of hours.

"Yeah, we can stay." Katie said. "Didn't really have any plans for today anyways."

"Totally." Matt said. "We'll keep an eye on him. You don't have to worry about a thing, Miss K."

Though she arched a brow at the way Matt addressed her, Krolia nevertheless appeared grateful. Something in her expression softened, no longer the hardened alien warrior, but just a mother, one who was grateful to see that so many people cared about her son.

When she spoke, her words were earnest. "Thank you."

Bowing her head, Krolia departed. As worried as she was for Keith, she was probably grateful to get the chance to get back to work— he hadn't missed how busy things were around here. Even with the addition of Regris, with Keith in a pod, they were still short one person. Any reinforcements they might get wouldn't be able to arrive until tonight at the earliest, as they'd need the cover of darkness to land.

If watching Keith helped, he'd be happy to do it.

"So, you know what Keith having a childhood friend means, right?" Matt asked, seemingly out of the blue. He'd taken a seat on the steps leading up to the healing pods, one hand idly stroking Dog's head.

"That he's a filthy liar?" Katie replied.

Eyeing his sister, Matt frowned. "Uh, no. It means embarrassing childhood stories."

Arching a brow, Shiro took a seat on the other side of Matt. "You know, I might know a few of those myself."

Taking the bait, Katie joined them, plopping herself down right in front of Keith's pod. "Let me guess— you hear them from Ulaz?"

"Keith may have come up a few times during our sessions." He remarked, absently flexing the fingers of his false arm. He should probably just be glad all of this happened after he'd gotten his new arm, as opposed to before— though it was probably safe to say that the finished version would be a bit delayed now.
Not that he minded- prototype or not, it worked like a charm.

"Apparently, Galra infants have a specific sound for when they're in distress." Shiro told them. "According to Ulaz, Keith's default cry sounded a lot like it."

"Oh man," Matt grinned, latching onto the idea quickly, "-so you're telling me every time he cried, he got the entire base or whatever worked up?"

"Pretty much." Shiro told him.

Keith would probably kill him later for this, but at least it served to keep both their minds off of their friend's near death experience. Maybe it wasn't quite that dramatic- but from the way he couldn't shake that image of Keith, pale as death, it sure felt like it.

"So," Katie grinned, peering down at him, "-what else did Ulaz tell you?"

"Have you made any progress?"

Letting out a low hum, Ulaz spared the princess only a faint glance. Most of his attention was fixed on the device in front of him, which he'd hooked up to a few devices of his own. Whatever encryption had been used on it, it was proving to be quite the challenge.

Nevertheless.

"I should have the encryption broken soon." Ulaz reported. "I have also ensured that we will have a recording of our own made, in the event that it is programmed to erase the message after being viewed."

Such a method was standard procedure amongst the Blade, so he knew full well how to deal with such a thing. He could not tell if this device had been rigged in a similar fashion, but he was not willing to take his chances.

Not when Prince Lotor was involved.

Sitting down across from him, the Altean princess looked stern. "Good. I am looking forward to finding out just what it is Lotor wanted to tell us, sending Ezor here like that."

Merely lifting a brow, his gaze flickered towards the princess' side. Regris caught it, simply giving him a shrug of his shoulders. It would seem the princess intended to stay here until the encryption was broken, then.

Fair enough. He did not particularly mind the company.

It was strange, seeing the princess without Keith flanking her side. On the few occasions she had visited Daibazaal after he'd taken up his post, he had always been there, trailing one step behind her like a shadow. Upon arriving on Earth, Keith had vacated his position by her side, and while he had grown used to that at the time, once he'd returned, he'd resumed his former position.

Perhaps it had been given to him by Zarkon under false pretenses, but he took it no less seriously for that. Given the friendship that had developed between himself and the princess, he doubted that he would have followed through with his orders to execute her, even if the Blade of Marmora had never strayed from Zarkon's command as they had.

For those that he cared about, Keith's loyalty was absolute. Unshakable.
It was a trait he shared in common with the princess.

With that in mind- "Have you checked on him?"

"Yes." Allura told him- and for a moment, he did not think she would elaborate any further.

Occasionally, he was proven wrong.

"He should have never been placed in that situation to begin with." Allura frowned. "Perhaps allowing free access to the Castle of Lions was a mistake. If the alarms had worked as they should have..."

"We cannot change the past." Ulaz stated simply. "We can only move forward."

"Be that as it may," resting her hands on the table, Allura's brows furrowed, "-I would very much like to move forward from this as quickly as possible. If we are to have any hope of putting an end to this war, Lotor must be dealt with."

Giving the princess a hum of agreement, Ulaz tweaked a line of code. So long as Lotor remained alive, there would be no Kral Zera.

It was imperative there was one.

"It has already gone on far too long." Allura said. "And we have lost far too many people."

That he could agree with. As a Blade, he was no stranger to death- to the contrary, he was quite familiar with it. But it did not make the loss of life any easier to bear, especially innocent life.

And many innocents had been lost.

"Keith will survive." Ulaz noted. "As he always has."

Not satisfied with that, Allura tapped a finger against the table, her frown deepening. "I am most certain that he will. But it still makes me feel awfully useless."

"You are hardly useless, princess." Ulaz remarked. "Without your ability, we would have never been able to mask the black lion from Zarkon's vision."

"And now he is dead." Allura said, her words, curt rather than diplomatic. "And the black lion has a new paladin. So once more, I am back to doing nothing."

"Even worse, simply by being here, I have brought trouble to the people of this planet." Allura continued. "I could not live with myself if my presence here brought the war to their doorstep. Even with both the Castle of Lions and the black lion, I fear it would not be enough to protect them."

"Do you think it will come to that?" Ulaz asked.

Heaving a sigh, Allura's shoulders slumped. "I cannot say for certain. I only know that Honerva will not be pleased should we kill her son."

That much was true. While his father had always been distant, the prince's mother had always possessed a soft spot for her son. Quintessence addled though her mind had become, it did not change that fact.

Though she would have little power left after the loss of both her husband and son, he did not doubt
that the Empress would use whatever scraps she had left in order to take revenge on the ones who had taken his life. That was something that they had to be prepared for, should the time come.

*When* the time came, he liked to think.

Opening his mouth to reply, he did not find himself with the chance. Just as he expected, it hadn't been much longer- the encryption was broken.

Allura did not fail to notice it.

"Well then," she began, "shall we see what our prince has to say for himself?"
Whatever she chose to do, she would need to move quickly. Lotor was a patient man, but he also had no tolerance for useless things. If it became apparent that she was not acting on the trade, then he would no doubt alter his plans.

And a corpse could just as easily be used against her as a live human.

Allura came through like fury.

It was enough to leave him frozen where he stood. He'd never seen the princess like this, not in either the short time he'd known her, or in the glimpses of her the black lion had showed him. She noticed him, coming to a halt, briefly composing herself. He couldn't help but notice that she was alone, no guard detail trailing behind her.

"I thought you were with Keith?"

"I-" Blinking dumbly, Shiro suddenly felt very small, in the face of this alien princess who clearly was furious, much as she tried to pretend otherwise. "-yeah, I was. Just went to grab something from the kitchen for everyone."

He'd lost rock paper scissors to Matt and Katie. Didn't even know why he tried. He always lost rock paper scissors. Especially to Katie- if he didn't know any better, he could have sworn that she'd figured out a way to cheat.

Glancing down at the food in his hands, Allura gave him a curt nod of her head. "Right. Of course. Is Keith...?"

"He's still in the pod." Shiro told him. "Is everything okay, princess? You look a little..."

Like she wanted to rip someone's head off, he was going to say, but thought better of it.

Allura stiffened at the question, narrowing her eyes. "Yes, everything is fine."

Somehow he didn't buy that for one second, but he was at least confident that if they were in any danger, she would have told them. "Right. Okay. Just wanted to make sure."

Giving him a curt nod of her head, Allura hesitated for a moment. "There is something I need to give you, but later. Ask Romelle for it when she returns, she knows where to find it."
"The black bayard, I'm guessing?" Shiro asked.

Nodding her head, Allura's gaze briefly flickered in the direction of the med bay. "Yes. That."

"I'll do that then." Shiro told her. "Are you sure you don't want to check on Keith? You seem kind of worried."

"I-" Hesitating for a moment, Allura shook her head. "I would love to, but I am a bit occupied at the moment."

Right, he'd kind of guessed that. Still, it was worth asking. From the glimpses that the black lion had showed him, it seemed like their relationship was a little more than just that of a princess and her bodyguard. More like friends, if he had to guess.

Katie had been right to doubt Keith's claim that he had none.

Instead of protesting, Shiro just accepted it. Things were tense right now, it didn't take a genius to figure out that much, and Allura was in the center of all that. Nodding his head, Shiro gave the princess a weak smile. "I won't hold you up, then."

Lingering for a moment longer, Allura looked as if she wanted to say something- but decided against it. Instead, she gave him brusque nod, moving on with her business. Watching her go, he could only frown, wondering what it was that had put her in such a foul mood.

Nothing good, he could only assume.

Perhaps her encounter with Shiro, however brief, had done her some good. Make no mistake, she was still furious, but some of the edge had been taken off of her anger, leaving her more composed than she was before. She'd nearly been considering doing something awful, but now that she was in a slightly better headspace, she had wisely reconsidered.

Snapping Ezor's neck would not get her the answers that she wanted. Needed, if she was going to be more exact.

Because Lotor had done something she could not ignore.

Yes, sending Ezor here was bad enough, but it was not as if he had sent her here with specific instructions to harm Keith. At least, she did not believe so- not when from the sound of it, her initial target had been Regris. Keith had merely gotten in the way.

She still did not know what Lotor wanted with the black bayard, but it did not matter. Soon enough, it would belong to Shiro- in whose hands it should be in already. She couldn't help but chastise herself for not doing it earlier, but she simply did not have the time to pass it on right now. Surely Romelle was more than up to the task.

She could only hope that he would have no need for it. But circumstances as they were, he just might.

If she had to be honest, she was a bit surprised to find that Krolia was already waiting down by the cells. She'd assumed she would still be with Keith. But from the look of it, she had been here for some time now.

Originally, there had been no cell block on the Castle of Lions. It simply had not been designed with holding prisoners in mind. After the war began, Coran had hastily made adjustments to one of
the lower decks, creating a handful of cells. It was a small mercy that they had no cause to use them until now.

There was the scout that the Galaxy Garrison had sent out, but he had raised such a fuss, that they had simply chosen to freeze him. Once all this was over, they planned on releasing him, no harm done.

But they needed Ezor awake.

Lifting her head, Krolia took stock of her. "Princess."

"Krolia." Allura returned the greeting in kind. "Has she woken up yet?"

"No, not yet." Krolia told her.

Letting out a faint hum, Allura came all the way into the cell block. They were designed so that they could view the prisoners within, but those inside would have no awareness they were being watched. Clever, really, but anything Coran designed usually was.

She also knew that Krolia had been the one to incapacitate Ezor. She had likely done so without mercy, because contrary to what those who did not understand Galran culture might think, they could be awfully protective of their children. Though Keith was already an adult by Galra standards, she knew that by human standards, he was just barely on the cusp of it- something his mother knew well.

And even subconsciously, it effected her actions.

"In that case, we must wake her." Allura said. "Our questions cannot wait any longer."

Frowning, Krolia read between her words. "Did Ulaz break the encryption?"

"Yes." Allura frowned. "The Earthling siblings... are they still with Keith?"

"They should be." Krolia told her. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I am afraid that this matter involves them." Allura admitted. "Or to be more precise, their mother."

Stiffening, Krolia narrowed her eyes. "Lotor is using her as a bargaining chip."

"Yes," Allura said, "I am afraid he is."

There was no use trying to say otherwise. For all the trouble that Ulaz had taken to decrypt it, Lotor's message was simple. That he would be willing to trade Colleen Holt if she were to hand herself over to the Galaxy Garrison- and by extension, Lotor.

Suffice to say, that was not an option that was on the table. But she could not simply ignore the fact that he was holding a human hostage either. Not just any human at that- although she was certain that the Galaxy Garrison had no way of knowing it, it did not change the fact that their connection to the Holt family had already cost the life of one of its members. She could not afford to put another at risk.

Whatever she chose to do, she would need to move quickly. Lotor was a patient man, but he also had no tolerance for useless things. If it became apparent that she was not acting on the trade, then he would no doubt alter his plans.
And a corpse could just as easily be used against her as a live human.

Pushing off the wall, Krolia unfolded her arms. "You're right. We should wake her."

She did not need to ask to know that her method of choice would likely be violent. She herself had been considering the same thing not long before. And while she might have calmed down enough to choose not to do so herself, she was hardly going to stand between Krolia and what she wanted.

Only a fool would.

Pressing her hand against the cell door, Krolia stepped in first, blocking off the exit with her body just in case Ezor was simply pretending to be sleeping. Once it became clear that she was not, she stepped aside, allowing Allura to enter the room with her. The door slid shut behind her, for the span of a second, plunging them into darkness before the emergency lights came on.

She would have to mention that to Coran.

Standing over Ezor, Krolia leaned down, lightly poking her cheek with one of her claws. The general twitched, but did not wake. A sour look setting itself on her face, Krolia grabbed Ezor by the tentacle, and yanked.

Suffice to say, that woke her up. With a yelp, at that.

And yet, she couldn't find it within herself to dredge up an ounce of pity. Perhaps she should, but circumstances as they were, she was fairly certain Ezor could stand a bit of a rude awakening. Standing tall, she watched with one eye as Krolia rose to her feet, flanking her side. She did not require a guard, but she was not about to raise an objection, either.

(Regris had not followed her. She could only assume Ulaz had the wisdom to stop him.)

To her credit, it took Ezor only a few seconds to determine her own circumstances. The energy cuffs that locked her wrists in place would not be easy to break, and she was not nearly hypermobile enough to dislocate her own arms. Not without rendering them utterly useless afterwards, at least.

"Well, well," Ezor looked up at her, almost seeming to beam, "-if it isn't the missing Altean princess."

"Hardly missing." Allura retorted.

Shrugging her shoulders, Ezor merely lifted her brows. "Nobody's seen you since the war started. That qualifies as missing to me."

"Hardly missing." Allura retorted.

Shrugging her shoulders, Ezor merely lifted her brows. "Nobody's seen you since the war started. That qualifies as missing to me."

Fair enough, she supposed. Saying nothing to that, she merely leveled her gaze with that of Ezor's. Seemingly bored with her lack of retort, she let out a small huff.

"Who would have thought you'd be hiding on some backwater planet?" Ezor asked. "And with Zarkon's pet kitty, too."

Narrowing her eyes, she otherwise did not react. "How do you know about the black lion?"

"I didn't." Ezor confessed. "Until just now."

She didn't flinch, but she did wince, if only internally. So Lotor hadn't known about the black lion then. She could only conclude that Ezor had put two and two together when she had seen the black
bayard- which in turn, could only mean that it hadn't been her objective.

"Tell me," Allura began, "-why did Lotor send you here?"

"Why should I tell you?" Ezor asked.

"Because if you don't," Krolia began, her tone cold as ice, "-we'll take it from you."

With no disservice to Krolia, Ezor didn't look the least bit intimidated. "Oh, scary. What, you mad because I hurt your son? All he did was get in my way."

Letting out a low growl, Krolia stepped forward. Holding out a hand to stop her, Allura shook her head. They needed Ezor alive, and preferably in one piece, if they hoped to get anything out of her.

"We found the recording device you had hidden on your person." Allura reported.

Arching a brow, Ezor had the audacity to look pleased. "Guess you saw what was on it."

"Yes." Allura told him. "I will only ask this of you once- where is Colleen Holt?"

"What part of why should I tell you didn't you get?" Ezor asked, leaning her back against the wall. "I mean, all you have to do to get her back is to surrender yourself. You guys can even keep the black kitty."

She made it sound so simple, and yet Allura knew that it would not end there. Once in Lotor's hands, there was no telling what he would do to her. The last thing she wanted was to end up as a hostage- or even worse, a tool.

With Narti around, it would be quite possible.

"Besides," rolling her eyes, Ezor frowned, "-I don't even know where she is. Do you honestly think Lotor would send me here knowing I'd get caught if I knew?"

No, she did not. But perhaps she knew more than she thought she did.

"You would involve the innocent in a war they have nothing to do with." Allura stated.

The accusation didn't so much as cause Ezor to flinch. "You're the one hiding out here, princess. If anyone involved them, it was you."

She would not give her the satisfaction of showing just how much those words stung. Even if she tried to rationalize that hiding here had not been her choice, it didn't make it any less true. She could have refused- and she had tried. If there was going to be a war, she did not wish to simply run away and hide for its duration.

If it had not been for the need to hide the black lion, she might have stayed on Altea. But she was the only one capable of masking its presence, and the further it was placed out of Zarkon's reach, the better. So reluctantly, she had agreed.

There was also the matter of her small, budding curiosity about these humans. Imagine her surprise when she finally saw Keith's face for the first time, only for him to not be purple. She had known for quite some time that he was only half-Galra, but given his stature, she'd always suspected the other half to be Altean, not some primitive race from a distant planet she had never even heard of.

But it had never been her intention to involve them.
"That may be so," Allura began, "-but I am not holding any hostage."

Ezor just scoffed. "Doesn't seem that way to me."

Narrowing her eyes, she knew that she wasn't entirely wrong about that either. Though it was not her wish to, it was true that she could not release the humans they had in their custody. Still, while they were not exactly free, she wasn't exactly holding them for ransom either - she wished nothing more than to be able to let them go.

If it were not for Lotor, she would have.

Closing her eyes, Allura weighed her options. She did not doubt that Lotor would be a man of his word, at least in so far as the trade went. If she were to surrender herself to the Galaxy Garrison, she had little doubt that he would release Colleen Holt as promised.

But she did not bargain with the Galra. Their only option, then, was to rescue her.

But in order to do that, they first needed to know where she was. But she doubted that Ezor would give up anything she knew with ease - likely, Lotor knew that.

So perhaps it was time for Altea to simply step aside.

"In that case," opening her eyes, Allura squared her shoulders, "-I will leave the rest of your questioning to the Blade of Marmora."

Let the Galra deal with the Galra.

He stumbled out of the pod into waiting arms.

"You know," Matt's cracked, "-we really have to stop meeting like this."

Groaning, Keith shoved him back, making out the sound of Katie's muffled laughter. Lightly touching his side, his fingers brushed over healed skin, still a bit sensitive to the touch. There were no traces of a scar - he'd never been in a healing pod before, but they did efficient work.

He'd expected to be disorientated, but instead he found his wits quickly back with him. Maybe it was the training. Maybe it was just how the pods worked. He didn't know. What he did know was that he was itching to get back on his feet, to catch up on anything he might have missed while he was out.

But also...

"So what did you three do?" Keith found himself asking, a faint grin touching his lips. "Just sit around all day, staring at me?"

He hadn't known what to expect when he got out of the pod. He didn't expect to be alone when he came out, but he'd assumed that it would just be Coran or something. Dog would be there for sure, but he hadn't expected anyone else, not really. He knew that without him, things would be busy, so he couldn't expect someone to just sit around and wait for him to get back on his feet.

Somehow, he'd forgotten about Shiro and the Holts. His friends. The ones he hadn't intended to make, but had somehow stumbled into anyways. Honestly? Not his worst mistake. Not even close. Maybe they had been a distraction from the mission, but not one he regretted.

But there they were - all three of them, gathered around in a circle. Matt had been the one to catch
him, but the other two were close, only giving him a bit of space once they determined he wasn't going to fall over flat onto his face. Dog let out a low whine, rubbing up against his leg, to which he responded by rubbing her head.

It felt... it felt good, having people waiting for him like this.

He kind of wished he had met them under different circumstances. He wondered what it would have been like, growing up on Earth, as a human. It was hard to think of himself as being anything other than Galra, but maybe if he had been raised here, things would be different. He would be different.

"Uh, I'll have you know that we played several rousing games of poker." Matt told him.

"Let me guess," Keith's grin grew, "-Katie won every hand."

"Oh, believe me, I crushed them." Katie told him, giving him an easy grin. "They didn't stand a chance."

"You should try playing against Keith sometime." Shiro told her, looking vaguely bemused. "He's got one hell of a poker face."

Tugging on the underlayer of his armor, it repaired where it had been damaged. He debated telling Shiro that they were taught how to gamble as part of their training, but decided against it. "Hey, have to put all this training to use somehow. What better way than kicking your butt at poker?"

"Honestly, I regret ever teaching you it." Shiro confessed, taking his joke for what it was. "I take it you're feeling better, though."

"Better, yeah." Keith agreed. "Have you seen my...?"

"-the rest of your armor?" Matt finished. "Yeah, Coran stored it over there. You need any help with it?"

Giving him a faint smile, Keith shook his head. "I'm fine. But thanks."

Retrieving his armor, he tugged the chest piece into place, before fixing the gauntlets back on his arms. He felt a little more at ease with it on, almost like a second skin. With his knife back in place, its weight a familiar companion, he felt himself relax. Those first few weeks at the Garrison had been hell, leaving him feeling exposed. He'd gradually gotten used to it, but even if he liked his Earth clothes, he still liked his armor the best.

Turning on his heel, he looked back towards the humans. "So how long have you three been down here?"

"Pretty much since this morning." Katie told him, her expression settling into something more grave. "You really scared us, Keith. I thought- when I heard from Shiro that you had gotten hurt, I really thought the worst."

"Yeah dude," Matt said, "-don't scare us like that."

Frowning, Keith tilted his head. He could understand why they would be worried about him, but he didn't get why they acted like this was anything unusual. Risks were just a part of the job, and he was no different from any other Blade.

Except... he guessed maybe they didn't understand that. Humans had a very different culture from
the Galra, after all. Falling in battle was considered the most honorable way to go—expected, even. There were old Galra, but dying of old age was almost unheard of.

But humans were different. They got sick and died, or they just got too old to keep living. Falling in battle was as alien a concept to them as dying of old age was to him.

"I- sorry." Keith frowned. "I didn't mean to scare you."

He didn't get it, not really. Yes, he missed Thace. He was upset that he wouldn't see him again, but he had done what he had set out to do, and died a noble death. It wasn't that they didn't mourn, didn't try to protect each other when they could, or tried to save those who had been hurt, but... he just didn't understand the concept of being so frightened of death. Of injury.

But it didn't matter if he got it or not. What mattered were their feelings. He was human enough to understand that much.

They had already lost their father- and he was their friend. The feeling of not wanting to lose anyone else was something he did sort of understand. Just because it was expected, didn't mean he had to like it. It was why he'd stepped in when he had, to save Regris.

"Well, just try not to do it again." Shiro told him, resting a hand on his shoulder- the mechanical one. "Though I guess I'm not really in much of a position to lecture you."

He knew he was just trying to make a joke, but he couldn't help but feel a sting of guilt at Shiro's words. No matter what anyone said, he couldn't help but feel responsible for his current predicament. They should have known better than to trust that the Galaxy Garrison would put their whole into building a shuttle that was meant never to return.

But no matter how guilty he felt about it, there was nothing he could do to change what had actually happened. He had to move forward instead.

"I should probably check in with Allura." Keith told him, giving them an apologetic smile. It was great to see them, but he'd already spent too much time in recovery as it was. He needed to get back to work. "See what I missed."

"You sure?" Shiro frowned. "I think you can afford another hour to rest."

"After one of Lotor's generals broke in?" Keith pointed out.

He had a point, and Shiro knew it. Sighing, the older man simply patted his shoulder, before withdrawing his arm. "Guess you're right."

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Matt asked.

Frowning, Keith chewed his lip. They were already involved enough as it was, especially Shiro. He really didn't want to get them tangled up even more. At the same time, he was pretty familiar with the feeling of being helpless, while everyone around you was busy with one thing or another.

"Maybe you could help Coran?" Keith ventured. "He's probably busy running diagnostics."

Exchanging a glance with her brother, Katie frowned. "I guess we could."

Giving them a faint smile, Keith felt a bit relieved. They weren't likely to get hurt doing that. "You can take Dog with you."
Dog barked, sharply. Cosmic wolves were remarkably intelligent, so he knew she could understand him. Even better, she could understand what he wanted. With Dog around, it'd help take his mind off their safety.

"I'm taking that as a yes." Katie noted. "Try not to push yourself, Keith. I know where your shins are, and I'm not afraid to use that knowledge."

Letting out a faint snort at the threat, Keith just held up his hands. "Promise."

He couldn't really promise that, but if it made her feel better, he could definitely lie about it. Judging from the way she eyed him, it didn't seem like she fully bought it.

"Right," he said, "-so I should uh, go."

Ducking his head, Keith made a quick exit. He got the impression that if he lingered any longer, that he might not want to leave, but he couldn't be afforded that luxury. Those past few years at the Galaxy Garrison had spoiled him, somewhat- making him think that the human traits he'd picked up from his father weren't such weaknesses after all.

Maybe if he'd been raised human, they wouldn't be. But he'd been raised Galra, so they were- especially to a member of the Blade of Marmora. Logically, he knew Regris would have been able to protect himself, but he hadn't been thinking that.

Like he said- he knew how it felt not to want to lose anyone. Just because he wasn't frightened of his own death didn't mean he liked seeing people die.

Unless they were the enemy. He spared no thought for them.

"Keith!"

Heedless of decorum, Allura wrapped her arms around the young Blade in an embrace, squeezing him tight. He gave a muffled reply, something to the effect of breathing, upon which she very quickly released him. His mask fizzled out, an awkward smile taking its place.

"Princess," Keith began, a teasing note to his voice, that made her cheeks puff out, "-nice to see you too."

"Oh hush." Drawing back from the embrace, she felt herself frown. "I am allowed to be worried. Am I to understand that you threw yourself in front of Regris here?"

Out of the corner of her eye, the Blade in question ducked his head. Peering past her shoulder, Keith frowned at him, arching a brow. "I wouldn't say I threw myself in front of him."

"It sounded more dramatic that way." Regris merely stated. "I thought you would like it."

Frowning, Keith's brows drew together. "Why does everyone keep calling me dramatic?"

"Because you are." Allura stated frankly. "I take it your recovery went well."

"Not even a scar." Keith reported. "The Blade of Marmora could use a few of those things."

"Perhaps when the war is over." Allura said. Just the simple mention of the war was all it took for the levity that had sprung up in her heart at seeing Keith whole and well to sink back, almost as if it had never been there. "Speaking of which, there is much to discuss."
Narrowing his eyes, Keith gave her a curt nod of his head. They were friends, yes, but he was a solider first and foremost, one who was largely under her command.

As much as anyone could command Keith.

Krolia's... inquiry had yielded results. As expected, Ezor did not know where Colleen Holt was being kept- but she did, however, know where Lotor had been residing while on Earth. While she doubted he remained there still, there was still a chance that they might be able to unearth some clues.

"There has been a development," Allura told him flatly, taking a seat, "-a disturbing one."

Folding his arms in front of him, Keith remained standing. It was a habit she tried to break him of, back on Altea, but it was too ingrained within him to change. If anything, his role as her bodyguard only served to make it more ingrained. "Did you figure out what Ezor was here for?"

"To deliver a message, it seems." Allura told him. "At least, that is part of it. We suspect that she might have possessed other motivations, but we have been unable to determine them."

"A message?" Keith asked, arching a brow. "Weird way to deliver a message."

Letting out a low hum, Allura considered how best to phrase this. Keith was close to the issue, and while he had the right to know, she couldn't help but worry how he would react to the news. It wasn't as if they could keep it from him- even if they were to try, he would quickly recognize that he was being kept in the dark, and would likely demand answers.

"Lotor is demanding my surrender."

Frowning, Keith's eyes narrowed, quickly gathering that wasn't the whole of it. "...in exchange for?"

"He is holding a hostage." Allura told him.

Tensing, Keith's breath hitched in his throat. "Adam?"

Shaking her head, Allura merely frowned. She had not considered the status of their own spy- an oversight, to be sure. But her conversations with the human had been minimal, and she could not say for sure if Lotor was aware of his connection to them or not. He had not, it seemed, been aware of the black lion, so perhaps his information was limited to whatever his own spy could tell him.

"It's not-"

Sensing what he wished to say, all Allura could do was nod her head.

For a long moment, Keith was silent. Angry, she sensed. While his appearance had taken her by surprise, his expressions were nearly spot on as she had imagined them.

"Have you-?"

"No," Allura shook her head, "-not yet."

"You have to." Keith told her. "They deserve to know."

"I know." Allura said. She did. It was not her intention to keep this a secret. "But we need a plan. A course of action might be able to provide them with some reassurance."
Keith simply grit his teeth. He looked like he wanted to say something, but at the same time, he knew she was right. Having some kind of plan, however rudimentary, would help.

"But we're going to rescue her, right?" Keith asked. "We can't- we're not going to-"

"We will not abandon her." Allura stated. "Though the trade is out of the question."

That earned her a curt nod. "Have you considered sending in a decoy?"

"I am afraid Lotor would not be fooled." Allura said simply. "At least, not long enough for us to do anything meaningful."

"Could serve to distract the Garrison, at least." Keith remarked.

"It could." Allura admitted. "But we could not simply leave Romelle in their hands either."

He had not mentioned Romelle specifically, but there was no one else to serve as her double. And Romelle had been trained to do so, raised alongside her with that specific task in mind. It was a small mercy that she so rarely had to act upon it, and she did not desire to put her at risk unless she had assurances that the plan would not only work, but that they could safely extract her afterwards.

Keith recognized this as well as she did. Closing his eyes, his shoulders slumped. "Has mom-?"

"She has made... inquiries of the prisoner, yes." Allura told him. "We were able to determine the location of Lotor's previous hideout."

"Knowing him, he's long gone." Keith observed.

"Hence the use of the word previous." Allura replied.

Clicking his tongue, Keith began to stalk the room. The Blade of Marmora might have trained him to be still, but this was a bad habit of his. She suspected it came from his human side. "And the spy?"

"Your father is looking for him. He seems to have some kind of plan." Regris piped up. "But we haven't found him yet."

"I doubt Lotor would have told them much anyways." Keith frowned. "Have we had any contact from Adam?"

"Your mother contacted him, to let him know to withdraw." Allura told him. "But since that, nothing."

"It's not safe." Keith stated. "If Lotor has Katie and Matt's mother, then it's not safe for him to stay at the Garrison. We need to extract him."

"And bring him where?" Allura asked. "Here?"

Coming to a halt, Keith met her eyes. "Here?"

"Here is not exactly safe either." Allura stated. "At least, not anymore."

Grumbling, Keith was forced to admit she was right. "I don't- I don't like this. They already lost their father because of us, we can't- they won't have anyone else."

They would have each other, she knew. And yet, she understood. She had lost her mother as well,
though it was due to sickness, rather than malice.

Allura felt the keen desire to do more. She knew she was already doing all in her power, and yet... it still felt as if it were not enough. "I understand. Believe me, I do. But Keith, you must know that you are not at fault for the death of their father."

Keith didn't look at her, merely ducking his head. "I should be the one to tell them."

Opening her mouth to protest, she caught Regris' gaze. The Blade merely shook his head, leaving her instead to sigh. "Yes, of course. If you feel you must."

Simply nodding his head, Keith spared her a glance. "Tell me you actually do have a plan."

Unable to quite stop herself, Allura grimaced. "I will admit, that is a bit of a work in progress."

Leveling his gaze with her, Keith narrowed his eyes- before letting out a frustrated sound. "In that case," he began, bringing up a holoscreen, "-we should probably get to work. Where did you say that previous hideout was?"

Shoulders relaxing, Allura rose to her feet, joining him. "Here, I believe."

"That's one of the Garrison's old supply depots." Keith frowned. "They haven't used it since World War Three."

"How many world wars does one planet possibly need?" Allura couldn't help but ask. "Unfortunately, Ezor did not know where Colleen was being held. All we know is that when Lotor departed the facility, he made use of the underground tunnels."

Frowning, Keith furrowed his brow. "Well, it gives us a place to start. I'll-"

"You certainly will not." Allura cut him off. "Besides, I have already sent your mother and Ulaz. Once we hear from them, we can decide our next course of action."

"And tell Matt and Katie." Keith added.

"Yes," Allura agreed, "-and tell Matt and Katie."

Necessary as it was, that was the part she was very much not looking forward to.
the blame

Chapter Summary

When Keith returned, he was practically leading Katie by the hand, pulling her along. It would have been humorous, if not for the intense expression on his face. Sitting her in between him and Matt, Keith took a step back, taking a moment to glance between all three of them, as if he were taking stock.

"I need to tell you something."

Chapter Notes

Chapter eighteen is here! I kind of wanted to talk about this earlier, but I totally forgot- so how about those teasers for season 8, huh? I think the chief takeaway is that the Garrison finally wised up and hired a halfway decent designer for their uniforms. Those new paladin uniforms... godspeed, I love them. And I'm super hyped for Honerva being the endgame villain- who doesn't love a good female endgame villain?

That said, hope you all enjoy! Until next time~!

Keith's mood when he returned was... decidedly different from when he left.

It's something they all can see, though Shiro suspected he picked up on it a bit better than most. There's something in his gaze as his eyes swept the room, a twist to his lips that tells Shiro that he's not finding whoever it is that he's looking for.

Again, he recalled the way he'd found Allura storming through the halls, trailing fury in her wake. Keith's mood is far more somber than that, but there's a weight to his alien gaze, eyes downcast.

"Keith?" Shiro asked. "Everything okay?"

Looking towards him, Keith frowned. "Have you seen Katie?"


Instinctively touching his face, Keith's frown deepened. "It's complicated. I need to find Katie first though."

Already getting to his feet, Shiro set down his book. "Do you want me to-?"

"No." Keith said, a little too quick. He seemed to realize that, because he winced. "I can just have the Castle scan for her. Just- just stay here. You and Matt."

Exchanging a glance with Matt, the elder Holt just shrugged. Looking back towards Keith, he gave him a faint smile. "Okay. We can do that."
Nodding his head, Keith hesitated for a moment longer, hovering in the doorway—before he quickly left, his usual grace absent. His smile fading, Shiro turned to look towards Matt again, silently questioning if he had any idea what that was about.

"No clue." Matt shook his head. "Seems kinda jittery though."

Jittery. That was one way of putting it. Nerves and Keith usually didn't go together, at least, not like this—nerves of steel, maybe, based off some of the things he'd seen him do in the simulator. He couldn't even imagine what he was like behind the controls of a real ship—though if what he had heard from Coran was true, he was just as skilled as the simulator seemed to suggest.

When Keith returned, he was practically leading Katie by the hand, pulling her along. It would have been humorous, if not for the intense expression on his face. Sitting her in between him and Matt, Keith took a step back, taking a moment to glance between all three of them, as if he were taking stock.

"I need to tell you something."

"Yeah, we kind of gathered that." Katie observed, rubbing her wrist.

"We're listening, Keith." Shiro encouraged.

Keith could either be incredibly blunt or painfully evasive, with very little in between. He can't help but wonder if it has anything to do with being caught up between two very different cultures, but that's a question for another day.

Straightening his back, Keith fixed his gaze straight ahead, purposefully avoiding looking at any of them. His posture was stiff, that of a soldier's. Blunt, then. "We received communications from Lotor."

Frowning, Shiro felt himself sit up. "He didn't-"

"He didn't get into our systems, no." Keith told him.

"I could have told you that." Katie added, rolling her eyes. "The only thing damaged was the ship's alarm system, and not even very well."

"So how did he get a message out?" Matt asked.

"He sent one out with his general." Keith reported. "He's offering a trade."

He felt his stomach churn at that, recalling the fury with which Allura had stormed through the Castle. If this was related to that message, whatever this trade was, it wasn't anything good.

He had a very, very bad feeling about this.

Something in Keith's gaze shifted, briefly flickering down towards the Holt siblings. The hard set of his brows softened, but only for a moment—before his face slipped into a mask. "He's demanding that Princess Allura turn herself over to the Galaxy Garrison in exchange for the freedom of Colleen Holt. Your mother."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Matt go white, his body so still he wasn't even sure if he was breathing. Katie, on the other hand, went rigid—before she exploded onto her feet, closing the distance between herself and Keith in the blink of an eye.
"How long." She demanded.

Looking down at her, something human surfaced in Keith's expression. "We don't know how long-
"

"I didn't mean how long Lotor's had her." Katie cut him off. "I'm asking how long you knew."

There was a flash of guilt in those alien eyes, offset by the slit nature of his pupils. "Since I spoke with Allura."

The words were like a physical punch to the gut. He watched as Katie took half a step back, before glaring up at Keith, anger coiling in her small body. "That was five hours ago."

Opening his mouth to say something, Keith quickly shut it. Eyes downcast, they fixed on the floor, guilt now visible in the set of his shoulders.

"Why didn't you- you should have told us, Keith. Then, not five hours later." Katie said. "She's our mother! She's- she's all we have left!"

"Katie," Matt had found his voice again, though he didn't miss the slight bitter tone to it, nor did Keith, based on the way his fists tightened, "-you know that's not how they do things around here. Keith was probably just following orders."

Looking between Keith and the Holt siblings, Shiro frowned. Getting to his feet, he added his presence to their little bubble, Keith's gaze flickered briefly towards him. "Do you know where she is?"

"No," Keith regretfully reported, "-we were able to determine the location of Lotor's hideout, but by the time we went to check it out, he was long gone."

"He probably knew you would be coming." Shiro said.

Stiffly nodding his head, Keith chewed on his lip. "Look," he began, "-I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. We were waiting for Ulaz and my mom to-"'

"Oh, your mom." Katie blurted out, venom lacing her words.

Keith flinched at that, before narrowing his eyes. "I just-!"

"You just what, Keith?" Katie asked. "Valued your mission more than you did your friends?"

"Katie," Shiro cautioned, "-this isn't Keith's fault."

She wasn't angry at Keith, he didn't think. She was just angry period, and Keith was the closest person she could take it out on. For all he knew, she might very well be angry at herself, for having left her mother behind- even if that wasn't her fault either.

No, if this was anyone's fault, it was Lotor's.

Turning on her heel, Katie glared sharply up towards him. "No, I'm not accepting this. This is my mother, Shiro. We have to- I have to get her back."

At that, Keith jerked his head up. "You aren't doing anything."

Pivoting, Katie fixed her glower back on Keith, who met it with one of his own. "I already lost my father to this stupid war of yours, I'm not losing my mom too!"
Her words sucked the fight out of Keith in an instant, the Blade almost seeming to deflate. She was probably only saying that because she was emotional right now, but that didn't make them hurt any less, not with Keith blaming himself like he did.

Either way, she'd gone too far.

"Katie..." Matt warned.

"No, I'm not done." Katie cut him off. "I thought you said you wanted to protect us, Keith. And now my mother's a hostage? Why didn't you- why couldn't you protect her?"

"I-" Keith began, his mouth working, but no other sounds coming out. "Katie, I-"

"No, save it." Turning on her heel, Katie took a step back. "I don't want to hear it."

Before anyone could stop her, she stormed out of the common area. Matt hesitated for a few seconds, before he scrambled to catch up with her, casting him a sympathetic glance as he did so.

Leaving him alone with Keith.

Whose gaze was rooted to the floor- less like a soldier, and more like someone whose friend had just lashed out at him. His shoulders were tense, hands hanging by his sides, balled into fists as if he couldn't quite decide what emotion it was that he wanted to feel.

"You know she didn't mean that."

Keith just nodded, not daring to look up at him. After everything he had learned about him, he didn't expect to use fragile as a word to describe him- but right now, it fit. He had always known that Keith held himself to blame for the death of Sam Holt, but he hadn't fully realized just how bad it was until now.

"I'm serious, Keith." Shiro told him. "She's just angry."

"She has a right to be." Keith said. "She's right."

"Keith..." Shiro began.

"No, listen, Shiro." Finally looking up at him, Keith cut him off. "I'm the whole reason we're here. It's because of me the Galra Empire even knew where to find us. I was the one who chose to take Katie back to the Castle with me. This is- all of this is my fault."

Shoulders slumping, Shiro studied the features of the younger man. There was an anguish written in them, obvious even with the intrusion of his alien heritage.

"Keith," he repeated, more insistent this time, "-Matt and I wouldn't even be here right now if it weren't for you. No one blames you."

"Katie-"

"Katie is upset." Shiro told him. "She's just lashing out, that's all. When she's calmed down a bit, she'll apologize."

"It's true, though." Keith muttered. "We knew Lotor was out there, we should have- I should have considered that he might do something like this."

"What Lotor did is horrible." Shiro stated. "But that's on him, it's not on you. I promise you Keith,
none of this is your fault."

Frowning, Keith didn't look convinced. "You keep saying that."

"And I'll keep saying it until you understand." Shiro said.

Brows knitting together, Keith folded his arms in front of himself, as if to withdraw. "I just- I feel like I could have done more to prevent this. All I wanted was to keep all of you safe. I didn't- we don't even know where she is, Shiro."

"You'll find her." Shiro told him. "You have faith in Allura and Ulaz, right?"

Looking up at him, Keith gave him a curt nod.

"Good," Shiro said, "-then you know you can trust them. Maybe I haven't known them for as long as you have, but I get the feeling they're not going to let Lotor get what he wants."

"It still doesn't change the fact that we let this happen." Keith said.

"Maybe not," Shiro admitted, "-but I know you'll do everything you can to correct it now that it has. That's what matters most."

He didn't look convinced, so Shiro just gave his shoulder a light, reassuring squeeze. "Do you have to get back to the princess?"

"I'm supposed to be resting still." Keith admitted. "So not exactly."

"Good." Shiro smiled. "Because I'm supposed to find Romelle and get this bayard of mine. I could probably use the help getting the hang of it."

Keith just frowned. "Why me?"

"Because you've seen the other paladins use theirs." Shiro stated.

Holding his gaze for a long moment, Keith looked uncertain. "Are you sure we should just leave Katie alone?"

"Matt went after her." Shiro told him. "He'll handle it."

He stared at him for a few seconds longer, before finally giving him a curt nod of his head. "Okay. But just for the record, I've never actually used a bayard before."

Patting him on the shoulder, he reassured him that would be alright. Really, he just wanted the excuse to spend some time with Keith. It was obvious that Katie's words, however much she hadn't actually meant what she said, had shaken him up, and he didn't exactly want to leave him alone right now.

Maybe he shouldn't be that worried- Keith was, after all, a specially trained agent, but underneath that, he was still just a teenage boy. At least he was, in so far as Shiro was concerned.

"Katie."

No response. Heaving a sigh, Matt frowned. "Pidge."

Katie stirred a bit at that, but didn't quite look up. "You know I don't like it when you call me that."
"You sure?" Matt asked, taking a seat next to her, pretending he didn't notice the way she scooted away from him. "Because I kind of recall you telling me that you'd miss it when we left for Kerberos."

Finally pulling her head from her knees, Katie frowned at him. "I just said that because I was going to miss you."

"Yeah, but you still said it." Matt told her.

Frowning, Katie rested her chin on her knees. She had drawn her legs up to her chest, wrapping her arms tight around them. Kind of like a ball, some part of Matt supplied. Customary sulking posture.

Scooting closer, Matt wrapped an arm around her shoulder. At first she went stiff under his touch, before she sunk into it, uncurling herself a little so that she could rest her head on his shoulder instead. With a pang, it reminded him of when he'd first gotten out of the hospital- seeing him return home without their father had made the reality that he wasn't coming back sink into his sister.

He got why she had blown up like that. He did. It definitely hadn't been the right thing to do, but he didn't think anyone was going to blame her for it.

Everything they had heard about this Prince Lotor guy had made him sound like serious bad news. And now their mother was his hostage. So yeah. He got it. He was upset too.

"Listen Katie, I know you're upset." He began. "I am too. But this isn't Keith's fault."

"I know." She admitted. "I just... I'm scared, Matt."

Admitting that she was scared was something Katie just didn't do. No matter what the situation, she always put on a brave face, and pressed forward. So for her to admit something like that showed just how badly shaken up she was by this news.

"I know." Matt told her. "I am too."

God, he was downright terrified. If they lost their mother, who would they even have left? Katie would only have him to depend on, and he didn't know if he could handle that kind of responsibility. He was pretty sure he didn't have a job with the Garrison anymore, so he was kind of unemployed at the moment.

And he... he didn't want to lose his mom either. He wasn't that much older than Keith, just barely an adult. Waking up to learn that his father hadn't made it had been devastating, he didn't... he couldn't handle that twice.

"I should probably apologize to Keith." Katie muttered.

"Yeah, you probably should." Matt agreed.

"Do you think he's mad at me?" Katie asked.

"Keith?" Matt said. "Not a chance."

"I'd be mad at me." Katie said. "I tried to make it sound like this is all his fault. You and Shiro would be with the Galra Empire right now if he hadn't stepped in."

Cringling his nose at that, Matt couldn't help but frown. Sometimes that thought still kept him up at
"You want to go find him?" Matt asked. Wherever Keith was, he was probably with Shiro right now.

"Can we stay like this a little longer?" Katie asked.

Smiling at his sister, Matt pulled her a bit closer. "All you need to do is ask."

"I just did, dumbass." Katie muttered, closing her eyes.

Letting out a faint chuckle, Matt closed his eyes. Their mom was tough, but he hadn't told her a whole lot about the situation before they had left. Just that they might not be coming back for awhile, and that he and Katie would be safe. He wondered what she had been told, if anything- he doubted she'd buy any lies about Keith, if that was what they were trying to pull.

Please be okay, mom.

Heels striking the castle-ship floor, Allura made her way towards the training deck. Her head was still buzzing with thoughts of her discussion with Ulaz and Kolivan, trying to sort through the plan that they had concocted.

It was not one that she cared for, not in the least. The only reason she had accepted it was because they simply had nothing better. While they had more cause to be familiar with the terrain, having been here longer, Lotor had the advantage of having human allies. While she supposed that they also, in a sense, had human allies, those that they possessed outside of the Castle of Lions amounted to one- and was furthermore a non-combatant.

The plan, such as it was, was simple. They would send in Romelle to serve as her decoy, while a member of the Blade of Marmora snuck into the Galaxy Garrison's base and tracked down this Admiral Sanda. As the highest ranking officer there, even if she could not tell them where Colleen Holt was being held, they could at least use her as a bargaining chip of their own.

If Lotor could not be moved, then perhaps the Galaxy Garrison could.

She did not like the idea of taking a hostage. It would be only falling into the villainous image that had no doubt been painted of them, but they had little other choice. With the information they had to go off of, their remaining choices were either to accept the trade, or to allow Colleen Holt to die.

And she would not allow that.

One casualty was quite enough.

Even worse, it had been decided that the Blade who would infiltrate the Galaxy Garrison would be none other than Keith. Given his close encounter with Ezor just the night before, it was not a thought that put her at ease. While she had full confidence that the healing pods had done their job well, she was not keen on the idea of sending him into danger again so soon.

But he was the one who had cause to know the layout of the base the best, having resided there undercover for quite some time. He was the best choice.

She supposed that was the problem in becoming friends with ones own bodyguard. At least she had
convinced him to rest. Or at least, she thought she had.

But no- according to Romelle, Keith was last seen heading with Shiro to the training deck. Something about helping him with his bayard.

That said, she could not help but deny her curiosity. Her father, when he used his bayard, had it take the form of an Altean broadsword, his weapon of choice. Zarkon, on the other hand, had been able to use his bayard to create all manner of weapons- though he had favored an energy sword.

She could not help but wonder what form Shiro's would take.

It was with a mix of anticipation and irritation that she entered the training deck, any words she wished to speak dying in her throat.

On one hand, Keith was very much not resting, blade in hand. On the other... well, that was most certainly not what she had expected at all.

Shiro must have caught sight of her out of the corner of his eye, because he came to a halt. Keith noticed a second later, seeming to tense when he realized what the cause of the interruption was. His blade changed form, transforming back into a knife, one which he hurriedly sheathed behind his back, as if she would somehow forget he had been ignoring her orders so long as she couldn't see it.

It was easy to forget sometimes that he was two full deca-phoebs younger than she.

"Princess," Shiro spoke up, almost jovial, "to what do I owe the honor?"

He did not yet rid himself of his bayard. It had taken her a moment to even recognize it for what it was, it's shape so dramatically different from anything that she could have anticipated.

To be quite frank, she didn't even know what it was.

Shiro must have caught her looking, for he blinked, looking down at his own right hand. The white and black metal that encased the hand that Coran had helped build was strange, seeming to encase his knuckles, protruding from them in a way that made it clear that whatever they were supposed to be, they were clearly a weapon.

Spreading out his fingers, he gave her a faint grin. "They're brass knuckles. Or well, they would be, if they were made of brass."

"Earth weapon." Keith merely supplied.

"I see." Allura remarked, taking a second longer to process it.

She had seen bayards take many shapes, but never one that seemed to become a part of the body itself, or close enough to it- even if Shiro's right hand was artificial. But then, there had never been a human paladin either.

Gaze flickering over towards Keith, she can't help but recall a late night hushed conversation, one that she was certain she had not been meant to overhear. Her father and Coran, speaking of the future- of the red lion, and how one day, Alfor would have to pass the mantle of red paladin down.

How they had spoken of Keith.

(Shes did not need to guess what form his bayard would take. That much was obvious.)
Straightening her back, Allura lifted her head. "If it is not too much trouble, might I borrow Keith?"

Dropping his hand, Shiro let his bayard dissipate, its shape returning to one that she was more accustomed to. "Is this about...?"

She didn't have to ask to know that he'd heard. "Yes."

Nodding his head, Shiro took a step to the side. She nearly thought he would try to pry, but he did not. "He's all yours."

Keith's gaze had sharpened, any fears of being chided having fallen to the wayside. Instead he stepped forward, his whole being almost tense with anticipation. She understood where it came from- Colleen Holt was the mother of two of the humans that he had come to befriend, leaving him with perhaps more vested interest than any of them to see to it that she was returned safely.

If there was one thing she knew about him, it was how deep his loyalties ran.

"I'll catch you later, Keith." Shiro told him.

Sparing Shiro a glance, Keith bowed his head. "If you see Katie, tell her I'm sorry."

"I will." Shiro promised, though based off the way his brow creased, she suspected he didn't quite know what for- or at the very least, didn't agree that any apologies were owed.

She supposed that telling them had not gone well, then.

Keith fell into step behind her, flanking her half a step behind, as was his custom. When she was younger, she had chafed at it, feeling as if she had gained an extra shadow. Now she found the presence comforting- knowing that she had someone behind her.

"So did you...?"

"Yeah," Keith said, "I told them."

Sensing that he didn't wish to talk about it, Allura closed her mouth. "We have a plan, of sorts."

Lifting his head, Keith frowned. "You don't sound happy about it."

"That is because I am not." Allura admitted. "But it is the only plan we have."

Sensing the resignation in those words, Keith lapsed into silence. Gaze downcast, Allura stared at her clasped hands, wondering if there were more she could have done to avoid these circumstances.

But as much as she turned the question over in her head, she could not come up with any answers.

Kicking off her blanket, Katie got to her feet. Despite the late hour, she hadn't been trying to sleep, and she was pretty sure even if she had been, she wouldn't have been able to. The only reason she was pretending otherwise was because she knew that both Matt and Shiro were liable to come check on her before they each went to bed.

Since they had both come and gone, it was time to get up.

She hadn't even changed out of her day clothes- she'd just covered them with her blanket. Tugging on her shoes, she pulled out her pack from where she had hidden it, already packed and ready to go. Slinging it over her shoulder, she opened the door to her room, making sure to disable the alarm.
She was grateful Shiro had mentioned it to her. The last thing she wanted was for anyone to stop her.

With the door open, she sucked in a long breath. Using it to steel herself, she peeked out of her room, confirming the hallway was empty. Disabling the alarm on the elevator, she slipped inside, selecting the main hangar as her destination.

Maybe Matt had tried to convince her that she should leave everything to Keith and Allura- and maybe he was right. But she couldn't. Not when there was something that she felt she could do. Not when it was her mother who was in danger.

She just couldn't do it.

She just wished she could have apologized to Keith before she left- but she hadn't gotten the chance. Once she had finally worked up the nerve to, she'd ended up just missing him. He'd been in strategy meetings ever since.

It was fine. She'd get the chance. She was just going to sneak into the Garrison, break into their systems, and try and get any information she could on this Lotor and her mother, and then sneak out.

And maybe while she was at it, she'd just dump everything into the open web. See how they liked that.

Smirking, Katie navigated her way through the darkened main hangar. She didn't dare turn on the lights, not wanting to be found. But if she was going to get out of here, then she needed transportation. Eying the Garrison issue hoverbike, she hurried towards it, doing a preliminary check.

Good, it worked.

Stowing her bag in the storage compartment, she reached into her pocket, digging out the pocket computer she had purloined from Coran. Bringing up their coordinates, she calculated what the fastest route from here to the Garrison was- the faster she got there and back, the better.

She didn't want anyone to notice she was missing.

Swinging her leg over the hoverbike, she adjusted the seat. She didn't have much experience with them, but how hard could it be?

"Isn't it a bit late for a joyride?"

Nearly leaping out of her skin, Katie let out a loud yelp. Jerking her hands away from the controls of the hoverbike, she cast her gaze behind her.

It was Keith.

Of course it was.

Even with her pitiful night vision, he was easy to make out in the dark. The glowing eyes helped. Brow cocked, Keith watched her with a slightly tilted head. His arms were folded in front of him, and somehow, she got the feeling he'd been here for awhile.
Right. Sometimes she forgot that Keith knew her just as well as she did him. At least they were on even footing now that his whole alien secret was out in the open.

He wasn't, she thought, in Blade armor.

Regaining her composure, Katie frowned. "Don't try to stop me."

"I'm guessing I can't convince you not to do this." Keith stated.

"No." She said, resolute. "I know you want to protect me, but I can't just sit around and do nothing while my mom is in danger, Keith. I have to do this."

Narrowing his eyes, Keith's gaze didn't falter. "And if I try to stop you?"

She didn't drop said gaze, instead holding it. "I won't let you."

It was a bluff. He knew it. She knew it. There was no way she could take Keith in a fair fight. She'd barely be able to take him in an unfair fight.

"Get up."

Narrowing her eyes, Katie gripped the controls of the hoverbike. "I'm not-"

"Get up," Keith repeated, "-we're going on mine."

Opening her mouth to formulate a reply, she quickly closed it. We. That hadn't been what she'd expected him to say. "Wait, you're...?"

"I'm coming with you." Keith told her. "If I can't stop you, at least I can keep you safe."

That explained the Earth clothes, she dimly thought, gaze flickering over his signature red and white jacket. She didn't even have to look to know that he'd brought his transforming knife with him.

She loved alien tech, but she hated how much of it seemed to be run on vaguely magical bullshit. She still couldn't believe that this whole ship was powered by a giant crystal.

Slowly getting off the hoverbike, she barely even remembered to take her pack out of the storage compartment. "So you're my bodyguard."

Quirking a faint grin, Keith arched a brow. "If that's what you want to call me, sure."

Wordlessly following Keith to his own hoverbike, she watched as he got on, testing the controls. With his back turned, it was easy enough to imagine that the events of the past few weeks had been nothing more than a fever dream.

She'd gotten really used to the Blade armor, she thought.

It was only when he glanced back towards her that she startled into action. Opening up the storage compartment on his bike, she tossed her pack in it, before she slid on the hoverbike behind him. "Is this even safe?"

"Probably not."

Arching a brow, Katie merely shrugged. "Fair enough."
Breaking into the Galaxy Garrison probably wasn't that safe either. Holding on to Keith's waist, the thought that she hadn't apologized to him yet flashed through her mind. But before she could say anything, Keith started the hoverbike.

She'd just tell him later.
the break-in

Chapter Summary

They had barely reached the first turn when they heard the sound of a door coming off of its hinges. Swearing underneath his breath, Keith muttered something about sentries.

Chapter Notes

Phew! Here's the next chapter, hot off the presses! Pidge gets carried a lot this chapter. Life's tough when you're like, the smallest character in the cast. But hey, Matt really sprang up, so maybe there's hope for Pidge yet! That said, thanks for reading, and I'll see you next update~!

