Knowing Me, Knowing You

by garbage_dono

Summary

Lotor is treading water, wrestling with writers' block, overdue bills and lingering family scars. He isn't expecting to find a new muse so close to home when Allura moves in next door to him, but he soon discovers that she is so much more than simply an aspiring businesswoman with a stubborn streak. Together, they discover inspiration, desire, and so much more.

Notes

A thousand thanks to the Lotura discord chat peeps, as always, for enabling me and for always being a neverending source of inspiration. :D

I can't promise a regular update schedule, but I'll do what I can!
See the end of the work for more notes.
Arrival

Moving was hell.

She had been shuttling boxes for the better part of two hours and she had barely made a dent. She had already sweat all the way through her favorite T-shirt and yoga pants what felt like three times over. Not to mention that the U-Haul was due back at three and she had no earthly idea how she was going to get this couch up to the third floor.

The elevator was out of the question; on top of it being painfully slow and creaking when the doors opened or closed, it was also just large enough to fit one person comfortably and two if they wanted to get to know each other very well. Fitting a couch onto it was out of the question. So the stairs it was. One floor down and two to go.

Moving was hell.

She had made it this far, at least. Far enough to get the god-forsaken sofa wedged in a corner between the first and second floors. Back against the padded arm, she dug her heels into the traffic-scuffed wood. “Pivot, damn you…pivot!”

This damn sofa was mocking her. Tormenting her. As she let her back slide down the secondhand faux leather, she seriously wondered if it would be better to cut her losses and leave it here for the landlord to deal with. Surely whatever fine they could slap her worse couldn’t be any worse than the endless struggle that was trying to get this thing three floors up under nothing but her own muscle power.

With a massive sigh, she plopped down on the steps, her shoulders propped up against the side of the sofa. “You’re halfway there Allura,” she sighed, pushing her sweaty bangs back out of her face. “Just two floors to go…four flight of stairs.” She rested her forehead against her knees. “Why did I have to buy this damn sofa…I’ll have a perfectly good floor to sit on.”

“Certainly the sofa would be much easier on your back,” someone answered, and she nearly launched herself down the stairs, she jumped to her feet so quickly. Just on the other side of the sofa she made out a flash of white hair.

Great…another irate tenant come to complain that she was blocking their way. As if she wasn’t painfully aware already. “Take the elevator,” she groaned. “I’m moving into 302 – you can come yell at me later.”

The man let out a laugh. “I was thinking of offering you a hand, but if you think me yelling at you will get your things moved into your place more quickly, we can certainly try that first.”

Finally, she blinked up at him and got a better look at his face – his skin was just a bit darker than her own, and his eyes were a sharp, gleaming amber. She hadn’t been seeing things earlier when she’d noticed the white hair, either. It was tied back in a messy ponytail, but she could easily see that it was bright silver all the way through.

Damn, he’s pretty, a little voice in the back of her mind chimed. She shook her head. “I-I’m sorry. You are-“

“You said 302, right?” He smiled. “Then I suppose that makes me your neighbor.”

“Oh.” She flashed him a smile over the back cushions. “Um…I’d shake your hand, but-“
He glanced down at the sofa. “There seems to be something between us.”

She snorted on a laugh and leaned against the damn sofa before covering her mouth. Well…that certainly was one way to make a first impression. But he was smiling when she glanced up at him again.

Forget pride. She just wanted to get her furniture up these god-forsaken stairs.

Somehow, working together, they managed to pivot the sofa around the corner and up to the second floor, and they took a moment to catch their breath on the landing before tackling the home stretch. Her new neighbor wiped his brow, pushing a few stray strands of hair from his face. His poor ponytail never stood a chance.

“If only my friend Zethrid was here,” he sighed. “She could probably move a whole apartment single-handed and be done before lunch.”

“I don’t suppose she lives in this building,” Allura said.

“She does, actually.” For a moment, Allura’s heart soared with hope, but it didn’t last long. “But she’s away at a competition right now…not able to lend a hand. Just our luck.”

“Just our luck indeed.” She let her shoulders slump before hoisting herself up again. “Just one floor to go. Think we can make it?”

“I know we can make it,” he said, smiling again. “It will take more than a flight of stairs to best us.” He pulled the tie out of his hair, holding it in his teeth as he swept the flyaway strands back over his temples and secured them again.

Somehow – Allura wasn’t sure how on earth they did it – they got the damn sofa up to her floor, and she all but collapsed onto it as soon as they got it onto the landing. “Oh thank the stars,” she sighed. Her door was finally in sight, and she beamed as she turned to face her new neighbor. “I can’t thank you enough – and I don’t even know your name.”

His poor ponytail was flagging again, hair looking damp and messy. But he smiled back anyway and finally extended a hand. “Lotor Galra,” he said. “304.”

“Lotor…” she mused, trying to commit it to memory. Though she doubt she’d ever forget it when it was so firmly attached to the memory of hauling that damn sofa up all of those stairs. She wiped her hand on her jeans and took his to give it a shake. “Allura Altea.” His hands were strikingly soft, and when she glanced down she noticed a glint of polish covering his nails. “It’s nice to meet you, 304.”

“Likewise, 302,” he said, flashing her a tired smile. “Suppose all that’s left is to get this into your apartment.”

“I can take it from here… I have about half a truck left to move anyway and just two hours before I have to get it back to the rental place.” Somehow just saying it out loud made her muscles ache even more. “Luckily no more sofas…”

“If you insist… at least you don’t need to worry about scuffing the floor. It’s already practically petrified.” He flashed her a wolfish grin. “A few more scratches won’t hurt. Might even make it look better.”

The floor was the least of her worries. All she wanted to do now was get all of the boxes out of the U-haul and into her apartment. She’d worry about making the place livable later, as long as she could clear a large enough area of carpet to pass out on once she was done.
Everything else fit on the elevator, thank god – if only barely. She stared down the empty truck and allowed herself a moment to revel in her accomplishment, a table lamp in one hand and a four-pack of toilet paper in the other. But her exhaustion outweighed her pride, and she still had to get the truck back to the rental place in the next twenty minutes if she wanted to avoid having to pay for an extra day. So she sighed and made the last trip up to her new apartment.

When she and Coran has been loading up the truck the day before, it had seemed like she had enough clothes and decorations packed up in boxes to fill most of the 850 square feet she was renting. But now that they were all stacked around the perimeter of her – surprisingly spacious, she had to admit – living room, the place looked sparse.

She was intimately aware of just how little furniture she had. Her mattress was propped up against the door to the bedroom and her bedframe was still packed away in a flat box under the window. The small wooden dining room table, if she could really call it that, was tucked in the corner of the open kitchenette to her left, covered in boxes of plates and pans. And then there was that damn couch…

A couch that, for all the trouble it had caused, looked pretty comfortable right about now.

She could spare a few minutes, just as long as she didn’t let herself drift off to sleep. She flopped down onto it with a deep sigh, grimacing at how her sweat-drenched shirt stuck to her back against the faux leather.

“Well…here we are,” she sighed, staring up at the ceiling. Nobody above her – that was a definite plus. And of course she already knew who she would be sharing a wall with.

Lotor Galra…quite the name for quite the man. Helping her move in before they had even properly introduced themselves was sure one way to make a lasting first impression. And she was sure she’d be seeing more of him soon, if only when they went to get their mail or take out the trash. Maybe if she was lucky, it would be more often than that. She would have been lying if she tried to pretend he wasn’t handsome.

Her phone vibrated against her hip, and her arm felt like rubber as she reached for it. She summoned barely enough strength to bring it up to her ear. “You have good timing… I just sat down.”

“Get everything moved in alright?” Coran asked her. He sounded relieved. “I can still come over if you need me to.”

“No, no…it’s all done. Just the unpacking to worry about now, and I can handle that on my own. Though…I wouldn’t say no to a home-cooked meal once I have my kitchen sorted out.”

“Consider it done.” She managed a smile. “After moving everything in yourself I’d say you’ve earned it.”

“I didn’t exactly do it all myself,” she sighed. “My new neighbor had to help me get that blasted couch up the stairs. The elevator was a no-go. I’m not sure I would have made it if he hadn’t decided to play the Good Samaritan.”

“Well that’s one way to meet the neighbors.”

“I’ll have to bake him cupcakes to make up for the trouble.”

She glanced at the kitchenette – at least the unit had come equipped with a new oven and fridge. She didn’t want to imagine having to maneuver either of those up the stairs, and she doubted the elevator would have been able to handle it. Given that more positive outlook on things, she could look past
the horrible shade of plum that someone had decided to paint the cabinets. That, at least, was fixable. After everything else had been properly put away.

Her lights were on, her air conditioning was working, her water was running, and all of her things were inside. Once she got that damn truck returned, then she’d let herself breathe a real sigh of relief.

She hauled herself up off the couch. “I’d love to talk more, but I have fifteen minutes to get this truck back,” she sighed. “I’ll call again once I’m not swimming in moving boxes.”


No, they certainly didn’t. She’d focus on that another day. For now, she had truck rental late fees to avoid.

“Geez, what happened to you?”

Lotor nearly jumped out of his skin, gripping the bookshelf to steady himself. “Ezor,” he breathed, “What did I tell you about coming into my apartment without telling me?”

She groaned, letting her head hang over the back of the armchair by the window. “You gave me a key to your place for a reason, right? What else am I supposed to use it for if I don’t come by when I’m bored?”

“I don’t know – emergencies?” She scoffed and waved him off with a flick of her wrist. “Well can you let me take a shower before you start insisting I entertain you while Zethrid’s away?”

“What are you showering in the middle of the day anyway? You look like you just got into a street fight or something.”

He was already halfway to the bathroom, pulling his hair free of his ponytail as he went. “With a sofa.”

“You got in a fight with a sofa?”

“More or less.” He shrugged, studying himself in the bathroom mirror. His hair was frizzing in this heat, curling around his ears from all the sweat that was caught in it. “New neighbor…she was trying to move a sofa up three floors alone.”

“Is she another frail old lady?”

“No,” he said. “Young, actually. And hardly frail.”

“Ooooooh!” Ezor sang. He knew that tone. He’d heard it enough times when they’d gone out drinking to know what was coming next. “Is she pretty?”

Instead of answering, he shut the door and turned the water on full blast.

His new neighbor sure was…interesting. She seemed like a strong-willed, if somewhat stubborn woman. How else could he describe someone who had tried to move a sofa up three floors with no help? Then again, maybe she didn’t have anyone else to help her. He could certainly understand that feeling…

Or maybe she had something to prove. He could understand that too.
And she was beautiful. Strikingly so. Ezor was right about that much, but it hardly meant that his old friend’s hopes were going to come to fruition. He had spent enough time quietly putting up with her efforts to nudge him toward any person who she thought might strike his fancy, and so far nothing had come of it.

Not that it mattered to him. He had other things on his mind besides finding a date. As good as his friends’ intentions were, he didn’t have any plans to start flirting with his new neighbor like some kind of creep. All he wanted now was to wash the sweat out of his hair, try and get some work done on the latest chapter of his book, and when Ezor inevitably made that impossible, watch a few episodes of *Hoarders* and call it a night.

Ezor was still in his living room when he came out again with his hair wrapped in a towel, and he made his way over to the fridge to try and find something to pull together for dinner. Scrambled eggs, plain pasta, or frozen chicken. Decisions, decisions…

“Nice T-shirt,” she giggled. “Didn’t even know you liked ABBA enough to own merch.”

“It’s laundry day,” he said into the produce drawer, grabbing an apple and taking a large, messy bite. “And everyone likes ABBA.”

“Acxa hates ABBA.”

“Acxa is a statistical anomaly.” He sat down at the dining room table and opened his laptop. “Feel free to pull up Netflix if you’re going to hang around here. I need to work. And don’t expect me to feed you.”

She scoffed. “I’m not friends with you for your cooking.”

“I’m painfully aware,” he said as he stared at the apple. He glanced back up at the computer screen. A mostly blank Word document stared back at him, the *Chapter Five* header mocking him from its place at the top of the page. “We meet again, my old foe.”

“Writers’ block?” Ezor asked as she scrolled through his Netflix queue.

“Writers’ block.” He brought his hands to the keyboard with a sigh. He had to power through, at least if he wanted to pay his rent this month. Which he very much did. He wasn’t likely to get another advance from his publisher if he didn’t have anything to show for the last month’s worth of work.

Ezor smiled at him, getting comfortable with her legs slung over the arm of the chair. “Maybe you just need a new muse,” she offered, eyebrows raising suggestively.

“Watch your Netflix,” he said to her, still staring at the page.

But as the cursor continued to blink and blink as the minutes wore on, he began to think that maybe she had a point.
Dancing Queen

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the feedback on the first chapter - it means so much to know that people are enjoying reading this as much as I'm enjoying writing it. :D

Please enjoy more of Lotor: Walking Disaster (TM)

Allura’s bedroom was empty except for a few boxes weighed down with books, a flat-packed bookshelf that she didn’t have the tools to assemble, and her Master’s degree leaning in its frame against the wall. All of that, and her mattress, freshly removed from its compressed packaging and completely bare except for one pink pillow. She slept on that mattress on the floor with a throw blanket draped over her, and it was one of the best sleeps she’d had in twenty-six years of life.

She was still half asleep when she brought a hand up to shield her eyes from the light filtering through the blinds the next morning. She fumbled blindly for her phone, pulling it off its charger and squinting at the time.

6:09 AM. God, she felt hungover. Every part of her was so sore it was throbbing and stiff. And on top of all of that…

Was that ABBA she was hearing through her bedroom wall? It sounded like it. Dancing Queen, specifically, and it seemed like it was being played at max volume.

She hauled herself out of bed, groaning when her knees protested the long journey from the floor to her feet. She had slept in her T-shirt from the day before, only bothering to drop her yoga pants on the floor before sliding into her makeshift bed and passing out. She regretted it now, though; her shirt was sticking to her back and under her arms, and the whiff she got of her sports bra when she tugged at her shirt collar almost knocked her right off her feet again. Those clothes went straight into a pile in the corner, soon to go into the hamper whenever she unpacked it, and she trudged naked across her apartment to the bathroom and got straight into the shower.

The hot water was working, which was a relief. But she turned the tap over to cold anyway and let it wash over her until goosebumps erupted across her skin. She let out a moan, so long and loud that she would have been embarrassed if she weren’t alone, as she washed the sweat out of her hair and off of her face. By the time she emerged, she felt a little more like a person again, brimming with renewed energy, ready to take on a day of unpacking. Except for the sound of Dancing Queen blaring through the wall for what had to be the fourth time.

Alright…maybe it was time to have another talk with her new neighbor.

She pulled her suitcases into her bedroom, rummaging through one to find her underwear, another to find a shirt, and yet another to find a pair of jeans, and by the time Dancing Queen had started up again for the fifth time, she was out the door and heading for 304.

She knocked, politely enough not to be obnoxious, but hard enough to say “It’s 6AM and if you play Dancing Queen one more time I’m going to bury you underneath every box in my new apartment.” About three seconds later, the music abruptly cut off.
She heard some rustling, a couple of crashes and thumps and a few muffled curses before the door opened, and there he was. Lotor. Wearing nothing but a pair of striped purple boxers. “Oh,” he said, blinking at her as she tried desperately to keep her eyes on his face instead his underwear or — what the fuck — the outline of his abs. A few moments later, it was like a haze lifted from his face, and his eyes widened, a blush spreading like fire across his cheeks. “Oh!” he said again, and the next thing she knew, he slammed the door in her face.

She stared at it, her jaw hanging open. She tried to will her arms to move to knock again, but they stayed hanging useless by her sides. She tried to walk away, but her feet felt glued to the floor. So she kept staring, blinking at the door until, suddenly, it flew open again.

“I’m so sorry,” Lotor sighed. He was wearing a shirt now – albeit inside-out – and a pair of jeans that looked like he’d picked up from his floor.

Not that she could really judge him for that.

“Allura,” she said, because it was the only thing she could bring to her mind. “302.”

“Yes…of course. With the sofa.”

“Right.” Why had she come over here again? Oh of course. “Ah…your music-“

Lotor’s face fell. “You…heard that?”

“I woke up to it.”

He let his forehead thump against the doorframe. “Of course you did. I’m sorry — the woman who lived in that unit before you was quite deaf, and she never seemed to mind…”

“Well I’m not deaf,” she said, like it needed to be stated.

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“Right. I know.” He drew in a huge breath, and it seemed to leave him deflated when he let it out again. “It won’t happen again — you have my word. It’s just…well sometimes a song just makes the words flow in a way I’m not expecting, and it helps me to drown in it a bit.”

Her brow pinched. “You’re…a writer?”

“Trying to be. Unfortunately to be a writer, you have to…well…write. And I haven’t been able to do much of that lately, so you can understand why I may get a bit…lost in it when inspiration strikes.” He was blushing, scratching at his neck and toying with the hair that had broken free from his messy bun.

A writer. A writer with a six pack who answered the door in his underwear and blasted ABBA at 6 in the morning. Just what kind of building was she making her home? Then again, she had spent plenty of weeks in graduate school baking cookies in the middle of the night to avoid thinking about her finals. So maybe she wasn’t in the best position to judge.

“It’s alright,” she said on a breath, and she managed a smile. “Honestly, I was awake anyway. And these walls do seem awfully thin…”

“Tragically so, I’m afraid,” Lotor sighed. After a slightly awkward, but luckily short-lived silence, he glanced inside and said, “I could make you some coffee to make up for it.”

She looked over his shoulder at the apartment. It seemed normal enough, clean albeit a little cluttered. She had to admit she was curious, but… “I still have an awful lot of unpacking to get done.”
“Right – of course.”

“But maybe once I have everything sorted out I’ll take you up on that offer.” She offered him a smile, trying to make the offer sound sincere. It was. At least she hoped so. But she didn’t exactly make a habit of inviting strange men she’d just seen in their underwear into her apartment.

Still, maybe he wouldn’t be strange for very long.

“Well,” he said, “I shouldn’t keep you…I’ll keep the music down from now on, now that I know your hearing is still very much intact.” Allura noticed as he spoke that he had a very nice smile – the kind that seemed to come as naturally to him as breathing. It suited him.

She had to force herself to stop staring. Right. Unpacking. She had plenty waiting for her back in her own apartment and only a few days to get it all done before her first day at her new job. “Thank you,” she forced out, and she hurried back down the hall.

A six-pack. What the hell kind of writer had a six-pack?

Zethrid stared at Lotor as he sank even farther down into their couch, looking like he was trying to melt into it. She leaned over to Ezor. “What’s wrong with him?”

Ezor shrugged. “Did something stupid in front of the pretty girl who moved in next to him.”

“Since when do you get this broken up about some girl?” Zethrid asked him as his face melded with the throw pillow.

“I answered…the door…in my underwear,” he said into the cross-stitched fabric.

“In his underwear, while blasting Dancing Queen on repeat at 6 in the morning!” Ezor added. Helpfully.

Zethrid winced. “Should I call Acxa?”

“No,” he insisted. “And for the record, I’m not broken up about anyone. I would have been just as mortified if I’d answered the door for the landlord in that state.”

“Yeah, but you probably wouldn’t have invited Mister LoCascio in for coffee after,” Ezor giggled, and Lotor buried his face in the pillow again with a groan. “Face it, Lotor, you have a crush!”

“I don’t get crushes,” he spat. “Especially not on people I’ve known for less than a day and spoken to twice.”

“But she’s pretty,” she cackled. “And you’ve been holed up in your apartment writing that damn book and hanging out with nobody but a bunch of lesbians for like two months. There’s no shame in being a little pent up.”

“I’m not pent up.”

“She kind of has a point,” Zethrid said, and Lotor looked at her like she had broken some kind of blood pact.

“Et tu, Zethrid?”

“I’m just saying – there’s no harm in asking her out on a-“
“Don’t you dare say date,” Lotor hissed, tossing the pillow aside and crossing his arms as he glared at her. “I barely know her. She’s my neighbor – I helped her move a sofa up the stairs. Honestly, you can’t just assume that any remotely attractive person I see is immediately irresistible just because of some evolutionary urge to-“

Ezor flopped against the counter. “Can you not give us the definition of demisexual for the thousandth time? We know it already. And if you say you don’t have a crush, fine, you don’t have a crush.” She held up her hands placatingly, as if admitting defeat. “I’ll drop it if it makes you so touchy.”

“Thank you.” He huffed his way over to their fridge and grabbed a soda out of it, grimacing when he saw it was decaf. But he drank it anyway and sighed as he tossed the can into the recycling bin. “My publisher called me again this morning.”

Zethrid winced. “Good news?”

“He wants to know how long it will take me to finish the damn book,” he groaned.

“Well…you’re close, right?”

“I’m on chapter five, Zethrid. *Five.* And I have been for a month now.” He slunk back to the couch, giving Ezor just enough time to scurry out of his way before he collapsed onto it again. “This is the book. *The* book. The culmination of all the work I’ve put into this damn trilogy. The one where the prince and princess finally make it Oriande and uncover all of their ancestor’s secrets-“

“And have sex in the interdimensional rift, right?” Ezor added.

“Yes,” he sighed. “And have sex in the rift. But it doesn’t feel right. Nothing I put down on paper feels right. And I can’t afford to do this halfway.”

“Since when do you do *anything* halfway?” Zethrid asked.

“I don’t. That’s the point. It has to be perfect.” He rubbed his eyes. “But it also has to be done if I’m going to get any money for rent. I have to deliver at least ten chapters by the end of the month if I have any hope for another advance.”

Not only that, but if he kept dodging his publisher’s calls, his whole contract could go up in smoke. And then he was facing collection agencies knocking at his door, years of work disintegrating before his eyes, the prospect of being forced to go begging his father for money to keep from being homeless.

“Are you gonna puke?” Ezor asked. “You look like you’re gonna puke.”

“I’m not going to-“ He shook his head. “I should go back and at least *try* and get some work done instead of sitting here whining…”

“Well, can you do it with headphones?” Zethrid asked, pointing up at the ceiling. “We share a wall with you too, ya know. And I swear if you ever answer the door for me in your underwear, I’m gonna chuck you out a window.”

“I don’t plan on it,” he said, already heading for the door.

He made his way up the stairs, taking his time, eyes trailing over the fresh scuff marks that sofa had left on the faded wood the day before. This wasn’t a crush. It wasn’t anything so juvenile. Was she attractive? Objectively, yes. Was he interested in getting to know her better? Certainly. But he had no
interest in trying to get her into bed – at least not after two conversations about nothing particularly
deep.

No, right now he was concerned with getting over this damn wall he had hit when it came to his
book. Now, all he wanted was to secure his next paycheck and get one step closer to publishing the
final volume of the series he’d been working on for the better part of half a decade. And more
importantly, he wanted to make damn sure he didn’t have to come within a hundred miles of his
father.

He was so lost in thought that he almost tripped over the package sitting on his doorstep when he
made it back to his apartment. He bent down the pick it up and realized it wasn’t from the postal
service – it was a plastic Tupperware container with a note stuck to the top.

Thank you for your help with the sofa! Hope you like strawberry!
-Allura (302)

There was even a wide smiley face next to her name. Sweet. He took the container into the kitchen
and opened the lid, and the scent of strawberries – fresh strawberries, too, not artificial flavor – hit
him hard enough to make his mouth start to water. Inside the Tupperware were three generously
sized cupcakes topped with pink icing. He blinked at them. Cupcakes…she had made him cupcakes.
No, no, they were probably just leftover from a batch she’d made for something else. But why in the
world would she spend her time baking when she had just moved into a new apartment?

Whatever the reason, his stomach growled, and he picked one up and removed the wrapper before
sinking his teeth into it. Icing smeared across his cheeks as fresh strawberry flavor exploded on his
tongue, and he let out an appreciative hum.

He had to thank her somehow, but she was probably still knee deep in moving boxes and trying to
make sense of her new apartment. Moving was stressful enough without him interrupting her day a
second time. But surely there had to be something...

An idea popped into his head, and as he licked the excess frosting from his fingers, he went into his
bedroom and knocked on the wall.

“Your cupcakes are to die for,” he said, loudly enough that she might be able to hear. If she was in
her bedroom at all, which she very probably wasn’t. Suddenly this idea seemed less clever by the
second as the silence stretched on and on. But then, just as he turned to walk away, a muffled voice-

“Thank you.”

She sounded like she was smiling. He couldn’t help but do so too.
It took Allura three days to get everything unpacked, or at least out of the boxes. Her walls were still bare and several pieces of her furniture were still unassembled, but at least she had managed to get all of the moving boxes neatly folded and stacked in one corner of her living room. That, at least, brought her a sense of accomplishment, even if she had a long way to go. It was a relief to know that, if nothing else, when she started work, she could come home to an apartment that was functional, if not particularly pretty quite yet.

Well…almost functional. She should have known that some problem would rear its ugly head sooner or later, and it did when she went to take a shower on Saturday morning and the nozzle popped right off in her hand.

She stared at it for a moment, eyes darting from the useless hunk of metal in her palm and the equally useless one still attached to the wall. Well…at least water wasn’t spraying all over her bathroom, but that didn’t change the fact that she had spent the morning putting together her bedframe and still needed a shower. Badly.

“Where is it, where is it…” she muttered as she searched through her kitchen drawers, the broken nozzle still clutched in one hand. Finally, she found the card she had gotten the day she’d picked up her keys.

“How any maintenance problems you have,” the landlord had told her, sounding thoroughly disinterested, “Shirogane’s your guy. That’s his number right there. Just…don’t call him to change any light bulbs, okay? He’s a busy guy.”

Well, this sure wasn’t a light bulb.

Sighing, she dialed the number and got a reply on the fourth ring: “Yeah?”

Oh god, he sounded annoyed already, and she hadn’t even gotten one word out.

“Ah…hello. I’m looking for…” She squinted at the card. “Takashi-“

“Oh, yeah, one sec.” Before she could get another word in, she heard rustling, like the phone was being pressed against something to muffle it before the same voice, farther away now, called, “Shirooooo!”

A second voice, barely audible, answered: “Wha – is that my phone?”

“Someone for you.”
“Yeah, it’s my phone.” Fabric scuffed against the receiver. “Probably a tenant.” Shiro let out a breath before he answered in earnest: “Takashi Shirogane.”

“Er…hello,” Allura sputtered. “I’m at Coalition Crossing, unit 302. Ah…I was told you’re the one to call about…repairs?” She glanced down at the nozzle in her hand and put it down on the counter with a sigh. “It’s my shower. Any chance you can come over to take a look sometime today?”

“If your apartment is flooding I can be there in twenty,” he said, and Allura managed a laugh.

“It’s not – thank God.”

“Then I’ll be there in about an hour.”

An hour was perfect – it gave her time to change out of her sweaty clothes and get her hair in as much order as she could manage with all the sweat still sticking to it. She didn’t care if she didn’t look entirely presentable. After all, she was waiting on the handyman, not a date.

She didn’t know what she expected when he finally knocked on the door – a gruff, fifty-year-old plumber with two days’ worth of stubble and a beer gut maybe? Whatever image she’d had in her mind, it was certainly not that of a twenty-something built like a tank with a black undercut and tattoos wrapping all the way up one of the biggest right biceps Allura had ever seen. He smiled and nodded at the number by her door. “302. Broken shower?”

Wordlessly, she tore her gaze away from his chest and handed him the broken nozzle. He stared at it for a moment before finally saying, “Um…right. I can fix that.”

Perfect. As long as she could shower before Monday – hopefully in her own apartment and not at the gym – she would be happy. For now though, she indulged in the small pleasure of watching the handyman’s back muscles flex under his shirt as he knelt down to study the shower. She had to admit, he was nice to look at. Nice smile, nice muscles, good with his hands…How could she not enjoy watching him inspect the nozzle?

“So,” he said, flashing her that nice smile again. “You’re the newest tenant, right?”

She leaned on the sink as Takashi – Shiro – dug through his tool bag. “As of Wednesday,” she sighed. “Um…I’m sorry for calling on a weekend. I promise I don’t make a habit of breaking pieces off of my appliances.”

Shiro let out a laugh. Damn, his laugh was as nice as his smile – bright and clear. It lit up his eyes. “It’s alright. I’m used to always being on call. The woman who lived in this unit before used to call me to help her change her light bulbs and the batteries in her smoke detector. I didn’t mind though – she was nice and she always baked me muffins.”

“I can change my own light bulbs and batteries, thank you.” She caught herself craning her neck a bit to get a better view as he leaned over and his shirt sagged down over his collarbone. “But I could bake you muffins sometime if you like.”

He paused for a moment, glancing back at her. After a beat, his look of surprise melted into a grin. “Yeah? You don’t need to feel obligated, but I never turn down baked goods.” He turned back to the faucet. “Doesn’t look too bad – just a bad screw. I can get this back on no problem.”

Relief washed over her, mixing with a dash of frustration. A bad screw, a sofa and a narrow stairwell…she was so pent up from the move and her new job that the smallest problems seemed like mountains. Baking helped, like it always had, but she needed something else to relieve this stress.
A few things came to mind.

Shiro finished re-securing the nozzle in record time, and he stood up with a satisfied sigh and turned on the shower. “Nice and functional,” he said as water streamed into the tub, a bit of it catching his forelock and making him recoil and wipe it away.

“Thank God,” Allura sighed. “You’re a hero, you know that?”

“Just a friendly neighborhood handyman.” There was that smile again. “Anything else that needs fixing while I’m here? Any light bulbs that need changing?”

“No, nothing like that. But…” Her thoughts wandered back to all of those books sitting in boxes in her bedroom. “Um…could I possibly borrow a screwdriver?” His eyebrows arched. “I know it sounds strange, but…I have a bookshelf I need to put together, and I haven’t gotten around to buying a tool kit yet, so I’m sort of at a loss. And all my books are in boxes…”

He seemed to turn it over in his head for a moment. “Forget the screwdriver,” he finally said. “I have a power drill in my truck. That’ll get the job done way quicker.” His eyes flashed, making him look lighter as excitement lit up his face. “I’ll go get it – why don’t you go get your bookshelf and I’ll give you a hand?”

“You mean it?” She gaped at him. “I couldn’t possibly-“

He laughed. “I like working with my hands, remember?” He wiggled his fingers. “Handyman. Five minutes – I’ll be right back.”

She hardly had any desire to argue with that. She’d thought her poor books would be doomed to spend the next several weeks shoved in the corner of her room before she finally got around to buying a damn screwdriver. But if she could get one step closer to having her apartment look like an actual functioning adult lived in it – well, who was she to turn that offer down?

She dragged the box into her living room, letting it drop onto the carpet just as Shiro returned with the power drill. “Princess?” he asked, and she spun around to find him pointing at her shirt. She’d almost forgotten she was wearing it – almost forgotten she owned it at all before she had pulled it out of her suitcase. She’d grimaced at the sparkling silver letters arching across the back, but a shirt was a shirt as far as she was concerned. Not like she had planned for anyone to see her in her old sorority T-shirt.

“My old nickname,” she sighed with a sheepish smile. She was already pulling the pieces of the bookshelf out of the box, lamenting all of the shreds of Styrofoam that crumbled into the carpet. “Followed me all the way from college. I thought I’d burned this damn shirt.”

“Well,” Shiro said, “Maybe that can be next on your to-do list after all you get all your books put away.”

She laughed brightly. “Yes, maybe.”