Keith barely said a word during the ride over.

Chewing on her lip, Katie pressed herself closer to his back. She'd forgotten how cold the desert could get at night, and was starting to wish she'd brought her sweater after all. She was half tempted to ask for Keith's jacket, since the chill of the night air didn't seem to bother him in the least.

When he brought his hoverbike to an abrupt stop, she frowned, peering over his shoulder. She couldn't see a damn thing in the dark, but she was pretty sure that she didn't see the Garrison anywhere around here.

"Why did we stop?" She asked. "We're not already at the Garrison, are we?"

"No." Keith replied. "Get off."

Not sure what to make of the curt tone, Katie swung her legs off the hoverbike. Keith got off a moment later, pausing to glance in her direction. "You cold?"

Giving him a weak smile, she rubbed her arms. "A bit."

"What, you didn't think to bring a sweater?" He asked.

Rolling her eyes, Katie fought the urge to glower at him. "My mind was kind of somewhere else."

"Can't say I blame you." He told her. "Want to borrow my jacket?"

"Geez, what are you, a mind reader?" Katie asked.

"A mind what?" Keith asked, staring at her blankly. The glowing eyes just made the familiar expression downright uncanny.

"A mind reader. You know, a telepath." Katie explained, only for Keith to just blink at her. Letting
out a frustrated groan, she just held out her hands. "Ugh, nevermind. Give it here."

Frowning, Keith shrugged his jacket off, handing it to her wordlessly. "We're about half a mile out from the Garrison. Any closer, and they might be able to pick up on my bike."

Lifting her brows, Katie tugged the jacket on. It almost looked like a normal sized jacket on her, except for the sleeves- which she guessed Keith must have had tailored to fit his arms, because that was the only explanation for just how much they dangled off hers. Eyes slightly more adjusted to the dark, she glanced down at Keith's arms, not missing the instinctive way he folded them.

He seemed to catch himself doing it, giving her a weak smile. "I know. My proportions are kind of off. It's a Galra thing."

"Hey, nothing wrong with that." Katie told him, grabbing her pack from the storage compartment of his hoverbike. "There's humans who are like that too. I mean, you are human, or well, half human, but I mean-"

"I know what you mean." Keith cut her off. "Come on."

"You sure its okay to just leave your bike out here?" Katie asked.

Humming, Keith pulled out his keys, pressing a button. In an instant, the hoverbike vanished from sight, blending in with its surroundings.

Squinting, Katie frowned. "Your hoverbike has cloaking technology, and we still have to walk?"

"It just cloaks the bike." Keith told her. "Not the people on it."

Ah. As funny a visual as that was, yeah, she could see how that wouldn't be very effective.

Keith tucked his keys away, before jerking his head forward. "Stay close."

"Don't have to tell me twice." Katie said, hurriedly falling into step behind him. "Not all of us can see in the dark."

She could have sworn Keith smirked at that. "Sounds like a pain."

Narrowing her eyes, she squinted at him. "Are you making fun of me?"

"Only a little." Keith told her.

Rolling her eyes, Katie bundled up the sleeves of his jacket. "At least I can tell the difference between blue and teal."

Keith just frowned at that. "You just have too many colors."

"I don't want to hear that from someone who wears a bright red jacket on a stealth mission." Katie pointed out.

"I'm not the one wearing the jacket." Keith quipped.

"...okay, that's fair." Katie admitted.

They lapsed into silence after that, Keith breaking it once to ask if she wanted him to carry her pack. She gratefully gave him the burden to shoulder- she hadn't expected to be walking part way. She was a computer geek- stamina was not her strong suit.
Keith slung it over one shoulder, carrying it like it weighed nothing. She knew that it, in fact, did not- but she guessed when you had alien super strength, it didn't matter.

God, she still couldn't believe Matt was right.

If the Galra could reproduce with humans, could other aliens? Could the Alteans? They looked way more human than the Galra, and Krolia looked pretty human. She wondered if she was mixed with something too, but if she was, Keith had never mentioned it.

She knew there were other half Galra out there. Heck, this Prince Lotor was half Galra, from what she'd heard. His mother was Honerva, an Altean alchemist- who sounded like a right nasty woman, if she was able to betray her own people like she was, quintessence poisoning or not.

Thinking about that just made her think about her own mother. Biting down on her lip, Katie forced that thought aside. She was going to save her. It would be fine.

She'd make it fine.

She was so lost in thought, that she barely noticed it when Keith stopped. He had to grab her arm to keep her from walking ahead of him, covering her mouth with his hand when she tried to yelp in response. Pulling her close, he shook his head, motioning with it.

Frowning, she peered past the rock he had dragged her behind. Even in the dark, she could make out the Garrison- they always kept their perimeter lights on.

She could also see guards.

"Those aren't normally there." Keith noted.

"Think they beefed up security?" Katie asked.

Nodding his head, Keith frowned. Shrugging off her pack, he set it down beside her. "Stay here."

Leaving little room to protest, he melted into the night. Opening and closing her mouth, she frowned, pulling his jacket tighter as she sat down. Just leave her out here in the middle of the desert by herself. Sure, no problems there.

Huffing, she peeked out from behind the rock. There wasn't much else to do but watch the guards. She could barely make them out, just vague figures patrolling the perimeter of the base. But even from here, she was pretty sure they were carrying guns.

Grabbing her binoculars from her pack, she trained them on the guards. Yep. Definitely armed. Those didn't look like standard Garrison tech either, though the guards themselves definitely were.

Had they anticipated that someone would try sneaking in? Or was this all just a precaution?

Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea.

Someone pressed a hand against her shoulder, and she had to bite back another yelp, only to heave a sigh of relief to find it was just Keith. "Remind me to put a bell on you."

"I'm not a cat, Katie." Keith retorted.

"Keith, I don't know how to break this to you, but you're like, half giant space cat." She pointed out.
Frowning, Keith's brows furrowed. "Galra aren't space cats."

"Galra are totally space cats." Katie insisted.

"That's ridiculous." Keith said. "Some of them are lizards."

The comment had been so unexpected, that she could barely hold back the burst of laughter that sprung forth. Keith, to his credit, briefly looked amused- before a more serious expression took its place.

"It looks like they have twelve guards, in total." He told her. "All armed."

"You think they know we're coming?" Katie asked.

Shaking his head, Keith frowned. "I think they're prepared for the chance, but I don't think they know specifically."

Nodding her head, Katie peeked out from behind the rock again. "What are those guns they have? They don't look Garrison."

"They're not." Keith said simply. "They're Galra."

Katie grimaced. "Guessing they do more damage than regular Garrison tech."

"A lot more." Keith replied.

"Comforting." Katie observed. "So what now?"

Arching a brow, Keith tilted his head. "Giving up?"

"Not a chance." She told him. "I've already come this far. There has to be information about my mother in there somewhere, and I'm going to find it."

Giving her a considering look, Keith just shrugged. "Know where we should look?"

"If this goes all the way to the top, that's where we start." Katie told him.

A look of immediate understanding crossed Keith's face. "Admiral Sanda."

"Admiral Sanda." Katie echoed. "If I can just get into her computer, I might be able to find the information that we need. I might even be able to find something about Lotor."

Folding his arms in front of him, Keith looked contemplative. "Seems dangerous."

"I thought that's what I had you for?" Katie asked.

Heaving a sigh, Keith gave her a tight smile. "Guess so. But you have to promise me that you'll listen to everything I say."

"Promise." Katie told him.

"Even if it means not getting the information." Keith quickly added.

She frowned at that, narrowing her eyes. Information was what they were taking this risk for in the first place, what was even the point if they didn't get it? But Keith held her gaze, unblinking, and so she was forced to heave a long sigh of her own. "Fine."
Only then did Keith seem to actually relax. Glowing eyes leaving her face and focusing on the Garrison beyond, his brow furrowed in deep thought. She watched him with undisguised interest—this was a part of Keith that he didn’t normally show to them, even with the truth out in the open.

The Keith that had been trained to do exactly this sort of thing.

It was fascinating.

She might joke about it, but seeing him like this, she could sort of understand why he had gone undetected for so long. The only reason the Galaxy Garrison had caught on to him was because he’d opted to blow his own cover, not because they’d figured it out on their own—and as awkward and strange as Keith could be, without the hints she had gotten, she probably never would have either.

They might have never known that they had an alien in their midst.

And clad in Earth clothes though he was, it was hard to think of Keith as being anything other than alien in this instant. Not when his eyes glowed dimly in the dark, as he scouted the Garrison’s perimeter with his naked eye—no binoculars needed when you were gifted with the kind of distance vision he had been.

Not to mention the fact that he could see in the dark at all.

Reaching into one of his pouches, he brought out a strange device. It lit up, displaying a holographic map of the Garrison, with lettering that she quickly determined was Galran. He scanned it with a furrowed brow, occasionally interacting with the screen, shifting the view slightly.

She just sat, huddled in his jacket, trying to ignore the late night desert chill that seeped into her bones.

Glancing up at her, Keith took note of it. "You're still cold?"

He asked the question with a hint of bewilderment, like a jacket was all she would need. Despite now wearing nothing but a thin t-shirt, he didn't look the least bit chilled.

"Just a little." Katie admitted. "What, you're not?"

Shaking his head, Keith frowned. "Galra can handle extreme temperatures."

Blowing out a breath, she tried not to think about how she could see it. "Lucky."

Quirking a faint grin, Keith banished the Garrison schematics. "Allura's not wild about the cold either. Altea's climate is pretty mild. Daibazaal tends to be more extreme."

"After the rift opened," his smile faded, transforming into a frown again, "-it just got worse."

Oh. Right. She'd nearly forgotten that Keith's home planet was essentially dying.

Shaking that thought off, Keith tucked away the device, and instead, pulled out his cellphone. She couldn't help but blink, watching him as he shot off a message. From her angle, she couldn't see its contents, nor who he was sending it too.

Either way, he quickly got a reply. Tapping out one of his own, Keith switched off his phone, tucking it back into his belt pouch. Getting to his feet, he did one more cursory check of the
perimeter, before glancing back down towards her, scooping up her pack with one hand. "Let's go."

Opening her mouth to say something, she quickly shut it. Instead, Katie hauled herself to her feet. Who cared how Keith got them in so long as actually did it?

This was a bad idea.

This was an incredibly bad idea.

In his lifetime, Adam Warner had been the subject of any number of bad ideas. Whatever else he was, he was still a teacher, so it kind of came with the territory.

And this? This was a bad idea.

Honestly, he didn't know what Keith was thinking. First, he told him to dig deeper. Then, that same night, he'd been contacted by one of the aliens- a woman by the name of Krolia, who looked remarkably like Keith for someone who was purple- and had been told to withdraw.

And now Keith was asking for his help to break into the Garrison.

Something was going on, but whatever it was, he hadn't been given any of the details. Which was kind of... par for the course, from his experience. The less he knew, the less danger he was in.

He knew three things- aliens were real, there was a war raging in deep space, and the Galaxy Garrison was on the wrong side.

Oh, and they had planned to sacrifice Shiro for their own gain. So, four things. The last of which he was unlikely to forget anytime soon.

When Sam had first contacted him, he'd been skeptical. He knew that the Commander was one of the good ones, and he'd consulted with him a few times before while his investigation had still been in its rudimentary stages. What he didn't expect was for Sam to call on him, and ask him to transfer so suddenly- apparently, he needed him at the Texas base.

He definitely hadn't expected aliens.

He definitely hadn't expected Keith.

He hadn't looked like much when Sam had introduced them- just a scrap of a kid with too pale skin and a mop of black hair that looked like he'd rather be anywhere but here. Typical teenager, basically.

Then he'd opened his mouth, and he'd noticed the abnormally sharp teeth.

He was part of an alien race, he'd been told, known as the Galra- and was a member of a group that had gone against the ruling power of his home planet. It sounded like something out of a science fiction story, and for a second, he thought Sam was pulling his leg.

Meeting Princess Allura had changed that.

If Keith looked vaguely human, then the princess... well, okay, she looked pretty human too. But she was far more obviously alien than Keith was- which he found out a bit later was because the kid was actually half-human, but had been born and raised on some planet called Daibazaal.

His life since then had just been flat out wild.
It also confirmed his suspicions that the Galaxy Garrison was even more corrupt than he'd first thought. Cutting a deal with an evil alien warlord? And he'd thought Admiral Sanda was one of the good ones.

Though, given the lies the Galra Empire had been feeding them... no, it still didn't excuse her willingness to trade away three of their own. No matter what she had been promised in exchange.

Heaving a sigh, Adam shifted on his heels. All he had to do was just let Keith and his companion in- they had changed the access codes since Keith had fled the Garrison. They had made a lot of changes to security ever since then.

But they still hadn't fixed the broken security camera in Wing B, Hall 13. The camera outside still worked, but Keith had some kind of jammer that he carried around with him, so all that really mattered was that he wasn't caught on tape allowing someone from the outside in.

Right on cue, he heard a knock on the other side of the door. Typing in his code, he opened up, coming face to face with Keith Kogane.

And blinked.

Keith, for his part, just stared up at him, like his sclera weren't yellow, glow fading from his eyes as he stepped out from the night and into the light. "What?"

His eyes, he wanted to say- but decided against it. He also didn't comment on the purple markings that marred his cheeks- but when he saw who came in behind Keith, then? Then he had something to say.

"Katie Holt?"

Katie, for her part, stared at him, just as shocked as he doubtlessly was to see her. "Professor Warner?"

"Hardly a professor." Adam automatically replied. "Wha- I thought you'd disappeared?"

"Oh, right," Keith frowned, tilting his head, "I forgot to tell you. Katie's with us."

Right. Of course. He should have known. If Shiro was with them, then it should have been a pretty safe guess that was where the two Holt kids disappeared to- beyond this valley that the Garrison had declared was off limits to everyone, cadets and personnel alike.

"Adam's your spy?" Katie hissed- okay, straight to first name basis then. That was- that was fine. She wasn't technically a cadet. "Does Shiro know?"

"No." Keith merely replied.

"Okay, but what's she doing here?" Adam insisted. "Last I heard, I was supposed to withdraw. And now you're bringing Sam's youngest here?"

"Look, it was her idea." Keith stated flatly. "Circumstances have changed."

"They have my mother." Katie stated.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Keith wince. Turning to stare at him, he felt his brows furrow. "...Keith?"

"We didn't know that when my- when Krolia contacted you." He said quickly. "We just- one of
Lotor's generals breeched the perimeter of the Castle and attacked."

"You're leaving out the part where she nearly killed you." Katie noted.

"She didn't nearly kill me." Keith said. "I probably could have survived without the healing pod."

"You were poisoned!" Katie hissed, still somehow managing to keep her voice down.

"Wait, Keith, you were what?" Adam cut him off before he could say anything.

"I probably could have survived." Keith frowned, folding his arms in front of him, like he'd been accused of cheating on a test, not cheating death. "It's not like I haven't been trained to handle poisons. Look, none of this is even important," and he had to bite back a comment that yes, nearly dying and getting poisoned were in fact, important things, "-what's important is getting you into Admiral Sanda's office."

"Admiral Sanda." Adam repeated, pinching the bridge of his nose. "You're breaking into Admiral Sanda's office."

"She might have information on Katie's mother." Keith stated. "Also, we're extracting you."

"We're-" Adam began, hand moving from the bridge of his nose to his forehead as he tried to work out his headache, "-you're extracting me."

"I'm extracting you." Keith repeated. "It's too dangerous to stay here. If they figure out you're connected to us-"

"Right, no, I get it." Adam said, holding up a hand. "Do I have time to pack?"

Tilting his head, Keith considered it. "Probably? Getting the information should take some time. Just be waiting here in one varga." He paused. "Hour. One hour."

Right. Okay. He couldn't say he hadn't expected something like this to happen, but it sure was happening. The idea that this might mean he'd get a chance to see Shiro again did briefly cross his mind, he'd admit, but right now, he was just wondering how the hell he'd gotten mixed up with all of this.

All he'd wanted to do was expose the Galaxy Garrison's corrupt practices.

And now he was involved with aliens. Right.

If this was how he felt, he could only imagine how Shiro felt about finally learning that the kid he'd taken under his wing was part alien. Not to mention a trained spy.

Somehow, he imagined he'd have more trouble with the latter.

"One hour." Adam repeated. "You two be careful. They've stepped up security measures since your brother broke into Iverson's computer."

"Fortunately, I'm a little more skilled than Matt is." Katie remarked.

"We'll be fine." Keith told him. "I won't let anything happen to her."

Frowning slightly, he couldn't help but wonder if he knew that applied to him too. Instead, Adam just patted his shoulder, nodding his head.
But he still couldn't shake the thought that this was a bad idea.

Alright, so if she was going to be honest, she hadn't expected that they would be using the vents.

In hindsight, it made sense. They were both slight enough to fit in them, and there weren't exactly any cameras in there- not to mention guards. And while she was still surprised to find out that Adam had been their man on the inside, he was right about one thing- there were way more guards here than there used to be.

She had snuck into the Garrison once, and while she had gotten caught, she'd at least gotten in. Now? Without Keith, she didn't think she'd even stand a chance.

Pausing to check his map, Keith tilted his head to the right, to indicate direction. Giving him a silent nod of her head, she crawled forward, just grateful the Garrison actually bothered to clean their vents regularly. She wasn't exactly the world's biggest fan of dust.

They came to a halt, Keith holding out a hand. Frowning, she sat back on her knees, watching as he pointed to the grate up ahead of them. Narrowing her eyes, she could faintly make out the sound of someone's voice. Not enough to understand what was being said, but enough to recognize it.

Admiral Sanda.

Resting on his knees, Keith pressed a finger to his lips. Nodding her head, she quieted her breathing, content to wait however long it took to get what she needed.

Still, why was Admiral Sanda working so late? Shouldn't she be gone by now?

She didn't have to wait long. The thin sliver of light from the admiral's office flicked off, plunging the vents into near darkness, illuminated only by the steady glow of Keith's eyes. She pushed off her knees, ready to go, but Keith shook his head, narrowing his eyes.

They waited for what felt like another ten minutes before Keith finally exhaled, motioning for her to move forward. Slowly but surely, they made their way to the end of the vent. Carefully unscrewing the grate, Keith grabbed it before it could fall, neatly slipping out in a manner that looked positively effortless.

She was a little less graceful.

Rubbing her butt, she glowered at Keith. Even in the dark, she could make out his faint smirk. Yeah, yeah, laugh it up- not everyone could be a trained space ninja.

Making her way to the admiral's computer, she opened up her pack. Pulling out one of the data chips she'd brought with her, she plugged it in. Cracking the password to get in wasn't hard, and she had it booted up in a matter of minutes. Out of the corner of her eye, she could make out Keith's silhouette by the door, his hand hovering on the hilt of his knife.

God, would she love the chance to try and take one of those things apart.

Instead, she focused on the task at hand. The base security itself was easy enough to get around, but as expected of the admiral's computer- she had another layer of security beyond that, and that was much more of a challenge. Plugging in her flash drive, she set to work, her full attention fixed on the task.

"Okay," she whispered, "-I'm in."
"Anything good?" Keith asked.

"Can't say." Katie admitted. "There's too much data here to go through it all piece by piece. I'm just going to try and download everything. I can go through it back on the Castle."

"Make it fast." Keith instructed.

Make it fast, she silently mouthed. Easy for him to say, but it wasn't exactly like she could just wave a magic wand and speed up the download.

She was halfway through the download when Keith stood bolt upright, eyes wide. "Someone's coming."

"Wha-" she began, but didn't have time to finish. Before she could, Keith was on the other side of the room, grabbing her pack and then her, yanking out the flash drive and shoving it in her hands. She barely had time to process what was happening before he tossed her pack back up into the vents, and then shoved her into it with it.

"But the download-!"

"Download's finished." Keith told her, slipping back into the vent with her, slipping the grate back in place. "Go."

Opening her mouth to protest, she quickly shut it. Keith looked... disturbed, and anything that could put him that on edge had to be serious bad news. Grabbing her pack, she slung it over both shoulders, starting to crawl forward.

They had barely reached the first turn when they heard the sound of a door coming off of its hinges. Swearing underneath his breath, Keith muttered something about sentries.

She just took that as her cue to crawl faster.

That's when the alarms started.

Inside of the vents, they were almost deafening. Keith swore again, this time in a language she actually understood, a plain, simple "-shit."

She barely had a chance to protest, before he grabbed her, kicking out the closest vent grate. With her tucked under his arm, he jumped out of the vent, into a hallway that was far too brightly lit for this hour.

They were spotted by a guard almost immediately. Setting her down, he reached for his knife before the guard had a chance to react, slicing their gun in half. Continuing forward with his momentum, he slammed his knee into their jaw, sending them staggering back.

Sheathing his knife, he grabbed her by the wrist. "Come on, we're running!"

Not one to protest, Katie instead hurried to catch up- or at least, prevent herself from being dragged. "What's going on?"

"Sentries." Keith remarked. "I don't know if this was some kind of a trap or not, but there were a pair of Galra sentries headed our way."

"Why didn't we just stay in the vents?!" She half asked, half yelled.

"It wouldn't take them long to figure out where we were." Keith told her. "If they caught us in
there, we'd just be sitting ducks."

Perhaps it was a mercy she didn't have time to think. They rounded a corner, only to be confronted by another pair of guards- both of whom Keith dispatched easily. Grabbing one of their guns, he tossed it to her. "Use this!"

She nearly staggered under its weight, the gun- more of a blaster, really- about the size of her arm. Not her forearm. Her arm. She wanted to protest that she had no idea how to use something like this, but there was no time. Finding her footing, she scrambled after Keith, not exactly wanting to be left behind.

Though she doubted Keith would leave her.

The next pair of guards they encountered weren't even human.

Sentries. They had to be. Humans couldn't build robots, not like these. These things had to be Galra. Panic triggered her reflexes, a shot ripping from her stolen blaster, taking one of the two robots by surprise. Keith took out the other one, his knife transforming into a sword in a flash, tearing through metal like it was butter.

"Think you got the hang of that?" Keith asked.

Gripping the blaster a little tighter, she felt herself grin. "I think I got the hang of this."

"Good." Keith said. "Come on, we're almost there."

Turning the corner, they came face to face with a definitely frantic Adam, who narrowed his eyes at the sight of them. "I thought you two were going to be careful!?"

"Change of plans." Keith said. "This is a hard out."

Opening his mouth to say something, Adam barely got the chance, before Keith slammed them both to the ground. Seconds later, something came sailing over them, crashing through the door behind them, the sound of metal tearing against metal ringing through their air.

It was a steel beam.

Someone had thrown a steel beam.

Hauling himself to his feet, Keith had his knife drawn and transformed in an instant. She crouched behind him, while Adam shook of the effects of the slight blow to his head he'd taken.

They weren't alone in the hall any longer.

The woman who faced them down had to be Galra. She towered over Keith, her fur more blue than purple, with massive ears unlike those she had seen on either Ulaz or Krolia. She looked like she was a solid wall of muscle, and she didn't miss the way Keith tightened his grip on his blade at the sight of her.

"Zethrid."

"Well, well," Zethrid leered, almost seeming amused, ",-if it isn't the princess' tame Blade."

Gritting his teeth, Keith narrowed his eyes. His pupils shrunk until they nearly disappeared, as if they weren't thin enough already. "Adam," he slowly began, "-take Katie and run."
Having pushed himself up into a sitting position, Adam frowned. "What about-?"

Reaching into his pocket, Keith pulled out his keys, tossing them towards Adam without so much as breaking eye contact with Zethrid. "Just go."

Realizing what he was saying, Katie's head snapped up. "No, we're not leaving you."

"I'll catch up." Keith said- but somehow, it didn't sound like he meant it.

"But-!"

Gritting his teeth, Adam scooped her up, stumbling to his feet. "You'd better."

"I will."

He had lied.

He wasn't going to catch up.

But it got Adam to leave, and to take Katie with him. Hopefully, they'd be able to make it out okay. Maybe they would find something in the information she had managed to download that would lead them to her mother.

He hoped so.

Or maybe he'd find her first.

Either way, in a one on one fight, he didn't stand a chance against Zethrid. His only hope was getting the jump on her with speed, but he'd lost the element of surprise.

"Guess you've got a soft spot for those primitives." Zethrid remarked. "Doesn't matter. They'll be caught soon enough."

"If they're primitives, so am I." Keith grinned, almost proud of that.

He took pride in being Galra.

But he took just as much pride in being human.

Pounding her fist into her open hand, Zethrid leered at him. "Don't worry," she began, "-Lotor's ordered me not to hurt you."

And then, after a pause.

"Much."
"Allura," Shiro repeated, "-where is Keith?"

She felt numb.

The desert air was cold against her skin, but she barely even felt it. All she could think about was the fact that they had left Keith behind.

And it was her fault.

She had been the one to insist on coming here. Keith didn't have to come with her- he could have put his foot down and locked her back up in her room. Sure, she would have been mad at him, but at least he would have been safe.

And while she had the utmost confidence in Keith's skills, she didn't see how he could possibly win against someone who could throw steel beams like it was nothing. Keith was strong, but he wasn't that strong.

"Katie?" Adam's voice was soft- or maybe she was just hearing it through a filter. She barely even noticed it when he shook her shoulders. "Katie, I need you to snap out of it."

Oh, she realized then, with a blink. She was in shock.

"I'm fine," she lied, she was very much not fine, "-but we need to go back for Keith."

"As much as I would love to, that's not really an option," Adam told her. "We barely got out of there ourselves. And if we don't get a move on quick, they're just going to catch us."

Swallowing, Katie opened her mouth to protest. But now that the shock was wearing off, at least a little, she could hear the sound of alarms in the background, not too far off from where they were hiding.

She also became too aware of Keith's jacket, still on her person.

"I promised Keith I would get you out of here." Adam told her. "Now I need you to tell me where exactly he left his hoverbike."
Katie slowly nodded, drawing Keith's jacket closer to her, feeling a sudden chill that wasn't just from the cold night air.

"The keys," she finally said, "-give me the keys."

Handing her the keys, Katie studied them for a moment. There was some kind of tracking system installed into them, that linked back to the hoverbike. He'd showed it to her once, when she had caught him doing maintenance on it. For all that it was of Earth make, it had so many alien parts floating around that it might as well have been alien.

After a few seconds of fiddling, she got it to work. The key made a soft beep, a small screen lighting up to display their current coordinates, as well as the coordinates of the hoverbike. Strangely, it was in English- even though she knew Keith's first and preferred language was Galran.

She tried not to think about what that meant.

Adam glanced at the small map, able to determine more from it than she could. Casting a glance back towards the Garrison in the distance, he motioned with his hand, silently indicating for her to follow him.

She did, even if every step made her feet feel like they were made out of lead.

Keith had promised he'd catch up with them, but she was starting to suspect that had been a damn lie. He'd gone into this knowing that there was a chance he might not make it back- that was why he had contacted Adam, not because he wanted to extract him, but because he wanted to ensure that there was someone who would drag her back to the Castle if things went south.

She wanted to be mad. She didn't know if she wanted to be angry at Keith, for his self-sacrificing bullshit, or herself, for coming up with this stupid, reckless idea in the first place. She should have left this to Allura and the Blade of Marmora- but she hadn't. She'd insisted on doing it herself.

Now because of that, both her mother and Keith were in danger. And as much as she tried to convince herself that Keith was a trained Blade, an elite, all she could come back to was the fact that he was barely that much older than her.

But instead of feeling mad, all she could feel was numb. Guess the shock hadn't completely worked its way out of her system yet.

She hadn't even gotten to apologize to Keith.

"We're here," Adam's voice jolted her out of her thoughts, "-but I don't see the bike."

"It's cloaked." Katie said, knowing her tone was probably way too curt. But right now, she couldn't bring herself to care.

Studying the key, she pressed the same button Keith had, hoping that it would undo the cloaking. She was right, the familiar red and white hoverbike slowly coming into view.

For a long moment, Adam merely looked at her. She was convinced he was going to say something, but instead he looked away, swinging a leg over the hoverbike, giving its controls an experimental twist.

"You might need this." Katie told him, pressing the key into his hand, before dimly mounting the bike behind him.
"Thanks." Adam told her, switching the bike on. It hummed underneath her, lifting off the ground, causing sand to dance around its twin propulsors. "So... any chance you know how to get to this Castle of Lions?"

Shaking her head, Katie buried her head in Adam's back. If she weren't so numb, she'd probably feel ashamed, but right now, she didn't care.

All she could think about was how this was her fault.

It was better than the alternative line of thought- which was knowing that Keith had probably felt like this ever since the Kerberos disaster. And she had just made that worse, basically digging a knife into his already open wound.

And now she was just... leaving him behind.

Maybe that was what he wanted, but that didn't make it okay. Keith was her friend, and she was abandoning him to save her own skin. What the hell kind of friend did that make her?

She knew. A shitty one.

"I'm guessing that's a no." Adam frowned. "Katie, you know this isn't your fault, right?"

"Coming here was my idea." She told him.

"That still doesn't mean-"

"Just drive." Katie said, her tone harsh, but she still couldn't bring herself to care. "Like you said. If we don't get away, Keith's choice will be pointless."

She didn't want to use the word sacrifice, even though she knew that was what it was. Keith had chosen to sacrifice himself for their sake- for her sake.

She hadn't even asked him too.

He woke to someone shaking him.

Groaning, Shiro lifted a hand, trying to swat the intruder away. He hadn't gotten to sleep until late last night, and although he didn't know what time it was now, he instinctively knew that it was too damn early to be dragged out of bed.

It was only after the shaking became more insistent that he finally cracked an eye open.

"...Matt?" He asked, still groggy.

"Shiro!" Matt sounded- and looked- relieved. "Please don't go back to sleep. I need your help. I can't find Katie."

Blinking, for a second, he didn't think he heard him right. "...Katie?"

"Katie." Matt repeated. "She's not in her room."

Now much more awake, Shiro sat straight up. That's right. Katie. Memories of yesterday's events flooding back to him, he felt a bolt of fear shoot through him, now fully understanding why Matt seemed so frantic.
"When was the last time you saw her?" Shiro asked, already on his feet and grabbing his vest and boots. Matt was still in his pajamas- he'd probably come straight here after he'd found Katie's room empty. He wasn't even going to ask how he got past the door lock.

"Before I went to bed, last night." Matt told him. "She was already asleep."

Tugging on his boots, Shiro absentely found himself reaching for the black bayard, grabbing his belt to hook it to. He didn't think he'd need it, but it never hurt to be prepared. "Have you spoken to one of the Blades yet?"

Shaking his head, Matt frowned. "No. I came straight here."

"Okay," Shiro said, "we should find the Blade that's on duty tonight, and talk to them. Maybe they've seen Katie."

"You don't think she could have left, do you?" Matt asked. "I mean... what with mom being captured and all..."

"I don't know." Shiro admitted. "Let's hope not."

He should have been able to predict something like this. He could sort of guess what Katie might have been thinking- that if she just got into the Garrison's servers, then she might be able to find information about her mother.

Hopefully, she hadn't gotten that far.

"I should have checked." Matt mumbled.

"There's no sense worrying about what you could have done." Shiro told him, briefly resting a hand on Matt's shoulder. "What matters is doing what we can now. With any luck, she hasn't left yet."

Nodding his head, Matt swallowed. They paused only for a moment, for Shiro to check Katie's room for himself, while Matt grabbed his shoes. Scanning the contents of the room, he frowned, noticing that her pack was missing- which definitely wasn't good.

If anyone could get around the Castle's security, it was Katie.

"Find anything?" Matt asked.

"Her pack's gone." Shiro told him.

Matt grimaced briefly, but it was quickly replaced by a determined expression. "Do you think we should wake Keith?"

Frowning, Shiro considered it. He probably had the night off from his Blade duties, but part of him just wanted to let him sleep for that very reason. But this was urgent- he'd apologize to Keith later, but finding Katie took top priority right now.

"He could probably tell us where to find who's on duty." Shiro said. "It's worth a shot."

Nodding his head, Matt made a beeline for the elevator. In spite of having longer legs, Shiro had to hurry to catch up with him. It was clear that his sister's disappearance had him on edge.

Resting a hand on his shoulder, Shiro gave it a light squeeze. "We'll find her, Matt."
He didn't say anything to that, just nodded his head. It wasn't like he didn't understand. He hadn't
forgotten how frantic he'd been the first time Katie had vanished- but at least then, they more or
less knew where they would find her, and were able to take comfort in the knowledge that Keith
was likely with her.

Now?

It still wasn't hard to guess where she was. But knowing that didn't bring them any comfort-
because if Katie was anywhere, she was probably at the Garrison.

He tried not to dwell on that as the elevator rose up, depositing them on the floor Keith's quarters
were on. Raising a finger to his lips, Shiro motioned towards Allura's quarters with his head- there
was no point in waking the princess just yet.

Except, he noticed, as they drew closer- the door to her room was wide open.

"Uh," Matt began, "-where's the princess?"

Frowning, Shiro narrowed his eyes. He didn't have an answer to that. Looking over towards Keith's
quarters, the furrow of his brow only deepened. Not only were the doors to Keith's quarters wide
open, but there was no sign of Keith either.

Something was clearly wrong here.

Keith was one thing, but he didn't think the Blade would wake Allura just because Katie tried to
sneak out of the Castle. Briefly, he considered the possibility that they might have determined that
she was the spy, for some absurd reason, but quickly dismissed it for exactly that reason- it was
absurd.

No. This had to be something else.

"Shiro?" Matt said, sounding uncertain, anxious. "I don't think I like this."

He didn't either.

Would Black know something? The lion had been able to tell that something was wrong last time,
but there was a chance that was only because their bayard had been involved. Still, it was worth a
shot.

Closing his eyes, he steadied his breathing. Matt was saying something to him, but he couldn't
quite hear it, having half tuned it out. So as to not worry him, he held up a finger, telling him to
wait.

Black?

It took a second, but he soon heard the rumble of the black lion. It prodded at him, questioning. He
questioned it back, sending it images of empty rooms- Katie's, Keith's, and Allura's.

It bid him to go to the hangar.

Eyes opening, Shiro let out a breath. The hangar. Not the black lion's hangar, but the main hangar.
His uneasy feeling only managed to increase.

"Shiro?" Matt asked. "What was that?"

"Nothing." Shiro quickly told him. "Let's try the hangar."
Now wasn't exactly the best time to go into the whole paladin business—while Allura had opened up about the existence of the black lion on the Castle, she hadn't said anything about him, so he'd taken that as his cue to keep his mouth shut.

Matt, for his part, looked like he wanted to ask—but Katie was still the most pressing issue. "Yeah," he said, "-let's hurry. You don't think she could have gotten mixed up with the spy, do you?"

"I don't know." Shiro admitted. As much as he wanted to reassure Matt, he couldn't lie to him either. "Let's hope not."

"You said that already." Matt faintly muttered.

In spite of himself, Shiro let out a dry chuckle. It was almost entirely humorless. If Allura had been woken up, as well as Keith, then it was possible that Katie might have actually succeeded in sneaking out. He could only hope the princess being awake was a sign that they had already mobilized to search for her—and that maybe they would be able to catch her before she got too far.

The ride down to the main hangar felt like it took forever, and once they got there, he felt something in his stomach drop. Unlike the rest of the Castle, which was still dim, the main hangar was brightly lit, as if it were daytime.

They also weren't the only ones down here.

He picked out Ulaz first, the Blade's tall frame hard to miss. Regris and Krolia were also present, as was the princess herself—even Coran and Romelle were with her. It wasn't just the aliens either—Commander Kogane was there too, next to his wife.

He had a hand resting on her shoulder, and that's when Shiro realized that something was very wrong here.

There was no sign of Keith.

Allura noticed them first, turning to look at them with a grave expression on her face. She was still in her pajamas, a stole thrown over her shoulders to protect her from the chill of the night air. It was then that he realized that they were all gathered around Keith's hoverbike—he'd been so focused on the people, that he had somehow managed to overlook it.

He didn't even get a chance to say anything before Matt burst forward, walking with hurried steps to meet the princess halfway. "Where's Katie?"

Allura's brows drew tighter. "She is safe."

Stepping forward, Shiro tried to keep his focus on the here and now, and not on the million what ifs plaguing him. "Where's Keith?"

Allura's face fell at that, but she didn't answer.

"Allura," Shiro repeated, "-where is Keith?"

"He stayed behind."

He barely even heard Katie, not at first. It took even longer to register the voice as hers. Slowly but surely, the brunette uncurled herself—she had been hidden behind the frame of Keith's hoverbike, wearing what he recognized to be Keith's favorite jacket.
"Katie!" Matt wasted no time in rushing towards his sister, practically leaping over the hoverbike to embrace her. He probably didn't register anything else other than her being here, whole and intact, if not obviously shaken. "You don't know how worried I was about you! Where were you?"

Katie swallowed, burying her hands inside the sleeves of Keith's jacket- not a hard task to do when they practically swallowed them. "I went to the Garrison."

"What?" Matt asked, paling. "Why would you do that?"

"I thought- I thought I could find information about mom there." Katie told him. "I didn't- I didn't mean for things to turn out like this."

"Katie," Shiro began, making sure to keep his voice level, "-what happened?"

"It was a trap."

And if it took him a minute to register Katie's voice, then it took him even longer to register Adam's. Because he couldn't fathom a reason as to why he would even be here- but sure enough, it was Adam that stood up, having been concealed behind the hoverbike as well, positioned next to Katie. Probably had been comforting her, right up until the moment they had arrived.

"Wha... Adam?" Shiro blinked, for a moment too baffled to react to what he'd said.

Adam, on the other hand, didn't seem the least bit surprised to see him. "Takashi."

"What are you...?" Shiro began, something clicking into place. "You're the inside man."

Giving him a weak smile, Adam nodded. "Yeah."

He wanted to ask for how long, wanted to ask how he had even gotten involved with all of this, but that wasn't the most pressing matter right now. "What do you mean, it was a trap?"

"They were prepared for the chance that we might attempt something," Allura informed him, "-though we cannot yet be sure of their goal. It may have simply been an attempt to root our own spy, but we cannot ignore the possibility that their goal was Keith from the beginning."

"I don't get it," Matt said, "-I thought this Prince Lotor wanted you?"

"He does," Allura admitted, "-but he desires Keith as well."

"He's been trying to recruit Keith for a long time now." Heath said, somehow managing to keep his voice level in spite of the pain in his eyes. "Wants him as one of his generals."

"Keith always refused." Krolia supplied. The only thing that betrayed her otherwise stoic demeanor was her husband's hand on her shoulder. "He took pride in being a Blade. And he never trusted Lotor."

"So he decided to take him by force." Shiro finished.

"It is a possibility." Allura stated.

Closing his eyes, Shiro took in a long breath, trying to process all of this. It was a lot to take in at once. Adam serving as the Blades' spy within the Garrison was noteworthy enough, but the fact that Keith had willingly stayed behind to get them out...

He had just escaped death yesterday.
"Okay," Shiro said, trying desperately to keep his voice level, "Adam, do you think you can catch us up to speed?"

Ordinarily he'd ask Katie, but he was pretty sure she was in shock. Cracking one eye open, he looked towards Adam, trying not to think about how this was basically the first time they had seen each other since he'd left for Kerberos. He hadn't even come to visit him in the hospital, so he'd kind of figured that whatever they'd had between them before he left, it was over now.

Now? Now he was kind of reconsidering that.

But his love life could wait. Keith's life, and the life of Katie and Matt's mother, couldn't.

"I don't know all the details." Adam admitted.

"Tell us what you do know." Krolia stated. "Were any of Lotor's generals present?"

"One, I think." Adam told her. "I think Keith said her name was Zethrid."

He was pretty sure Allura paled at that. Looking towards her, she bit her lip, clearly actively fighting the urge to look away. "Zethrid is Ezor's partner."

Ah. Suddenly he got the apprehension.

Exhaling, Shiro looked towards Katie, lips curling in a tight frown. He didn't like how pale she was. First things first, they should get her checked out. "Coran, do you think you can take Katie to the med bay?"

"Of course, I would be more than happy-"

"No."

Blinking, Shiro turned back towards Katie, staring at her. "Katie, I really think you should-"

"No." Katie repeated, firmer this time. "I'm fine, Shiro."

"Katie, no offense, but you're not fine." Matt told her. "Shiro's right, you really should let Coran give you a quick checkup."

"I mean it, Matt, I'm fine." Katie insisted, before digging into her pockets, pulling out a flash drive. "I only got halfway through the download before the sentries took us by surprise, but maybe there's something on here that we can at least use."

"We could let Ulaz or Regris-"

Katie cut Allura off, grip tightening around the flash drive. "English isn't their first language, and knowing the Garrison, there's a chance that the most important stuff might be in code. It'll be faster if I'm the one who goes over it."

There was a slight pause, before Matt rested a hand over Katie's own. "I'll help."

Heaving a sigh, Shiro relented. He knew how stubborn Katie would be, even more so if she felt responsible for all this. "Fine. But at least let Coran give you a heated blanket or something."

Katie frowned, but eventually assented. "Fine."

With that decided on, Coran ushered both Holt siblings out of the hangar. He watched them go
with a frown- he just hoped that Katie didn't try to push herself too much. Turning back to those who remained, Shiro's gaze lingered on Adam for a moment, before he focused back on Allura.

"What are the chances that Keith will get out of there on his own?" Shiro asked, already having a feeling that he wasn't going to like the answer.

It was Ulaz who replied. "Minimal. Keith has been well trained, but he's a poor match for Zethrid."

"She threw a steel beam." Adam supplied.

"I take it she's pretty strong, then." Shiro grimaced.

"She's mixed with a race known for their physical strength." Krolia remarked. "Consequently, she's nearly twice as strong as your average Galra."

That only managed to make him grimace further. He'd already seen for himself how strong Keith could be, and he supposedly had his human blood to weaken him. If Keith was below average for a Galra in terms of physical strength, then he couldn't even imagine how strong this Zethrid was.

"Maybe we can still go after him?" Romelle meekly suggested.

"We can't." Krolia's tone didn't falter from it's usual stoicism, but he didn't miss the way her brows creased, nor the way Heath's grip on her shoulder tightened. "That's not the Blade of Marmora way."

"Well, maybe it ought to be." Allura remarked.

"Be that as it may," Ulaz said, "-there is too much risk."

"So you're just going to leave him there." Shiro stated.

Ulaz locked eyes with him, not so much as blinking. "Yes."

Frowning, Shiro looked up towards Commander Kogane. "You can't possibly be okay with this."

"I'm not." Heath admitted, looking visibly pained. Given the choice, he'd probably tear the Garrison apart to rescue his son. "But Keith knows the risks."

"Lotor is unlikely to kill him." Krolia said. "He's too valuable."

Biting down on his lip, Shiro could think of a million things that he wanted to say to that. That Keith was just a kid- maybe he was an adult already by Galra standards, but this was Earth, and he was still part human. But he got the feeling that this wasn't a decision that they had come to easily.

And they did have a point- he had a hard time picturing them killing Keith. Which didn't necessarily mean that they would leave him in one piece.

"Not to butt in," Adam said, doing exactly that, "-but I'm pretty sure I'm out of the loop in some places. Does anyone mind catching me up to speed?"

Heaving a sigh, Allura squared her shoulders. "I am certain Romelle would be more than happy to catch you up to current events. I assume you will be staying here."

"I don't think I have much of a choice." Adam remarked.

"Right, of course." Nodding her head, Allura glanced towards Romelle. "Do you think you can
show Adam to the guest residences? I fear that we must report tonight's events to Kolivan."

Romelle simply grimaced. "In that case, I would be more than pleased."

Glancing briefly towards Adam, Shiro debated going with him- it had been so long since they had spoken to each other, and it was clear that they had a lot they needed to catch up on- way more than he would have thought. He was still trying to figure out just how long Adam had been involved in all of this- had he known, back at the Garrison? Or was it only after Keith had left that he'd gotten involved?

But those questions could wait.

"Princess," Shiro began, "-if it's not too much trouble, I'd like to come with you."

Allura blinked. "You wish to speak with Kolivan?"

"I think I have the right to." Shiro said.

"I agree." Krolia said. Briefly squeezing her husband's hand, she took a step forward, letting it slip from her shoulder. "You are the black paladin now."

"I suppose so." Allura admitted. "Though I do not know if Kolivan will agree."

"If he does not agree, then I will make him." Krolia stated. "But I doubt that he will refuse."

Briefly closing her eyes, Allura nodded her head. "In that case," opening her eyes, she steeled herself, "-we should not waste any further time. I trust that we can leave patrol of the border to you, Regris?"

Regris gave the princess a dutiful nod, the furrow of his brow betraying his own worries. Right. He and Keith were close. Not going after him probably wasn't an easy decision for any of them. "I shall guard it well."

"I'll join you." Heath volunteered. "Could use an extra pair of eyes. Maybe I'm not a trained warrior, but I know this land better than anyone."

That seemed to give Allura pause. "Are you certain? Now that we know for certain that Narti is here, there is a chance that Lotor might attempt to use Keith against us."

Shiro stiffened at her statement. In all the commotion, he'd nearly forgotten that Lotor apparently had a general with brainwashing powers. He almost wished it had stayed forgotten.

"I'm aware," Heath said, "$-but I don't think that's gonna be his first option."

"No," Allura admitted, "$-I suppose you are correct."

"He still may use this as an opportunity to attack." Ulaz observed. "Though I am skeptical he would send another general so soon."

"I can handle a few sentries." Heath remarked.

"As can I." Regris said.

"Good," Allura said, "$-see to it that you do."

She said nothing more, simply turning on her heel. Shiro took that as a sign to follow her.
Keith had briefly shown him the Castle's bridge on their tour, but this was the first time Shiro had been in here since then. Normally it was off limits, even to him.

Allura swept into the room with the kind of dignified grace that only someone who had been trained from birth could possibly hope to possess, to the point where he almost forgot she was still in her nightgown. There was determination, steel in her gaze, as she took to a central plateau- he didn't even have to ask to know that she wasn't the least bit happy with the current situation.

Krolia and Ulaz had accompanied them, each standing straight, their arms linked behind their backs. Right- this Kolivan was their leader. He had heard Keith speak of him before- whenever he did, it was with a certain level of admiration.

Guess he'd finally get his chance to find out just what kind of person he was.

It took a few minutes for the transmission to connect, which he had expected. Based on the way they had explained it, they were essentially on the fringes of the known universe, so distant from the center of it that most wouldn't give them a second thought.

"Princess," the Galra that accepted the transmission sounded mildly surprised, though they didn't look it, "I did not expect another report so soon."

"Circumstances have changed." Allura stated.

Instantly, the Galra's expression became grave- and he very quickly concluded that this was Kolivan. Though he could only see him from the shoulders down, it was enough to determine that his armor was different from that of Krolia's- it possessed the same shoulder wraps as Ulaz, but they appeared to continue past, covering up the chest plate of his armor.

Like Ulaz, he possessed solid yellow eyes, no trace of visible pupil in sight, but his right was scarred- an old one, from the look of it. His most striking feature was the red fur that served as markings, almost, a stark contrast to the blue-gray. There was a thin braid of what was either white hair or simply white fur, twined over his shoulder.

He was fairly impressive, Shiro concluded.

"Has there been another attack?" Kolivan inquired.

"Not quite." Allura reported. "I am afraid that Keith has been captured."

Kolivan's eyes narrowed- and only now did he seem to pay attention to his presence, though he somehow didn't doubt he'd noticed him beforehand. "And this is?"

"This is the new black paladin," Allura introduced him, barely even sparing him a glance, "-Takashi Shirogane."

"Shiro." He meekly supplied. He was suddenly keenly aware that vest and boots aside, he was still in his pajamas.

"Shiro." Kolivan repeated. "The princess has told me about you."

He had to bite back the urge to make a smart remark- now wasn't exactly the time or the place. Instead, he simply nodded his head, suddenly finding himself at a loss as to what to say. He hadn't exactly had much of a plan when he'd asked to come here.
Thankfully, Kolivan's attention didn't stay on him long.

"In regards to Keith," he began, "-how was it that Lotor was able to capture him?"

"I am afraid that one of our human... guests, made a rather rash decision." Allura said, frowning. "Instead of escorting her back to her quarters, Keith made the independent decision to accompany her, and attempted to infiltrate the Galaxy Garrison in order to download information stored on their servers."

"Unfortunately, they were caught." She finished.

Kolivan seemed to frown, though it was only in the corners of his lips. "Lotor was prepared."

"It would seem so." Ulaz agreed. "Zethrid was there."

"And the human?" Kolivan inquired.

"Safe." Kroli stated. "Keith ensured that she would be able to escape."

Kolivan said nothing to that, merely considering the information he had been given. "He was expecting this."

"So it would seem." Allura stated. "In all likelihood, even if we had gone through with our original plan, it is quite likely that he would have sprung a similar trap."

"We should have foreseen this." Kolivan stated. "I fear Lotor's ambitions are greater than we could have anticipated."

Frowning, Allura looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"In the past few vargas, we have received word from each of the paladins." Kolivan stated. "It would seem that the Galra Empire have doubled their remaining forces, in an effort to conquer their worlds."

Instantly, a surge of worry shot through the princess. "What of Altea?"

"Word has spread of Zarkon's death." Kolivan stated, dry and almost emotionless. Clearly, the Galra tended towards stoicism. "Empress Honerva herself is leading the invasion fleet against Altea, with the claim that it was your father who saw to Zarkon's murder."

Allura paled. "Our forces...?"

"They are holding, for now." Kolivan stated. "But if something does not change soon, I fear that they won't last long."

"Why the sudden change in tactics?" Ulaz asked.

"We believe that Honerva means to eliminate the paladins and claim the Voltron lions in the name of the Galra Empire." Kolivan stated. "We also believe that she has since been in contact with Prince Lotor."

Allura stood up straight at that. "He's trying to collect new paladins."

Blinking, Shiro stared at the princess. "What do you mean by that?"

"I heard my father and Coran discussing it once." Allura said. "Keith has the potential to become
the next red paladin."

Frowning, Krolia's brows knit together. "Perhaps Lotor understands that he lacks the potential to become one himself, and is thus relying on others."

"And by relying, you mean he's using this Narti." Shiro stated.

Krolia didn't even blink. "Yes."

He knew he should be worried about himself, but in that moment, it didn't even occur to him. "Are there others? Other potential paladins?"

"I cannot be certain," Allura shook her head, "father was awfully close-lipped on the matter. I do believe that he was eventually planning on turning over the reins to a new generation of paladins, but I do not know how far they got into choosing their successors before the war began."

"Regardless, we cannot allow this to happen." Ulaz stated.

"Agreed." Kolivan said. "Given Empress Honerva's unstable state, it is possible that should anything befall Lotor, her attention will shift away from Alliance planets, and to Earth. It may provide us with the break we need."

Shiro bristled at that. "That sounds a lot like you're planning on sacrificing Earth."

Kolivan turned his full attention on him. "That was not my intention."

"You intend to lure the Empress into a trap." Krolia determined. "Using Earth as bait."

"Right now, the Empire's forces are unified out of desire for vengeance." Kolivan stated. "Prince Lotor's death will splinter them, as they seek to consolidate their own power in preparation for the Kral Zera. That would severely limit the number of fleets the empress would have at her disposal."

"But she would still have some." Shiro observed.

"Yes," Kolivan stated, "-but it will also leave the paladins free to intervene."

"It's risky." Allura admitted. "But it might be our best chance."

"No offense princess, but even if we could get the Galaxy Garrison on our side between now and then, they don't exactly have the firepower to go up against Galra ships." Shiro stated.

"No," Allura admitted, "-but this Castle is a considerable weapon- and we have the black lion. All we will need to do is hold them at bay until my father and the rest of the paladins arrive."

"That is, provided we can manage to track down Lotor." Ulaz observed.

"Yes," Allura frowned, "-that is the main issue."

"We still need to get Keith and Colleen back." Shiro reminded them.

"We have not forgotten." Krolia said. "But Ulaz is correct. We need more information."

Jaw clenching, Shiro could only frown. They kept circling back to that point, but she was right-they simply didn't have enough information.

He could only hope that Katie and Matt would turn up something.
She might have only met the cadet once, but he'd been hard to forget. She wasn't sure if it was out of guilt, or if it was because when he had smiled at Lieutenant Shirogane, he'd done so with far too many teeth, all of which were far too sharp. Either way, he'd left an impression.

Groaning, Keith returned to consciousness slowly.

His head hurt, and his right wrist stung. His memories trickled back, recalling how Zethrid had slammed the former into the ground and had dug her claws into the latter- he was lucky it was still attached.

Guess Lotor wanted him in one piece.

Forcing himself upright, Keith quickly noted that he'd been cuffed. Glancing behind his back, he frowned- definitely not standard Garrison issue. Ignoring the pain in his right wrist, he tugged against the cuffs, but the energy beams would only let him move his wrists so far apart. Pulling his legs out from under him, he quickly assessed that the same was true for them- his ankles had been bound with the same type of cuffs.

Guess they weren't taking any chances.

Heaving a sigh, he closed his eyes. He hoped that Katie and Adam had at least been able to get away, and that maybe something in the information she had downloaded would lead her to her mother. He didn't want this whole mission to be for naught.

Kolivan would probably be furious with him.

Grunting, Keith brushed his fingers against his belt- his sheath was still in place, but predictably enough, his knife was gone. He was willing to bet they had found the ones he'd hidden in his boots too- tapping his right against the ground, he frowned. The false heel had been torn away, so they'd probably taken his jammer too.

And he hadn't exactly brought any com devices with him.

Great. Unless he could find a chance to escape, he would probably be stuck here.
At least he was able to determine where here was. The Galaxy Garrison was a military institution, and as such, had cells. The cell block was small and was far away from the main campus- while they were only meant to be interim holding cells, nobody wanted to put prisoners anywhere near the cadets. For that very reason, security here was top notch- and to his regret, it was the one place on base he had never bothered mapping out.

Blowing out a long breath, his bangs fluttered. At least it was a little more homey than your standard Galra cell- there was a cot and a toilet, but not much else.

Didn't matter. He'd camped out in worse conditions than this. He'd manage.

Besides, it wasn't the Garrison he was worried about.

Lifting his head, he made out the sound of footsteps. A set of lighter ones, military issue boots, flanked by a pair of heavier, metallic sounding ones. Someone from the Garrison, accompanied by a pair of sentries- he couldn't help but snort. They really weren't taking their chances.

Guess the only accurate thing they'd been told was the Blade of Marmora's reputation.

The cell door cracked open, flooding the room with light. Keith hissed, his eyes not taking the sudden change well. The contacts that had he'd worn to make his eyes appear more human had helped with that, but he was still better suited for low lit environments than he was brightly lit ones. While his time on Altea had certainly helped, adjusting between the two was still something of an issue for him.

"Cadet."

Right. He knew that voice.

"Admiral Sanda," the cell itself brightened as the door was shut behind the admiral, probably so she could see, ",-been awhile."

Sure, he'd only met the admiral once, during the Kerberos launch. But she cut a pretty memorable figure- and the fact that she had been the one behind selling out Shiro helped. He wasn't about to forget the woman who had chosen to betray her own kind.

Maybe she thought she was doing it for the greater good, but it still didn't excuse it. Whatever offer the Galra Empire had given them, it couldn't have possibly been worth the lives of Shiro, Sam, and Matt combined- or even just one of them.

If the admiral had flinched at the sight of him, he hadn't seen it. He knew Adam had, this being the first time he'd seen him without his... cosmetic adjustments. Odds were, she'd probably already been briefed on the fact that he wasn't fully human.

"I'm sure you know why you're here." Admiral Sanda stated. "Falsifying data and infiltrating Garrison networks are both offenses punishable by law, not to mention breaking into a commanding officer's office with a non-Garrison civilian."

"Well," Keith couldn't help but grin, baring his teeth as he did so, ",-human law doesn't exactly apply to me."

"Maybe not," Admiral Sanda freely admitted, ",-but I imagine the law of your own kind does."

Yeah, she had him there. At least until they managed to dismantle the Empire, it would.
"I'm taking your silence as acknowledgment." Sanda remarked.

"Maybe," he told her in Galran, "-maybe not."

Narrowing her eyes, Sanda stiffened at the use of what she doubtlessly considered an alien language. "You will speak in a language that I can understand while you are in my custody, cadet."

"And how long will that be?" Keith asked, switching back to English. "I know Zethrid was here. That was the only reason you managed to catch me in the first place."

"Long enough," Sanda said, lifting her chin, "-you're the first alien human crossbreed in existence. We can't just turn you over to Prince Lotor without first running some tests."

Tests. The hair on the back of Keith's neck prickled at the mention, but he didn't let it show on his face. It brought to mind the religious cult that had sprung up deca-phoebs ago, back when he had first been assigned to guard Allura. They had worshipped the lions, viewing them as gods, unjustly chained to the command of mortals- in addition to trying to kill King Alfor and the other paladins, they had also tried to kidnap Princess Allura, all in the name of trying to understand the bond she had with the lions.

They had captured Romelle instead, but thankfully they had managed to spring her out of there before they got that far. Either way, it had been enough to leave a sour taste in his mouth, even if it wasn't him they had wanted to run tests on.

"What's the plan?" Keith asked, narrowing his eyes. "Cut me open? Try to figure out which parts of me are Galra and which are human?"

The admiral, to her credit, bristled at the implication, and he was pretty sure she had grown half a shade paler. "We're not savages."

No, they weren't. Odds were, they were probably aiming for blood and skin samples- maybe a tissue sample, at the absolute worst. Again, if Lotor wanted him, he probably wanted him in one piece.

"Now," Sanda began, "-I have some questions for you about our missing scout- not to mention the two missing cadets. It's clear to me that you and the Holts are working together, so I'll leave them and ex-Lieutenant Shirogane out for now."

"They're safe." Keith freely provided. "That's all I'll tell you."

"Do you have any proof?" Sanda inquired.

"I'm chained up in a cell." Keith deadpanned. "What do you think?"

The admiral merely inclined her brows. "Fair point. Now, on the subject of the former lieutenant-"

"You have a lot of nerve to ask me any questions about Shiro, given the fact that you tired to sell him out." Keith hissed, narrowing his eyes- and this time, the admiral did flinch, if only minimally. "But that wasn't enough for you, was it? No, you had to destroy his reputation too. You designed a craft that couldn't handle reentry, and he landed it anyways. But all you did to thank him was strip him of his rank and lie about it."

"What happened to Shirogane is... regrettable." Sanda admitted, but he didn't buy it. "But we couldn't let the public find out about the faults in the craft. It was never meant to return to Earth."
"So what was the plan?" Keith asked. "Announce them dead on Kerberos? Say that it crashed there? Do you even know what kind of deal you were making?"

"I was ensuring Earth's continued security." Sanda stated. "We can't risk being involved in a war where we're hopelessly outclassed. If that meant sacrificing three lives to save millions, then I was willing to make that sacrifice."

"You sold them out." Keith growled, his eyes flashing. "And not just them, either- where is she, Admiral? Where's Colleen Holt?"

It was in that instant, that Keith realized that the admiral had no idea what he was talking about. It was subtle- the admiral had a poker face that would give Kolivan's a run for its money- but he didn't miss the faint way her brows furrowed.

"Colleen Holt is a civilian," Sanda began, "-she doesn't fall under our jurisdiction."

Guess that was her way of saying that she was only willing to sacrifice those under her own command. Narrowing his eyes, Keith racked his brain- would she even believe him if he told her that Lotor was holding Colleen hostage? There was no question that he had her- he'd watched the video message himself, and Colleen had been it.

That Lotor would have acted without authorization from the Galaxy Garrison didn't surprise him. He wasn't the type to concern himself with that sort of thing.

He didn't know if he could convince Admiral Sanda that Lotor had kidnapped a civilian, or if it would even do him any good- but it was worth the gamble. Opening his mouth, he stopped short at the knock on the door, gritting his teeth in frustration.

"Admiral Sanda," a voice he didn't recognize spoke, "-Prince Lotor is requesting your presence."

Frowning, Keith narrowed his eyes. The timing of that was too good. Was Lotor watching him from somewhere?

"Understood." The admiral said. "We're not done here, cadet."

"Looking forward to seeing you again, admiral."

She watched him for a moment longer, her gaze inscrutable. Turning on her heel, she knocked on the cell door, the two sentries that flanked her not giving him any chance to try and slip by while she slipped out of the cell. Even if he could, with his legs bound, he wouldn't exactly get very far.

With the admiral gone, the lights in the cell dimmed again. Taking a moment to adjust, Keith curled his legs up to his chest, pushing himself to his feet. Scanning the room, he tried to determine where he was being watched from- but if there were any cameras in here, then they were hidden well.

At least maybe he could do something about the cuffs around his wrists. He wouldn't be able to get them off, he knew, but he could at least make things a little bit more comfortable. Breathing in, Keith relaxed his shoulders.

He always hated this part.

Grunting, he raised his arms above his head, biting down on his tongue to keep himself from making any noise as he dislocated both of his shoulders, bringing his arms around to the front. Drawing in a long breath, he forced his shoulders back into position, only then allowing himself to
relax again, the pain ebbing away. The Blade of Marmora were trained to endure pain, but it didn't mean he liked it. At least like this, he could properly assess the damage to his wrist- he guessed he had the Garrison to thank for treating it.

Closing his eyes, Keith rested his head against the wall of his cell. There was nothing else to do but try and think about his next course of action.

No one would be coming for him, he knew that much. That wasn't how the Blade worked. The last thing they needed was to risk sending anyone else after him. Besides, he'd chosen this. He was just paying the price for that.

If Lotor wanted him dead, he'd be dead already.

Although, given what the prince probably wanted with him, being dead might actually be preferable.

Ever since they had first made contact with the Galra Empire, dealing with extraterrestrial life had always left her with a sense of unease. At first, she had thought it was just because of their eyes- the aliens that they had dealt with up until that point appeared as if they had no pupils, making them appear almost uncanny.

But no. Even after they had begun their dealings with Prince Lotor and his generals, almost all of whom possessed visible pupils, the feeling hadn't faded.

And now it was stronger than ever. But at least this time, she could pinpoint the source.

She had only met Keith Kogane once at the Kerberos launch, while he had still been a cadet. The plans for the exchange had already been in motion even back then, so she had gone into it with a heavy sense of unease. As far as she was concerned, she was doing the right thing- those that they were sending off might be lost to humanity, but she had assurances that the Galra Empire would treat them well, and that they would become vital assets in their war against the Alteans.

The faster the Galra won the war, the less risk Earth was in.

She might have only met the cadet once, but he'd been hard to forget. She wasn't sure if it was out of guilt, or if it was because when he had smiled at Lieutenant Shirogane, he'd done so with far too many teeth, all of which were far too sharp. Either way, he'd left an impression.

In hindsight, perhaps she should have seen it coming. But to think that one of their own would have already made first contact and had not only failed to report it, but had also chosen to mate with said alien. That they were even successfully able to produce an offspring was something she was frankly still trying to wrap her head around, but one thing was clear- what they were keeping prisoner was no human.

That was an alien.

That information, of course, had been provided to her by Prince Lotor. When they had been forced to contact the Galra with information in regards to the death of Commander Trugg, it hadn't taken long for him to get into contact with them. He was the one who told them about the Blade of Marmora, a group of renegade Galra who had chosen to betray their own kind and side with the Alteans.
He had also informed him that the one known as Keith Kogane was one of these Blades, and that he had been tasked with protecting the daughter of the Altean leader- Princess Allura. And that if he was here, spying on the Garrison, then in all likelihood, the Altean princess was located somewhere on Earth as well, likely close by.

At the time, she was still reeling over the fact that they had unwittingly accepted an alien life form into their cadet program. Going through his files, she saw the inconsistencies for herself. Every record they had was in some way falsified- everything from his birth certificate, to his school records. Given that the latter she had been able to determine with just a phone call, it was obvious that someone had been covering for him.

She wasn't the least bit surprised when she found out it was Sam Holt. Maybe his father had been the one to introduce Keith to the Galaxy Garrison, but it had been Commander Holt who had vouched for the kid, getting him into the program.

All so that he'd be able to spy on them.

That bit of information she kept to herself. She didn't know what kinds of lies Sam had been told by these Alteans, but she didn't want to put him at any further risk than she already was. If the Galra found out about it, it wouldn't be from her.

Except the renegade cadet had managed to foil those plans too. And with the shuttle failing at reentry, she'd never be able to ask Sam herself.

The remaining Holts, alongside Lieutenant Shirogane, had been place under observation. If Cadet Kogane attempted to contact them, they would know.

Apparently not.

Now, seeing the cadet again for herself, she wondered how he had managed to go under the radar for so long. How he had managed to trick anyone into believing that he was a human. He might have Commander Kogane's blood in his veins, but the humanity that gave him only seemed to go so far.

But that wasn't what had left her with that sense of unease.

He'd asked about Colleen.

It made no sense. As far as she knew, Colleen Holt was at home- probably desperately worried about the disappearance of her son and daughter, the only family that she had left. Though given the fact that Katie Holt had been visually confirmed as being in cahoots with Kogane, perhaps not.

Either way, it was worth looking into.

It could be a trap, but she couldn't imagine as to how. Even if it was, it wouldn't be an issue to send out someone to check on Colleen. Better safe than sorry.

They were about to hand a high profile prisoner over to Prince Lotor. In exchange, he'd promised to extract the information they needed from him- the whereabouts of their scout, as well as the two missing cadets, Garrett and McClain. Their safety was paramount.

Her only objective was to keep Earth safe. To that extent, she would do everything in her power to ensure it remained safe- that was why she had cut a deal with the Galra Empire in the first place.

But she could at least consider the chance that she had been lied to.
The med techs came and went. He offered little resistance, allowing them to obtain their samples without protest. It still creeped him out, but it was better to save his energy for when he actually had a chance to escape.

Besides, the last thing he wanted was for them to put him under.

He'd prefer they didn't treat him like he was some kind of a spectacle, though. Yeah, he got it- first crossbreed in existence. Cool. Didn't mean they could gawk at him.

Even Lance hadn't gawked at him when he'd found out. He'd accused him of lying, right up until he had removed one of his contacts, at which point he'd- okay, yeah, he'd actually gawked a little, now that he thought about it. But there was a difference between what he'd done and what the med techs had been doing, and he'd stand by that.

Maybe he'd taken Shiro and the Holts' easy acceptance for granted.

Heaving a sigh, Keith rested his hands on his knees. At least he'd given them a shock when they realized he'd relocated his arms in front of him. Even if he did hear one of them mutter something about x-rays, it was worth it to see them turn that shade of pale. They hadn't made an attempt to cuff his arms behind him again, probably afraid that he would use the chance to escape.

Well, they weren't wrong.

It had probably six vargas since he had regained consciousness. He had no way of determining just how long he had been unconscious, nor what time it was- his internal clock was good, but it wasn't that good. He was willing to bet it was morning now, though.

It meant that unless Lotor was already somewhere in the cell block, that he probably wouldn't be getting a visit from him until evening. Somehow he didn't think that the Garrison just let him walk around in the open- and that Lotor was pretending to comply. He didn't know how they had explained away last night's events, but he was willing to bet that they had swept the whole thing under the rug.

He wondered how his mom and everyone were doing.

He hoped they'd made some kind of breakthrough in Colleen's abduction. But now that it seemed that even Admiral Sanda had no clue about it, that was looking less and less likely. At the very least, it didn't seem like they had caught Adam or Katie, which meant that they had to have gotten away safely.

Katie would probably be mad.

Making out the sound of footsteps, Keith lifted his head, frowning. It didn't sound like more med techs- but it didn't sound like sentries either.

Crouching, Keith raised his guard. He didn't like uncertainty.

They weren't a med tech or a sentry- or even Admiral Sanda. He did recognize them, though.

"Iverson?"

Keith stared. He couldn't help it. He didn't think Iverson's clearance was even high enough to know what was going on, beyond the fact that he had interfered with numerous Garrison affairs since being removed from the cadet program.
Ironically, the official excuse that they had given for removing him was that he had punched Commander Iverson. He couldn't help but wonder if Commander Iverson knew about that.

"Cadet," Iverson began, his one good brow arching as he met his eyes- or well, eye, in Iverson's case, "-guess the rumors were true."

Narrowing his eyes, Keith felt himself tense. Standing up to his full height, he tried to get a read on the Commander. What was he even doing here?

"You're probably wondering why I'm here." Iverson stated.

"You're letting me out on good behavior?" Keith ventured.

"A sense of humor. Didn't think you had one of those." Iverson noted, and he couldn't help but glower. Why did everyone seem to think that? "Seeing as you were once under my supervision, the admiral wants me to make you talk."

"You?" Keith asked, tilting his head. "I don't exactly recall us getting along."

"No, but it was either me or Officer Warner, and since he was apparently helping you and is now missing in action, then yes," Iverson said, "-it's going to be me."

*Missing in action.* Good. That meant Adam had got away.

"If it's about the cadets," Keith began, "-then I already told the admiral that they're safe. The scout is too."

Well, the scout was actually frozen in a cryopod, but the Garrison didn't need to know that.

"I'm afraid that's not good enough, cadet." Iverson told him. "The scout aside, it's nearly been three weeks since the cadets disappeared. That's three weeks we've gone without anything to say to their families. Let us bring them home."

"If you want them so badly, why don't you just ask Prince Lotor where to find them?" Keith asked.

Iverson's blank expression was all he needed.

"Oh. Guess the prince hasn't told you that he sent one of his generals to raid our ship two nights ago." Keith said. "Maybe he's the one you should be questioning, not me."

He felt himself stiffen under Iverson's gaze, unconsciously standing up straighter. It felt like he was being assessed- but for what, Keith didn't know. Honesty? Where best to cause him pain, so that he could make him talk? Joke was on him, he was trained to withstand torture.

Iverson reached into his pocket, and Keith went on his guard. He didn't know what he was reaching for, and Keith didn't know how much of a fight he could put up like this, but damned if he wasn't going to try. Whatever he was trying to pull, he'd-

Keith froze.

Blinked.

"...is that my jammer?"

"Pulled it out of evidence storage." Iverson remarked. "We've probably got five minutes before they notice the feeds been cut off, so I'll make this quick, Kogane. We sent one of our officers to
the Holt place first thing this morning, and nobody has seen Colleen Holt in days. What do you know?"

Keith blinked. He didn't exactly expect the admiral to follow through on what he'd said.

"I- Lotor has her." Keith said truthfully. "He wants Princess Allura in exchange for her freedom."

"This Princess Allura," Iverson frowned, "-she's your commanding officer?"

Technically, that was either Ulaz or Kolivan, but sure. Let's make this simple. Opting not to say anything, he just nodded his head.

"I'll ask one other question." Iverson said. "How is former Commander Kogane involved in all this?"

Keith frowned. "He's my father."

"So that part was true." Iverson stated. "You're scheduled to be turned over to Prince Lotor this evening. If what you said about Colleen Holt is true, that's when we'll make our move."

"But you'll still be turning me over." Keith observed.

"Nothing personal." Iverson stated, though he sounded a bit... strained, Keith couldn't help but notice. "The safety of Earth citizens simply takes priority. Exchanging you will buy us some time."

Time? Time to do what?

Keith scoffed at that. "Oh, so now that matters."

Iverson frowned, narrowing his good eye. "What do you mean by that?"

"What, Admiral Sanda didn't tell you?" Keith asked- and in that moment, decided to take another gamble. If he was going to be stuck here, he should at least do what he could- even if about the only thing he could manage was sowing seeds of doubt.

"The Kerberos mission was a sacrifice," Keith told him. "-three of Earth's best and brightest in exchange for Earth's guaranteed security. All orchestrated by Admiral Sanda."

"Is that true?" Iverson asked.

"What good would it do me to lie at this point?" Keith asked. "You're just going to turn me over to Lotor anyways."

Iverson stared at him for a long moment in consideration, before he returned the jammer to his pocket. Guess time was up. "That's all, cadet."

Watching Iverson leave, Keith narrowed his eyes. He didn't know if Iverson would believe him or not- but if he did, it might be worth the risk. If they could get the Galaxy Garrison on their side, it would give Allura an advantage over Lotor.

Slumping against the wall, Keith slid down, letting out a long breath. Even if they did, it would probably be too late for him. Biting down on his lip, he tried not to think about it- but it was no good. There wasn't much to do in this cell but think.

How long could he hold out against Narti for? Resisting interrogation, enduring torture- these were all things that he had training for. But there was no amount of training that could prepare him for
Narti's power.

He shivered, shutting his eyes. He should have known this was a stupid idea, but he just thought... Katie was right, this was all his fault. If that was the case, he should at least do something to help her for a change- he'd already taken her father from her, he wasn't going to let anything happen to her mother too.

He knew how it felt to be powerless.

How many Blades had they lost? It weighed on him every day he was here. Being on Earth was practically like a vacation, at least up until recently. Here, they were far away from danger, safe from the war, the same war his fellow Blades were willingly giving their lives to fight.

And what had he been doing? Posing as a cadet, living the life of a normal human teenager. It didn't seem right.

That was why when his cover was blown, he was almost glad. At least he would be doing something now, instead of just sitting around, keeping tabs on a primitive space exploration program. But where had that gotten him? Now he was just being held prisoner by the same people he'd been tasked with spying on.

Even worse, once Lotor got his hands on him, he could only imagine that the prince would make use of him. Biting down on his lip, a low rumble began deep in his chest, causing him to snap his eyes open in shock.

No- nope. He wasn't afraid. Please- he was a trained Blade, what could he possibly have to be scared of?

But the rumbling didn't stop. Drawing his knees up to his chest, Keith buried his head in them, too ashamed to show his face. He wondered if Lotor was watching right now, since he was apparently actually being monitored. He wondered if he could hear the sound he was making, like he was some kind of frightened youngling again.

How pathetic.

Maybe Shiro was right- maybe he was more human than he thought he was. Human enough to still be a helpless child, frightened and afraid, not the elite Blade he was meant to be. He really was pathetic, if something like this could scare him.

And fuck it- that's what he was. He was afraid. Afraid of what was to come. Scared that he might hurt the people he cared about. Frightened that they might have to hurt him- or at worst, kill him- and would have to live with that for the rest of their lives.

He wasn't afraid of Lotor.

But he was terrified of Narti.
"Because if you play your cards right," Iverson began, "-there's a chance you might get to see your brother."

Lance. She swallowed, looking Iverson square in the eye. "Tell me what I need to do."

"Hunk, buddy, is it just me, or does this place seem a little empty?"

Hunk frowned at the question. The obvious answer was yes- usually at this time, there were other people in the little kitchen they all shared. But right now, the only ones around were him and Lance- no sign of the Holt siblings, Shiro, or even Keith, who sometimes popped up.

Come to think of it, neither of them had seen Keith since, well... two days ago, maybe. That was when the Castle had been attacked, and scary as that was, the sudden absence of the half-human Blade somehow managed to make him even more nervous. But maybe he was just over thinking it? It wasn't like Keith was always hanging around here- after all, he had important bodyguard work to do, right?

Which still didn't explain why they were the only ones here.

"You don't think they're all eating with the princess, do you?" Lance asked with a frown.

"I don't know." Hunk admitted. He wanted to say no, that if they were having that kind of meal, they would have been invited, but compared to Shiro and the Holts, they were pretty much uninvited guests. He was, of course, using a very liberal definition of guest- sure, maybe the Castle of Lions wasn't so bad, and he'd met a lot of cool aliens, but he'd still rather be at home right now, eating his mom's cooking.

"You don't think... you don't think something else happened, do you?" Hunk asked.

"Nah," Lance shook his head, "-didn't hear any alarms."

"You slept through the alarms last time." Hunk pointed out.

Lance shot him a glare. "Okay, fine. Maybe I did. But did you hear anything?"
No, he hadn't. Staring at his eggs, Hunk prodded them with a fork. That should have been comforting, but for whatever reason, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong.

They sat in relative silence for a few more minutes, before someone finally joined them in the kitchen. It was Matt- and he quickly took note of both his impressive bedhead and the deep bags under his eyes- not to mention the fact that he was making a beeline for where the coffee was kept.

Exchanging a look with Lance, his fellow cadet just shrugged. Looking over towards Matt, he could have sworn that he hadn't noticed them yet, too focused on making coffee. His theory proved correct when Hunk cleared his throat, and he practically jumped out of his skin.

Once he realized it was just them, Matt heaved a sigh of relief. "Oh, right. It's just you two. Geez, you spooked me."

"You, uh, you okay?" Hunk asked. "You seem kind of out of it."

Matt opened his mouth to say something, before he closed it, brows knitting together as if a realization had just dawned on him. "Oh, right. You guys don't know."

"Uh... don't know what?" Lance asked.

"Please tell me nobody broke into the Castle again." Hunk quickly added.

"No, it's not that, it's..." Matt frowned, running a hand through his hair, only successfully turning it into more of a mess, "sorry, I'm just trying to work out where to even start."

"Would coffee help?" Hunk asked.

"Yes, coffee would help." Matt told him. "Think you can wait like, two minutes?"

"Yeah, yeah, we can do that." Hunk agreed. Whatever was going on, it at least couldn't be that urgent if Matt could spare two minutes for his coffee to finish brewing. That relaxed him a little, just not as much as he hoped it would- it was still pretty obvious that something was wrong.

They were also the most awkward two minutes of Hunk's life. He wasn't going to speak for Lance- no offense, but his friend had a knack for getting himself into some pretty awkward situations. Like, you know... getting them kidnapped by the Garrison's former ace cadet. Like that.

By the time Matt had his coffee, Hunk was brimming with equal parts anticipation and dread for whatever news he had. He still somehow managed to hold himself back from asking about it until Matt had drank down half his mug, taking his long sigh of relief as his cue that he could now ask whatever he wanted.

"So uh... what happened?" Hunk asked.

"Yeah, and where is everyone else?" Lance added.

"Busy." Matt told him. "Sorry we didn't tell you guys yesterday, but there were some developments with that prince guy."

"Who, Prince Lotto?" Lance asked.

Matt actually snorted at that. "Pretty sure it's Lotor, but yeah."

"Pssh, same difference." Lance rolled his eyes.
Matt just gave him a weak smile, clearly fighting the urge to stare into his cup of coffee instead. "Well... apparently he kidnapped my mom."

Hunk wasn't even eating anything, and he still felt himself choke. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Lance pale, and it didn't take a genius to guess where his thoughts were going. To Veronica, probably. Which... yeah, he got. If Matt's mom had been abducted, then who was to say their families were safe?

And Lance's sister worked for the Garrison.

"Why would he do something like that?" Hunk asked.

"He said he wanted to make a trade." Matt told them. "My mom for the princess."

No way was that a clean deal. He didn't even know the first thing about this Prince Lotor, but he knew a trick when he heard one. There had to be some kind of ulterior motive there- other than you know, kidnapping the daughter of the dude his people were fighting a war against. Actually come to think of it, that was a pretty good motive in and of itself.

"So is that why nobody's here?" Hunk asked.

"No," Matt admitted, "-we've known that since yesterday afternoon. And I mean sure, we're still looking for her, but the main problem right now is uh... well, now they've got Keith."

Lance choked. "Mullet was kidnapped!?"

"Kind of." Matt said. "Katie tried to break into the Garrison last night. Keith went with her. Unfortunately, they were ready for us."

"So... now you're looking for your mom and Keith?" Hunk asked.

That sounded bad. That sounded very, very bad.

"Again, kind of." Matt told him. "We know where Keith is, unless the Garrison's already moved him offsite. We just can't get to him."

"What, they can't send out one of those Blade guys to get him?" Lance asked. "I thought they were like, super cool space ninjas or something."

"Yeah, isn't he one of them?" Hunk added.

"Apparently that's not how they do things." Matt frowned, crinkling his nose in disapproval.

Right. He and Keith were friends. Probably not as close as Keith and Shiro were, but still pretty close. Close enough that he had to be super worried right now.

And he was too! For all that yeah, he had basically kidnapped them, it wasn't like he hated Keith. He got it, he did! They were somewhere they weren't supposed to, and he'd been forced to make a choice. He was just doing his job. Sure, maybe that was like, Stockholm Syndrome or something doing the talking, but hey- tendency to abduct people aside, Keith wasn't a bad person, and he didn't exactly want to see him get hurt.

And everything he'd heard about this Lotor guy made him sound like bad news. Which, granted, wasn't much, but still.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Hunk asked. Sure, maybe he hadn't signed up for this, but he
didn't like just sitting around and waiting while everyone else was working hard to solve the problem. It just didn't feel right.

"Thanks, but we'll manage." Matt told him, giving him a weak smile. "Anyways, I should probably get back. Katie and I are going through the data she managed to steal from the Garrison. We're hoping we might find something."

Matt stayed long enough to refill his mug, before hastily departing. Watching him go, Hunk frowned.

"So... wanna maybe head down to the town and do a little reconnaissance?" Lance suggested. "I bet that spy of his knows where to find this prince guy."

Hunk chewed on his lip. "I mean... we tried that yesterday. We didn't find anything."

And he still thought the whole thing was dangerous.

"Sure, but it beats sitting around and doing nothing." Lance pointed out. "Besides, I still have a bone to pick with mullet. How am I supposed to do that if he's gotten himself kidnapped?"

Fair point. It sounded like Matt and Katie pretty much had the data covered, and it wasn't like he had any other viable skills. He was just an engineer, and this ship already had plenty. He was pretty sure that Coran had the Castle handled.

"Fine," Hunk relented, "-but you remember what Keith's dad said, right? If we find the spy, we tell him."

"Sure, sure, I remember." Lance promised, in a way that did not exactly fill him with confidence. He heaved a long sigh. Guess he'd just have to keep a close eye on Lance, make sure he didn't do something they would both end up regretting.

Because usually when Lance got in trouble, so did he.

Getting called to Commander Iverson's office was not how she expected to start the afternoon. She wasn't a cadet anymore- hadn't been in years- but there was still something about an unprompted summons from one of her commanding officers that always managed to make her nervous.

The fact that her baby brother was still missing didn't help matters.

To her surprise, Iverson was waiting outside of his office. She came to a halt, briefly hesitating before she opted for a salute, unsure of why she had been called and deciding it best not to test the waters too much just yet. "Commander."

"At ease, Officer." Iverson told her. "No need to stand on ceremony."

And that just gave her even more cause for concern. "Sir...?"

"Walk with me, McClain." Iverson said- and he didn't exactly give her much room to protest, because he was already on the move.

Falling into step behind him, Veronica's brow furrowed. "Is... is this about Lance?"

"We have a lead on where your brother might be." Iverson told her.

She froze- only to quickly scramble to catch up since apparently, she was the only one that the
news stopped in their tracks. "You know where Lance is?"

"Not precisely." Iverson told her. "But we know the general area. I'll be honest with you, McClain- we've actually known about this for awhile now."

This time she froze for real, staring at the Commander in shock. "So you've known where my brother was all this time, and you chose to do nothing?"

Iverson turned, looking back at her. "It's not that simple. We sent a scout out to that location ourselves previously, and they still haven't come back."

Well that was comforting. At the same time, she could almost hear the gears working in her head. "Is... is my brother in the valley, sir?"

It made the most sense. The Garrison had declared the valley off-limits for both personnel and cadets alike for nearly a year now. At the time, she had assumed it had something to do with the west town, which was only a few miles out from the valley in question, but something told her that maybe that wasn't the case.

She just didn't know what Lance would be doing there.

Cadet Kogane's apparent involvement in her brother's disappearance only further complicated matters. Former cadet, she reminded herself. It was hard to believe that someone with such a promising future had simply chosen to throw it all away like that. And now he'd apparently kidnapped not only her brother, but his friend as well?

She had a tough time swallowing that.

But that was the story that the Garrison had given them. That Lance and Hunk had gone to the west town on a dare, where they had crossed paths with Keith Kogane. There were witness statements that verified the fact that the two cadets had taken off in pursuit of Keith, which was the last time anyone saw them. The evidence was damning, but she still wasn't convinced.

The Garrison tried to paint it like the ex-cadet had a grudge, but if anyone had a grudge, it was her brother. He'd never liked the Kogane kid.

"We have every reason to believe so." Iverson confessed. "I'm sorry we didn't tell you sooner. There's a lot going on behind the scenes that you don't know about."

Veronica narrowed her eyes. "Pardon me for asking, but what?"

"It's a long story." Iverson told her.

"I've got time." Veronica observed.

"Not as much as you might think." Iverson stated. "We've recently learned some disturbing information about someone who the Garrison has considered a valuable ally. We need to make sure we're not making a mistake."

She didn't like the sound of that. She had heard rumors for a long time now that the Galaxy Garrison was involved with some shady under the table deals, but she had always thought they were just that- rumors. She'd never seen anything of the kind during her time here, at least.

"Why are you telling me this?" Veronica asked.
"Because you're the one they'll most likely listen to." Iverson told her.

She blinked. That answered absolutely nothing. She didn't even know who they were. "Does Admiral Sanda know-?"

"No." Iverson stated. "The admiral doesn't know about this, and I intend to keep it that way. At least for the time being."

"You're going behind the admiral's back." Veronica observed. She honestly didn't know Iverson had it in him. She'd be impressed, if she wasn't so clearly out of her depth here.

"The admiral wants us to hold course." Iverson stated. "I disagree. That's why I need you to do a favor for me, McClain."

"A favor." Veronica repeated. "I don't suppose you're going to be giving me any specifics?"

"There's a war coming, McClain." Iverson told her. "One that I fear the Garrison might be on the wrong side of. I need you to get a line of communication open with the other side."

She felt herself tense at that statement. The Commander was not one who typically gave himself over to metaphors, so odds were, he was probably being literal, but a war? How could there be a war brewing behind everyone's backs? Wouldn't someone have noticed by now?

And what did Lance have to do with all this?

"Again," Veronica began slowly, "-why me? I'm just an analyst."

"Because if you play your cards right," Iverson began, "-there's a chance you might get to see your brother."

Lance. She swallowed, looking Iverson square in the eye. "Tell me what I need to do."

Letting out a loud groan, Katie pawed at her eyes. It felt like she had been doing nothing but pour over data for hours. A quick glance at the clock told her that was exactly what she had been doing.

"Maybe you should take a break." Matt suggested.

She wanted to protest, but she knew Matt was right. Everything was starting to blend together. At this rate, she'd be of no use to anyone, much less her mother and Keith.

"Ugh," she crinkled her nose- just because she knew it was true didn't mean she had to like it, "-fine. Maybe you're right."

Matt just arched a brow. "Wow, you must really be out of it if you're actually agreeing with me."

"Do you want me to take a break or not?" Katie snapped, glaring at her sibling.

All he did was hold up his hands. She groaned- she was way too tired for this. She'd grab something to eat and then take a quick nap, and then hopefully she would be in better condition to continue. She couldn't just stop looking, not when two people were in danger, and one of them was because of her.

Now she knew how Keith felt, she thought. Carrying the weight of her father's death on his shoulders. She had said something truly horrible to him, hadn't she?
She had to get him back— at the very least so she could properly apologize.

"Think you can hold down the fort for awhile?" Katie asked, hauling herself to her feet. "I'll be gone for twenty-five minutes, at most."

"I'll be fine." Matt promised. "You get some rest."

Nodding, Katie dragged herself out of the archive room they had been using as their base of operations. She still had the heated blanket that she had gotten from Coran, draped around her shoulders. In hindsight, she realized that maybe plunging straight into data analysis when she had been so clearly in shock was not her best idea, but she just couldn't sit around and do nothing, not when this was all her fault.

Maybe it hadn't been her fault her mother had been taken hostage by Lotor— except she'd been the one to tell Keith to take her. That was the only reason Matt had come all the way out here, leaving their mother alone. Because she had chosen to get involved, her mother was now suffering the consequences.

She grit her teeth. The thought was almost enough to make her turn on her heel and head back, but she fought the urge. Matt was right. She needed to rest, at least for a little while, so she could approach this with a clear head.

She crossed paths with Shiro on the way back to her room, offering him a weak smile. She got the feeling he hadn't slept either.

"Katie," Shiro began, "-are you-?"

"Taking a rest." Katie told him. "Brother's orders."

He opened his mouth to say something, but clearly thought better of it. She wanted to huff— what was it with people and thinking that she wouldn't rest when she clearly needed to? It wasn't like she'd- okay, so fine, she had done it a ton of times in the past, so maybe they actually did have some kind of basis to go off of. Still.

"Glad to hear it." Shiro told her. "I take it you haven't found anything."

"Not yet." Katie shook her head. "Matt's going to keep looking while I take a quick nap. How did things go on your end? Did Allura contact Kolivan?"

"She did." Shiro said, his expression grave. "It's not good."

She could have guessed that much from his expression alone. "How bad?"

"Bad." Shiro told her. "But we have a plan. We just-"

"-need to find Lotor first?" Katie finished, to which Shiro just gave a helpless sigh. "You know, I'm really starting to hate this guy."

Shiro just grunted in agreement.

"So... have you spoken to Adam yet?" Katie asked, unable to fight her curiosity for much longer. It wasn't exactly relevant, but listen— she was curious, and she needed something to take her mind of the varying scenarios of impending doom that were currently playing out. She knew that he'd had something going on with the professor before Kerberos, even if she didn't know the specifics.
"Not yet." Shiro frowned. "He's being debriefed in full by Ulaz."

"Sounds fun." Katie observed, before letting out a loud yawn. "Well, I'm gonna get that rest. Maybe you should think about getting some yourself. No offense, but you look like death warmed over."

"So... normal." Shiro joked.

In spite of herself, she snorted. "Hey, don't sell yourself short. You weren't voted the Garrison's most eligible bachelor for three years running for nothing."

Shiro sputtered, his cheeks heating up. "Wha- did Matt tell you that?"

"It was dad, actually." Katie said.

She didn't miss the flash of guilt that went through Shiro's eyes at the mention of her father. Keith wasn't the only one shouldering the burden of guilt for his death.

"You just get some rest, Katie." Shiro told her, rather than address the elephant in the room. She was tempted to bring it up herself, but that was a conversation she needed to be fully awake for. "If anything happens, I'll come get you."

In other words, he wasn't going to sleep just yet. Maybe the real reason he had stopped himself earlier was because he knew he had no right to call her out on being stubborn, not when he was just as stubborn, if not more.

"Thanks," she said weakly, "I'll hold you to it."

She parted ways with him, all but collapsing in her bed. She weakly reached out to set a timer to wake her up in twenty minutes, but didn't quite make it. She fell asleep first.

Her dreams were anything but pleasant.

He wasn't even aware that he had fallen asleep.

Cracking his eyes open, Keith groaned. It sounded absurd that he could have dozed off in this situation, but he had. Maybe it shouldn't surprise him- time in the healing pod aside, he hadn't exactly gotten a lot of sleep lately. Ever since they had brought Shiro and Matt into the Castle, he'd been in a state of hyper-vigilance, only catching a few vargas of sleep each movement.

He might be Galra, but he was also part human, and it was starting to weigh him down. Heaving a long sigh, he rested his head against the wall, wondering how long he'd been asleep.

He was going to be handed over to Lotor tonight, if everything went according to plan. It had probably already been afternoon when Iverson had spoken to him, so he wondered exactly how many vargas of freedom he had left.

Not to mention free will.

He wasn't any less terrified by the prospect of losing it than he was earlier, but getting it out in some form had at least helped. His head was clearer than it had been, for one thing. He'd take his victories where he could get them.

And maybe, just maybe, he had convinced Iverson that there was something going on behind the scenes here that he needed to take a closer look at. He didn't know what would come of it- he
couldn't imagine that the Garrison would risk openly defying Lotor, not if they knew anything about the might of the Galra Empire.

So even if they did believe him, he'd still be handed over as planned.

Guess Lotor was going to get what he wanted- him as one of his generals. Staring down at his hands, he clenched his fists, for the first time almost resenting the fact that he was a halfbreed. If he wasn't, he doubted the prince would have any interest in him.

If he got out of this, he'd have to apologize to his father later. Hopefully he'd be the only one he'd have to apologize to- and hopefully, he'd get that chance.

He'd frankly rather be killed than be allowed to hurt anyone he cared about. He wouldn't be able to live with it if he did. At least his fellow Blades could defend themselves- but if he hurt the princess, or one of his friends...

Allura could defend herself. He knew that. Honestly, being her bodyguard at times had felt completely superfluous. But it was because he was charged with protecting her that he knew he couldn't live with himself if he ended up hurting her instead. Maybe when Zarkon had assigned him his mission, he'd done so with the intention of using him as a tool to destroy Altea, but it didn't change the fact that he had taken it seriously.

Besides, even with their difference in status, when it came down to it, Allura was his friend just as much as Shiro and the Holts were. Maybe even better, considering how long they had known each other.

Shiro could defend himself too. Their sparring session together had more than proven that. But the others... he shook his head. He wasn't going to dwell on that. He would do what he could to prevent that from happening.

Studying his cuffs, he frowned. Trying to make a break for it during the exchange wasn't a bad idea, but he wouldn't get very far with it unless they removed the cuffs from around his ankles. It was hard enough to walk with them on, much less run or fight. And somehow, he didn't get the impression that the Garrison was going to be in a hurry to remove them.

Closing his eyes, he let out a long sigh. He'd do what he could, but right now, his options weren't looking that great.

The feeling of something cold pressing against his cheek made Matt yelp.

"Time for a shift change?"

Groaning, Matt leaned back in his chair. He sure talked big to Katie, considering he was putting off sleeping to work on sorting through all this data just the same. Looking up at Adam, he rubbed his eyes, gratefully accepting the cold can of juice he'd been offered.

"Thanks," Matt said weakly, "-I think I've got another hour in me, though."

Adam just lifted his brows. "You were drooling."

Flinching, he raised a hand to his mouth, wiping away traces of drool. "Okay, maybe I don't have another hour in me."

Katie hadn't come back yet- and it had definitely been more than twenty-five minutes. He wasn't
worried though. He was pretty sure that after last night, she wasn't about to take anymore rash actions, at least, not without telling someone first. He just wished it was a lesson she didn't have to learn.

Not like this, at least.

"I might not be a tech wiz like you or your sister," Adam began, "-but I am familiar enough with how the Garrison works. I think I can take over for a bit."

"Might be a good idea." Matt grunted, opening the can of juice, taking a long sip. Oh man, he definitely needed that. Glancing at Adam out of the corner of his eye, he frowned. "So... you're the inside man, huh?"

He'd be more shocked, but frankly, he kind of hadn't had the time.

"Guess you could call me that." Adam noted. "Sam... your father approached me when Keith first enrolled in the Garrison. He knew I was already looking into some stuff, and wanted me to help. Guess I didn't know quite what I was signing up for at the time."

"Aliens?" Matt asked, arching a brow.

"No, I knew about that." Adam said, almost dismissively.

Glaring at him, Matt frowned. "You knew about aliens, and you didn't tell me?"

"It was supposed to be a secret." Adam simply stated.

Okay, fair enough. It wasn't like he and Adam were super close anyways. Sure, they had talked a few times- he did have that thing with Shiro, after all- but they weren't exactly buddies. Work friends, at best.

And he guessed his dad had kept the whole alien thing from him too, but he had a hard time being angry at his dad, especially since from the sound of it, his plan had always been to tell them once he was able. Part of him was just happy that he had gotten to see a part of his life's work fulfilled before he...

Nope. Now wasn't the time to be thinking about his dad. He knew it would just take him in a bad direction.

"You're right," Matt said, pushing back his chair, "-I should get some sleep. Thanks."

"It's the least I can do," Adam said. "Look, about Keith..."

He cut him off, shaking his head. He knew what he was going to say. "It's fine. You brought Katie back. And we're going to find Keith."

And his mother. This wasn't an either or situation. He wouldn't settle for anything less than both.

She replayed the message again. There wasn't much else she could do.

There was, and she knew that. Her maternal side was at war with the part of her that had been trained by the Blade- it was telling her to risk everything to rescue her son. She wouldn't lie- it was tempting. The only thing that stopped her was because she knew how rarely such spur of the moment rescue missions actually worked.
No. She had better odds of saving her son if she were patient. But patience seemed to be alluding her at the moment. That was the other reason she had shut herself away. Right now, she wasn't fit company for anyone, save maybe Heath- and he had thrown himself into border patrol work. He'd only briefly come back to the Castle to rest for two hours, before he headed back out again.

Guess he was just as restless as she was.

Leaning back in her chair, Krolia folded her arms in front of her. She was hoping that she might be able to pick up some clue from the message Lotor had sent, but so far, all she could tell was that Colleen had to be housed on Garrison property somewhere, if the obnoxious use of orange trim was any indication.

But that wasn't exactly a surprise- and it didn't exactly narrow things down either. The Garrison had no shortage of bases- not just all across the planet, but even a few off planet as well. That wasn't even factoring in the abandoned ones, of which there were also plenty, left behind when the Garrison had outgrown them.

And if she were Lotor, she wouldn't be keeping her hostage within driving distance of them.

Closing her eyes, she drew in a long breath. She didn't like doing nothing- especially not when the situation was as dire as Kolivan had described it. If Altea were to fall...

Sitting upright, a thought occurred to her. She hadn't yet shown the video to any of the humans yet. Heath had seen it, but his knowledge of the Garrison was nearly twenty phoebs out of date, and he admitted himself that he had never left that one base.

She didn't know if it would get her anywhere, but it was worth a shot.

Grabbing the recording device, she purposefully made her way down to the archives. She only stopped when she realized that her son's friends had switched places with Keith's flight instructor- Adam, she recalled.

Truthfully, she had almost forgotten he was here.

Adam looked up, taking notice of her. "Oh, uh... Krolia, right?"

Krolia gave him a curt nod. "Where are Matt and Katie?"

"Resting." Adam told her. "They've been working non-stop since last night."

Right. Humans required far more sleep than Galra did. Even though she was married to one, it was easy for her to forget.

"Is there something I can help you with?" Adam asked. He sounded nervous, though she couldn't imagine why.

"I was hoping to have them go over some footage for me." Krolia stated.

"Footage?" Adam asked.

"The message that Prince Lotor sent to us." Krolia told him. "I was hoping they might have better luck at identifying the base their mother is being kept at."

Only when she said it out loud did the obvious flaw in her plan present itself to her. If they couldn't, she would only just be needlessly traumatizing them. At times she forgot how sensitive
humans could be. Perhaps it was fortunate that neither were here, then.

"Maybe I could check it instead?" Adam offered.

Yes, that might work. Adam had been with the Garrison, and recently, at that.

Without responding, she set the recording device in front of him. Switching it on to display the message, Adam's eyes quickly narrowed, his body growing tense. While no harm came to Colleen Holt during the duration of the message, it was still a difficult thing to watch.

"Wait," Adam said suddenly, "go back."

Merely glancing down at him, she did as he requested.

"There. Stop." Adam told her, and she did so. "I know that emblem from somewhere. It's only a partial, but..."

Digging through the Garrison data that Katie had retrieved, Adam scanned it, searching for something. "Here. I can't be sure, but this looks a lot like the emblem that was commissioned for the first lunar base. It was decommissioned fifteen years ago after they built a newer one and hasn't been used since."

Well, Krolia thought, it certainly wasn't within driving distance.

"You're certain?" Krolia asked.

Adam frowned. "I'm not one hundred percent positive, but... if you were going to hide aliens, it wouldn't be a bad place to put them. There's almost no reason anyone would go there."

Krolia frowned. She was hoping for a more positive identification, but it was still the best lead they'd had so far. She couldn't afford to waste it.
"Lunar- are you saying mom's on the moon?" Katie asked.

"Katie! Katie, wake up!"

Groaning, at first all Katie did was attempt to swat her brother. Her eyelids were heavy, her sleep had been restless, and all she wanted to do was sink further into her bed. The last thing she wanted to be was awake.

Then, in a jolt, she remembered.

Matt had to scramble out of the way to avoid being headbutted, she got up so fast. It was enough to make her head spin, but not enough to do away with the sudden clarity she'd gained. She'd only meant to take a nap, but she didn't need to glance at her clock to know that she'd slept for way longer than twenty-five minutes.

She glanced at her clock anyways, and immediately cringed. She had been asleep for six hours, way longer than she initially planned. Worst of all, she didn't even feel all that refreshed. Groaning, she ran a hand through her bangs, finally acknowledging her brother. If he was here, there had to be a reason.

"Please tell me you're here because you found something, and not just because I overslept."

Matt, to her great relief, just grinned. "I found something. Or well, Krolia and Adam did, but-"

"Save the semantics." Katie cut him off. "Just tell me the news."

"We found mom." Matt told her, barely able to contain his excitement. "Allura and the Blades are meeting right now to decide on our next course of action. Shiro told me to come and get you."

She didn't waste any time in throwing off her covers. "Well, what are we sticking around here for? Let's go!"

This was probably the best news she had heard all day. She had been worried sick about her mom ever since Keith had spilled the beans- and maybe if they found her, they could also find Lotor. And maybe if they caught Lotor, then maybe the Blade would be more willing to risk rescuing
Keith.

Provided he hadn't been turned over to the prince already. Nobody had said that out loud, at least not to her, but that was just because nobody had to. It was pretty obvious that the Garrison's plan, whatever it might be, would involve turning Keith over to the Galran prince. What he'd do with him, she didn't know. Use him as another hostage, maybe.

Then again, if he had been turned over to Lotor already, there was a good chance he might be in the same location as her mom. In which case, they could kill two birds with one stone.

Or rescue two birds, she guessed. Maybe she should think of a better metaphor. One that felt a little less like a jinx.

Matt followed behind her, hot on her heels. It was only when it became obvious that she didn't actually know where this meeting was being held that he took the lead. Stepping onto the bridge behind him, she found that most of the Blades were already there, save for Regris, who she assumed was still on border patrol. Both Coran and Romelle were absent, leaving Allura as the sole Altean component of the meeting.

Shiro and Adam were both already there, but on other sides of the room, occasionally shooting the other glances, but only when the other wasn't looking. Even under the circumstances, she couldn't help but groan. She didn't know what it was about romance that turned people into total dumbasses, but she for one was grateful that she had no interest in it.

There was no sign of Keith's dad, but she made a rough guess that he was probably still patrolling the border with Regris. He'd been like a ghost since the news broke, and even Krolia looked tenser than normal. She bit her lip, gaze darting downwards.

Right. Keith being in enemy hands was her fault. She couldn't let herself forget that.

"Looks like everyone's here." Shiro observed, catching her eye. He gave her a smile that was equal parts reassuring and sympathetic. She returned it as best she could.

Allura nodded. She wasn't wearing the gown that she had become accustomed to, but rather, the pressure suit that she had only seen her wear once before, the morning after one of Lotor's generals had raided the Castle. That hadn't even been that long ago, but it sure as heck didn't feel that way.

She wondered if that normal in a war. If Keith had been living underneath that pressure the entire time he'd been at the Garrison. If he had, she hadn't noticed.

"Thanks to Adam, we have managed to obtain a possible lead as to Colleen Holt's location." Allura began. "And hopefully, Lotor's as well."

"There's just one problem." Adam began. "Well, two, actually."

Allura nodded, unbothered by the interruption. With a wave of her hand, she brought up an image on the main screen- one that she instantly recognized as being a Galaxy Garrison emblem, just not one that she was overly familiar with. She was fairly certain that it was a base logo- they all followed the same general pattern- she just didn't know which base it was for.

"This is the emblem of the Galaxy Garrison's first lunar base," Adam began, ":which I have reason to believe is where Colleen Holt is being held hostage."

She swore the record scratch was practically audible.
"Lunar- are you saying mom's on the moon?" Katie asked.

"It would seem so." Allura replied.

Okay, that would explain why they hadn't been able to find her. Or Lotor, for that matter. Plus, they were dealing with aliens that had developed the technology to traverse deep space- going to the moon and back was practically nothing. But still- the moon? The literal, actual moon?

Unexpected didn't even begin to cover it.

"I'm guessing the first problem is getting up there." Matt said.

Krolia nodded. "We have no shortage of ships capable of making the flight. The problem is arriving undetected."

"Even if we try to remain out of visual range, the Garrison has scanners set up that are rigged to detect anything in the vicinity." Adam reported. "There's no way to avoid them."

"We don't have anything that could get around them?" Shiro asked.

"Not here." Ulaz shook his head. "There are several ships in the Blade's fleet that are capable of such stealth, but presently all of them remain on Altea."

"And without a wormhole, there's no way we can get one here quickly." Allura stated.

"I'm guessing that's not the most subtle form of approach." Matt said.

"I'm afraid not." Allura told him. "They give off a unique signature that can be tracked. Even if we were to wormhole the ship in, it is highly likely that Lotor might be able to detect it."

"So even if he wouldn't be able to detect the ship itself, he'd still know we were coming." Shiro stated.

Allura nodded. "Precisely."

Chewing on her lip, Katie mulled over the problem. It felt like there was something that... ah! With a spark, she recalled that Keith's hoverbike had some form of cloaking. Maybe...

"I think I might be able to help." Katie said. "Keith's hoverbike has cloaking, right? If I could install that system onto one of the pods, then maybe..."

Krolia considered it. "It could work. Heath built the cloaking device on that bike in accordance to the same schematics we use to build the cloaking device for our ships."

"I have experience in integrating our technology with that of the Alteans." Ulaz said. "I may be able to assist."

"That's my sister!" Matt remarked, a proud grin on his face. She felt herself preen at it, but not as much as she would usually- it was her fault they were in this mess, so it went without saying that she would do whatever she could to make up for it.

Not to mention get her mom back. Her and Keith.

"That takes care of one of the problems." Shiro said. "What's the other?"

"That would be the lunar base itself." Allura remarked. "We simply lack the intelligence to
properly plan an infiltration."

"It's a pretty big base." Adam told them.

"And I'm guessing they could be keeping mom anywhere on it." Matt stated.

Again, Allura nodded. "I am afraid so. Going in blindly would be a huge risk."

"We can't just leave her there." Katie said, narrowing her eyes. "We have to rescue her."

This was already sounding too much like what had happened with Keith- that even if they knew where he was, nobody was going to save him. But her mom wasn't a Blade- she hadn't signed up for this. She didn't even know what was going on.

Her mom was tough. She knew that. But these were dangerous aliens they were talking about here. She wouldn't rest easy until she knew for a fact that she was safe.

"And we shall." Allura stated. "We just need to gather more information first."

"It's not in the files that Katie downloaded from the Garrison?" Matt asked. "Even if the base is defunct, they should still have blueprints."

"Unfortunately, that information doesn't appear to be present." Krolia stated.

Clicking her tongue, Katie fought the urge to growl. The download had to have cut off before she could get that information. Of all the luck!

"We could try to remotely access the Garrison." Matt said.

Adam shook his head. "After what happened last night, they're probably all on guard. I don't think we'll be getting into their servers that easily."

"There has to be a way." Katie insisted. "We can't just come this close and just do nothing."

"I understand how you feel." Krolia said. "But if we choose to go in blind, there's a chance we could be detected before we have a chance to locate your mother."

"At which point, we will have made it abundantly clear that we have no plans of engaging in a hostage exchange." Allura remarked.

She didn't need to say anything more. She got the picture. Judging from the way the color drained from Matt's face, so did he. Clenching her fists, she stared down at the ground. So not only could inaction get her mom killed, but taking action could as well. That was just... that didn't seem fair.

"We do have the blueprints of the Garrison's active moon base. They're in the files that Katie downloaded." Adam offered. "If we combine that with publicly available photographs of the old one, we might at least be able to come up with some kind of basic floor plan."

Allura frowned, considering it. "It's worth a shot, I suppose."

"Wait," Shiro began, glancing over towards Krolia, "-the base was closed fifteen years ago, right?"

Krolia nodded. "That is what Adam has told me."

Shiro briefly spared Adam a glance, his gaze just as quickly darting away again. "Your husband left earth twenty years ago. Before that, he worked for the Garrison. He might have some intel
Krolia blinked, before a faint smile tugged on her lips. "It's possible. I will consult with him."

"Please do." Allura told her. "The more information we can get on this lunar base, the better."

"I will attempt to extract information from our prisoner." Ulaz said. "She may know something. Once I am done, I will assist Katie with the cloaking device."

Katie felt herself breathe. Right. They still had options.

"So," Matt began once Krolia and Ulaz had left, "what are we doing about Keith?"

The hush that fell over the room was undeniably tense. She felt herself clench her fists, nails biting into her palms. Even if they got her mom back, there was no guarantee that they'd be able to free Keith. It wasn't like she had forgotten that was also a possibility, she was just... she just really hoped they could.

Keith had only been captured because she'd struck out on her own. No other reason.

"We cannot be sure if he is even still in Garrison hands," Allura observed. "For all we know, he could already be with Lotor."

Katie lifted her head at the choice of phrase. That didn't seem like normal wording. "With Lotor?"

Allura frowned. "Right. I suppose no one has told you yet."

Katie's brow furrowed at that. "Told me what?"

Shiro drew in a deep breath, as if bracing himself. "Lotor has a general that can manipulate minds. We think he might try and use her ability on Keith."

She felt all the color drained out of her face. She remembered them saying something like that back when they had first been briefed on the situation with Lotor, but honestly, she'd kind of forgotten it until now. She had been so focused on the idea that Lotor was interested in using that ability on Allura, that she hadn't really stopped to consider that he might try to use it on Keith.

"I'm sorry," Allura began, "we should have told you sooner."

Katie just swallowed, nodding her head in agreement. Yeah, that would have been nice to know before she had brought Keith with her into a surefire trap. "So, you're saying...?"

To his credit, Shiro did a fair job at masking his pain. He just didn't do it nearly well enough to fool her. "There's a good chance that Keith might already be working for Lotor."

Keith. Working for Lotor. Just thinking about it gave her the shivers. Even worse was the fact that he wouldn't be given any choice in the matter.

"But we can't be sure, right?" Matt asked.

Allura shook her head. "We cannot know for sure. Only I fear that when the time comes, Lotor will not hesitate to use him against us."

"But there's a way to save him, right?" Katie asked. "Some way to beat this power?"

Allura bit her lip, looking uncertain. "I cannot know for sure. There is much that isn't understood
about Narti's powers. The only one who really knows anything about them is Honerva, and I doubt she would be of much help."

Right. Of course the only person with the know how would be the enemy empress. Because that was just apparently how things went around here- just when she thought they couldn't get any worse, they somehow did.

Shiro spared her a look, equal parts sympathetic and understanding. "Why don't you and Matt get started on that cloaking device? Best to be prepared."

She nodded her head, almost numbly. Back when they still didn't know what was going on with Keith, alien brainwashing had been one of the options she'd considered. She just didn't expect it to come back to haunt her like this.

And it was her fault. Hers.

"Wait," Allura began, as she turned to leave, "-before you go, there is something I must confess to you."

Blinking, Katie looked up at the princess. Confess? What could the princess possibly have to confess to her? It wasn't like it was her fault that Keith had been captured. It was barely even her fault that her mother had been kidnapped by hostile aliens, even if it was true that it never would have happened if they hadn't chosen Earth to hide on it. It wasn't like that had been her choice anyways.

"It's about Keith." Allura told her. "I... our original plan was for Romelle to take my place and make contact with the Garrison under the guise of accepting Lotor's offer, while Keith used that as a distraction to gain access to their systems. I suppose what I wish to say is... this is not your fault."

Katie blinked again, staring at her. "So... your plan from the beginning was to do the same thing I did?"

"Essentially, yes." Allura admitted. "And seeing as Zethrid was already there, I fear that we would simply be in the exact same situation as we are now. The only difference is that it happened a little sooner, and that they would have two prisoners, instead of just one."

"Maybe even three." Adam chimed in.

Allura glanced back at him, before nodding her head. "Yes, what Adam says is correct. And your mother would likely be in grave danger as well. At least this way, Lotor is likely to believe that you merely acted alone."