The bookshelf was assembled before she knew it. Shiro was an expert with the drill – good with his hands indeed, she couldn’t help but think. As they worked, Allura listened to Shiro talk over the whirring of the drill, and she let her mind wander…How long had it been since she had been on a real date? All of the ones that came to mind were painfully forgettable. She hadn’t thought she’d want to bother so soon after moving and on the verge of starting a new job, but maybe it was time.

Surely there had to be better ways to relieve stress than baking cupcakes for strangers…
“By the way,” Shiro said, sounding sheepish as he put down the drill. “Ah…sorry about when you called. Keith doesn’t usually answer my phone like that.”

“Keith?”

He smiled sweetly. “My boyfriend.”

She hoped he didn’t notice the flash of disappointment that slipped onto her face.

“He’s a lot nicer in person than he is over the phone,” Shiro chuckled. He tapped the top of the shelf proudly as he stood. “There you go – functional bookshelf. Ready to go.”

“Seriously, you’re a hero,” Allura said.

“I won’t turn them down.”

Well, maybe this wasn’t the place to start looking for a date. Or anything else in that territory. She wasn’t about to curl up and wither on her carpet because of that. At the very least she’d gotten a working shower and a finished bookshelf out of it. Plus, Shiro was as easy to talk to as he was on the eyes, and that had to count for something.

Lotor opened his mailbox with a grimace. It was easily the least favorite part of the day, sorting through credit card offers he didn’t dare take, coupons for stores he’d never been to in his life, and spam disguised as discounted renters’ insurance offers. Oh, and bills. More bills that he couldn’t pay until he got ten damn chapters of his damn book to his damn publisher.

And a…hand addressed envelope? How long had it been since he’d seen one of these in his mailbox? It felt like a card, the apartment address scrawled on the front of a baby blue envelope in wide, curling cursive handwriting he didn’t recognize. And addressed to-

“Allura.” He blinked down at the name – Allura Altea – and his memories of cupcakes and sofas and answering the door in his underwear flooded through his mind so rapidly that it almost made him dizzy. And a little nauseous. Especially the underwear thing.

He closed the mailbox again just as footsteps echoed down the stairwell, distant voices carrying alongside each creak and thump. “…and he graduated back in May,” said one, on the edge of a deep, warm laugh. “So it just made sense for him to move in with me. I guess that was where we were headed anyway.”

“That’s so sweet,” chimed the second, softer, feminine, far more familiar. “Sounds like he got the better deal, living with a handyman. He’ll never have to change a light bulb again.”

They were both laughing as they rounded the corner, Allura smiling brightly. And next to her…next to her was – oh god, the handyman? He was the same one the landlord had hired a year before. Good at his job and unendingly nice, and more muscular than any handyman had any right to be. Not to mention almost unfairly attractive. He had the kind of jawline that was so solid it made Lotor want to punch something.

He wondered if the guy had ever figured out that the old tenant in 302 had called him on a weekly basis to change her light bulbs just so that she could have more chances to flirt with him. From what Lotor had seen, Shiro had never seemed to notice. Or at the very least he didn’t mind.

“Thank you again,” Allura said.
“No problem.” He waved on his way out the door. “Don’t forget those muffins, princess!”

She laughed as she watched him go, and who could blame her? It was a nice view. He had to tear his own gaze away, sticking his nose back into his mail instead. “Maintenance troubles?” he asked. Small talk. Small talk was good. Better than looking through his bills for the third time.

Allura sighed. “Broken shower. And a bookshelf that needed assembling.” She leaned on the counter next to him, drawing in a long breath. “I felt awful calling the handyman on a Saturday morning.”

“I’ve never heard him complain,” he said with a shrug.

“He was awfully sweet.” A warm smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. A moment later, she glanced down at the blue envelope resting on the counter, and it fell. “Er…is that…my mail?”

He looked at it, then back up at her, and horror flared up in his gut as he fumbled for it and thrust it toward her. “Yes – ah, no – it was in my box. By mistake.”

“Oh.” She took it. “Oh shit…I must have told Coran the wrong unit.” She tapped it against her open palm, letting out a soft chuckle. “It’s probably a Home Depot gift card.”

“That’s…specific.”

“He promised me one when I moved out of his place. Said it was a better housewarming gift than fine china and made me promise to buy a fire extinguisher before I did any real cooking.” She winced. “I…suppose I already broke that promise.”

Did he even own a fire extinguisher? He certainly didn’t remember ever buying one. It did remind him of something though…

As she offered a polite goodbye and a quick wave, she turned to go, but Lotor reached for her. His hand almost landed on her shoulder before he thought better of it and pulled it away, just letting it brush her arm. “Allura-” She turned. “Ah…thank you. For the cupcakes.”

Her eyes lit up, making her entire face look so much brighter. “Oh,” she breathed. “Of course. I figured I had to thank you properly for helping me move in. And it gave me a reason to hurry up and stock my fridge anyway.” She blushed and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and Lotor’s stomach did an awkward little flip. “Honestly,” she said. “I couldn’t wait to start baking again. It helped me clear my head a bit after the move, so…”

She looked almost shy, and Lotor couldn’t for the life of him understand why she did. Baking was nothing to be shy about as far as he was concerned. Though…maybe it had more to do with the handyman. Honestly, he couldn’t blame her if it was. She’d said herself that she was stressed. Maybe she was looking for a different kind of stress relief other than baking.

 Plenty of people did that. It was normal, for a lot of them anyway.

“Are you blushing?” she asked, and he choked.

“N-no! It’s nothing. Just…a lot on my mind. Book and all.”

She smiled, warmly. “Right – I almost forgot. I was wondering, what exactly is it that you write anyway?”

Epic space elf erotica, Lotor thought. Then he said, “Sci-fi.”
Allura positively beamed. “Really?” Her voice was brimming with disbelief and excitement, her eyes sparkling. “That’s amazing! I grew up watching Star Trek. I adore Isaac Asimov – I remember reading *I, Robot* when I was in high school, and *Foundation* in college. And-“ She paused and bit her lip, a blush spreading across her cheeks. “Sorry… didn’t mean to start rambling…”

“No, please. Ramble as much as you like.” He couldn’t help but notice how well that excited smile suited her face. “I… hardly consider myself anywhere on the same level as Asimov, but…”

“Could I read one of your books sometime?” Allura asked excitedly, and Lotor forgot how to breathe. “How many have you written? Maybe I could track you down in the library.”

“You… you could certainly try.”

Liar. He knew perfectly well his books weren’t on the shelves of any public library. But he couldn’t decide which would be worse – watching Allura’s smile fade into disappointment, or having her find out how much he was starting to sweat.

But she gave him an enthusiastic nod. “I will! I’ll let you know what I think!” She was still smiling as she turned and headed back up the stairs, and Lotor offered a wave. When she was out of the sight, he let his forehead thump against the mailboxes.

“Ow.”

“Someone’s got a cru-uuush,” Ezor’s voice chimed, and he shot a long-suffering glance toward the doorway where he found her standing there with grocery bags piled up in her arms.

“Ezor,” he said, “if you use that ridiculous word one more time, I’m going to fold you up and shove you into my mailbox.”

She didn’t seem intimidated by his empty threat, and she hopped up on the counter. “You know, she really is pretty.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” he sighed, and he banged his head against the mailboxes again. “She likes Asimov.”

Ezor laughed and patted him on the shoulder. He resisted the urge to shrug her off. “Be still your poor nerd heart.”
I Have a Dream

Chapter Notes

Been meaning to post this all morning and now that AO3 is back up, here it is! :D

A little more spice in this chapter, so I went ahead and bumped the rating up a notch and added appropriate tags.

Allura sighed as hands traced down her ribs, her hips, her thighs, nails leaving gentle trails along her skin and leaving goosebumps in their wake. She moaned as hot breath puffed against her lower belly. Her entire body was electric, charged with so much energy she felt like she might explode, and she finally opened her eyes and looked down to meet a pair of sharp amber ones staring up at her from between her legs.

“Lotor…” she breathed. Her voice didn’t sound like her own – lower, rougher, trembling with desperation and arousal. Suddenly his mouth was on her, and it was hot, so hot that fire spread up her spine from where his tongue pressed against her clit. She let out a broken moan. “Oh god, Lotor…”

“That’s it, Allura…say my name.”

“Lotor…Lotor…Lotor…” His mouth was like magic, driving her higher and higher, tightening every muscle in her body like a guitar string until she was shaking, until she was teetering on the edge, about to burst-

Until she woke up.

Her eyes flew open and the ceiling greeted her. Mocking her. Her apartment was dark and silent except for the humming of her desk fan, her sheets were damp with sweat, and the ache between her legs made her press them together seeking some kind – any kind – of relief.

It didn’t help much. Or at all, really. She groaned as she fell back against the pillows.

She must be more pent up than she’d realized if she was fantasizing about her neighbor…Well, at least it wasn’t her gay handyman. Even in a dream, that would have made her feel like a homewrecker, and she’d never even met his boyfriend. Lotor though…why had his face popped up in her brain?

Not that he wasn’t nice to look at. And with a voice like butter too…maybe that was all her dream-self had needed. Now, though, her awake-self needed something else.

Biting her lip, she threw aside her sheets and hopped out of bed, going over to her bookshelf and kneeling in front of it. If she remembered right, she’d put the book on the bottom shelf, right corner, tucked out of the line of sight…Ah, perfect – it was right where she left it. She sighed as she brought it back to her bed and settled under the covers again.

Journey to Oriande – The Alliance Banner by L. Sincline. It was the second book in a (tragically unfinished) trilogy she’d discovered in the back of a secondhand book store back in graduate school. She had devoured the first two in a week, and even if the third was still nowhere to be found, she
had re-read them more times than she wanted to admit. A few times for the incredible story of two space elves from warring factions traveling the galaxy together and slowly growing from sworn enemies to friends to lovers as they searched for the mythical land of their ancestors. A few other times for reasons like this. Because the books were more erotic than anything she’d ever read in her life – hell, moreso than any real sexual experience she’d ever had.

She had her favorites bookmarked. Nobody could ever know that. She would be mortified enough if anyone ever knew she had this on her bookshelf at all.

But she didn’t have time for embarrassment right now. She was alone and hornier than she had any right to be, and she had more important things on her mind as she opened to one of her favorite scenes – the first time the space elves Arus and Drule finally consummated their fledgling love in the cockpit of their ship in orbit around a dying sun.

She couldn’t imagine a more romantic setting for a date. Dinner and a movie would never live up to this.

“You are stunning,” Drule breathed, his eyes gleaming with love and lust. They swirled together, melding into a fire so unquenchable that Arus could feel herself already being consumed. His hands wandered up her thighs, claws tracing up along her hip as his fangs teased her jawline. “Beautiful, delicious…my queen.”

Arus’ face was lit by the ruby glow of the star below, drawing out the soft blue flush high on her cheeks as Drule kissed a blazing trail down across the column of her neck and between her breasts. “Drule…” she moaned, her flesh quivering with need. “Take me…claim me.”

“No, love,” he replied with a wicked smirk. “I cannot claim you, for I am already yours. Now and forever.” He pulled her closer, letting her feel his desire hot and hard against her stomach. “But I would give myself to you – all of myself. If you would have me.”

She dragged her fingers through his hair, dragging him in for a hungry kiss. The points of his fangs against her tongue felt so exquisite that she couldn’t wait another second. “I would have you. Of course…”

When she lifted her hips and sank down onto him, stars exploded behind her eyes, and Drule’s long and shaking moan mixed with her own and sounded like music to her ears. The ridges of his cock were pure euphoria, dragging across her inner walls as she took him in, inch by blissful inch.

He growled against the crook of her neck. “My love, my Oriande…” His hips rolled up to meet hers, pushing the breath from her with every thrust, driving her pleasure higher and higher, until she thought she was going to burst from it.

“Drule,” she moaned. “Oh Drule…oh my stars, my prince-“

The book slipped from her hand, falling open on the carpet as she smothered a loud moan into the palm of her hand and finally came. Thank god. For a few perfect seconds she floated on her high before she came down again and collapsed against her damp sheets.

Not the most pleasant feeling, wet fabric against her skin. But she could deal with that later. After she had the chance to enjoy her afterglow for a few minutes.

She sighed as she wiped her hand on the sheet – they were going to need to be washed anyway, and there was nobody here to judge her – and glanced down at the book on the floor. God, she was so strung out that she’d finished before she’d even gotten halfway through the meat of the scene. At
least she was efficient. And she refused to dwell on the fact that a sex dream about her neighbor had been the cause of all this. There was no point. It didn’t mean anything. Nothing worth overthinking anyway. For now, she needed to settle back in and get a few more hours’ sleep before she had to get up and start getting ready for her first day at her new office.

That alone took up enough space in her mind without pondering whether Lotor’s tongue would actually feel that amazing against her-

No. Bad Allura.

She blew a half-hearted raspberry as she stared at the ceiling again. Satisfied now, at least physically, she managed a heavy sigh and looked over at the clock. 4AM. Plenty of time to get more sleep. And hopefully not have any more sex dreams. About anyone.

Or…

Her gaze trailed down to the carpet and rested on the book lying there. Or…she could always give her favorite book another read. For old times’ sake.

Lotor rubbed his eyes, but it didn’t do much to stop the words on the computer screen in front of him from blurring together. Sparse as they were. He’d barely made a few paragraphs of progress, and he was on the verge of erasing them anyway and cutting his losses.

Chapter five. Damn you, chapter five. Damn you to hell with the rest of the mediocre content he’d created the last few weeks.

He groaned as his phone buzzed. If it was Zethrid texting to complain about his pacing again, he would go downstairs and shove his phone down her throat. But it wasn’t Zethrid’s contact picture that lit up the screen.

Acxa – 4:54 AM
>> Why are you still awake?

He raised an eyebrow, haphazardly cleaning his glasses on his shirt before he typed out a reply:

Me – 4:54 AM
<< I could ask you the same thing.
<< How did you know anyway?

Acxa – 4:55 AM
>> Spotify. I sent you that workout playlist a while back, remember? It shows you’re online.
>> Please learn to start a private session btw. I don’t need to know that you’ve been listening to Lourde for the last hour.

Me – 4:55 AM
<< I’ll listen to whatever I damn well please.

Acxa – 4:55 AM
>> And I have an early shift. Those poor drunks aren’t going to stitch themselves up. :P

There was something charming about seeing Acxa use an emoji. Especially one that seemed so…bubbly. It wasn’t a word – or an emoji – he would have ever used to describe her.

He dropped his phone on the desk next to his laptop before opening Spotify and switching over to a
private session. Acxa chastising him for his music tastes wasn’t going to help his writer’s block, but maybe some Florence and the Machine would. She never failed to get his creative juices flowing.

Acxa – 4:59 AM
>> Ezor told me you have a crush on some new woman living in the apartment.

Lotor slouched over his desk, head thumping on his keyboard and leaving a string of R’s on his screen in its wake. “Of course she did…” he sighed.

Me – 5:00 AM
<< I have a new neighbor, but there’s no crush.

Acxa – 5:00 AM
>> Ezor says she’s pretty.

Me – 5:00 AM
<< She likes Isaac Asimov.

He wasn’t quite sure why he’d sent that. Ezor had probably already told her about what had happened by the mailboxes anyway, and even if she hadn’t, it wasn’t like it was important. But for some reason he felt like she needed to know. Like he needed someone else to find it – and her – just as inexplicably fascinating as he did.

It had to be normal…right?

Acxa – 5:02 AM
>> Neeeeerd.

He rolled his eyes and tossed his phone across the room to his bed. He needed to focus anyway, and she wasn’t helping.

Unfortunately, even after another hour of trying to force out a workable plot, neither was Florence and the Machine.

He had two options – get up and try to get his mind off of the two piss-poor paragraphs that were taking up space on his screen, or throw his laptop out a window. And with barely enough money in his checking account for a week’s worth of cheap groceries and his Netflix subscription – let alone rent – the latter was hardly an option at all. So he stalked out into the hallway to watch the sunrise from the window at the end of the corridor. For the third time in a week.

God, he hated this damn view. He hated the feeling of scuffed wood under his bare feet, hated the way the cobwebs brushed against his elbows as he leaned against the sill, hated the way his breath fogged up the glass. He hated the road that ran along the side of the building below him, and the traffic light at the corner that seemed to always be stuck on red, and the office building across the street that had been up for lease for the past year and a half.

He hated his damn book. And he hated that he hated it. He hated the fact that he could remember so vividly a time when writing was a pleasure.

He let his nose press against the glass, leaving a greasy imprint. Damn that book. Damn Arus and Drule for being so difficult. Damn Oriande. Damn the Lifegivers and the quintessence and every other plot device he had ever thought up. Damn them all for keeping him up at night.

A door unlocked and opened behind him, but he didn’t even bother to glance over his shoulder before a familiar voice began to mutter: “Keys…wallet…phone…lunch…” A sigh. “Tampons…”
The door closed and keys jingled before he heard the sound of them clattering on the floor. 
“Damnit.”

He turned to look at Allura as she bent down and grabbed her keys, and he couldn’t seem to look away. She looked like a completely different person than the one she’d seen in the hallway and by the mailboxes – no messy bun or old T-shirt or faded jeans, but instead dressed in rose-colored blouse and cream pencil skirt, with heels high enough that she could have used them as an impromptu murder weapon in a pinch. Her hair was still pulled back, but in a tight ponytail without a single strand out of place.

She locked eyes with him as she straightened up, flawless mascara accentuating the surprise that flashed across her face. “Oh!” she said softly, clutching her keys in one hand. “Lotor – I didn’t expect to see you here so early…Did I wake you up?”

He blinked and forced his mouth closed. “No – no, I was never asleep.” Concern flashed across her face. Damn, now he’d made her worry. About him of all people. He flashed her a placating smile. “I’ve always had an…erratic sleep schedule. Are you…going to work?”

She smiled, reaching up to tuck away a strand of hair that wasn’t there to tuck. “First day. Um…this may sound odd, but…do you think this blouse looks alright? I wasn’t sure if it went with the skirt.”

Somehow, it brought an easy smile to his own face too. “You look stunning.” God, had he really just used the word stunning to describe a work ensemble? “Ah – very professional,” he added.

“Thank you,” she breathed. The words seemed more genuine than he’d ever heard them, filled with relief, but still tinged with anxiety. Was she really so nervous? “I feel so ridiculous. I could barely sleep last night, and I woke up at four and figured I may as well just get up and start my day. I thought it would take me longer to get ready, but I didn’t see much point in sitting around fidgeting.”

“Better early than late,” he offered.

“Two hours early may be a little much.” She let out a half-formed laugh. “But I can always stop for coffee and take some time to look around the office before I start. Plenty of things to do to kill time.”

The way she spoke made it seem like she was trying to convince herself as much as she was him.

“Allura,” he said, barely realizing he was doing it. “You’ll do wonderfully. I’m sure.”

She stared at him, blinking, sunlight spilling over his shoulder and tinting her face and hair an orangish pink. A blush slowly spread across her cheeks, and Lotor’s gut twisted into a tight knot. Why had he said that? What the hell had come over him? Here he was, standing out in the hallway at six in the morning, probably looking like a trainwreck, giving a woman who barely knew him the world’s most pitiful pep talk. What was wrong with-

“Thank you,” she said, and when he glanced at her again, her eyes were shimmering. Watering. But she was smiling at him anyway. “Thank you so much, Lotor. I know it sounds silly, but it…it means so much…to hear that.”

She shook her head, taking a deep breath, and draping her purse over her shoulder. “Anyway, I should get going.” She laughed. “Don’t want to be late!”

She turned on one pointed heel and headed for the stairs, her shoes click-clacking on the scuffed floor as she went. She carried herself tall, with newfound confidence, her hair swaying behind her squared shoulders with every step.
Lotor went back into his apartment and threw himself into bed, falling asleep as the sun streamed in through his bedroom window.
Sorry for the slightly longer wait! I'm working on about 4 different things at the moment, so thank you for being patient. :)

Chocolate.

Allura wanted – needed – chocolate. Now. She didn’t care that it was almost time for dinner. Or that she had everything she needed to make brownies at home. She’d been nervous enough about her first day at work without her damn period making things worse, and now that she had managed to survive her first two days without bleeding through her skirt, she wanted to find the biggest chocolate bar in the store and eat it in one sitting on her couch.

She lived alone after all – only God could judge her.

Sweatpants and tennis shoes had never felt so comfortable after an entire eight hours in a pencil skirt and heels. Even the walk to the corner store had been pleasant enough, despite the heat, now that she didn’t have an extra layer of makeup to sweat off. She browsed the candy aisle comfortably bare-faced, finally settling on a Toblerone before starting to make her way to the checkout.

“Why do you eat these things?” someone asked the next aisle over. And the voice sounded familiar.

“Don’t judge my snack choices,” said another, and she swore she’d heard that voice somewhere too, but she couldn’t place where. “Who doesn’t like flaming hot Cheetos?”

“The regular ones are perfectly good – why mess with a good thing?”

“Same reason I put Sriracha on everything, Shiro. Some of us like a little kick.”

She glanced over the shelf and saw him – Shiro, hunched over a bag of Cheetos (flaming hot Cheetos to be precise) before the other man with him snatched them away. The other one was shorter, leaner, with longer black hair and an indignant expression that softened as Shiro laughed.

“Alright,” Shiro said, nudging his companion softly. “Get your spicy snacks.” He dropped his voice a little lower. “Just…wash your hands after you eat them this time. I don’t want spicy Cheeto dust on my-”

“Shiro?” Allura called, and both of them spun around so quickly they almost knocked over the shelf. She smiled. “I thought that was you.”

“P-princess!” His face had gone a little pink, and the other man was already rushing down the aisle to inspect the sodas. Shiro mirrored her smile. “Hey…I didn’t see you.” The flush in his face slowly receded as he scratched his neck. “How’s the shower? Still working alright?”

“Perfect, thanks.” She carefully stepped around the shelf, tucking the Toblerone behind her back. No need to advertise to the world just how badly she needed a twelve ounce chocolate bar to herself.

“Thanks to you I was able to start my new job smelling fresh instead of like a sweaty mess.”

“Stuff like that makes my job worthwhile,” Shiro laughed. As he spoke, the man from earlier made
his way back over with a bottle of Powerade tucked under one arm. “Oh – hey Keith, this is Allura. That tenant I was telling you about.”

The man looked her over – he looked a little younger than Shiro, but not by much, and he studied Allura with an expression that wasn’t quite a frown, but far from a smile. He seemed almost pensive, but when Shiro gently put a hand on his back, his features visibly softened. “This is Keith,” Shiro said.

“Boyfriend, right?” Allura asked, and finally, Keith smiled, albeit a little hesitantly.

“Last time I checked,” he told her. He held out a hand, which she took. “Hey.”

He seemed shy at first, but his grip was firm. He closed the distance between himself and Shiro as he pulled his hand away again, like the contact grounded him, and Shiro wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “You two make a cute couple,” Allura found herself saying before she could help it, and a rosy blush spread across Keith’s cheeks.

“Yeah,” Shiro laughed, “I think so too!”

“God, you’re cheesy sometimes,” Keith groaned. “Gimme my Cheetos already – I’m gonna go check out.”

Shiro dutifully handed them over, and Keith tossed a quick goodbye and a wave over his shoulder as he headed for the register. Shiro watched him go, a fond little smile still stretching his lips. “It takes him a little bit to warm up sometimes.” His tone wasn’t apologetic – he sounded downright enamored. “Anyway, it’s nice to see you. Hope you don’t have to call me anytime in the near future, but maybe I’ll see you around.”

“Right – I still haven’t forgotten your muffins.”

His face lit up at that. “You’re actually making those? I thought you were just kidding.”

“I never kid about muffins,” she said, keeping her expression as serious as she could make it. Which wasn’t very serious at all, honestly. She had spent too much of her day being serious to manage it well right now. “Maybe…this Friday. You could come over for dinner if you like. Both of you.”

Shiro’s eyebrows arched. “Really?”

“Well, dinner will probably be frozen pizza…I’m not very much of a cook. But I’ll make the muffins from scratch.” She hoped it was a tempting enough offer, even if she couldn’t offer them much in the way of a home-cooked meal. Muffins would have to do.

“That sounds great, actually,” Shiro said, grinning from ear to ear. “Let me know if you have any other furniture that needs building – I can bring my power drill.”

That got her to laugh, and her smile stayed fixed in place as she shamelessly bought her chocolate and headed down the road toward the apartment. Maybe she could manage to make a few friends in this new place after all.

First, though, she had a couple of episodes of *Downton Abbey* to watch and a chocolate bar to destroy.

The week flew by, which Allura had never been more thankful for in her life. She didn’t dislike the job – her father had been right when he’d said she would be more than qualified for the position –
but the first week was a whirlwind of introductions, meetings, paperwork, and training. Most of it reading. Most of it dry. Her team seemed like a good one, eager to work and good at what they did, but she couldn’t help but wonder if people treated her so well because of her father’s position.

She knew what it looked like: the daughter of the company president taking a position just a few years after graduating, taking over a team of people who were all older than she was herself. She wouldn’t blame anyone for having doubts, or even for spreading rumors. She’d expected that much, even if she had applied and interviewed just like everyone else.

She was more than qualified. She knew it. Her father knew it. And soon, if they didn’t already, her co-workers would know it too.

But it could wait until the next week. For now, she was focused on more important things. Muffins, to be exact. A promise was a promise, after all, and she intended to deliver. She was just pulling them out of the oven and putting the pizza in when there was a knock on her door.

“I smell gingerbread,” she heard Shiro muse, his voice radiating excitement.

“Cardamom,” Keith said as she reached for the doorknob. “That’s cardamom.”

“Really?”

Allura was already smiling as she opened the door. “He’s right,” she said. “It is cardamom.”

Keith looked started only for a moment before he grinned, nudging Shiro in the ribs. “See?”

“All right, I admit it – your nose is better than mine.” He was beaming as he looked at her, teeth glinting in the low evening light as he scratched the back of his neck. She swore she heard his stomach growl from across the threshold. “I still can’t believe you made good on your promise – you might be the first tenant to pay me back for a few quick repairs with a home-cooked meal.”

“I don’t know if I’d call Digiorno home-cooked,” she sighed. “But it’s…something. It’s a small price to pay for a working shower.”

She fought hard to tamp down the tendril of anxiety that curled in the pit of her stomach as she welcomed them in. It was a strange feeling, having guests – real guests, not just someone here to fix her appliances – for the first time since she’d finished unpacking. Her apartment still felt sparse and unwelcoming, especially when she was faced with the conundrum of figuring out where everyone could sit. She only had two dining room chairs, and her couch was just big enough for two people to sit comfortably – three if they really wanted to get to know each other.

She got around it by making herself look busy in the kitchen – checking the pizza when she knew the cheese hadn’t even melted yet and studying her fridge like there was anything in it more fascinating than a half-full bottle of diet Pepsi and a few apples. When she turned around to offer them some mostly flat soda, Keith was already tugging Shiro down to sit next to him on the couch. They sat so close together that there was almost an entire cushion’s worth of space still beside them, their hands discretely folded together between their bodies.

“Sorry,” she said with an apologetic smile. “Still not quite settled in…it’s still a little…spartan.”

“I think it’s nice,” Keith said, and Shiro laughed.

“You should have seen our place.” He nudged Keith with one leg, smirking as he did it. “If it weren’t for me, Keith probably still be living out of boxes in an empty apartment.”
Keith pouted and nudged him right back, a little harder, but it only made Shiro’s smile even brighter. “So I didn’t move in with a million house plants – sue me. We can’t all dream of living inside an issue of Better Homes and Gardens.”

“You like my house plants,” Shiro giggled.

“I never said I didn’t like them.”

The edge of a smile was pulling at Keith’s mouth as Allura leaned back on the counter. “So,” she sighed, “Shiro told me you two met in college, right?”

A blush spread across Keith’s face, turning his cheeks and the bridge of his nose pink before he answered: “Ah…yeah. In my intro to engineering class sophomore year.” He took the soda that Allura offered him and took a long sip of it before clearing his throat and adding, “Shiro was the T.A.”

“First year in grad school,” Shiro said fondly. “Never thought I’d fall for a sophomore.”

“You went to graduate school?” Allura asked before she could stop herself, and Shiro shrugged.

He flashed her a knowing grin. “Not what you’d think from a guy who fixes showers for a living right?”

“N-no! I didn’t mean-”

“He’s messing with you,” Keith told her.

Shiro was already guffawing, leaning against the arm of the couch. “It’s okay, I swear. I didn’t even graduate.” He shrugged. “All that research…it wasn’t for me. I had always been good at working with my hands and I was happier doing that anyway.” He let his arms rest on the back of the couch, one finger playfully poking Keith in the shoulder. “I got a boyfriend out of it, so it wasn’t a total loss.”

“You failed me for my midterm before you dropped out,” Keith said coolly.

“You’re paper was a week late,” Shiro fired back. “And you still passed the class – plus I made it up to you with dinner.”

Yeah, two semesters later.”

It made Allura feel light and warm, watching them like this. Keith was a little more quiet than Shiro was, but as the evening wore on and all three of them talked, he seemed to morph into a completely different person. By the time they sat down to eat – pulling the ottoman up to the table as a makeshift third dining chair – he had managed to rope Allura into a heated discussion about the Star Trek movie reboots that lasted so long that their food got cold. He laughed brightly as Shiro told the story of their disastrous first date when a blown head gasket in Shiro’s old car had left them stranded in a Denny’s at two in the morning. By the end of dinner, he was insisting that Shiro arm wrestle him for the last slice of pizza.

Shiro won, but surreptitiously cut the piece in two and slid the larger half onto Keith’s plate anyway. And as Allura watched, she couldn’t help but feel a tiny pang of jealousy – not because she wanted Shiro, but because she wanted…well, just someone.

It was the kind of easy, playful, happy relationship that she had craved for a long time, and yet somehow she forgot just how much she wanted it. Other things had always been more important: her
education, her job, her apartment – all things she was proud of, things she didn’t regret leaning into.

But now…was it selfish of her to have accomplished so much and still want more?

She let out sigh as she stood up with a wide smile. “Well, I don’t know if they’re still warm, but-“

“Oh yeah, those gingerbread muffins,” Shiro said, his eyes lighting up.

“Cardamom,” Keith told him.

Allura set them down on the table. “Cardamom and banana, actually.” She let herself revel for a moment or two in the pride that welled up in her chest as Keith and Shiro both stared at the basket with wide eyes and watering mouths. “It was my mother’s recipe…she always put so many walnuts in them I’d be picking them out of my teeth for hours after. But they were always so heavenly I never minded.”

Shiro and Keith dug in eagerly, Keith smearing crumbs all over his face as he took a huge bite and hummed in appreciation. Meanwhile, Shiro threw his head back and let out a loud moan. “Oh my god…Allura, that’s amazing.”

Keith snorted. “You wanna take your sex moans somewhere else?”

“No.”

“I’m just glad you like them,” Allura giggled, feeling lighter than air. Despite all that pizza. “Take the rest home. Consider it payment for the shower and any light bulbs I might need changed in the future.”

Shiro laughed so hard he almost choked.

Lotor couldn’t believe he was doing this.

He’d gone to the store for toilet paper and dish soap. It had been a normal, thoroughly boring trip, and he’d planned for it to end with him coming back to his apartment for an even more thoroughly boring night at home. But then he’d seen it – sticking out of the five dollar bargain DVD bin by the checkout line: Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan.

He didn’t believe in signs from the universe, but something in him told him – insisted – that he buy it. So here he was, standing outside of Allura’s door with the DVD in one hand and the other poised to knock. Like it had been for the last minute and a half.