She... hadn't thought about it like that. It didn't really get rid of the guilt- there was no guarantee that the princess' plan would have failed as spectacularly as she claimed, but... she guessed there was at least a little comfort in knowing that her impulsive plan might have actually been the lesser of two evils, so to speak.

It still didn't change the fact that Keith had been captured.

But she could change it. Right now, successfully installing that cloaking device was the first step to set things right- and it was something that she knew she could do. She had been learning about Altean tech from Coran for weeks. She could do this.

Giving Allura a weak smile, Katie let some of the tension slip out of her shoulders. "I... thanks, princess. I appreciate it."
"We will get him back." Allura promised. "He is like family to me."

Yeah. Her too.

"You seem... perturbed."

Romelle's observation came with a curious frown, the Altean cocking her head slightly to one side. While Hunk had gone in to visit Shay, he'd opted to remain outside the humble tent that she shared with her brother and grandmother- didn't want to get in the way of the mood. Hunk might try to deny it, but he couldn't fool him- he was totally head over heels for the Balmeran.

He just kind of wished that they could do this visit after they had checked the town for any suspicious activity, and not before, but hey- he got it. Hunk was worried about Shay. And like any good friend, he wasn't about to stand in the way of doing something that helped put him more at ease, not with how nervous he knew the big guy could get sometimes.

At least they could check on Shay.

He tried really hard not to think about his own family. About Veronica, specifically. It was funny- she had been so excited to get into the Garrison, and he'd been so excited for her at the time- but now he just found himself wishing she worked literally anywhere else. The CIA could use a few good analysts, right?

"Just anxious." Lance said.

"Anxious?" Romelle frowned, like she somehow didn't get it. "Anxious about what?"

He couldn't tell if she was just naturally oblivious, or if it was just all part of an act on her part. Maybe both. Since apparently, she was actually a highly trained body double, and not just a maid or something like that, like he'd assumed. And he'd thought learning that Keith was an elite alien super spy bodyguard had been mind blowing enough.

"You know," Lance frowned, "-just anxious. This whole situation has me on edge."

A look of understanding dawned on Romelle's face. So she had been acting. Maybe. Like he said, it was pretty tough to tell. "You're worried about your family."

Still, he didn't exactly see any reason to deny it. "Yeah. My sister Veronica especially."

Romelle nodded in understanding. "I understand. My family is still back on Altea. I tried to convince Bandor to come with me, but he refused. Said he wanted to stay and fight."

"Bandor?" Lance asked.

"My younger brother." Romelle smiled. "He has a very inventive spirit. A bit like Katie, actually, now that I think about it. They would probably get along."

Huh. It wasn't like he didn't know that the aliens here had families that they had to leave behind- it was just that they didn't talk about it all that much. He guessed it made sense- at least he was still on the same planet as his family. Everyone here... he couldn't imagine how many light years away from their families they were. It had to be pretty rough.

"Probably." Lance agreed. "I just... I don't know. I know Veronica can handle herself, but she's still my sister, and I can't help but worry about her."
"She works for the Garrison?" Romelle inquired.

"Yeah. She's an analyst." Lance told her. "She's probably worried sick about me. They all are."

Romelle's face fell at that. "I am sorry."

Lance just snorted. "Not your fault. It's mullet's."

"Yes, I suppose it is." Romelle admitted, but she didn't exactly cheer up at his joke. If anything, she just looked even more down.

He nearly slapped himself. Right. She was Allura's rained body double. She'd probably been raised around Allura, which meant she'd also probably been raised around Keith. Keith, who had gone and gotten himself kidnapped, winning an award for irony that Lance didn't even know was being given out.

"Look, I'm sorry." Lance said. "I didn't mean it like that."

Romelle merely shook her head. "You have every right to be annoyed with Keith."

Heck yeah, he did. But what kind of jerk made someone feel even worse when they were already worried about someone? Not Lance McClain, that was for sure.

"Hey, who knows?" Lance shrugged. "Maybe Hunk and I will find that spy, and we can find that Prince Lotto guy no problem."

"It's Lotor." Romelle deadpanned, and then blinked, narrowing her eyes. "Wait. What do you mean, find the spy?"

"Uh, did I say find the spy?" Lance stammered, averting his gaze from the Altean, internally cursing his own big mouth. "Because what I meant was... oh hell. Yeah, I meant find the spy."

Romelle stared at him in disbelief. "That's what you've been doing? Something that dangerous?"

Shifting on his feet, Lance stared down at them. "I, uh... look, it wasn't my idea. Keith's dad is the one who talked us into it, I swear."

Sure, he'd been onboard with it like, immediately, but Romelle didn't need to know that. He was probably in enough trouble as it was already.

"Oh did he now?" Romelle asked, such a sour expression on her face that he just knew she was going to be having a word with ex-commander Kogane once all of this was over. "And Hunk? Is he in on this as well?"

He opened his mouth to claim that he wasn't- no need to get Hunk into trouble too. He quickly shut it- he'd already used the word us, so it would be pretty obvious he was lying if she just stopped to think about it for a second. So instead, he just cringed, slowly nodding.

Romelle's look of annoyance only grew. Crossing her arms in front of her, she glowered at him, and he had to wonder if she had picked that up from Keith, or if Keith had picked that up from her. Either way, he was suddenly overcome with the desire to be literally anywhere but here.

"So all this time, you've been snooping around, looking for the spy," Romelle began, and he flinched- yep, she was definitely mad, "-and you didn't think to include me?"

Opening his mouth to say something, Lance snapped it shut, blinking. "Wait... that's what you're
"Well of course!" Romelle insisted. "Ezor only tried to kill one of my best friends, and the only reason she even got in here in the first place was because of that spy. Why wouldn't I want to be involved in trying to find them?"

Huh. Good point.

"I mean... it's dangerous." Lance reminded her.

Romelle merely gave him a blank stare. He didn't know if it were good or bad timing, but at that exact moment, Hunk chose to came out from Shay's tent, barely able to get a word in edgewise before Romelle simply hefted his entire body over her head without so much as breaking a sweat.

"...that is fairly convincing." Lance admitted.

"Okay," Hunk deadpanned, showing what was frankly an impressive amount of detachment from his current predicament, "-clearly I've missed something."

"Clearly." Romelle echoed, setting Hunk back down just as easily as she had picked him up. "Now, will you let me help you or not?"

All Lance could do was meekly nod. She might have phrased it as a question, but he was pretty sure he didn't actually have a choice.

"That old base?"

Heath frowned. He wondered what it was that Krolia had come all this way to discuss with him, but he hadn't expected it to be the old lunar base. He hadn't been in the least bit surprised to hear that it had been decommissioned upon his return to Earth- given the state it was in, he was just surprised the Garrison had kept it functioning for as long as they had.

"Sure, I've been there." Heath told her. "Why do you ask?"

A look of relief washed over his wife's features. Maybe to anyone else, it would have been subtle, but he'd known Krolia for over twenty years now. Maybe for a Galra, that amounted to just a blink of an eye, but for a human, that was a pretty long time. Long enough to know all of her tells, subtle or not.

"We have reason to believe that is where they are keeping Colleen Holt." Krolia stated.

"Sam's wife?" Heath asked. "You're sure?"

It wasn't that he doubted her, but... the old lunar base? He wouldn't have have even considered it.

"Positive." Krolia said.

Right. Okay then. He guessed it would be a pretty good place to hide an alien. Probably better than the rundown shack that he'd used to hide Krolia the first time around.

"Right," Heath nodded, "-so what did you need to know?"

"Unfortunately, we don't seem to be having much luck tracking down information about it's layout." Krolia said. "We were hoping you might know something."
Heath frowned. "I did do a few supply runs back in the day, but I didn't get too far beyond the hangar. I'll tell you what I can, but I don't know how much of it will be useful."

"It'd give us something to go off of." Krolia told him.

"If it'll help, I'll be glad to tell you anything I can remember." Heath said. "Any news about Keith?"
Krolia shook her head. "No. Nothing."

Yeah, he figured. Turning on his heel, Heath stared out towards the horizon. Climbing up to the top of the plateau hadn't been easy, at least not for him- Krolia had made it look effortless- but from up here, he had a clear view for miles. While he might not be able to see the Garrison from here, it still made for a good vantage point. He didn't know what he expected to see- he just expected something.

He wanted to believe that there was still someone at the Garrison who had their wits about them. There were still good folk working there- even in the higher rungs of command. Maybe Admiral Sanda had been blinded by whatever it was Lotor had promised her, but there had to be someone working under her who could see that there was something fishy about this whole situation.

He wanted to believe that. He had to believe that.

Even then, he had a tough time picturing Sanda as approving of Colleen's abduction. He was willing to bet anything that she didn't know about it. And maybe that could work in their favor- in Keith's favor.

Krolia squeezed his shoulder, an affectionate gesture that she had picked up from him. "He will come back to us."

Giving her a weak smile, he placed his hand over hers. "I know."

That he had full confidence in. What he wasn't sure of was if he'd come back to them as the Keith they all knew. Because once Lotor got a hold of him... he bit his lip, trying not to think about it.

Sometimes he wished Keith wasn't a Blade. Wished they had raised him here, on Earth. Krolia had talked about it, when she'd first found out she was pregnant. About staying here, about leaving behind the brewing war for the safety of their peaceful planet.

In the end, they had decided against it. As Keith grew, he convinced himself he'd made the right choice- maybe he wasn't purple, but he fit right in with the other Galra younglings. It was clear that he could thrive there in a way he never could have on Earth.

But at times like this... he doubted.

Krolia's hand slipped away from his. She took a step forward, seeming to stare off into the distance. Just when he was about to ask what it was, it came into his line of vision.

A car, Garrison issue.

Tensing, Krolia stood at full alert. She didn't avert her gaze and growled even as she spoke to him. "Contact Regris."

Just breathe.

Her vehicle breaking down was within her realm of expectations. Iverson hadn't told her much, but
he'd at least warned her about that. Heaving a long sigh, Veronica grabbed her pack. Slinging it over her shoulders, she stared out into the valley beyond, the sun just starting to sink below the horizon.

In half an hour, the Galaxy Garrison would be making contact with the leader of an alien race. In perhaps less time than that, she'd be making contact of her own.

Aliens. Of all the possible things for her baby brother to have gotten mixed up in, it was aliens. If Iverson hadn't shown her proof, she never would have believed it.

She didn't know what was more unbelievable. That aliens were real, or that Lance's sworn rival from the Garrison was one. And while she'd always thought the Kogane kid was a little weird, him being an alien wasn't an option she'd ever considered.

But the glowing eyes were pretty hard to deny.

Exhaling, she adjusted the strap of her pack, staring off into the horizon. Supposedly somewhere out here was some kind of alien princess that Iverson wanted to establish contact with. Because apparently, in space, everything was a monarchy. Figures.

Right. Advancing on foot, Veronica paused to glance behind her. She still wasn't sold on this whole idea, but if it would let her see Lance again, then it was worth a shot. She just hoped Iverson was right.

Personally, at least. In terms of the bigger picture, she hoped he was wrong. That maybe they were trusting the right aliens. Because if they weren't... getting mixed up in an alien war sounded bad enough. Getting mixed up on the wrong side... well, that sounded a lot worse.

Of course, if he were wrong, that meant that not only had her brother been abducted by evil aliens, but that she was about to walk right into their nest.

So. That was fun.

She must have trudged about a mile before she finally let herself take a break. Removing her canteen from her pack, she took a drink of water, letting out a long sigh. Aside from that abandoned shack she had passed a few minutes ago, she didn't see much of anything out here. Definitely no alien ship.

Still, she had a while to go before she actually got to the valley. And if what Iverson had told her was anything to go off of, she was bound to run into a greeting party at some point.

Hooking her canteen back onto her bag, she adjusted the straps again before heading forward. She only got a few steps in before she paused, frowning. Maybe it was just her imagination, but she could swear that she felt someone watching her.

Glancing behind her, she narrowed her eyes. Maybe she was just being paranoid.

"You have some kind of business out here, officer?"

Or maybe not.

Turning on her heel to say something, she immediately froze. Because out of the three people staring her down, she was pretty sure only one of them was actually human. The one on the right almost could have fooled her, but the one on the left- the tail alone was enough of a giveaway.
Right. Guess she really was dealing with aliens here.

Holding up her hands in surrender, Veronica steeled herself. Aliens or no aliens, she wasn't about to back down here. She had a mission to finish- and a baby brother to find.

"I'm just here to talk."

"Then talk."

Turning her head, she looked at the one who had spoken. They were probably female, though their mask distorted their voice. At least, she was pretty sure it was because of their mask, but she couldn't be certain.

She also didn't sound very happy.

"I was sent here by Commander Iverson." Veronica began. "He can't leave the Garrison without rousing suspicion, so I'm acting on his behalf."

"Iverson?" The lone human asked. "You're working for Iverson?"

He spoke with such familiarity, that Veronica decided to take a gamble. "Are you... Commander Kogane?"

The man merely snorted. "Ex-commander. I hung up my uniform a long time ago."

Right. Iverson had mentioned that he might be involved. All she knew about him was Garrison hearsay- that he had been their ace pilot, right up until he'd gone AWOL on them because he'd met some woman. Considering the fact that his son was apparently not human, she was guessing that woman was an alien.

Possibly the woman standing next to him. Oh. That would explain why she sounded so annoyed. Right. Made sense. They had her son. Of course she would be.

But they had her brother- and for a lot longer.

Slowly lowering her hands, Veronica gauged their reactions. They didn't appear to be openly hostile, but it was clear that they were all on their guard. She didn't want to do anything to startle them.

"Look," Veronica began, "I'll be the first to admit that I don't have a clear picture of what's going on here. All I know is that Commander Iverson wants to cover his bases. He wants to establish contact."

"So he sent you."

It was the tailed alien who spoke- and they also sounded annoyed. Great.

"Yes," Veronica nodded, "-he sent me."

"Why you?" The woman- Keith's mother, she was just going to assume- asked.

"Because I'm Veronica McClain," she said, "-and you have my brother."
the prince

Chapter Summary

Narti's hand was cold on his shoulder. He froze, his breath hitching in his throat. He hadn't expected the effect to be so immediate, but it was all he could do to keep from buckling at the faintest touch.

Chapter Notes

It is time. Here's Lotor, twenty three chapters late, as is fashionable. I hope everyone enjoys this chapter, because I had fun writing it! My only regret is that Acxa ended up with like, one line, whoops. Sometimes you just don't get a chance to shine. But here we are, heading towards the climax! Next chapter we'll check back in on what Allura and the Blades are doing now that Veronica has arrived, but don't worry... we'll catch up to Keith soon.

"Cadet."

Keith didn't even flinch. He had heard Admiral Sanda coming long before she actually showed up at his cell door, so he'd had plenty of time to brace himself for what was to come.

Instead, he tilted his head to his side, locking eyes with her. "I take it you're not here to bust me out."

Not when she was flanked by a pair of Galra sentries, she wasn't.

"No," Sanda stated, "-I'm here to escort you."

Keith forced himself not to react, to show any signs of weakness. It was more difficult than he'd like to admit. He wished at least he had his Blade armor. It was hard to feel secure in flimsy human clothing.

Instead, he just smirked. "You're the one escorting me? Guess I should be honored."

Sanda merely narrowed her eyes, but otherwise didn't dignify his quip with a response. Instead she merely squared her shoulders, lifting her chin in an attempt to make herself look more authoritative.

"On your feet, cadet." She instructed.

He complied. It wasn't like he had much of a choice. Resisting wouldn't accomplish anything aside from using up needless energy. As soon as he saw a chance to escape, he had to be ready to take it. Assuming that he even got that much.

"In front," Sanda instructed, stepping aside, "-move."
He merely shot her a glare, but followed her instructions to the letter. The cuffs around his ankles allowed for some degree of movement, but still made walking extremely difficult, so his progress was slow. Sanda was at least patient- or just not in a hurry.

Outside of his cell, the light was almost blinding. He had to take a few ticks to adjust. There weren't any windows, so he had no way of gleaning what time of day it was, but he assumed it was probably sometime after sunset, likely after lights out and all non-essential personnel had gone home for the day.

They were trading a former cadet away to an alien prince. That wasn't exactly something they would want just anyone to see.

"Don't try anything funny." Sanda instructed. "We have orders to bring you by force, if necessary."

Keith just snorted. "You're taking orders from Lotor now? That's rich."

He didn't turn his head to look, but he knew the admiral was glaring at him. It wasn't hard to guess. "I'm doing what needs to be done to ensure Earth's security."

"By striking a deal with a hostile Empire?" Keith questioned. "Yeah. You're doing a great job."

"You and the Alteans are the ones who brought this war to our doorstep." Sanda pointed out. "I won't risk putting the people of Earth in danger for a war that we have nothing to do with."

He bit his tongue, gaze fixed on the ground. He didn't even have a defense against that. She was right- them being here had brought the war to Earth. There was no question about that. It was his own actions that had ensured that the Galra Empire would take beyond a passing interest in the planet, and he couldn't say anything to the contrary.

If he had just stayed hidden... he closed his eyes, drawing in a long breath. Even if he had stayed hidden, all he would have done was bought time. When the cruiser that they had sent to capture the members of the Kerberos mission lost contact with the main fleet, it would only be a matter of time before they figured out that there were probably at the very least, Alliance allies taking refuge in the system.

But abandoning Shiro and the Holts? That was never even an option.

It was ironic. It was his human blood that had ensured Earth's involvement, in the end. It was both what had lead them here, and what had prompted him to make the choices that he had. If he were full Galra, they probably wouldn't even be here.

If he were full Galra, then Lotor probably wouldn't have ever taken an interest in him.

Opening his eyes, he stared straight ahead. He didn't have to guess what kind of fate was in store for him. The only question was just how much time he had between being handed over to Lotor, and ending up brainwashed by Narti. He couldn't decide if he wanted to get it over with quickly, or if he wanted Lotor to take his time, so as to maybe give Allura and the Blade time to rescue him.

It wouldn't happen. He knew that. It wasn't the Blade way. Allura would probably argue in favor for it, but at the end of the day, she only had one trained combatant, and that was Romelle. Even his own mother wouldn't come for him.

He wasn't upset. He knew the risks. He had known that there was a chance that he might be captured when he had decided to escort Katie to the Garrison. He also knew that if he hadn't agreed, she wouldn't stop trying to get there on her own. If anyone could figure out how to slip out
of the Castle of Lions without being noticed, it was Katie. Better with him than without.

There was nothing he could do but resign himself to his fate. It didn't mean he would give into it that easily, but he was at least prepared for what was to come.

But still, some small part of him held out the hope that they would. Maybe Shiro was right. Maybe he was still a child. Maybe he was more human than he gave himself credit for.

In spite of the circumstances, he still found himself making a mental map of the halls, which turns they took, where the cameras were located. It was ingrained in him from years of training. He didn't even know if the information would be useful, but still he found himself taking it all in.

He be lying if he tried to claim he could stand the thought of having his own skills turned against him. Against Allura, against the Blade- his own family. But he knew it would happen. There was no point in trying to fool himself into thinking otherwise.

He could always pretend to join Lotor, but he knew that the Galran prince wouldn't buy it for one second. In that case, he'd rather resist until the last possible second.

"Stop." Sanda instructed, and Keith complied.

They were standing in front of a pair of doors, which were flanked by another pair of sentries. He hadn't seen any human guards since he had entered the prison wing. Either Sanda wasn't willing to put them at risk, or Lotor didn't trust them.

He could catch the scent of desert air from just beyond the doors, so they had to lead outside. The admiral brushed past him, instructing the pair of sentries that guarded them to open the doors. Lotor must have programmed them to follow her instructions to an extent, because they did just that.

His instincts were right- it was well after sunset, the moon high in the sky. He stared up at it, taking in what might very well be his last view of Earth's night sky.

Back when they had first landed, his father had brought him out into the desert to watch the sunset. They had climbed up onto the roof of the small shack that skirted his property, the same one he had hid his mom in after she had crashed. They sat there until the sky turned dark, and stars dotted the horizon.

He remembered his father's calm, steady voice as he taught him about Earth's stars, about the planet's constellations. They hadn't had anything like that back on Daibazaal. The Galra weren't the type to gaze up at the night sky, and see in the stars images that weren't actually there.

The Alteans had constellations. Allura had taught him them, once she had begrudgingly accepted his presence as her bodyguard- or maybe she had just been trying to take her mind off the fact that Romelle was still in a healing pod. He had sat with her, listening to her chatter on about Altean myths and legends, heroes that they said were now depicted in the stars, in honor of their valiant deeds.

Her voice wasn't calm or steady. It had been weak and vulnerable. She had come close to losing one of her best friends that day, and it had affected her deeply, even though being Allura's double was Romelle's sworn duty. Even though Romelle knew the risks- that death was accepted as an occupational hazard.

That was the difference between her and Prince Lotor. Allura cared.
Lotor just viewed everyone as a pawn. If they weren't useful, they weren't needed.

Tearing his eyes away from the moon, they landed on none other than the prince in question. He grit his teeth. Lotor had no right to look that smug.

If there was one thing he had in common with Allura, it was his regal composure. He held himself every bit like the prince he was. He wasn't alone- with him were Zethrid and Acxa. There was no sign of Narti, but that didn't give him any comfort. Narti was here. They had confirmed that- Lotor had ensured it. He wasn't the type to make a threat unless he intended to follow through with it.

And Narti's presence was a threat.

They weren't alone either. The top commanding officers had all been assembled- Iverson included, he noted, catching the man's good eye. He wondered if anything had come out of talking to him. Iverson held his gaze, but betrayed nothing.

Probably for the best.

"Admiral Sanda," Lotor greeted the admiral, "-I see that you have held up your end of the bargain. I trust that you were able to obtain the information you needed?"

"We still don't have the coordinates of the Altean ship." Sanda informed him. "He refused to speak."

"Pity." Lotor mused. "Perhaps we'll be able to get a bit more out of him."

He felt himself tense. Right. He had been so focused on being brainwashed into serving Lotor, that he had nearly forgotten that they would be able to make him talk. He tried to convince himself that it didn't matter- Lotor already knew where the Castle of Lions was, so what else could he possibly have to tell him?

A lot, actually. The number and identities of the Blades onboard. Security measures. Where Ezor was being held. The black lion's location. The fact that they even had the black lion. The access code to the its hangar. Who its new paladin was.

"And you'll inform us if you do?" Sanda inquired. "We have innocent cadets who are being held captive by these Alteans of yours. Cadets we have every interest in seeing safely returned to their families."

"But of course," Lotor promised her, "-you have my word."

He just glowered at Lotor. He wanted to say that was a lie, but he didn't know what the consequences might be if he did. He had warned the Garrison, but he wasn't exactly oblivious to the risks that they would be taking if they turned against Lotor at this point. Their base was crawling with Galra sentries, all of whom could be ordered to turn on them at the drop of a hat. Not just on the commanding officers- but the cadets as well.

Effectively, Lotor had taken the entire Galaxy Garrison hostage. He wondered how many of them even realized that.

He couldn't in good conscience sentence them all to death.

Victory or death was the Galra way- his way- but that didn't mean sacrificing others for the sake of your own survival. The only acceptable sacrifice was yourself, and yourself alone.
"You know," Lotor observed, stepping forward, using his height to loom over him, almost seeming to drink in his unmasked appearance, "if you had simply accepted my proposal in the first place, it wouldn't have had to come to this."

Keith just grit his teeth. "How about you just eat shit and die?"

Lotor was too composed to give him much of a reaction, but he did give him one. He'd have to think Katie later for teaching him human swears.

You know. If he lived.

"I see your time on Earth has allowed you to get in touch with your father's... culture." Lotor observed. "Though I see it has not dulled your edge."

"Takes more than a few deca-phoebs of easy living to do that." Keith shrugged. "The Galra Empire isn't going to win this war, you know that, right?"

Lotor merely inclined a brow. "Yes, well... we'll just have to see about that."

Stepping back, Lotor returned his attention to the admiral, who grew stiff under his gaze. "I trust you will inform me if there are any changes. Perhaps with her loyal guard in our hands, Princess Allura may choose to surrender herself."

"We'll notify you if we receive any contact." Sanda replied.

"Good." Lotor said. "Now then, as agreed, I will take the prisoner with me. I trust there are no objections?"

"I object." Keith piped up.

Lotor merely rolled his eyes. "Are there any objections that aren't from the prisoner?"

His question was met with silence, which he took as affirmation. "Good. Zethrid, if you will escort our guest to my fighter."

"Guest." Keith snorted. Leave it to Lotor to make it sound like he was inviting him over for a cup of tea, instead of dragging him off to be interrogated and brainwashed.

Brodar, he was a prick

He stayed stubbornly silent during the flight. Not that Lotor asked him any questions, but even if he had, he wouldn't have said anything.

Instead, Zethrid just spends the entire trip glaring at him. Not surprising- it was never hard to miss how close she was to Ezor. His still aching wrist was evidence enough of that. He should probably just consider himself lucky that he kept it.

Narti wasn't in Lotor's fighter either. Which meant that she was probably waiting for them at their destination.

He wasn't sure where they're headed. He had never been able to track Lotor down, and not through any lack of trying. According to what his mom had learned from Ezor, they had been hiding in a network of underground tunnels, but it wasn't hard to guess that they had since moved since neither his mom or Ulaz had found any evidence of them still being there when they had checked said tunnels out.
Closing his eyes, he tried to drown everything out. To think of nothing. It was a skill that they had taught him with the Blade of Marmora, but he had never been very good at it. His head was rarely silent. He wondered if it was because of his human half, or if that was just the way he was.

All he could do was think about those he left behind. About Katie, about Matt, whose mother was still missing. He hoped she found something in the files that she had stolen from the Garrison that would lead her to her, but that was looking less and less likely now that he knew the Garrison had no involvement in Colleen Holt's abduction.

He thought about Allura, and then tried not to. He knew how frustrated she was to be sidelined during the war- it was a feeling that they shared, even if they both knew how important the task of hiding the black lion had been.

He thought about his parents. About his mom, who had been raised from birth the same way he had- the mission before the individual. Who knew the risks, but probably never thought he would be the one she would have to leave behind. About his dad, who he knew had always been afraid that something like this might happen to him, who he knew had always secretly balked at the sort of training that was considered normal for a Marmora youngling. He hoped this didn't create a fracture between them, but he didn't think so. They were stronger than that.

He thought about Ulaz and Regris, and Kolivan too- his fellow Blades, his leader. They too, knew the risks. Kolivan more than anyone else. That didn't make it any easier.

He thought about the cadets, about Hunk and Lance- he hoped that they would be able to return to their families soon. Kidnapping them had been his mistake, he knew that. Maybe they shouldn't have lied to him, but he had still made the wrong call. Once he had brought them to the Castle of Lions, there was no way that he could take them back to the Garrison.

He thought about Shiro, about Adam. God, he hoped they at least worked their shit out. Hoped that Shiro might be able regain his reputation after everything was said and done. He didn't have to hope that he would become an excellent black paladin- that went without saying. Of course he would.

The ship shuddered, and he snapped his eyes open. He tensed, sensing that they had docked. Sure enough, after a few ticks the hatch opened, and he was hauled to his feet, Zethrid's grip on his arm tight enough to leave a bruise.

Zethrid stared down at him, teeth set in a savage grin. "I'm going to enjoy watching Narti make you squirm."

Keith just glared right back. "Too bad that's not going to happen."

Zethrid's grin didn't fade. "We'll see."

The general hauled him off the ship with more aggression that was necessary, and he had to walk quickly just to keep up with her. Not for the first time, he grumbled about his own short stature- maybe it had let him blend in with humans, but it was far from a boon when living among the Galra.

Lotor and Acxa were both already waiting in the hangar. And that's what this place was, he quickly noted- some kind of hangar. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the Galaxy Garrison logo, and suddenly, he understood why Lotor had been so impossible to find.

They were on the moon.
In spite of himself, he snorted. Right. Of course. All this time he had been searching for them on Earth, and they hadn't even consistently been there. Just his luck.

Zethrid shoved him forward. He stumbled a bit, but quickly regained his footing. Maybe he was still shorter than anyone else here, but that didn't stop him from standing to his full height, holding his head high. The last thing he wanted was for Lotor to see him at his weakest.

To know that he was afraid.

Because he was. He was terrified. That hadn't changed, he'd just come to terms with it.

"Nice place." Keith remarked dryly. He could switch to Galran, but he kept to English instead, largely out of spite. Still, it didn't faze the prince- but then, he didn't think it would. He had heard him speaking English back at the Garrison, flawlessly too, where his own was still a little bit accented, even after all this time.

It was like he was just trying to be annoying.

Lotor merely hummed, his reply likewise in English. "It has seen better days, I suppose. Though for an outpost constructed by such a primitive species, it is really quite impressive."

He couldn't tell if that was a diplomatic lie, or if Lotor genuinely meant it. That was the other thing he hated about the Galran prince. He was impossible to read.

Keith just narrowed his eyes. If there was one thing he hated, it was pretense. "Look, we both know what you brought me here for. So why don't we just cut to the chase and get it over with?"

"Now, now, there's no need to be in such a rush." Lotor told him. "Unless you are that eager to join my ranks."

Keith just snarled, baring his teeth. "I'd rather slit my throat and die."

"Pity." Lotor observed. "You would make an excellent general."

"And you'd make an excellent corpse." Keith snapped.

Beside Lotor, Acxa stiffened. "You will not speak to Prince Lotor that way."

"Or what, you'll break my arm?" Keith asked, switching to Galran, since Acxa had addressed him in their shared native tongue. "Pretty sure your prince wants me in one piece, otherwise Zethrid here would have already ripped it off."

"It's true." Zethrid agreed.

"Now, now, Acxa," Lotor lightly chided, resuming speaking in Galran as well, "-there's no need to raise such a fuss. I'm sure we can persuade him to see things our way."

"That's a funny way to say brainwash." Keith remarked.

"Think of it as you will," Lotor simply said, "-but I will do what I must to ensure peace."

"Peace?" Keith spat, now outright glowering at the Galran prince. "You don't want peace. You just want power."

Lotor merely looked indifferent. "Think what you will. It does not change the truth."
Keith bit back a growl. There was no reasoning with Lotor, he knew that. But to hear him actually have the audacity to preach about peace... someone who truly wanted peace wouldn't force his own ideals onto people, but come to the table and discuss the matter with them. Someone who truly wanted peace would have stood against his father, rather than ally himself with him, simply because he had everything to gain from that while he was still in power.

And now that he stood to gain the Galra throne, he was truly showing his colors.


"Now then," Lotor began, "-since you seem so eager to begin your interrogation, I suppose I have no choice but to comply. Zethrid, if you will."

Zethrid merely gave him a wicked grin, hand already firmly gripping his shoulder. "It would be my pleasure."

"Yeah," Keith retorted, "-I bet it would."

Zethrid's grip on his shoulder didn't grow any lighter as she lead him down the almost labyrinthine halls of the lunar base. He didn't let it stop him from tracking their movements- every hall he was lead down, every turn they made, every camera he spotted. His chances of escape were limited, but the phrase give up wasn't exactly one he was familiar with.

"In here," was all Zethrid told him, before unceremoniously shoving him into a room and closing the door behind him.

It was pitch black inside. It took a tick for his eyes to adjust. Breathing in, Keith tried to collect himself, even if he could hear the beating of his own heart. He got the feeling Narti would be along shortly.

He was right. Lifting his head, he made out the sound of footsteps. Narti's steps were distinct- even if he hadn't been trained to pay attention to such things, he would have recognized them. With her was Lotor, but beyond Kova, Narti's eyes and steadfast companion, they seemed to be alone.

Squaring his shoulders, Keith watched as the door opened, and Lotor stepped inside. Narti followed, and as soon as she entered, the door was shut again. Lotor merely smiled, taking the only chair in the room. He tensed, feeling his blood boil as he realized that he had his blade hanging from his belt.

Without thinking, he lunged for it. He didn't get very far- Narti's tail slammed into him, knocking him back. The blow was hard enough to knock the air right out of him, and he coughed, feeling his ribs throb.

"Now, now," Lotor said, "-we can't have that."

"Give it back." Keith hissed, his eyes flashing in the dark.

"Once you begin to see things my way, you can have it back." Lotor told him. "Until then, I'll be holding on to it, I'm afraid."

Growling, low and guttural, Keith watched the prince through narrowed eyes. His lifeforce was connected to that blade, so to know that it was in Lotor's hands... he couldn't stand it.
"Now," Lotor began, "-why don't we discuss what the lovely Princess Allura has been doing? I'm sure you have fascinating insight on the subject."

"Right now?" Keith asked. "Right now she's probably thinking about how best to kill you."

"Charming." Lotor remarked. "But not the answer that I am looking for, I'm afraid. Narti, if you would?"

He felt himself tense, a cold bead of sweat trickling down the back of his neck. Kova's eyes were leveled on him, and even though she lacked eyes of her own, he could still feel Narti looking at him. It was all he could do to maintain his composure as the general approached him, hand outstretched.

Narti's hand was cold on his shoulder. He froze, his breath hitching in his throat. He hadn't expected the effect to be so immediate, but it was all he could do to keep from buckling at the faintest touch. Any illusions he might have had about being able to resist faded away, met with the crushing reality that Narti's power was not to be underestimated.

"Tell me," Lotor began, "-what is it exactly that Allura and her Blades are hiding? I know Alfor didn't send his daughter all the way to the fringes of the universe simply to protect her. We both know she would never stay put if that were the only reason."

"The black lion," Keith replied, unable to stop the words from tumbling out, "-we've been protecting the black lion."

"As I thought." Lotor said. "And does she plan to agree to our little trade?"

He tried to fight it this time, harder, but still, the words came out. "No."

"I thought not." Lotor said. "Now then, what is it that King Alfor is planning?"

He stayed silent, but only because he didn't know. He knew that his plans had likely changed since he had been captured- he wasn't that valuable a chess piece that the Alliance couldn't afford to lose him, but his capture was indicative of Lotor's true intentions.

He wanted Allura, and by extension, the Altean throne. Alfor's throne. By force, if necessary.

And it would be necessary.

Lotor merely frowned, but seemed to accept his silence. "You know," he began instead, changing the subject, "-before he was killed, my father became frantic to locate the black lion. He told my mother- in private, of course- that he felt his already weak bond snap. What do you suppose that means?"

He froze. He knew exactly what it meant, and with Narti's urging, he couldn't stop himself from saying it. "It means that the black lion found a new paladin."

"Ah yes," Lotor said, arching his brows, "-exactly as I thought. What I cannot figure out is who the black lion would choose for such an honor."

His thoughts nearly drifted to Shiro, but he forced them back. Narti only increased the pressure in response, sensing his hesitation, and internally, he panicked. Shiro's name was already on the tip of his tongue, and there was nothing he could do to stop himself from saying it.

He bit his tongue. Galra teeth were sharp. His were no exception.
He couldn't speak without a tongue.

Lotar paled, aghast at the sight, and Narti drew her hand away, likely getting feedback from the pain that rocketed through him. He hadn't expected it to hurt so much. Already, he could taste blood, and he had to force his mouth open to keep himself from choking on it.

Lotar narrowed his eyes, rising to his feet. "Clever. But not enough, I'm afraid. All you have done is delay the inevitable."

No. It wasn't enough. He knew that. But if Lotar wanted to get him to say anything, he would have to wait until the healing pod cycle finished. Until then, he wasn't getting anything out of him.

He shuddered, feeling Narti's hand on his shoulder again even through the haze of blood loss. He stumbled forward against his will, like a puppet, making his way down the halls of the lunar base, even as he slowly began to grow more and more lightheaded. Secretly, he hoped he'd bleed out before they reached the healing pod, but he had no such luck.

Under Narti's command, he found himself willingly stepping inside, remaining still even as his cuffs were removed. He was dizzy by this point, his vision blurring so badly that it almost looked as if there were two of her.

But he still had enough presence of mind to hear Lotar's final instructions to Narti, right before the pod closed around him. And he knew it wasn't just the chill of the pod that crept down his spine.

"When it is done, see to it that he sees things our way."

He had just enough awareness when he stumbled out of the pod to recall that the last time he had done so, he had done so into the arms of a friend. That he had been safe, with those that he trusted and cared for.

This time, it was Narti who caught him.

He shuddered at his touch, any resistance leaving him before he even managed to gather it up. He could barely think straight, senses still dull from the pod. But even so, he still managed to catch a glimpse of the armor strewn over the table, in Lotar's colors.

He closed his eyes tight. He felt something slip inside him, and then, knew nothing else.
Chapter Summary

Frowning, Veronica fixed her gaze in front of her. Krolia lead them all into some kind of pod, one that would presumably take them up into this Castle of Lions. She shifted on her feet, counting the seconds it took for the pod to dock. When the doors opened, someone was waiting to greet them.

Oh. Suddenly she understood Lance's terrible pun.

Chapter Notes

It may be my birthday, but you're the ones getting the present today! Have the next chapter of anomalous point! I also hope all sports fans enjoyed the most important sporting event of the year... yes, I'm talking about the Puppy Bowl. Of course it's the Puppy Bowl. Was there anything else even showing on television today? I think not. Anyways, that said, I hope everyone enjoys the chapter, and I'll see y'all next update!

It turned out that rooting out a spy was a lot harder than he thought.

By the time evening rolled around, Lance was just about ready to throw in the towel. He must have spoken to hundreds of aliens, but hadn't turned up any real leads.

Okay, so maybe not hundreds. There weren't hundreds of aliens here. But it felt like it had been over a hundred, okay? That was what really mattered here. Even Hunk and Romelle looked like they were about ready to call it quits for the evening too.

"I don't get it," Lance groaned, "-how hard is it to find the one suspicious guy among the bunch? It's not like this Prince Lotto hired a real spy or anything."

"Pretty sure it's Prince Lotor." Hunk corrected- and yeah, he knew that- he was just using the wrong name out of pure spite by now. "And maybe he did?"

"I doubt it." Romelle shook her head. "Allura never would have accepted someone who seemed suspicious. Everyone here is fleeing from hardship caused by the war. We can't put them at risk by letting in someone who might be dangerous."

"So you're saying whoever is working with Lotor, he might like, have something against them?" Lance asked. "Well that sucks."

The dude had already taken one hostage- two, if you counted mullet. Who knew what else he might be capable of?

Sure, he and Hunk might not exactly be free- but they weren't exactly hostages either. Princess Allura wasn't using them against the Garrison, even though she probably could. Honestly, other
than the part where they couldn't leave, she'd been nothing but a gracious hostess the entire time they'd been here.

It just sucked that someone had betrayed the princess' trust like this. She didn't deserve that.

"I still say it's Rolo." Lance huffed.

"You just say that because you don't like the guy." Hunk pointed out.

"Hey, what can I say?" Lance shrugged. "I've got good instincts."

"You mean like the instincts that got us abducted by aliens?" Hunk asked. "No offense, Romelle."

"None taken." Romelle said simply.

Glaring at Hunk, Lance just folded his arms in front of him. "Hey, how was I supposed to know Keith's terrible mullet was because he was part alien?"

Romelle frowned. "I do not think that Keith's hairstyle has anything to do with him being Galra. It used to be longer, actually, before we came here."

"Wha- longer!?" Lance blurted out. "How long!?"

Before Romelle had a chance to answer, they caught the fringes of commotion. Instantly forgetting the question of Keith's hair, Lance grabbed the first alien that he could find, curious. "Something going on?"

"The Blades have returned." The alien told him, using a hushed voice as if they didn't dare speak of it. "They brought someone with them. A human."

A human? What, had some other unlucky person wandered in here? Or was it-?

"Lance?"

Wait. He knew that voice. But it couldn't be. Why would she be here?

"Veronica?"

Turning on his heel, sure enough, it was his sister. Based on her uniform, he was willing to bet that she had come here straight from the Garrison. He was just about to ask when she broke away from her escort, scooping him up in an almost bone crushing hug.

"Lance!" Veronica exclaimed. "It really is you!"

"Uh, yeah, of course it's me." Lance told her, only slightly embarrassed to be seen being hugged nearly to death by his eldest sister. "There anyone else around that's this handsome? But what are you even doing here? Did the Garrison send you?"

"Sort of." Veronica told him. "At least, Iverson did."

"Iverson sent you?" Lance asked. "Why?"

"We would like to know that as well." Krolia stated.

Looking up at Keith's mom, Lance frowned. She looked... unhappy. Which he guessed he couldn't blame her for, given that her son had been captured. And seeing as that was basically the Garrison's
fault, he could only imagine that she wasn't too happy about escorting someone wearing a Garrison uniform into their base camp.

But seeing as how they hadn't knocked Veronica out, whatever she had come here to discuss, it had to be important. There probably wasn't time to waste on heartfelt reunions.

"Oh, uh," Lance frowned, hesitantly pulling away from his sister, "I guess you've got all kinds of important stuff to discuss with the princess, then. I should probably let you get to it."

"Wait no, Lance," Veronica grabbed his hand, "come with me."

"Uh..." Lance trailed off, his gaze drifting towards Krolia. He was all for it, but...

Krolia merely heaved a sigh. "He can come."

"See?" Veronica beamed. "Oh, I see Hunk's with you too."

Behind him, Hunk offered Veronica a small wave. "Hey."

"You should all come." Commander Kogane said. "We could use all the help we could get right now."

"Uh, are you sure?" Lance asked. "Because I don't know how much help we can be."

"Speak for yourself," Romelle huffed, "I can be extremely helpful."

Veronica blinked, finally taking notice of the Altean. "Who's this?"

"Oh, this is Romelle." Lance told her. "She's Princess Allura's body double or maid or something?"

"A bit of both." Romelle said. "I assume this is your sister. Veronica, was it?"

Veronica narrowed her eyes. "It's Veronica. You're Altean, aren't you?"

Romelle blinked. "Last I checked. Is that a problem?"

Veronica opened her mouth to say something, but quickly shut it, shaking her head. "No, it's fine. I'm still just trying to wrap my head around the whole alien thing. Although," she added, glancing up at her surroundings, "I guess there's no way I can deny it now. Is that a spaceship?"

"It is the Castle of Lions!" Romelle chirped. "Our people's pride and joy. The greatest of all our ships."

Veronica just arched her brows. "And it's a castle?"

"Yeah, I had that same reaction." Lance told her. "Come on. Wait until you meet the princess. She's."

"Lance, if you're about to say that she's out of this world, I'm going home." Veronica cut him off. Frowning, Lance furrowed his brow. "Yeesh. Guess nobody appreciates a good pun around here."

Clearing her throat, Krolia focused their attention back on her. "I understand that you are enjoying your reunion, but there's much we have to discuss. If you'll follow me, I can show you to the princess."
Something told Lance that wasn't a suggestion.

Right. While he was busy having a heartfelt reunion with his sister, Keith- Krolia's son- was still being held captive, by either the Garrison or by Prince Lotor. And from what little he had been able to gather about the heir to the Galran throne, the guy was serious bad news- and also seemed to have a like, weird interest in Keith.

And also had someone on his side who had creepy brainwashing powers? Yeah, that too. Basically, what he was trying to get at was that he could understand Krolia's rush. He'd be pretty anxious too, if it were Veronica or anyone else from his family- or Hunk- in Keith's place.

And it wasn't just Keith. It was Matt and Katie's mother, too.

"Right, yeah," Lance nodded, "-got it."

"We can talk later." Veronica told him, giving his hand a squeeze, before pulling away from him. They all fell into step behind Krolia, with that new Blade- Regris, he was pretty sure his name was Regris- bringing up the rear.

"For what it's worth," Hunk whispered as they started to walk, "-I thought it was a good pun."

Lance flashed his friend a smile. "Thanks, buddy. I knew I could count on you."

In spite of the urgency of the situation, Veronica kept finding herself taking glances back at her baby brother. She hadn't expected to see Lance so soon, and was just glad that he seemed to be no worse for wear. She'd been surprised to find him out in the open- she'd pictured... she didn't know. Him being kept in a prison cell or something, but from the look of it, he was more like a guest than he was any kind of prisoner.

She had so many questions, but she guessed she'd just have to wait to get them answered. Right now, she had a job to do.

Still... she was so glad to see Lance. And Hunk, of course- he was her brother's best friend, after all. It was good to see that both of them were doing well.

Still... when she'd been briefed by Iverson, the only thing he had told her was that there was an alien ship somewhere out on the valley, on Commander Kogane's family land. She hadn't expected an entire pop up town filled with nothing but aliens.

She definitely hadn't expected Commander Kogane to be in the welcoming party.

Glancing between him and the woman who had curtly introduced herself as Krolia, she could sort of see how Keith was their son. What she remembered of Lance's (largely self-declared) rival was that he was a pale, lanky kid who had teeth that were too sharp and an eerie stare- both of which could probably be explained by the apparent fact that he was an alien.

Or at least, half alien.

But all these aliens... they didn't look like soldiers. She was pretty sure some of them were even children. Others appeared older- senior citizens, maybe. They definitely didn't seem like any kind of invading force.

Sure, maybe there were soldiers inside this Castle of Lions- it was big enough that it looked like it could have held a few units. But somehow, she didn't get the picture that these Alteans were here
to invade.

They just looked like they were hiding.

Maybe Iverson was right to send her. Frowning, Veronica fixed her gaze in front of her. Krolia lead them all into some kind of pod, one that would presumably take them up into this Castle of Lions. She shifted on her feet, counting the seconds it took for the pod to dock.

When the doors opened, someone was waiting to greet them.

Oh. Suddenly she understood Lance's terrible pun.

"Welcome," the young woman spoke, holding herself with the kind of grace and dignity that Veronica didn't even know was possible, "-I am Princess Allura, of the planet Altea."

Based on her initial greeting, she'd expected something more hostile. But if this princess bore any strong feelings towards the Garrison, she was keeping them well hidden.

Shaking off her stupor, Veronica squared her shoulders. "Veronica McClain. I'm an analyst with the Galaxy Garrison."

"And Lance's sister, I hear." Allura remarked, her expression sobering. "I must apologize. Whatever our reasons, we have caused you and your family unnecessary grief. I can assure you that he has been well taken care of here."

She hadn't exactly expected an apology, especially not one that sounded so sincere. Either this princess was an excellent actress, or she meant every word that she said. Somehow, she felt it was the latter.

"Knowing Lance, I'm sure he did something stupid." Veronica quipped.

"Hey!" Lance protested. "I'll have you know I had a very good reason for coming here."

"Lance, you got jealous because you saw Keith with a pretty girl." Hunk pointed out. Veronica had to fight back the urge to snort. Because yeah- that sounded a lot like her brother. It wouldn't be the first time he'd done something dumb because of a pretty girl, and given that he had a few years left until adulthood, she suspected it wouldn't be the last, either.

(Not that she hadn't done dumb things because of pretty girls at his age. She had. The apple didn't fall far from the tree.)

"Yeah, well, I didn't hear you try to talk me out of it." Lance pointed out.

"Uh, yeah, I did." Hunk said. "Like, several times."

Lance just glared at Hunk. "Whose side are you on anyways?"

Clearing her throat for a second time, Krolia once again refocused attention on her. "She claims to have been sent by a member of the Galaxy Garrison's upper command."

"It's not just a claim." Veronica stated. "Commander Iverson has noticed... inconsistencies in the information the Galra Empire has given the Galaxy Garrison."

"So he wishes to hear from the other side?" Allura frowned- and for a second she almost seemed disappointed. "Very well. Since you have come all this way, you have our full, undivided attention."
"I suggest we relocate to the bridge." Krolia said.

Allura nodded. "Agreed. Coran is already waiting for me there. Romelle, do you think you could fetch Shiro and the Holts? That is, if Katie is finished installing that cloaking device. Ulaz should be with them, if he is finished with Ezor."

"Of course." Romelle said. "Where exactly is Shiro, though?"

"I believe he should be on the training deck." Allura replied. "If you can find Adam as well, that would be a great help."

Adam? Veronica blinked. She didn't mean Adam Warner, did she? Glancing towards Lance, he just shrugged. Come to think of it, he hadn't shown up for work today. She knew he'd been on close terms with Keith back when he was at the Garrison, but she thought that was just because of his relationship with Shiro.

Romelle peeled off from the group, and Allura turned back towards her, a diplomatic smile on her face, one that showed a fair bit of strain. "Come. I will show you to the bridge."

"Us too?" Hunk asked.

Allura blinked, looking towards him. "If you wish."

"Uh..." Hunk hesitated for a moment, before firmly nodding. "Yeah, I guess I do. Lance?"

"Yeah, you can count me in too." Lance said.

With that settled, they made their way through the Castle. She wished she had a little more time to appreciate the fact that she was inside an alien spaceship, but even though the princess was going through lengths to conceal it, she could still sense an air of urgency. She already knew part of the reason why- by now, Admiral Sanda had probably already traded Keith to Prince Lotor.

She also knew that there was a high chance that Prince Lotor was holding Colleen Holt hostage. She'd been stunned when she heard that, but not as stunned as she had been when she'd learned that the crew of the Kerberos mission were meant to have been traded off to the Galra Empire. Presumably, it was in exchange for Earth's continued security, but the actions of their prince cast a shadow of doubt over that claim.

Even if the claim was honest, it still wouldn't have been a fair trade. Not if those involved didn't know about it.

Still, she did take a moment once they arrived on the bridge to marvel at it- especially the crystal that hung down from the ceiling. This place was almost more of a work of art than it was a spaceship. Guess that was what happened when you had mastered space travel- you could start worrying less about function, and more about form.

"Ah, princess!" A man with an orange mustache greeted them- Coran, she was assuming. "I see you brought our guest."

"That I have." Allura gave him a warm smile. "Coran, this is Veronica. Veronica, this is Coran. He is my father's most trusted advisor."

"Always a pleasure to meet one of the locals." Coran remarked. "Though I do wish it could be under better circumstances. Ones that involve substantially less kidnapping."
Veronica just arched her brows. Well, at least they were aware of it.

"Now, while we are waiting for the others, I must ask- what is it that the Garrison actually told you about us?" Allura inquired.

"Me?" Veronica asked. "The Garrison didn't tell me anything about you. The first I heard that they were dealing with aliens was from Commander Iverson this morning."

"Oh." Allura frowned. Well, in that case, what did this... Commander Iverson tell you?"

"Well," Veronica began, her gaze briefly darting towards Lance before it returned to the princess, "he told me that the Galaxy Garrison had been contacted by aliens a little over two years ago. They called themselves the Galra, and said that they were searching for something- and someone."

"I would assume that someone would be me." Allura observed.

"Right." Veronica nodded. "He said that they claimed that they were involved in a war with aliens known as Alteans. They... didn't exactly give a very glowing picture of you."

Allura didn't look the least bit fazed. "I would imagine not."

"Commander Iverson went along with Admiral Sanda's orders for the most part, but recent events have convinced him that the Galra Empire might not be on the level." Veronica said. "So he sent me here, in hopes of establishing contact with you and your people."

Again, Allura frowned. "So he has no information on Keith?"

Veronica shook her head. "They're planning on trading him to someone called Prince Lotor. The exchange may have already been made."

Krolia spat out what she was pretty sure was a swear. "He asks us to trust him, but will not act against his superiors?"

"From the sound of it, he doesn't exactly have a choice." Veronica said. "She keeps them out of the public eye, but apparently the admiral accepted the prince's generous offer of several sentries to help with base security. Your son left quite the impression."

"So... you're saying Lotor's basically holding the entire Garrison hostage?" Hunk asked.

"That does complicate things." Allura admitted.

"There were definitely sentries there when I broke in with Keith." A new voice confirmed. Turning on her heel, she took note of the three newcomers- two she recognized as being Katie and Matthew Holt, who had reportedly gone missing two weeks ago, and someone that she definitely didn't recognize beyond his armor- another Blade, from the look of it.

Maybe this was Ulaz. The princess had mentioned something about him being with the Holt siblings. He was tall, taller still than Regris- another Galra, she guessed.

"In which case, we will need to disable the sentries, which could prove a problem." The Blade stated. "Regris and I are both familiar with remotely disabling them, but we may be needed elsewhere."

Allura gave him a curt nod of her head. "Ulaz is correct. If we are to stand any chance of taking down the lunar base, then we will need the Blade of Marmora on our side."
"You could teach me." Katie offered.

"Wait," Veronica cut in before they could get any further, "-taking down the lunar base? What's that supposed to mean?"

Allura frowned. "Did Commander Iverson not include that in his briefing?"

"I- he mentioned that Prince Lotor was using it as a base, but-" Veronica cut herself off, shaking her head. "Look, all I was sent here to do was establish a secure, direct link between you and the Commander. He didn't exactly tell me everything. We didn't have the time."

"Then let's establish that link."

Another new voice, but this time, one that was more recognizable. Turning to look behind her, she confirmed it- entering the bridge was none other than Takashi Shirogane- and with him, alongside Romelle, was Adam Warner.

Guess she had meant that Adam.

Adam stared at her. "Veronica?"

"Adam?" She asked. "Why are you even here?"

"Adam's been spying on the Garrison." Matt supplied.

"Wait," Veronica frowned, narrowing her eyes, "-you've been spying on the Garrison? For them? Do you mean that you've known where Lance has been this entire time, and you just didn't say anything?"

Adam, to his credit, flinched, taking half a step back. "I couldn't exactly-"

"We can discuss that later." Krolia cut in. "If you're here to establish contact, then let's not waste time."

Turning back to look towards Krolia, she watched as Commander Kogane rested a hand on her shoulder. They exchanged a look between them, dashing away any doubts that she might have had that this was Keith's mom.

Okay. That was a thing, then.

Pausing to glance back towards Adam for a brief second, she quickly fixed her attention back on Krolia. "In that case, I'm going to need the transmitter you confiscated from me."

Krolia considered it, before giving her a curt nod of her head. "Regris. Give her the transmitter."

The Blade named Regris complied, retrieving the transmitter that had been taken her when she first arrived. Not for the first time, she noticed the way he towered over her even as he pressed the transmitter carefully into her hands, seemingly mindful of his claws.

"Thank you." Veronica said, curling her fingers around it.

"Krolia is only so curt with you because she is concerned." Regris informed her. "Let us hope this commander of yours can see sense."

He didn't give her a chance to say anything back, because he left her side to return to Krolia's. Ulaz had joined them, the trio of Blades flanking together, Commander Kogane remaining the only
human among them. She guessed he must have spent considerable time with them, if he'd really raised his son in space.

"Hold on a tick before you get started," Coran piped up, "-we just need to make sure this link of yours is really secure."

Veronica merely frowned, but held out the transmitter, allowing Coran to scan it. She couldn't read what his monitor displayed, but whatever it was, it was apparently enough to satisfy him.

"Alright then, everything seems to check out." Coran said. "Princess?"

Allura nodded. "Begin the transmission."

Taking a breath, Veronica booted up the transmitter. A few awkward minutes of no response went by, before a screen flickered to life, Iverson's one eyed visage appearing on it. Before he could even open his mouth to speak, the image flickered. For a second she wondered if something had gone wrong, but no sooner than had she thought that, did Iverson's image appear in full, on the bridge's main monitor.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Coran twirling his mustache. Ah. His handiwork, then.

For his part, Iverson merely blinked. She could only imagine what it had looked like from his end. Still, he sought her out among the crowd. "Officer McClain."

"Sir." She saluted, half on instinct. "As requested, I've established contact with the Alteans."

"I can see that." Iverson stated, his gaze drifting towards Allura. "I assume you're Princess Allura."

Allura stood tall, her back almost impossibly straight. "I am."

"I'm sure Officer McClain has already mentioned it, but I'm Commander Iverson. I'm part of the upper chain of command at this Garrison base." Iverson said. "Although my actions are, for the moment, completely off the record and against orders."

"So we have been lead to believe." Allura stated. "Officer McClain has briefed us on the situation."

"That makes things simple, then." Iverson said, before his gaze darted to the side a bit. He seemed to blink in surprise. "Kogane?"

Commander Kogane merely gave him a lazy salute. "Iverson. See you never got that eye fixed."

"Well I'll be." Iverson almost chuckled. "Guess you really are in on all of this."