She loved Asimov and Star Trek. She made the best cupcakes Lotor had ever had in his life. Her eyes lit up when she laughed, and she her nose wrinkled when she cursed, and – dammit all – she was pretty. He would have had to be blind not to recognize that.

So could he help that he wanted to spend a little more time getting to know her? It didn’t have to be a date, no matter what Ezor kept telling him. It could just be a movie. And no matter what it was, it was better than sitting in his apartment stewing over how little of his book he had managed to write in the past month.

He took a breath and was about to knock when-

“Oh my god…Allura, that’s amazing.”

He froze – he knew that voice. The handyman. Shiro. With the biceps. And it sounded like he was…
thoroughly enjoying himself. How, Lotor didn’t want to picture. *Especially* when he swore he could hear Allura giggling a moment later.

His face flushed so hot that he could barely stand it. Of *course* it was Shiro. Who in their right mind wouldn’t jump on an opportunity to spend the night with him? Whatever it was they were doing, it had to be more fun than sitting around watching Star Trek with a barely-functioning barely-writer from down the hall.

Maybe it was better that way. Allura barely knew him. All he’d done since she’d moved in was wake her up with his music, accidentally flash her and steal her mail. Why the hell would she ever want to sit around with him when she could spend time with the world’s most ripped handyman? He couldn’t blame her for that.

At least the movie had only been five dollars, and he had the receipt still sitting on his kitchen counter. Reasonably, it was hardly a loss at all.

Still, he couldn’t help but feel like it was.
Lotor could feel Acxa’s eyes on him before she said a single word. She had a tendency to loom like that, staring intently until he could feel her judging him from across the room. Or in this case, from behind the couch.

“Are you going to help or not?” she asked, and he finally opened his eyes with a sigh just a second before she dropped a box into his lap.

“Oof.”

“Not like you’re using it.” He shot her a glare as he sat up. Luckily for him, the box was full of nothing but winter clothes. “Those need to go in the hall closet. And don’t just shove the whole box in the back. There are hangers in there for a reason.”

“Go easy on him,” Ezor called as she leaned around the corner from the kitchen. “He just got his heart broken.”

“I did not,” he insisted, and just to prove his point he stood up, marched the box over to the hall closet and threw the door open. “Was I hoping to spend more time with her? Yes. Was it mortifying hearing her…do whatever it was she was doing with someone else? Absolutely. But I’m not heartbroken.” He got to work taking his frustrations out on a tangled bunch of scarves.

Axca groaned. “Damn those thin walls…I don’t think I got a single good night’s sleep while we lived in that old place. I could always hear our neighbors singing in the shower at five in the morning.”

“You lived next to us,” Zethrid reminded her.

“Exactly.”

Ezor pouted. “Did she ever mention having a boyfriend or something?”

“I never asked,” Lotor insisted as he shoved a folded stack of scarves into the back corner of the closet and turned his attention to a few musty coats that looked like they hadn’t seen daylight since the last ice age. “And I’m pretty sure he wasn’t her boyfriend - she hasn’t known him long enough.”

“How do you know that?”

“It doesn’t matter.” He pulled a single knit cap out of the bottom of the box and waved it in front of Acxa’s face inquiringly until she took it from him and tossed it on top of the scarves. “Besides, I don’t care who she spends time with. It’s none of my business.”

Axca was quiet as she folded the box flat and added it to the growing pile by the door. They’d been at this almost an hour, lured by the promise of a home-cooked meal and the knowledge that Acxa
would hold it over their heads for months if they didn’t come to help her unpack. Of course she had they only needed to help unpack the kitchen, not the entire damn first floor.

“You know,” she said, “I never figured you as the type to get so bent out of shape over some woman moving in next door to you.”

Lotor let out a long and exhausted sigh. “Don’t start – I’ve had enough of Ezor insisting that I have a ridiculous crush. I don’t need it from you too.”

“Well…” she offered, crossing her arms. “Maybe you do.” She said it like it was the simplest thing in the world. Like it was easy. The moment he opened his mouth to argue, she added, “If you try and tell me you don’t get crushes, you’re not getting dinner.”

He closed his mouth again.

“Wow,” Ezor mused, “I think he’s actually speechless!”

Lotor shook his head, intently studying his handiwork instead of looking back at her. “Acxa,” he said carefully, “I barely know her. It’s not that I want to date her or…or sleep with her. I just…she…she’s interesting, alright?”

“She’s a sci-fi fan,” Zethrid said.

“And she bakes cupcakes!” Ezor added. “Best I’ve ever tasted!”

“And she’s clever,” Lotor said. “Intelligent, funny, confident. I’m interested in her. Not romantically – at least…at least I don’t think so.” He rubbed his forehead. God, all of this was starting to give him a headache.

This wasn’t a romantic sort of attraction, was it? He’d described the feeling on paper plenty of times: sweaty palms, a racing heart, butterflies in the stomach. He knew what it was supposed to feel like, but in practice it was all so much murkier. Like the words were blurred on the page and he couldn’t quite read them, even if he knew the gist of what they were trying to get across.

He wanted to learn about her. Wanted to know about her family and her hobbies and her favorite books. He wanted to know if she preferred Picard or Kirk, what her favorite recipes were, what she thought of his books…

That last one did make his stomach flip, but he didn’t think it had to do with any sort of crush, if there was one. What would he do with himself if his neighbor found out how he made his meager living?

“Wow,” Acxa finally said, and when he looked up at her, her eyes were wide with awe as she stared at him. “You’re…blushing.”

His hand flew to his face, like he was trying to feel the flush creeping across his cheeks. “What?”

“You are!” Ezor proclaimed, sounding delighted. “You’re totally blushing!”

He stumbled backward, ramming his shoulder into the closet door as he rushed toward the hall. “I… I’m going to go help Narti,” he choked, praying they couldn’t see just how much hotter his cheeks were getting by the second as he fled up the stairs.

Judging by how loudly Ezor was still laughing, he was pretty sure they could tell anyway.
He found Narti in the upstairs bathroom, (blessedly) quietly hanging a shower curtain. She barely glanced over her shoulder when he came in, but quirked one eyebrow as he leaned against the doorframe. “I needed a break from Ezor,” he said, his forehead still pressed against the wood, and she nodded sagely. “Can I at least act like I’m helping? I could use a little bit of quiet.”

She shrugged, deftly hooking two more curtain hooks on the rod above her before signing, *I’m good at quiet.*

He let out a soft laugh. “Yes, that’s a relief.” He knelt next to the sink, studying a box of soaps and towels that were still sitting there waiting to be put away. Narti glanced at him and nodded at the closet to her left, and he dutifully carried to box over and started unloading it. “If I tell you something,” he sighed, “Can you keep it a secret?”

She looked at him for a long moment before hanging the last ring. She signed, *I’m good at secrets too.*

Lotor put the last stack of towels into the closet and dropped the empty box on the edge of the sink. He pulled in a deep breath. “I think…I may have a…crush.”

She blinked, her expression unreadable before she finally smiled. *As long as it’s not Acxa,* she signed. *She’s mine.*

“No,” he chuckled, relief flooding through him. “No, definitely not. Not anyone you know.” He groaned as he sat down on the lip of the tub, watching her unfold the shower curtain. “I’m not even sure it is a crush. I’ve never been sure.” He toyed with his hair – a terrible habit he’d tried and failed plenty of times to break, but he needed something to do with his hands. “I don’t even know her that well. I want to, but…but I’m not even sure where I want it to go.”

*Friends?* she signed.

“Yes.” He stood up when she shooed him out of the way to start hanging the curtain. “And…and maybe something else too. God, how the hell do people tell?”

Narti shrugged, but with her hands busy with the curtain, she didn’t say anything more.

Lotor leaned against the sink, wanting to curl up under it and disappear. Not forever, but at least long enough to get his thoughts in order again. “What the hell am I supposed to do?” he asked in a small voice. “If it is a…a crush. What do I…do with it?”

Narti’s breath puffed out of her nose in what sounded like a laugh. She let go of the curtain just long enough to sign, *Dinner is a good start.*

“You say that like it’s easy,” he groaned.

*Movie?* She offered. *Less talking.*

“I want to talk to her.”

Narti rolled her eyes and went back to hanging the curtain. Alright, so maybe he was being picky. But how was he supposed to know the right thing to do – everyone seemed to think it was so easy, but really that was the furthest thing from the truth. “Besides,” he added, “I think she’s been…spending time with someone else anyway. It wouldn’t be right for me to…” He sighed. “…insert myself.”

Narti arched an eyebrow at him as she hung the curtain on the last ring and sat down on the tub.
Who? She signed.

God, why did he have to relive this again? Thinking of that voice, those moans…it made his stomach turn. “The handyman,” he said. “Shiro. Big muscles. Deep voice. Tattoos. You remember him?”

Narti’s face was unreadable. She blinked at him, her mouth hanging slightly open in shock. She raised her hands to sign something, but lowered them again before stepping toward him and grabbing his sleeve. He barely had a moment to protest before she was dragging him down the hall.

“What the hell-“ he managed to get out before Narti pushed him back into the living room, and all eyes were on him. “Narti, what-“

She jabbed him in the ribs, gesturing toward Acxa encouragingly. Tell her, she signed insistently.

“What?”

What you just told me.

“Uh…Narti,” Acxa asked, eyes darting between Lotor and her fiancée. “Did you…get the shower curtain up?”

Narti just signed again, more harshly, Tell. Her.

“Tell me what?”

“The…person Allura was…with the other day?” Lotor offered helplessly, and Narti gave him a deep nod. “Ah…it’s…Shiro. The handyman?”

Silence dragged on, all four of them staring at Lotor with wide eyes. It was finally broken, after a painfully long time, by Ezor. Muffling a snort into the palm of her hand. Zethrid followed, then finally Acxa, until all three of them – and Narti too, leaning on the back of the couch with a wide grin – were laughing uncontrollably.

“What?” Lotor insisted, his face flushing hot. “What are you-“

“Lotor,” Acxa gasped, pressing a hand against the wall for support as she wiped away a tear. “Shiro – he’s gay.”

Lotor blinked. “He…is?”

“Yes.”

“Super gay,” Ezor said.

“He has a boyfriend,” Zethrid added.

Acxa drew in a long breath, looking downright delighted. “How did you not know? How long have you lived there again? You never figured that out?”

“I…” The words felt like molasses in his mouth, sticky and clumsy and slow to come. “I…guess I never…asked.”

“Lotor.” Acxa’s hand landed on his shoulder, her smile stretching brightly across her face. At least she wasn’t sobbing with laughter like Ezor and Zethrid, who had all but collapsed in a pile by the door. “I don’t know what Allura was doing with him, but I promise you…it’s not what you think.” She lightly tapped the side of his head. “So go ask the woman to dinner or something already.”
Allura’s eyes were fixed on the paper in her hands, her brow creased as she studied it. She’d been mulling it over for almost ten minutes now, but she couldn’t rush her decision – not when it was so important. She had managed to narrow it down, at least, but now came the most difficult part. She had to choose.

Chicken lo mein or beef and broccoli…it wasn’t an easy, but she had to choose.

She barely registered the knock on her door, and she pulled herself up from the dining room table and headed over to answer it with the menu still clutched in one hand. But when she opened the door, thoughts of her dinner fled from her mind.

She blinked. “Lotor.”

“Ah.” He stared at her, like he was surprised to see her. Like he had forgotten she lived here. “Ah… hello.”

“Hello.”

Silence dragged on between them. And dragged…

“Uh…do you need something?” she asked, and his eyes widened a bit, the tiniest hint of a blush creeping across his cheeks.

“Oh – yes!” He swallowed. “I was wondering…what you’re doing tonight?”

“Ordering Chinese food,” she said with a small smile, glancing down at the menu. Chicken lo mein sounded perfect the more she thought about it…

He was fidgeting, fingertips tapping against something in his hands. Like he was nervous. But what reason on Earth did he have to be nervous? “I… I was at the store,” he said, his eyes locked on his own hands and the object in it. It looked like a… DVD? “And I noticed a movie in the clearance bin, and I thought you might like it so I bought it and I was wondering if maybe you would like to… watch it. Together. Tonight.”

“Oh,” she said.

“Unless – unless you have plans.”

She smiled. “Nothing besides chicken lo mein.” Well, that was one decision made. “What movie did you find?” Wordlessly, he handed it over, and she gasped. “Wrath of Khan?” She tossed the Chinese food menu onto her bookshelf, beaming. “What idiot with poor taste put this in a clearance bin?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Lotor said with a small smile and what sounded like a sigh. His shoulders relaxed, his fidgeting stopped, and he looked at her expectantly. “The last thing I want is to interrupt your… dinner plans.”

“Oh,” she said.

“Unless – unless you have plans.”

She smiled. “Nothing besides chicken lo mein.” Well, that was one decision made. “What movie did you find?” Wordlessly, he handed it over, and she gasped. “Wrath of Khan?” She tossed the Chinese food menu onto her bookshelf, beaming. “What idiot with poor taste put this in a clearance bin?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Lotor said with a small smile and what sounded like a sigh. His shoulders relaxed, his fidgeting stopped, and he looked at her expectantly. “The last thing I want is to interrupt your… dinner plans.”

“Please, I’d love to do something with my Saturday night besides eating lo mein by myself,” she laughed. “Are you hungry? I haven’t ordered yet. Why don’t you get something too?”

He shuffled his feet a bit, biting his lip. “I would, but… not much disposable income at the moment.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She tapped him on the shoulder – was that his biceps she felt? – and grinned at him. “It’s my treat. You brought the movie. It’s only fair.”

A rosy pink tint spread even farther across his cheeks, all the way to the tips of his ears where they
poked out from underneath his hair, and Allura couldn’t help but note just how…cute it was. “Oh,” he said, his lips forming a soft ring around the word as his eyebrows arched, and then a sweet smile began to stretch across his face. “Well…right. If you want.”

“I do.” She let her hand trail down his arm and her fingers hook around his wrist. “Come on in – I still need to hook up my DVD player, so why don’t you pick out what you want from the menu? Anything you want, as long as you can decide quickly. I’m starving.”

His smile was genuine and warm. It suited his face, made him look so much lighter. She glanced back at him as he sat down on the sofa and studied the menu, watched as his brow creased and he rubbed one finger against his chin. His lip was lightly caught between his teeth, one leg crossed neatly across his other knee, his thumb stroking back and forth against back of the menu. It made him look distinguished in a way – moreso than he should have for someone studying a Chinese food menu. But she couldn’t quite look away. He was…nice to look at.

“Crab rangoon and vegetable fried rice,” he finally said, snapping her out of her semi-trance and making her painfully aware of just how long she’d been staring.

“If that’s alright with you.”

“Allura said, and damn – why had she gotten so breathless all of a sudden? She smiled, shaking the feeling off and reaching for her phone. “Sounds perfect.”

Once the food was ordered and the movie was DVD player was finally hooked up to the TV, Allura collapsed onto the couch with a sigh, drawing her feet underneath her body and curling up against the throw pillows. Lotor sat almost rigidly, like he was afraid he’d break something if he relaxed too much. She nudged him with her knee. “Are you alright?”

“Oh-“ He jumped a bit, looking over at her and letting out a breath. “Yes, fine…just…thinking is all.”

“About your book?” He stiffened a little, and she winced. “Sorry, is it…not going well?”

He offered her a placating smile. “It’s going…slowly. Which isn’t ideal. But I needed a break.”

“Ah, so coming over with my one of my favorite movies was purely selfish, hm?”

“Completely,” he said, and she giggled. His smile warmed up a bit. “I didn’t realize it was your favorite.”

“Certainly among the best of the Star Trek movies. The classic ones anyway – I don’t think I’ll have the mental energy to get into another debate about the reboots after the one I got into with Keith last night.”

He blinked at her. “Keith?”

“Oh, Shiro – you must know him, right? He’s the handyman.” Lotor seemed to fidget a bit in his seat. “Keith’s his boyfriend – very sweet, but a little…introspective. At least at first.” She laughed. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone get so worked up about a movie franchise before, but it was kind of refreshing to get into it. I can’t exactly debate the Star Trek canon with my coworkers.”

“Can’t you?” Lotor offered.

“No until I get to know them better at least. It’s not exactly the environment for…spirited talks about science fiction.” She let out a long sigh. “And I don’t want to give them any reason to doubt my professionalism so early on…”
Concern flashed across his face. “Why on earth would they doubt your professionalism?”

Allura bit back a bitter laugh. “How would you feel if the president of the company you work for, and have worked for for years, announced that the new head of the marketing department is his own daughter?” she asked, and Lotor blinked at her.

Slowly, realization seeped in. “Oh…”

“Oh is right.” She crossed her arms, like that could shield her from the wave of frustration that rolled through her, just like it did anytime she thought about the way everyone looked at her at work. She knew what they thought of her, and she was sure they knew she knew. “I’m more than qualified. I applied and interviewed the same as anyone else. I know my father – and I know he wouldn’t have hired me if I wasn’t the right person for the job. I know I am…”

A moment later, she felt warmth on her arm, and she glanced over to see Lotor’s hand pressed against her skin, so gently that the touch was barely there at all. “I’m sure you are,” he said, gazing at her intently. “Allura – I don’t… I don’t know you very well yet. But I can already tell that you’re kind and intelligent and sincere. And I’m sure you’ll prove yourself to all of them in due time, even if it’s unfair that you have to…”

She stared at him, heat creeping across her cheeks, and just a moment later his words seemed to catch up with him and he pulled his hand away. But she smiled. “You’re so sweet,” she found herself saying. “And you know…I’m sure your new book will be fantastic.”

Her fingertips brushed the sleeve of his shirt just as the doorbell rang, and she pulled her hand away as she stood up. “But for now, I’m starving, and I don’t want to think about work. But you may want to find some tissues, because I always cry when Spock dies, and I don’t think that’s going to change anytime soon…”

Lotor let out a small laugh. “Very forward-thinking of you.”

It certainly did turn out to be, because at least it saved her the indignity of crying into her lo mein an hour and a half later.
Real talk for a second: I know I’m bad at replying to comments, but thank you so much for all of the warm responses you’ve left on this fic. This thing really is my creative happy place right now, and it means so much to know that everyone is enjoying it. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Another week passed by in a blur.

Allura was thankful for that in some ways and annoyed in others. She preferred being busy to stagnant any day, but by the time she made it home she barely had enough energy to kick off her shoes and microwave sometime for dinner before passing out in bed. Between her early morning jogs and 8 A.M. meetings once a week at the office, she didn’t get the chance to sleep in, and more often than not she got up before sunrise, not to mention before any of her neighbors.

It made the weekend come quickly, but it didn’t leave much time to socialize. She was comfortably settling into her new routine, at least. Maybe it would get easier with time.

Today, though, it was Saturday, and she woke up with a smile. It was a day that she’d been looking forward to for weeks now. She hopped out of bed, energy carrying her all the way through cleaning her apartment from top to bottom, and by noon she got to work gathering all the ingredients she needed for the cookie recipe she had stuck up on her fridge. Flour, salt, eggs, chocolate chips, walnuts…

Sugar. Where the hell was the sugar? “Shit…shit!” Had she really forgotten it? There was no way. She’d used the last of it to make those muffins the weekend before and now there was nothing but barely a few tablespoons left in her pantry.

She groaned. There was only forty-five minutes before she had to have the cookies ready. Barely enough time to go to the store, but there were no guarantees, especially since Coran was habitually early. The last thing she wanted was to be out when he arrived.

An idea hit her. Like something straight out of an eighties sitcom. Before she lost her nerve, she pulled on a bra and a clean T-shirt, grabbed her measuring cup, and headed down the hall.

She knocked on Lotor’s door, sighing as she did. She couldn’t help but feel a little ridiculous, but desperate times…

So she waited. And waited. And waited…Until she had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach that he wasn’t in. Or maybe that “erratic sleep schedule” he’d mentioned to her before had him sleeping into the afternoon. Either way, the endeavor seemed more and more like a fruitless one. And sugarless.

No, she couldn’t give up so easily. It was a large building – there were plenty of other floors. Plenty of other neighbors that she had yet to meet. Maybe there was no time like the present. So she made her way down the stairs to the second floor.
She picked a door at random – the one closest to the stairwell, and tried to plaster on her sweetest smile as she waited. Finally, she heard the door unlatch, and a moment later she was face to face with a woman.

She was just a little shorter than Allura was, and a little slimmer, and she was dressed in bright pink from head to toe: a sunset-colored tank top hung off of one shoulder, and her sweatpants draped over her fluffy bunny slippers. She stared at Allura for a moment, her eyes going wide, like it was Regis Philbin standing on her doorstep instead of her upstairs neighbor.

“Um…” Allura tried not to let her smile falter. “Hello, I’m–”

“Zethriiiiiiiid!” the woman screamed, and Allura almost staggered backwards. “It’s her!”

“It’s…me?”

Heavy footfalls came rushing in from the other room, and suddenly there was a second woman staring at her from the doorway. She towered over the first, muscles bulging against her T-shirt and shorts. Her hair was dyed a deep blue, cropped short over her ears, and she pushed it from in front of her eyes as she blinked at Allura for a minute and then groaned.

“Ezor…what the hell are you doing?”

“It’s her!” the first woman – Ezor? – insisted. Like Allura couldn’t even hear her. “The girl from 302! You know…” She elbowed Zethrid in the ribs, and the larger woman rolled her eyes.

“Sorry about her,” she said, and Ezor pouted.

“Er…it’s alright,” Allura lied, forcing her smile as well as she could. “I…did just move in upstairs. I hope I haven’t been too noisy or anything.”

“You? Please. We have to put up with pacing and ABBA at 3 in the morning.” She pointed up at the ceiling. “You couldn’t annoy us if you tried.”

The connection clicked in her mind, and she let out a gasp before she could reel it back in. “You’re Zethrid,” she said. “Lotor mentioned you when he was helping me move in. Are you two friends with him.”

“Something like that,” Ezor said. “I guess you’re getting to know him a little better too – he’s mentioned you once or twice.”

There was a smile on her face – closer to a smirk. Allura wondered what she was thinking. “He’s…mentioned me?”

“He shared your cupcakes with us,” Zethrid added. “They were damn good by the way.”

“Thank you!” Allura said, pride welling in her chest. “Actually, that’s kind of why I’m here…I know it sounds a little archaic, but…do you think I could borrow a cup of sugar from you? I have company coming in an hour and I forgot to buy it for the cookies I’m making. I’ll be sure to repay you with a few when I’m finished! Chocolate chip with walnuts…it’s an old family favorite.”

Ezor’s lips formed into a delighted “O,” her eyes shimmering. “I haven’t had homemade cookies in so long! I burn everything and Zethrid can barely figure out how to turn on an oven.”

“At least I do the dishes every once and a while, unlike you,” Zethrid called, already on her way to
the kitchen. She was back a moment later with a bag of white sugar, and she filled Allura’s cup while Ezor practically vibrated with excitement beside her. “There ya go…that all you need?”

Allura beamed at her, cradling the cup in her hands like it was made of gold. It felt like it may as well have been. “It’s perfect…I can’t thank you enough!”

“If you really wanna thank us, you could ask Lotor on a d-“ Zethrid slapped a hand over her mouth, muffing the rest of that sentence against her palm. She waved with her other hand, sending an easy smile Allura’s way.

“Don’t mention it…Allura, right?”

“Allura,” she said with a nod. “And I’ll be back with cookies later this evening. There’ll be more than enough to share. There always are.”

And there were. There always were. Every time she made this recipe she underestimated just how many cookies she was bound to end up with. Back in grad school she would inevitable stock the student office with baked goods all through midterms, and the kitchenette had been overflowing as she had approached graduation. Now she smiled as she plated the warm cookies on a ceramic blue serving platter that she might have accidentally stolen from Coran’s house during the move.

If he noticed and asked for it back, she would hand it over of course. But if he didn’t…it was a very nice little piece of tableware.

She had just finished putting aside a few extra cookies in a baggie for her downstairs neighbors when there was a sharp rap on her door, and she flew across her living room to answer it, grinning as she did. The moment she saw him, sunglasses perched on his head and mustache curling neatly over his wide smile, she couldn’t resist throwing her arms around him with a bright laugh.

“You’re late!” she giggled. “You’re never late!”

“Drive took a little longer than I thought…believe me, my back is just as upset with me as you are.” He held her by the shoulders as she pulled away, and he glanced down at the floor where a box wrapped in bright yellow paper sat at his feet. “But I brought you a housewarming gift to make up for it!”

“Housewarming gift? You already sent me off with half the kitchen and a whole box full of extra towels when I moved out.”

He hefted the box into his arms and marched across her threshold, putting the present down on her kitchen table. “Well you’re getting a bit more from me. No arguing – I won’t hear it.” Not that she would have ever turned him down. Before she had the chance he was zipping past her to gaze at the cookies on the counter. “Ooh! I was craving these cookies the whole drive up!”

“Well take one then – hell, take the whole plate if you want.” She couldn’t resist picking up the box on the table and shaking it lightly.

“Dmf ffmmf fwwff,” Coran insisted, crumbs littering his mustache and a half-eaten cookie in his hand. His hand pressed against her arm. One swallow later, he said, “If you want to open it so bad go ahead and do it! But don’t shake it. I didn’t keep the receipt…”

“Receipt?” she laughed. “Coran, what on earth did you get me?”

“Well open it and find out! No use dawdling. And once you do, I want the grand tour!”
Allura looked from the kitchenette to the living room. “This is…more or less it. Well, except for my bedroom and the bathroom around the corner.”

“Still!”

Absently, Allura wondered if she had put away her vibrator from the night before and decided then and there that she wasn’t going to include her bedroom in the tour.

“Well go on, open it up!” Coran insisted with a grin. “Consider it repayment for the cookies, because I may already have plans to take the rest home with me tonight.” She snorted out a laugh and reached for the huge – albeit slightly crooked – bow topping the box. She felt like a little girl on Christmas morning, full of curiosity and excitement as she ripped away the paper, seeing Coran’s eyes twinkling in her peripheral vision. He seemed just as excited as she was – just what had he gotten her that had him so eager? She hoped it wasn’t another ceramic lion. As beautiful as the ones that adorned her bookshelf were, five of them were quite enou-

She got the box open and almost forgot how to breathe, choking over the sound of Coran’s excited snickering. “The pink one!” was all she managed to say. “The stand mixer in coral pink that was sold out everywhere! How the hell did you get your hands on it?”

Coran just twirled his mustache between his fingers, shooting her a wily grin. “I have my ways, my darling. I always have my-

Even with all of the windows closed, Allura felt a shift in the wind.

“What…is…that?”

She had to turn to look over her own shoulder to follow his line of sight until she spotted it. Flung thoughtlessly over the back of her sofa. She’d meant to return it a week ago, but her week had been busy and she’d honestly forgotten and he hadn’t come looking for it so she hadn’t even thought about it while vacuuming earlier.

A jacket.

Lotor’s jacket.

She glanced back at Coran and found him viciously shoving the rest of the half-eaten cookie into his mouth. “That’s not your jacket!” he insisted, crumbs flying all over her freshly swept kitchen floor.

Of course it wasn’t hers. She couldn’t say it was – there was a tear in the collar and a hole in the sleeve and she didn’t look good in dark gray and maroon on the best of days anyway. “Well…it’s a friend’s.”

“That’s a man’s jacket!”

“Oh, you don’t know that,” she huffed. Even though he hadn’t been wrong about a single thing so far.

“There was a man in your apartment!”

Three for three. Though stating obvious facts wasn’t really all that impressive. She sighed, fighting the urge to pout – and losing – as she went to pick up the jacket. It had barely touched her fingers when Coran snatched it from her. “Coran, it’s 2018. I’m allowed to have a man in my apartment.”

“Well of course you’re allowed! But this – he – I – who is he?” He studied the jacket closely,
stopping just short of sniffing it for – what, sex pheromones or something? Allura wasn’t quite sure. And she didn’t quite care either.

She took it back. “He’s a friend,” she said. “My neighbor.” It didn’t do much to stop Coran’s eyeballs from threatening to pop out and roll across her kitchen floor, and she planted her hands on her hips. The jacket brushed her calf. “Nothing is going on, you know.”

Not that she would tell him if it was. Not that it was any of his business.

Not that a *jacket* meant anything.

“Are you alright?” she asked. “Do you need the Heimlich maneuver or something?”

“No!” The word came out like he’d been punched in the gut. Finally, he slumped, almost folding in half. “No…No, it’s not my business who you…spend time with. In your apartment. On your sofa.”

“Coran!”

“I just said it’s none of my business!” That didn’t cool the blush on her face. But Coran held up his hands, as if in defeat. “I’m sure he’s…a very nice person.”

“He is,” she said.

God he was.

They had sat together so long after the credits played that the title screen music looped at least ten times over. Laughing about the tissues littering the coffee table, about the unopened soy sauce packets overflowing from the empty take-out boxes, about the ridiculously vague fortunes they’d gotten in their cookies. And when he’d finally excused himself with a polite smile and a nod, he’d left his jacket (accidentally) the DVD (intentionally?) on her couch.

Maybe she could repay him with another movie night. And this time she could provide the entertainment.

By which she meant the *movie*. Of course.

“Anyway,” she added with a wide smile, rushing gleefully back over to the mixer still in its box. “Come on – I want to set this up! Coral pink! I can’t believe you managed it!”

Ezor’s eyes were wide. Enraptured. Awe-struck. Her jaw was slack, her hands clasped in front of her lips like she was about to fall to her knees and start praying. “You…you’re admitting it? You’re actually admitting it? You?”

“I’m not *admitting* anything,” Lotor said. “I’m just entertaining the idea that…after spending a bit more time with her…I may…have the slightest bit of an…attraction.” He furiously twirled spaghetti onto his form, the tines scraping against his plate. “An intellectual attraction.”

“Intellectual,” Zethrid scoffed. “You know we’ve seen her, right?”

“Don’t start.” He slurped up the noodles. With extreme prejudice. “She’s pretty. She’s *beautiful*, actually-“

“You said the *b*-word!” Ezor gasped.

He stared at her, marinara dripping from his fork onto his table. “Excuse me?”
“Beautiful!” She practically draped herself over his shoulder, grinning madly until he shooed her off by brandishing his fork. It didn’t stop her from letting out a dreamy sigh. “Don’t you know that’s all any girl wants to be called?”

“I’d kinda prefer tough,” Zethrid offered.

“Or maybe intelligent?” Lotor added.

“Durable!”

“Witty?”

“Hardy!”

“Or resourceful?”

Ezor groaned. “Ugh, whatever. You guys are no fun.” She drove her finger up against Lotor’s chest. “And you’re a man – you don’t know. A movie was a nice first step, but why not take her out for a nice dinner? Give her an excuse to put on some makeup and a pretty dress and wine and dine her!”

“She wears dresses and makeup all the time at work. I’m sure she relishes a chance to wear something more comfortable.” He focused on his food, pushing the last few bites around his plate instead of eating them. Suddenly this conversation had his stomach twisted in knots, and it wasn’t doing wonders for his appetite.

But before Ezor could say anything else someone knocked at his door. When he opened it – Ezor proclaiming, “Concerned for her comfort, like a true gentleman! – he couldn’t do much but stare.

Allura. With…his jacket?

“I…hope I’m not interrupting your dinner,” she said with a small smile, flicking her thumb against her cheek, and suddenly he was painfully aware of the marinara stain on his own face before he scrubbed it away with his sleeve.

She laughed, though. That was…nice.

She handed him the jacket. “You um…you left this at my place last weekend. I meant to get it back to you sooner, but I kept forgetting. I hope you weren’t missing it.”

“No,” he managed to say as he took it from her. “I hadn’t even realized…thank you.”


But Allura just laughed again, and smiled at her. “Oh – I still have those cookies. I’m still planning on repaying you for the sugar.”

“Hell yeah, free cookies!” Ezor cheered.

Allura turned to Lotor again, her hands clasped in front of her as she chuckled. “Your friends saved me quite the headache earlier. They’re very sweet.”

“They’re certainly…something,” he muttered. “By the way I…ah…I would…love to do it again
sometime.” He swallowed. “The movie.”

“I sure hope so. We do live next to each other. It would just be a little sad if we never spent any time together.” She bit her lip, ever so slightly. “Anyway, I still have company, so I should get back…but here.”

She shoved something into his hands. A folded piece of paper. He looked at it. “The…Chinese takeout menu?”

“My number’s on the back,” she blurted. “Figure it might be easier than knocking on each other’s doors and all. You can text me. For our…next movie night?”

Behind him, Ezor made a choking noise.

“Right,” he said with a nod and a smile, praying that he didn’t have any more marinara anywhere on his face because he was sure it would only make his blush look even more ridiculous. “I’ll…I’ll do that.”

Bless her, Ezor waited until the door was closed to completely lose her composure. “She gave you her number!” she cried, bouncing up and down so vigorously that he worried she was going to go crashing through his floor right into her own living room.

“Must have been some movie night,” Zethrid said with a smirk.

“Yes – right – whatever – out.”

“Wha-“

“Out,” he insisted. “Come on, you’ve overstayed your welcome and I already fed you. I have writing to do. Out, out, out.”

“Okay, okay,” Ezor said, hands thrown up in surrender. “We’ll let you get back to your writing.” She waggled her eyebrows as she passed him on her way to the door. “Just don’t get too distracted texting your neighbor, Romeo.”

He huffed.

When the door had closed behind them, he tossed his jacket over the back of his couch and got to work doing the dishes. It was better than letting his mind wander. Better than overanalyzing. It was just a number. After just a movie. Just-

He glanced down at his floor and saw a smaller bit of paper. It looked like it had fallen out of one of his jacket pockets. It was no bigger than a gum wrapper, crumpled into a ball, and he bent down to pick it up, intent on throwing it away. But something made him unfold it first.

A fortune. From a solid week ago. He’d almost forgotten about it. Why wouldn’t he? It was forgettable. An average, forgettable fortune that just happened to read:

Keep your heart open – new love is on the horizon.

He groaned, looked up at the takeout menu with ten digits scrawled over the dessert list, and chucked the fortune across his living room.
https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MayIBorrowACupOfSugar
Chapter Notes

I like this chapter. I hope you all do too. :)

A date.

How was he supposed to know how to ask someone out on a date? How was he supposed to know what to do, what to say, where to do it, when to do it? He’d certainly never had to deal with any of it before. And the characters in his books had usually…skipped this step.

Besides, alien courting methods were much different from human ones anyway. So that was a moot point.

He was used to seeing people around him fall into relationships, like they just got lucky (in every sense of the phrase) and it happened on its own.

Oh yeah, we bumped into each other at a work party and he was in I.T. and I was in marketing and we just hit it off and we’re getting married in two weeks!

Or…

Well she was a friend of a friend and I messaged her online to tell her I thought her dog was cute and we just talked for hours until I asked her to dinner.

Or…

We hooked up in a bar once and now we have a house and a kid together.

Did people really do this? Was it something everyone learned except for him? Did he miss the flier advertising the class that walked him through the steps? Everyone seemed to talk about it so casually, like it was really no big deal that a simple dinner could end with a kiss or sex or any number of things in between.

How in the hell did people treat it like it was so inconsequential? When there were so many possible consequences?

He slammed his mailbox shut with a groan. No mail for Allura in his box today – no mail for him either, besides a postcard from his Aunt Dayak that would inevitably wind up getting lost on his kitchen counter. It was a relief, actually. He didn’t need anything else to remind him just how romantically inept he was.

“Careful with those,” someone said beside him. “I just replaced all those hinges last month.”

Lotor turned on his heel and saw him. The handyman. “Shiro.”

Right? God, he hoped that was right.

“Wow,” Shiro (Please let that be his name so I don’t feel like even more of a dimwit today) said with 
a smile. “You know my name.”

Hallelujah.

He scratched at the back of his neck with a shy little half-laugh. “Don’t mean to make that sound nasty or anything. Just don’t think I’ve ever heard you use it before, and I fixed your radiator three times last winter.”

“Well I know I never baked you muffins, but I can learn a name easily enough,” Lotor said.

“Ah, you met Allura? In 302.”

“I helped her move in. Well…helped her move a couch in. I wasn’t quite heartless enough to watch her push it up three floors on her own.”

“I think she mentioned that,” Shiro chuckled. “Mentioned you a few times, actually.”

Lotor’s heart tripped over a beat or three. “She…did?”

“Yeah. She’s sweet. She invited Keith and me over for dinner a couple weeks ago.”

Ah, the boyfriend. He’d almost forgotten. The handyman had a boyfriend. The gay handyman’s gay boyfriend – well, Lotor was assuming.

Something clicked in Lotor’s head. Shiro had a boyfriend. So he must have been on at least one date. There must have been a first date in the equation somewhere. And if he knew Allura – at least a little – maybe…

Was he completely insane to think this might work? Maybe. But it was better than asking Ezor or Zethrid. He needed at least another two cups of coffee to open that can of worms. So he took a breath and cleared his throat and-

“Shiro…” He straightened his back, as if better posture could make what he was about to ask a little less ridiculous. “Could I…ask you something?”

“Is it something that would require a work order?” Shiro asked. “Because all my tools are still in my truck.”

“No, no…actually, I was…I was wondering…” He swallowed. “If someone were to…say…ask you out to dinner, on a…on a date…” Shiro’s eyebrows arched almost to his hairline. “Ah…where would you say would be a good place to go?”

He hoped it wasn’t Italian. The only Italian restaurant near here was expensive, and their free breadsticks weren’t even all that good. Maybe Greek, but he hated olives, and they seemed to sneak into his dinner the last three times he’d been to the place down the street. Hell, maybe a first date was something that just called for a good burger somewhere that didn’t have tile floors, but how was he supposed to know-

“Oh…” When Lotor looked up at him again, Shiro was…blushing? “Lotor…I um…I’m flattered, but I’m kind of spoken for.”

Oh God. Kill him now. Drag him down to hell so he could burn in peace.

“No!” he blurted. “No no no! I’m not – not you. Not you and me. I’m not asking.” Dayak’s postcard fluttered to his feet. “Not that you aren’t – but that’s not what I-“
“Oh.”

Shiro’s eyes had gone wide, and suddenly he started to smile, his blush receding. Was that good? That had to be a good sign right? He still wanted to sink through the floor and dissipate into the void, but at least Shiro didn’t think he was trying to steal him away from this Keith person.

“Are you ah…asking about your neighbor by any chance?”

Lotor’s mouth snapped shut. Suddenly he wasn’t sure if dissolving into nothingness was enough. Somehow it felt like the damn flush spreading across his own cheeks was hot enough to keep burning regardless. “Uh…”

Shiro laughed, quietly, discretely. He had the decency to glance up the stairs before taking a step closer and dropping his volume a couple of notches before he said, “If you ask me…if you asked her out, I’m pretty sure she’d say yes.”

Somehow – he wasn’t sure quite how – Lotor managed to ask, “What makes you so sure?”

“Just kind of a feeling,” Shiro told him with a shrug, and he smiled knowingly. “She did tell me about the handsome neighbor of hers who helped her move her couch up the stairs.” Lotor felt like he was in freefall. “So maybe that counts for something.”

“Uh…”

Shiro brushed past him, clapping him on the shoulder. “I’d just ask her to get a cup of coffee. It’s nice, it’s casual…no pressure, you know?” He sent a thumbs-up his way as he headed for the doors. “Anyway good luck.”

Luck. Right. He was probably going to need that, because he hadn’t even gotten around to asking her anything yet, and he already felt like he was on the verge of a coronary. He climbed the stairs in a confused haze, unable to shake the child-like giddiness that welled up in his chest as he turned over what Shiro had said in his head.

He fell into the armchair in his living room, staring at the window. A tiny smile snuck onto his face as he breathed, “She thinks I’m handsome.”

Allura collapsed onto her bed, still in every bit of her work attire except her heels. She’d left those evil things at the door, like she did every day. But she had yet to change out of her dress and blazer – she hadn’t even taken her earrings out yet, and she was sure that she was probably staining her pillowcase with lipstick as she muffled a groan into it.

It wasn’t that she hated her job. She actually enjoyed it, and the days didn’t feel quite so long now that she was getting into the swing of things with her new schedule. Her closest coworkers were starting to get a little warmer, a little friendlier, smiling at her more in the hallway and greeting her when she went to grab coffee from the lounge.

She took that as a sign that she was doing a damn good job.

But she was still exhausted when she made it home every day. Today especially for some reason. It felt like a Friday, but it was only Thursday, and she had woken up thinking it was Saturday and has almost been late because she’d shut off her alarm.

She wriggled out of her blazer and dropped it on the floor next to her bed. Just as she did, her phone chimed on her bedside table.
She expected another text from Coran – he’d been checking in on her every evening since he’d left last weekend. It was a nice thing to look forward to, a refreshing little taste of home that helped her ease into feeling like this new city was somewhere worth staying. But it wasn’t Coran’s name that lit up her screen. It was Lotor’s. With two little words that made her find the muscle strength to sit up in bed:

\textit{Lotor – 5:59 PM}  \\
\textit{>> Dinner tonight?}

Dinner. Dinner? Dinner as in a movie night or dinner as in…something more intimate? Her heart raced. Her phone chimed again.

\textit{Lotor – 5:59 PM}  \\
\textit{>> Not at my place.}  \\
\textit{>> At Ezor and Zethrid’s. They want to get to know you better.}  \\
\textit{>> Though I suspect they might just be hoping for more cookies…}

She managed a laugh, her shoulders relaxing. Was that relief or disappointment swirling in the pit of her stomach?

She couldn’t dwell on it. She texted back instead.

\textit{Me – 6:00 PM}  \\
\textit{<< That sounds nice! :)}

Was the emoji too much? She hoped it wasn’t.

\textit{Lotor – 6:00 PM}  \\
\textit{>> No pressure. I know it’s a school night. :P}

That made her laugh a little louder. A school night…like they were schoolchildren texting about sneaking out after their parents went to sleep…

\textit{Me – 6:01 PM}  \\
\textit{<< No, it sounds like fun! I was looking for an excuse not to cook.}  \\
\textit{<< At least I won’t have to sneak out of my bedroom window.}

\textit{Lotor – 6:01 PM}  \\
\textit{>> Don’t let me stop you if you feel so inclined.}

“If you feel so inclined.” She didn’t think she’d ever seen someone use those words in a text before. Well, except for Coran maybe, but Lotor didn’t follow it with ten smiley emojis.

It was strange in a way. He seemed…more refined over text. He didn’t stumble over his words or stutter. Not that she minded that when they spoke in person, but he always seemed like his mouth couldn't keep up with his brain. Her father had always told her growing up that it was a sign of intelligence, but maybe he had just been trying to make her feel better for almost failing her first public speaking assignment in middle school.

Either way, she couldn’t help but feel a little rejuvenated at the thought of going to dinner.

Even if it wasn’t a date.

Not that she’d been hoping for that.
Grinning and full of renewed vigor, she let out a sigh of relief as she pulled off her dress and trotted to the bathroom. She hummed as she washed the makeup off of her face and lathered up her hair – it struck her how quickly her mood had shifted. Maybe it was the excitement of knowing she wouldn’t have to wash any dishes that night. Maybe it felt good to be making friends with her neighbors so quickly. Maybe it was just that Lotor had a surprising ability to make her feel…well, giddy. Like a schoolgirl with a crush.

Not that she had a crush.

But he was sweet, even if he didn’t stutter sometimes. He was considerate and kind. He’d helped her carry her couch up the stairs within five minutes of meeting her, for God’s sake. And yes, he was handsome. She had yet to figure out how a writer – and a bit of a shut-in from what she could tell – could get abs like he had.

And sure, he’d been the subject of her first sex dream in months. But she wasn’t focusing on that.

The light, airy feeling in her chest followed her back out of the bathroom once she’d toweled off and applied a quick fresh coat of mascara, back to her bedroom where she pulled on a comfortable sunset-pink summer dress. It followed her down the hall, down the stairs, all the way to the door for unit 204.

People were yelling inside.

Not angry yelling. Nothing violent. Coran probably would have called it “spirited.” She double checked the number to make sure she had the right door – even though she knew she did, memories of standing here with a measuring cup in her hands flowing through her mind – and knocked.

The yelling stopped. Just for a moment, and then the door opened.

“You came!” Ezor said with a grin, and before Allura knew it, the other woman was throwing her arms around her in a tight hug. “Lotor said you might be tired from work, but I insisted he text you anyway! You’re welcome!”

“Oh, thank you,” Allura said with a small nervous laugh as Ezor let her go and tugged her inside.

Their living room was flooded with color – baby blue cabinets, dark red curtains, a purple and white rug under a cream colored sofa flanked by white end tables. There were flowers in every window, plus a couple overflowing onto the kitchen counter that Zethrid carefully moved aside as she set down a pan of dinner rolls.

“Lotor, come greet the lady like a gentleman for crying out loud!” Ezor insisted, and Lotor looked up from the stove, a wooden spoon in his hand halfway to his lips.
Just as she noticed him, the smell hit her, and her stomach began to growl. “What are you making?” she breathed, rushing over to him before she could stop herself. “It smells incredible!”

The rosy tint to his cheeks might have been from the heat of the stove – there was steam rising up from the pot as he smiled at her. “It’s chili,” he said. “It’s almost done. I was just about to check and see if it needed any more cumin.” He glanced back down at the pot and then up at her again. “Would you…like to try?”

“Would I…” she breathed, and she leaned forward when Lotor held the spoon out to her. Her shoulder brushed his as she tasted it, and she hummed, her eyes lightly closing. “That’s good.”

“Is it?” Lotor beamed.

“Just a bit more cumin. Not too much.”

He nodded. “More cumin it is.”

“Any idea how long it’ll be?” someone called from the living room. “We’re starving over here.”

Allura glanced over and noticed two others sitting on the sofa that she’d missed before: one woman with gleaming blue eyes and dark hair pulled back in a messy short ponytail, and another in a gray hoodie with the hood pulled up over her head.

“That’s Acxa,” Lotor said, not looking up from the pot as he stirred in the cumin. “The one in the hoodie is Narti.”

Narti pulled the hood back and offered Allura a small smile and a wave before…signing something? “Oh!” Allura said. “Oh, I’m sorry, I don’t-“

“She said ‘Nice to meet you,'” Acxa said, her tone a little gentler now. “She can hear, by the way. Just doesn’t talk.” She let one hand fall on Narti’s knee, and Allura noticed the flash of a gold band around her ring finger. “I’ll translate for you. It’s no problem.”

“Oh…” Allura let out a soft sigh as she smiled. “Well it’s nice to meet you too…both of you. Do you live here?”

“Used to,” Acxa told her. “Used to live right on the other side of that wall.” She stuck her thumb back over her shoulder at the living room wall. “After we got married, we skipped the honeymoon to put a down payment on a house.”

Allura watched as Narti signed something else that made Acxa guffaw and Zethrid pout. “My singing isn’t that bad!” the latter insisted, and Narti’s shoulders shook as she grinned. “Ezor’s on the other hand-“

“I’m a delight to listen to once I warm up!”

“Well you never warmed up during all the years we lived next to you,” Acxa said. She glanced back at Allura before Ezor could come up with a retort. “So, how is it, living next to Mister Mamma Mia here?”

Lotor thrust the spoon at her, sending tomato sauce splattering across the counter. “You leave my taste in music out of this.”

“I was speaking to the lady,” Acxa said coolly.
“It’s fine, really,” Allura insisted the moment Lotor opened his mouth to reply. “I actually happen to love ABBA.”

“Just not at five in the morning, right?” Zethrid asked, attaching the tomato sauce stains with a paper towel.

“Well…”

“And dinner is served,” Lotor announced. “Ah…there are only four chairs so someone will have to sit on ottoman.”

“Not it!” Ezor chimed.

“Not it!” Zethrid added.

“We already claimed the couch,” Acxa said.

Allura smiled at him. “And I know you’re not going to make me take the ottoman when you invited me over.”

Acxa threw her head back and laughed. “Oh, I like her!” Beside her, Narti offered Allura a thumbs-up, which she thankfully didn’t need translated.

Over the next three hours she spent there, Allura felt herself decompressing more and more with each passing minute. Zethrid offered her a new route for her morning run, and Ezor complimented everything from her earrings to her shoes. Acxa and Narti were a bit more reserved, but they were never cold – halfway through dinner, they told her about their wedding and their newly adopted cat, with Acxa translating for her wife like it was second nature to her.

But Lotor…Lotor was quiet. All through dinner, he listened and didn’t say much in reply. It seemed like something was weighing heavily on his mind. Maybe he was still struggling with his book, or maybe all of the estrogen floating around the room was getting too overwhelming. But she always seemed to catch him looking at her whenever she glanced at him, and every time, his eyes would quickly dart away.

It was dark outside long before Allura made her way toward the door again, mourning the fact that she would have to set her alarm for the next morning when she got back to her own apartment. Narti and Acxa were gathering their own things too, while Ezor scrubbed dishes in the sink, moaning the entire time about the suds stripping off her nail polish.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Zethrid elbow Lotor in the ribs, and suddenly his hand was pressed against her arm. “Allura,” he said, his voice wavering just a bit. “Could I…talk to you in the hall for a moment?”

Her heart fluttered as she blinked at him, feeling every eye in the room gazing their way. “Oh…sure.”

It was a relief in some ways when they were alone on the other side of the door, but in other ways it made her even more wound up. She could feel her heart pounding, even though she wasn’t quite sure why, as Lotor stood took a breath and shoved his hands into his pockets. “I ah…I hope it wasn’t too much,” he said with a small smile. “I know they can be…a lot to handle.”

Allura returned his smile, hoping it would hide the blush creeping back over the tops of her ears. “They’re all lovely. I didn’t mind at all. This was…actually exactly what I needed tonight, in a weird way.”
“Well…” He swallowed. “I just wanted to ask you…” His breath shuddered a little on its way out. “I know we…we’ve only known each other for a few weeks, but…you’re…quite the woman.”

She blinked at him, and his cheeks reddened a little. It wasn’t from steam this time, that much was for sure. “You…said you wanted to ask me something?” she offered.

“Yes,” he said, like he’d just remembered. “I…well…I wanted to see if…you’d like to get coffee sometime. With me. Just me.”

Just him.

Just them.

He couldn’t be…

“A date,” he suddenly blurted. “I’m asking you out a date.”

The words came out all in one jumbled bunch, but they rang loud and clear in Allura’s burning ears. Her eyes widened, her jaw slack, and the first thing that came out of her mouth as she stared at him was, “Oh.”

That wasn’t an answer, dammit.

Lotor, bless him, looked like he was about to either pass out or vomit, and vaguely she wondered if he had ever done this before. Or maybe he had and he had wound up getting slapped or spat on or yelled at. Maybe that was why he seemed so terrified.

But when the surprise wore off, her heart swelled with glee, and she smiled. “Yes,” she breathed, and Lotor actually looked shocked. “Yes, of course. I’d love to! Is that…is that why you seemed so thoughtful all night?”

He let out a sigh that seemed to rattle him all the way down to his toes as relief flooded his face. “Was it that obvious?”

“Well I didn’t know you were planning on asking me out, but I certainly noticed something was going on.” She stepped just a little closer, looking up at him and getting a good view of the deep red creeping over the apples of his cheeks all the way up to the tops of his ears. “When did you have in mind?”

He blinked, and she laughed.

“For coffee.”

“Oh!” He seemed bemused. “Ah…I have to admit I didn’t really think it through that far.”

“Would…this Saturday be too soon?”

“No! No, Saturday would be perfect.”

He was grinning from ear to ear, and it made Allura’s heart soar. “Perfect,” she said with a smile of her own. “Um…I should get back. Work early tomorrow and all. But now I have something to look forward to.”

“Of course,” he said.

She didn’t know what came over her, didn’t know what gave her the idea, barely even realized she
was doing it as she reached for his hand, pushed up on her tip-toes and pressed her lips to his warm, flushed cheek. When she pulled back and let go of his fingers, he seemed frozen in place, his eyes wide and his lips lightly parted.

“Goodnight,” she breathed, feeling lighter than ever as she turned to hop up the stairs again.

She managed to make it two steps into her apartment before clenching her teeth and elatedly punching the air.
“Coffee?” Ezor said with a pout. “I thought you were gonna ask her to dinner.”

“We’ve had dinner,” he reminded her. “Twice now.”

“Those weren’t dates, dummy.”

Zethrid’s hand fell on his shoulder, so heavily that he almost staggered. “Give him a break,” she said with a wide grin. “He asked her out! That’s a big deal.” She gave him a good-natured jostle. “Way to go!”

“Thank you,” he sighed with a half-hearted tap on her hand.

“And she said yes!” Zethrid bellowed, but her voice sounded muted, distant. It was hard to focus on her and Ezor bickering about whether his methods had been clumsy or sweet when he was too busy reliving that moment over and over again in his head.

A date. I’m asking you out on a date.

It had been clumsy. Because he was clumsy, and inexperienced, and anxious. At least when it came to things like this. When it came to her.

God, when had he turned into such a walking cliché? Falling for his neighbor, of all people. A literal “girl next door” scenario. As far as plot twists were concerned, it was a pretty damn predictable one.

Predictable, maybe. But it still made his heart race just remembering standing there, waiting for her reply. It still made his head spin when he recalled her smile as she’d said yes, her eyes shining like the answer was the most obvious thing in the world.

Well, it had been news to him. That had probably why he hadn’t managed to eat a bite of his dinner that night.

But now here he was, with a date scheduled and two of his oldest friends arguing right next to him – like he wasn’t even there – about how likely it was to go well. Strangely enough, he didn’t care. Oh, he valued their opinions, to a point at least. But they could argue all they wanted. They could give him whatever advice they pleased. It didn’t do a thing to change the smile that seemed to have plastered itself on his face for the last twenty-four hours.

“God, look at him,” Ezor sighed. “He’s like a lovesick puppy.”

He blinked. “Huh?”

“You’re doing that thing again – where you go down some weird rabbit hole in your head.” She giggled. “You imagining your wedding now?”

“Please,” he scoffed. “We’re just having coffee.”

“Yeah, which is a perfectly good first date,” Zethrid insisted. More to Ezor than to him, though he appreciated the sentiment.

“If you’re boring,” Ezor countered, and they were off again.

He let them argue about his love life (his love life, which was actually something he had now) as he
scrolled on his phone through the menu for the Olkari Café. It was nicer than the Starbucks down the street, at least, even if the prices of the pastries made him painfully aware of how empty his wallet was after barely managing to pay the rent.

Maybe if he buckled down and got the last bit of these overdue chapters done and sent to his publisher, he would be able to take Allura out to a nice dinner. Well, a reasonably nice dinner, anyway. For now…coffee would do.

“Uh…you know the menu’s not that complicated, right?” Zethrid said over his shoulder. And almost making him jump out of his skin too. His poor phone fell through his legs and wedged itself between the couch cushions. “You’re not overthinking this are you? Allura doesn’t seem like the kind of woman to judge someone for ordering a latte instead of a macchiato.”

“I’m not overthinking anything,” he huffed. “And I would never order a latte over a macchiato.”

He retrieved his phone just in time for Zethrid to snatch it away again, and she held it out of reach. Like he was going to embarrass himself jumping up and down for it. “Don’t act like I don’t see what you’re doing,” she said.

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh,” Ezor mused. “Strategizing?”

Zethrid nodded sagely. “Strategizing.”

“I am not-“

“You do this when you’re nervous,” she insisted. Her hands were planted on her hips, his phone tucked away in her fist. “You plan. Every little thing. Remember the Miss Ironsides Championship? In Maryland?”

Lotor eyed his phone. “The…powerlifting competition?”

“Specifically the road trip there. When we broke down outside of Frederick, you were on your phone looking up towing services, motels, car rentals…you were more anxious about it than I was, and I was the one who almost missed the competition!” She sighed, her expression softening almost imperceptibly. “When you’re nervous about something, you try and control it. Right down to figuring out what kind of coffee you’re gonna order before you even get to the café.”

She finally handed him back his phone, and Lotor stared at it. His own eyes stared back on the darkened screen, and he blinked.

He barely felt Zethrid sitting down beside him, Ezor perching herself on the arm of the couch. “You’re gonna do great,” the latter told him with a smile he could tell was there even without looking. “She likes you. And she’s already seen you naked so you’re ahead of the game.”

“She saw me in my underwear. That’s not naked.”

“Closer than most people get before the first date!”

“She’s right,” Zethrid added. “You’ll be great, dude. The lady’s got good taste. She wouldn’t say yes just to humor you, so quit worrying about what coffee you’re gonna get and start worrying about what you’re gonna wear.”

Lotor almost stopped breathing. “Oh god…what am I going to wear.”
“Makeover!” Ezor sang.

“No.” He stood. “No, I…I should go…look through my closet.” Zethrid opened her mouth. “Just to get an idea. I won’t be there for the rest of the night, thank you very much. I have some self control.”

“Just pick a nice pair of jeans,” Zethrid sighed. “And don’t worry about a tie – it’s coffee, not the Ritz-Carlton.”

He made a mental note of that. No tie.

It didn’t keep him from going through his entire closet three times over. But he did leave his ties hanging in the back, untouched.

Allura hadn’t been on a date since her first month of graduate school, and hadn’t been on a first date in even longer. Still, she didn’t think that was any reason to be so nervous. It was just coffee. With her neighbor. Her eccentric, handsome, slightly awkward but endlessly sweet neighbor who somehow had a six-pack despite presumably sitting hunched over a laptop all day. Or a notebook. Or a…typewriter? Honestly, she had no idea. All of her college friends had been science majors.

At least when she was letting her mind wander over silly little questions like that, she didn’t have to focus on her own nerves. Oh wait…there they were. Back in full force. Making it impossible to stand still as she waited in front of the café for-

“Allura.”

She spun on one heel and smiled. “Lotor.” Suddenly her nerves mellowed just enough for her to take a breath. “I feel a bit underdressed.”

A first date down the street from her apartment. With her neighbor who had already seen her sweaty and bare-faced and deathly in need of a shower while she’d lugged all of her possessions up the stairs…She hadn’t bothered to put on anything more than a clean T-shirt and a pair of shorts that made the heat bearable. But Lotor was standing there in a crisp button-up and dark jeans that made him look casually distinguished, even if there was a bead of sweat rolling down his temple.

He smiled despite the flush in his cheeks from the walk. “I’m probably just…overdressed,” he admitted. He swallowed, and for a moment she wondered if he was as anxious as she was. “I hope the place is alright.”

“Is it air conditioned?” she asked as she wiped her brow.

“Last time I checked.”

“Then it’s perfect.” She giggled as he held the door open for her followed her inside. “They could have the worst coffee in the world and I wouldn’t care as long as I could get it on ice.”

The sigh that slipped past her lips when she stepped out of the heat and into the cool café bordered on obscene, and she brushed her sweaty hair off the back of her neck. She was hyper-aware of him standing near her as he let the door close behind them, his hand brushing her hip before pulling away like she was a hot stove top.

With a smile, she reached out for his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“This place is lovely,” she said. “I can’t believe I haven’t tried it yet. I pass it enough on my way to
work.”

Lotor barely seemed to hear her, his eyes fixed on their hands. But just as Allura’s smile began to falter, he took a breath and squeezed her hand right back with a grin of his own. “I had a feeling you’d like it,” he said, almost sheepishly. “Or I hoped, anyway. Ezor seemed to think coffee was a disappointing choice for a…” He paused for a moment to clear his throat. Like the words had gotten stuck there. “…first date.”

She was just about to tell him just how wrong Ezor had been when another voice piped up: “Oh hey, you want the regular?”

Oh, right. This was a coffee shop. And when people stood at the counter at a coffee shop it usually meant they wanted to order coffee. She’d been so busy quietly admiring the dimple in his cheek as he spoke that the menu might as well have been blank.

“She was just about to tell him just how wrong Ezor had been when another voice piped up: “Oh hey, you want the regular?”

Oh, right. This was a coffee shop. And when people stood at the counter at a coffee shop it usually meant they wanted to order coffee. She’d been so busy quietly admiring the dimple in his cheek as he spoke that the menu might as well have been blank.

“Sure,” Lotor said, sounding like he was on autopilot.

Just another reason Ezor had been wrong about coffee being a poor choice for a date. Coffee was simple. “Iced vanilla latte please,” Allura heard herself say to the wisp of a girl behind the counter. “Extra vanilla, extra milk, extra…cold.”

“One hazelnut macchiato and one melted milkshake coming right up,” the girl said with a sweet smile, and Allura tried not to pout.

Their drinks came quickly, and Allura set her sights on a table by the window. She kept her voice low, but it was hard to hold back a laugh as she turned away from the counter and sidled up next to him: “You have a regular?”

“I know what I like,” he said as he brought the cup to his lips, and she swore she saw him pout now behind the rim.

“I thought that kind of thing was just in cliché romance novels,” Allura giggled. “Some mysterious, handsome stranger goes to their local coffee shop every day and orders the same thing, slowly falling in love with the beautiful barista…Orders extra pastries just to have an excuse to exchange a few more words with each other…”

Lotor let out a small chuckle. “Maybe you should be the writer instead of me.”

“You think?” She beamed at him.

Suddenly, he let out a sigh. “I feel like I should…confess something,” Lotor told her. There was a hint of a laugh in his voice, but it sounded like he’d planted it there to cover up his own nerves more than anything else. He kept his eyes on his macchiato, stirring with slow, methodical turns of his wrist. “I’m not very good at dates.”

Something about the way he said it – with a shy smile and a flush to his cheeks, holding his cup in front of him like he was trying to hide behind it – made Allura melt into an easy smile. “Well if it makes you feel any better,” she offered, “I’m not all that good at them either. I’m honestly not sure anyone is…”

He lowered his cup just enough for her to get a glance of his smile – easy and genuine this time. “Strangely enough…that actually does make me feel a bit better.”

“Maybe we can just start simple,” she offered. “Talk about something easy. Your family – what are they like?”
Just like that, the smile was gone. Shit.

“That’s ah…not exactly simple,” he said into his next sip of coffee.

Of course it wasn’t. Why couldn’t she have just offered to talk about the weather? Or his books? Or the way the apartment plumbing groaned when she ran the water too hot? Her throat tightened around a hasty apology. She opened her mouth, but before she could backpedal Lotor insisted, “It’s alright.” She closed her mouth again as he sighed. “I don’t mind talking about it, but it’s not exactly…well it’s not very cheerful.”

“That’s okay,” she heard herself telling him in a voice that was too soft and too saturated with pity. But if he picked up on it, he didn’t seem offended.

“My mother hasn’t been around since I was young,” he said with a shrug. “Still a baby, as far as I know. I don’t remember much of her.”

She blinked for a moment before she blurted, “Mine too.”

His mouth froze open in a soft little o, his brows arching as his cup froze halfway up to his lips. Gently, he put it down again. “Really?”