"You always said I ought to find a pretty girl to settle down with." Commander Kogane shrugged, before resting a hand on Krolia's shoulder. For a split second, she swore that the Galra actually blushed. "Reckon I just did what you told me to."

For a split second, Iverson looked like he almost wanted to dispute that, before he seemed to remember he was on more or less an official call. Clearing his throat, he fixed his gaze back on Princess Allura. "I was able to speak with Cadet- no, with Keith, before he was handed over to Prince Lotor. So was the admiral."

"He told us both that Prince Lotor engaged in the abduction of Colleen Holt," Iverson continued, "-and that he was using her to try and force a trade."

"Your information is correct." Allura stated. "If you need proof, we have the recording that he sent
"So the Garrison really didn't know that Lotor kidnapped my mom?" Katie asked.

Iverson blinked, glancing down towards Katie, seemingly surprised to see her there- and with her brother and former Lieutenant Shirogane, at that. "No." He stated. "We had no involvement with that."

"How do we know this isn't some kind of trick?" Katie pressed. "Maybe this is all part of Lotor's plot."

"Katie," Shiro warned her, "-let's hear him out first."

That silenced her, but she didn't seem happy about it, tightly folding her arms in front of her. Shiro just offered a weak smile up towards Iverson. "Commander. It's been awhile."

"Shirogane." Iverson stated. "Arm's new."

Blinking, Veronica looked in his direction. Huh. She hadn't even noticed the prosthetic arm. She'd heard that he'd lost his arm during the Kerberos disaster, but when he had walked in here with two, she just assumed she'd heard wrong. Guess not.

Grinning, Shiro clenched his right fist. "A gift, from the princess and the Blade of Marmora."

Taking that as her cue, Krolia stepped forward. "Commander Iverson. I am Krolia, of the Blade of Marmora. You claimed that the Garrison handed Keith over to Prince Lotor. Is that correct?"

Iverson eyed her warily, clearly connecting the dots. "I'm afraid so. I apologize, but I was unable to do anything to assist your... son."

"Then assist us now." Shiro said. "We already know that Prince Lotor is hiding out on the Garrison's decommissioned lunar base. We also have reason to believe that's where Colleen is being held."

"Before this discussion goes any further," Allura interjected, "-we need to know if we can trust you."

Iverson considered her words. "Cadet Kogane also informed me that Lotor is aware of your location."

"That is correct." Ulaz said. "He sent one of his generals to raid our base. That is how we came to learn that he had abducted Colleen Holt."

Iverson narrowed his eyes. "I see the missing cadets are with you."

Glancing back towards her brother and Hunk, who had both been largely silent until now, she watched as they exchanged nervous glances.

"Yeah, yeah," Hunk said, nervously bobbing his head, "-we're here. Just a bit of a mishap really. See, Lance saw Keith when we were over in the west town on a dare, and-"

"He doesn't need to know all that Hunk." Lance cut him off.

"I mean, I just thought if he knew how we ended up here, then..." Hunk trailed off, his shoulders slumping a bit under Lance's glare. "Okay, right. You're right."
"Yes, I must apologize. I am afraid that Keith made a bit of an error in judgement that lead to their internment here." Allura stated. "But I can assure you, we have been looking after your cadets quite well since they have joined us."

"This true?" Iverson asked.

Lance shrugged. "I mean... yeah, I guess. Other than the fact that we can't leave and that I've had to look at Keith's ugly mullet every day, I've got no real complaints. Even got to meet some cool alien chicks."

He winked at Allura as he said that, who merely stared at him blankly, before clearing her throat, returning her attention back towards Iverson. "I suppose our own actions have not exactly leant themselves much towards building a trusting relationship, but I can assure you that when we arrived here, we had no intentions of putting your planet or your people in danger."

"But there is no changing the fact that we have," Allura continued, "-and for that, I am truly sorry. But if you are willing to work with us, I believe that not only can we keep your planet safe, but that we can also end this war, once and for all."

Iverson considered her words. "Kogane always had a good nose, back at the Garrison. I don't think he'd be working with you folks if he didn't believe you were on the right side of things. Definitely wouldn't have married one."

(Veronica swore she heard Regris mutter something to the tune of but he has a terrible sense of smell underneath his breath. She had to fight the urge to laugh.)

"You can trust the princess and the Blade of Marmora, Iverson." Kogane said. "You won't regret it."

Iverson merely heaved a sigh. "Guess I'll just have to take your word on it then."

"So then we have an agreement?" Allura asked.

"We do." Iverson stated. "But I'll be frank with you. My ability to assist you is limited."

"Can you get us the blueprints and the access codes to the old lunar base?" Adam asked.

Iverson arched his brows. "That I can get you."

Allura smiled, her expression set in one of cold determination. "Then that is all we'll need."

The discussion continued for at least an hour. Iverson agreed to send them the files that they would need, and Allura promised that they would do something about the sentries still stationed around the Garrison. She learned that even prior to her arrival, they had planned to sneak onto the lunar base in order to free Lotor's hostages, and with any luck, to kill the prince.

The blueprints Iverson sent them would make that more than possible.

Once the transmission with Iverson ended, Allura had excused both her and her brother, along with Hunk. She suspected it was probably just because they wanted to reduce the number of people who knew the exact plan for the base raid, but she didn't mind. She hadn't seen her brother for three weeks- she wasn't about to miss out on catching up with him now that she had the chance.

Especially since she would have to leave before the sun rose. There had been some debate about
that- Krolia had wanted to keep her here, but Iverson pointed out that if she didn't return to work tomorrow, it would only arouse suspicion. Eventually, his argument had won out.

"I wish you could come back with me." Veronica said, staring down at Lance. Hunk had graciously bowed out, giving the two of them some much needed time alone.

"I wish I could too." Lance told her. "But you heard Allura."

"No tipping our hand?" Veronica asked. "I know. But I still wish that you could come home. Everyone's worried sick about you."

"Well, look on the bright side." Lance said. "At least I shouldn't be here too much longer."

"That's true." Veronica said, ruffling his hair. "But you have to promise me that you'll be careful. I don't want to see you get hurt."

Lance frowned. "I should be the one telling you that. You're the one who's about to put herself in danger."

"That's sweet," Veronica said, "-but I'll be fine. I've come this far, so I'm not about to back out now."

"Yeah, I know." Lance said. "I just wish there was something more that I could do. Right now I just feel like extra baggage... which I guess I am, since you know, I'm not actually supposed to be here right now."

"And I hope this has taught you a lesson about following people." Veronica said, before giving her brother a soft smile. "But trust me Lance, you're not extra baggage. Sometimes we just run into situations where there's not much we can do. That doesn't mean we're useless."

"Yeah, I guess." Lance said. "It just sucks that there's this whole big war out there and the only thing I can do is just sit around."

Heaving a sigh, Veronica bit back a comment that she would rather have him sit around than stick his neck out for a war he had nothing to do with. He probably knew that already. "Your time will come, baby brother. Sometimes you just have to be patient."

Lance still looked unconvinced, but at least he smiled at her. "Are you sure you have to go? I don't like the idea of you having to go back to the Garrison. It's not safe there."

"Like I said, I'll be fine." Veronica promised him. "And we'll see each other again soon. Especially if these Blade guys are half as good as they're supposed to be."

"Ugh, don't get me started." Lance rolled his eyes. "Keith told me that if I could get even a single hit on him, he'd let me go home. Guess what I couldn't do?"

She might not know Keith that well- or at all, really- but she was pretty sure he'd only made that promise because he as damn sure Lance never could. "I'll just take that as a good thing. The faster they can take care of this Prince Lotor, the faster you and Hunk can come home. I just wish I could tell everyone that."

She knew her mother had been in frequent contact with Hunk's mother. It killed her a little inside to know that she couldn't tell them both that their kids were okay, and that with any luck, they both would be home soon.
But also... just in case things went wrong, she didn't want to give anyone false hope. If there was one thing that she had grasped from all this, it was that there was a massive danger looming over not just the Garrison and the Castle of Lions, but over all of Earth. Even if they dealt with Prince Lotor, from the sound of it, there was still the Empress to deal with- and she couldn't imagine she'd be too happy about her son being killed.

And also... there seemed to be some kind of weird tension to the room, whenever Keith was brought up. But nobody was willing to talk about it.

Maybe they were just worried because he was in the enemy's hands. She would be too, if she were in their shoes.

She didn't dwell on it long. Not when Lance was the one who initiated the hug this time.

Smiling down at her brother, Veronica buried her head in his hair, returning the embrace. "You take care of yourself, baby brother."

"You too, Veronica." Lance said. "And stop calling me your baby brother already."

"I'll stop calling you that when you stop being my baby brother." Veronica told him.

"Yeah?" Lance asked. "And when will that be?"

"Never."

Watching Veronica go was hard. He'd admit that. Turning around to find Romelle way too into his personal space? Even if you pressed him, he wouldn't admit that he'd yelped.

"Why are you screaming?" Romelle frowned. "Anyways, it doesn't matter. I think I know a way we can find our spy."

Opening his mouth to say that it very much did matter, Lance quickly shut it. "I'm listening."

Romelle just beamed. "How are your feelings towards being bait?"
Chapter Summary

That... still didn't explain how he'd ended up suspended from a cave by his ankle, but listen- alien courting rituals were weird, and he thought she'd just wanted to go somewhere private.

Chapter Notes

And we're back with the latest chapter! Lance makes some very questionable life choices, but when does he ever not? He's trying. We think. That said, thanks for reading! I'll see all of you again next update~!

"I want to state, just for the record, that this is a bad idea."

"Yeah Hunk, you've kind of said that already." Lance rolled his eyes. "Look, if you didn't want to get involved, you could have just stayed in the Castle."

"And let my best friend face danger alone?" Hunk asked. "No way."

He had to admit, he was a little touched. Hunk had made no attempts to disguise how much he didn't like this plan, and... yeah, he kind of had a point. It was dangerous. Anything that involved basically setting oneself up to be kidnapped generally was.

Which was basically the whole gist of Romelle's plan. He and Hunk would serve as bait for the spy, who by now had definitely heard about the human in the Galaxy Garrison uniform who had been brought to the Castle of Lions. There was a chance that they might have already contacted Lotor, but Romelle was willing to bet that they were waiting to get more information before they reported in- information which they didn't have.

Information which he did have.

Or at least, that's what they wanted them to think. Truth was, he didn't have the full picture of what it was that Allura and the Blades were planning with Commander Iverson. Didn't matter- the important thing was that the spy might think he did.

Well, not just him. Him and Hunk. But for some reason, Romelle seemed convinced that whoever it was, was more likely to go after him. Maybe it was just because it was obvious he and Veronica were related. Or maybe, if he was going to be frank about it, because Hunk was just a lot bigger of a guy and that made him a lot less of an ideal target.

Not that he didn't have muscle. Pssh, of course he had muscle. Just... it was pretty hard to compete with Hunk, alright? That's all it was.

"Glad to have you, buddy." Lance told him, and he meant every word of it. "But you do remember
"This plan involves splitting up, right?"

"Oh," Hunk frowned, ",-right, yeah. See, that's the part of this I don't like."

"You heard Romelle. We can cover more ground this way." Lance told him. "Besides, if anything happens, both Romelle and Commander Kogane have our location. We'll be fine."

"Yeah, sure, that's true, but I just want to point out that's what you said when I told you that following Keith was a bad idea." Hunk pointed out. "So the reassurance is kind of limited. No offense."

Lance opened his mouth to say something, only to snap it shut. Yeah, okay- he did kind of have a point there.

But they had to do something. One way or another, the spy was going to report back to Lotor, and when he did, Veronica might end up in danger. He couldn't let that happen.

"Look, I know I've made some bad decisions before, but-"

"Nope," Hunk cut him off, physically shoving a finger against his lips to shush him, ",-not why I was pointing that out. You're worried about your sister, right?"

Lance frowned, then nodded, lightly moving Hunk's finger away. "She might be headed back to the Garrison just to get captured, and she doesn't even know it. We have a chance to stop the spy, hopefully before they report in about Veronica."

Hunk smiled. "Then I guess we've got no choice, huh? I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm still not wild about this whole plan, but it's still probably our best shot at finding them. So I'm in."

Lance gave him a grateful smile. "Always knew I could count on you."

"In everything but haunted houses." Hunk told him. "Which, by the way, I am never doing that again."

Recounting the incident in question, Lance laughed. "Yeah, okay. That's fair. But you're sure?"

"Wouldn't be here if I wasn't." Hunk said with a shrug. "Just promise me that you'll be careful."

"So long as you do the same." Lance told him.

"Mm, fair enough." Hunk said. "I promise."

"Me too, buddy." Lance grinned, lifting a fist. "Now bring it here."

Returning his grin, Hunk gave him a fist bump. "See you at the base of the Castle in like, one hour? Unless one of us gets kidnapped, in which case... yeah. That tends to complicate things."

"Ugh, don't remind me." Lance rolled his eyes. What was it even called if you got kidnapped while you were already in the process of being kidnapped? "I hope there's like, a clause in the Garrison's attendance policies for getting kidnapped. I would hate to have to make up all the classes I missed."

Hunk paled. "Oh man, I hadn't even thought of that. Do you think they'll like, give us a free pass if we help save Earth from evil aliens?"

Lance scoffed. "I mean, they'd better, since apparently all they've been doing is making deals with shady alien princes."
Save Earth, huh? He really hadn't thought about it in such grandiose terms, but yeah- he guessed what he was doing right now really was helping to save the Earth. Granted, it kind of made him wish he was doing something cooler than setting himself up as bait, but given that the alternative was just sitting on his hands the entire time, he'd take it.

Besides, he... kind of had faith in Romelle and Commander Kogane, honestly. More in Romelle, since he knew her better, but his few short interactions with the former commander had made him seem like just a very reliable guy. Honestly, it was hard to believe that he and Keith were even related- guessed he took more after his mother. He even had her same terrible mullet.

God, he still couldn't believe his rival had been *half-alien*. Talk about your unexpected plot twists.

"That is a solid point, my friend." Hunk told him. "So... how should we do this? You take north, I take south?"

"South, huh?" Lance asked, arching a brow. "You mean where Shay is, right? I get it."

Hunk just groaned, but didn't say anything back. See? He knew it. He was *totally* into her.

"North is fine with me." Lance said. "Maybe I'll run into Nyma."

"Maybe Nyma's the spy." Hunk pointed out.

"Oh come on, Nyma *can't* be the spy. She's way too nice for that." Lance rolled his eyes. "If anyone's the spy here, it has to be Rolo."

"Just saying," Hunk said, "-we should keep our options open."

"Where's Lance and Hunk?"

Looking up from her half-eaten microwave burrito- a sure sign that Hunk hadn't been anywhere near the kitchen this evening, Katie just shrugged. "I heard they were doing something with Romelle and Commander Kogane."

"Something." Shiro repeated. "Any chance you know what that something is?"

He had noticed Romelle leave the bridge at some point, only to return later. She had briefly spoken with Keith's father, and in turn, he had spoken with Krolia- after which, both he and Romelle had left. He assumed that they had other business to deal with- not surprising when their plan had so many moving parts.

But with Lance and Hunk?

Katie just shrugged. "Don't know, but they left the Castle. Maybe it has something to do with the spy?"

Shiro frowned. "You're sure?"

"Like I said," Katie swallowed a bite of her food, "-I don't know."

He turned it over in his head for a few moments longer. He knew Lance had bemoaned not being useful more than once, but trying to track down Lotor's spy? He didn't know if he liked it.

Still, Romelle and Commander Kogane were both with them, and he doubted they would let either of them do anything reckless. At least... he hoped.
Then again... Shiro just heaved a short sigh, running a hand through his white forelock. He could go check it out himself, but there was a chance he might just complicate whatever plan they had thought up. And besides, they didn't exactly have time- once the base raid plan was ready to go, they would be moving out.

By the time the sun rose, they would be making their move.

Right now, they were working on the plan in shifts- from the sound of it, Katie, Matt, Adam, and Commander Kogane would all be staying here. They would stay behind and work to clear the Galaxy Garrison of any Galra influence. If things went south for him on the lunar base, he wouldn't put past Lotor to take the place hostage.

What was less clear was who was going to the lunar base. They would need at least two teams- one to search for and rescue Colleen Holt, and another to track down Lotor and either take him into custody, or kill him. It was a given that Regris and Ulaz would go, but Allura had been insistent about going with them, and there was some doubt if Krolia should really go when there was a chance that they might just end up fighting her son.

He narrowed his eyes at that thought. Keith.

There was no team to rescue Keith. They just didn't have the manpower. There were the refugees, but they hadn't come here to fight- they had come here to get away from the war. And... circumstances what they were, even if they didn't try to find him, it didn't matter.

He'd probably find them.

As for himself... if Lotor was hunting paladin candidates, then as someone who had already been chosen by the black lion, him going to the lunar base would put him at risk, just as much, if not more so than the princess. And if Lotor had gotten his hands on Keith... then there was no reason to believe he didn't know that he was the new black paladin.

But he still wanted to go. Even if it was just to pilot the ship that had taken him there.

Keith had never asked anyone to protect him. He'd never even asked anyone to cover his back. From what he understand, that was just the way the Blade worked. But he was still just a kid- a kid that he owed his freedom to.

A kid who didn't deserve to be used. If he could do something to help him... he didn't want to run away just because he was scared the same thing could happen to him.

Allura wasn't.

Polishing off her food, Katie stood up, the creaking sound her chair made snapping him out of his thoughts. "Princess calling me back?"

Shiro nodded. "If we're going to take the Garrison back from the Galra, we'll need you. Where's Matt?"

"Probably still holed up in the communications room." Katie said with a shrug. "I can go get him if you've got something else to do."

He blinked, wondering if it was that obvious- then smiled. "Thanks. That would be a help."

"Hey, us humans have got to stick together." Katie told him.
He chuckled, watching as she ducked out of sight. He lingered in the kitchen long enough to grab a granola bar- the other reason Allura had sent him away was so that he could get something to eat. He wasn’t exactly in the mood, but he knew better than to let himself give into that line of thought. If he was going to do this, then he need to be in top condition.

Because come hell or high water, he would be.

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So.

Hunk was right. Nyma was, regretfully, the spy. But hey, at least there was still some good news- he was right too. Rolo was also the spy. Turned out they were a pair! Who knew?

Actually in hindsight, it should have been pretty obvious that if one of them was the spy, then they were probably in it together. But maybe Veronica had a point about him and pretty girls. Maybe.

(Would he admit it? No.)

The good news was, Hunk hadn't been captured- at least, not yet. The bad news? Yeah, turned out Romelle was right too. All Nyma had done was bat her- admittedly very, very pretty eyes at him and told him that she wanted to show him something, and he had followed after her like a lost puppy. That... still didn't explain how he'd ended up suspended from a cave by his ankle, but listen- alien courting rituals were weird, and he thought she'd just wanted to go somewhere private.

(He did not actually have any proof of that- the weird courting rituals part. But listen- that's just how aliens worked, right? At least, it was in all the cheap dime novel romances he had read.)

Well... at least the plan worked, he guessed. He just hoped the cave didn't block the signal from the transponder that Romelle had given him.

It had been almost painfully simple, given how hard it had been to root anyone suspicious out before. But before they had been trying to keep the fact that there was a suspected spy among the refugees a secret- now? Now they had purposefully spread that rumor, in an effort to see who it drew in. Information was a good incentive, but if the spy thought that they might be on to them, they might just be prompted to take rash action.

At least, that was what Romelle had said. And seeing as she was some kind of elite body double slash maid, who was he to doubt her?

Sure, there was the unintended effect that everyone might panic, but from the sound of it, one way or another, the Galra were coming to Earth. Best to just have everyone on their toes?

Look, he didn't know. The blood was all starting to rush to his head. Ugh, this sucked. He definitely knew that.

"So uh, any chance you could maybe let me down?"

"Not until you tell us what you know." Nyma said.

Right. This was the part of the plan that he hadn't so much planned on. In hindsight, he should have known any plan that used the promise of information as bait would end with a potential interrogation, but... yeah. He'd been so caught up in the idea of being useful and protecting Veronica, that he kind of hadn't stopped to think about it.

Okay, now he was understanding why Hunk had thought this was such a bad idea.
"So... what?" Lance asked. "You're just going to dangle me from the ceiling until I talk? That doesn't sound so bad."

"I've heard being inverted for too long can lead to the death of your kind." Nyma coolly observed, and he felt a chill run down the length of his very inverted back. "But I'm sure you'll talk before then."

Okay. Now he was starting to worry.

Hunk was slowly starting to panic.

It had been one full hour, plus five minutes on top of that, and Lance still wasn't back yet. That couldn't be a good sign.

Except it also sort of was, because if Lance wasn't coming back to their agreed meeting place on time, didn't that mean he'd found the spy? On the other, it was also still bad because it meant the spy had found Lance. Which, yeah, that was the plan, but still- he'd rather have a version of this that didn't involve either of them being potentially kidnapped.

"Oh, this is bad." Hunk muttered to himself. "This is really bad."

Right. Romelle. He had to get Romelle. She'd told him that she would be waiting just inside the Castle if anything happened. Which, yeah, he was starting to suspect it had.

But what if Lance was fine? What if he had just gotten held up somewhere? It had only been five minutes past the deadline. Maybe he'd just lost track of time? It happened. What if he left, and Lance showed up, and thought he was in danger?

But what if Lance actually was in danger, and he was just wasting precious time? Hesitating for a moment longer, Hunk nervously glanced over his shoulder. There still wasn't any sign of Lance, and he was pretty sure at least two more minutes had passed while he worried over that.

Seven minutes. Lance was seven minutes late.

That was too late, he decided. Sucking it up, he boarded the shuttle pod that would take him back up to the Castle. Romelle had given them both transponders for exactly this reason. It would be fine.

Unless Lance had been snatched up within the first minutes, in which case...

No. He wasn't going to think like that. Still, the ride up to the Castle felt like it took forever, when he knew it barely even took a minute. It just felt like a really, really long minute.

Eight minutes past the deadline, he arrived inside the Castle. To his relief, Romelle was indeed waiting just outside where the shuttle pod docked, and with her was Commander Kogane. She did say she was going to go talk to him and brief him on her plans, but he guessed she had.

"Hunk?" Romelle frowned. "Where's Lance?"

"I don't know." Hunk admitted. "He wasn't at our meeting place."

Romelle's frown just deepened, before she exchanged a look with Heath. "He must have been abducted."

"Guess Lotor's spy took the bait." Heath stated.
"So it would seem." Romelle said. "I gave him a transponder. We should be able to track him using that."

"Got it. Give me the code." Heath told her. Romelle complied, even as he fished out a matching device from one of his belt pouches. In a less dire situation, Hunk probably would have noted the similarity between father and son, but right now all he could think about was Lance.

"Based on his location," Heath observed, studying the image projected from the small transponder in his hand, "-it looks like he's still pretty close. There's a system of caves that are pretty near the town. Odds are, he's probably there."

Unless they found his transponder and were sending out a dummy signal, Hunk wanted to say, but he bit it back. Chances were, they had both probably already realized that was a possibility and voicing it out loud just felt like he'd be jinxing Lance.

Heath glanced over at him, giving his shoulder a squeeze. "Don't worry. We'll find him."

Hunk just swallowed, nodding his head. If Heath's grip on his shoulder was a little too tight, he didn't say anything. He was pretty sure that wasn't about Lance anyways. "Okay. Okay, good. I'll just- should I come with you? Lance is my friend, I don't want to-"

"Stay here." Romelle instructed- but there was a certain edge of softness to her words. "This was my idea, so I'll be sure to bring Lance back safe and sound."

Strangely enough given how nervous he was, he felt like he believed that.

"Okay," Hunk said. "-okay."

Romelle smiled at him, even as Heath released his grip from his shoulder. Without another word, the two boarded the shuttle pod, and disappeared from view. Hunk watched them go, taking in a long, deep breath, trying to convince himself that things would be fine, just like Lance had said they would be.

Next time Lance came to him with an idea like this? Next time, he was going to say no.

"So," Romelle had the audacity to chirp, dusting off her hands so casually like she hadn't just thrown Rolo over her shoulder and into the nearest wall, "-I would say my plan worked quite well!"

Lance just groaned. "Yeah, sure. Now can you let me down before my eyeballs like, burst out of my head or something?"

"That's just a myth." Heath observed, even as he pulled a knife out from one of his boots. Ugh. Figures Keith's dad would have hidden boot knives.

"It doesn't feel like a myth." Lance grumbled as Heath cut the rope that held him up, carefully lowering him back down to the cave floor. "I'm never hanging upside-down from anything ever again."

Heath just chuckled, tucking his knife back away. "Think you can stand? Your friend's pretty worried about you."

"Yeah, just... just give me a few seconds." Lance told him. Heath indulged him, waiting until he was ready to help him sit up, only hauling him back to his feet once he was sure all the blood that had pooled in his head wouldn't come bursting out of it all at once.
Okay, so he was pretty sure that didn't happen either. But it felt like it.

"So... Hunk's fine?" Lance asked, watching out of the corner of his eye as Romelle produced an extra length of rope and proceeded to tie both Nyma and Rolo up.

"I did say he made a less desirable target for kidnapping than you." Romelle observed, hefting Rolo, who was unsurprisingly unconscious, over her shoulder. "But thanks to you, we were able to secure the spies. Well done, Lance! You were excellent bait!"

"...thank you?" Lance said, uncertain if that were meant as a compliment.

"We should probably get back to the Castle." Heath said, taking a little more care with holding Nyma- who was also pretty much out cold. "Ideally, we would be asking them both some questions, but..."

Romelle looked sheepish. "Oops. Just... got a bit carried away, that's all."

Heath sighed, like this wasn't the first time he'd had to deal with something like this. With a kid like Keith, somehow he doubted it. "Don't suppose you managed to learn anything from them."

"Only that they hadn't contacted Lotor yet." Lance said. "I think I heard Rolo say something about a bounty."

"Probably teamed up with Lotor in hopes of getting their bounty taken off their heads." Romelle observed. "Though I suppose we won't know for sure until they regain consciousness."

Heath just gave her a pointed look, silently chastising her in a way that only a man who had raised a part-alien child could. Recalling how angry he had been when he had first asked them to help him find the spy, he was surprised at how calm he was being right now. Maybe it had just been long enough that his anger had cooled somewhat.

Or maybe he was just better at holding it in than his son was.

"Hey, at least we know they haven't contacted Lotor yet, right?" Lance asked. "That's good."

It meant Veronica wasn't in danger. At least, he hoped it meant Veronica wasn't in danger. He still wished he could have gone with her- not just because he'd be able to see his family again, although... yeah, that was part of it- but because the more he heard about this Prince Lotor character, the less he liked him.

There was also the imminent threat of an alien invasion looming over their heads. That too. The princess had sounded pretty confident that they could fend them off, but he didn't know about that- anything that involved an invasion just sounded bad to him.

But he guessed he'd done his part. It just sucked that what he was able to do basically boiled down to serving as live bait. He wished he could do something more- but maybe Veronica had a point. Maybe sometimes, people just found themselves in situations where they just weren't very useful.

Didn't make it any less frustrating.

"So... I guess we're done here?" Lance asked.

"All that's left is to take these two back to the Castle!" Romelle said. "Allura should have everything in order by the time we get back. The fact that his spies haven't yet contacted him in regards to your sister's presence here will be of great help to everyone."
He brightened a little at that. Oh. Guess that was a good thing, huh? He'd only been thinking about Veronica, but now that he thought about it... if Rolo and Nyma had contacted him, wouldn't he have some idea they would be coming? Or at least that they were planning something.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Lance asked. "Let's get back to the Castle!"

"Lance!"

Lance barely even had a chance to get out of the shuttle pod before Hunk threw his arms around him, embracing him in a crushing hug. "Oh man, buddy, am I ever glad to see you! They didn't hurt you, right?"

"Mostly they just dangled me upside-down from the ceiling, so no." Lance assured him. "But I do kind of need to breathe."

"Oh, right." Hunk said, giving him a bit more wiggle room, but not releasing him quite yet. He did peek over his shoulder, watching as Romelle and Heath transported Rolo and Nyma into the Castle proper. "Guess we were both right, huh?"

"Guess we were." Lance admitted. "Sorry I worried you."

"Yeah, we're not doing that again." Hunk told him, actually pulling away this time.

"You know what?" Lance said. "I agree. That was terrible."

"I hate to say I told you so, but," Hunk shrugged, "-I told you so."

"That you did, buddy." Lance said, before looking up at Romelle. "So what's the plan now?"

"Oh, right, speaking of plans," Hunk began, "-Regris came by looking for the two of you. I think the princess wants you both to gather on the bridge when you're done with uh," he paused, glancing at both Rolo and Nyma's unconscious forms, "-that."

"Noted." Heath said. "What about you boys?"

"I heard Matt mention something about attempting to patch into the Garrison's radio feed." Romelle suggested, before he could even say anything. "He should be finished by now. I think the plan was for him to monitor it, but..."

"Radio feed, huh?" Lance asked, glancing down at Hunk. "What do you say?"

"Sounds safer than being bait." Hunk said. "I think we can do that."

Romelle nodded. "Good. Last I recall, he was setting it all up in the communications room. I'll be sure to let Allura know. I'm certain she'll be quite grateful for all your assistance."

Again, Lance felt himself brighten. Earning a princess' favor didn't exactly sound bad. The exact opposite, actually.

"Tell her old Lancey-Lance is ready to help any time!" Lance beamed, puffing out his chest.

Romelle merely looked vaguely bemused. "I will be sure to tell her that as well, Lancey-Lance."

He couldn't be sure but something in Romelle's tone made him think she was poking fun at him. Hunk's snickering definitely didn't help.
They didn't longer long after that- from the moment that Hunk had told them that the princess wanted them, there had been an undercurrent of urgency in the air. Once they were gone, he felt himself let out a long sigh of relief, before glancing back towards Hunk. "So... the communications room?"

"Yup," Hunk nodded, "-just you and me, staying up all night. Reminds me of the Garrison."

"Hunk, we were still at the Garrison a month ago." Lance pointed out. "That's a little too soon to be waxing nostalgic."

"Mm, yeah. You've got a point." Hunk said, before glancing down at him. "I'm glad you're alright. You scared me."

Looking up at him, Lance gave Hunk an apologetic smile. "Sorry about that."

"Just don't do it again." Hunk warned him. "So... how'd you end up hanging upside-down anyways?"

All Lance could do was groan.

Romelle and Commander Kogane were the last to arrive.

From the sound of it, their efforts to track down the spy- or spies, as it turned out- had been successful. With it brought some much needed good news- namely, they had yet to contact Lotor about them establishing a possible point of contact with the Galaxy Garrison. That would make taking back the Garrison from the Galra a lot easier.

To that end, Matt and Katie would remain behind. Veronica would remotely link them into the Garrison's system, which Matt would use to take control of their security network. Hopefully they wouldn't have to use it, but just in case things went south, having a handle on the Garrison's lockdown procedures would be a massive help.

Katie would be tasked with taking down the sentries remotely. That shouldn't be a problem. Ulaz had shown her how to do it. The problem lay in the fact that they couldn't say for sure that there weren't any actual Galra down there- if Lotor had sent any of his underlings to the Garrison, they could be in real trouble.

That was where Adam and Commander Kogane came in. They would infiltrate the Garrison and intervene if needed. There had been some debate about sending Krolia with them, but they had all decided that if it came down to it, it was probably best to send humans, since they were technically invading the Garrison.

It was a gamble- if Lotor sent any of his generals to standby at the Garrison, they would be a lot harder to deal with than any member of the rank and file. But Commander Kogane had experience in dealing with the Galra- he'd lived with them for just under twenty years now. If anyone could take one, it was him.

If things really went south, Romelle would be waiting just outside the perimeter on standby. Glancing over towards Adam, Shiro hoped it wouldn't come to that.

That just left the lunar base raid.

"I'm going."
This time, nobody disputed Allura. No one could.

"I'm coming too." Shiro stated.

"Shiro-" Allura began, only to cut herself off as she met his eyes. He knew what she saw there- it was the same expression that he saw in hers.


This might not be Earth's conflict. But if he was going to become the black paladin of Voltron, then he couldn't just think about Earth. He had to start thinking about the bigger picture- and the big picture was that if they failed to deal with Lotor here, then the Galra might just have a chance to regroup, to double their forces. They had a chance to defeat them here and now- and they couldn't pass that up.

But he'd be lying if said his main reason wasn't a lot more selfish. Somewhere on that base, two people were being held captive against their will- a woman whose husband he had failed to save, and someone that had wormed his way into becoming an irreplaceable aspect of his life.

He didn't want to lose either one of them.

Allura merely sighed. "Very well then."

No one protested. Across the room, Krolia briefly met his eyes, before tearing her gaze away. She would remain behind on the Castle alongside Coran. They couldn't afford to leave the Castle unguarded. Right now, they didn't have any reason to believe that Lotor was aware they knew where he was hiding, but they had to be prepared for anything.

"Once we arrive on the lunar base, we will split into two teams." Allura spoke, her tone commanding the attention of everyone in the room. "Regris, you will take Shiro and attempt to track down Colleen Holt. Ulaz and I will find Lotor and put an end to this."

"And if we fail?" Shiro asked.

"We won't." Allura stated. "The fate of the entire universe is resting on us. We cannot afford to fail."

She made it sound so simple, but everyone here knew it wasn't.

Nobody brought up Keith. Nobody dared to.

But just like how everyone knew that there was nothing simple about this mission, everyone knew what had to be done if they met him. If he was himself, fine- but if he wasn't...

...they'd have to fight.

He got the awful feeling it'd be the latter.

"Is everything in order?"

In response, Narti saluted, bowing her head. There was a bundle of clothing held in her tail, that he recognized as being what Keith had been brought onboard wearing- human clothing, he supposed. The garishly bright colors of the jacket alone were appalling.

"Good." Lotor stated. "Leave us."
Once again, Narti bowed her head, before complying with his command. He paused for only a brief moment, before he entered the admittedly hastily arranged medical ward, really nothing more than a single healing pod. When he had first arrived on this planet, he had seen no need for such a thing—these humans were so primitive, that he hardly needed to worry about them even should they decide to fight back.

But when they had contacted to inform him that they had captured a member of the Blade of Marmora... well, that he had taken an interest in. He knew from experience just how reckless the half-Galra Blade could be when pushed into a corner, so he’d had Zethrid and Acxa install one of the healing pods from his ship just in case he tried something rash.

Still, he had to admit, biting off his own tongue was a bit extreme, even for Keith.

But in the end, while the action had bought him time, it had also left him vulnerable. He was loathe to resort to this, truth be told— but he would do what he must.

Lotor quickly picked him out, standing across the room. From here, there was a window from which one could view the Earth. He did admit, it was a rather pretty sight.

The sight of one once so stubborn clad in armor of his colors was also quite nice, he decided. He doubted it would be enough to convince Princess Allura to join him, but he had ways of dealing with her... hesitation.

"I trust the healing process was successful."

Keith stirred, turning to look back at him. His pupils were thin enough that it was rather difficult to tell from this distance, but they appeared blank. The yellow of his sclera seemed a bit brighter, possibly due to exposure to quintessence from the healing pod. It had been necessary if they hoped to salvage his tongue.

One mute general could be difficult enough at times. He hardly needed two.

Looking at his face, he could understand why Kolivan had felt the need to hide him. Were it not for the rounded ears, he might have passed for Altean— but without them, it was clear that what he was mixed with was a race yet unbeknownst to the Galra. Truthfully, he was surprised to discover just how primitive his father’s people were, but as someone who was of mixed blood himself, he would not use that as a basis to judge him.

In his Galra Empire, there would be no such prejudices.

"There have been no lasting effects." Keith spoke. He was used to hearing his voice through the filter of his Blade mask, so it was quite to treat to hear his actual voice for a change. Still compared to the fire he'd had in it before, it was almost... depressingly monotone, now.

Ah, well. Some things simply could not be helped. Perhaps in time, it would change. If he remained under Narti’s control long enough, her influence would take a more permanent hold.

"I am glad to hear it." Lotor stated. "I believe you were telling me something about the new black paladin...?"

For a tick, Keith merely blinked. His brain was likely attempting to translate the question into terms that he was able to understand. What Narti fed it was merely a powerful suggestion— even he could not say for sure just how it would interpret said suggestion. All he knew was that he now believed himself to be one of his generals— one whose loyalty to him was unquestionable.
Finally, Keith lifted a hand over his chest, saluting him with a bowed head. "He is the same pilot the Galaxy Garrison would have sent us had the Blade of Marmora not interfered. Takashi Shirogane."

Ah. Now he understood why he had been willing to go so far to protect the new black paladin's identity.

"Excellent." Lotor stated. "Soon we will return the black lion to where it belongs."

"And the new paladin it has chosen?" Keith inquired.

"Perhaps we can convince him to join us." Lotor said. "Him and the Altean princess."

If the lions would not choose him as one of their paladins, then all he needed to do was to control their paladins. Then Voltron would be as good as his.

"Now then," turning on his heel, Lotor did not even glance behind him, knowing without question that his new general would follow, "I believe we have much to discuss if we are to turn the tide of this war back in our favor."

"What would you have me do?" Keith asked. "Do you wish me to invade the Castle? I will do whatever you command, my prince."

*Loyal,* he had instructed Narti. Loyal he had been given.

"Now, now, there is no rush." Lotor told him, undeniably pleased by the outcome, loathe though he had been to resort to it. "They will come to us."
Perhaps the death of someone he'd known, and at his own hands no less, would cement his control over the future red paladin. With that, he would have one less thing to worry about.

Chapter Notes

Chapter twenty seven, hot of the presses! I hope everyone enjoys this latest installment! I'm still trying to adjust to daylight savings time... why does this still have to be a thing and how can we cancel it like sensible people? If you live somewhere where it's not a thing, then you are truly blessed. That said, thanks for reading!

"Alright, so we're all clear on the plan?"

"We're clear." Allura confirmed. "Are you certain you do not wish to pilot the ship yourself?"

Shiro just offered her a faint smile. "I'm sure."

They had already discussed this back on the bridge. Allura would be the one to fly the Altean pod, since she had the most familiarity with them out of all of them. Right now, they needed to use every advantage that they had. They had so few of them that they couldn't afford not to.

Allura simply nodded, returning her attention back to the controls of the pod, making preparations for takeoff. Katie had already briefed her on how to activate the cloaking, so they were good to go there.

The princess had once again donned her pressure suit, this time equipped with a helmet. Fixed to her back, there was a white staff, broken into two parts. He didn't doubt that she knew how to use it.

Ulaz and Regris were both wearing their Blade armor- no surprise there, since he'd never seen them wear anything beside it. He didn't even know if they had casual clothes, or what those would even consist of for a Galra. But then, he was wearing armor too- armor that the princess had given to him personally. It was white with black accents, and though she hadn't said as much, he suspected that this armor was meant for the black paladin of Voltron.

He'd hesitated to accept it at first, but Allura had insisted. It, like the black bayard, belonged to him now. It was only right that he wear it.

"You have to promise us that you'll come back, Shiro." Katie said. She and the others had gathered around the exterior of the pod- the only ones not there were Adam, Commander Kogane, and Romelle, who had already left to take up positions around the Garrison. Everyone else was present and accounted for.
He didn't know how to feel about Adam not being here. Part of him was almost grateful—things were still awkward between the two of them. They hadn't really had a chance to talk, in spite of being in such close proximity to one another.

Maybe once all of this was over, they could fix that.

Provided, you know, that they survived.

"We’ll try." Shiro promised her.

"Oh no," Katie said, narrowing her eyes, "-you're going to have to do a lot better than just try."

He cracked a more genuine smile at that. Guess this was just her way of wishing them luck. "Okay, then. I promise."

Katie nodded, apparently satisfied with that. "Go get our mom back, Shiro."

"And Keith." Matt added. "Bring them both home safe."

Shiro’s jaw clenched. They all knew that bringing Keith back in one piece was going to be a lot harder than bringing back Colleen in one piece. It had already been several hours since he had been handed over to Lotor, and that was likely plenty of time to brainwash him. It was something that they all understood, but none of them dared talking about.

Almost like they were afraid of jinxing it.

His gaze briefly flicked towards Krolia, who had been watching the entire exchange silently. He couldn't read her in the least. But even if she didn't show it, he knew some part of her probably wished that she could come with them.

But she was also a Blade, and Shiro was coming to understand just how deeply ingrained the teachings of the Blade of Marmora were in those who were raised as one. Even Keith, with his half-human blood, was no different.

But just because he likely didn't expect anyone to come save him, didn't mean Shiro would allow that to become a reality. He was going to save Keith, even if he had to drag his brainwashed rear end kicking and screaming back to the Castle.

"We will." Shiro promised.

"Stay safe, princess." Coran said. "I don't know what I would do if I lost you."

Peering back over her seat, Allura gave Coran a soft smile. "I promise it will not come to that, Coran."

"I'll get the healing pods ready, just in case." Coran told her. "Hopefully we won't need them, but you can never be too prepared."

"Thank you, Coran." Allura said. "Let us hope that we do not."

"We should begin preparations for departure." Ulaz said. "Dawn will break soon. The cloaking should be more effective under the cover of darkness."

Allura nodded her head. "I understand. Shiro?"

Shiro shook his head. "You won't hear any arguments from me. Matt, be sure to take care of your
Katie just scoffed. "Please. He's the one that needs me to take care of him."

"Yeah, that's fair." Matt just shrugged, apparently not denying it. "You don't have to worry, Shiro. We'll take care of things around here."

Shiro just chuckled, ascending the entry ramp. It closed behind him, cutting off the view from the outside. Drawing in a deep breath, he clenched his right fist, staring down at his arm- the one that Ulaz and Coran had built for him. This would be his first time using it in actual combat- he'd sparred with Keith a few times, but that wasn't the same thing as seriously trading blows.

The thought that he might just have to do with that with Keith... he closed his eyes, trying not to dwell on it.

He'd fight if he had to. They all would.

"Are we ready to depart?" Allura asked.

Shiro nodded. "Ready when you are, princess."

Allura briefly met his gaze, before she turned her attention forward, fixing it out the cockpit. "Then let us not waste any further time here."

"We're approaching the base."

Looking up, Shiro stared out the cockpit window. Sure enough, the moon was in full view now, and on it, he could make out the Galaxy Garrison's old lunar base. At first glance, it looked decrepit and run down, but upon closer examination, it became clear that at least some parts of it were still in use.

Looks like they were spot on.

"Sure didn't take us long to get here." Shiro said.

Allura spared him a slight glance. It was just the two of them up front- Ulaz and Regris were in the back of the pod, giving them a bit of privacy. "Our engines are just a bit faster than yours. Are you sure you are prepared for this?"

"No." Shiro admitted. "Are you?"

"No." Allura confessed. "You must understand- Keith and I are... close."

"You're friends." Shiro stated.

Allura gave him a faint smile, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Yes, we are. It is strange to think how much I loathed having him around at first. Now I cannot imagine what I would do without him."

"We'll get him back." Shiro said.

"I hope so." Allura said. "If Lotor has used Narti to get to him... we may have to kill her in order to break her control."

Shiro frowned, glancing over towards her. "You don't want to."
Allura bit her lip, her gaze darting downwards. "There has already been far too much blood shed during this war, on both sides. And even if we succeed here..."

Allura closed her eyes, allowing her shoulders to sag. "I know we must kill Lotor. I have no qualms with that. But I would rather avoid killing his generals too, if we can."

"Are you sure there's no other way to break Narti's control?" Shiro asked.

Opening her eyes, Allura shook her head. "I am afraid I do not know. There is so little that we know about Narti's abilities. But if there is a way..."

"...you'd rather take that." Shiro finished. "I understand."

Allura cast him a faint smile. "I am glad, you know. That the black lion chose you as its paladin."

"I'm not sure what it saw in me." Shiro confessed, staring down at his right hand. When he had first come here, he'd been a handicapped pilot who couldn't even fly any longer. Far from the ideal candidate for anything, much less the head of one of the most powerful weapons in the universe. "But I promise you, that I won't let it- or you- down."

"I know you won't." Allura smiled, stronger this time. "Keith trusts you. And that is more than enough reason for me to trust you. I think I understand why he's so fond of you now."

"Really?" Shiro asked. "Because I was just to say that I think I can understand why he's so fond of you."

In spite of herself, Allura laughed. "Well then, it is a good thing that we understand each other."

Silence fell over the cockpit, but it wasn't an awkward one. It wasn't a casual one either- there was too much tension in the air for that.

But it was strangely comfortable nonetheless.

"Now," Allura said, breaking it, "-let's see how Lotor likes having his base raided."

"We're picking up a signal from the raid squad. They're approaching the lunar base."

"Copy that." Katie said, glancing over her shoulder towards Lance and Hunk, who sat in front of the communication station. She sat a short distance away from them, her laptop balanced in her lap. "How's the feed from the Garrison?"

Matt had gone to join Coran on the bridge, so he could help him monitor things there. She had put together some hastily built drones whose feeds he was monitoring. With every Blade except for Krolia away on the lunar base, there was no one left to guard their perimeter. They couldn't ignore the possibility that Lotor might take advantage of the situation.

"So far, so good." Hunk informed her. "You hear from Adam and Commander Kogane yet?"

"They're in position." She said. "I'm about to run the sentry deactivation protocol. Keep monitoring that Garrison feed."

"You can count on us." Lance told her.

Exhaling, Katie took a moment to prepare herself- she would need to shut down all of the sentries simultaneously, and keep them shut down. Once that happened, Adam and Commander Kogane
would breach the perimeter, where Veronica and Commander Iverson were waiting for contact. Once inside, they would gather the members of the Garrison's upper command into one room, and hopefully keep them there for the duration of the lunar base raid.

If they called for backup- Galra backup- they'd be screwed.

"Okay," Katie said, "I'm starting the protocol. Any sentries within the confines of the Galaxy Garrison should be down within the next two minutes."

"Copy that." Adam's voice came over the radio. "Commander Kogane and I are ready to go."

"Ex-commander." Heath corrected, with the sort of exasperation in his tone that indicated he had all but given up.

"Romelle here." She piped up. "Ready to provide backup, but hoping I will not have to."

Katie let out a faint snort. "Let's hope not."

"Try not to get yourself killed, Professor Warner." Matt's voice piped up over the radio. "I don't think Shiro would be very happy about that."

She could almost see Adam's eyebrow twitch. "What, no warning for the commander?"

Katie just shrugged, before recalling that he had no way to see that. "He's been living with the Galra for the past twenty years. I'm pretty sure he can take care of himself."

"Your assumption would be correct." Krolia remarked, causing her to jump. For a split second, she thought she was in the room, but no- her voice was just being transmitted over the radio. She was probably still standing guard just outside the bridge. "Though he has never won a match against me before."

"That's because you don't give a man a chance, Krolia." Heath lightly complained.

"The Blade of Marmora do not take their sparring sessions lightly." Krolia plainly informed him, but she swore she could make out a hint of mirth in her voice. "If you wish to defeat me, you must step up your game."

"Okay, how is it that Keith's mom is better at Earth lingo than he is?" Lance asked.

"Sorry to interrupt," Hunk piped up, shooting Lance a faint look, as if silently telling him to focus, "but it sounds like you're good to go."

"Copy that." Heath said. "We're moving in."

"Good luck." Katie said.

Hopefully, they wouldn't need it. If they really did have any luck with them, then taking the Galaxy Garrison should be relatively simple.

It was the base raid that she was worried about.

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"We have detected an unauthorized ship docked in our hangar."

"Thank you, Acxa." Lotor said, barely so much as sparing a look at his general. "It would seem that our guests have arrived quite a bit earlier than expected."
"That gonna be a problem?" Zethrid asked.

"Hardly." Lotor remarked. "Let us see just who it is that is on our guest list."

Bringing up the feed from the base's cameras, Lotor made a low hum. As expected, Princess Allura herself had come- also less surprising were the two Blades, only one of whom he was familiar with. The other tailed Blade, had likely been the Blade Kolivan had sent to bring the black bayard to Princess Allura- while the other was surely Ulaz, who had formerly worked underneath his mother's command.

In a certain sense of the word, of course.

More unexpected was the human wearing the black paladin armor. Lotor merely arched a brow, steeppling his fingers in front of him. "The new black paladin. It would seem we have a very interesting guest today after all."

Keith had given his name as Takashi Shirogane- and had said that he had been the same man that the Galaxy Garrison had agreed to trade to the Galra. The best of the best had been asked for, and this man was seemingly the best pilot that humanity had to offer. Normally, he would have laughed at the thought- humans were so primitive, that surely even their best would be lackluster when compared to even the most unskilled of Galra pilots, but the fact that this man had been chosen by the black lion of all things seemed to indicate otherwise.

Then again, Keith's very existence proved that there had to be at least some humans of merit. He doubted that his mother would have been willing to partner with anyone less. He had only met Krolia on a few occasions, but he could understand why she was considered Kolivan's right hand woman.

It was almost a mockery that he had sent his two best Blades so far from the main battlefield. Did he really think so little of his father's forces?

Speaking of his newest general... he fixed his gaze on the half-human, studying his features. They appeared blank, but his gaze was fixed on the camera feed nonetheless.

"Do you see something of interest?" Lotor inquired.

Keith blinked, turning his gaze back towards him. "The Altean princess is here."

"Yes, it would seem that she is." Lotor stated. "Will that be a problem?"

For a tick, Keith almost seemed to frown- as if he were trying to work out the question. "Emperor Zarkon wished for me to kill her."

Lotor merely inclined his brows, for a moment, curious about how exactly his memories were being translated now that he had been... overwritten, he supposed. "Yes, well, my plans for her are quite different."

Keith gave him a curt nod. "You need the princess alive."

"If I wish to obtain the Altean throne, then yes." Lotor said simply. "A union between our two great people will surely put an end to this brutal war."

"She has refused in the past." Keith pointed out.

"I suppose she has." Lotor admitted. "But I believe that in time, she will begin to see things my
Keith lapsed once more into silence. Truth be told, he did somewhat wish that this whole affair had taken place a bit later- perhaps a few more quintants of being under Narti's control would have made him more stable. He was not entirely worried- thanks to his mother's research, it was unlikely that Narti's control could so easily be broken.

Still, it seemed that his mind was still in the process of adjusting to his new role. That left him vulnerable- and for a tick, he was nearly tempted to send him away, back to Daibazaal, where he would not have to concern himself with such matters.

And he would have- were it not likely that there were still Blades within the ranks of the Empire's army. Kolivan would no doubt try to kill him before he was able to become much of a threat to him and the rest of his mutinous Blades. He would much rather keep Keith close, in order to prevent such a barbaric occurrence.

Rising to his feet, Lotor watched the camera feed. They had seemingly split up into groups of two- Ulaz with the princess, and the unknown Blade with the new black paladin. He frowned slightly at that- while he had certainly expected them to split up, he would have preferred it if the princess and this Shirogane would have remained together. Having them separated was somewhat of a nuisance.

Still, it was nothing that he could not deal with.

Turning back to face his generals, they lifted their hands in salute, heads bowed- Keith included. In spite of himself, he smiled. He wished that it didn't have to be this way, but his constant stream of rejections had forced his hand.

If he were to secure true peace for the universe, then he would need the red paladin at his beck and call. And since he doubted he would ever be able to manipulate King Alfor such an extent, his rumored successor would simply have to do.

Besides, in time he was certain that Keith would come to enjoy serving him- and out of his own free will at that. It would be some time before the person he was becoming would take full hold, but when that happened, he would no longer have to worry about him breaking free of Narti's control. Once the process was complete, he would likely never even recall that he had another life before this one.

He would just simply be.

"Your orders, sir?" Acxa asked.

"You may kill the Blades." Lotor stated. "But I want Princess Allura and the human alive."

Hearing Keith's voice, monotone or not, added to the chorus of vrepit sa that followed was a rather nice touch. Losing Ezor had been... regrettable, he supposed, but she could always be recovered at a later time.

Provided the Blades hadn't already killed her, of course. It would be a loss, to be sure- it was rare to find those within the Galra Empire who possessed Ezor's ability. But he supposed that a trained Blade would make an efficient substitute for her powers of invisibility.

And would be a sight more loyal, too.

"Oh yes," he added, almost as an afterthought, "-I suppose our hostage has outlived her usefulness.
Kill her."

Acxa looked up, her brow slightly furrowing. "Sir?"

Lotor narrowed his eyes. Acxa could be loyal, but she was too... he was loathe to use the word 
moral, but it was true that they got in the way sometimes. "Do not make me repeat myself, Acxa."

"Prince Lotor," Keith spoke, "-if Acxa will not, I will."

Lifting his brows, Lotor had to admit- he hadn't quite expected that. It would seem that Narti's 
brainwashing had been even more effective than he could have dreamed.

Good. He could use this. Perhaps the death of someone he'd known, someone whose children he 
had fought to protect, and at his own hands no less, would cement his control over the future red 
paladin. With that, he would have one less thing to worry about.

"See to it that it is done."

Bowing his head, Keith saluted. "Vrepit sa."

She didn't like this one bit.

That went perhaps without saying. There was nothing about this whole war that she cared for. How 
could she? All it had brought to the universe was pain and suffering- not to mention bloodshed.

Far too much bloodshed.

No, what she didn't like was specifically this situation. Which yes, she supposed that went without 
saying as well. If she were to be more precise, then what she truly had a problem with at this exact 
moment was the utter lack of security- that, and the fact that the hangar doors had been left wide 
open.

Lotor had been expecting them.

Perhaps he did not know when- but he had known that they would arrive here at some point. 
Perhaps his offer of a trade for Colleen Holt had never been honest, only not for the reasons that 
she thought it wasn't.

Regardless, they were here now. Perhaps they were all playing into Lotor's hands, but she would be the one who had the last laugh.

At least Ulaz was with her. His presence was reassuring. Among the Blades, he was third in rank, 
second only to Krolia and to Kolivan himself. She could more than hold her own in a fight, but there was no harm in having skilled backup.

Especially against an opponent such as Lotor.

Or worse- Keith.

Gripping her staff tighter, Allura tried not to let her thoughts dwell on Keith. She didn't want to 
fight him, but she would if she must. She was prepared for that- and how could she not be? This 
whole war had been about fighting those who had once been their allies- she had still not forgotten 
how Zarkon had once fought alongside her father, how Honerva had once learned alchemy by his side.
She could not afford to forget.

Too much bloodshed. Far too much.

And she knew that it was far from over. If they were to truly end this war, then the Kral Zera must be...

She shook off the thought. That future seemed so far distant right now, that it wasn't even worth dwelling on. All that mattered was the here and now- for if they failed to kill Lotor here, then all of Kolivan's plans would be for naught.

The entire universe was depending on them. She would not fail them.

And Lotor? *Lotor* she had no qualms about killing. From the day he was conceived, he had been exposed to quintessence, and while she supposed in that, he was entirely blameless, the man he had grown up to be was *entirely* to blame for his own actions. How he had the nerve to preach peace while doing nothing to actually champion that cause- if that was what he truly sought, they would not be in this situation right now.

No. What Lotor wanted- what he *craved*- was power.

And the throne of the Galra was not nearly enough to appease him. He wanted Altea too. Altea- and Voltron.

She wouldn't let him have *any* of them.

"Be on your guard." Ulaz warned. "There is something amiss here."

Allura looked towards him. "You sense it too?"

"They would have detected it when our ship entered their hangar, and yet we have met with no resistance. The prince likely plans something." Ulaz spared her a look. "I served Honerva for many years. In that time, I encountered Prince Lotor frequently. He has just as many tricks as his mother, if not more."

"Then we will have to be prepared for any eventuality." Allura stated.

One thing was clear- trap or not, they could not afford to turn back now.

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Once inside the old lunar base, they split up into pairs.

Just like they planned, Ulaz went with Allura to track down Lotor, while he went with Regris to track down Colleen. Thanks to the blueprints they had received from Commander Iverson, and the scan they had done of the base just before landing, they had a pretty good idea as to where she might be kept.