“Well-“ She fiddled with the straw in her own drink, debating whether she should take another sip to buy herself some time to get her thoughts together before she oversharable on the first date. But since they were teetering on the edge of this rabbit hole anyway… “She died when I was four or five,” she finally decided to say. “So I do remember her. Bits and pieces. It’s not quite enough, you know.”

“No,” Lotor quietly agreed. “It’s not.”

She cleared her throat. “So you grew up with-“

Lotor’s expression turned sour. “My father.”

Allura had a feeling this conversation not being cheerful had less to do with his mother being gone and more to do with his father being present. She swallowed, but nodded with a shaky little, “Uh-huh…”

“He…well, let’s just say he never approved of much of anything I did. My interests, my friends, my choice of career.” He huffed and muttered “Such as it is sometimes.”

Carefully, Allura pressed onward. “So he…didn’t approve of you being a writer?”

“God no.”

“He wanted you to be a doctor or a lawyer or something.”

“I don’t think he wanted me to be anything else in particular. Just always looking for an excuse to be disappointed in me.” He glared at his coffee, tipping it back and draining about a third of it before continuing: “So after trying to earn his respect turned into more trouble than it was ever worth, I did what any rebellious nineteen-year-old would do and moved out. Spent my share of time on other peoples’ couches until I landed a decent publishing deal and managed to find a place of my own.”

Now he smiled, his teeth flashing in the sunlight streaming through the window, but it was tinted with a hint of bitterness. “I never looked back,” he said. “No more than I had to.”

“And your father…” she hazarded, “He’s…he’s still…”
“Still breathing,” Lotor said tersely. “Last I checked. We don’t talk. No surprises there.” And that, Allura figured, was that. She watched as Lotor knocked back another good portion of his coffee, and the look on his face when he put it down again seemed embarrassed. “Ah…I’m sorry. I told you it wasn’t cheerful, but I didn’t mean for it to get so…maudlin.”

“Please.” She barely realized it was her hand moving across the table until she felt her fingers folding over his, and she stared down at it at the same time he did.

*Say something*, a voice in her head screamed. *Something supportive. But not too patronizing. Or insensitive. And don’t pry for crying out loud-*

“Maybe you’re better off,” she said, but it sounded like a question and she couldn’t help but wince.

But Lotor smiled and turned his hand over underneath hers, curling his fingers around her own and giving them a gentle squeeze. “I know I am,” he told her with renewed certainty, and he let out a laugh – one that made him look lighter and calmer.

He had very clear eyes, she noticed.

“Well,” he breathed, “Maybe it’s for the best that that’s out of the way…one less surprise to pop up later.”

“Next I’ll have to ask you if you have any crazy tattoos,” Allura quipped, and he pointedly looked down at the napkin dispenser as he took a long sip of coffee and slowly pulled his hand away. Before she could ask about that, he cleared his throat loudly enough to draw her attention back from the blush creeping over the tips of his ears.

“What about your father?” he asked.

“What about him?” Allura asked with a blink. He couldn’t have a tattoo on his ass, could he? He didn’t seem like the type to have an ass tattoo. But he’d surprised her before, and she’d seen more of his body than she’d ever expected to already so there were only so many other places it could be-

“Are you two close?”

“Me and…my father?” She yanked her mind back from wandering any further past *ass tattoo* with a quick shake of her head. “Oh – yes. I mean, we were when I was growing up. We still are, as much as we can be. He does own his own company, so he’s busy a lot of the time. And we don’t particularly talk much at work – professionalism is important to both of us and it wouldn’t be right to spend my time talking about personal things at the office. Not that I mind! He always calls me on my birthday and we have dinner once a month or so and catch up…”

She sighed, suddenly painfully aware of the fact that she was rambling. And about something that paled in comparison to what Lotor had undoubtedly gone through. What right did she have to complain about the state of her life when he had been all but driven out of his own home and family before his twentieth birthday-

But she looked up at found Lotor’s eyes fixed on her, his expression rapt and thoughtful.

She would have thought that years of giving presentations and leading meetings would have prepared her for being the center of attention, but this was more intimate than explaining marketing strategies or budget proposals. Her cheeks warmed.

“A-anyway,” she sputtered, “He offered to let me live with him after graduate school, considering how flat broke I was, but I was too stubborn. I guess I thought it would have felt like…admitting
defeat somehow.” She sighed. “It seems stupid now.”

“Nothing wrong with craving a bit of independence,” Lotor offered, in a tone that made it seem like he understood the feeling plenty well. He probably did.

“Well, I wound up moving in with an old family friend instead. And even if I was being stubborn and shortsighted about things at the time, it worked out for the best. Coran had a spare room over his garage and I managed not to completely drain my bank account between rent and student loans.” She sipped her drink. It was getting watery. “In hindsight, working for a startup charity straight out of school might not have been the most lucrative business, but it seemed like it was for a good cause and I haven’t regretted it yet.” She put on a smile, one that Lotor mirrored. “That probably counts for something, right?”

“A good cause always counts for something,” he told her. He sounded like a fortune cookie. A handsome fortune cookie.

Allura felt her shoulders droop just a bit as she looked down at her hands folded in her lap. Something tightened in her chest like a knot as she added, “I…do wish I could spend more time with him. I never really got to know my mother, and I can’t stand the thought of…missing out on anything.”

No, she was not going to get misty-eyed on a first date. That had to be in the top ten rules for first dates – no crying. Period. How would Lotor feel, opening up about his completely absent father and then having to watch her turn around and weep over the fact that she hadn’t spent enough time with her own-

But then she felt something against her hand, and she looked down. A…napkin?

His expression was sympathetic. Warm and kind. There wasn’t a hint of judgment or annoyance in his eyes. “It’s okay,” he told her, and his voice was so gentle that she knew he must have seen the tears in her eyes before she forced them back. He nudged the napkin against her knuckles again, until she finally reached out and took it.

She dabbed at her eyes without looking at him, and when she glanced up again he was smiling. It was soft, almost fragile. “It seems like you have a lot of people who care about you,” he said. “A little time apart won’t change that.”

A handsome, considerate fortune cookie.

Before she realized she was saying it, she told him, “You’re awfully sweet, you know that?”

It wasn’t what she’d planned to say. She hadn’t planned to say anything at all when she’d opened her mouth. It felt almost naïve, putting it that way, but Lotor’s reaction wasn’t what she would have imagined – he looked almost shocked, bewildered even, as he said, “Oh.” And then a moment later, on a long exhale: “I…don’t think anyone’s ever called me that before.”

She couldn’t help it – she giggled. Allura curled her fingers around the napkin in her hand, pressed it over her lips and giggled, like a schoolgirl with a crush. “Well you are,” she insisted. “I mean, I could have told you that much from the moment I met you, considering that you were willing to help a complete stranger move a couch up two flights of stairs.”

“Well I wanted to make a good first impression on my new neighbor.”

“Just admit it.” Her finger jutted out toward the center of his chest. “You’re sweet.”
He smiled, a soft pink glow spreading from the bridge of his nose to the tips of his ears. “Alright… sweet it is then.”

When Allura had managed to rein in her delighted laughter, she drew in another breath and leaned closer, until the edge of the table was pressing into her stomach. “So,” she insisted, “Do you have any crazy tattoos?”

The glow deepened into a full-force blush in record time. “Not…that I can show you in public.”

Now *that* piqued her interest. And as she grinned at him she suddenly realized that despite the fact that his cup was empty and her drink had melted into vaguely sweet, murky water, she wasn’t quite ready to let this date end. And her stomach was growling anyway. “You know,” she said, “I could go for some pound cake.” She stood up from the table, beaming and elated. “My treat. I insist.”

He gave her an enthusiastic nod.
“So,” Shiro said, taking a long drink of his beer. “Date went well?”

At least her own drink was cold – maybe it would cool down her cheeks as she drank it. It was worth a shot. “It was good,” she said, a smile pulling at the corners of her mouth. Oh…there wasn’t a beer on earth cold enough to stop the blush spreading across her cheeks. “It was fantastic. We talked for hours. God, it seems like such a cliché, but I felt so at ease, like we had this connection…”

Shiro was staring at her, and she realized she’d been speaking with the bottle hovering by her lips without taking a sip. “Ah…” She sighed, putting it down on the arm of Shiro’s Adirondack chair. “Sorry…I sound like a hopeless sap.”

“Nah…you should have seen Keith after our first date. Apparently he looked like he was floating for three days straight…” He chuckled as he stared down at the parking lot below his apartment balcony through the leaves of a large fern in the corner.

Allura let out a giggle. “He told you that?”

“God no. Our mutual friend Hunk did. He didn’t let Keith live it down for weeks after, but…I thought it was kinda sweet.”

She finally pulled the beer to her lips and sipped it. The warmth in her cheeks held firm. “Hunk, hm…He sounds…interesting.”

“He’s a good guy. You two would probably get along, actually – he works in a bakery.” Allura pulled the bottle away from her mouth mid-sip, her lips frozen in a shocked little “o.” It made Shiro lean back in his chair and guffaw. “See? You two would probably click.”

She could practically see an idea forming on his face before he pointed at her with a grin. “You should meet him – the whole group! Hunk and Pidge and Lance…hell, bring Lotor too if you want. I’m assuming there’ll be a second date?”

She was glad she hadn’t taken another sip, because she probably would have choked on it. “W-well, we haven’t made plans, but…I certainly wanted:“
“So bring him over sometime! I’ve seen him around so much and I feel like I barely know him…”

“You’re sure your friends wouldn’t mind? That Keith wouldn’t mind?”

“Keith wouldn’t mind,” Keith said as the door slid open. He leaned against the doorframe and a ball of black fur streaked past his legs. The next thing Allura knew a panting, drooling weight jumped halfway into her lap. “Hey – Kosmo, no!”

Allura’s beer went rolling by her feet, spilling through the slats between the wood. Maybe it was for the best – she’d only really taken it to be polite. “It’s fine!” she insisted, laughing brightly. Kosmo was relentless, his tongue catching her jaw and neck. “It’s fine, really. Oh, he’s such a sweetheart… aren’t you, you sweet fluffy thing?”

It took a good strong tug for Keith to get the dog off of her, and she wiped the slobber off her skin. “He sure is…energetic,” she said.

“Yeah…sorry about that,” Keith winced.

“Seriously, it’s fine.” She grinned at Shiro. “I think I’d love to meet your friends. Just as long as none of them are such big lickers as this one is.”

“They’re not,” Shiro said.

“Lance might be,” Keith pointed out.

“He won’t.”

Keith snorted. “He might be.” He glanced at Allura just as she finished drying off her neck. “Are you staying for dinner? I made ratatouille.”

Shiro nudged her. “I’d recommend staying…he makes a mean ratatouille.”

“It’s alright.”

“It’s mean.”

“Well it’s my mom’s recipe,” Keith said with a shrug. “And she always dumps like half a bottle of hot sauce in at the end, so if that’s what you mean by mean…”

Kosmo was back again, nudging at Allura’s hand until she scratched behind his ear. “Well…” she said, “It looks like this one wants me to stay, and I can’t argue with that face.”

And it turned out that Shiro was right – Keith did make a mean ratatouille.

After months of treading water, Lotor felt like he was floating.

It wasn’t the love-struck (smitten, as Ezor lovingly put it) kind of floating that (he assumed) came after a good first date. Well, maybe it was partially that – after all, the date with Allura had been phenomenal. But a lot of it was thanks to what had happened afterwards.

Once he had finally made it home, he had sat down on his living room sofa and written six more chapters of his book, for a total of eleven. Far from done. But still, it was everything his publisher had been demanding plus one more for good measure.

He still couldn’t quite believe it, even as he dropped the heavy manila envelope into the mailbox on
“Mailing something?”

It was a good thing he’d gotten his fingers clear of the mail slot, because he was pretty sure he would have lost them when he jumped and it slam closed. And that would have made finishing the damn book difficult.

She was smiling as she strode up to him, hair messily framing her face. She was flushed from the summer heat, despite how much it had started to cool off since the sun had set. “I don’t think I’ve even bought stamps in…God, it’s probably been years.”

“Yes, well…my publisher is a bit on the traditional side,” Lotor admitted. He kept his eyes pointedly above the soft line of her bare shoulders, focused on the swoop of her bangs over her eyes instead. “He always insists I mail a paper copy on top of an email. Something about not wanting to waste paper printing at his office. So he just insists that I waste the paper instead.”

Allura’s grin stretched across her face, her eyes shining. “Is that your book?” she breathed. “The one you’ve been working on? Did you finally finish it?”

“Part of it.” He shrugged. “The first eleven chapters, and considering how overdue they are, I didn’t bother complaining about killing a few trees on my publisher’s behalf.”

“That’s incredible! Well, not the killing trees part – I really hope your publisher at least recycles. But eleven chapters! And you’ve been working so hard…all that early-morning ABBA…”

“I didn’t wake you up again did I?”

She giggled. “No.”

She was…leaning closer, her smile shifting to something softer, playful even. From underneath her bangs he could make out her eyes, half-lidded and fixed on his face. She didn’t touch, but she was close enough that he could have easily closed the gap if he wanted.

He swallowed.

“Maybe I could read it sometime?” he barely heard her say.

“Ah – maybe.” God no. “When it’s finished.” Especially not then. “I’m sure you could find something far more…stimulating.”

Bullshit. Chapter seven had easily been the most carnal eighteen pages he had ever written. But that had nothing to do with Allura. Or their date. And he certainly wasn’t going to open up to her about any of that.

Allura drew back a bit, looking almost…disappointed? It only flashed across her face for a second before she smiled at him again, clasping her hands in front of her. “I’m actually glad I caught you. I was just going to text you, but I’d rather do this face to face. I just had dinner with Shiro and Keith at their place.”

He blinked. “Shiro?”

“The handyman.”

“I remember.” Now, anyway. How could he forget almost accidentally asking the guy out?
“He’s having a party next weekend. Well…not really a party, just having a few friends over for a potluck. I offered to bake a pie – strawberry rhubarb.”

Lotor’s mouth watered. Had he even had dinner yet? He couldn’t quite remember. “Sounds heavenly.”

“Anyway-“ She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and he got a full unobstructed view of the light dusting of pink spreading across her cheeks. “Well…I was wondering if you would…maybe like to come along?”

He tore himself out of a passing fantasy about a big fat slice of warm strawberry rhubarb pie with a blink. “Really?”

“It wouldn’t exactly be a one-on-one date, I know. But maybe we could get drinks afterward to make up for it. Just the two of us.”

A second date.

She was asking him out.

How did she make this look so easy?

When he didn’t answer right away, Allura started talking again: “You don’t have to. They all seem like good people. Friends of Keith’s from college apparently.” That stubborn strand of hair fell from behind her ear and into her face again. “I guess I never really asked if you’d be…interested in a second date. I just felt like the first one went so well, and I’d really like to get to know you more and-“

Surely she couldn’t possibly think there was any version of this universe where he would ever turn her down? But from the look on her face, she seemed to be weighing the possibility more with each passing second that he went without answering the damn question.

“Allura-“ His hand was moving, reaching for her, his fingers gently nudging themselves around her wrist and closing against her palm. She paused, looked down at it, and he fought against the urge to pull away. “I’d love to.” He smiled. “But I don’t think I can do much to contribute to the potluck.”

Slowly, her expression shifted to match his own. “Don’t sell yourself short,” she insisted. “That chili you made was astounding.” Her laugh was muffled against the palm of her free hand. “I just feel bad you were so nervous that you didn’t get to eat any of it.”

Oh god, she’d noticed? Of course she had. He’d been so damn obvious he would have been surprised if she hadn’t noticed.

“It’s just as good the next day,” he said with a shrug.

“Well-“ She gave his hand a squeeze before taking a step back toward the apartment. “Bring something or don’t – the pie can always be from both of us.”

That was such a strange little word.

Us.

Both of us.

It echoed and rang in his head like a the sound of a bell as he watched her climb the steps up to the
front door. She disappeared inside with a smile and a wave, and Lotor’s hand tingled as he shoved it into his pocket.

And then a familiar pair of voices echoed all the way down the street from the second floor window: “LOTOR AND ALLURA, SITTIN’ IN A TREE~”

“Ezor, shut up!”

A flock of birds lifted off from the opposite roof in a huge, undulating black cloud, and he sighed. But he smiled anyway as he ran the pad of his thumb against his palm.

“So what do you know about these friends of his?” Lotor asked, and Allura couldn’t help but feel very aware of the silence that passed as she paused outside the door to Shiro’s apartment.

“Well…apparently Hunk is a phenomenal cook, and Katie is halfway through graduate school even though she’s only twenty. She’s studying…something with computers. And Lance…” She stifled a giggle. “Apparently Lance is a licker.”

Lotor choked. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I have no idea,” she said with a shrug. “But I’m sure they’re all great. I hope they like the pie – I left it in a little too long and burnt the edges…” She frowned down at the foil-covered dish in her hands.

Lotor let out a thoughtful hum and said, “Well, if it’s horrible I volunteer to eat all of it so you won’t feel bad.”

“Stop,” she insisted, nudging him so hard that she almost dropped the pie right there in the hallway.

The sound of the doorbell was met with frantic barking and the scratch of Kosmo’s claws on the hard wood, mixed with Keith’s voice insisting (unsuccessfully) that he quiet down before he bagged them an official noise complaint. The door opened a moment later, and by then Kosmo was sitting contentedly behind Keith’s legs as he let out a breath.

“Hey.” He smiled. “Sorry about the dog.”

Allura didn’t waste any time shoving the pie into Lotor’s hands and squatting down to welcome an energetic round of kisses from the German shepherd. “I don’t mind! No, I don’t…how could I ever mind when you’re such a sweet little fluffy thing!”

“You must be Lotor, right?” she heard Keith say over the sound of Kosmo’s happy panting in her ear.

“Yes – and you’re…”

“Keith.” A beat. “Handyman’s boyfriend.”

“Right.”

From inside, someone called, “Keeeeeith, how do you set your oven timer?”

Keith huffed. “It’s the button next to the broiler switch.”

“Which one’s the broiler switch?”

“Maybe the one that says broil?” someone else – a higher voice, definitely not Shiro – insisted.
“Okay, don’t be a smartass.”

“Can’t. Too smart.” The second voice sounded like it was catching on the edge of a smile. One that Keith had started to mirror.

“Uh, why don’t you come in? The gang’s all here.”

Kosmo bounded across the living room to splay across Shiro’s lap on the sofa, and he grinned at them as they made it through the door. “Oh, hey – I guess Kosmo already got in his hello’s,” he chuckled, scratching the dog’s ear. “Glad you guys made it. I uh…I hope you don’t mind that I don’t get up.”

“This just in, everyone – Shiro’s a shitty host!” one of the voice from before called from the kitchen. And then a moment later: “Ow, not in the ribs, Pidge. You’re gonna make me drop the mac and cheese.”

“Drop it and I end you.”

“Guys,” a third voice insisted. “No fighting in the kitchen! Don’t make me turn this oven around.”

“Everyone else is working on food,” Keith said. “In case you couldn’t already tell. C’mon, I’ll introduce you while Shiro distracts Kosmo.”

He led them around the corner to the kitchen, which was small enough for two people to cram inside, let alone the three that were climbing all over each other now. “Lance,” huffed a man in a yellow apron, “Did you pre-heat the oven already?”

“Yeah.”

“No,” said a short-statured girl with light brown hair and round wire-rimmed glasses. “He set the timer for three minutes and fifty seconds.”

The man in the apron groaned. “Laaaance…”

“It’s not my fault Keith and Shiro’s fancy oven doesn’t make any sense!”

“Guys.” They paused and turned at the sound of Keith’s voice. “This is Allura and Lotor.”

Oh, now all those eyes were on her. Them. She fought back a blush and offered a wave. “Hello…”

“Hell-oooo,” Lance said with a wide smirk, leaning on the doorway and extending a hand.

“Ignore him,” the girl with the glasses said. But Allura shook Lance’s hand anyway, and a moment later the girl was pushing past him with a smile. “I’m Katie. Friends call me Pidge.” She nodded behind her at the man in the apron who was busy setting the oven temperature and carefully crumbling cheese and bread crumbs over the macaroni on the counter. “That’s Hunk. He’s kinda in the zone right now.”

“You can’t rush art!” Hunk insisted.

“I’m sure it’ll be worth it,” Allura offered.

She was rewarded with an enthusiastic snap and point in her direction. “The lady gets it.”

Katie looked past Allura with a chuckle. “You’re the date, right?”
Lotor tapped his fingers against the edge of the pie dish and blinked. “Ah…yes.”

“I knew you looked familiar! I saw you guys at the Olkari last week!” She was grinning as she spoke, her eyes shining behind her glasses and a fringe of bangs.

“Way to go full stalker,” Lance quipped, earning himself a shove and a pout.

“I wasn’t stalking. I was on stock room duty. They won’t let me back on the hot bar since I tried to fix that espresso machine.” She sighed.

“What was wrong with the espresso machine?” Allura hazarded.

“Nothing,” Katie said. “But I figured I could get it to brew a little faster to keep up with the mid-morning rush. And I did, but the manager got pissy at me anyway.”

“Aren’t you leaving out the part where you got second-degree burns?” Keith pointed out.

“So? Getting electrocuted that one time was worse, and I’m not dead, am I?” Allura opened her mouth to say something – something…supportive? Or congratulatory? – but Katie interrupted her, beaming at Lotor. “Did you bring pie?”

“Well, Allura did,” he said. “I’m not much of a baker, unless you count those cinnamon rolls from a tube.”

Well if that chili he’d made was any indication, he was a much better cook than she could ever hope to be. One couldn’t live off of cupcakes alone.

And speaking of food, the mac and cheese was miles better than anything Allura had whipped up out of a box in her life, and for all of his struggles figuring out the oven, Lance’s pulled pork came out of the slow cooker tender enough to melt in her mouth. Shiro dutifully ensured that everyone got a heaping portion of spinach salad on their plates – even though Pidge grumbled about it before cleaning her plate – and looked on in silent horror while Keith doused his entire plate in at least two layers of hot sauce.

“You kiss Shiro with that mouth?” Lance grimaced as he watched Keith shovel a healthy scoop of red-stained mac and cheese into his mouth.

“Yeah,” he said simply.

Shiro shrugged. “He’s right.”

“Speaking of couples–” Lance’s head swung around in Lotor and Allura’s direction as he waggled his fingers at them. “How did you guys meet anyway?”

Beside her, Lotor coughed on a bite of pork, and she knew all too well that the heat spreading over her cheeks wasn’t thanks to the steam rising off of her plate. “O-oh…well…it’s not all that exciting of a story. I was trying to move this damn couch into my apartment and he just…swooped in and helped.” She shot him a smile. “Really, it was very gentlemanly, actually.”

Lotor coughed again.

“And then we kept running into each other…” I had a random sex dream about him for some reason. She left that part out. Way out. Buried at least a mile down in her brain. “…and then we went out for coffee, and…well so far that’s it.”
“Wait, that time at the café was your first date?” Pidge gaped. “I thought you’d been on at least like…five or six.”

“You…you think?”

“Yeah! You were both so into talking to each other that you were still there when my shift ended.”

Lance smirked, almost knowingly. “Now that’s a sign of some serious chemistry.”

“I suppose we just…found a lot to talk about,” Lotor offered. Allura was almost too busy shoveling food into her mouth – trying to distract from her blush – to notice the hint of pink on his cheeks. Almost.

“Well I think it’s a nice little love story!” Hunk assured them with a bright smile.

“At least it wasn’t a complete disaster of a first date like Shiro and Keith here,” Pidge snickered. “Stranded at a T.G.I. Fridays at two in the morning…”

“It was a Denny’s,” both Keith and Shiro said.

“I hate to break it to you, but that’s not any less of a disaster.”

“You…stranded in a Denny’s?” Lotor asked, one eyebrow neatly raised, and Lance leaned back and groaned.

“Aaaagh don’t make them tell it again. We’ve heard it a thousand times.”

“It’s not even a long story,” Keith insisted. “We went out for dinner, then walked along the beach for so long that we wound up getting hungry again, tried to go to Denny’s, and Shiro’s car died right there in the parking lot.”

Pidge shot a sympathetic glance Lotor’s way. “Shiro tells it better.”

“Yeah, what about that romantic kiss in the rain?” Hunk insisted.

Allura couldn’t help but grin as Shiro blushed. “You didn’t tell me that part!”

Shiro twirled a bit of his forelock between his fingers as he pointedly avoided every pair of eyes on him. “It…wasn’t really all that romantic. But ah…yeah, I guess it was technically a kiss in the rain.”

“Kissing in the rain is overrated,” Keith groaned.

Lance cackled. “But admit it – it was a great kiss!”


Shiro shot him a warm smile. “Me too. But I think it was worth it.”

Allura ate until she could barely move, and found her second wind by the time they cut into the pie. Pidge devoured hers in less than a minute and went back for more, Lance insisted that it was the best (and only, Pidge reminded him) rhubarb pie he’d ever tasted, and she swore she saw tears in Hunk’s eyes as he praised the ratio of sweet to tart with every single bite.

“Guess I don’t have to eat the whole thing for you after all,” Lotor told her in almost a whisper with a reassuring smile.
“Just don’t tell them it’s store-bought crust,” she said even more quietly.

“I won’t tell a soul.” His gaze shifted to her cheek. “Ah…you have a little…”

Before she could ask, he pressed the pad of his thumb against the corner of her mouth. She wondered if he could hear her heart pounding from there. Or maybe feel it in his fingers as his nail just barely grazed her lip. “Oh…th…thank you.”

“Whelp-” Lance’s voice was rough with a subdued yawn as he stretched in his seat. “I think Kosmo’s got the right idea.” He nodded at the dog, curled up and snoring on the sofa. “I think it’s time I go home and settle into a nice food coma.”

“Yeah…I have a test to study for,” Pidge sighed.

Lance smirked. “And by ‘study,’ do you mean ‘stay up and play video games until one in the morning?’”

She shrugged. “Yeah. But it’s multithreaded parallelism. I got it in the bag.”

Allura took the opportunity to glance at Lotor and found him looking right back at her. She’d mentioned getting a drink after all this, spending some time alone…And as wonderful as all of Shiro’s friends were, she found herself craving some one on one time with him. A nice cocktail and some quiet conversation sounded like exactly what she needed.

They bid their goodbyes – mostly to Kosmo, since she just couldn’t resist waking the dog up for one last good belly scratch – and headed down the back stairwell. She allowed herself a breath of relief, and she thought she heard him do the same. “See? They’re nice,” she said.

“They are,” he agreed.

After a moment, she added, “Loud.”

He laughed. “They’re that too.”

They lingered by her car, and Allura weighed whether to even ask about that drink. Lotor had been quiet all evening – not in a bad way, she sensed, but he seemed like the type of person with only so much social battery to use in one evening. She didn’t consider herself very introverted, and even she was a little weary after spending dinner caught in the crossfire of at least three different conversations at any given moment.

And yet she didn’t quite want the night to end. At the thought of spending another hour, or two, or hell, maybe three talking to Lotor, it felt like the evening was just beginning.

But she didn’t get a chance to ask.

Lotor beat her to it.

“Would you…still like to get that drink?”

He sounded hesitant, like he’d been weighing the same possibilities as she had. Allura let out a breath and answered with a wide smile: “Absolutely.”
The bar down the road from Shiro’s apartment was one that he and Keith had both recommended. According to them it had been the first place they’d gone together after they’d moved, and according to Keith they had fantastic sriracha peanuts served his favorite brands of whiskey.

“The bathrooms are nice too,” Shiro had offered. She’d thought it was a little odd at first, but if she’d read Keith’s blush right, it seemed they had gotten up to more in those bathrooms than fixing their hair.

Maybe that was a good sign.

Not that she was planning on dragging Lotor into a bathroom stall. She had class, dammit.

To the bar’s credit, though, it wasn’t too loud and there were plenty of comfortable-looking booths settled out of the way of the mostly deserted dance floor. It was still relatively early for the Saturday bar crowd, she supposed. Maybe that was a good thing. Drunken yelling wasn’t exactly the best way to set the mood for a date.

“I haven’t been to a bar since grad school,” she sighed. “Last time I remember ever getting puked on…”

Lotor winced. “Let’s try to avoid that this go around, shall we?”

“Yes, please.”

They found a booth in the corner, quiet and tucked out of the way, and they settled there with their drinks. The ice cubes in Allura’s dark and stormy clinked together soothingly as she brought it to her lips for a thoughtful sip. “You didn’t have to buy me a drink,” she said with a smile. “I was going to offer – to celebrate you finally getting those chapters to your publisher.”

Lotor blinked at her over his whiskey sour. “I thought it was only fair – you bought the pastries on our first date.” He raised one careful brow. “Turnabout’s fair play. Isn’t that the phrase?”

“Well…” She raised her glass. “I propose a toast. To your book. May it sell a million copies and let you settle into an early retirement.”

His glass clinked against hers over the sound of him chuckling. “I doubt that’s in the cards.”

“You never know!”

“True…but first thing’s first – I still have to finish the damn thing.”

She carefully stirred her drink. “How long does it normally take you to finish a book?”

“The first one in this serious only took me about a month,” Lotor said breezily. “Editing and getting it published took much longer than that. The second took a bit longer to write, but I had connections to rely on, so it felt a little easier.” He let out a sigh and took a good long sip of his cocktail. “At this point all I want is to finish this damn trilogy and be done with it.”

Allura gripped her highball glass with a wide grin, forgetting for a moment how quickly the ice cubes were melting. Watery rum be damned, she couldn’t help but ask – “A trilogy?”

A blush crept across his face. Maybe it was the whiskey. “Ah…well, yes.”
“That’s amazing! And it reminds me, actually…I looked around the library, but I couldn’t find your name anywhere.”

Lotor very nearly choked, and she wondered if she had said something wrong. “Oh-“ he coughed. “Well…I suppose I should have told you – I do write under a…well, I use a pseudonym.”

A pseudonym…of course. Everyone seemed to nowadays. And considering how little his father seemed to approve, it wasn’t any wonder that Lotor might have started out using an assumed name to publish his work. She felt foolish for not thinking of it sooner, but instead of wallowing in it, she offered him a smile and cooly said, “If I didn’t know better I’d say you didn’t want me reading your books.”

“No!” He very nearly knocked over his drink – luckily, he righted his glass at the last moment. That would have been a waste of good whiskey. “No, it’s not that, Allura. I just…I guess I’m not used to sharing it…you know…face to face.”

“It’s alright,” she insisted, and for good measure, she folded her hand over his on his glass. “Really. If you don’t feel…comfortable sharing it with me, I wont take it personally.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to.” He was staring at her hand over his, and slowly turned his hand to lace their fingers together. He seemed to be getting more comfortable doing that. Allura couldn’t have been happier to see it. “Let me put it this way…what I write, it’s…it’s not for everyone. I’ve known that a long time.”

She didn’t have any idea how bad it could possibly be. Some kind of bloody murder-mystery? A tragic, sappy love story? Kink-filled, heavy BDSM erotica? No, there was no way Lotor wrote anything like that. Not when he had such a pink tint to his cheeks as she squeezed his hand.

But surely he didn’t think she would judge him for whatever it was…not when she had a few proverbial skeletons in the closet of her own literary choices…

“Well, whatever it is,” she said, “I’m sure it’s fantastic. After all, you must have done something right to get two parts of this series published already.” She smiled as she pulled her hand away. “I’m going to run to the bathroom. Rum always goes right through me…”

“Right.” His tone was a bit clipped. Not angry. Not at her. But frustrated about something Allura couldn’t quite place.

She hoped she hadn’t been the cause.

No, of course she wasn’t, she scolded herself. Maybe it was a touchy subject, but subjects could be changed. No problem.

Double entendre aside, Shiro was right about the bathrooms here – they were impeccably clean and well stocked with lavender-scented soap. She took her time washing her hands, resolved to steer the conversation away from Lotor’s book to let him relax a bit, and walked out with a smile on her face and a spring in her step.

Maybe that was partly thanks to the rum in her system. But it worked either way.

Two steps outside the bathroom she smelled cigarette smoke and beer, and the next moment a voice piped up – uncomfortably close – accompanied by a breath against her ear. “Hey there, beautiful.”

She had to stop herself from letting out an audible ugh. She tried to get it across in her eyes instead. But the drunk – and unpleasantly greasy, if his hair was any indication – twenty-something at her
side just smiled.

“Didn’t mean to startle you or anything. Just wanted to say you got the prettiest eyes I’ve ever seen.”

“Thank you,” Allura said, out of habit. It came out sour. “But I’m not interested.”

He scoffed. “What, can’t take a compliment.”

“Dude, just forget it.” One of his friends – Allura assumed, pretty generously – nudged at his arm.

“Nah, what a guy can’t compliment a lady anymore?” He wasn’t looking at her, but she still didn’t appreciate the tone. “What, all I said was she has nice eyes. What’s wrong with that?”

“She’s leaving now,” Allura said icily, and she tried to step around him.

He blocked her.

That was a mistake.

“Hey, you don’t have to be such a-“

“Is there a problem?”

Now that voice she knew. It was a welcome one. But it was different than she was used to. When she turned to glance at him, Lotor looked different too.

Damn, he could level a stone-cold glare when he put his mind to it. Impressive.

Mister Greasy Beer Breath shrank back a bit, barely enough for Allura to relax much. “Shit, you her boyfriend?”

“Date,” Lotor said, like the distinction was important. “And I think you owe an apology.”

“Hey, I’m sorry for stepping in, man-“

“No, you owe her apology.” He narrowed his eyes. “You were rude.”

Eyes were turning their way as the man across from them shot them a clumsy smile. “Hey, it was just a compliment-“

“It doesn’t sound like you know the meaning of the word. A compliment is meant to be polite.” He stared down his nose at the man, whose face was growing redder by the second. “Do you understand? Or should I define any of those terms for you?”

Damn, Allura thought, and a second later she realized she’d said it out loud too.

“You can’t talk to me that way!” the man growled, stumbling a bit as he took a step toward them, and suddenly Allura was very aware of just how Lotor had positioned himself – directly between her and the drunken bar-goer.

“Can’t I?” Lotor asked, eyebrows arched, leaning forward. She’d almost forgotten how tall he really was – he towered over the man. “Because it seems to me that you know how to speak about as well as a trained parrot. Although that might be an insult to my grandmother’s pet macaw.”

For a drunk, the man’s fist was surprisingly quick.
His knuckles caught the side of Lotor’s face – he stumbled a bit, but stayed on his feet, and kept himself planted between his assailant and Allura. For a moment, it all seemed to slow down around her, like she’d stepped into the Matrix. Lotor caught himself on the bar, the bartender started screaming at the man to back off as she reached for the phone, and the man’s fist cocked back for another blow.

It was slow, for a second or two, and then suddenly Allura was moving very fast.

She didn’t think much about it – her body seemed to do it all on its own. One moment she was watching Lotor take a good blow to the face, and the next she was grabbing the drunk man’s arm, turning on her heel, and heaving him in a wide arc over her shoulder and onto the bar floor.

Chaos melted into silence – except for her victim groaning at her feet – and suddenly she was painfully aware of how many eyes were on her.

She panted, looked over at the bartender, and said the only thing that came to mind as she reached for Lotor’s hand. “I…think we should go.”

Lotor winced and drew a breath between his teeth. “Ah-“

“Stay still,” Allura said, gently. She was frowning when he managed to open his eyes and look at her. “Are you sure you don’t need a doctor…what if you have a concussion?”

“I don’t have a concussion,” he insisted. He held the towel-wrapped back of frozen brussel sprouts to his temple, his fingers brushing hers as he did. “He didn’t hit all that hard. Just took me by surprise.”

So had Allura throwing him like a sack of potatoes over her shoulder. Something twisted in his chest when he remembered it. Something not entirely unpleasant.

She sighed. “I can’t believe I did that. I don’t know what came over me.”

“He had it coming.”

“I just…did it without thinking.”

“Luckily for me.” He managed a smile. “I haven’t been in a bar fight in a good long time.”

A moment later, she mirrored his expression with a smirk of her own. “You could have taken him.”

“The fact that he was drunk certainly gave me an advantage.”

Her hands covered his a second later – not the one holding the sprouts to his head, but the one on his lap. Her fingers were slightly cold from grabbing the bag from the freezer, but it only took a few moments for them to warm up again.

He glanced down at it and blinked.

“You…you didn’t have to do that,” she softly told him. The lamp by her sofa gave off a soft, yellow-tinted light that reflected in her eyes and made her gaze look that much warmer. Like evening sunlight through stained glass.

He swallowed. His throat was dry. She was so close… “I couldn’t just let him speak to you that way.”

“You got hurt on my account.”
“It’s just a bruise.”

“Still.” One hand cupped the cheek opposite the bag of sprouts, her thumb running gently over his cheekbone.

Oh. When had her lips gotten so close to his own?

“It was…” Speaking was more difficult than he wanted to admit. “It was just the right thing to do. Though I don’t doubt you could have handled it yourself…”

When she smiled, the feeling in his chest grew tighter. It gained direction, purpose – it was a pull. He couldn’t stop looking at her lips.

“It was brave,” she whispered. “Maybe even daring.”

For a moment he thought he saw her eyes dart down toward his mouth. And then she was leaning forward, toward him, closer-

His legs moved before he realized it, shooting him up from the sofa and almost sending his head straight into the lamp. “I-I should-” He lamely handed the bag of brussell sprouts back to her and cleared his throat. What the hell had happened to his voice? “I should…probably get home. And let you sleep. It’s late.” He tried to smile.

It took her a tragically long time to offer one of her own. “It is getting late,” she finally admitted. She sounded so…disappointed.

Damn.

He bit his lip. “Ah…Allura.” She looked up at him, eyes still shining. Beautiful. “I…I hope I didn’t ruin our evening.”

“No…God, no.”

Her arms wrapped around his shoulders, warm and tight.

“Thank you, Lotor,” she said, and even though her face was buried in the crook of his shoulder, he could hear her smile in her words. “I really did have a good time…despite the hiccup at the end.”

Hiccup. That was one word for it.

Concern was still swimming in her eyes when she pulled back again. “You’re sure you’re alright?”

“Absolutely.” He gave her arm a reassuring squeeze. “Though tomorrow I’ll probably look like…well, like I got in a bar fight.”

That got a laugh out of her, and it warmed him all the way to the tips of his ears.

She walked with him down the hall to his door and lingered there as he turned the key in the lock. “We’ll just have to have a re-do some time,” she told him, hands clasped in front of her as his hand hovered over the doorknob.

“Right.” He looked at the door and back at her. “I’d like that. Very much.”

“To celebrate the next ten chapters of your book?” she offered, and he chuckled.
“Sooner than that, I’d hope.”

She *beamed* at him, her cheeks rosy and her eyes glinting with excitement. “Sooner, then.”

Her lips looked *so* soft.

He turned the doorknob. “Goodnight Allura.”

She took a few steps back down the hall. “Goodnight Lotor.”

He stepped inside and closed the door behind him before he changed his mind.
“So,” Acxa said, in a tone so carefully measured that he felt like he was about to get the lecture of a lifetime. “Let me get this straight...She was sitting across from you, she looked down at your mouth, she leaned in, and you didn’t kiss her?”

He wondered if he could become one with the couch if he concentrated hard enough on sinking into it. No such luck so far.

“Lotor.”

“What? What do you want me to say? No, I didn’t kiss her. I could have – maybe I wanted to, but I… I couldn’t alright?”

“Why? She obviously wanted you to! The signs were all there – she was hoping for it!” She sighed, looming over him with her hands planted on her hips. “She wanted you to make a move.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Uh, yeah I have a pretty good idea. You know, being a woman and being married to another woman and all.” Her expertly shaped eyebrow was just as expertly arched. “Sure, I wasn’t there, but it sounds to me like she was sending some pretty strong signals. You didn’t get any sort of read on her at all?”

“Maybe she did want me to, but I couldn’t.”

“You… couldn’t? You took a punch for her like an hour before that and you couldn’t work up the nerve to kiss her?” She gestured at his face. “A kiss probably would have left less of a bruise.”

“That’s the point!” he snapped, and he sighed as the frustration burned and twisted in his chest. “It… it wasn’t right.”

“What were you waiting for, a chorus of angels?”

“No, just…I… I didn’t want it to happen like that.” He groaned. “Sitting there on her couch with a bag of frozen vegetables pressed against my face… that’s not how I wanted to remember it.”

“Remember what?”

“My first-“

He cut himself off. Instead of finishing the sentence and risking the mortification that was sure to follow, he sat up and busied himself fluffing Acxa’s pillows. A moment later, though, she snatched one out of his hand and leveled him with a long stare.
She looked…shocked.

“Your first…kiss with Allura?”

He stared at the pillow in her hands and sighed.

“Your…first kiss…period?”

There wasn’t an answer he could give her that wouldn’t feel utterly ridiculous. Instead, he pulled the pillow back and jammed it against the arm of the couch. She didn’t fight him. “It’s not important,” he insisted.

“Lotor…” Her voice was soft, gentle, and when he looked at her again, so was her expression.

“Lotor…you’ve never…”

He didn’t look at her as he muttered, “I never thought I’d get the chance. Is it wrong of me to want it to be…special?” He let out a long sigh, standing and brushing past her on his way to the kitchen. There wasn’t anything in here that he particularly needed, but the counter gave him something to rest his weight on and an excuse not to look Acxa in the eye. “I don’t…I don’t know how to do this, Acxa. I don’t know anything about any of this.”

He heard her sidling up behind him, but she didn’t say anything. He didn’t blame her – there wasn’t anything she could say that would make it any less laughable. Almost thirty without ever having been on a date – well, until recently – and still never even have kissed-

“You probably know more than you think you do,” she said.

He almost turned around to face her. Almost.

“Lotor…” Out of the corner of his eye he could see her hopping up to sit on the counter beside him. “You’ve…really never kissed anyone before?”

Her tone wasn’t judgmental or mocking, but it still made him flinch. “I never felt like I wanted…”

“Yes you do!” she said with a warm and somewhat disbelieving laugh. “You don’t think you do, but you do. I know it sounds like a stupid cliché, but sometimes you just…you just know. You get butterflies, the shakes, sweaty palms, all that sappy shit.”

He considered it for a moment – the feeling twisting in his stomach when he’d watched Allura lean in closer, the way his hands had shaken as he’d turned the key in his apartment lock, the way they’d slipped on the knob when he’d gone to turn it and caught her smiling at him...

Acxa’s hand landed on his shoulder. “Look, if you wanna make it special, then make it special. But don’t second-guess yourself into losing her, alright? She’s into you.”

Finally, he hazarded a look over at her. “You think?”

“She agreed to date you, didn’t she?” she laughed. “Look, I’ve only met her the one time, but trust me – as someone who knows ladies, this one really likes you.”

He surprised himself by managing a weak smile. “You’re actually very good at the pep talks when
you put your mind to it.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t.”

The sharp rap of knuckles against wood drew their gazes to the door, where Narti was standing with her arms crossed. She nodded at Acxa and signed, What did I just finish telling you?

“I know, I know – you don’t have to remind me how much you hate it when I sit on the counter. But mister grumpy here needed it.” She jumped down again and strode over to plant a chaste kiss on Narti’s lips. “See, Lotor? Easy.”

She whispered something to her wife, pecking her on the cheek once more for good measure, and as she slipped past her up the stairs, Lotor looked at the kitchen window at the setting sun. The dishes from dinner were already in the dishwasher, Ezor and Zethrid had left almost an hour ago, and Lotor couldn’t help but feel like he was overstaying his welcome.

Narti was still leaning on the doorframe, watching him with a knowing smile on her face. He sighed. “I’m guessing you heard all that.”

She just shrugged.

“You’re very good at that – eavesdropping. You’d make a good spy.”

I was just passing by, she signed.

“Passing by, right.” He chuckled. “Don’t you dare tell Ezor and Zethrid about…what I said. About the…the kiss thing. They’ll never let me live it down.”

Narti pressed the pad of her thumb and forefinger together and drew it across her lips. The meaning was clear enough. A moment later, though, she brought her hands up again to sign, I think it’s sweet.

He blinked. “What, that I managed to make it this far in life without kissing anyone?”

That you want it to be special, she told him.

The sunset gave the sunlight spilling through the kitchen window a pink tint, and maybe that was for the best, because it hid his blush. At least he hoped it did. “It’s…not just for my sake. Even if it’s not her first, she deserves to have our…first kiss be something special, don’t you think?”

I’d sure appreciate it, she signed with a smile. What did you have in mind?

“I’m honestly not sure,” he sighed, staring at the window again. The sunset was beautiful. Most of them were. Romantic, albeit cliché.

Narti nudged him to get his attention and then insisted, Don’t overthink it.

“Yes.”

Yeah you are.

She was grinning from ear to ear. It almost made her look proud. He huffed. “I’m going home.” He twirled his keys around his finger and shot her a glance over his shoulder. “And I’m not overthinking it. I’m just…considering my options.”

Narti didn’t reply, which was probably for the best. All she did was wave as he stepped out onto the back porch and headed for his car.
On Wednesday, for the first time since she’d started her new job – the first time in several years, actually – Allura called in sick.

It wasn’t the stomach flu, like she claimed on the phone, but it had confined her to her bed just as well anyway, her knees to her chest and a pillow tucked in her arms. Pain washed through her abdomen in harsh, unforgiving waves, tempting her with a moment or two of relief every minute or so before coming back with a vengeance again once she’d let her guard down. She’d spent the last twenty minutes or so stifling whimpers and curses into her pillow and weighing the benefits of looking up a Lamaze tutorial or two on YouTube.

The worst part, though, was realizing to her horror that she’d forgotten to buy tampons.

How the hell had she managed to forget? She remembered explicitly writing them down on her list when she’d gone to the store that Sunday, but they hadn’t had the brand she’d wanted so she’d resolved to go Monday after work instead.

Well, that had worked out well. And now she was bed-bound and tampon-less. She’d managed to find a dusty Kotex in her travel toiletry case, but that wouldn’t last her all day, and if she tried to make it to the store in her current state she’d probably wither and die before she made it halfway.

She stared at her phone. There was only one option, as far as she could see. Desperate times…

She took a breath and dialed his number.

Lotor picked up on the second ring: “Allura?” He sounded almost surprised. She couldn’t blame him – it felt ridiculous calling him from right down the hall, especially when the cell reception in this building was as spotty as it was.

“Hi,” she muttered.

If she sounded half as close to death as she felt, it wasn’t any wonder that Lotor’s voice was tinged with concern when he asked, “Is something wrong?”

No use sugar-coating it. “I think I’m dying. My body has turned against itself.”

He was silent for a moment before he carefully asked, “Are you…sick?”

“No, I-“ She sighed. “Lotor…I…need a favor.”

“Of course.”

Despite the fact that he couldn’t see her, she hid under her blankets anyway. Like that would make it easier. “Normally I wouldn’t pull you into something like this after just a couple of dates, but… would you mind going down to the corner store and getting me a box of tampons?” When he didn’t answer right away, to have something to focus on other than her cheeks burning, she added, “It’s a matter of life and death.”

“Is that all?” She swore she heard him laugh, and for half a second she resented that before he said, “You make it sound like you’re asking me to help you hide a body.”

“No until we’ve been on at least five dates.”

The chuckle turned into a full-blown, warm laugh. She felt a little better already.
“Give me…twenty minutes? Can you survive that long?”

“I think so,” she sighed, uncurling from around her pillow a bit with a grimace.

He was a saint. A downright honest saint.

She managed to get up from her bed long enough to shuffle to unlock the front door and relocate to her sofa. She sank into the nest of pillows and blankets that she’d gathered there and got to work absentmindedly scrolling through Netflix and trying to ignore the growing urge to carve out her own ovaries and save herself any more trouble.

After what felt like an eternity – though to Lotor’s credit, it was only twenty-three minutes by her watch – the knock at the door finally came. “It’s open,” she called, and hoped he could hear her from underneath the comforter she’d dragged off her bed.

“You know, I could be a burglar.”

She listlessly thrust her arms toward the screen. “If you’re here to steal my TV, have at it.”

A plastic shopping bag dangled in her field of vision for a moment before dropping onto her coffee table. “I got your tampons,” he said matter-of-factly, and she breathed a massive sigh of relief. And then a second one too when she dug out the box and realized they were the super-absorbent variety.

“Thank you for not wasting my time with any of those ridiculously tiny ‘light’ matchsticks.”

Another bag joined the first, and Lotor knelt across from her on the carpet and began to unpack it. “I also picked up a few other things for good measure,” he said. “A bottle of Midol–” He set it on the table, and Allura could have cried. “–and some chocolate for good measure. Ah…I wasn’t sure if you preferred milk or dark chocolate so I went ahead and grabbed both.”

Allura actually cried at that. “You bought me chocolate?” she sniffled.

“And–” Lord, there was more? Was this a dream? Was she dead? “Er…I found this face mask in the bargain bin. Wasn’t completely sure if it was something you’d want, but it says it’s ‘refreshing and hydrating,’ so I assumed it couldn’t hurt.”

“How…how did you…” She stared at the pile of goodies like they were made of gold. Actually, forget gold – this was a thousand times better, no matter what the market value was. “How did you know to get all this?”

He let out a laugh. “Ah…well all of my closest friends just so happen to deal with the same thing, and I’ve lived with all of them at some point or another. You don’t do that without learning a thing or two.”

At that, Lotor winked. Honest-to-God winked. Allura wiped her eyes and reached for him, tugging him in close the second she got a grip on his shirt. “Thank you,” she muttered into his shoulder. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“It was just a little favor,” he insisted, a hint of a smile in his voice. “What was I going to do, leave you here to suffer?”

She pouted. “I was going to try and gather my strength to make it to the store on my own.” With a sigh, she sat up and tugged him down on the couch with her, her arms wrapped tightly around his elbow. “Stay a bit?” she murmured.
He tensed, just for a moment, as she rested her cheek against his shoulder, but that tension seeped out of him with his next exhale. “Sure.”

“Do you have work to do? Writing to work on?”

He thought it over a moment, then shrugged. “It can wait.”

“You’re sure? Because I wouldn’t mind if you had to get back to it – or you could bring your laptop here and work on it while I watch Queer Eye.”

She wondered if it was her hands on his arm making him blush. “Really, it can wait.”

One dose of Midol, a chocolate bar and a 20-minute face mask treatment later, Allura felt better than she’d thought possible. She’d almost forgotten what it felt like not to be curled up in a sad little ball of pain and sugar cravings, but as she tucked her legs underneath her and leaned against Lotor’s side on the couch, she managed to breath a sigh of relief.

“Better?” he asked her.

“By about a hundred miles.” She glanced up at him. “I owe you.”

“How about we just consider it even from you nursing my black eye this weekend?” he chuckled. She couldn’t help but notice the angry-looking bruise wrapping up and around the line of his eye socket – the swelling had gone down at least, but he was left with quite the badge of honor for defending her pride.

She had almost felt guilty about it, but Lotor never once complained. Besides, she didn’t bother pretending that the memory of flipping that drunken asshole straight onto his back on the bar floor wasn’t deliciously satisfying. She lost zero hours of sleep over what had happened at the bar.

What had happened in her apartment afterwards, though…that had kept her up the past few evenings.

Maybe she had read him wrong. Maybe she’d made too many assumptions. She’d thought he would want to kiss her just as much as she wanted to kiss him, but the second she’d taken the leap he’d run off like she’d insulted him. He didn’t seem angry or terribly put-off, just…scared. Freaked out. Like instead of trying to kiss him she’d sprouted a second head.

She couldn’t help but wonder just what the hell she’d done wrong.

She tried not to take it to heart – things were comfortable now. More than comfortable, she was perfectly content sitting here with her head resting on his shoulder. And he didn’t seem to mind one bit either. And he had asked her out on the first date, so the attraction had to be mutual.

Wasn’t it?

Maybe they should…talk about it. Communication was important, right? Or would that just make things worse? This was good – this was nice. There wasn’t any reason to go ruining it by making things more awkward, was there?

But Lotor spoke first. Well, he cleared his throat first, and spoke second: “I…had an idea for this weekend.”

She blinked at him. “Oh?”
“It’s supposed to be nice and cool on Friday night, and there’s...something I’ve been meaning to show you.” He met her gaze and smiled at her, a glint in his eye. “But it’s a surprise. So you have to trust me.”

“You haven’t given me any reason not to trust you so far,” she chuckled. “Just what kind of surprise did you have in mind?”

“You know damn well why I can’t tell you.” He arched a brow. Yes, she supposed he was right – after all, that wouldn’t make it much of a surprise. “But it isn’t far. In fact we don’t really even have to go anywhere. I’ll just...meet you here after you get home from work and have a chance to change into something comfortable.”

“So I don’t have to wear heels for this surprise?”

“No.”

“Thank God.”

His smile was warm and welcoming. “So...is that a yes?”

She gave him a well-meaning nudge before snuggling up to his side again. “Well how else will I ever find out what the surprise is?”

“I guess you’re right,” he admitted with a grin – one that Allura mirrored.

All pain aside, this was shaping up to be the best sick day she had ever taken.
When I Kissed The Teacher

After a good hour or two of prepping, wrapping, and packing everything up neatly, Lotor stepped back to admire his handiwork.

Ezor had the basket sitting in the back of her bedroom closet from two Easters before, and luckily for him, she’d ignored Zethrid’s continued insistence to take the thing to Goodwill already. He didn’t need to do much convincing to borrow it. In fact, he was pretty sure it was his to keep.

He wasn’t so lucky when it came to finding a classic checkered picnic blanket. Those were – oddly enough, despite the cliché – pretty hard to come by. But after he threw the worn purple throw blanket from his couch in the washer, it made a perfectly respectable stand-in. At least it would keep them from sitting on hot concrete.

Then it was just a matter of piling in the sandwiches, cheese, berries, chocolate, and sparkling cider in a way that looked decent. Top the handle of the basket with a bow he’d grabbed out of a box of old Christmas decorations in the corner of his living room, and he was good to go.

Not bad, he figured. Not bad at all. And with an hour to spare before he was due at Allura’s door.

Now if only this damn stomach ache would go away.

He sighed as he collapsed on his sofa. Maybe a rooftop picnic was a cheesy idea for a date, but there was a hopeless romantic buried deep down inside of him, and that version of Lotor Galra had never been able to shake the image of what a perfect first kiss really looked like. The sun would gently set behind the skyline in the distance, casting them and everything around them in soft golden light. They would sit in comfortable silence, side by side, watching it slowly dip below the horizon, and when their hands brushed, they would share a poignant look and just know that the time was right. And he would look into her eyes, lean in, and that would be that.

It was the kind of memory she deserved after all, and the kind he would actually be able to look back on fondly. Certainly better than something clumsy and messy with a bag of brussels sprouts pressed against his head.

Everything was ready, and there was no reason he could see why it wouldn’t go smoothly. But still, anxiety twisted in the bit of his stomach, settling there like a deep throbbing ache.

Actually, it really was a deep, throbbing ache, and it made him grimace as he tried to get more comfortable. Damn nerves…at the very least he would be able to take his mind off of it when he actually went to fetch Allura. Until then, he could grin and bear it.

In the next hour he spent absently scrolling through his phone, his heart raced faster and his stomach ache grew steadily worse. He could only hope that by the time they sat down he’d be able to eat. He drew a steadying breath as he stood – wincing at how it smarted – and grabbed the basket before heading right on down the hall.

Allura opened the door to meet him before he even had to knock, a smiling vision in a lavender sun dress. “I hope I’m dressed right for this surprise,” she said. He saw the moment when her eyes found the basket. “Oh…are we going on a picnic?”

He brought a finger to his lips with a smile. “Surprise,” he said. “Remember?”

“Right, of course.” She was practically bouncing with excitement. “It’s been so long since I went on
a proper picnic – with the blanket and the basket and everything! It’s so perfect! I can’t wait! Where are we going – oh, right. Surprise. Don’t tell me.” She quickly locked her door and reached for his hand.

She blessedly said nothing about how sweaty his palm was. In fact, he felt a bit warm just standing here, a bead of sweat running down his temple despite the air conditioning. But he smiled anyway and gently tugged her toward the stairs. “Come on…follow me.”

She didn’t hesitate, giggling like a giddy schoolgirl as she let him lead her down the hall. When they reached the stairwell, instead of going down like she seemed to expect, he pulled her two flights up. They came to an unsightly metal door.

Lotor reached up to wipe his brow and shot her a smile. “I told you – it isn’t far.”

“I thought this was off limits to tenants,” she said.

He shrugged. Damn, something was still throbbing in his stomach, but he tried not to let it show. “I managed to convince the landlord to give me a spare key. Not entirely sure how…legal it is, so…” Once again he brought a finger to his lips and pushed open the door.

It hadn’t taken nearly as long as he’d expected to string the lights up, criss-crossing above their heads as they stepped out onto the roof. It didn’t do much to make it look less drab, but it was a start. And it would be a hell of a lot more impressive after the sun went down.

And by then, he would have made his move, assuming it all worked out. He felt a little queasy.

But he didn’t focus on that, or on the ache in his stomach or the flush in his face. He was too distracted by Allura’s glowing, radiant smile as she stepped outside. “Oh,” she breathed. “Did…did you put up these lights?”

“I did what I could to brighten it up, but there was only so much I could do.” He wiped his brow again. Why the hell was he sweating so much all of a sudden? “But-“ He took her hand again, after wiping it on his pants. “-the view is really the important part.”

They leaned against the concrete lip that ran around the perimeter of the roof, and Allura let out a breath. As unimpressive as the rooftop ambiance was on its own, the view was surprisingly breathtaking – the sun was just starting to dip lower in the sky above the buildings on the horizon, staining brick and glass and metal pink and orange.

Lotor looked down at the basket and forced back a wave of queasiness at the thought of food. But timing was important… “Shall we?” he offered despite his stomach’s insistence to the contrary, and he spread out the blanket on the concrete ground.

Allura turned, leaning back against the half wall and a grin. “Yes, we shall.”

They sat down on the blanket – Lotor extra gingerly – and he got to work unloading the food and cider. The sight of food made his stomach lurch and the pain in his abdomen worsen, but he smiled anyway as he pushed a plate toward her.

“Lotor…I can’t believe you put this together,” she said, her eyes sparkling as she took the plate from him. “You made this all yourself?”

“It’s just sandwiches. Hardly difficult…” He shifted – couldn’t seem to get comfortable as he picked a crumb of bread off the top of his sandwich and touched it to his lips. “You like it?”
“I love it!” Her smile faltered as she watched him struggle to swallow his non-bite of food. “Are… you alright?”

“Fine,” he insisted, shooting her an extra-wide grin for good measure. “More than fine – I’m just ecstatic that you’re enjoying yourself, more than anything.”

“I could I not?” she laughed. “A picnic on the roof – an honest-to-God picnic, with the sun setting and lights strung up above our heads…” She scooted a bit closer, turning to look at the orange glow reaching out across the sky and the tops of the surrounding buildings. “It’s perfect. It’s…romantic, actually.”

She turned, and she looked at him, her cheeks and eyes stained peach. She was smiling, her hair gleaming silver on her shoulders.

It was so warm. It was perfect.

It was time.

He swallowed.

And then she frowned, and he felt the moment cracking, slipping. “Lotor…you…look pale.”

“Huh?” His head swam. Lean in, you moron.

“N-no, I…I’m fine-“ The pain in his stomach spiked, and he couldn’t hide his grimace.

“L-Lotor? What’s wrong?” Her voice was quickly overflowing with concern as she pressed her hand against his cheek. It moved to his forehead a second later. “God, you’re burning up.”

“I…am?”

He was woozy. The orange and yellow tint of the sunset started to swirl together like wet watercolors. His head throbbed. His stomach hurt. He thought he said as much, but he wasn’t sure.

Allura was standing up, frantically gathering her things. “I think we should get you to a hospital-“ Her voice sounded distant, echoing. He could barely process what she was saying as he reached up with a shaking hand to wipe away the sweat on his brow.

And then he puked on the concrete.

The perfect end to a perfect evening.

An appendix.

A rooftop picnic, a sunset, a perfectly romantic end to a perfectly romantic date…well, it would have been, if it hadn’t been for Lotor very nearly puking on her shoes and practically collapsing right there in front of her. She’d run at least three red lights driving him to the E.R., still in her sun dress and sandals with the picnic basket in her back seat.

All because of a damn appendix.

The appendectomy went off without a hitch. It felt like it was over in the time it took for Allura to eat the sandwich and chocolate truffles she hadn’t gotten to eat on the roof. To Lotor’s credit, the sandwich was very good.

And now here she was, sitting at his bedside while groggily resurfaced from the anesthesia. The sun
had long since set outside.

“Hey…” she breathed, reaching for his hand as his eyes opened blearily. She offered him a smile. “Congratulations – you’re the proud owner of a shiny new appendectomy scar.”

He groaned, head lolling forward as he glanced down at the blanket draped over his stomach. “They took my appendix?”

“Afraid so.”

“Did I throw up on your shoes?” he rasped, brow furrowing. “I remember throwing up…I think. And I remember your shoes…they’re nice shoes…”

She propped her leg up just enough for him to get a glance of her sandal. “Still clean, don’t you worry.” She folded her other hand over his. “Lotor…you must have been in pain. I had my appendix out when I was fifteen and I felt like I was dying. Why didn’t you say something?”

He made a noncommittal noise, pressing his cheek against the pillow as he turned to face her. His eyes were still glazed over, unfocused as he slowly blinked. “Didn’t wanna ruin the date,” he slurred.

“Well…it was pretty great before I had to drive you to the hospital.” He closed his eyes and let out a whine. Allura laughed before she could stop herself. “Lotor, you didn’t ruin a thing. The rooftop, the sunset…it was all so thoughtful and wonderful.”

He blinked at her a few times, his eyes focusing a bit more each time. “Wanted it to be special,” he murmured.

“The date?”

“The kiss.”

Allura stared at him.

He squeezed his eyes shut again and buried his face in the pillow with a huff. “I wanted…to kiss you…and I wanted it to be perfect. Special.” He let out a long sigh, staring out the window at the darkened sky. He looked forlorn.

Allura could hardly breathe. “You were…going to kiss me?” Warmth bubbled up in her stomach and stretched across her face as a wide smile. “You…planned all of this to make it special? One little kiss?”

“First.”

“First?”

His voice was muffled by the pillow as he insisted, “My first kiss.”

She let out a gasp. “You…Lotor, you…”

Lotor laughed, mirthlessly. “It’s stupid.”

“No!” She was on her feet, staring down at him with wide eyes and her hands clenched almost desperately around his. “No, it could never be stupid. It was perfect. Lotor, it was perfect.”