That should have been reassuring, but based on the fact that she seemed to be on the opposite end of the base from where Lotor was... it wasn't. It was almost like it had been designed so that any possible raid party would be forced to split up if they wanted to deal with both targets.

Lotor knew they were coming.

Maybe not precisely *when*— but he'd known they would at some point, and had prepared accordingly. And now that they were on the base itself? Well, there was no way he didn't know *now*.
Without a second thought, Shiro summoned his bayard, shifting it into knuckle form. He hadn't tested it out in actual combat either- again, his only experience with it was from sparring with Keith- but now was as good a time as any.

He just hoped he didn't have to use it on Keith.

That said, the alternative was that he would be sent after Allura. He didn't like that much either. They were childhood friends- if anyone had to fight him, he'd prefer it to be him.

Except... his gaze darting in Regris' direction, Shiro frowned. Allura wasn't the only childhood friend of Keith around here. *Regris* was too, and he'd known him for a lot longer. Ulaz, likewise, had clearly been a mentor figure for him growing up. No matter which group Lotor chose to send Keith out to engage, there would be pain.

But Keith wasn't the only person that they had to worry about. From what he understood, Prince Lotor was a trained combatant in his own right, and all three of his remaining generals were not to be underestimated. Allura had given him a rundown on them just before they had left- Narti he was familiar with, but less familiar were Acxa and Zethrid, Lotor's other two generals.

That said, he still remembered how Adam had said Zethrid had thrown *steel beams* at him.

Clearly, he had to be prepared for anything.

He kept pace with Regris, though he suspected the Blade was moving purposefully slow so that he wouldn't be left behind. Even with his mask fixed in place, Shiro sensed that he seemed bothered by something- maybe it was just the way his tail twitched, which somehow came off as anxious to him.

"Something wrong?" Shiro asked.

"There are no sentries." Regris observed.

Shiro blinked, narrowing his eyes. Regris was right- there weren't. Lotor definitely had some with him- according to what Iverson had said, whenever he came to the Garrison, he always had at least two at his side.

"So we should be prepared for an ambush." Shiro concluded.

Regris merely nodded, but otherwise remained focused. They were coming up on the area of the ship where Colleen was being held. If Lotor was going to spring a trap, then he would do it either before they got to her, or right after- though there was also the possibility that he might wait until they had returned to their ship.

But somehow, Shiro felt he was planning on interfering a little bit sooner than that.

True to his hunch, they soon ran into their first obstacle. So far, all of the doors on this rundown base had been wide open- but as soon as they approached the section of the base they believed Colleen was being held in, they ran into their first locked door.

Exchanging a glance with Regris, Shiro nodded his head. Cautiously approaching the door, Regris pressed a button on his gauntlet, remotely connecting to the base's systems. It took him an almost depressingly short amount of time to get through their security system, and Shiro braced himself, prepared for whatever- and whoever- was on the other side of that door.

Even if it was Keith.
But when the door finally opened, no one was on the other side. Exchanging a glance with Regris, Shiro frowned. Something about this didn't seem right.

He didn't have long to dwell on it. A loud scream came from just up ahead - a woman's scream.

Shiro swore underneath his breath. Guess Lotor not only knew they were here, but he was trying to rid himself of the extra baggage. Without waiting for Regris, he dashed forward, following the sound of the scream. He only hoped that he didn't get there too late.

He hadn't been able to protect Sam. He had to protect Colleen.

Another scream, closer this time. Shiro quickened his pace, turning the corner just in time to collide into someone. His brain automatically switched into fight mode, preparing himself for an attack, before he realized that the person who had slammed into him wasn't an enemy - it was none other than Colleen.

Stunned, Shiro dropped his right arm, staring at her in shock. "Colleen?"

Recognizing his voice, Colleen looked up at him. "Shiro?"

For a second, she looked almost relieved - before a growing horror washed over her features, and she took half a step back. "Stay back."

Shiro's frown deepened. He didn't like that reaction. "It's okay. You're safe. We're going to get you back to Matt and Katie."

Colleen watched him suspiciously for a second longer - before something in her eased. "It's really you."

Shiro gave her a weak smile. There was a dreadful feeling in the pit of his stomach, but he chose to ignore it for now. "It's really me."

Colleen exhaled, momentarily tensing again when Regris caught up to them. Once she realized that he wasn't a threat, she relaxed again - but not fully. Which meant whoever she was running from, they would catch up soon.

And he had a bad feeling about that.

"Colleen, this is Regris." Shiro introduced the Blade. "It's a long story, but he's a friend. Regris, do you think you can take Colleen back to the ship?"

Even with the mask on, he could almost sense Regris' frown. "What will you do?"

He could already make out the sound of footsteps coming towards them. Involuntarily, his right hand clenched into a fist. "I'll guard the rear."

"Shiro," reaching out, Colleen grabbed his right arm, blinking in brief surprise as it dawned on her that he had one again, "-no. You can't fight him."

Shiro swallowed. Those words were all the confirmation he needed of his worst possible fear.

But he was prepared for this.

Turning to face the front, Shiro drew in a deep breath, squaring his shoulders. "Go. I'll hold him off."
Regris hesitated- he'd seemed to realize the same thing he had. "It is not the way of the Blade to come back for those we have left behind."

"I know." Shiro said. "I don't expect you to."

Regris merely shook his head. "No. What I mean is- bring him back too. Please."

Glancing back towards Regris, Shiro gave him a faint smile. "I will."

Regris held his gaze for another second, before he grabbed Colleen rather unceremoniously. The woman made a noise of protest, reaching out her hand as if to try and stop him again, to prevent him from facing down someone she seemed to know would only bring him pain. He just met her gaze, and though it took a second, she dropped it, pulling back her hand and closing her eyes in defeated resignation.

When he faced forward again, Keith was waiting.

It just... wasn't the Keith he remembered.

He recalled the first time they had met again after so long- after the failure of the Kerberos mission had separated them for nearly a year, and the Kerberos mission itself for longer than that. He had been dusty from his time spent out in the desert, an air of mystery clinging to him that had never quite been there before. Even that Keith was more recognizable than the one who stood before him now, clad in unfamiliar armor, a blank expression in his eyes, which seemed a bit more yellow than he remembered.

"Keith."

"Takashi Shirogane." Keith cut him off, his voice almost painfully monotone. Even worse was the way he spoke his name with no familiarity, and he didn't even have to ask to know that he didn't recognize him any longer, even if he still knew his name. "I have orders to bring you to Prince Lotor."

Shiro narrowed his eyes. "And since when do you take orders from Lotor?"

Keith just stared at him. "As heir to the Galra throne, Prince Lotor's orders are absolute."

"Keith, you can't mean that." Shiro said.

Gritting his teeth, Keith narrowed his eyes. "Don't refer to me so casually, human. We may share blood, but I am nothing like you."

"So then what are you?" Shiro asked, already well aware that he wouldn't like the answer.

"I," Keith began, drawing a blade- not his Marmora knife, but one emblazoned with the symbol of the Galra Empire on its hilt instead, "am a loyal servant of the Galra Empire."

"You, human, will refer to me as General."
Chapter Summary

This human seemed to think he knew him better than he knew himself. It was laughable— even if for a tick, it caused something deep inside him to twinge. It didn't last long, the tiny voice quashing it, seeming to almost become stronger— but in a tick, that thought slipped from him too.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone, I'm back from vacation! I am happy to report that I had a very good time! I actually got back yesterday, but I was so wiped from being in the car for most of the day that I didn't want to do anything, lol. I wrote the first part of this chapter before I left, and I've been tinkering with it off and on while I was gone, but now I'm home so I can put a little more focus into my writing again!

See y'all next update!

The human female proved more slippery than he had expected. He'd expected some form of resistance from her— just not an escape attempt, much less a successful one.

Narrowing his eyes, he stalked after her. Even with the intruders present on the base, she likely wouldn't get far, nor was she the most pressing concern, so he took his time. Whether she lived or died would change nothing about Lotor's plans, nor his odds of success.

It wasn't that he was in any way hesitant about killing her— these were Lotor's orders. Even if there was some squirming knot in the pit of his stomach that recoiled at the idea of doing it, it didn't amount to much. It had grown a bit when he'd actually seen her— and saw the visible shock in her eyes as she laid eyes on him— but it was nothing that he couldn't ignore.

Lotor's orders were absolute.

He picked up on the sound of voices long before he actually spotted the intruders. She must have caught up with them— though he didn't know how they had managed to find her so quickly. Narrowing his eyes, he paused mid-step, bringing up the security footage on his gauntlet's computer in order to determine just which of the intruders he would be dealing with. To his surprise, one of them was Takashi Shirogane— the new paladin of the black lion, while the other was one of the two Blades that had arrived with Shirogane and the princess.

For the span of a tick, he felt himself hesitate. He had the strangest feeling that he'd met the Blade before, but he couldn't recall...

Regris. He was a young Blade, close to his age, easily recognizable due to his tail. They had met a few times before the war begin. Before the Blade of Marmora had turned on the Galra Empire, lead by Kolivan— who likely sought to seize control of the Empire should the royal family be killed and
the Kral Zera be called.

And of course, the human, Takashi Shirogane- they had met when Lotor sent him to spy on the Galaxy Garrison, to see if they could be used. He'd been in charge of mentoring him for a time, and while he was no less primitive than any other human, he could somewhat understand how it was that the black lion might have chosen him. He had talent- or what amounted to it, for a human.

Sharing half his blood with such a primitive species was something that gnawed at him constantly. It held him back- a weakness that he had tried to stamp out. Unlike Zethrid's strength, Ezor's invisibility, and Narti's ability to manipulate the mind, it provided him with no useful abilities- save for the fact that in a pinch, he could pass for something other than a Galra.

Banishing the security footage, he continued down the hall. Lotor's orders had been explicit- they could kill the Blades, but the princess and the paladin were to be brought to him alive. While he had not planned on running into any of the intruders, he would nevertheless not fail his prince.

*His* prince? He froze, a sharp pain spiking in his head. Raising a hand, he grit his teeth, forcing the headache back. Closing his eyes, he drew in a long breath, feeling the pain ebb away as if it had never been there.

His head had been... strangely fuzzy, ever since he'd left the healing pod. He struggled to recall why he had been in it in the first place- he must have gotten injured somewhere, but he couldn't recall where nor how. It felt almost as if there were gaps in his memory, gaps that he was still trying to piece together.

It... had to be some kind of malfunction, he decided. It wasn't like he didn't know who he was. He had the honor of being one of Prince Lotor's personal generals, and though he was of mixed blood, he was a proud servant of the Galra Empire. They had been fighting against the Alliance for several deca-phoebs now, though his prince sought an end to that violence through an alliance with the Altean princess- one which she stubbornly refused.

Too prideful to marry an Altean of mixed blood, something deep inside him informed him, and he took it as the truth. Why wouldn't he? The words were spoken in his voice, therefore they must be his own thoughts.

Whatever the case, he would worry about his spotty memory later. The problem seemed to be steadily resolving itself on its own anyways, so he'd likely be just fine if he gave it some time. It wasn't as if it would impede him from carrying out his duties.

The first of which would be to deal with the one known as Takashi Shirogane.

He wasn't what he expected. There was a tension in him as they leveled eyes, but his expression... something about it was off. He opened his mouth to say something, but he ignored it, cutting him off.

"Takashi Shirogane." The name felt familiar yet unfamiliar on his lips. "I have orders to bring you to Prince Lotor."

Shirogane just narrowed his eyes, clenching his right fist by his side. "And since when do you take orders from Lotor?"

He didn't- *couldn't* understand the question, not at first. Then it occurred to him that this was the first time they had met in this capacity, though clearly, someone had since informed him of his true identity. Obviously he had taken it personally, which was strange, since though he had been tasked
to mentor him, it wasn't as if they had ever been close.

(Like he would ever befriend a human. The idea was laughable.)

"As heir to the Galra throne, Prince Lotor's orders are absolute." He stated plainly, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world- since it was.

Shirogane searched his face, looking for something, though he didn't know what. "Keith, you can't mean that."

The name caused him to twitch, as if he had only just now remembered it. That was absurd- of course he knew what his own name was. He just didn't like the sound of it being used so casually by a lower lifeform. He must have thought that since they shared blood, or perhaps because he was the older, that he could address him without formality.

Loathsome. Earth wasn't even worth being conquered by the Empire.

"Don't refer to me so casually, human." Keith warned him. "We may share blood, but I am nothing like you."

"So what are you then?" Shirogane asked.

"I," Keith began, drawing his sword, ",-am a loyal servant of the Galra Empire. You, human, will refer to me as general."

He had fought to get this rank, the tiny voice inside of him informed him. He wasn't about to tolerate any disrespect. There were far too many in the Galra Empire who mistook being of mixed blood as a sign of weakness, of inferiority- but once Lotor ascended to the throne, that would change. Especially once he had the lions of Voltron- and their paladins- under his control.

Shirogane looked stubborn, but he was sure Narti would straighten him out. Him and the princess. Lotor's way was the correct way- that was why he had sworn his undying allegiance to the Galran prince. Under his leadership, the universe would see peace and prosperity the likes of which it never had under the Alliance.

And he would be right there with him, as he always had been.

"I guess there's no way that we can avoid this." Shirogane said- and he almost sounded sad about it. He could have laughed- and he did, internally.

"Surrender," Keith stated plainly, ",-and Prince Lotor will take mercy on you."

"Mercy." Shirogane repeated, narrowing his eyes. "Somehow I get the feeling I don't care for Prince Lotor's mercy."

Keith tensed, the hair on the back of neck bristling. His grip on the hilt of his sword grew tight, for a tick not liking the idea of having to fight this man, before the tiny voice in the back of his head quashed it. What did he care if this human chose to fight him? If anything, he should be commending him for his courage- foolish though it was- for daring to fight one of Galra lineage.

"Then I will have to take you to him by force." He declared- all the warning he gave Shirogane before he angled his sword towards him and lunged.

Though Shirogane appeared unarméd, he managed to block the blow. Upon closer examination, not only was his right arm artificial, but it appeared to be partially encased in some strange form of
armor, beyond the paladin armor that he wore. His sword slid off of it, allowing Shirogane to duck back, clenching his fists in a boxing stance.

He didn't stop to question what boxing was, instead opting to sheathe his sword. If it was hand to hand combat the human wished, then that's what he would get. Shirogane merely arched a brow at it, but didn't drop his guard.

He made the first move, ducking into Shirogane's guard with a powerful blow to the chin. For all that his speed was arguably superior, he seemed to see it coming, avoiding it by jerking his head to the side, already moving to counterattack. His punch just barely avoided connecting, his body relying almost on muscle memory to avoid the blow.

Weird. It almost felt like this wasn't the first time he had fought him.

Shirogane did seem surprised that he had managed to avoid his attack, so he shook off the thought, not hesitating to take advantage of the momentary gap in his defenses. His paladin armor took the brunt of the blow, absorbing most of the shock from his knee strike to the stomach- but not all of it. He staggered back, creating another gap for him to take advantage of- but he managed to avoid this one, jumping back out of range.

Keith narrowed his eyes. The human was better than he'd expected.

"Keith," Shiro began, "-you know this isn't you."

Keith narrowed his eyes, unsure of what to make of the bizarre statement. What wasn't him? The human was making no sense.

He didn't respond, instead moving to strike. Shirogane blocked his punch with his right arm, trying to take advantage of it by grabbing it. Somehow, he instinctively knew that if he got a solid hold of it, he'd use it to throw him, so he moved without thinking, grabbing Shirogane's arm instead, jerking him forward before slamming his head into his chin.

Shirogane groaned, staggering backwards. For a tick, he thought he'd broken his jaw from the way he was holding it, but then the human dropped his hand, almost seeming to laugh. "That's a little more like the Keith I know."

"Know?" Keith asked. "Just because you mentored me for awhile doesn't mean you know me, Shirogane."

Shirogane blinked, like he hadn't been expecting him to say that. "You... you remember that?"

"Why wouldn't I remember that?" Keith asked. "Prince Lotor sent me to the Galaxy Garrison so that I could assess if they might be of use to that. I thought you'd already been briefed, judging from the fact that you didn't seem surprised to see me."

Shirogane narrowed his eyes. "No. That's not how it happened."

Keith scoffed, amused. "Then how did it happen?"

This human seemed to think he knew him better than he knew himself. It was laughable- even if for a tick, it caused something deep inside him to twinge. It didn't last long, the tiny voice quashing it, seeming to almost become stronger- but in a tick, that thought slipped from him too.

"Lotor didn't send you." Shirogane told him. "The Blade of Marmora did."
"Don't lump me in with those mutinous traitors. I would never fight alongside them." Keith glared, blood boiling at the mere implication that he would be anything but loyal to the Galra Empire- to Prince Lotor. His memories might be a bit fuzzy, but the depth of his loyalty to the prince was one thing he was crystal clear on.

Shirogane frowned. "You really believe that, don't you?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Keith asked. "It's the truth."

He didn't even understand what the human was trying to accomplish here. Was he trying to make him doubt himself? Why? That wouldn't-

"Wait," Keith narrowed his eyes, not missing the way Shirogane almost seemed to perk up, "-it's you. You're the reason why my memories seem so hazy. You did this."

Suddenly everything made sense, like it had all just snapped into place. Why his memories seemed so patchy in places, why he'd been in the healing pod in the first place- this was because of the Alteans, wasn't it? Princess Allura had to be behind it all- she had always possessed strange powers, beyond those of any normal Altean alchemist, so she had to be the cause of this. She must have known that he had the potential to become the next paladin of the red lion, so she wanted him on her side, whether he wanted to be or not.

She- and by extension everyone who fought alongside her- were trying to turn him against Lotor.

"What?" Shirogane frowned. "Keith, no, we-"

Baring his teeth, Keith growled. "You what? Were trying to manipulate my mind?"

"No." Shirogane said firmly. "We're your friends, Keith. Lotor is the one who-"

Not only were they trying to turn him against Lotor, they were trying to turn his own mind against him, make him believe he was someone he wasn't. He wouldn't let them.

"I swore an oath of loyalty to Prince Lotor." Keith hissed. "I know who I serve. It's going to take more than your Altean tricks to turn me against him."

For a long moment, all Shirogane did was stare at him. Then he heaved a sigh, a look of resignation on his face as he raised his guard again. "Okay. I didn't want to have to do this, but you're not giving me much of a choice."

In spite of himself, Keith smirked. Guess with his ruse done away with, Shirogane was finally deciding to fight seriously. Good.

"Say that after you manage to beat me." He told him, readying himself for any attack the paladin might throw at him. "Not that you will."

Shirogane leveled his gaze with his- and he felt his blood boil at the pity he found in it. There was nothing about him that was to be pitied. "We'll just see about that."

"Princess Allura, how good it is to see you again."

Allura narrowed her eyes. She didn't know what trick Lotor was playing at, but she was quite certain he had one, otherwise he never would have left himself unguarded like this. Though she had scanned the area, she couldn't find a single one of his generals in sight- nor even a single sentry, for
that matter.

Aside from Ulaz, she was alone with the Galran prince.

"I wish I could say the same of you, Lotor." Allura said coolly. "Sadly, I cannot."

"Now there's no need for that." Lotor said simply, leaning back in his chair, motioning to the one closest to him. "Please, sit."

"I am perfectly content to remain standing, thank you." Allura replied, exchanging a brief glance with Ulaz. She sensed he was just as uneasy as she was. "I am quite certain you know why we are here, Lotor."

Lotor simply frowned. "The war, I take it."

He said it as if it had nothing to do with him, which she couldn't help but bristle at. Even if that was likely exactly what Lotor wanted.

"You know full well it is more than just that." Allura said. "Where are they?"

"Ah," Lotor hummed, arching his brows, "-you wish to know where Keith and the human are. Well, I suppose there's no harm in telling you- though I'm afraid it is rather too late for the latter, seeing as you've made it implicitly obvious that you have no desire to uphold your end of the bargain."

Allura didn't miss the true meaning of his words, not even for a tick. She forced herself to remain composed, even though in truth, all she wanted to do was to cross the room and beat Lotor senseless until he spilled every single one of his loathsome plans. "I do not recall ever striking a bargain with you."

"Ah, well," Lotor said simply, "-at least you've come now. Though I can't say I remember saying that you could bring company."

Allura frowned. This was getting her nowhere, and the more they talked, the more obvious it was that Lotor was simply trying to buy time. Exchanging a glance with Ulaz, she drew her weapon, linking the two ends of her staff together and pointing it towards Lotor.

"Enough." Allura snapped. "If you will not tell me what I want to know, then I will extract it from you by force."

In spite of her obvious threat, Lotor remained unfazed. "I see your time spent with the Blades has begun to influence you, Princess. But very well- if it is a fight you want, then that is exactly what you will get."

With a snap of his fingers, something- or rather, someone- dropped down from the ceiling. Allura gripped her staff tighter, watching out of the corner of her eye as Ulaz drew his blade, angling it at the general who had appeared from one of the dark crooks of the ceiling, having hidden herself where it was too difficult for even Galra eyes to make her out.

Narti.

"This way," Regris urged, "-we must make haste."

He tried not to look back. It should have been easy- the mission before the individual was the creed
of the Blade of Marmora, a creed that had long since been bred into him- into them all. And yet... no Blade had ever quite dealt with a situation like this one before. One of their own, turned against them- against himself- by some kind of foul magic?

Nothing in his training had prepared him for this. And for it to be Keith...

Part of him was almost grateful that the human had taken the burden of fighting him off of him. The rest of him... the rest of him wished that he could be the one handling this. He had known Keith since they were both younglings- they had played together, trained together, even fought together. For it to come to this... it didn't feel right, leaving it to someone else.

But he had been given a mission, and he intended to see it through, on his honor as a Blade. He was to escort the female human, given name Colleen Holt, back to the shuttle pod, and was to protect her until it came time to depart. The last part had not been explicitly stated, but was nevertheless understood.

Which was exactly why they needed to make haste.

"Are you really just going to leave him?" Colleen prompted. He had only known them briefly, but he could already see the resemblance she shared with her two younglings- the daughter more so than the son. "That was- that was Keith back there! Shiro can't fight him, he's-!"

"My mission," Regris hissed, cutting her off, ", is to see you safely back to your family. Your young- your children are anxious to see you safe."

Colleen snapped her mouth shut at that, narrowing her eyes. "You know Matt and Katie?"

"Yes." Regris told her. "And I can get you back to them, but only if you follow me."

Colleen seemed to consider it, before glancing back in the direction they had come. "And Shiro?"

"We wait." Regris said firmly. "Until it becomes unsafe to do so."

Colleen's eyes narrowed further, clearly not caring for the provision he'd tacked on. Humans, it seemed, were far more sentimental than the Galra- something which he could not decide if it was a weakness or not. In Colleen's hesitation to leave, to get to the relative safety of their ship, it seemed a weakness, but he owed his life to that same so-called weakness.

If Keith had not taken that poisoned blade, he would have. Rescuing him went against Blade protocol, something that was deeply bred into every Blade. It was a part, he suspected, of what made Keith so human, in spite of being raised so far away from his father's people. Perhaps looking out for each other in this fashion was exactly how their race had survived for so long, in spite of possessing no obvious features that would have allowed them to take the place of the dominant race of their planet.

"Fine," Colleen conceded, ", but I don't like this."

"Noted." Regris said simply.

Retracing their steps left him with the same uneasy feeling he'd come here with. Lotor had obviously brought sentries with him- he couldn't have given them all to this Galaxy Garrison. And what about his generals? Aside from Ezor, he had three others- even if he assumed they were all with Lotor, the whole thing still left him with an anxious feeling that something was wrong.

It was not long before he was proven right. Zethrid was waiting for them in the hangar, blocking
their access to their ship. Narrowing his eyes, he tried to duck out of sight, but it was too late- she'd already caught whiff of his scent. His, and Colleen's.

"Well, well," Zethrid began, a fierce grin on her lips, "I had a feeling the new kid would screw up something as simple as killing a hostage. Looks like I was right."

Sensing that he wasn't getting out of this without a fight, Regris drew his blade, his grip tight on its hilt. He had been trained more for stealth assassinations than he had been for hand to hand combat- but the same definitely couldn't be said of Zethrid. It was undeniably a bad match.

He *also* hadn't been trained for protecting people, he thought, his masked gaze briefly flickering back towards Colleen. That was more of Keith's speciality.

"And look!" Zethrid exclaimed, clearly pleased. "There's even a Blade here for me to kill! This day just keeps on getting better and better!"

And here he'd just been thinking that this day was getting worse and worse.

Adam was understandably nervous.

He wasn't sure what the Garrison would say about his absence, however brief, if anything at all. It was easy to cover up a flight instructor who had just decided not to show up for work one day. Sudden transfers were a thing at the Galaxy Garrison- although his investigation had showed that almost all of them were tied on some level to the corruption that had taken hold of the organization since it's founding a hundred years before.

It was just... most people didn't know that. They didn't see past the glitz and the glamour- if one could call it that- of the world's foremost space exploration program. And to be fair, there really wasn't another organization out there that could compete with the Garrison in terms of achievements- which would mean more, if part of that *wasn't* due to under the table negotiations and the occasional outright sabotage.

To his surprise, however, nobody reacted to his sudden reappearance at all. Both he and Commander Kogane agreed that he should be the one in charge of handling the cadets- since, as a teacher, he had the closest relationship with a good number of them. Veronica would handle the lower rank and file, while Commander Kogane would join forces with Commander Iverson to deal with the higher ranking members of the Garrison- in other words, anyone who might be involved with Prince Lotor or the Galra.

The ex-commander's job was arguably the most important. Even though Katie's virus had disabled the sentries, they would be screwed if the upper command was able to send out any kind of distress signal. If it was just to another Garrison base, they might be able to survive, but if they tried sending one to the Galra...

...everything he'd learned about them indicated that they would wipe the entire base, and everyone in it, off the map just to get rid of a few of their enemies.

Thankfully, rounding up the students and putting them on lockdown in one of the more protected hangars wasn't hard. He'd left one of his more responsible students in charge- he was confident that Cadet Kinkade would keep things well in hand, even if he didn't have any idea what was going on. His job was to rendezvous with the former commander, and with Iverson.

They were effectively pulling a coup against the current command. They needed all the people they could get.
"This is Adam, checking in." Adam said over the radio. "I've secured all the students."

"Copy that, I've got their location." Katie responded, her voice crackling a bit. "Matt, see if you can get into the camera feed. I want eyes on that room."

"Roger that, little sister of mine." Matt said- and even though he couldn't see him, Adam was pretty sure that he'd just saluted. It brought a smile, however faint, to his lips. "Pulling up the video feed now."

"We're all clear here." Heath's voice came in over the coms.

He was pretty sure he could make out the sound of Admiral Sanda's voice just at the edge of his hearing. He couldn't tell what she was saying, but she sounded positively indignant. That brought a smile to his face too, just a different type of one.

"No sign of any unusual movement outside of the base." Romelle reported. "At least, not from this angle."

"We're not picking up anything unusual on the radio either." Lance supplied. "Hunk?"

"Nope, nothing on this end either." Hunk said. "I think we're... wait, hold on."

Adam frowned, freezing mid-step. "What's wrong?"

"It might be nothing, it's just- I thought I saw something. In the easternmost corridor." Hunk said, sounding uncertain of himself. "But I thought you guys cleared that corridor already."

"We did." Heath said. "There shouldn't be anyone there."

"I'll check it out." Adam said.

He didn't like the sound of that. At best, it would be a straggler they had missed. At worst... he shook his head, trying not to think about how that general of Prince Lotor's had been able to lift a steel beam clear over her head, much less throw it at them. He'd been armed with a blaster by the princess, but he was pretty sure that wouldn't be enough if he had to fight an actual Galra.

He'd seen how Keith could move during their mandatory self-defense classes- and he was only half-Galra. And holding back. He shuddered to think what fighting one would be like. And if one of Lotor's generals was here... that probably wouldn't be a good sign.

"Any word from our base raid team yet?" Adam asked, fighting to keep his nerves out of his tone, reminding himself that aside from Matt, it was just a bunch of cadets manning the radios. He didn't want to cause them any unnecessary panic, even if he was worried about Takashi.

"Not yet." Katie reported. "But it hasn't been that long since their ship landed."

Right. Maybe he was overthinking things. There was no way Lotor could get one of his generals here that fast, could he?

...actually, probably, yeah. He didn't know much about aliens, but he did know that their tech was lightyears ahead of anything that they had developed on Earth. Keith had been able to use a standard shuttle to get all the way to the edge of the solar system in a matter of minutes when he'd intercepted that Galra cruiser, so fast was clearly the name of the game.

"Need me to join you?" Heath asked.
"No." Adam said firmly. Someone needed to stay with the upper command- there was Iverson, but he was just one man. They needed to be debriefed anyways, and nobody knew more about the situation than the ex-commander.

"I can-"

Romelle’s voice faded away with a burst of static, so loud that Adam had to rip the com link from his ear, wincing in pain. Either he'd run into a point of natural interference, or...

He felt something cold pressed up against his temple. Right. Definitely not natural interference.

"Put your hands up," a woman's voice instructed- and he was almost relieved that it wasn't the same one who had thrown the steel beam at him, "-and slowly turn around."

Raising his hands, Adam complied. His blaster was still in his belt, but he wasn't confident that he could get to it before she shot his head off. And he’d rather get out of this situation alive, thanks. He was not going to die before he had a chance to work things out with Takashi.

Based on the woman's armor, she was definitely with Lotor. She had blue skin, her equally blue hair neatly coiffed, her sclera tinted with that increasingly familiar shade of Galra yellow. He racked his brain, trying to recall which general this was- he'd been shown images of them prior to this, but all of a sudden he was drawing a complete blank.

Probably had something to do with the gun pointed at his head.

"Is there anyone else here with you?" The woman- and suddenly, he recalled that her name was Acxa- half-asked, half-demanded.

"Just me." Adam lied.

She merely arched a brow. "I doubt that. Take me to them."

Adam narrowed his eyes. "And if I say no?"

"I think you know what happens then." Acxa stated.

Yeah, pretty much he did. Eying her blaster, Adam weighed his options. He could try to lie about Romelle- there was a good chance that she might lose interest if she learned that their infiltration team was only made up of humans.

Except one of those humans was Commander Kogane, and something told him that Lotor might want him dead- if only to further Keith's hopefully only hypothetical brainwashing. That was, again, not something he knew much about, but he was willing to bet that his parents were probably the two biggest threats to whatever it was that he wanted Keith for. And if that was the case... he didn't want to lead Acxa right to him.

Acxa waited for his response with a surprising amount of patience, which he took as a good sign. The other one would have probably shot him by now.

Coming to a decision, Adam resolved to keep lying. But before he could even open his mouth to respond, Acxa let out a cry, staggering back. Her gun had been shot out of her hands, and she was nursing them, glaring fury just behind him. He turned, expecting to find Romelle there- but to his surprise, his rescuer was actually Veronica. Dimly, he recalled that she'd had the highest marks in all of her shooting classes when she'd been a cadet- even her younger brother, although talented, hadn't been able to break her records.
"I think I'll be the one asking the questions around here." Veronica said firmly, her pistol still leveled on Acxa. "If you don't mind."

"Uh, guys, not to cause a panic or anything, but I'm pretty sure I just lost contact with Professor Warner."

Katie narrowed her eyes, trying Adam's line herself. Sure enough, it was dead. Even worse, his line wasn't the only one. No communications were getting in or out of the Galaxy Garrison.

"Our communications have been jammed." Katie grunted, making a noise of frustration. Mostly she was just annoyed that she hadn't seen this coming. It was so obvious in hindsight.

"Okay, this is bad, right?" Lance asked.

"This is bad." Katie agreed. "Matt, can you try-?"

"A workaround?" Matt finished. "Already on it."

Katie nodded, satisfied with that. "What about Romelle? Is she still on the line?"

"I'm here." Romelle replied. "What happened? I was trying to speak to Adam, then all of a sudden the line went dead."

"That's what we're trying to figure out." Katie said. "But they may need you in there."

"Got it." Romelle said. "I'll start by heading to Adam's last known location."

"Sending that to you now." Katie told her, bringing it up on her computer, before sending it off to Romelle. "Be advised that we'll probably lose contact with you when you enter the Garrison. Matt's trying a workaround, but..."

"It might take awhile." Matt reported.

"Understood." Romelle said, then added, "-I don't like this."

She couldn't argue with that. They still hadn't had any contact with the raid team since their ship had landed, and now she was wondering if that was because they couldn't. But before she had a chance to ask, something caught her eye on one of the camera feeds- not from the Garrison, but the feeds from within the ship.

"Uh, guys?" Katie piped up, feeling cold sweat prickle on the back of her neck. "Does anyone remember where they were keeping that general of Lotor's?"

"You mean Ezor?" Matt asked, craning his head for a better look at the video monitors. "She was- oh."

The way her brother paled, unable to finish his sentence, was all the answer she needed. She'd hoped that she was wrong, that the cell with the open door wasn't the one that Ezor was being held in, but apparently she wasn't.

And that definitely wasn't good.

"Coran," Katie began, paging the bridge, "-I think we might have a problem."
the garrison

Chapter Summary

Leaning back in his chair, Heath just arched a brow towards Admiral Sanda. He'd taken up position at the head of the conference table, where she would normally sit, his feet firmly planted on the table. He couldn't tell if she was angrier about that, than she was about being held prisoner in her own base.

Chapter Notes

Okay, here's the next chapter! I'm glad I was able to finish this tonight, since I have a pretty busy day planned tomorrow, so I don't know how much writing I'll be able to get done! Or anything else, for that matter. Some days are just like that... but at least I'll get a free dinner out of it, so that's always a plus. I had a lot of fun writing this chapter, especially the very first scene, lol- like father, like son.

Thanks for reading!

"I demand an explanation for this."

Leaning back in his chair, Heath just arched a brow towards Admiral Sanda. He'd taken up a position at the head of the conference table, where she would normally sit, his feet firmly planted on the table. He couldn't tell if she was angrier about that, than she was about being held prisoner in her own base. "Thought you'd be able to figure it out on your own, Admiral."

"If this is about your son, we don't have him anymore." Sanda said firmly. "You're barking up the wrong tree."

"If yer asking if I'm mad about Keith," Heath began, one finger idly tapping the shotgun he had resting in his lap, "-then the answer's yes. But that's not what this visit of mine's about."

"I would hardly call this a visit." Sanda hissed.

"Call it what you like." Heath shrugged. "But I'm here to make sure that none of you can call for help from your so-called alien friends."

"The sentries-" 

"The sentries have already been disabled." Heath finished the lieutenant's sentence before he could even finish it. "They're not gonna help you now. Not gonna hurt you ether."

There was a faint murmur at his words, at least until Admiral Sanda cleared her throat, and everyone in the room shut up. She might not have the chair at the head of the table, but she sat straight backed in hers like she still did, her forearms resting on the table, fingers entwined as she looked him dead in the eyes.
"Everyone here knows about your involvement with the Alteans, Heath." Sanda said flatly. "And about your son."

Heath just hummed, wondering if that was supposed to be a threat or not. His gaze briefly flickered towards Iverson, who was still playing good soldier. If Sanda suspected him of treason, then she'd yet to make a scene, which meant she probably didn't know.

"Good," Heath said, "-makes things easy."

"You would betray your planet, your entire people, for what?" The lieutenant that Heath couldn't for the life of him remember his name spat. "Some alien woman?"

"Now don't get me wrong," Heath began, "-I absolutely would betray every last one of you for Krolia without so much as batting an eye, but that's not what's going on here."

"I don't know what the Alteans have told you, but-"

"Admiral," Iverson interrupted, "-I think we should at least hear him out."

Sanda snapped her mouth shut, half glaring at Iverson. He met her eyes with his one, unblinking. From what Heath remembered from this time at the Garrison, neither of them were the type to be easily intimidated.

But neither was he. If he had been before leaving Earth, then he damn well wasn't anymore. Living for twenty years with a warrior race as intense as the Galra kind of did that to a person.

"Fine." Sanda relented. "Let's hear what our former commander has to say."

Heath gave her a mock salute, before dropping his hand back to rest on his shotgun before anyone got any ideas. He had one of those blasters they used up in space too, but in his experience, few things were more effective than a good shotgun. He hoped he wouldn't need to use it, but he wouldn't hesitate if he did.

Because honestly? Yeah, he was still mad about Keith. Pissed, actually.

But that was out of his hands, frustrating as that was. He would just have to put his trust in the princess and the rest of the raid party, in hopes that they could do something about it. If he had the chance, he'd wring Lotor's scrawny neck himself for even thinking about touching his son, nevermind trying to manipulate him.

He crinkled his nose at that thought. He'd always known Lotor was a little creep, but this just confirmed it.

"You all know Prince Lotor, I'm assuming." Heath said. "So, show of hands- how many of you know that he abducted Commander Holt's wife in an attempt to force a trade with us?"

No hands went up, but everyone started mumbling to each other, save for Admiral Sanda, who simply watched him silently. Finally, one of the lieutenants briefly glanced in her direction, before looking back towards him. "We sent out an officer to investigate the valley. They never came back."

"That's in addition to the two missing cadets." Sanda added. "I'll give you a pass on the Holt children, seeing as it seems the youngest at least is willingly working with you, though I don't know what you told her to convince her to do so. I'll assume the same is true in regards to former Lieutenant Shirogane."
"Fair point." Heath admitted. "I can promise you that all three are just fine."

"How do we know you're not lying?" Sanda asked.

"You could just ask Officer McClain." Heath said, seeing no reason to hide it any longer. Nobody here was getting out of that door, not with him around. "She paid us a visit just yesterday, come to see her brother. I'm sure you all noticed she came to work today like normal."

Sanda's brows shut up nearly past her hairline at that. "Officer McClain was not informed of any of this. How did she know where to find you?"

"She didn't." Iverson said. "I was the one who told her."

For the span of a second, Sanda allowed herself to look surprised- before she glowered at Iverson. "You divulged confidential information. That's treason."

"All I did was tell the family of a missing cadet where to find him." Iverson stated plainly. "If that's treason, then I'd be willing to do it again."

Sanda glared at him for a moment longer, before she turned her attention back towards Heath. "And yet she didn't bring Cadet McClain back with her."

Heath merely hummed. "Let me ask you, Admiral. Why do you think I'm here?"

The admiral opened her mouth to say something, before snapping it shut, realization washing over her features. "You're not here to get information out of us, are you?"

"No need." Heath shook his head. "Thanks to Professor Warner and Commander Iverson here, we have all the information we need, including where to find Lotor. This is just security."

He watched as the admiral grit her teeth, her fingers digging deeper into the backs of her hands. "You're making a mistake. Without the Galra to protect us-"

"The Galra have no interest in protecting you." Heath cut her off, ignoring the way she bristled at the interruption. "And you know that, don't you? You've got yourselves stuck in a bad deal, so you're just trying to dig in your heels as best you can to save face."

"This isn't about saving face." Sanda insisted. "This is about doing what's best to protect Earth. We can't allow ourselves to get involved in a war where we're hopelessly outclassed. A war that you brought to our doorstep, Commander."

Heath sighed, swinging his legs off the table, pushing his chair back so that he could stand up. "I won't deny that. But it wasn't our intention to bring the war here with us."

"Then what was your intention?" Sanda asked.

Scratching the back of his head, Heath slung his shotgun over his shoulder. For a second, everyone gathered seemed to relax, until he moved to pull something out of one of his belt pouches- at which point they all tensed again, save for Iverson and Sanda, the latter of whom was watching him like a hawk. He made a show of pulling out the transmitter slowly, setting it on the table.

"We didn't come here to fight." Heath stated. "We came here to keep the war from getting worse, by keeping both the black lion and Princess Allura out of the reach of the Galra Empire. But we also came here to save lives."
He pressed the button on the transmitter, multiple screens flickering to life. They were images of destruction, of devastation fueled by the Galra Empire's search for quintessence. All of which was made possible by Empress Honerva, who seemed to have gained the ability to drain it for her own personal use, which she in turn used to fuel the Empire.

"The Galra Empire have destroyed dozens of planets already," Heath stated. "Countless lives have been lost, and even more people have been misplaced because of the fighting. Whole families have been separated by this war, a war that the Galra Empire started."

Sanda narrowed her eyes. "We were told the Alteans started the war."

"You were lied to." Heath said firmly. "King Alfor, the leader of the Altean people, did what he had to prevent Emperor Zarkon from tearing his own home planet apart out of greed. The Daibazaal that my wife was raised on and the Daibazaal that my son was raised on are worlds apart from each other- if King Alfor hadn't destroyed the rift that was at the center of all of this, there likely wouldn't be a Daibazaal anymore."

"That's who you're dealing with." Heath said. "Those loyal to Daibazaal's royal family were willing to destroy their own home planet for the sake of power. And if they were willing to do that to their own home, what do you think they would do to Earth?"

The mutterings weren't even hushed this time. Admiral Sanda's brows were drawn tight together, and for a second, he thought she would continue to insist that she was doing the right thing- but instead she heaved a long, disgusted sigh.

"You might be right." Sanda admitted, her shoulders slumping in defeat. "But at this point, what can we do?"

"You're right about one thing, Admiral. War is coming to Earth." Heath plainly said. "Right now we have a strike team that's in the middle of raiding Lotor's lunar base. Their intention is to kill him. Once they do, the Empress will know, and she will retaliate."

Sanda shuddered, closing her eyes. "So we're finished."

"No." Heath said firmly. "Without Prince Lotor, Empress Honerva will lose any claim she has on the throne. There will be a few Galra who will side with her, but most of them will break apart and start to consolidate their power in order to claim the throne for themselves at the Kral Zera. We have a plan to deal with that, but we also have a plan to protect Earth from what forces the Empress does manage to muster."

"But we'll need the Garrison's help." Heath said.

"How?" Sanda asked. "We've all seen the Galra's ships. We're hopelessly outclassed."

"You also have bases all around the world." Heath stated. "When a bunch of alien ships start knocking on our doorstep, what do you think will happen?"

"Panic." Iverson responded.

Sanda locked eyes with him. "You want us to try and control it."

"Yes." Heath said. "If the Galaxy Garrison tells the people of Earth that they have nothing to worry about, they'll believe it."

"But do we?" Sanda asked. "I can't just go out there and lie to our people."
Heath bit back a remark that she already had, when she'd chosen to lie about the Kerberos mission. Right now, they needed Admiral Sanda and the influence she wielded on their side.

Retribution would have to wait.

"Yes." He said firmly. "Voltron will come."

Sanda narrowed her eyes. "Do you think that will be enough?"

"Trust me." Heath grinned. "It'll be more than enough."

"Veronica, do you have any idea what's going on around here?"

Glancing back at the person who had grabbed her arm, Veronica frowned. She knew Curtis- she worked alongside him pretty often. She wasn't surprised at all that he'd zeroed in on her, especially since she'd been the one to round everyone up into the nearly empty maintenance hangar. Every member of the rank and file, every tech, every communications agent and every civilian member of the staff- even the large hangar was starting to feel a little cramped.

There were no alarms going off in the hangar, but she could still hear them from the halls. She wasn't sure who had tripped them- probably Adam or Commander Kogane. Since they had made rounding everyone up that much easier, she wasn't necessarily complaining.

"It's... complicated." Veronica hesitated, unsure how much she should tell him- or anyone, for that matter. She didn't want to start a panic.

"So you do know what's going on." Curtis frowned. "Why are we all here? Those are the intruder alarms, aren't they?"

"Like I said, it's complicated." Veronica told him. "I only just found out... yesterday? The day before? These past few days have kind of passed in a blur for me."

"Well... what can you tell me?" Curtis asked. "Maybe I can help."

Veronica chewed on her lip, considering it for a moment. "There's... Admiral Sanda has made some decisions that could put the Galaxy Garrison in danger. And not just the Galaxy Garrison, but the whole planet."

For a second, Curtis stared at her, open-mouthed. She couldn't exactly blame him- even just that was a lot to take in. Then slowly, he closed it, narrowing his eyes. "Veronica... is this a coup?"

"Yes." Veronica said resolutely. "This is a coup. Or close enough to one."

"Okay." Curtis said. "Okay. That's more than I expected, but okay."

Tilting her head, Veronica stared at him a bit skeptically. "I'm not going to have to knock you out now and drag you off to the nearest supply closet, am I? Because if I have to..."

"I think I'll pass on that." Curtis said firmly. "I know you. If you say Sanda needs to be taken out of power, then you probably have a good reason for it."

"Good." Veronica nodded. "Because I'm going to need your help."

When she had met them at the entry point, Commander Kogane had handed her an earpiece, one that linked her up to their communications network. At some point, it had gone silent- judging from
the fact that Adam had been the middle of saying something when it had, she suspected it wasn't just due to inactivity.

Not when it was right after Adam had said he was going to check something out, it wasn't.

Not only was she worried about Adam, she was also worried that the interruption in radio contact might mean that whatever it was they had used to knock the sentries out might lose effect. Somehow she didn't think standard issue Garrison weapons would do much good against them.

"Tell me what to do." Curtis said.

"I need you to stay here, keep a handle on things." Veronica told him.

Curtis blinked, clearly not expecting that. "Sure. But what about you?"

Resting a hand on her Garrison issue pistol, Veronica's eyes narrowed. "There's something I need to check out."

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"I think I'll be the one asking the questions around here, if you don't mind."

Nursing her injured hand, Acxa leveled a sharp glare at the Earthling who had seemingly appeared from nowhere. The blast from her pistol had enough force to knock hers from her hands, and though it hadn't done much damage, she'd certainly felt the impact. It had provided the other Earthling with ample time to get away, putting some distance between the two of them. The two Earthlings spoke to each other briefly in hushed tones, quiet enough that she could only make out every few words.

Her eyes drifted in the direction of her own pistol. If she could just-

"I wouldn't try it." The woman stated, keeping her own pistol trained on her. She'd seemed to realize how little damage it had done, so it was now leveled at her head.

That was a risk Acxa wasn't willing to take.

Instead, she slowly held her hands up, keeping her eyes trained on the woman's pistol. She was willing to bet that she was faster than either of the Earthlings, but that didn't mean they wouldn't have time to take a lucky shot. And now that the Earthling she had been attempting to question had pulled his own, considerably more dangerous weapon, she quickly decided those weren't good odds.

At least this confirmed that the man wasn't working alone.

"Good." The woman- Veronica, she thought she'd overheard the man call her- said. "You're going to tell us exactly what you're doing here."

"Prince Lotor sent me to get a handle on the situation here." Acxa stated. She considered fluency in multiple languages to be one of her strong points, but her Earthling was a bit shaky. She'd had to learn it in haste. "He suspected there would be an attempted coup, and it would appear he was right."

"Coup is such a strong word." The man- Adam, she thought she heard Veronica call him- said. "I prefer taking down corrupt leadership that has allowed itself to be lied to by a hostile alien race."

Hostile. Acxa bit her tongue- she could certainly understand why they might view the Galra
Empire as hostile. But Lotor was different. What he sought was an end to this war, not its continuation. A true end, where everyone involved could be happy.

"While I can't speak for any agreements your people may have made with the rest of the Empire," Acxa began, carefully gauging her words, "-now that Lotor is in charge, I can assure you that he intends to honor any agreements made, down to the letter. He has no interest in seeing your people harmed."

"That's a bold claim, seeing as you took one of our people hostage." Adam pointed out.

"Oh yes- I suppose our hostage has outlived her usefulness. Kill her."

She bit down on the inside of her lip, trying not to dwell on that. She trusted Prince Lotor- he had taken her and the rest of her fellow generals under his command when no one else would. Even if she didn't always agree with everything he did, she knew he had a reason for it. Everything was for the sake of peace, for the sake of ending this terrible war- she had to believe that.

She couldn't let herself lose faith in him.

"We have every intention of returning her." Acxa lied. By now, she was probably already dead, no matter what kind of connection Keith might have had to her before. Narti's influence was not to be underestimated.

But that was necessary too, she told herself. If Lotor was to bring true peace to the universe, then he needed Voltron to do it. And since none of the lions had ever called to him, and none of the paladins- present or future- would listen to him, this was the only option they had left.

The Galra Empire had become too dependent on quintessence. Voltron was the only thing that could safely access the quintessence field now that the rift had been destroyed. Brainwashing a few paladins was a small price to pay for not having to resort to the more barbaric methods the Empire had taken to after the destruction of the rift.

"Somehow I find that hard to believe." Veronica stated.

"It's the truth." Acxa said firmly. If it weren't for the raid on their temporary base, she was sure Prince Lotor would have kept his word. It had been the Altean princess who had shown that she had no intention of honoring her end of the bargain.

These people, these Earthlings, weren't even supposed to be involved in this war. They'd just gotten mixed up in it. If Princess Allura hadn't chosen to flee here, none of this would be happening. Didn't they realize that? How could they still side with her, knowing that she had brought this war to them?

"Are you the one who jammed our radios?" Adam asked.

Acxa said nothing, merely stared them down. If she could just find a way to distract them, she could turn the tide back in her favor. She was loathe to kill them, but she would do what she must if it meant fulfilling Prince Lotor's orders.

"I'd answer him, if I were you." Veronica said.

Acxa narrowed her eyes. "Yes."

"How many more of there are you?" Veronica asked.
"I'm the only one here," Acxa said truthfully, "-since you seem to have disabled the sentries we left behind somehow."

In that instant, Acxa saw her chance. Adam and Veronica both broke eye contact with her, instead looking towards each other. It barely lasted a second, but it was enough to give her a gap. Diving for her pistol, she rolled out of the way of Veronica's first shot, though it just barely missed her shoulder- and her second came far too close to her head for comfort. Adam fired as well, but his shots were less precise, likely due to the unfamiliarity of his weapon.

It left her with more than enough time to grab her pistol, aiming it square at Veronica's head. She didn't pull the trigger- her gap of opportunity had been small, too small for her to effectively retaliate. She might not have turned the tide, but she had forced a stalemate.

"Lower your weapons." Acxa instructed.

"Give us one good reason to." Veronica countered.

"Lower them, and I swear that I'll spare your lives." Acxa said.

"Sorry if I find that a little hard to believe." Veronica said, an echo of her words from before.

Acxa narrowed her eyes, her trigger finger itching. She really didn't want to kill them, but this was war. Even if these people shouldn't have ever become a part of it, now that they had decided to take up a side, she couldn't afford to not consider them as her enemy. If she didn't kill them first, they would kill her- that was the Galra way, the way that had been drilled into her by her mother, so that she wouldn't get left behind due to her own mixed blood.

Her mother, who never had any qualms about sleeping with her father, but seemed ashamed of her own halfbreed child. Like so many others in the Empire, she thought she was somehow faulty, as if the non-Galra blood in her veins tainted her, made her less pure.

Lotor would change that. She had to believe in that.

If she couldn't believe in Lotor, what could she believe in? The Galra Empire had become no place for those of mixed blood- or most of it had. The Blade of Marmora was accepting of those with mixed blood, seeing no shame in those who were less Galra, but instead embraced them for who- and what- they were. It was part of why she had always envied Keith, from the moment that she had learned he was of mixed blood.

She still wasn't entirely sure he deserved the fate he'd been handed, even if it was necessary to bring peace to the universe. But if it would... then she would do what she had to. At least this way, he could keep his life- even if the person he'd been before would have to die to accomplish that.

But it had to be done. It had to be.

She fired, but in that same instant, so did Veronica. The two beams met with explosive force, enough to knock the two humans off of their feet. Acxa stood her ground, holstering her pistol as she surged forward, knocking Adam's weapon out of his hands first, before she pivoted on her heel. By that time, Veronica had already recovered, but missed her head and hit her in the left shoulder instead.

She didn't stop, grabbing Veronica by the wrist, pinning her arm behind her back. In the same movement, she drew her pistol, pointing it towards Adam, a warning look in her eyes that told him exactly what would happen if he tried to go for his weapon.
As much as she had resolved herself to killing them, it would still be her last option.

"Put your hands up." Acxa instructed. "You're going to take me to where the rest of your allies are."

"Don't do it, Adam." Veronica said, determination in her eyes.

Acxa frowned slightly. She had thought of the Earthlings as innocents who had simply been thrown into this war, but perhaps she had been underestimating them. Maybe they were tougher than she had previously given them credit for.

"Do it." Acxa said. "And I promise, no harm will come to you, or to your friend."

"Do you really even have the authority to make that promise?" Veronica asked.

"Veronica," Adam cautioned, "-let's maybe not make the alien with a gun to your head mad."

"I have served as Prince Lotor's right hand for deca-phoebs." Acxa said. "He will listen to me."

Even though he hadn't, not about the hostage. Or about sending Ezor infiltrate the Castle alone. There had been no word about her since then, and she feared that she was already dead, tortured by the Blade in hopes that she might divulge some tidbit of useful information. It would be useless. She would never give Lotor up, she knew- none of them would.

Adam looked at Veronica, then at her. Then slowly, he raised his hands, holding them up in a universal gesture of surrender. "Fine. I'll do what you say. Just let Veronica go."

Veronica's eyes went wide. "Adam, you can't-!"

"Please," Adam pleaded, "-just listen to what she has to say."

Veronica frowned, glaring at her, hard. She had to admit, she was impressed by how fierce she was. She wouldn't be out of place at all, living amongst the Galra.

She hurriedly tucked that thought away. Now was not the time to be admiring the enemy.

"Fine." Veronica relented, dropping her weapon. It fell to the ground with a decisive clatter. "I'll do what you say."

"Good." Acxa said, placing her foot on her pistol first, kicking it back behind them before she released her. She kept her own pistol trained on her, not willing to take any chances. "Now. Take me to where your allies are."

"How about you take us to where your allies are, Acxa?"

Acxa went stiff, feeling cold metal press into the bare skin of her throat, where there was a gap in her armor. It stunk of Altean magic, the slender needle probably crafted not by a forge, but by Altean alchemy, designed to be able to do far more damage than something its size ought to do. One false move, and she would surely lose her life.

Reluctantly, Acxa dropped her pistol. The wielder of the deadly needle pulled it slightly away from her throat, but only enough so that a poorly miscalculated breath wouldn't cause her to slice her own throat open. She could win against human speed and strength, but not against that of an Altean who had been trained in the deadly arts.

"Romelle." Acxa said shortly, recalling the name of Allura's assassin maid, for it could only be her.
"You abandoned your post."

She had been wondering just where she was, upon realizing that she wasn't a part of the team that was currently raiding their temporary base. She'd assumed that she was waiting on standby at the Castle, but it would seem that she'd been mistaken.

A massive miscalculation on her part, clearly.

"Allura's orders." Romelle said. "Besides, she hardly needs my services. Or Keith's, for that matter."

The needle angled itself a bit closer to her throat as she mentioned the Blade's name, and Acxa realized that the Altean was actually furious. Keenly aware that she was now walking on a razor's edge between life and death, she opted for life instead.

The Galra creed might be victory or death, but she saw no sense in hurrying to throw away one's own life, when there might be another chance at victory in the future.

"Now," Romelle began, "-take us to whoever else you have with you."

"I meant it when I said I was alone." Acxa told her.

"Really?" Veronica frowned, seeming to have recovered from the shock that had crossed her features at Romelle's sudden appearance. Adam had fared better, but perhaps he had seen her coming. "Lotor didn't even send one sentry with you as backup?"

Acxa narrowed her eyes, not caring for what her tone suggested. "Prince Lotor has faith in my abilities."

"And yet you're being held at bay by a needle." Adam pointed out.

She glowered at him- as much as she could, with the aforementioned needle still angled at her throat. "I didn't expect Romelle to be here."

"Well I'm here." Romelle simply said. "If you can't take us to your allies, then how about you disable the jamming you set up instead? You can do that, can't you?"

"Fine." Acxa relented.

Romelle's needle moved a bit more away from her throat again, and she took the chance to take in a long breath. Letting it out, she retrieved the jammer that she had tucked away in a chink of her armor, breaking it and letting the remains drop to the floor. "Satisfied?"

Romelle shifted her head, looking up towards Adam and Veronica. "How is it?"

"Commander?" Adam asked, tapping an earpiece. "You there?"

This close, Acxa could just faintly make out someone's voice, responding in the affirmative. Adam looked up, giving Romelle a curt nod of his head. "Looks like we're back online."

"Good." Romelle said. "I'll inform the Castle."

Glaring at the floor, Acxa debated if she should try to take advantage of the natural lapse in attention that contacting the Castle would cause. Warily eying the needle, still angled at her throat, and still too close for comfort, she quickly decided against it.
"That's strange," Romelle frowned, "-I can't get through to either Katie or Coran."

Veronica glared at her. "I thought you said you fixed the jamming."

"I did." Acxa said, genuinely puzzled. Lotor hadn't mentioned anything about taking action against the Castle of Lions- they just didn't have the manpower to pull it off. "Something else must be blocking your communications."

There was a long, anxious pause as Romelle once again attempted to get into contact with the Castle. Out of the corner of her eye, she could make out a tight frown on the Altean's face, and a tick later, her needle was once again much too close to her throat.

"Did Lotor send someone to attack the Castle?" Romelle inquired.

"No." Acxa said firmly.

She nearly thought she wouldn't believe her, but the needle was pulled away again. Romelle's brows knit together, as if deep in thought- only for horror to flash across her face.

"Ezor." Romelle said. "She must have gotten free somehow."

Acxa blinked, more surprised by the fact that Ezor was apparently still alive, than she was about her having escaped. Out of all of them, she was the best at that.

"That's the general who raided the Castle before, right?" Adam asked.

"The same." Romelle said, cursing under her breath. "New plan. I will take Acxa back to the Castle with me. We need to stop Ezor before she can hurt anyone. A hostage should help."

"I'm coming with you." Veronica said.

Romelle shook her head. "It's too dangerous. I can't guarantee your safety."

"My brother's on that ship." Veronica said firmly. "I'm going."

Romelle locked eyes with her, before she heaved a sigh, seemingly conceding. "Fine. But what will we do about the coup? Isn't that important?"

"I don't think we need to worry about that." Adam said. "From the sound of it, Commander Kogane has that handled. I'll regroup with him, just to be safe."

Romelle nodded. "Good. I'm glad at least one thing is going as planned."

Acxa bit down on her tongue, refraining from saying anything. She would bide her time, allowing them to take her back to the Castle of Lions with them. Once there, she would look for a chance to break free and regroup with Ezor. Together, they could take over the Castle of Lions and deliver it, and the black lion to Prince Lotor.

Surely Lotor would be pleased if they were to present it to him- pleased enough to forgive her failures here. Because if there was one thing Acxa was afraid of, even more than the deadly needle still poised at her throat, it was failing her prince.
"Give me Ezor's location." Krolia said, drawing her blade. "I'll head her off. Once I'm gone, lock down the bridge, and don't open it for anyone."

"Coran, I think we might have a problem."

Krolia's ears twitched, lifting her head and looking in Coran's direction. She had been left behind to guard the Castle, as well as the black lion- a monumental task for just one person, but one that she was more than up to the challenge of taking on. That said, she doubted that she would see any action- it would be better if she didn't, frankly.

"What sort of problem?" Coran asked. "If it's the fact that we've lost communications with our group at the Garrison, then we've-

"No, it's not that." Keith's friend, the one called Katie cut him off. Her tone seemed urgent. "Well, I mean, yeah, it's that, but we also have a much bigger problem."

"Bigger?" Coran asked. "Have the sentries come online again?"

Krolia frowned, making her way over towards Coran. "This is Krolia. Give me the situation."

"I don't know how, but somehow that general of Lotor's that you were keeping prisoner has escaped." Katie said. "At least, according to the security footage she has."

Krolia's eyes narrowed, bringing up the footage herself. Sure enough, the door to Ezor's cell was wide open- so either someone had gotten in and altered the footage to make her believe she had escaped, or she'd actually done so. Either way, it wasn't something she could ignore.

"Coran, lock down the communications room," Krolia said.

"What?" Coran asked. "If we do that, we'll cut off all our communications."

"If Ezor's free, she could free Lotor's other spies as well." Krolia said. "We can't allow the humans to get hurt. If we lock down the communications room, anyone who wants to get in will have to
come through here to bypass the system."

"So what," Lance asked, "-we'll all be stuck in here until you let us go?"

"Yes." Krolia said. "But it's the best way to keep the four of you safe."

She wasn't sure if Ezor would go after them on purpose, but on the off chance that she was headed towards the communications room, their paths would inevitably cross. If she wanted to get any kind of message out to Lotor, or to Empress Honerva, then she would need to head there. Ezor was just ruthless enough that Krolia didn't trust that she wouldn't try and harm the children, even if they responded to her appearance by running.

Actually, running might just encourage her.

"She's right." Coran agreed. "Sorry, but we'll have to lock you up for the time being."

"If that's what you need to do to keep us safe, then I guess we'll just have to deal with it." Matt said. "Besides, if it gets too stifling in here, I'm pretty sure Katie and I can come up with a workaround anyways."

"Or Hunk." Lance interjected. "Just saying, you two aren't the only tech geniuses in the room."

Hunk's voice was far enough away from the source of the transmission that all she was able to make out was a loud, "Aw, Lance!"

"Once it's safe, we'll unlock the room." Krolia told them, nodding towards Coran. He quickly began the procedure of locking the room down. Once done, she felt herself breathe a little easier. It wasn't only the fact that they had the responsibility to keep the humans safe, it was also simply the fact that they were Keith's friends- even if Lance's status as one was contentious at best. What kind of mother would she be if she didn't at least try and protect her son's friends?

The same kind of mother who stayed behind when her son was in danger. She huffed slightly, trying not to dwell on it. She had faith in Ulaz and Regris, and confidence in the princess and Shiro. She just had to believe it would be enough.

"Coran, do a heat scan of the Castle." Krolia said. "If Ezor's on the move, then odds are she's invisible. I want to know where she is, and where she's headed."

When the Altean didn't immediately respond, Krolia frowned, glancing in his direction. He had already brought up surveillance footage of the entire Castle, his attention fixed solely on it.

"Coran?" Krolia repeated. "If we're going to find Ezor, we need that heat scan."

"Well... that's just it, actually." Coran said. "We don't."

Krolia blinked, following Coran's gaze. It was hard to miss Ezor's colorful figure, especially against the white of the Castle's walls, but she also hadn't expected to find her that easily. She hadn't even tried to hide herself.

Something about this felt wrong.

"Do the heat scan just in case." Krolia instructed. "And check for any data interference."

Coran nodded, quickly complying. Not only did he not find any data interference, but the heat scan proved that the figure that looked like Ezor was Ezor. Her cell was empty, and everyone else
onboard was present and accounted for, right where they should be, including Lotor's spies. There was no one else on board.

"How did she even escape?" Coran asked. "I thought you and Ulaz checked her over for anything suspicious."

"We did." Krolia said. They had stripped her of her armor, leaving her in nothing but her undersuit- and they'd checked that too. "She must have smuggled something in using another method."

But why now? The timing was too good. Ezor had been completely isolated in her cell, the information she got tightly controlled. She couldn't have known that they would be reduced down to a skeleton crew, much less about the raid on the lunar base. If she was somehow receiving outside communications, they would have picked up on that.

Kolivan had once remarked that her instinct was one of her strongest advantages. And right now, her instinct told her that there was something off about this whole scenario. For a tick, she considered the possibility that there might be another spy, but no- there was no one on board who wasn't already supposed to be there, and she knew that herself and Coran were clean. It was impossible for it to be one of the humans, which left no one.

Right now, her only lead was Ezor.

"Give me Ezor's location." Krolia said, drawing her blade. "I'll head her off. Once I'm gone, lock down the bridge, and don't open it for anyone."

"Are you sure?" Coran asked. "It could be dangerous."

"I'm sure." Krolia said.

She could more than handle Ezor on her own- at least, under normal circumstances. Something told her these weren't normal circumstances, but regardless, she was all the Castle had right now. It was too late to call back Romelle, and they might need her at the Garrison anyways.

"Alright," Coran frowned, "-but be careful. There's not much point in orchestrating a family reunion if the whole family's not around for it."

Krolia gave him a faint smile. "I will."

"Good." Coran nodded. "It would appear that Ezor is on the third floor, heading down. By my calculations, she's headed towards..."

He squinted, his brow furrowing. "Well that can't be right. It looks like she's heading down towards the black lion's hangar."

Krolia swore. She doubted Ezor would be able to fly it- or even get in- unless the black lion wanted her to, but that didn't mean that was something she could let happen.

"What's the fastest route to the hangar?" Krolia asked.

"Conventional or unconventional?" Coran asked, arching a brow.

"Fast." Krolia repeated.

"Unconventional, then." Coran said. "King Alfor did recently install a zip line system that leads to each lion. He just never got the chance to test it out before Zarkon went rouge."
Krolia opened her mouth to say something to that, but quickly snapped it shut, instead shaking her head. She didn't understand the point of a zip line system when they had hover technology, but Alteans could be odd. But if it let her get to the black lion's hangar faster, then for once, she wasn't about to question it.

"Show me how."

The drive to the Castle was tense, to say the least.

If there was one silver lining, it was that Veronica was too distracted to really notice. All she could think about was her brother. She had thought that he would have been out of danger on the Castle, but now she couldn't shake the sense of dread.

"I'm sure he'll be alright." Romelle tried to assure her. "Krolia is still there."

Veronica nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Glancing towards the back, where Romelle sat with Acxa, the latter who had been handcuffed, she silently hoped it would be enough. She was certain that this Krolia was both highly trained and capable, but it paled in comparison to the natural worry of a big sister for her baby brother.

"If Ezor really did escape," Romelle continued, "-then she's probably headed for the bridge anyways."

In spite of Romelle's attempt to reassure her, Acxa's continued silence just made her nervous. She picked up speed, until they were practically blitzing through the desert. It made for a bumpy ride, but nobody complained. They had taken the vehicle that Adam, Romelle, and Commander Kogane had used to get here, so it had no problem in getting past the dampening field.

Soon, but not soon enough in Veronica's opinion, the Castle was in sight, looming over the desert landscape. It stuck out like a sore thumb, the only thing hiding it from the eyes of passing planes being the aforementioned dampening field, and the illusory effect tied to it. She'd been briefed on it all yesterday, and while it had been interesting, now she just wished that someone had briefed her on how to get into the Castle on her own.

"Don't worry," Romelle said, as if reading her mind, "-I can get us in."

"Provided this Ezor hasn't locked the Castle down." Veronica muttered.

She could make out Romelle grimacing in the rear view mirror, which did nothing to make her feel better. She would have picked up even more speed, if she wasn't also worried about plowing someone in the town that had cropped up around the Castle down. In the end, she slowed down, though she still drove as fast as she dared to.

They attracted attention, to say the least. The vehicle was one of the standard issue Garrison transports- probably taken from the officer who had been sent to investigate the valley months back. That said, almost no one was actually out on what passed as the streets- so either they had been told that a massive operation was about to go down, or they had simply sensed it.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Acxa staring out the window as they passed through the camp. Her expression was unreadable, even though she didn't have the pupilless eyes that some of the other Galra she had met possessed. Granted, she'd only met two- Keith and Krolia both had pupils. Genetic variation or something, she guessed.

"Take a good look." Romelle said, her tone harsh. "All these people are refugees, fleeing from the
war your Empire started."

Acxa's eyes narrowed. "Prince Lotor hasn't been-

"-involved in the war effort?" Romelle finished. "No, but he hasn't exactly been involved with the relief effort either. For someone who claims to seek peace, he hasn't exactly done a lot to back that up."

Acxa said nothing to that, merely tearing her gaze away from the window, her expression even harder to decipher than before. Veronica narrowed her eyes, but otherwise focused on her driving.

Once they were close enough to the Castle, she parked the car, grabbing the pistol that she had requisitioned from Acxa. She still had her own, but she had a feeling that this one would be the more useful.

Adam had offered her his blaster, but she'd told him to keep it. She hoped he wouldn't need it, but it would be better for him to have it than to not. Besides, she was more accustomed to firearms of this size anyways, rather than something as unwieldy as a blaster.

"Get out." Veronica instructed Acxa, popping over the passenger side door. "Don't try anything."

"I'll make sure she doesn't." Romelle said firmly.

Veronica didn't question that. Whatever- whoever- Romelle was, it was clear that she was extremely skilled. Lance had introduced her as Princess Allura's maid- or her body double. He hadn't been very clear on that fact. Whatever she was supposed to be, Veronica guessed that her role was a little bigger than a mere maid- or even that of a body double.

"Good." Veronica said, sliding out of the car. She shut the door behind her, watching as Romelle got out after Acxa. She hadn't seen her put away the needle-like weapon she'd had back at the Garrison, but she was positive it was on her somewhere.

Staring warily up at the Castle, Veronica trailed behind Romelle and Acxa. Nothing looked off, but it wasn't exactly like she could tell if anything was wrong from the outside. Not unless the Castle's exterior was on fire, or had been exploded into a thousand little pieces. Neither of those things had happened, which she guessed was a good thing, but she still couldn't bring herself to shake the wary feeling that had taken hold of her ever since communications with the Castle had been shut off.

Romelle pulled a device of some kind out of her pocket, some kind of holographic screen popping up out of it. The Altean squinted, the static she was getting obviously not what she wanted to see, before she adjusted the device some. When nothing changed, she huffed slightly, tucking it away.

"I can't communicate with the Castle, even from here." Romelle said. "Ezor must have done a real number on our communications."

"Can you get us in?" Veronica asked.

"That shouldn't be a problem." Romelle told her. "Communications might be cut off, but I was able to at least call us a transport pod. Here it comes now."

Veronica glanced upwards, watching the almost painfully slow descent of the pod. Once it touched down, she felt herself tense, half expecting some kind of alien monster to leap out of it at them- but when the doors to the transport pod opened, there was nothing inside. Exhaling, Veronica's shoulders slumped, trailing a bit behind the alien pair.
She glanced towards Acxa a bit, her brows knitting together. "What's this Ezor like?"

Acxa said nothing, merely stared straight ahead.

"Would she hurt my brother?" Veronica asked.

"No." Acxa said, after a distressing amount of consideration. "Not unless he got in the way."

Veronica frowned, unsure if she trusted that. Even if she did, she wasn't sure if it brought her any comfort or not. Lance had a good heart, but sometimes it could get him into trouble- and this was exactly the kind of situation where it just might do that.

"For what it's worth," Romelle began, "she's likely telling the truth. Ezor can be ruthless in battle, but she never strays that far from her objectives."

Veronica frowned, wondering if that was supposed to be comforting. All she could hear was ruthless in battle, and not much else. She chalked it up to just to space alien awkwardness, and not any actively malicious attempt to make her worry even more.

"She can also turn invisible." Romelle mentioned, as the transport pod locked into place, almost as an afterthought.

As the doors to the transport pod opened, it was all Veronica could do to scramble after Romelle and Acxa. "She can what?"

"Turn invisible." Romelle repeated. "She's only half Galra. It comes from her mother's side."

Veronica swallowed, her gaze darting around the loading bay. The idea that this Ezor could be anywhere, and they might not even know it didn't exactly bring her comfort.

"Don't worry!" Romelle nearly chirped. "That's what we brought Acxa for!"

Somehow that didn't provide her with much comfort.

"Fine." Veronica said, even though it wasn't fine. Nothing about this was fine. "Where should we go from here?"

"We should head directly to the bridge." Romelle said. "Maybe Coran can tell us what's going on."

Veronica nodded. That sounded as good an idea as any, and it wasn't like she had anything better. Sure, she had been given a tour of the Castle, but everything just looked the same to her. She'd probably just get hopelessly lost if she tried to navigate it on her own.

Following behind Romelle and Acxa, Veronica brought up the rear. She kept a wary eye out for any signs of trouble- not that she'd be able to see anything if there was trouble- so she kept an ear out for it too. She hoped Romelle was right, and that having Acxa around would prevent this Ezor from sneaking up and attacking them.

Honestly, she was starting to think aliens were more trouble than they were worth.

"That's strange," Romelle frowned as they made it to the bridge, "the bridge appears to be locked down from the inside."

Sure enough, the bridge was sealed shut. Veronica felt a shiver run up the length of her spine- something about the sight of it just felt ominous.
"Can you get in?" Veronica asked.

"Not from here, no." Romelle shook her head. "Whoever is inside would have to let us in."

"Can you get them to let us in?" Veronica asked, half hoping that whoever was inside wasn't Ezor. Facing down Acxa in the Garrison was one thing, but now that she was inside an alien spaceship, she suddenly felt so much more out of her league.

But she would do what she had to to protect Lance.

"I think so." Romelle said with a slight frown, as if she wasn't sure if she believed it or not.

There was an access panel off to the side of the bridge. Romelle tried that first, to see if she could bypass the lockdown and get in, but the doors remained firmly shut. Veronica made sure to pay close attention to Acxa while all this was going on, but the Galra didn't budge. She didn't know if she was just biding her time, or if she had resigned herself to surrender.

Or if Romelle's words were still getting to her.

Thankfully, the intercom proved functional. "Coran? This is Romelle. Can you let us in?"

A few anxious seconds passed, before the intercom crackled to life and a man's voice could be heard over it. She dimly recalled it as belonging to this Coran- he had cut a figure that was hard to forget, what with his bright orange mustache and his accent.

"Romelle?" Coran asked, sounding uncertain. "What in the blazes are you doing here? I thought you were over at the Garrison."

"I was." Romelle said. "But we managed to capture the general that Lotor sent to investigate matters there. Say hello, Acxa."

"Hello." Acxa said, dryly and with more sarcasm than Veronica thought possible.

"Veronica's here too." Romelle added, glancing her way and giving a slight wave. She blinked, but didn't wave back. "Anyways, we came back because communications to the Castle were cut off and we were afraid something happened."

"Oh, something happened alright." Coran agreed. "But how do I know you're the real Romelle? Krolia said not to open the doors for anyone when she left."

Romelle made a face. "I could tell everyone where you hide your stash of nunvill."

She didn't know what nunvill was, but judging from the face Acxa made at the mention of it, she was going to guess it was unpleasant.

"Now hold on one second. There's no need to resort to threats." Coran said. "I'll let you in, but I'm warning you, if you turn out to not be who you say you are, I'll shoot."

"We'll keep that in mind." Romelle replied dryly.

A few seconds of tension later, the doors to the bridge slowly opened. There was Coran, a blaster similar to the one Adam had in his hands, watching them warily. His gaze rested the longest on Acxa, only leaving once she held up her hands to show that she was handcuffed, though she didn't look threatened in the least.

"Well, come on in then." Coran told them. "Can't keep these doors open forever you know."
Exchanging a glance with Romelle, the Altean nodded. Nodding back, Veronica trailed behind the two aliens, glancing behind her as the bridge doors shut once she was inside. Looking around the bridge, she didn't see anything that seemed to be out of place—though granted, she had only been here once. While observation was a big component of her job, it didn't mean that she had anything close to a photographic memory.

"So, you caught Acxa, eh?" Coran asked, lowering his blaster. "I'm hoping this doesn't mean Lotor was prepared for us."

Acxa narrowed her eyes, but refused to say anything, instead looking at the floor.

"Not a talker, eh?" Coran asked.

"I refuse to betray my Prince." Acxa simply said.

"So... what happened here?" Veronica asked, trying to get back on the subject before they strayed too far from it. Lance was nowhere to be seen on the bridge, which had to mean he was somewhere else on the ship. And considering the fact that the bridge had been locked down... it didn't exactly put her at ease.

Coran shook his head. "I don't know. Somehow the general we were keeping prisoner managed to escape. I knew we should have put her in a cryopod when we had the chance."

"If she escaped, then Ezor's probably long gone by now." Acxa said. "You're wasting your time trying to look for her."

"Actually, that's where you would be wrong." Coran said, tugging on one end of his mustache. "She didn't even try to escape. Or hide, for that matter."

Acxa frowned, her brows knitting together. "That doesn't sound like Ezor."

"Where is she now?" Romelle asked.

"Last I checked, she was heading towards the black lion's hangar. Probably about there by now." Coran said. "Krolia left to try and head her off."

"Can you bring up the footage from the hangar?" Romelle asked.

"Actually, we never switched that camera back online." Coran apologetically replied. "Kind of got lost in the shuffle."

"Why was it offline?" Veronica asked. She only vaguely knew what the black lion was. She'd been told that it was just one part of some kind of superweapon that the Altean king had developed, and had once been piloted before the leader of the Galra Empire, before he'd gone power mad or however the story went. They'd been hiding it here ever since.

"Oh, to hide the black lion." Coran said. "We made it look like the hangar was empty, so that way the only way one could actually see the truth was if they saw it for themselves. Of course, the hangar was restricted to everyone save for the princess and Keith, so they would have to go through quite a bit of security before they could get in."

"Why would she even be heading there?" Romelle asked. "It's not as if she can get in."

"Not sure." Coran admitted, looking towards Acxa. "Unless you perhaps have some kind of idea...?"
"No," Acxa said, "-I don't."

Veronica frowned. She sounded honest, at least, even if she didn't care for the answer.

"Where are Lance and the others?" Veronica asked.

"Oh, they're fine!" Coran assured her. "Nice and secure in the communications room. We had to seal it off, which is why all our communications cut out. Sorry about the scare!"

Exhaling, Veronica finally felt some of her tension ebb away. It still wasn't completely gone, and probably wouldn't be until both Acxa and Ezor were safely in custody, Prince Lotor was dead, and the Galra Empire taken care of. Only then could she feel assured that Lance- and the rest of her family for that matter- were safe.

But until that happened, tension would be a constant companion.

Odd as the transportation system was, she couldn't argue with its speed. It looked only half-built- once she got past the section with the zip line, there had been another section, with tracks laid out along the floor that indicated that there was some sort of vehicle component, but the vehicle itself wasn't present. It had been easy enough to run along the tracks, which came out to some kind of loading platform.

Truly, King Alfor was an odd man.

Krolia still arrived at the black lion's hangar much faster than if she had used any other route. Unsheathing her blade, she stalked the length of the hangar, eyes scanning her surroundings for anything out of place. Nothing was, but she didn't fail to notice the fact that the black lion had it's particle barrier raised. Gazing up at it, she frowned, wondering if it could sense that something was wrong as well.

"Don't worry," Krolia caught herself saying, "-I intend to keep you safe."

She swore the lion heard her. Logically, she knew that they were sentient, but she never had the same connection with them that either Zarkon or Alfor had- or even her own son or Princess Allura, for that matter. She smiled slightly at that, though it was tempered somewhat with the knowledge of her son's likely fate. She always knew that Keith was destined to become something great.

Seeing as the hangar was clear, Krolia made her way towards the hangar doors. Pressing her hand against the access panel, she slipped out, sealing them shut behind her. Now all she had to do was wait.

She didn't need to wait for long. Her ears twitched, picking up on the sounds of the elevator's gears, the sound coming closer and closer. She braced herself, awakening her blade and angling it towards the doors, while also giving herself plenty of room to dodge if necessary.

As soon as the doors opened, she knew something was wrong.

Ezor didn't give her the chance to dwell on it, instead lunging for her- which was just another indication that something was wrong. All of her experiences with the general indicated that she enjoyed taunting her opponents, as well as engaging in banter, but there was none of that now. Instead she appeared to have almost laser focus, keen on presumably getting past her and into the black lion's hangar.

Without the access code, she wouldn't be able to get in- but she also shouldn't have gotten out of
her cell either. She wished she had been able to check it out herself, but there hadn't been the time, and they didn't have anyone that they could safely spare to investigate it. Once she dealt with Ezor, she would try and figure out how she had managed to escape, but until then, it was just going to have to wait.

This time they'd put her in the cryopod for sure.

She easily dodged Ezor's initial lunge, keeping a wary eye on her tentacle. It packed a punch, and was prehensile to boot, so she couldn't afford not to.

For a tick, she expected Ezor to lunge for the door with the same single-mindedness she'd displayed earlier, but instead she turned around to face her again. Krolia braced herself for another attack, all while noting that the thing that had confirmed her suspicions that there was in fact, something wrong here hadn't just been her imagination.

Ezor's eyes were blazing yellow.

That definitely wasn't normal. She was aware that long term exposure to quintessence- even the kind that wasn't harmful to mental facilities- had the side effect of turning the eyes of her fellow Galra more yellow, and in some cases causing their pupils to completely vanish. Ulaz and Kolivan had both been effected by it, having spent so much time with Empress Honerva and Emperor Zarkon respectively, and even Regris, who had been born after the rift had been sealed had pure yellow eyes.

A lot of Galra infants born after the rift had formed did, actually. Half-Galra were a different matter. Keith's sclera were actually several shades lighter than the normal shade of yellow, and Ezor, she knew, while possessing yellow sclera, also had visible pupils.

Had being the operative word, since they were gone now.

Ezor lunged again, but Krolia was able to evade it. She had a slighter size than many other Galra, but it made her quicker on her feet, more agile. Ezor should be the same way, but she was moving with none of her usual grace. It was almost like something else was moving her.

Narrowing her eyes, she flipped her blade so that she held it by the lower part of the hilt, the actual blade pointed away from Ezor. The general didn't even seem to notice, just lunged at her again- but this time, instead of evading, Krolia dropped into her guard, slamming the hilt of her blade sharply into her jaw, sending her staggering back. Pivoting on her heel, Krolia moved so that she was behind her, knocking Ezor out with a single, swift blow.

Exhaling, Krolia switched her blade around, returning it to its unawakened form. She was just about to crouch down to check her pulse when something caught her eye.

There was something... she didn't know what, exactly. It almost appeared to be leaking from Ezor's head. For a tick, she thought it might be blood, but neither of Ezor's species were red-blooded, and the substance was very red- not to mention the fact that it was going up, not down. Instantly on her guard, Krolia backed away, watching as the strange energy escaped from Ezor, taking the form of a small, dark red orb.

Krolia's thoughts instantly went backwards, back to a time before the rift had been sealed. She had never seen the creature herself, but Ulaz had, and he had shared what he'd seen with the rest of the Blade of Marmora. Even before it started pulsing with an unknown energy, she recognized it as dangerous- the same kind of thing that had nearly destroyed her home world, and would have done so, if not for Voltron.
Suddenly, she realized why Ezor's movements had been so irregular.

The orb- or creature, she supposed- surged towards her, but she evaded it. Now that it didn't have a host, it was quicker. She could question how it had gotten here and how it had gotten into Ezor later- right now she needed to think of a way to deal with it- and fast, before it decided to take someone else as its host. And given the fact that she was the only one around, that someone could only be her.

It surged towards her again, and again, she evaded it. She still held her blade, but somehow she doubted it would be effective against the creature. Narrowing her eyes, she wished again that she had been the one to go up to the lunar base, rather than Ulaz. He might actually know a way of dealing with this thing.

Had it just been trying to lure her out? Or did it need the black lion?

Just as she thought that, a powerful roar sounded from within the lion's hangar. She couldn't communicate with the lions, but somehow she felt like she instinctively knew what to do. The lions had been able to defeat a creature much larger than this before, so maybe giving the creature what it wanted was exactly what she needed to do right now.

Ducking out of the way of the creature for a third time, Krolia slammed her hand against the access panel, grateful that the hangar was no longer restricted access. As soon as it realized that the doors were opening, the creature lost all interest in her, instead zipping inside. Wasting no time, Krolia sheathed her blade, scrambling to grab Ezor and pull her out of the way, off into a corner of the hallway. She wasn't sure what was about to happen, but she doubted it was anything she wanted to be in the center of.

There was another roar, this one so loud that it shook her down to her very bones. There was a bright flash, and Krolia shut her eyes tight, ducking her head to prevent herself from going blind. Only once she was sure the light had faded, did she finally allow herself to crack a single eye open.

The light was gone, and she couldn't hear the black lion roaring anymore. Carefully rising to her feet, Krolia made her way into the hangar. There was no trace of the creature, and the black lion was once more sitting regally, surrounded by its particle barrier.

Krolia huffed. "Guess you're not the one who needs the protection."

The black lion didn't respond, but she didn't expect it to. Shaking her head, she made her way over towards Ezor, stooping down to check her pulse. It was weak, and her breaths were shallow- not a good combination, and definitely not like she had left her. She wasn't going to deny that she had used some unsavory interrogation techniques, but nothing that should have left the general in this bad of a condition.

Scooping Ezor up, Krolia made her way back towards the elevator. Truthfully, she didn't much care if she lived or died, not after she had nearly killed Keith. But it seemed that she wasn't quite done asking her question.

"Krolia! Oh thank the ancients, you're back!"

Acxa looked up as the Blade entered, the stiffening of her shoulders at the sight of Ezor's unconscious body the only thing that betrayed her reaction. At least, she hoped she was merely unconscious, as opposed to dead. She couldn't even see if she was breathing from where she was standing.
"The situation's been handled." Krolia said curtly, before glancing in their direction. Her gaze lingered on Acxa, flickering down towards her handcuffs, before moving on to Veronica. "I thought I said to seal off the bridge."

"Well, you did." Coran admitted. "But then Romelle arrived, and I thought..."

Heaving a sigh, Krolia simply placed Ezor's hopefully unconscious form on one of the chairs that lined the bridge. "Something's wrong with her, but I don't know what."

Acxa felt herself exhale. Something being wrong with Ezor implied that she was at least still alive. She was just surprised that the Blade hadn't already killed her. Their interrogation methods weren't exactly known for being kind.

"Well, let's see if we can't figure that out." Coran said, retrieving a scanner. Crouching next to Ezor, he turned it on, running it up and down the length of her body. Acxa strained her neck, but she wasn't able to make out what it said from this distance.

"Well that's strange." Coran frowned. "According to this, her quintessence levels are dangerously low."

Acxa froze, her breath hitching in her throat. She didn't need to be a trained medic to know just how bad that was. Quintessence, in addition to being a fuel source, was also a life source- and once someone ran out of theirs, that was it. That was the end. It was why Lotor was so interested in finding a way to harvest quintessence from within the rift, so that there would be no need to drain it from entire planets just to fuel a few ships.

Krolia's eyes narrowed, before she turned in her direction. Her gaze didn't linger long, before it flicked back towards Romelle. "How did you capture her?"

"She tried to raid the Garrison." Romelle said with a shrug. "Adam and Veronica occupied her long enough for me to sneak up on her."

Acxa huffed, but otherwise remained silent. All she wanted to do was to cross the room and check on Ezor, but she wasn't about to push her luck.

Krolia's frown deepened. She turned back towards Coran. "Can she be saved?"

Coran shook his head. "Not with any equipment we have. The Princess might be able to when she gets back, but I don't know if she'll last that long."

"Save?" Acxa asked, the question escaping before she could stop it. "Why would you even care about saving Ezor?"

"I don't." Krolia said coldly. "My son nearly lost his life thanks to her. But I need answers."

"What answers?" Acxa asked. "You already know where Lotor is."

Krolia looked towards her, almost seeming to study her face. "There was something in her that didn't belong there. I think that's what drained her quintessence so badly."

Acxa's brows furrowed. "What do you mean by that?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out." Krolia said. "All I know is that it had a composition similar to the creature Empress Honerva called from beyond the rift."
For a tick, Acxa let her mask of composure slip, unsure if she'd heard her right. "That's not possible. The rift was sealed deca-phoebes ago by King Alfor. We both know that."

"It was." Krolia said. "But maybe Empress Honerva found a way to open another one."

"That's impossible." Acxa firmly stated. "We would have known. Emperor Zarkon would have never agreed to continuing to mine planets for their quintessence if they could access the quintessence field, and there's no way the Empress ever would have called out to one of those creatures again after what they nearly did to Daibazaal."

But even as she said that, she couldn't ignore the gnawing feeling of doubt that bubbled up within her. What if she had? But no- if they had access to a quintessence field, then the war should have been over long ago, and there would be no need for any of Lotor's schemes. It couldn't be. There had to be some other explanation.

Only she couldn't think of one. And it had been Empress Honerva herself who had brought Lotor news of his father's passing. What if...

"Regardless, one of those same creatures ended up in your friend." Krolia said.

"What happened to it, incidentally?" Coran inquired. "Perhaps if we study it, we could-"

Krolia shook her head. "It's gone. The black lion took care of it."

"Oh," Coran frowned, "-well, that's good, I suppose. I was going to say that we might be able to trace the creature's origins, but I suppose that's just not in the cards."

"Cards," Veronica finally chimed in, the human doubtlessly feeling somewhat out of her depth, "-the word you're looking for is cards."

"Ah yes, that's it. You humans have such quaint phrases." Coran observed, before rising to his feet. "Well the good news is that if we put Ezor in a cryopod, we should at least be able to stabilize her condition until Allura comes back."

Assuming she will, Acxa thought, but she bit back that comment. She nearly wanted the Altean princess to return, if only to save Ezor's life. But if that meant Prince Lotor's death... narrowing her eyes, she tried not to allow herself to think about that. Lotor was her prince, whom she had sworn an oath of loyalty to.

But Ezor... Ezor was her friend. They had known each other since they were children, had served in the military together. She didn't want to think about losing her.

"Do it." Krolia said. "And prep me a pod. I'm going to the lunar base."
"You fight like a coward." Keith sneered.

"I fight like your friend." Shiro said.

"I know who I serve. It's going to take more than your Altean tricks to turn me against him."

The words stung, possibly more than Keith would ever know. When he had first seen him, clad in the armor of one of Prince Lotor's generals, he'd known it was bad. He just hadn't realized how bad it was until he had started to blame him for whatever inconsistencies he'd noticed in his brainwashed state.

Clearly, there was no talking to him.

"Okay." Shiro said slowly, resigning himself fully to his fate. He didn't want to have to fight Keith, but if that was what it took to disarm and capture him, he'd do it. "I didn't want to have to do this, but you're not giving me much of a choice."

Keith merely scoffed, a smirk on his face that didn't suit him in the least. "Say that after you manage to beat me- not that you will."

The words were probably meant to intimidate, but all they brought him was a sense of pity. Raising his guard, Shiro clenched his right fist, ready his bayard knuckles for whatever Keith would throw at him next. Surprisingly, the way he fought wasn't that different from normal- suddenly he was grateful for all those hours spent on the Castle's training deck, sparring to get the hang of his new arm and bayard.

"We'll just see about that." Shiro told him.

The temper was the same too, if the way Keith reacted to his words was any indication. Or maybe it was the pity in his gaze- he'd never thought of himself as the type to pity, just sympathize, but in this instance, he couldn't exactly help it.

Keith surged forward in a burst of speed that he frankly didn't know he was capable of. It couldn't
be an effect of the brainwashing, so he must have been holding back before. It wasn't just *speed* either- he was stronger than before too, his blows heavier and with more weight behind them. He wondered just how much he had been holding back during their friendly matches.

He could see why it had been impossible for Lance to land even a single hit on him.

There were no words exchanged between them now, only blows. For only being a prototype, his new arm held out well against Keith's sword- not his usual Marmora blade, but one with the emblem of the Galra Empire on its hilt. He still fought with it like he'd used it all his life, growing more comfortable with it as the fight dragged on. Whatever Lotor had done to him, it was solidifying itself right before his eyes.

He couldn't shake the sinking feeling that if they failed here, they might never get Keith back to how he was before. Truthfully, he'd been holding out a faint glimmer of hope that he could just deal with the brainwashing by talking to him, but he'd since realized that was impossible. He just hoped Allura would know some way to fix him.

And that he didn't lose this match, which was a real possibility.

Grunting, Shiro narrowly avoided another blow. He'd already taken a few hits, his paladin armor thankfully protecting him each time. He knew that if Keith had been using his Marmora blade, he wouldn't have been so fortunate, but thankfully he didn't seem to have it on him. Lotor must have hidden it, so that he didn't have any evidence that could be used against him.

Keith didn't even hesitate to press his attack, pivoting slightly on his heel just enough to ram him into the wall with his shoulder. It was almost comical, given how much shorter Keith was than him, but there was nothing funny about the sharp pain that crept down his back as he hit the wall.

Still, if Keith thought he was going to give up, he had another thing coming. Taking advantage of their close quarters, Shiro grabbed Keith's sword arm with his right hand, returning the headbutt from earlier. He'd have regretted it without the helmet, but with it, it was enough to send Keith staggering backwards. Pressing his attack, Shiro released his arm, clenching his fist and socking Keith square in the jaw.

Anger flashed in Keith's eyes, the half-galra glowering at him. He had long since gotten used to the alien appearance of Keith's true eyes, but now it was like looking into the eyes of a stranger. Spitting out blood, Keith growled, lunging at him. Ducking out of the way just in time to avoid losing his other arm, Shiro tried to grab Keith's arm again only to find that he wasn't going to be drawn in so easily a second time. He leapt back, angling his sword defensively.

"You fight like a coward." Keith sneered.

"I fight like your *friend.*" Shiro said. Maybe there was no point in talking to him, but he found that he couldn't help himself. Fighting Keith was awful, and if it was bad for him, then he could only imagine how much worse it would be for anyone else.

"You're not my friend." Keith said, narrowing his eyes. "I don't know what you did to me, but I'm not falling for your tricks."

"We didn't do anything to you, Keith." Shiro told him. "Lotor did."

"*Lies.*" Keith hissed, gripping his sword tighter. "Prince Lotor's intervention saved me from your schemes."

Frowning, Shiro used the brief respite to catch his breath, but also to try and piece together
whatever story Keith was putting together in his head. He wasn't sure exactly how the brainwashing process worked, but there were apparently gaps in it- but Keith had convinced himself that those gaps were his- or more precisely, Allura's- fault, and not that they were the result of being brainwashed to serve Lotor. He truly believed that he'd devoted at least a good chunk of his life to the Galra prince, if not all of it.

It was painful to watch, like the person currently inhabiting Keith's body wasn't Keith at all. The way he fought was the same, and so was his temper, but Keith didn't sneer, nor put out an air of superiority like he did now. It was as if his entire personality was being rewritten to support the belief that he was a loyal servant to Prince Lotor, and by extension, to the Galra Empire.

"Keith," Shiro began again, even though he knew it would be in vain, "-I promise you. Whatever you think is wrong with you, we didn't do that to you."

Keith growled, lunging towards him with his sword. Shiro deflected it with his right arm, sending sparks flying. Breaking away from him, Keith pivoted on his heel, once again angling his blade in his direction.

"You can lie all you want, but I know your tricks." Keith said. "Princess Allura knows that I have the potential to connect with the red lion, so she wants me for her own. So I can't steal it from her traitorous father."

"No, Keith." Shiro said. "That's what Lotor wants. It's why he wants you to bring me to him."

Keith just scoffed. "The Alteans and the Blade of Marmora stole the black lion from Emperor Zarkon. All Prince Lotor wants is to show you why you're on the wrong side of this war, paladin."

"By brainwashing me?" Shiro asked. "Like he plans to do with the princess? Like how he used Narti to brainwash you?"

Keith twitched, but didn't drop his stance. "Why would he use Narti to brainwash me? I am loyal to my prince."

"Lotor isn't your prince." Shiro insisted. "You serve the Blade of Marmora, and Princess Allura."

"I served Princess Allura only as a pretense." Keith told him. "My orders were to kill her."

"Those were Zarkon's orders." Shiro said, making a mental note. A lot of what Keith seemed to believe about himself were based on lies, but there was a thread of truth woven in them. "But you had a different set of orders. Orders to protect her."

"I had no such orders." Keith said.

"Then why didn't you kill her?" Shiro challenged.

For the first time, Keith seemed to falter. He watched as he searched for an explanation and came up empty. But that wasn't good enough- he knew that if he gave him long enough to think about it, the part of his brain that was actively working against him would come up with an explanation for it. He couldn't let that happen.

Maybe there was still a chance for words.

"You didn't kill her because you couldn't." Shiro said. "Because she's your friend."

"The princess and her father are traitors!" Keith growled. "They destroyed the rift, stole the black
lion and killed Emperor Zarkon! They need to be brought to justice for their crimes."

Shiro’s gut churned. He knew he should take some comfort in the fact that Keith's strong sense of justice seemed to remain, but it had been twisted into something nearly unrecognizable. He had seen too much through the black lion's eyes to believe that Zarkon's actions were in the right. He'd seen the pain of betrayal on Allura's face, in her voice as she spoke about the former black paladin, a man whom she had once trusted. He'd heard the bitterness in Keith's own voice as he spoke about what Zarkon had done to their own home planet.

"Please, Keith." Shiro pleaded. "Just think for a second. You have to know that you're not acting like yourself right now. That something is wrong."

"Because of you." Keith insisted. "You-"

"No, Keith." Shiro said firmly. "This is all because of Lotor. He used Narti to make you believe you're one of his generals, but you're not. You never were."

"No." Keith said, but he saw the way his grip on his sword weakened. "That's not true. I am loyal to Lotor."

"Okay," Shiro said slowly, choosing his words carefully as he opted for a different approach, "-in that case, tell me how long ago it was that the Galra Empire learned about Earth."

"What kind of question is that?" Keith asked, narrowing his eyes. "You should know."

"Humor me." Shiro told him.

"A little over two deca-phoebs ago." Keith said resolutely.

"Two deca-phoebs ago." Shiro repeated. "And how old are you, Keith?"

Brows knit together like he didn't understand the question, Keith frowned. "What do you mean how old am I? I'm-"

He cut himself off, lowering his sword almost completely. He didn't even attempt to hide the puzzlement in his eyes. "I'm eighteen."

"But the Galra didn't know about Earth until two deca-phoebs ago?" Shiro asked.

"That's not- that doesn't make any sense." Keith said. "I'm half-human. How can I be half-human?"

Biting down on his lip, Shiro took a careful step forward. Keith responded reflexively, raising his sword to guard himself. "Stay back!"

Shiro came to a dead stop, holding up his hands. "I'm not going to hurt you, Keith."

"No." Keith said, but not as firmly as before. "You're trying to trick me. I know you are."

"I'm trying to help you." Shiro told him. "Don't you remember? Lotor set up a trap for us at the Garrison. You stayed behind to protect Katie and Adam."

Keith twitched, taking half a step back. "Katie?"

"Yes, Katie." Shiro said. "Your friend."

"I don't have any friends." Keith said, but it didn't sound like he entirely believed that.
"You do." Shiro said. "Me, Katie, Matt... there's Hunk and Lance too. Regris was your friend before you even came to Earth, and so are Allura and Romelle. Don't you remember them?"

Keith hesitated, gaze searching the hallway, for what, Shiro didn't know. "I- I don't know. Things aren't right."

"I know." Shiro told him, trying to sound calm and patient. "Lotor used Narti to brainwash you."

"That doesn't make any sense." Keith said. "I'm loyal to Lotor."

"Because Narti brainwashed you into thinking that." Shiro said. "I know you're confused, but if we can just get you back to the Castle, maybe Allura can help."

Gripping his head, Keith staggered back, his sword now forgotten. "But I remember- I know I've been serving Lotor faithfully. For deca-phoebs! How can that be a lie?"

"Your mind is playing tricks on you." Shiro told him, carefully taking another step forward. This time Keith didn't move to stop him, instead staring down at the sword in his hands, his gaze traveling up towards his armor. "It's trying to convince you that you're Lotor's general. That you have been for years, that you're loyal to him and the Galra Empire, but it's not- none of that is true."

"It has to be true." Keith insisted. "Why would- why would Lotor do that to me?"

Shiro bit his lip. Whatever else Narti had done to him, she must have made the belief that he was loyal to Lotor practically unshakable. He could see the conflict in his eyes, as he tried to grapple with what he was being told and what he thought he knew. Given time, the brainwashing would probably win out, and he would go back to being Lotor's general. But right now, he had a chance.

"I know you're scared, Keith-" Shiro began, only for Keith to cut him off with a snarl.

"I'm not scared!" He snapped, his eyes flashing angrily. "I'm Galra! Victory or death!"

"Okay, you're not scared." Shiro corrected himself, even though he had no doubt Keith was actually terrified. "But believe me when I say that all I want to do is help you."

Keith stared up at him, searching his face, probably for some sign of a lie. He kept his expression as open and honest as possible, now standing right in front of him. Though he twitched, Keith didn't make a move to attack.

"Something's wrong with me, isn't it?" Keith asked, staring up at him. "I'm not right."

"No, you're not." Shiro admitted, placing a hand on his shoulder. Keith flinched at the touch, but didn't move to pull away. "But Allura can help."

Keith opened his mouth to say something, but whatever it was, he didn't get a chance. Clutching his head, Keith doubled over in pain, instantly sending him into a state of alarm.

"Keith-!"

"Stay back!" Keith growled. "Something's-!"

He didn't finish the sentence, any words transforming into a scream of pain. It filled the hallway, Keith doubled over and clutching at his head- until he suddenly went completely silent, the sudden absence of noise somehow more terrifying than his screams. When he looked up, his eyes were blazing yellow, no pupil in sight. There was no pain, no confusion on his face- there was no
expression at all. He gripped his sword anew, and almost on instinct, Shiro put some distance between himself and Keith.

Something was wrong.

Keith's first lunge was clumsy, without any of his usual finesse. It was like he had forgotten how to use it. Even his steps were off, shambling in a way that reminded him of a marionette- and it dawned on him that was exactly what Keith was. Whatever was moving his body now wasn't Keith, not even a brainwashed version of him.

Thankfully, whatever it was that was doing the puppeteering didn't seem familiar with how to move his body. Its next sword strike was no better than its first, easily dodged. It stumbled over its pivot, before lurching forward again, slightly more steady this time. If he gave it time, he didn't doubt it would master how to move Keith's body.

But he wasn't going to give it that time.

Muttering a silent apology, Shiro disarmed Keith- or whatever was using his body. It clutched at empty air where its sword had been, before it lunged towards him, but he flipped it over his shoulder, pinning it down. It writhed underneath him, but he quickly restrained it with the cuffs he had brought with him. When it continued to pull against those, Shiro opted to knock it- and Keith- out.

For a second he was afraid it wouldn't work- but then Keith slumped. Checking his pulse, Shiro exhaled, relieved to find that it was normal. Waiting a few more minutes to see if anything changed, he eventually pulled his weight off of Keith, carefully scooping him up. He debated taking off the restraints, but opted against it- he wasn't quite sure what had happened, but it seemed an awful lot like it had been trying to keep him from convincing Keith to go back with him.

There was no telling if the person who woke up next would be Keith, or if it would just be... he didn't know what that had been. Narti?

He didn't know. He just wasn't willing to take that risk.

Narti's first blow was easy enough to dodge, almost painfully straightforward. Except it was never meant to hit, its sole purpose instead being to separate her from Ulaz- an attempt which succeeded. While she went right, Ulaz dodged to the left, creating a gap between them that Narti instantly took advantage of.

It wasn't a tactic that would have worked had she been by herself, but Narti was hardly alone. She just hadn't anticipated Lotor joining the fight himself. He'd always seemed more the type to allow others to do his dirty work for him.

Unfortunately, he still didn't seem inclined to fight her.

Gripping her staff tight, Allura evaded Narti's next blow. She forced her attention away from Lotor. She would just have to trust that Ulaz could occupy him long enough for her to take care of Narti. She would begrudgingly admit he was likely the better match, a sword for a sword, rather than the ill match of a sword vs a staff.

Not that pitting her against Narti was much better. She had little experience in fighting opponents with tails, and even worse, she couldn't risk letting Narti touch her. Not unless she wanted to turn this into a battle of three versus one, in Lotor's favor.
Even worse still, that powerful tail of hers was Narti's main weapon. She knew for a fact that it was strong enough to shatter bone, and she didn't have the luxury of having protective armor like Ulaz did. She had debated taking some of the spare paladin armor, but had decided against it- to wear it was an honor, an honor which she had not been granted. Even with armor, it wouldn't have done much to protect her from a possible choke hold- and while getting a few bones broken wouldn't kill her, being suffocated surely would.

Or at the very least, it would knock her soundly unconscious. Somehow she didn't think Lotor wanted her dead.

And that, she thought, gave her an advantage.

Twisting to avoid a tail strike from Narti, Allura shoved both it and her away from her using her staff. She didn't necessarily want to kill Narti if she could help it, but she might not have any choice. At the very least, it was an option on the table for her, whereas Narti had likely been given explicit instructions not to kill her. Granted, that didn't mean that she couldn't injure her severely- it was relatively safe to assume that they had a healing pod somewhere, so as long as she didn't suffer fatal damage, it would be fine.

Then there was still the matter of Lotor. She had her hands full with Narti, and thus couldn't afford to pay attention to his fight with Ulaz, but she at least tried to keep the Galran prince in her peripheral. She wouldn't be surprised if he had some kind of trick up his sleeve.

Either way, one thing was clear- she couldn't afford to let her guard down. She would just have to trust that Ulaz could hold his own.

Focusing fully on Narti, she leapt backwards to avoid a low tail strike from the Galran general that would have surely swept her off her feet had it landed. Not one to remain on the defensive forever, Allura surged forward the moment she landed, catching her off guard with a staff strike, and forcing the general to retreat. Going onto the offensive, Allura struck again, not leaving Narti enough time to get her bearings. She managed a sound hit on her shoulder, knocking Narti back nearly against the wall.

Unfortunately, she wasn't as quick on her follow through as she would have liked, allowing Narti to regain her bearings and avoid her next blow. Fending off another powerful tail strike with her staff, Allura grit her teeth, trying to figure out the best way to end this match quickly. She almost wished that she had the advantage of bladed weapon, but she had no such thing on her.

Lotor did though. She'd seen it when they'd come in- a blade that she knew for a fact did not belong to him.

It was Keith's blade.

She grit her teeth, trying not to think on it. She knew for a fact that he would never hand it over willingly to him, but while she was certain that Lotor had merely seized the blade, it didn't mean that they weren't already too late. If what Lotor had said was true...

Momentarily distracted, she allowed herself to be caught off guard by Narti. Though she managed to avoid the burn of the blow, she found herself being thrown against one of the support columns, grunting in pain as the wind was briefly knocked from her. She kept a tight grip on her staff, refusing to let it be knocked out of her hands.

Narti was quick to follow up, Allura just barely raising her staff in time to stop her tail strike. Grunting, she was forced back further against the support column, as Narti used all her strength to
keep her pinned down. Grinding in her heels, Allura drew on her own strength, slowly forcing the general back- an effective strategy, right until Narti’s tail curled around her staff, snapping the weapon in half.

Cursing under her breath, Allura slammed into Narti with as much force as she could muster, forcing her to stumble backwards, knocking Kova off her shoulder. The cat yowled in protest as she did so, and for just a tick, Narti stumbled, appearing almost disorientated.

All at once, the realization sunk in- it wasn’t Narti she had to defeat. It was Kova. He was her eyes and ears- without her, she would be virtually defenseless, unable to continue to fight. And while she wasn’t overly enthusiastic about harming a defenseless animal, it was still a far better option than outright killing Narti.

She didn't even hesitate to act, pivoting on her heel and moving towards Kova. The cat yowled, shaking off his brief daze to dart to the right, away from her, and back towards Narti, but he wasn’t quite fast enough. Muttering a silent apology, Allura slammed the butt of one of her broken off staffs into his head just as he darted by her, using only the amount of force necessary to temporarily knock the animal out.

The effect on Narti was nearly instantaneous. Robbed of her eyes and ears, she was left completely vulnerable, and though taking advantage of such a state made Allura feel awful, it might be better to take Narti alive than to kill her. If Lotor truly had used her abilities on Keith, then there was no proof that her death would break her sway. Better to have her live and ask her directly.

With Narti knocked out, she could now afford to turn her attention back towards Lotor. She paused only long enough to restrain the general, before she pivoted on her heel, searching for the Galra prince. She could still hear the clash of blades, so she was confident his fight with Ulaz was still ongoing.

What she saw made her sick to her stomach.

Lotor was wielding two blades now- his own sword, and Keith's knife. One would think it a pointless endeavor, since he could not transform it, but she knew that it wasn't about how useful it was a weapon- but rather, that he could use it to taunt Ulaz- and herself, for that matter. Though she was loathe to admit it, it was an effective strategy, and though Ulaz showed no signs of reacting to Lotor’s taunt, his face was also masked, leaving her with only his body language to go off of.

She didn't even hesitate, rushing in with a loud cry. It served to catch Lotor off guard for a few precious ticks, long enough for her to disarm, robbing him of Keith's luxite knife. It wouldn't transform for her either, but it was better than allowing Lotor to wield it.

"So," Lotor began, seemingly unfazed to her great annoyance, "-I see you managed to deal with Narti."

"This is over, Lotor." Allura said firmly, tossing away the last half of her broken staff, switching entirely to the knife. She wished she could take comfort in its bright glow, but she found it difficult to. "We are putting an end to your schemes."

Lotor merely smiled, cold and bereft of any joy. "We will see."

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Regris grunted, tentatively testing his left shoulder. It hung loosely in its socket, twisted out of place by Zethrid's last blow. If he had the time, he'd set it, but he'd barely even managed to switch hands before Zethrid was charging at him, releasing what could only be described as a battle cry.
He knew this was a bad match.

Gripping his blade as best he could with his right hand, Regris suddenly felt grateful for those grueling hours of training to make him ambidextrous. He wasn't a natural like Keith or his mother, so his right arm was still weaker than his left, but it would do in a pinch. And if there was ever anything that qualified as such, now would be it.

Dodging Zethrid's blow, Regris wished he were as light on his feet as Keith. He was definitely speedier than Zethrid, but the state of his left arm was proof enough that he wasn't as quick on his feet as he could be.

Fast enough to annoy Zethrid, at least.

"Stay still!" Zethrid growled behind him.

Regris merely shook his head, angering the general even more. At least while she was paying attention to him, she wasn't paying any attention to Colleen. She had managed to make her way to the pod, but even if he could manage to defeat Zethrid, the doors to the hangar had been sealed shut. He could try a manual override, but he was willing to bet that Zethrid had already destroyed the control box, rendering that impossible. Short of blasting their way out the hangar, they had no exit.

In other words, if Ulaz and Princess Allura failed, there would be no escape for any of them.

Zethrid charged again, forcing Regris to move. He knew he should switch the offensive, but close quarters combat was proving difficult. Zethrid was just too strong, and he wasn't quick enough to duck into her guard for even a disabling blow before she caught him. And with his left arm in the condition it was in...

Narrowing his eyes, Regris pushed the thought aside. Knowledge or death.

Leaping upwards to avoid Zethrid's blow, Regris landed on top of a long abandoned shipping crate, the Galaxy Garrison logo emblazoned on it. His tail lashed behind him, useless against an opponent who was too strong for him to use it to trip up. She was too used to fighting against tailed opponents for him to use any of his usual tricks, and he had the broken tip of his tail to show for that.

"Come down here so I can crush you!" Zethrid shouted.

"I really don't think so." Regris said.

Growling, Zethrid wasted no time in coming to him. Leaping down off the crates, he quickly pivoted on his heel. When Zethrid leapt after him, he saw his chance and took it, throwing his blade at the general. She wasn't able to completely avoid it in mid-air, his luxite blade piercing through her armor, sinking into her right shoulder. She slammed hard into the ground, barely giving him time to avoid being flattened.

Unfortunately, he didn't have enough time to get away. Zethrid recovered faster than he thought, grabbing his tail and yanking him back. He felt the bones in the very tip of his tail snap, and he knew that they had been severed completely- even a healing pod wouldn't be able to fix them. The only thing that kept him from howling in pain was his Blade training, and even that almost wasn't enough.

"So," Zethrid said, staggering to her feet, keeping a tight grip on his tail, "-you thought you could do a fancy trick, huh?"
Craning his head to look behind him, Regris watched as Zethrid plucked his blade from her shoulder, seemingly unfazed by the blood loss. He'd forgotten how sturdy the general was, on top of being a powerhouse. It would take way more than a single wound to take her down.

Zethrid grinned, pointing his own blade at him. "It's been awhile since I had the chance to kill anyone. Prince Lotor wanted me on my best behavior around the humans."

Narrowing his eyes, Regris racked his brain for possible routes of escape. But short of cutting off his own tail, he was drawing a blank. Even that option was taken from him as Zethrid yanked on his tail harder, stepping on his right leg to pin him down. Gritting his teeth, Regris drew on his training, not letting himself show any pain, his mask having fizzled out when he'd hit the floor.