Finally, he glanced up at her, hesitantly. “You…liked it?”
“Yes.”

“Yes?” she laughed. “God, yes.” She pressed a hand against his cheek. “Oh Lotor…that…that has to be, without a doubt, one of the kindest, sweetest, most romantic things I’ve ever heard.”

Despite the grogginess clouding his face, his eyes lit up as he smiled at her. “But we still missed the sunset,” he said, nodding at the window.

He was right – it was well past dark. But she let her thumb stroke his cheek where the last remnants of his bruise were starting to fade. “Yes…but I’ll tell you what…how about, just for the moment, we pretend we didn’t?”

She went to the window, drawing the curtains until the night sky was blocked from view. Then she went to the door and flicked the switch so that the yellow tint from the bedside lamp was the only light in the room. It was a poor substitute for a real sunset, but it would do for now.

And she didn’t much care where they were. Lotor's hands were just as warm here in this hospital room as they had been up on that roof.

She smiled at him, a gentle, soft smile, as she leaned closer. She paused, just for a moment, searching his face for any hint of hesitation, but he was staring right at her, his eyes wide and wanting, and he tilted his head up, just enough for her to notice.

Allura closed the distance between them.

His lips were chapped and his breath could have been better, but it didn’t matter. His cheek was warm under her palm, and his hand was soft in hers, and elation swelled in her chest as she let herself drift in the sensation of his lips molding gently to her own. He let out a noise – an almost inquisitive hum, like he was intrigued by the new sensation and trying to commit every detail to memory. She almost laughed against his mouth at that.

When she pulled away, his eyes opened a bit owlishly. “Damn,” he said.

She giggled. “What?”

“I’m…on so many drugs.”

Her giggled turned into a full-blow guffaw. “And?”

“And now I’m worried I won’t remember this.”

He pouted, and Allura gave him another quick peck on the tip of his nose for good measure. “I think you will.”
Chapter Notes

A BIG HECKIN’ THANK YOU to everyone who's been leaving feedback so far. I hope you're all still enjoying. :)

Also, there's MORE ART, which is frankly mind-boggling to me. Here it is:

Mistiqartsillustration drew a few scenes from the last few chapters (including The Kiss (tm)) plus the Lady Generals Squad and a very Sexy Shiro: https://mistiqartsillustration.tumblr.com/post/177487310390/enjoy-the-humanized-babies-all-thanks-to-the-most

brimful-of-giggles did this AMAZING art of The Kiss (tm): https://brimful-of-giggles.tumblr.com/post/177447326641/loving-me-knowing-you-chapter-13-by

<3

Lotor’s head was blessedly more clear the next day. With the fever gone and the last of the anaesthetic finally having worn off, he could think again without feeling like his mind was slogging through a deep marsh whenever he opened his mouth. The pain wasn’t pleasant, of course, but it was tolerable – partially thanks to the lovely IV and partially thanks to tingle he could still feel in his lips when he thought back on the kiss the night before.

She’d kissed him. She’d kissed him. It still didn’t quite feel real.

“Go fish,” he said, and Allura’s brow pinched in frustration.

“That’s the third turn you’ve told me that.”

He smiled as he watched her lips move. “You haven’t asked for the right card yet.”

She pouted and drew from the pile.

It was quiet, comfortable (despite the ache in his stomach), and each time Allura looked up at him from behind a makeshift fan of playing cards, she shot him a smile. Each one made his stomach flip a bit, and luckily for him, it didn’t hurt one bit.

Well, he supposed he was past arguing that he didn’t have a crush.

“So,” Allura said, a faint tint of pink painting her cheeks as she neatly set down a set of aces, “do you remember?”

He let out a laugh, wincing when his stomach throbbed. “Ah…unfortunately, I remember throwing up on your shoes and crying in your car.”

“For the last time, you didn’t get a thing on my shoes, and of course you cried. You were in agony. I would have cried too.”
“Any sevens?” he asked.

She huffed and handed one over.

He tucked it neatly in with the other three in his hand and laid them down on the table. His eyes were still fixed on the cards as he softly added, “I also remember you being here when I woke up from surgery.”

“Well I wasn’t just going to leave you all alone.”

“I remember it was dark outside.”

Past sunset. But it hadn’t mattered.

Allura giggled. “The nurse was nice enough to let me stay a little past the usual visiting hours.”

His own cheeks flushed. “I remember saying some…very embarrassing things to you.”

“Well,” she said as she carefully studied her cards. “You were, in your own words, on so many drugs.”

He reached for her hand, drawing her up onto her feet and closer to him. “And I also remember something a little like this…” A tiny tug was all it took for her to lean closer and press a kiss him. Her laugh escaped through her nose and ticked his lip, and he wished for a moment that he’d had the chance to brush his teeth that morning. But Allura didn’t seem to mind – she lingered for a few moments anyway before pulling away, grinning.

“Seems you have two kisses under your belt now,” she told him.

“Ah…yes, I guess so.”

“I promise eventually one of them will be during an actual sunset.”

He couldn’t help but smile at that, even if the sunset itself was far from the point.

The door burst open after barely half a knock, and a blur of pink and orange rushed across the room towards his bed before Ezor pulled him into a tight hug. “Oh my god,” she gasped, “Oh god, you’re not dead! Or in a coma! Or missing any limbs!”

“Well…” He coughed. “-would I be missing limbs from appendicitis?”

“Ezor… I told you he’s fine,” Zethrid sighed, one hand rubbing Ezor’s shoulder comfortingly – or maybe trying to pull her off of Lotor before she pulled out his IV. Either way he was grateful. At least until Zethrid shot him a playful smile and said, “You really know how to woo a lady, dude. A romantic picnic on the roof, a frantic trip to the ER…really touching stuff.”

“Be nice to him – he just got sliced up,” Ezor insisted.

“And actually,” Allura piped up with a soft smile, “The date wasn’t half bad. You know, before he almost collapsed and after he came out of the anesthesia.”

Ezor’s eyes went wide as she glanced his way again. “Whoa, your face is super red. Is that bad? Should I get a doctor?”
“N-no!” he insisted. “I’m fine!” He let out a long sigh, trying (failing) to will his face back to its normal color. “And she’s right – it was nice. Aside from the whole…writhing in agony thing.”

He looked up at Zethrid, expecting a supportive smile and maybe a too-hard pat on his shoulder. But instead she was looking at the floor, her hands shoved into her pockets as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Um…speaking of agony,” she muttered, “I should tell you something.”

“What?”

“Well…Allura texted us when you guys first got to the hospital, and at first we didn’t know what was going on and we were…you know, a little freaked out.”

“I didn’t know who else to reach out to,” Allura sheepishly admitted. “I was…a little freaked out too. And by the time they took Lotor to surgery my phone had died…”

“It’s all good!” Ezor assured her.

“We figured Lotor was okay,” Zethrid sighed.

Ezor laughed. “Please – you were practically sobbing!”

Zethrid pointedly ignored her. “But I figured we should call someone. Just in case.”

Lotor’s eyes widened. “Oh.”

“And I only had one emergency contact number that you gave me a while back!”

“Zethrid you didn’t.” He could practically hear the clack of sensible heels on the tile, the quiet jingle of sterling silver bracelets under well-tailored sleeves. Maybe the pain meds were making him crazy.

Zethrid looked like she was confessing to a capital crime as she continued: “I mean I was going to call her back and tell her not to come, but she said she was…already…boarding a plane…”

“Maybe she changed her mind?” Ezor said to break the uncomfortable stretch of silence, and the next moment the door swung open.

Lotor took one look at her and muttered, “Oh no…”

“You.” One long arm swept toward him, impeccably manicured burgundy nails glinting in the fluorescent light. “-have cost me a night’s sleep, my young man.” Ezor and Zethrid quickly scurried out of her way as she strode toward him. “Appendicitis.” She said it like the word tasted bitter, her lip curling.

“I’m sorry you disapprove,” he sighed.

“Of course I disapprove – how could I not disapprove of my only nephew being confined to a hospital bed?” She drew a deep breath and a tiny hint of a smile – so small that he might have imagined it – stretched out the wrinkles around her lips. “I’m glad to see your making a speedy recovery.”

The tension in his chest and shoulders loosened a bit. “I’m doing my best.” He glanced over at Zethrid and Ezor, who were doing their best not to get in the way. “You really didn’t need to come-“

“Please. Of course I had to come to see you. I couldn’t simply ignore you, could-“ She paused, and Lotor saw her gaze wander over to the other side of his bed. To Allura. Her tone was softer, tinged with piqued interest as she asked, “And who is this?”
Allura’s cheeks turned pink. “Oh! I, ah…I’m Allura.”

Dayak raised one impecably shaped eyebrow. “Allura?”

Lotor couldn’t stop himself from looking back and forth between the two of them, and he swore he saw Ezor and Zethrid doing the same. How could they not? It was strangely riveting, watching Dayak silently appraise her. And Allura handled it with aplomb.

But he wasn’t selfish enough to let her squirm under Dayak’s gaze. “Ah-“ he said, and Dayak turned her attention to him instead. “Allura…she’s my…erm…my…”

She shot Dayak a warm smile and extended her hand. “I’m his neighbor.”

“I see,” Dayak said with a nod as she gave Allura’s hand a firm shake.

Allura’s smile widened a bit. “And we’ve been…seeing each other for a few weeks now.”

Lotor wasn’t sure he’d ever seen Dayak’s jaw drop before. It was…oddly entertaining. It almost distracted him from the fire blazing in his cheeks as Allura let go of Dayak’s hand and took his instead. He swallowed as he gave it a squeeze. “Yes,” he said. “She’s…that.”

Allura giggled softly. Dayak blinked.

“Allura?” she asked, more softly this time. “Yes, I…I see.” The moment ended as quickly as he’d noticed it, and she straightened her back once again. “Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Allura. My name is Dayak – an old friend of the family.” She nodded at Lotor with the same almost-imaginary smile from before. “How old, I won’t be saying.”

“Not by blood, no. But in the long run blood only means so much.” She neatly poured some water into a plastic hospital cup and handed it to Lotor as she spoke. He took it without a word and sipped it gingerly. “As well as you’re looking, I’m assuming you’ll be heading home before too long, hm?”


“Good – I’ve always found hospitals ghastly.” She sneered, and Lotor could hardly blame her. The smell of antiseptic and industrial laundry detergent was starting to get old for him too. “Well, don’t you worry. I saw to you through many a flu and cold when you were a little one, and I’ll have no trouble seeing to you now.”

Ezor stifled a snort, but Lotor was too busy trying to remember how to speak that he barely cared. “Y-you…you’re staying?”

“Well I didn’t come all the way here just to bring you flowers and well-wishes,” Dayak huffed.

“Dayak…you…you really don’t need to-“

“Enough.” Lotor closed his mouth. “I promise not to overstay my welcome. Just a few days. A week at most.”

He was getting the feeling there was no use arguing. So instead of wasting his breath, he let out a sigh. “Thank you, I guess…”

“You’re welcome!” This time Dayak’s smile was obvious – wide and immensely pleased. She turned to Allura again. “I don’t suppose you could show me where I can find a cup of coffee nearby?
I wandered around this blasted building for twenty minutes before I managed to find the right wing, and I had a long flight.”

Allura blinked. “O-oh! Ah…sure.” Her smiled was a little shaky, but it firmed up after Lotor gave her hand a small, reassuring squeeze. She lingered for a moment before pulling her hand away and stepping around the bed, and she and Dayak made their way toward the door. “The coffee down in the cafeteria is horrendous, but there’s a Starbucks on the corner.”

“It will have to do,” Dayak sighed, and a second later she had swept Allura out the door.

The second it closed, Zethrid let out a long breath that it seemed like she’d been holding since Dayak had arrived. “Oh man, that lady freaks me out.”

“Poor Allura,” Ezor moaned. “She’s gonna get eaten alive…”

“Dayak’s not eating anyone,” Lotor insisted.

At least he certainly hoped not.

The walk to the Starbucks was agony.

Dayak didn’t say a word, and Allura wasn’t sure if that made things better or worse. As hard as she tried, she couldn’t read the woman – she was like an impeccably dressed brick wall who smelled like Chanel Number Five. By the time they made it to the coffee shop, Allura had probably wrung permanent wrinkles into the hem of her T-shirt.

“So,” she finally said as they approached the counter, “Can I…treat you to a coffee?”

“I’m happy to go Dutch,” Dayak said. She pulled her wallet from her purse. “French roast, black please.”

Allura ordered an iced green tea lemonade and prayed that Dayak would suggest heading back to the hospital, but instead the woman found a table by the window and sat down. Her posture was like something out of an etiquette textbook – imposingly straight, even as she brought the coffee to her lips and thoughtfully sipped it.

Swallowing, Allura sat beside her and stirred her tea. Was she supposed to break the silence, or just let it drag on? Dayak didn’t seem like the talkative type. Or maybe it was just her. Maybe she wasn’t thrilled at the idea of her “nephew” dating his neighbor-

A few sips of coffee later, Dayak finally broke the silence: “So you’re the new woman in Lotor’s life, hm?”

Allura was mid-sip and had to remind herself to swallow before she answered. “I…I guess I am.” It came out more like a question than an answer. When Dayak looked at her and didn’t say anything else, Allura toyed with her straw and said, “We’ve been on a few dates over the past couple of weeks, but we met when I moved in almost two months ago.” She managed a small laugh. “He helped me move my couch up the stairs and into my apartment – it would probably still be sitting in the stairwell now if it weren’t for him.”

“Hm,” Dayak said, and took another long sip of her coffee.

“I-it was awfully thoughtful of you to come all this way to see him. Are you two close?”
Dayak glanced at her through the steam rising from her coffee before placing the cup on the table and folding her hands in her lap. “He’ll be the last to admit it,” she said. “And it has been a good long time since we saw each other in person. About two years, I’d say. But I’ve known him since he was still in diapers.” Allura might have imagined it, but she thought she saw a small smile on Dayak’s face. If it was there, it faded a moment later as she added, “I was a friend of his father’s.”

Was. Past tense. She emphasized that word with so much venom it made Allura’s tea taste sour.

“Oh,” she said.

Dayak let out a bitter laugh. “Judging from the look on your face, I’m assuming Lotor has told you a thing or two about the man.”

Allura tried to choose her words carefully as she glared at her cup. “Forgive me if this seems…disrespectful, but from what little he’s mentioned before, I assume he’s an abhorrent excuse for a man.”

She wondered if she should brace herself for a cup of hot coffee in the face. But instead, Dayak surprised her with a hearty laugh. “You’re a firebrand, aren’t you?” she said. “And quite perceptive too. I haven’t spoken to Zarkon in almost a decade now, and I’m perfectly content to keep it that way. Luckily, though, it seems that sometimes the apple does fall far from the tree.”

Dayak’s tone was softer, gentler. It put Allura more at ease. “He’s been so sweet the entire time I’ve known him,” she found herself saying. “It’s…it’s strange – I get the feeling he hasn’t dated many people before…”

She hadn’t meant to say that much, but it stumbled out of her mouth before she could stop it. A flush spread over her cheeks, but if Dayak noticed or minded, she didn’t let it show. The older woman let out a thoughtful hum as she studied the coffee swirling in her cup, and then she said, “Far be it from me to divulge anything too personal. But Lotor…it took him time to come into his own. To figure out his place in the world, as it were. But it was heartening to see how healthy he’s looking. Well, as healthy as one can look lying in a hospital bed.”

That brought a smile to Allura’s face. “You think?”

“I’m not sure if it has to do with you or that book of his, or maybe something else entirely. But it does make me curious about you.”

“Me?”

“If Lotor is dating you, you must be quite the impressive woman.”

“I don’t know if I’d call myself impressive,” Allura said on a nervous little laugh.

“Well you’re lovely at the very least.”

That certainly was an unexpected compliment. “O-oh! Thank you.” Her blush spread like wildfire across her face, and she sipped on her tea to try and cool it.

“But Lotor’s never been the type of person to be swayed just by a pretty face. So I’m curious what led to this burgeoning little relationship of yours.”

“I did bake him cupcakes,” Allura said. “After I got settled. So I guess he…must have really liked them?”
That made Dayak laugh again. “I’m sure.”

“And after that, it was just…I guess you’d call it chemistry.” She toyed with her hair. “On our first date, we talked for hours. I always thought that was something that only happened in cheesy romance novels or sitcoms.”

“Zethrid mentioned something on the phone about you…defending him in a bar fight.” Allura almost pulled out a long strand of hair that she’d wrapped around her finger. “That was you, wasn’t it?”

“O-oh, that…it wasn’t nearly that serious. It wasn’t even a fight. Just…just a misunderstanding that luckily didn’t get too out of hand.”

“Still, I get the feeling you care very much for him.”

“It’s…been a long time since I dated anyone so considerate,” she admitted. “It almost makes me wonder what I did to deserve it.”

“Plenty, I’m sure.”

Allura let out a laugh as she reached for her tea again, feeling a bit lighter. “It’s kind of hard to believe that the man who planned a romantic rooftop picnic for me is the same one who woke me up with ABBA at six in the morning the day after I moved in and answered the door in his underwear.”

Dayak nearly spat out her coffee. “He did what?”

“Ah…please don’t tell him I told you that.”

She let out a long sigh. “I suppose I won’t. Though I’m tempted to give him a good talking-to about the importance of manners, which seem to have gone thoroughly out the window.”

“They haven’t, I promise,” Allura assured her. “Ever since then he’s been a perfect gentleman.”

Dayak seemed content with the answer, and she tipped her coffee cup back to drain the last of it before it had even stopped steaming. “I certainly hope so.”
Andante, Andante

Lotor was discharged first thing Sunday morning. Dayak drove him home. Insisted, really. None of them – least of all Allura – had any desire to argue with her. Lotor didn’t offer a single complaint either, stoic and silent with a stuffed purple sea turtle (courtesy of Ezor’s latest trip to the hospital gift shop) propped up in his arms as Zethrid rolled his wheelchair toward the hospital entrance.

“I can walk,” he muttered when they were halfway through the lobby. “In fact I was supposed to be walking. It’s good for circulation after surgery.”

“You’re a liability until you’re out that door,” Acxa helpfully chimed in with a knowing smile. “And once you’re over the doorstep, you’re Dayak’s problem.”

Lotor closed his eyes and buried his face in the seat turtle’s plush violet shell.

Ezor frowned. “Are your pain meds wearing off or are you just realizing that she’s gonna be sleeping on your couch for the next week?”

“Both.”

Allura let her hand brush against his arm, giggling when Lotor glanced up from the turtle to look at her. “I can come by after work,” she offered. “Can’t do much in the way of cooking any dinners, but I could always bring a movie. Does Dayak like Star Trek?”

“The reboots may be a gamble,” he sighed. “But I do remember her enjoying Next Generation. Always had a soft spot for Patrick Stewart?”

“Who doesn’t?” Acxa mused.

“Perfect – I have the entire series on DVD.” That seemed to pique Lotor’s attention, and she winked. “Got the boxset for Christmas a few years back.”

“God you’re both nerds,” Zethrid laughed, her tone almost as warm as the air hitting them as they exited through the sliding glass doors and found Dayak’s Lexus idling at the curb.

Acxa patted him on the shoulder and told him, “Godspeed.”

Afterward, Allura took her time getting herself home. She stopped on the way and got a muffin for breakfast, picked up some chicken breasts and vegetables for dinner the rest of the week, and topped off her car’s gas and oil. As she slid back into her car before pulling out of the gas station, she glanced down at her phone just as a new text message came through:

Lotor – 9:47 AM
>> I’ve been home half an hour and Dayak has already sent me to me room.

She’d never been quite so thankful that nobody was around to hear her laugh. It was less of a laugh and more of an undignified honk.

She wrestled it back to a snort as she typed out a reply:

Me – 9:47 AM
<< Did she catch you trying to spoil your dinner with cookies?

Lotor – 9:48 AM
>> I think she’s worried I’m going to rip out my stitches if I do anything other than nap.

Me – 9:48 AM
<< And you don’t want to take a nap?

Lotor – 9:48 AM
>> I never said that…

The next message to come through was nothing but a sleepy emoji. It made Allura giggle.

And one more after that made her face heat up enough to be considered a fire hazard this close to a gasoline pump:

Lotor – 9:49 AM
>> I’d much rather have you here with me instead.

Was he…flirting?

Was Lotor flirting with her? Via text? If he was – and it sure seemed like he was – it was quite the milestone.

Lotor – 9:50 AM
>> Sorry…pain meds still making me a little loopy.

Me – 9:50 AM
<< Well I kind of like loopy you. :)  
<< And I’ll come keep you company after work this week.

He didn’t send her a reply after that, and someone behind her was honking indignantly, so she tucked her phone away and pulled out of the gas station with a smile on her face.

She had just gotten up the first flight of stairs when her phone started to vibrate in her pocket, and she barely made it to her door – more out of breath than she cared to admit – before catching a glimpse of Coran’s face on her screen. Her grocery bags were hanging from her elbow and her keys were still jingling in her hand when she answered: “Coran? I wasn’t expecting-“

“You were in the hospital?”

She stumbled through her front door and barely managed to avoid dropping her chicken. “Wh-what? How did you-“

“Facebook!”

“I thought you’d stopped using Facebook a year ago?”

“I still log on every now and then to follow those recipe pages, and that’s beside the point! I saw a picture of you – someone named Ezor-“ Allura dropped her chicken in the fridge and covered her eyes with one tired hand. “You and some…some man? In a hospital room?”

“Are you more upset about the hospital or the man?” Allura asked him, stifling a giggle.

She could practically hear him thoughtfully twisting his mustache as he said, “Well you weren’t in the hospital, were you?”

“No, just…” At least he couldn’t see her cheeks flushing over the phone. “Just…visiting someone.” She chewed her lip. Well, maybe now was as good a time as any… “That, ah…that man.”
Coran was quiet for so long that Allura probably could almost *see* the cogs turning in his head, turning over all the different possibilities that could have been going on. Like it wasn’t painfully simple.

She was expecting him to chastise her, maybe to probe for more information, to get to the root of her *intentions* – or maybe Lotor’s. But when he finally broke the silence, his tone was so gentle that it made her feel guilty for expecting all of that to begin with: “What’s his name?”

She blinked. “L-Lotor,” she answered, and she felt a smile sneak onto her face. “His name’s Lotor. And he’s…very sweet. Intelligent. Funny. I think you’d like him?”

Coran let out a warm laugh. “You think so?”

“Absolutely. I was…going to tell you—”

“Oh, pish-posh. Your life is your life – you’re living under your own roof, and you’ve always had impeccable judgment.” She felt a weight lift from her shoulders. A moment or two later, Coran cleared his throat. “So…this thing…is it serious?”

Something cinched in the pit of her stomach again. “I-I wouldn’t say that. We’ve only been on a few dates so far…”

“And he’s behaved himself like a true gentleman, I trust!” Coran insisted.

God, she didn’t even want to imagine what he meant by *that.*

“Of course,” she insisted, hoping to all that was holy that would be the end of it. “Next time you come to visit you…you could meet him if you like. He lives in the building.”

“I think I’d like that.” He was smiling – she could tell. So was she. “As long as knows how to show you a bit of respect! It seems like that’s a rare quality these days…”

“He is! He does…” She curled her fingers against her lip, barely resisting the urge to bite her nail. She couldn’t go ruining her manicure now… “I’m sure you’d both get along – as long as you give him a chance to recover from surgery first. You remember how out of it I was after I got my appendix out.”

“Oh, I remember! Though I also seem to remember your father telling me that you milked it just a bit for extra sweets…”

He couldn’t really blame her for that – who could expect a fifteen-year-old to turn down an extra scoop of ice cream after getting home from the hospital?

“So this…new man,” Coran added a moment later, “You…like him, hm?”

“I am dating him, so…I guess that much is kind of obvious.”

He laughed. “Enough to visit him in the hospital.”

Enough to *drive* him to the hospital. But she kept that much to herself for the moment. She was blushing enough as it was…

“Well, as long as you’re happy…I trust your judgment, Allura.”

She grinned. “I am happy,” she said softly.
“And not in the hospital,” Coran sighed, sounding relieved. “That’s a weight off my chest if ever there was one.”

For her too.

Inviting Lotor to meet Coran, though…that was something that could wait for another day.

Lotor slept through most of Sunday, woke up long enough to take his medication and polish off the bowl of soup Dayak delivered to his bedside (at her insistence and his stomach’s), and then drifted off again just as the sun started to set.

Dayak didn’t bother waking him. By the time he shuffled out into his living room the next morning it was well past eleven.

“Sleep well?” she asked him, stationed at his kitchen table with a newspaper unfolded in front of her and her reading glasses perched on the bridge of her nose.

“It’s almost noon,” he muttered.

“It seemed you needed it.”

He groaned.

Dayak was up a moment later, grabbing an extra mug from the cabinet above the sink and neatly pouring a cup of tea from the kettle on the stove. She handed it to him. “Earl Grey. Luckily I thought to bring my own – I’ll leave you a few bags when I go.” He could feel her eyes on him as he sipped it, slowly. At least it helped to settle his stomach.

When Dayak broke the silence again, her tone was a bit softer: “Your friends came by while you were still sleeping. The quiet one and her wife, the nurse.”

“Acxa and Narti?” he offered.

“Yes, those are the ones.” She nodded toward the coffee table where a pot of daises sat in the sun. “They brought those for you, but Acxa insisted that I not wake you. I seem to remember her always being the most sensible of your troupe.”

That sounded right, though he had a feeling Narti had been the one to pick out the flowers. Sensible as Acxa was, she had never had an eye for flower arrangements.

As she sat down at the kitchen table again with a fresh mug of tea, Dayak added, “Allura hasn’t been by yet.” She took a long and thoughtful sip. “I noticed her leaving, dressed impeccably. I’m assuming she was on her way to work. That or court.”

“Work,” Lotor confirmed. He gingerly sat down across from her, grimacing as he did it. “She told me she’d come by after…”

“Oh?”

He hid behind his mug, trying as hard as he could not to think back on his abysmal attempt at flirting the day before. Why he’d ever thought it would be a good idea, he didn’t know. Damn opiates. “I hope you weren’t too hard on her the other day, interrogating her over coffee.”

“I’m just curious to know more about the woman.” She poignantly placed her mug down beside the neatly folded newspaper and clasped her hands together in her lap. “Can
you blame me? I wasn’t expecting to find out you were seeing someone.”

“I was just as surprised as you were,” he quietly admitted.

“Well she seems like a fine woman,” Dayak told him. “Well-spoken, intelligent, and she cares very much for you.” The tiniest hint of a smile slid onto her face as she raised the mug to her lips again. “I’m impressed – it seems you have excellent taste.”

He damn near choked on his tea. “I…ah…”

She snapped the paper open in front of her. “I certainly hope you two are taking all of the necessary safety precautions – I’d rather not hear any news of new additions on the horizon just yet.”

That time, he did choke on his tea. Sent it splattering across the table and narrowly missing staining Dayak’s newspaper in the process.

“That…that’s not…we aren’t…”

“Please, there’s no need to tell me any details.”

Lotor pushed his mug away as he sighed and pushed himself up. “I’m taking a shower.”

“Be careful of your sutures.”

“Mmhm.”

After his shower he managed about a half a chapter’s worth of work on his book, painfully aware that he’d most likely have to scrap it once he came back to edit it after coming off of his painkillers. But poor progress was better than no progress, and he’d written entire chapters drunk before, so maybe the brain fog wasn’t quite as much of a death sentence for his first draft as it seemed.

Dayak kept her distance and let him work, for the most part – she interrupted only to insist that he eat something for lunch. He did his best to do as he was told, no matter how little appetite he had. And afterward, his bed was calling again. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d slept so much. As drained as he felt, he wondered if all of his energy reserves had been stored in his poor traitor of an appendix. When he woke up again, it was half past six, and someone was knocking on the door.

Dayak was nowhere to be found; there was a note up on the fridge in her unmistakably impeccable handwriting that told him she’d headed out to buy eggs for the morning.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten on such a regular schedule either.

He turned his attention to the insistent knocking on the door, opening it just in time to catch Allura turning to leave. She spun on her heel to face him. “Oh! I thought maybe you were asleep…”

He stifled a yawn. “I was.” Before she could get out an apology, he stepped aside and nodded toward his living room. “Do you want to come in?”

She glanced past him. “Is…Dayak still here?”

“Out for the moment.” He winked. “We have a bit of room to breathe.”

She let out a breath as she smiled and brushed past him, and suddenly he was painfully aware of the fact that she had never been in her apartment before now. In a way, maybe it was lucky for him – at least with Dayak here his apartment was tidier than it had been in months. No dirty dishes in the sink or clothes on the couch.
That was a plus.

Allura sat close to him on the couch, letting out a sigh as she sank back against the cushions. “I wanted to come by yesterday,” she said. “But I figured you’d want to get some rest.”

“I’ve been doing almost nothing but sleep the last day or so. You’d think I’d feel rested, but I’m still half exhausted.” He resisted the urge to rest his cheek on his palm. He’d probably fall right back asleep if he did. “But the pain has been fading a bit at least.”

“If you need a nap, don’t let me stop you.”

“I’d much rather be awake and talking to someone other than Dayak, to be honest.”

She giggled. “She doesn’t seem nearly as bad as I thought she would from the way you reacted to Zethrid calling her. A little… old-fashioned, but…”

“She’s not bad. I’ve known her for as long as I can remember.” He allowed himself to rest his head against the back cushion. As long as he kept his eyes open, he could stay awake this way. “She’s always been supportive… more than any of the rest of my family, anyway. I just wanted to make sure she didn’t scare you off.”

“It would take more than that to scare me off,” Allura said, rolling her shoulders back and smirking up at him. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Yes.” He met her smile with one of his own. “You are…”

From the moment he caught her eye, he stopped thinking about his book, about his clumsy texts from earlier, and – blessedly – about Dayak’s comments about safety precautions. She leaned in, and even as sleepy as he still was, he did too.

It was still new and different, kissing her. Kissing anyone. It still hadn’t quite sunk in yet that this was something he could do, that he could pull her close like this whenever he pleased. That it was normal. A new normal.

Even newer was the feeling of Allura reaching up and wrapping her arms around his shoulders, holding him close, carding her fingers through his hair. And he must have made a noise at that, because she pulled away just enough to look up at him and ask, “Is this okay?”

“Yes,” he said too quickly. “Yes, it’s…it’s fine.”

She nodded, and met him halfway as he leaned in again.

He let his eyes slide closed, shivering as her nails grazed against his scalp, and damn was he ever glad that he had showered earlier that day. Especially when Allura let out a sigh and moved her lips against his and-

Oh.

Tongue. That was her tongue.

Just a hint of it, so quick that he wasn’t sure he’d really felt it. But then there it was again, and his heart pounded. He mirrored her actions from before, carefully parting his lips as he let his hands rest on her hips.

It felt clumsy. And considering that Allura laughed softly against his lips, he guessed it felt the same
to her. But if it bothered her, she didn’t let it show. She was gentle, patient, taking the lead and letting him test the waters as she soothingly rubbed her thumb along the line of his cheekbone.

Thank God for her.

When they finally did part, he felt like he was coming out of anesthesia all over again, and Allura was beaming at him. He cleared his throat. “I ah…” Damn, was his voice really that rough? It must have been the nap… “I haven’t exactly… had much experience with that.”

“I can tell,” Allura giggled, and Lotor bit his lip. “But it’s okay! We can… work on that.”

He swallowed. “Right. I’d ah… I’d like that.”