"Now," Zethrid began, looming over him, "-I'm going to enjoy this."

With no options left, Regris resigned himself to the idea that his death would neither be quick nor painless, nevermind honorable. Closing his eyes, he hoped that his struggle had at least bought everyone enough time to finish their own individual missions. At least then, his death would have some meaning.

But though he'd resigned himself to it, death didn't come.

Without warning, the hangar shook violently, knocking Zethrid off her feet. Snapping his eyes open, Regris scrambled to his own, ignoring the stinging pain in his right leg. He didn't have to wait long to discover the source of the shaking, since it blitzed right past him, a single Altean pod slamming into the other end of the hangar. For a tick, he thought it was the one they came in, until suddenly Krolia was on Zethrid, having used her own ship to ram the hangar doors at full speed.

In spite of himself, Regris laughed. He'd never say it to her face, but she was the only person he knew crazy enough to pull off that kind of stunt.

Other than Keith, of course. If his humanity drove him to protect, then it was his mother's blood that drove him to recklessness.

Krolia had Zethrid pinned in seconds, her blade to the general's throat. "Tell me where Lotor is."

"Never." Zethrid spat.

"Tell me," Krolia repeated, bringing her blade closer to Zethrid's throat, "-or your lover might not survive."

Zethrid went very still, before her eyes flashed angrily. If Krolia didn't have her pinned down so securely, she would have thrown her off. "Don't you dare hurt her."

"We're not the ones hurting her." Krolia told her, no emotion in her voice. "Your Empress put something inside of her that badly drained her quintessence. We removed it, but without Princess Allura, she won't make it."

The anger didn't fade completely from Zethrid's eyes, but she did cease to struggle. Disbelief briefly took its place, before giving way to something harder to pin down. "How do I know you're not lying?"

"You're not dead." Krolia merely stated.

Zethrid eyed her warily, clearly weighing her options. She was loyal to Lotor, but she was also loyal to Ezor- and right now, those two loyalties were at war within her.
"Fine." Zethrid conceded. "If you promise to save Ezor."

"I swear on my honor as a Blade." Krolia said. "Now show me."

Regris watched warily as Krolia released Zethrid. The general staggered to her feet, but made no move to attack.

"Follow me." Zethrid said, shooting him a dirty glare. "You'll need an access code to get into the room."

"I'll come-" Regris spoke up, only to be cut off by a shake of Krolia's head.

"You're injured. Rest." Krolia said.

Regris opened his mouth to protest, but slowly conceded. Even if he went, he wouldn't be much use in a fight in his current state. His left arm and right leg would likely recover, but the tip of his tail would likely need to be amputated. Better just the end than his whole tail, he thought to himself, recalling the fates of others who had lost theirs in battle.

"Keith is-" Regris began.

Krolia shook her head, though he could sense a reluctance in it. "Thank you. But later."

Closing his mouth, Regris could only nod. Watching as Krolia trailed after Zethrid, her blade at the ready in case the general decided to change her mind, he slowly sunk down to the floor. He'd been so prepared to die, but now for the second time, he'd survived when he shouldn't have.

Nursing his badly broken tail, he hoped it was a sign.
Had he meant to kill her, she doubted that she could have successfully avoided it. The blade cut the fabric of her pressure suit, a thin line of blood trickling from her shoulder. It wasn't a deep cut by any means, but it still stung against the relatively cold air of the lunar base.

Lotor's taunt had barely left his lips before Allura charged him. She lacked the same experience in fighting with knives that Keith had, but she was more than competent in her own right. Nevertheless, Lotor easily saw her blow coming, deflecting it with practiced ease. She had heard tell of his skill with the sword before, and it would seem the rumors proved true.

Fortunately, she wasn't fighting alone.

Lotor's gaze flickered slightly to the side, and not even a tick later, he jumped back, out of range of Ulaz's strike. While Lotor might be skilled with a sword, so too was Ulaz, more than enough to balance her out. The Blade stood at her side, his own sword raised, prepared for any possible strike Lotor might choose to make.

"Princess."

"Ulaz." Allura said. "Thought I would give you a bit of a hand."

Ulaz let his gaze fall on Narti and Kova, both still unconscious and restrained. He gave her what she thought was a curt nod of approval. She felt her own lip twitch upwards, knowing that Ulaz had trained any number of Blades in his lifetime, so any praise from him was worth receiving.

Lotor merely scoffed. "You think the two of you will be enough to beat me?"

"You are outnumbered, Lotor." Allura said firmly. "If you surrender, I may have mercy."

It was a lie, and she knew it was soon as she said it. There would be no mercy for Lotor, nor his mother. Not after everything they had done. This could only end with their deaths.

"Surrender?" Lotor merely arched a brow, looking unperturbed. "I think not."

Spinning his blade, Lotor surged forward in a flurry of movement, forcing her to once again separate herself from Ulaz. This time there was no general for her to fight, so even as Lotor turned
his attention back towards Ulaz, she pushed forward on her heel, a firm grip on Keith's knife as she ducked into his guard. It wasn't fast enough, Lotor seeing her out of the corner of his eye, blocking it with the hilt of the sword, while at the same time managing to parry a strike from Ulaz.

He separated from the two of them quickly, angling his sword defensively. She was forced to admit he was good.

"I see your father trained you well." Ulaz remarked.

"Well enough to rival any Blade." Lotor said, speaking the name with disdain. "Once I gain control of the Empire, I will be sure to wipe out every last one of you."

"You would have to find us all first." There was a surprising amount of mirth to Ulaz's tone, given the situation. "You will find that it is not so easy."

Lotor only smirked in response. "As long as Keith is under my control, I can extract the information from him."

Allura clenched her teeth, feeling her temper flare. Thus far he'd been dancing around the subject, taunting her with Keith's fate, but for him to admit it so freely... he was still confident that he would get out of this alive, wasn't he? It made her sick to her stomach, but she refused to lash out at him like she wanted to.

That was likely exactly what he wanted, for her to lose her temper. She'd been known to make careless mistakes in the past when blinded by it, something which Lotor knew full well. It was also exactly why he had been using Keith's knife, even though he was far more skilled using only one weapon than he was at using two. Between the two, Lotor had more skill with the sword, but he lacked Keith's natural ambidexterity.

"He won't be under your control for long." Allura said. "The others will see to that."

"The others?" Lotor only laughed, causing her to bristle. "By others, do you mean your new black paladin? He may have been chosen by my father's lion, but I doubt he has the skill to win against a trained Galra opponent."

As much as she wished she could deny that, she couldn't. She had expected that there was something more to not only Keith's absence, but to the absence of the rest of Lotor's generals. He must have sent them to interfere with Regris and Shiro, and she could only hope that they would be enough to hold out. Both Zethrid and Acxa had far more experience in combat than Regris did, and skilled as he was, Shiro was only a normal human without his right arm, which he hadn't fully adjusted to yet.

She was starting to wish she had brought Krolia with them after all. Or at the very least, Romelle.

"Either way," Allura forced herself to remain firm, "-you will not be leaving here alive."

Lotor's lips twitched in amusement. "Whatever happened to mercy?"

"There is no mercy for those who manipulate others." Ulaz replied for her. She could tell he was furious, but he was too well trained to allow it to take control of him.

"So be it." Lotor said, before launching into another flurry of movement.

He angled his sword at her, prompting Allura to raise her borrowed knife defensively. However at the last second, he pivoted slightly on his heel, slashing towards Ulaz. The Blade avoided the blow,
but Lotor seemed to predict this- instead of pressing his attack against Ulaz, he took advantage of the whiplash his earlier feint had given her, and angled his sword at her instead.

Had he meant to kill her, she doubted that she could have successfully avoided it. The blade cut the fabric of her pressure suit, a thin line of blood trickling from her shoulder. It wasn't a deep cut by any means, but it still stung against the relatively cold air of the lunar base.

She hardly allowed herself to stand still, instead retaliating against Lotor. She lunged at him, ducking into his guard- and while he avoided the burnt of her blow, at this close of a range, he wasn't able to avoid it completely. She felt the edge of her lips turn upwards in a faint smirk at the faint line of purple that leaked from his left cheek, more than satisfied at having been able to return the favor.

Lotor bristled, but did not lose his cool. Perhaps it was simply because he didn't have the time- Ulaz lunged at the prince, and it took every once of speed Lotor had to avoid being decapitated on the spot. The Blade was quick on his feet, an unusual trait for a Galra of his size, catching most people off guard even if his frame did somewhat hint at it.

Perhaps two against one wasn't exactly the most *honorable* match up, but quite frankly, Allura wasn't sure if she cared about honor right now. Taking Lotor down was far more important.

In the back of her mind, her objective had already changed. The faster they could defeat Lotor, the faster she and Ulaz could go and help the others. Defeating Lotor was important, but it paled in comparison to the lives of her friends and companions, too many of which had been lost in this war already. Though she had never known him, and had no real involvement in his death nor his mission, Thace's sacrifice still weighed heavily on her soul.

And there had been countless others aside from him- and would continue to be, until the war was finally brought to a close. Even then, she wasn't certain the cycle of death and destruction would end.

But Lotor, she knew, would not go down without a fight.

So instead of backing down, he pressed forward. Throwing himself back into the fray, he proved that he had the speed it took to counter Ulaz. The Blade raised his own sword to deflect Lotor's, but before she could search for a possible opening, an ungodly screeching meet her ears, forcing her to clamp her hands over them. It was even worse for Ulaz, who nearly buckled under the sound- only Lotor seemed prepared for it, a wicked smirk splitting his face.

She barely had time to question what the screeching even was, before the answer leapt at her, Narti crashing down wildly from above. Her arms were still restrained, but she seemed to have regained consciousness, hurling herself back into the fray with almost reckless abandon.

But something was wrong, Allura realized, even as she fought off Narti's advances. Narti was awake, clearly, but she didn't see Kova anywhere. And if she wasn't seeing through Kova's eyes, then whose eyes was she seeing through?

She didn't have time to question it before Narti was lunging at her again. She caught sight of Ulaz out of the corner of her eye, who had somehow managed to regain his composure, in spite of the high-pitched screeching that she wasn't even sure how Narti was producing. But they had once again been split up, and if her brief look was any indication, then Lotor had taken advantage of the confusion for long enough to get a blow in against Ulaz, the Blade slightly favoring his right leg. She didn't think any help would be coming from that direction.
Very well then. She'd dealt with Narti once, she could deal with her again.

Except this time, something was clearly different. Having her hands bound should put her at a disadvantage, not to mention being effectively blinded, but somehow, Narti didn't appear to be struggling in the least. On the contrary, there had already been more than a few blows that had been too close for comfort. It was as if there was no discernable pattern to her attacks, which, while that could simply be due to the fact that she was essentially fighting blind, nevertheless felt wrong.

That was, of course, not even touching on the screeching. Really, that should have been the first sign that something was off.

She attempted to defend herself using Keith's knife, but it was knocked out of her hands and was sent skidding across the floor. In doing so, Narti cut her own tail, but she didn't even seem to notice, in spite of the fact that it was dripping blood.

That settled it. Something was clearly wrong here.

Holding her ground, Allura waited for Narti's next strike. When it came, she grabbed the general by her tail, using her momentum to slam her into the floor behind her. Quickly pinning her down, she pressed her knee into her back. She assumed that she would struggle, but instead, she simply went completely limp, unmoving.

Taking a moment to catch her breath, Allura's shoulders slumped. What was-?

"Princess, look out!"

She barely had time to register that it was Krolia who spoke, before she found herself yanked away from Narti. At first she thought it was an enemy, before she caught a flash of familiar Blade armor. Turning her attention back towards Narti, her eyes fell on the strange orb that hadn't been there before, which pulsed and glowed in a way that made her feel sick.

"What is that?" Allura asked, Krolia setting her back on her feet.

"That," Krolia began, "is one of the creatures that attacked Daibazaal, deca-phoebs ago."

Allura paled. She had only been just an infant when it happened, but her father had described the event to her before. She had seen the footage, but nothing could have prepared her for how the creature felt. It was almost as if it didn't belong here.

Given that it had come from another reality, it likely didn't.

She caught a flash out of the corner of her eye- Ulaz and Lotor continued to exchange blows. She wanted to glare at the prince, to demand answers from him, but she didn't have the time. The creature surged towards her, forcing her and Krolia to separate. She jumped back to put some distance between herself and the creature, catching a flash of general armor out of the corner of her eye as she did so. She almost thought Narti had gotten back up, before she realized it was actually Zethrid, standing stock still by the entrance.

The expression on her face was more than enough for her to gauge that she hadn't known about this.

She didn't have time for any other observations, as the creature came for her again. Somehow she instinctively sensed that what it wanted was her body, and she wasn't about to allow it to have it. That said, it had taken Voltron to defeat the creatures the last time, and while this one was considerably smaller than the one she had seen from the footage, she had no clue as to how to go
about and defeat it.

At the same time, she felt something pulse within her—something far more familiar to her than the foul energy the creature was exuding, more comforting. She knew it, but for a tick, she struggled to place just what it was. It was soft, like her father's hand on her shoulder, and it was with that thought that it all clicked into place.

Her father always said she had a gift, just as he did, but she'd never had the chance to properly train it. The war had taken that from her, as it had taken so many other things. But even without training, there were still things she instinctively knew how to do, like how to hide the black lion's energy from Zarkon.

And how to deal with this creature.

This time, Allura let it come. She didn't run away, or attempt to dodge. She only barely registered that Krolia was speaking, but didn't understand what she was saying.

She didn't need to. It would all be over soon.

Exhaling, she let the energy flow through her—and then in one burst, she released it, so blinding that it nearly filled the room. The Blades, with their masks to protect them were safe from the blinding glare, but Lotor and Zethrid had to shield their eyes to protect them, something she would only hear from Ulaz later.

All she was focused on was the creature.

She swore she felt its cry, but felt no pity for it. It was not meant to be here. Without the creatures, without the rift, there never would have been a war, never would have been countless lives lost. She channeled that feeling, harnessing its power—and in a flash, the creature was no more.

Coming back to herself, Allura stumbled. Even for just such a small thing, it had taken quite a bit of energy to banish it. Or perhaps she had simply unleashed too much power, having relied on instinct rather than training. Someone caught her by the shoulder—Krolia, who helped her to her feet. She looked up towards the Blade, who nodded her head in understanding, before she turned her gaze back towards Lotor.

The Galra prince glowered back towards her. He had managed not to lose focus, which only further proved to her the fact that he had known about the creature residing within Narti. Even from here, she could feel the ebb of her quintessence, flickering in a way that concerned her deeply. It must have taken a considerable amount of it with it when it had left her body, and her stomach churned at the thought.

What if Keith—?

"Go and help Ulaz." Allura told Krolia. "I'll be fine."

Krolia gave her a curt nod, and though she was slow to release her, not until she was positive she could stand unsupported, she was nevertheless quick to actually enter the fray. And while Lotor might have held his own well against the combination of herself and Ulaz, he found him having a far more difficult time when faced with two Blades, especially two as highly trained as Krolia and Ulaz.

And above all, they were furious.

Those creatures had nearly destroyed Daibazaal. Their presence here meant that Honerva, at the
very least, was knowingly using them in spite of that. And while Lotor might not be the one manipulating them, he had likely approved of them being placed in his own generals, whose loyalty to him was genuine.

But not so loyal that they were blind to his own betrayal.

Zethrid, contrary to common opinion, wasn't stupid.

She had been against the idea of using Ezor to infiltrate the Castle of Lions from the start. There were other, better ways to send the Altean princess a message, but Lotor had been insistent. He'd wanted to do some damage, maybe even kidnap the princess herself if they got lucky, and Ezor had been more than willing to comply. It had been frustrating, sitting out so much of the war on Lotor's orders, that they were all itching to see some action.

No one felt that more strongly than she did. But she'd still been against Ezor going.

Eventually though, Lotor had his way. He always did. In hindsight, that should have been a red flag, but she was loyal enough to the prince that it hadn't been.

(In hindsight, there had been a lot of red flags that she'd ignored.)

When the Blade had shown up, claiming that Ezor was alive, but just barely, and that Lotor and Empress Honerva were to blame, she didn't know if she believed her. She begrudgingly admitted that the Blade probably could have killed her in that situation if she'd wanted to, but she could still be lying. Everyone knew she was partnered with Ezor. It was no secret. She could have just been making the whole thing up just to get to her.

She could have been- but she might have also been telling the truth.

Zethrid had hedged her bets.

If the Blade was lying, she could have lead her to Lotor and Narti, and then killed her alongside the other one. Even if the human and the tailed Blade got away, the deaths of two senior Blades and the capture of the Altean princess would make it worth it. She doubted Lotor would lose in a fight, not when she'd lost to him countless times.

And if the Blade was telling the truth... she didn't think she was, but if she was- then she'd figure that out when they got there.

The Blade, Zethrid realized, as she watched something seep out of Narti's unconscious body, had been telling the truth. But at first, she still hoped that Lotor didn't know about it, that this was something Empress Honerva had done on her own.

All it had taken was the look on his face once the creature was banished for her to realize that he had been in on it. He'd known about this. And he'd... he'd had it done to Ezor too. Her stomach churned, recalling how Ezor and Narti had escorted the Empress Honerva back to her shuttle during her brief visit, and instinctively, she'd racked her brain, trying to recall if she'd ever been alone with her.

She hadn't. Not that she remembered. Understandably, it wasn't a comfort.

She was loyal to her prince. He had helped her rise to the rank of general, something that would have been unthinkable for someone of mixed blood, even someone as fearsome in battle as she could be. He had treated her like a fully fledged citizen of the Galra Empire, taught her that her
own mixed blood wasn't something to be ashamed of. She'd believed in his ideals, even if she hadn't always understood his plans.

And he'd betrayed her.

And she was furious.

In all the chaos, she had been largely forgotten. But she wasn't the only thing—her eyes caught the familiar gleam of a knife. It was the one Lotor had taken from Keith, his Blade weapon. He'd kept it on him, she assumed like some kind of trophy. She picked it up without even thinking about it, before turning back towards Lotor. He was engaged in battle with the two Blades now, and would probably eventually lose on his own. She didn't need to do anything.

But he'd hurt Ezor.

And she could forgive a lot of things, but that was one thing that she couldn't.

Only the Altean princess saw her charge, but she didn't even so much as open her mouth to warn her comrades. Maybe she had already sensed what she was about to do. For her part, Zethrid just felt numb. She had always been one to gleefully throw herself into battle, but she couldn't find any excitement in this, no thrill in the revenge she was about to take.

Because she had trusted Lotor. They all had.

But when it came down to it... she'd always trusted him the least. And maybe that was why he didn't look all that surprised when she sunk the knife into his chest, the luxite easily piercing through his armor. She'd shoved it in hard for extra measure, so she didn't doubt she'd reached his heart.

Sound didn't come back until Lotor had sunk to the floor, one hand still clutching the luxite knife. Zethrid drew in a long breath, squared her shoulders, and turned to the Altean princess, not even looking at the two Blades. It wasn't like she could read their expressions with their masks up anyways.

"She said you could save them." Zethrid found herself saying.

Allura looked towards Narti, a grave expression on her face. "I can try."

Her trust had been badly battered, and she'd barely had time to process any of it. She knew that the princess was the enemy, that she shouldn't trust a single word that came out of her mouth... but she did. Maybe she just needed something to believe in. Maybe she was just stupid.

Princess Allura owed them nothing. Not one thing. It didn't matter that she had just killed Lotor for them, and had effectively rendered the Galra Empire leaderless. She was still the enemy, and they had been complicit in doing something awful to someone she knew the princess valued as a friend.

Someone she had come all this way to rescue, putting herself at risk in the process.

Lotor wouldn't have done that.

And that, she thought, was why she believed her.
The hangar, Shiro quickly realized, was a mess.

It had taken him longer than he wanted to admit to haul Keith's unconscious body back towards the hangar. He was heavier than he looked, and his armor wasn't exactly light. He'd ditched the Galran sword, but he'd still been forced to sort of half drag Keith along. Not exactly the best way to carry an unconscious person, but Keith was tough, so he'd probably be fine.

He'd still apologize later, though.

Thankfully, even though the hangar seemed to be a mess, both Colleen and Regris appeared to be safe, even if the latter did look a little worse for wear. The Blade was wearing an impromptu sling, and his tail was dragging limply on the ground behind him in a way that didn't exactly look good, but he was alive at the very least.

Colleen noticed him first, looking up in his direction. She didn't seem any worse for wear herself, other than some bags underneath her eyes that he hadn't noticed before. She flinched a little when she saw Keith, before seemed to exhale when she realized he was both restrained and unconscious. Hopefully he'd get a chance to explain everything to her later.

"I take it I missed something." Shiro observed, looking at what appeared to be the remains of a wrecked Altean shuttle pod. It had been on fire at some point, but apparently the base's fire suppressors were still in working order, leaving behind nothing more than traces of scorched metal.

"Krolia came." Regris said. "She said there had been a situation on the Castle, but that it's been handled. She went to join Allura."

Shiro frowned at that. "What kind of situation?"

"Something about Ezor." Regris said, shaking his head. "I didn't get too many details."

He wasn't sure how he felt about that, but at least from the sound of it, it had been taken care of. That was one less thing to worry about.

Carefully laying Keith's unconscious body down inside the shuttle pod, Shiro turned back towards Regris. "Do you think I should go help?"

Regris cast an assessing glance over him, and then shook his head. "You're better off than I am, but you're still looking a bit bruised."

Shiro huffed. He couldn't exactly dispute that. He was sore in places he didn't know could be sore, so he dreaded what state he would be in come tomorrow morning. Adam would probably let him have it when he got back to the Castle. But at least he'd come out of the fight in one piece, which was more than he could say about the last time he'd gotten himself into a bad situation.

"Is he...?" Regris began, glancing down at Keith.

Shiro shook his head. "I managed to convince him that something was wrong, but then... I don't know what happened. It was like something took him over. I had to knock him out."

Regris frowned, visibly displeased. Stooping over Keith, he did a quick check of his vitals, not exhaling until he was done. "We can get the princess to look at him later."

Shiro nodded, before turning back towards Colleen. "Mrs. Holt."

"I keep telling you to call me Colleen." Colleen scolded, though her usual humor wasn't quite there.
"Any chance you know exactly what is going on around here?"

"It's a long story." Shiro told him. "Just... whatever Keith tried to do, I just want you to know that wasn't him. He was brainwashed. By aliens."

Colleen just hummed. "I did think something seemed off. I don't think he recognized me. Is that why his eyes are...?"

"No, that part's because Keith is an alien." Shiro said.

Colleen's brows shot straight up, disappearing into her hairline. "An alien."

"Well, part." Shiro shrugged. "He's still Commander Kogane's kid."

Colleen just huffed, shaking her head. "After what I've been through? I'll take it."

"Glad to see you're alright." Shiro told her. "Matt and Katie have been worried sick about you. They're safe too."

Colleen exhaled, nodding her head. If he had to be honest, she looked kind of like she wanted a nap and a stiff drink, maybe not necessarily in that order. He couldn't exactly blame her. He'd been thinking about it himself.

The sound of the hangar doors opening caught his ears, and he jerked his head up, instantly tense. He relaxed once he spotted Allura, flanked on each side by Ulaz and Krolia, only to tense again when he realized that one of Lotor's generals was trailing behind them. Allura caught his gaze and gave him a strained smile, and he felt himself relax again.

Whatever was going on here, he didn't think the general was here to harm them. In fact, she seemed to have her hands full with yet another general- one he instantly recognized as Narti, having memorized the general's face from the data he'd been shown. Not that hers was an easy one to forget- he could only tell she was unconscious based on the fact that she wasn't moving. There was an odd looking black cat curled up on her chest, also seemingly out cold.

Regris watched the conscious general much closer, absently touching his injured arm. Ah. So that was how that happened.

"We need to get back to the Castle." Allura said when they got closer. She looked... tired, he noticed, unsteady on her feet. She didn't seem too badly hurt, which was a relief, nor did Ulaz or Krolia for that matter, though the former was limping slightly. "But I'm afraid the pod isn't going to be of much use. It's been disabled."

Behind her, the general- Zethrid, he dimly recalled her name was- just shrugged, saying nothing in her defense. He still wasn't sure why she was here, but he was too tired to question it. Allura probably knew what she was doing.

"Guess we'll just have to find another ship." Shiro said, glancing towards the other Altean pod. "Probably not that one."

Krolia coughed into her hand, before she turned her attention towards Keith. Her expression softened at the sight of him, but tensed again once she noticed the restraints. All he could do was meet her eyes and shake his head. He'd done what he could. The rest was up to Allura.

Krolia heaved a long sigh, carefully scooping her son up, absently checking his pulse as she did so. He didn't stir, for which Shiro was grateful. He'd rather not have Keith regain consciousness until
they were back at the Castle.

"What about Lotor?" Regris asked, still eying Zethrid warily.

"Dead." Allura said coolly.

Shiro just nodded. He knew that likely meant there was another battle ahead of him, one that he would be involved in. Thinking about the black lion prompted him to reach out to it. It had become like a constant companion in his head, even now, when there was a distance between them. He felt the lion brush up against his mind, working away at the knot of tension that had formed there.

Lotor was dead, they had Keith, and now all they needed was a ride home.

The steady purr suddenly became much louder. Snapping his eyes open, Shiro got to his feet. The primary set of hangar doors had been broken open, presumably by Krolia's ship, but the emergency doors, like the fire suppressors, had still been in proper working order. So while that meant he couldn't see the black lion, instinctively, he still knew that it was out there.

"I think," Shiro slowly began, turning back on his heel, "-that I found us our ride."

If she didn't look at his armor- or the restraints- it was just like he was sleeping.

Brushing a stray strand of hair out of her son's face, Krolia couldn't help but frown. Part of her wished she could remove his restraints, but logically, she knew that Shiro had made the right call. There had been no time to go over anything in depth- the priority right now was returning to the Castle, where they could place Narti in a cryopod to prevent her quintessence levels from dropping too low, and where they would be able to treat Regris's injuries.

Only once that was done, could they help her son.

She tried to fight down the rage she felt at seeing him wearing the armor of one of Lotor's generals. Lotor was dead now, and they had the one responsible for her son's brainwashing in their custody. Zethrid had begrudgingly accepted restraints, though knowing how strong she was, they wouldn't hold her for long if she truly wished it. But Allura's promise to help Ezor and Narti appeared to be holding, so she simply sat on the opposite side of the black lion's cargo hold, glaring at the floor.

In time, she might sympathize with the sense of betrayal she felt. Right now, she was still angry.

A hand on her shoulder drew her attention away from the general. Looking up at Ulaz, she gave him a weak smile.

"He will be alright." He assured her.

"I know." Krolia said. She had his head resting in her lap, even as she wondered if he even remembered her in his brainwashed state.

Bending over, she pressed her forehead against his own. Closing her eyes, she took in a long whiff of his scent, once again picking up on that scent that didn't belong. It wasn't just the armor he wore, it was something more- something she had started to already become familiar with, given that she had encountered it twice now. Right now, it seemed dormant, knocked out with its host, but it churned her gut just knowing that there might be one of those things inside of her son.

It was to her great regret that she hadn't killed Lotor herself.
Pulling her head away, she glanced down at her hip. In addition to her own blade, she had sheathed Keith’s knife next to it. She was glad to have recovered it, and hoped she could recover her son just the same.

Only then, would she truly begin to feel like the tide of the war had finally changed.

She had only just recovered from the feedback she had received from the destruction of the creature when she felt the bond between her and her son snap.

Snapping her eyes open, it was only years of training that allowed Honerva to keep some measure of composure. There was rage simmering under the surface as she rose to her feet, turning sharply on her heel. There was grief too, but that could come later, when she had avenged both her lost son and husband.

And vengeance she would have.

With both dead, she no longer had any claim to the Galran throne, but there were those who would still follow her into battle to avenge their fallen Emperor, as well as their Prince. They would be more than enough to wipe out whatever puny forces Alfor's daughter had brought with her to protect her.

Once that was taken care of, she could return and claim whoever had ascended the Steps of Destiny as her own. She had that power now- the creatures had shown her the way. Alfor would think her mad, entering into a pact with them as she had, but he had always been an old fool, afraid of progress. It was a mistake to leave something as powerful as Voltron in his hands.

Soon, she would destroy him too- but not until he had suffered what she was now. She would kill his daughter, and broadcast it for all of Altea to see.

Then maybe he would know even half her grief.
Shiro just nodded, suddenly feeling weary. It had been a long day, and fighting Keith hadn't been easy—physically or mentally. He was torn between the urge to sleep for several days and the desire to not leave Keith's side until they could be sure that he was free of Narti's brainwashing.

He also caught himself scanning the hangar, looking for Adam.

Chapter Notes

Chapter thirty-three, and we're still introducing new characters lol. I'm getting more used to writing on my new laptop, so that's always a good thing, though it's still very much a work in progress. I don't think it likes my mouse all that much so I'll have to see about getting a new one. It is way too sensitive to it. That said, I hope everyone enjoys this chapter, and I'll see you all next update! Thanks for reading!

He'd barely lowered the black lion's ramp before Matt and Katie were all but flinging themselves at their mother. Colleen took both children in her arms, embracing them so tightly he wasn't sure if she ever intended to let go.

"Mom!" Katie cried, not caring who heard it. "Mom, I missed you so much. I was so worried about you! Are you fine? Did Lotor hurt you? What did he-?"

"I'm fine, Katie." Colleen assured her, finally pulling away from her children. "And I'm glad to see that you're both alright. Especially you, Katie. You don't know how much of a scare you gave me when I came home and you weren't there."

Katie flushed, staring at her feet. "It seemed like a good idea at the time, in my defense."

Colleen just huffed, lightly stroking her daughter's hair, before she turned towards Matt. "I take it this is where you and Shiro got off to."

"It's a long story." Matt told her.

"Yes, that's what Shiro told me too." Colleen said, turning on her heel to glance back at him. He was just coming down the ramp himself as she did so, and instinctively flinched, wondering how she'd known. Some kind of mom instinct, maybe.

"Shiro!" Matt called out, separating himself from his family after a moment's hesitation. "Where's-?"

Krolia emerged a second later, Keith's still unconscious form cradled in her arms. Matt took one look at him, taking in the Galra armor, and snapped his mouth shut.
"Yeah." Shiro said. "It's been a long day."

"And it's going to get even longer, I'm afraid." Allura appeared behind them, a grave expression on her face. "Honerva had to be the one controlling those creatures. She likely already knows her son is dead. I wouldn't be surprised if she was already on her way here."

"How much time do we have?" Shiro asked. The last thing he wanted to do was get involved in a space battle so soon after being forced to fight one of his best friends. He'd like at least a little time to recover from that.

"Long enough to tend to the wounded." Allura observed, glancing up towards the ramp, where Regris was just starting to disembark, his tail still dragging limply behind him. "And to Keith."

Shiro just nodded, suddenly feeling weary. It had been a long day, and fighting Keith hadn't been easy- physically or mentally. He was torn between the urge to sleep for several days and the desire to not leave Keith's side until they could be sure that he was free of Narti's brainwashing.

He also caught himself scanning the hangar, looking for Adam.

"He's still at the Garrison with Commander Kogane." Matt told him, catching his eye. "You're looking for Adam, right?"

"Am I that easy to read?" Shiro asked.

"Very." Matt said.

Shiro laughed, though he wasn't sure if it was actually because it was funny, or if it was because he was so tired that it just seemed that way. "I should probably try and make up with him, huh?"

"Probably." Matt shrugged. "You know. If we live."

Shiro winced, turning to ask Allura just what their odds were, but instead found the princess being swept up in a tight embrace by Coran. Shoulders slumping, he faintly smiled, knowing that he couldn't possibly interrupt. He must have been worried sick about her.

Instead, he turned back up to look at the black lion. Zethrid was the last to disembark, escorted by Ulaz. Much like Keith, Narti was still unconscious, though unlike Keith, her breaths were shallow and didn't sound all that good. From the sound of it, Lotor's mother, the Empress Honerva had put some kind of creature in her that had caused her to lose control and go berserk- or something along those lines, at least. Allura only had the time to give him the briefest of rundowns, but whatever it was, it had drained her quintessence badly.

All at once, the mood in the hangar shifted. Coran and the Holts, who had made up their reception party, watched Zethrid warily, not drawing any real comfort from her restraints. The Galra general came to a halt in front of Allura, who pulled herself away from Coran, meeting her eyes.

"I trust you're going to keep your promise." Zethrid said.

"Of course." Allura told her. "I will do everything in my power to help both Narti and Ezor recover. Consider it a term of your surrender."

Zethrid scoffed, staring at Narti's unconscious form. "Never thought I'd ever be the type to surrender."

"I suppose I'll need to set up another healing pod, then." Coran said. "Come on, I'll show you the
Shiro watched as Coran lead both the general and the Blade to the med bay, a tight frown on his face. Up until now, he'd only been thinking of the Galra Empire in the abstract- as the enemy of a conflict that was happening thousands of lightyears away. But something about the way Zethrid held Narti, the way she spoke... it made him realize that these were real people, just as much as Keith and Allura were.

It didn't mean he forgave them for what they had done, but it was something to remember. In a way, Lotor had exploited and manipulated his generals almost as much as he had Keith and the Garrison. He thought about the Galra people, the ones who weren't soldiers, and wondered what life was like for them.

"You should rest." Allura told him, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"I'm not sure I can." Shiro admitted. "What about you?"

Allura shook her head. "I need to contact father and Kolivan, and find out what's going on in the larger universe. Then I have to coordinate with the Galaxy Garrison, and begin preparations for defending your planet, not to mention deal with Keith..."

Heaving a sigh, Allura shook her head. "It will be quite awhile yet before I can rest. But you should still try and get some while you can."

"If it's all the same to you, princess, I think I'm going to go after Krolia and Keith." Shiro told her. "I should probably be there when he wakes up."

"I understand." Allura said. "I will try and get there as soon as I can."

Shiro just nodded. He understood that debriefing took precedence, no matter how badly he wanted to help Keith. They had him back. He was safe, if not wholly sound. That was what was most important.

Allura gave his shoulder a pat, before she wordlessly slipped away, doubtlessly heading towards the bridge. Turning back towards Matt, he gave him a strained smile.

"Where's Lance and Hunk?" Shiro asked, finally noticing their absence.

"With Lance's sister." Matt told him. "I think they're going over everything that's happened in the past month or so. Lance is probably embellishing the story of how he caught Lotor's spies as we speak."

"Veronica's here?" Shiro asked, arching his brows.

"Yeah, she came with Romelle." Matt said.

Shiro frowned, tilting his head. Last he'd heard, Romelle was serving as backup at the Garrison. "Where is Romelle, anyways?"

"Guarding Acxa." Matt told him, letting out a faint laugh upon seeing his obvious look of confusion. "It's been a crazy day. We can catch each other up later. You should go after Keith."

"Right. Thanks." Shiro nodded. "It's good to see you safe, Matt."

"Good to see you too, buddy." Matt said, giving him a hefty pat on the back. "Thanks for bringing
our mom home."

Shiro smiled, trying not to let the stab of guilt those words had given him show. "It was the least I could do."

He wasn't sure if it made up for his earlier failure, but at least he didn't have the deaths of both their parents on his hands. He wasn't sure if he'd ever stop blaming himself for the death of Sam Holt- or even if he should.

He said a quick goodbye to Katie and Colleen, before he made his way towards the Castle's isolation ward. Keith would have to be kept there, restrained, until they knew he was safe. From the sound of it, he had the same creature inside of him that had caused Narti and Ezor to go berserk- that was what had taken him over during the last part of his fight. It must have been acting as some kind of defense mechanism, protecting his brainwashed state, though that was only a theory on his part. Once Allura got the chance to really look him over, they'd know more.

Knowing that there was something as awful as that inside Keith... it made him sick. He shuddered at the memory of it using him like some kind of puppet.

Keith didn't deserve that.

By the time Allura finished debriefing Kolivan, she was more exhausted than ever.

She'd meant to go directly to the isolation ward to check on Keith, but instead found herself making a detour, heading to her chambers instead. After taking what might possibly have been the world's quickest shower, she hastily combed her hair, tying it up in a tight bun before donning a new pressure suit. Somewhat refreshed, she steeled herself for the rest of what was sure to be a long, exhausting quintant.

She'd been hoping to speak with her father as well, but he'd been unavailable. Kolivan was quick to assure her that both he- and the rest of Altea- were alright, but she still felt anxious. She should be proud of the victory they'd won- and she had been, for a time.

Now she simply felt tired.

Kolivan had confirmed that Honerva had pulled some Galra troops away from the front lines. They were now on their way to Earth, and would likely arrive in a few vargas. She was simply grateful that the empress lacked the ability to create wormholes, otherwise they would be here far sooner than they could possibly be ready for. Kolivan had promised that help would arrive before then, and she took the Blade leader at his word.

Honestly, some part of her almost welcomed Honerva's invasion. Once the empress was dealt with, there would only be the matter of the Kral Zera left- and that was Kolivan's task, not hers. Once the invasion was thwarted, her role in this long war would finally be at an end. She could finally return home to Altea, and the humans would be free to live in peace, without the cloud of war hanging over their heads.

A war she had brought to them.

Whatever other nonsense Lotor might have said, that at the very least was true. None of them would be in this predicament if she hadn't come here. But there was nothing she could do to change that now- all she could do was accept responsibility for her actions, and do whatever she could to protect the people of this planet.
Once things calmed down somewhat, she would return to offer them a place in the Alliance. It was only right.

Pushing all such thoughts aside, she made her way towards the isolation ward where Keith was being kept, bracing herself for whatever she might find there. Based on what Shiro had told her, Keith was suffering the same fate as both Ezor and Narti- in that he had one of those loathsome rift creatures inside of him. Only unlike Ezor and Narti, his hadn't left yet, and appeared to be directly tied to his brainwashed state- sustaining it, even.

Shiro hadn't spoken in length about what he had endured, but the look in his eyes alone was enough to tell that it had taken its toll on him. Some selfish part of her was almost grateful that she hadn't been the one to stumble upon Keith- she didn't know if she could handle seeing him in such a state, brainwashed into believing he was loyal to Lotor. She was even less sure if she could have brought herself to actually fight him.

Although depending on what she found waiting for her, she might have to deal with him yet. She hoped not. It would be so much easier to deal with him if he was still unconscious.

She could feel her apprehension grow with each step that she took. When she finally reached the isolation ward, she briefly hesitated just outside. Her hesitation only lasted a handful of ticks- before she chastised herself for it, drawing in a deep breath and squaring her shoulders. Right now she was the only one who could help Keith, and she owed it to him to do so. He had proven to be nothing but loyal to her, and above all else, he was her friend.

What sort of friend backed down in their hour of need?

For all her worries, Keith was still unconscious when she entered. Krolia and Shiro were with him, each with equally grim expressions on their faces. He'd been stripped of that awful armor, now only wearing the undersuit, which was mercifully nondescript. She would burn it the first chance she got.

He was also restrained, strapped to the examination table. She knew it was necessary, but it still didn't sit well with her.

"Princess." Krolia greeted her. "Did you speak with Kolivan?"

"Yes." Allura inclined her head. "He says that Honerva is moving exactly as predicted. He's already sending reinforcements to help. With any luck, they should get here before the Galra fleet."

"Did he say what kind?" Krolia asked.

"No." Allura shook her head. "I assume he meant a few larger ships from our fleet. Anyone we can spare."

It would be nice if one of the paladins came, but she wasn't sure if they could make it or not. The last she heard, Gyrgan was pinned down in his own home. She wasn't sure about her father, nor Trigel or Blaytz- but she assumed that they were attempting to break the blockade of the yellow paladin's home world. Now would be the most opportune time to do so. It wouldn't be long before news of Lotor's death would spread throughout the Galra Empire, leaving the various Commanders to realize that there was now a vacant throne that any one of them could potentially occupy.

But that was a matter for another day.

"How is Keith?" Allura asked, changing the subject.
"Still out cold." Shiro said. "He's been like this for awhile now. I don't think I hit him that hard."

Allura frowned, making her way over towards Keith's prone form. The closer she got, the stranger his quintessence felt- it didn't feel drained, like Narti's had after the creature left her, but rather, it felt tainted. The creature had to still be inside him, she reasoned- though why it hadn't tried to escape yet, she could only guess. Perhaps knocking Keith unconscious while it was in control rendered it unconscious too, although that sounded a little overly simplistic for her tastes.

"Can you help him?" Krolia asked.

"I can try." Allura said.

Drawing in a deep breath, she placed her hands on either side of Keith's head and closed her eyes. She could feel where Keith's quintessence had been entangled with that of the creature's- if one could call it that. It didn't feel like any quintessence she knew. It almost seemed to be leeching off of Keith's, as if it were some kind of parasite.

Perhaps it was.

She could feel it pulse under her fingertips, and for a tick, she was afraid it might escape and seek a new host. She could feel it try, but it seemed to be held back by something. It was with a shock that she realized that something was Keith- and that the reason he had been unconscious since his fight with Shiro was because some part of him had been holding the creature back, preventing it from taking control of his body again or failing that, escaping.

It was an effort that was clearly exhausting him.

Feeling a sudden spike of urgency, Allura doubled down on her efforts to untangle the creature from Keith's quintessence. She knew forcing it out would be faster, but that would leave Keith drained of most of his quintessence, leaving him vulnerable. Untangling the creature bit by bit would be far safer, if more time consuming.

She knew that as soon as the creature was free, it would attempt to seek out a new host. She couldn't let that happen either. Hopefully she was up to the task of destroying a second one, even though she had barely recovered from the first one. She wasn't certain quite how she'd done it- it was as if a strange power had come over her, guiding her. But she could still remember the sensation of it, at the very least.

She hoped it would be enough.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed since she began her work, having completely tuned out the world around her. She was, however, able to pinpoint the exact moment in which she began to falter, her own exhaustion starting to overcome her. As if sensing this, the creature redoubled its efforts, digging its roots deeper into Keith. She could feel him flinch, and realized with a spike of panic that it was hurting him.

Fearing that she might simply have to force it out of him and deal with the consequences, Allura drew on what strength she had left, only to find that she was more drained than she'd originally anticipated. With a shock, she realized that the creature must have been slowly siphoning off her own quintessence, drawing further strength from her.

In a panic, she nearly broke the connection with Keith. She just barely managed to hold on, concentrating what power she had left on it. To her surprise, she felt herself growing stronger, as if she'd gained a second wind.
"You can do this, Allura."

Snapping her eyes open, Allura glanced behind her at her father. He was smiling at her, a gentle hand resting on her shoulder. She had no idea when he'd even gotten here- wasn't he supposed to be on Altea? How could he be here?

"Father, I-" Allura began.

"It's alright, Allura." Alfor told her. "Trust your instincts. I'll provide the energy you need."

She opened her mouth to say something, to ask when he'd arrived, but instead snapped it shut. She could feel Keith struggle, and sensed that their time was short if there was any hope of saving him. Any questions she wanted to ask could wait.

With renewed strength, she doubled her efforts against the creature. It struggled, but it couldn't win against their combined power, and before long came free.

"Let me handle this one." Alfor told her, patting her on the shoulder as he stepped forward.

She let him, too weak to even stand. Someone caught her. Looking up, she found that she wasn't the one Shiro was looking at- but rather, his gaze was fixed on her father, watching in awe as he destroyed the creature, vaporizing it as if it were nothing. She couldn't help but smile, finally feeling herself relax after what felt like almost a lifetime of tension.

Perhaps it was childish of her, but with her father here, she felt as if they could accomplish anything.

He felt Allura go slack in his arms.

Fearing the worst, Shiro tore his gaze away from the man who could only be King Alfor, turning it instead to his daughter. "Allura? Allura!"

"It's alright," Alfor said, calm as anything, "-she's only sleeping."

Checking her pulse, he realized that Alfor was right. Allowing himself to relax, he looked up towards Alfor, suddenly struck by the fact that he was in the presence of royalty. Though he had been for some time, there was a sea of difference between the way King Alfor held himself and Allura's more personable nature- either that, or he'd just gotten used to her. Instinctively, he felt himself stiffen, fingers twitching as he fought the urge to snap into a salute.

Alfor noticed it and merely smiled. "There is no need to stand on ceremony. I am here as a father, not as a king."

Shiro nodded, but didn't relax yet. He still wasn't even totally sure what had just happened. All he knew was that the creature that had come out of Keith was gone now.

With a gasp, Shiro turned his gaze back towards his friend. Keith!

Alfor was already checking on him, two fingers nestle against his neck. Krolia hovered over him, looking more like a worried mom than he'd ever seen her.

"He appears to be fine." Alfor said. "There are no irregularities in his quintessence, either. I imagine he'll recover with a bit of rest."

Shiro heaved a sigh of relief, feeling his shoulders slump. Still, he couldn't completely relax yet-
until Keith regained consciousness, there was no way to tell if he was back to his normal self or not. He tried to stay positive- the creature had definitely played a role in his brainwashing, and even if removing it didn't make him go back to normal, they had Narti in their custody now. Whatever she had done to him, she could hopefully reverse.

Of course, she had to recover first.

Alfor looked up, catching his gaze. As if reading his thoughts, he gave him a reassuring smile. "Kolivan briefed me on the situation. As long as they're in the pods, their quintessence levels shouldn't drop any lower. That will give us plenty of time to treat them."

Shiro nodded, taking some comfort in that. While that might mean there was a chance that Keith might remain somewhat affected by her brainwashing for some time, at the very least, he knew it was possible to get through to him now. And there were plenty of people around who were more than capable of doing just that.

That was, if he was still brainwashed.

Allura stirred in his arms, prompting him to look down. After a few seconds, her eyes fluttered open, taking a few seconds before she fully recognized him. "Shiro?"

"Princess." Shiro said, a bit stiffly, unsure of how to talk to Allura in the presence of her father. "Is Keith...?"

"He'll recover." Shiro told her, before glancing over towards Alfor. The man smiled at his daughter warmly, coming over to help her onto her feet.

"Father!" Allura exclaimed, not even hesitating to throw her arms around him. "It really is you. For a tick, I thought I'd merely dreamt it."

"I can assure you, I'm very real." Alfor said, holding his daughter close. "I missed you so much, Allura. Your mother would be proud of all that you accomplished."

Allura merely frowned. "I do not feel as if I have accomplished much."

"Ah, but you have." Alfor assured her. "Come. Let us get you to somewhere you can rest for awhile. You can leave the rest of the planning to me."

"Thank you, but no." Allura shook her head. "I'm the one who brought this trouble to these poor people in the first place. I should be the one to see it through."

"Be as that may," Alfor told her, "I hardly think a varga or two of sleep will do much harm. It will take Honerva's forces some time to arrive."

"Fine." Allura conceded. "I suppose you're right. But Keith..."

"Keith needs his rest too, after all he's been through." Alfor assured her. "I suspect it will be some time before he wakes. And I'm sure Krolia will let you know when he does."

Krolia gave the king a curt nod of her head. "Of course."

"See?" Alfor said. "Nothing to worry about."

Allura frowned, still looking a little unconvinced. "Alright. Just so long as you promise to wake me if anything happens."
"I promise." Alfor told her.

Finally having run out of arguments, Allura gave her father a small nod. She gave them both a quick goodbye before she let him escort her out of the isolation ward. Once she was gone, Shiro turned back to Krolia, who was already removing Keith's restraints.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Shiro asked. "We don't know if he'll be himself again when he wakes up."

"I'm sure." Krolia said simply.

Shiro said nothing to that, assuming that she knew best. If it came down to it, he was willing to believe that Keith's mother was more than capable of beating him in a fight. Given how she had maintained her cool this entire time, she could probably handle it emotionally too- likely better than he ever could.

He was still shaken up over their fight. He was trying not to let it show, but... it had been hard. Hearing Keith say those things about him, about Allura and the Blades... it was a lot to take in. He wasn't stupid either, he knew the reason that Keith was in the cell block was likely because Lotor had given him orders to kill Colleen- orders that in his brainwashed state, he had been more than willing to carry out.

He was just glad they'd gotten there when they had.

"You know you don't need to stay." Krolia observed.

"I know." Shiro said. "But I'd like to."

Krolia leveled her gaze with his, almost seeming to look through him. "I'm sure. But if I'm not mistaken, there's another place you'd like to be just as much."

Shiro winced. There was no point in pretending she wasn't right. He was worried about Adam, and how things were going at the Garrison. With Lotor defeated, he couldn't imagine that they would put up any further resistance, but still... he'd come close to losing people he cared about today, and they still weren't entirely out of the woods yet. He got the feeling that if he didn't take this chance to see him now, he'd regret it.

"I don't know if-"

"You can go." Krolia said, cutting him off. "Keith will understand."

Shiro still hesitated. He really did want to stay here and wait for Keith to wake up, but it was obvious that Krolia had the situation well in hand. For all he knew, he could get to the Garrison and back before he even regained consciousness- but then again, he could always use one of the transponders to just call Adam...

No. That wouldn't be good enough. Heaving a long sigh, Shiro gave Krolia a weak smile. "In that case, I'll take you up on that."

Krolia only nodded, most of her attention fixed on Keith. He shifted awkwardly on his feet for a few seconds, before he dismissed himself, making haste to his quarters. Stripping out of the paladin armor, he changed back into his regular clothes. Part of him wanted to stop and take a shower, but he wasn't sure how much time he actually had, and would rather avoid pressing his luck. If King Alfor was here, that probably meant at least the red lion was too, but they would still probably need both him and the black lion to defend the planet.
At that thought, he stopped in his tracks, glancing back at his discarded armor. He hadn't even stopped to think about it before, but Alfor was a paladin, wasn't he? And wasn't the black paladin supposed to be the leader of Voltron? Was he supposed to give orders to a king?

He dwelt on that for a few seconds- before he pushed it to the back burner. He could think about all that later.

One thing at time.

He had no problems leaving the Castle, or the valley, for that matter. Now that Lotor was dead, there was no point in keeping their location a secret anymore. He borrowed one of the transports they had in the Castle, along with a transponder- he'd considered taking Keith's hoverbike out, but that somehow didn't feel right. It still sat in the hangar, right where Adam had left it after his dramatic flight from the Garrison with Katie.

He hoped he'd get the chance to use it again.

To his surprise, when he got to the Garrison, the gates were wide open. Not only that, but people- officers and cadets alike- were milling about the base, all of whom turned to stare at him as he went past. He pulled the transport to a stop, taking a moment to brace himself before he leapt out, searching for someone who could tell him where Adam was.

"Lieutenant Shirogane?"

Turning on his heel, Shiro looked back at the cadet who had called his name. He recognized them as being one of the cadets from Keith's class- or well, his former class, he guessed, now that he was no longer a student at the Garrison. They'd never gotten along well, though he wouldn't be surprised if Keith had entirely forgotten him by now. He'd never been exactly that great with faces.

(Of course, now that he'd seen the types of people Keith had grown up around, that began to make a bit more sense. Compared to the Galra, humans did all look pretty similar.)

"I'm not exactly a lieutenant anymore, cadet." Shiro told him. "It's Griffin, right?"

"James Griffin." James replied, giving him what he couldn't help but feel was a wholly unnecessary salute. "What, uh," he began, his eyes darting down to his right arm, confusion and wariness sharing space in his expression at the sight of it, "-what brings you to the Garrison?"

"I'm looking for Adam Warner." Shiro said. "Any chance you've seen him around?"

"He was the one who let us all out of lockdown." James said. "Any chance you know what's going on around here, sir? I've tried asking around, but nobody seems to know, and I can't find any of the higher ranking officers."

"They're probably still with Commander Kogane." Shiro told him.

James' brow shot up. "Commander Kogane, sir? As in, Keith's father?"

"That's the one." Shiro said. "And I wouldn't worry too much. I'm sure Admiral Sanda will let everyone know what's going on before long. But before that..."

"Professor Warner, right?" James asked, glancing over his shoulder. "I saw him heading towards the main conference room."
"Thanks." Shiro nodded, quickly excusing himself. He made his way past equally confused cadets and officers, forcing himself not to stop for any of them. If he had time on the way back, then maybe he could explain the situation a bit - they deserved that much.

The trek to the main conference hall was a short one. He didn't see Adam, so he must have already gone inside. He nearly knocked on the door before he remembered the intercom, and used that instead.

Heath's unmistakable Southern drawl answered him. "Who is it?"

"It's Shirogane," Shiro replied. "Is Adam here?"

What felt like the longest few seconds of silence went by before the door buzzed, indicating that it was unlocked. Before he could move to open it, someone inside did just that, leaving him to come face to face with Adam.

"Shiro!" Adam said, his expression a mixture of relief and surprise. "We heard from Coran that you'd made it back from the lunar base, but-"

Adam paused, glancing over his shoulder. He could make out a few members of the Garrison's upper command behind him, so he assumed this was where Heath was keeping them. He couldn't see Admiral Sanda, but he was almost positive she was in there. He caught the former commander's gaze, the man giving him a mock salute. Shiro returned it, much more seriously, briefly wondering if he knew Keith was safe yet.

He probably did, if Coran had contacted Adam. For a minute he was tempted to offer to relieve him, before realizing it wouldn't work. He'd be needed back at the Castle at some point, what with him being the black paladin and all.

(That was starting to feel so much more real to him, lately.)

"Why don't we talk outside?" Adam asked.

Shiro just nodded, taking a step back, allowing Adam to shut the door behind him.

"Adam-"

Adam shut him up by throwing his arms around him. He was so stunned, he didn't quite know how to react. "I was so worried. Coran told me that you'd made it back alright, but I-"

"I'm fine." Shiro reassured him, finally finding his voice again. "We all are."

As if he suddenly realized just what it was he was doing, Adam hastily broke the embrace, jerking away from him. His cheeks were dusted with a deep red color, one that made Shiro's heart yearn with fondness. He really had missed Adam, and he regretted being so stubborn that he'd never even tried to contact him after the crash. They had spent so much time apart when they could have been working things out together. Maybe he could have solved Keith's mystery without resorting to getting himself abducted.

"Keith's fine too, by the way." Shiro added. "At least, he will be."

Adam just nodded. "Good to hear. I was worried about the kid. What about Colleen?"

"She's fine." Shiro assured him. "She's back with Matt and Katie. I'm sure they're regaling her with every detail of this past month right about now."
Adam cracked a smile at that. "Shiro, I-"

"I'm sorry." Shiro said, cutting him off. "I should have reached out to you after Kerberos, but I didn't."

"I'm the one who should apologize." Adam said. "I thought I was protecting you by keeping my distance, but it didn't help at all. All I did was leave you on your own when you were at your most vulnerable. I should have just come clean to you from the very beginning."

"Well," Shiro began, "-I wouldn't say I was vulnerable, but-"

"Don't ruin the mood, Shirogane." Adam jokingly chastised him.

"Wouldn't dream of it, Warner." Shiro said. "But seriously, I missed you."

"Me too." Adam said. "When all of this is over, would you want to try again?"

"I would love to try again." Shiro said, taking his hand with his left. "Who knows? Maybe I'll be able to take you on a date to an alien planet."

"I think I'll settle for the pizza place in Plaht City." Adam grinned, entwining his fingers with his own.

"Deal." Shiro said. "Pick you up at your place around six, this Sunday?"

"Provided we don't all die," Adam began, "-then sure. Six works."

"I'll try my best not to let that happen." Shiro promised.

Adam nodded, but he didn't miss the way his grip on his hand tightened. "Promise me you'll stay safe up there."

Giving him a faint smile, Shiro leaned down, planting a soft kiss on his lips. "I will."

Ducking his head, Adam let the tint of his glasses conceal his eyes, if not his flustered expression. "Right. Well, I'll be holding you to that, Shirogane."

"Cross my heart and hope not to die." Shiro joked. "I should probably go. Do you and Commander Kogane have things handled here?"

"We've got it covered." Adam assured him. "Go knock 'em dead."

"Well," the edges of Shiro's lips twitched upwards, "-if you insist."

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