“Maybe when you’re a bit more recovered.” She glanced at the front door, dropping her voice low despite the fact that there was no sign of Dayak getting back just yet. “And when we don’t have to worry about your aunt interrupting.”

“I’d like that very much.”

Allura laughed, squeezing his hand, and his lips tingled as he smiled right back.
Two for the Price of One (Part 1)

It was getting late – the sun was starting to set outside, and Allura’s stomach had been growling for almost twenty minutes now. But she didn’t dare move. Because moving would mean pushing Lotor off of her shoulder and that would mean waking him, and she just didn’t quite have the heart.

She hadn’t imagined he’d snore this much. Or drool this much. Though maybe that was thanks to the painkillers.

She resisted the urge to turn and look when the door opened, but she could feel Dayak’s eyes on the back of her head as the older woman closed and latched it. “I was wondering when you would be coming by,” Dayak mused. If finding Lotor passed out on her shoulder shocked her, she didn’t let it show.

Then again she wasn’t exactly the easiest person to read, even when Allura could see her face.

When Dayak did stride into her field of vision – not stopping to acknowledge her or the man passed out against her side as she set a couple of grocery bags on the counter – Allura shot her a careful smile. “I don’t want to overstay my welcome,” she whispered, pausing when Lotor snuffled in his sleep and buried his nose deeper in the crook of her neck. She wondered if the flutter in the pit of her stomach showed on her face. “But I ah…I can’t really move at the moment.”

“Allora,” was all Dayak said in reply. She didn’t add much else as she got to work unloading the groceries into the fridge: eggs, spinach, bacon, peppers.

“Do you like to cook?” Allura asked. It was something to break the silence, at least. Well, besides Lotor’s snoring.

“Out of necessity.” She neatly folded the canvas bags and set them down on the kitchen table. “One of the few life skills I managed to pass on to that one.” Dayak jutted her chin toward Lotor’s sleeping face. “Though you wouldn’t know it from how poorly stocked he keeps his fridge and pantry.”

Allura managed to get her arm free – just in time to shake out the pins and needles that had started prickling at her fingertips. “He did make a pretty impressive chili a few weeks ago.”

Lotor muttered something in his sleep that she couldn’t quite make out, but the feeling of his lips brushing against her neck made her shiver. Dayak let out a sigh. “He’s sleeping like the dead – you could probably escape without waking him if you wanted.”

She glanced down at him. No, she didn’t think it was worth the risk. “I’m not in a rush to get anywhere,” she said with a smile.

Dayak shrugged. “Well stay for dinner if you like.”

“Oh! I couldn’t-t-“

“Don’t bother insisting that you don’t want to intrude – my nephew is passed out on your shoulder for goodness’ sake. You couldn’t do anything of the sort of you tried.”

Allura shut her mouth again.

A tight-lipped smile stretched across Dayak’s face. “He’s quite taken with you, you know that?”
Oh, there it was – the blush was back in full-force. She couldn’t hide it if she tried, and she had a feeling Dayak saw it too from the way that smile of hers widened. Allura bit her lip, glancing down at Lotor again. He had listlessly wrapped his arms around her stomach, hands folded against her ribs.

Well, at least he’d stopped drooling. Still snoring loud enough to wake the dead, but she could handle that much.

“I think this is just thanks to the painkillers,” she laughed.

“Painkillers or no,” Dayak said as she got to work boiling a pot of water on the stove, “I do believe Lotor is smitten.”

For a second it almost sounded like Dayak was laughing too. But no, that couldn’t be right. Allura had only known the woman a few days and even that was enough for her to know she must have been hearing things.

Smitten…who even used words like that past the third grade?

“He’s been so wrapped up in that book of his,” Dayak sighed. “I was starting to think he was turning into some kind of shut-in. And then you turn up on his doorstep…” She eyed Allura as she added a generous pinch of salt to the water with a flourish. “Literally. It’s almost poetic in a way.”

She didn’t think it looked very poetic at the moment, considering that Lotor had started drooling again.

Dayak went quiet, staring at the pot on the stove, and Allura was about to make a comment about watched pots and how they felt about boiling when she tapped a carefully manicured nail on the counter and added, “I hope I can trust you not to do anything to hurt him.”

Her voice was so soft – almost uncharacteristically so, from what little Allura had gleaned from her character – that it was barely audible over the sound of bubbles starting to form on the surface of the water. Allura blinked. She couldn’t have heard that right. It had almost sounded like Dayak was trying to…give her the talk.

The “hurt my family and I’ll come for you with a shovel and a body bag” talk. But with more eloquent vocabulary.

She swallowed. “I…I’m not trying to hurt anyone.”

Dayak hummed, still not looking at her as she grabbed a wooden spoon and gave the water a thoughtful – unnecessary, except for the sake of keeping her hands busy – stir. “I’m not accusing you of anything. If that one were conscious-“ She nodded Lotor’s way again. “-he would certainly give me an earful for insinuating that he needs protecting. He’s a grown man after all, and he can make his own choices. He has been for some time now. Maybe longer than he ever should have.”

Something in Dayak’s voice sounded regretful. Resentful, even.

The older woman drew in a long and careful breath before neatly resting the spoon on the lip of the pot and turning to face Allura. “Lotor is not a stranger to heartbreak,” she said quietly, holding Allura’s gaze. “But he doesn’t need any more.”

Just what was she supposed to say to that? All she could come up with was a clumsy, lingering, “Uh…”

Dayak huffed. “I’m not naïve, Allura. Nor am I nearly old-fashioned enough to start harping about
courtship or marriage when you two have only been seeing each other a few weeks. If you two find you aren’t right for each other, I’m sure you’re both perfectly capable of handling it as adults. But for as long as you are together, in whatever capacity you are, just…” She paused, and something flitted across her face that made her look so much older than she was. It made Dayak’s eyes shimmer, just for a moment. “Just… treat him well. That’s all I want.”

Did Dayak ever really think Allura planned on doing anything different?

“Nneuughh…” Lotor stirred, sighing against her clavicle as his eyes slowly cracked open. “Wh’time issit…”

“Time for you to relieve Allura of her duty as a throw pillow, I think,” Dayak chimed, turning to the pot again.

When Allura glanced down at him and met his eye, she could see the fog lifting. A moment later it was replaced by confusion, then realization, then horror as he shot up quickly enough to almost topple off of the other side of the couch. “Allura! I didn’t – how long was I–“

Dayak waved the wooden spoon at him over her shoulder. “Don’t go falling off the sofa. It won’t do if you rip open your stitches and make poor Allura drive you to the hospital a second time.”

“It’s fine,” Allura giggled. Maybe if she kept her hair draped over the drool stains on her shirt Lotor wouldn’t notice them. “Really. I felt so bad about waking you up earlier that I just didn’t have the heart to do it again.”

“I fell asleep on you,” he groaned, hiding his face in his hands. But not before she got a perfect view of the crimson blush spreading over his cheeks. “Did I drool on you too?”

She avoided his gaze as she pulled her hair down farther over her collar. “No?”

He muffled a moan into his palms.

“Enough of that – shake off that sleep and make yourself useful by stirring in the pasta.” Dayak’s tone was so different from the soft – almost vulnerable – one that she’d taken before Lotor had woken up that it made Allura’s head spin. She watched as Lotor hauled himself up off the couch and got to work at the stove with a wide yawn. He nodded along as Dayak spoke to him, regaling him with some tale of some poor fellow who had made the mistake of cutting in front of her at the grocery store.

Surely Dayak didn’t think she was going to hurt him. It wasn’t like this thing they had going on was just some fling. She’d never driven a fling to the hospital or stepped in to prevent one from getting into a bar brawl.

Then again, she wasn’t entirely sure what they were supposed to call it quite yet.

All she knew was that her arm felt oddly cold without Lotor passed out against it.

“You-” Zethrid poked him in the middle of the chest. “-need to get out of the house.”

Lotor answered with a grunt and little else.

Over the last several days he’d managed to come off of his pain medication – even if he was popping ibuprofen as often as the label allowed – and stay awake for more than three hours at a time. He was down to one nap a day, which did wonders for his productivity.
Or it would, if not for Dayak looming over him like a stern owl.

Not that he didn’t enjoy her company…alright, maybe *enjoy* wasn’t quite the right word. But it was nice, in a way, to see her after all of these years. And he would have to be made of stone not to be touched by how she looked after him. But having another person staying in his apartment was getting old.

And that wasn’t entirely Dayak’s fault – it would have gotten old if it was anyone else too. He lived alone for a reason, even if it meant paying more rent and not having anyone else to blame if the milk went bad in the fridge.

Zethrid didn’t give up easy. She nudged him in the leg. “C’mon, you’ve been cooped up in here for almost a week. Aren’t you going stir crazy?”

“No really, no,” he said, just to get her boot off his thigh if nothing else.

“He’s got his *girlfriend* to come visit him,” Ezor chimed with a smile. “Why would he ever wanna leave?”

“She’s not my–“

“Don’t mention the G-word yet,” Zethrid hissed. Suddenly Ezor was the target of all of her nudging instead of him. Hallelujah. “They’re in that weird undefined phase. Ya know, kinda serious, but not *serious* serious.”

Lotor fought back a choke. Just how was he supposed to know when things were…*serious* serious? How was *anyone* supposed to know?


“I’m not,” he groaned. “It’s nothing. Maybe…maybe I am getting a bit of cabin fever…” He sighed and let himself slump against the arm of the couch. “I’ve been so low on energy that I haven’t managed to do anything but sleep and let Dayak cook my meals.”

Zethrid snickered. “Must be hard, having a live-in nanny.”

He fought the urge to pout and lost. “She’s not my *nanny*.”

Ezor ignored him. That or she wasn’t convinced. “Where is she anyway? I thought she’d still be here giving you a sponge bath or something.”

“I had my appendix out – I’m not an invalid,” Lotor spat. “And she went out for coffee. Apparently my coffee maker doesn’t live up to her tastes.”

“In her defense, that thing is probably older than this building,” Zethrid said.

Before Lotor could leap to the defense of his poor coffee maker – it was *dependable*, dammit – Ezor’s eyes lit up. “Oooh! Why don’t we go to the mall? You can go to Sur La Table and get some specialized kitchen gadget you’ll never use and I’ll treat you to one of those big pretzels!” Her eyebrows bounced playfully under her bangs. “You can bring Allura – maybe you two can sneak off into Victoria’s Secret and pick out something lacy.”

Zethrid threw her head back and guffawed just as he choked on his own breath. “Ezor, easy – you’re gonna shortcircuited his poor virgin brain.”
“I resent that,” he croaked.

Still, it had been too long since he’d had one of those delightfully over-salted soft mall pretzels. And he had wanted to find a new cast iron skillet for a while.

He staunchly refused to think of anything else – namely Allura anywhere in the vicinity of lingerie. Not that the image was all that unpleasant…

No. Bad.

He cleared his throat and did his best to clear his head of that picture at the same time. “It…has been a while since I spent some time at the mall.”

“That’s the spirit!” Ezor sang as she launched herself up to her feet and strode toward the door. “I’ll track down Allura and find my car keys! Ooh this is gonna be so much fun-“

She got all of half a step through the door before slamming straight into Dayak’s chest.

Dayak barely bit back a curse as she stumbled backward, a light mocha stain dripping down the front of her blouse. The glare she leveled at Ezor could have scared off an army. “You-“ she snapped, making Ezor seemingly shrink down to at least half her usual size. “-are very lucky I chose to order iced coffee this morning.”

She swept past Ezor into the kitchen, ignoring Ezor’s shaky apology and grabbing a wad of paper towels. She didn’t bother neatly folding them before dabbing the coffee from her neck and hands and adding, “And you’re even luckier that my best blouse is in the wash.”

Zethrid was busy pulling a shaking Ezor against her chest and rubbing her shoulder. Poor Ezor looked like a small dog in a thunderstorm. “Dayak,” Lotor sighed, “Please don’t threaten my friends.”

“I never threatened the girl,” she insisted.

“The threat was implied.”

She huffed, then glanced up at Ezor again and it turned into a full-blown sigh. “Don’t give me that simpering look, girl. I know you’re far tougher than that.”

Ezor’s puppydog-like gaze morphed into a pout as she straightened up again. “To be fair,” she said, “That simpering look got me out of two speeding tickets.” She picked at an errant thread on her sleeve. “Er…sorry about your coffee. And your shirt.”

“I’ve been meaning to replace it anyway,” Dayak sighed.

Lotor saw the idea forming in Ezor’s gaze before she opened her mouth again, and he shot her a look: Don’t you dare.

She did anyway. “Why don’t you come shopping with us!” Dayak paused halfway through dabbing at her shirt. “I’ll…buy you another coffee?”

He couldn’t really blame Ezor for trying to be nice, even if it was more a strategic move more than one from the goodness of her own heart. After all, being on Dayak’s shit-list was something he wouldn’t wish on anybody. The woman could hold a grudge more tightly than an alligator with its dinner in its jaws.
Dayak glanced his way. “I’m glad to see you’re finally getting out of the house. Sitting around doing nothing is as bad for your spirits as it is for your back.”

“My back is fine,” he sighed.

“You’ll thank me for my advice when you’re my age,” she insisted, and she turned to Ezor again. “I’ll take up your offer for that coffee.”

“G-great!” Ezor said with a wide, albeit forced smile.

“Does this mean you’ll by me another burrito to replace the one you ate out of the fridge last week?” Zethrid asked her.

But Ezor was already sprinting to the door. “Can’t hear you! Gotta get Allura!” Zethrid was hot on her heels – “Hey! Hey! I sprung for guacamole, get back here!” – and before he knew it the door had slammed closed behind them.

Dayak gave him an appraising look. “Allura is coming along too? Was that your idea or theirs?”

“Theyirs,” he told her. No use lying. It didn’t stop the blush from spreading stubbornly across his cheeks. “But I didn’t argue.”

“I’m sure.” That was a smile on her face as she turned on her heel and headed for the bathroom with a fresh shirt in her hand. “It will do you some good, you know.”

He didn’t have the chance to ask if she was talking about Allura or the outing itself before she put the bathroom door between the two of them. He had a feeling it was probably the former.

And he had a feeling she was probably right.
He was loathe to admit it, but Dayak was right – getting out of the house did wonders for his mood. And his back too. Stretching his legs felt almost as good as the rush of cool air that pushed away the summer heat as they stepped through the automatic doors.

“I’m taking bets,” Ezor chimed, “How long until Lotor disappears off on his own into the bowels of Sur La Table and Barnes and Noble?”

He rolled his eyes. “Keep your money. You need it to buy Dayak that coffee, remember?”

“Oh…”

“And me that pretzel.” He smirked. “You did promise.”

“Fine, fine.”

Allura’s eyes lit up as she smiled. “Ooh, I can’t remember the last time I had a mall pretzel!”

Lotor shot Ezor a look, and she groaned. “I’ll buy all of you guys pretzels then!”

“Lotor can have mine,” Zethrid said. “I’m doing that keto thing.”

Well, he wasn’t going to complain about that, even if it made Ezor groan – “Don’t remind me…our apartment is full of cottage cheese and avocados.” – and he didn’t bother giving it much thought after Allura slipped her hand into his and gave it a squeeze.

“I’d love to take a look around Sur La Table,” she told him. “Ever since Coran got me a new standing mixer I’ve been dying to get more attachments for it.” She had a gleaming, almost dream-like look in her eye as she swung their arms back and forth between them with each step. “That and I want to buy a new dress or two before the summer’s over…but I promise not to drag you around the women’s clothing section of Macy’s.”

“As if he’d mind seeing you try on a few pretty dresses,” Ezor giggled with a wink.

He huffed. “Ezor.” Was it really too much to ask to just enjoy the feeling of Allura’s hand against his for a bit?

“What?” Allura shot him a playful smirk. “Don’t you want to see me try on a few pretty dresses?”

Ezor threw her head back and laughed loud enough to draw the attention of everyone all the way to the escalators, and Lotor wondered if the blush creeping across his face would help him blend in and disappear into the abhorrent salmon colored tile under their feet. Warmth bloomed up his arm as Allura leaned closer and whispered, “I was just joking.”

He shot her a placating smile. “For what it’s worth, I wouldn’t mind helping you find a new dress.”
“Would you mind helping me find a breadmaking extension for my standing mixer first?” she shot back.

Lotor glanced over his shoulder just in time to catch a glimpse of Dayak disappearing into the Dillard’s. Ezor was trying desperately to pull Zethrid into Sephora while Zethrid loudly insisted that she wanted to go to Dick’s Sporting Goods first to hunt down a new kettle bell.

He gave Allura’s hand a tug. “Come on – now’s our chance.”

She followed close behind him, laughing as she did.

Sur La Table was across the mall, up on the second level, but they took their time getting there. It wasn’t like anyone was chasing them, but Allura glanced over her shoulder on their way up the escalator anyway. “Are you sure they won’t mind?” she asked. “Us running off on our own?”

“More than sure,” he told her with a grin. “Dayak is probably up to her elbows in fragrance samples, and once Ezor sets foot in a Sephora or an Ulta she’s bound to be there for an hour or more.” He was painfully aware of how much his palm was starting to sweat, but when he pulled it away to wipe it on his jeans – for Allura’s sake as much as his – she neatly laced her arm through his instead. He distracted himself from the way his stomach flipped by clearing his throat. “Believe me…I’ve made the mistake of offering to carry her bags before. Never again.”

“Well I promise not to make you carry anything,” Allura said. “You’re still not supposed to lift anything, remember?”

He was painfully aware – the last time he’d gone to lift the milk out of the fridge for a late night bowl of cereal Dayak had given him an earful.

“So-“ He shivered when she shifted against him and the length of her arm brushed his ribs through his shirt. “Are you looking to restock your kitchen or are you just planning on window shopping?” She tugged him through the store entrance, eyes darting around every corner of the rustic, warm interior. “Because I’ll warn you – I can never seem to leave this damn store emptyhanded.”

“Why do you think I avoid it like the plague unless I have money to spend?” Lotor fired back, making Allura grin. “I want to find a new cast iron skillet. I think Acxa stole my old one when she and Narti moved into their new house.”

“She stole it?”

“She insists I gave it to her as a housewarming present, but I can’t remember a thing about it.”

She considered that with a thoughtful little hum. “Well obviously we have to find you a new one. And you can break it in by making me dinner!”

He barely had time to turn that over in his head before she was tugging him farther inside the store, giggling as she did it. There was a lightness to her voice and a spring in her step as she pulled him by his hand down the aisles – she always seemed to have a contagious light in her eyes. It glimmered there behind her lashes whenever she mentioned Asimov or Shiro and Keith’s dog or a new cookie recipe, and it seemed to make her entire face shine.

He could see it now as she stopped to peruse a shelf of cookie cutters in all different shapes – “Oh my god, this one is shaped like a duck! That’s adorable!” – and he couldn’t help but stand there with a helpless little smile on his face.

The light flickered just a bit when she turned and caught him staring. Damn, he must have been
doing so for longer than he realized. “Sorry…I know you probably want to find that skillet and here I am distracted by cookie cutters.”

“Be as distracted as you like,” he assured her. God, he was desperate for that light to come back full-force.

Maybe this was what Dayak had meant by *smitten*.

He cleared his throat. “It makes me curious actually…just what got you so interested in baking?”

She shrugged as she knelt down to inspect another row of cookie cutters, her lips forming into a soft little “O” when she found one in the shape of a crescent moon. “It’s just a hobby, really. When I was little my father and I used to bake pies in the summer and cookies in the winter. He’d always set the bowl on the kitchen table and hold me in his lap while I stirred.” She let out a warm laugh. “It always got ridiculously messy, but he never seemed to mind.”

He swallowed before he hazarded, “This was…after your mother died.”

She gently put the moon-shaped cookie cutter back in its bin and picked out a star-shaped one instead as she nodded. “I think it…helped him cope. I didn’t realize it until I was a lot older, obviously, but…her dying took its toll on him.”

Oh god, this conversation was wandering into dangerous territory. The last thing he’d wanted was to send that beautiful light fleeing from her face entirely. And in the middle of a kitchen supply store nonetheless. But when she looked up again, she was smiling, even if it was a little more…muted than before. “But it brought us closer, and now I get to boast about making the best pumpkin pie out of all my extended family.”

“And some delicious cupcakes,” Lotor reminded her, and she nudged him.

“Those too.”

Her arms full of cookie cutters of all shapes and sizes, they wove their way through the rest of the store until they were faced with a wall of skillets, pans, pots, and Dutch ovens. Allura picked up one of the largest skillets and tested its weight in her hands. “What about you?” she mused as she stared at it. “Did Dayak really teach you to cook?”

“She claimed that, did she?” he sighed.

“Didn’t she?”

“Well, yes – but I didn’t get much say in the matter.” He ran his finger along the edge of a Dutch oven so large and solid he probably would have blown out his stitches if he’d tried to lift it. “She taught me to make mushroom risotto when I was seventeen, and I hated every second of it.” He shrugged. “But I never forgot the recipe, even if I think that standing by the stove stirring the damn thing for a half hour is torture.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever had risotto,” Allura mused. “I always thought it must be good, considering how much Gordon Ramsay likes to scream about it.”

He smiled at her as he picked out a skillet just at eye level with a high lip and a smooth shine. “Well,” he said, “Maybe I can endure a little bit of torture for you sometime.”

Allura’s eyes lit up again at that, so brightly that he swore it glinted off the edge of the pan in his hands.
She insisted on carrying the pan for him, no matter how much he tried to insist he could manage on his own. It was probably for the best, all things considered – the last thing he wanted was to ruin another day by making her drive him back to the hospital. And even as heavy as it was, she didn’t seem to mind one bit. She carried it like it weighed nothing.

He wondered why it had taken him so long to notice the thick muscles in her shoulders and arms. Had they always been there?

Of course they had – she’d thrown a full grown man over her shoulder for God’s sake. An iron skillet and a few cookie cutters were nothing compared to that.

“I think you said something about letting me try on a few dresses,” she told him, spinning on her heel to face him as she walked backwards into the Macy’s. “If I’m lucky I’ll be able to find something that isn’t floral. Everything seems to be *floral* this season.”

“You don’t like flowers?” Lotor asked her.

“Oh my god – this one has *pockets*!” she exclaimed as she spun around. “There you are!” A pair of arms wrapped
around his shoulders from behind, a Sephora bag whacking against his chest. Ezor beamed up at him as she perched herself on the armchair by the dressing room entrance. “Look at you two, sneaking off together as soon as you got the chance.”

“Did you really expect all of us to follow you into Sephora?” Lotor asked her, and she scoffed.

“Oh of course not! Why do you think I wanted to go there first? I knew you guys would wanna run off together the first chance you got.” She smirked. What, did she expect them to get up to something more than browsing kitchenware and summer dresses? “I kinda wish I could get Allura into Sephora with me though…with her perfect skin she’d probably look amazing in the new Bite Beauty plum rose lip gloss.”

“And Zethrid?”

“Nah, she’s not really a lip gloss kinda gal Says it smudges too much at the gym.”

“No, where did she get off to?” He gingerly sat down next to Ezor and fished another dose of ibuprofen out of his pocket. “Did she manage to escape into the sporting goods section?”

Ezor pouted and handed him a half-full bottle of diet Pepsi. “Yeah. And Dayak’s still roaming around Dillard’s someplace. Probably intimidating all the fragrance people into giving her extra free samples.”

That did sound like her.

She gave him a hearty shove that almost made him choke on his pills. “And look at you! Playing the role of the dutiful boyfriend waiting outside the dressing room. Good on ya.”

There it was again, that word. Boyfriend. Like girlfriend, it sent something zapping up his spine that he couldn’t name. Not something all that unpleasant, but for better or worse it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end anyway.

A flash of silver hair peeked around the corner, followed a moment later by Allura’s voice: “I’m not sure about these polka dots.”

His stomach did an excited little flip, and suddenly he was on his feet much more quickly than his still-healing scar wanted to allow. Behind him, he could practically feel Ezor vibrating with excitement. “You found a polka dot dress?” she sang gleefully. “That sounds so cute! Lemme see, lemme see!”

He got a glimpse of Allura’s face as she smoothed a lock of her hair back behind her reddening ear. “Lotor found it actually,” she said with a sheepish little laugh. “It’s…it’s cute. I’m just not sure it suits me…”

She stepped out as she spoke, her shoulders rounded and one hand gripping her other arm. She had her bottom lip caught between her teeth, her eyes fixed on the wall as she toyed with the shoulder strap. Her silver hair fell over the white-spotted pastel pink, a hint of her collarbone poking out from underneath the dip of the fabric at her chest, the hem swishing around her knees.

Lotor swallowed.

“I think he likes it,” Ezor giggled, and Allura’s eyes went a little wide.

“Oh! Does he?” A smile joined the blush on her face. “Lotor, what do you think? You picked it out after all.”
She turned in a little twirl, making the hem of the dress billow daintily out over her thighs, and Lotor’s mouth went dry. “It’s…” He grabbed the diet Pepsi from Ezor’s hands again and took another swig, coughed, and forced out, “It’s beautiful.”

“You don’t think I look like an elementary school teacher?” Allura asked, hands neatly folded in front of her.

“I believe your exact words were a kindergarten teacher. And no…neither.” He smiled. “You look…fantastic.”

“It’s so cute!” Ezor chimed. “Adorable! Man, if this is just the first one I can’t wait to see what other stuff you guys picked out.” She nudged Lotor in the ribs. “This one’s got a good eye.”

Allura’s eyes gleamed as she grinned. “Just wait until you see the next one – it has pockets, Ezor! Pockets!”

It really did suit her. The dress and the smile. And the sparkle in her eye.

With her bags in one hand and a soft pretzel in the other, Allura felt content. Lighthearted, even. A little bit of retail therapy could do wonders.

Lotor and Zethrid seemed content to while away the next few minutes in the massage chairs next to the Sunglass Hut, and she couldn’t blame them. She was tempted to join them, but Ezor tugged on her arm. “C’mon,” she said as she pulled her toward the Victoria’s Secret. “I need a new bra and I need a second opinion. You in?” She shot Allura a warm smile. “You can get something new to go with that pretty pink dress of yours.”

Well, maybe she was overdue for a new bra or two – the underwire in her favorite one had finally given up the ghost the week before and her backup was on its last legs. So she dropped her bags at Lotor and Zethrid’s feet and matched Ezor’s grin with one of her own. “Sure.”

“I’ll join you,” Dayak piped up, and Ezor blinked.

“Oh…really?”

Dayak huffed and shot Ezor a look down the length of her nose. “Their underwire hasn’t failed me yet. And besides – I don’t plan on letting you out of my sight until I’ve gotten that replacement coffee.”

Ezor pouted, just enough for Allura to catch it before she shoved it down again. “R-right. Okay. C’mon, then.”

Allura let Ezor tug her into the sea of pink. She turned just in time to watch Zethrid and Lotor both pop another two quarters each into their massage chairs before her view was obscured by a display of lacy red bralettes.

Beside her, Dayak huffed. “Ridiculous little things.” She hooked one finger under the strap of one of the bralettes and let it snap against the mannequin’s shoulder. “Completely impractical.”

“But so fun!” Ezor insisted. “C’mon, everyone needs a little bit of lace in their closet, don’t you think?” She grinned at Allura.

“Well,” she sighed, her ears burning. “I don’t think I’ve owned anything lacy since college…”
“My point entirely,” Dayak sniffed. “Enjoy your lace monstrosities if you want – I’ll be on the hunt for something a bit more…substantial.”

Ezor watched her disappear behind another display before tugging Allura back to the opposite corner of the store, stopping by a wide table covered with thongs. Her eyebrows did a playful little wiggle underneath her bangs as she grinned. “So?”

“So…huh?” Allura said, and Ezor sighed.

“Oh, don’t be coy. You really don’t anything, ya know…playful?” She glanced at the lacy thongs all over the table. “For a certain…someone?”

Oh.

So this was…that kind of talk.

Surprisingly, she thought she preferred all of Dayak’s talk about heartbreak. Her face burned all the way down to her neck. “I ah…we haven’t really…”

“I kinda figured you hadn’t,” Ezor giggled. “Hey Allura…can I ask you something…personal?”

“Depends how personal…”

“Are you a virgin?”

That was pretty damn personal.

But she also didn’t see any point in lying. Especially not when they were surrounded by thongs. “No.”

“Right on, girl!” Ezor said with a grin, and then she held up her hands as if proposing some kind of truce. “Look, I’m not trying to pry. I do get boundaries and all, you know? But Lotor’s a good friend and all, so I guess I just…” She sighed. “I just want to look out for him.”

Allura glanced past the underwear table and the bralette mannequin to catch a glimpse of Dayak across the store. “You’re not the only one.”

“I know I’m not, but I gotta know – you two haven’t…”

“N-no.”

“Not even a little?”

Just what did that mean? “No.”

“Do you want to?”

Allura balked.

Did she want to? With Lotor? How could she not? He was handsome and witty with a voice like melted butter. He’d brought her tampons and chocolate and loved to cook. She’d have to be dead not to want that. But…

“We haven’t…ah…talked about it…”

She wanted to take that step, sure. She would have jumped on the opportunity – figuratively
speaking – if it ever…presented itself. But she had no idea of knowing if Lotor felt the same.

She’d been his first kiss. It only made sense that she would probably be his first…other things too.

The thought made her stomach flip.

She swore it was like Ezor could see the cogs turning in her head, because the next thing she said, with a smile, was, “Ya know…he might surprise you.”

Allura blinked. “You think so?”

“Sure! But don’t rush…I’m not trying to pressure you. Or him.” She leaned down to pick up a lacy purple thong, stretching it in front of her with a smirk. “But I still think that everyone should have something lacy in their closet. Even if it’s just for you. For now.”

She shot Allura a wink, and Allura couldn’t help but think that maybe she had a good point.
Why Did It Have To Be Me?

Chapter Notes

So first off, I know it's been a long while. Thank you guys for being patient. I've been really looking forward to writing more of this self-indulgent little fic for a while and it's so nice to be able to get back into it. I don't like taking hiatuses like this, but with a full-time job, other volunteer work, other writing projects, and just life in general demanding my attention too, sometimes it's necessary.

I hope this chapter is worth the wait. :)

Dayak’s flight left on a Wednesday, about three days after the “week at most” she’d promised to stay, and two days after he finally got his stitches out. But as happy as Lotor was to have his apartment back to himself, now that he was finally starting to feel like a person instead of an invalid again, the trip to the airport felt bittersweet.

And quiet.

Dayak couldn’t stand any of the local radio stations, which wasn’t surprising. He suspected she listened to nothing more than the sound of wind when she drove herself anywhere. She insisted on as much from the moment they loaded all of her bags into the trunk of his ’99 Corolla, and for the entire hour drive until they pulled up to the curb.

She wasn’t one for long goodbyes either. He was half expecting to pat him on the shoulder and be on her way without any more fanfare. But she lingered in the passenger’s seat, drawing in a deep breath and finally turning to look at him.

He swallowed. That look of hers had a way of making him feel like a child again. And usually one who was about to get a stern lecture at that.

“So,” she finally said. “Allura.”

Yes. That. Her.

And then Dayak smiled. Really smiled – more widely than he thought he’d ever seen. “You’ve done something very right to end up with her,” she said. “Either that, or you’ve gotten exceedingly lucky.”

He suspected it was both. Probably luck more than anything else.

“In either case, you seem quite taken with her.”

Dayak had a keen way of convincing him that she knew too much already for him to bother trying to hide anything else. The glint in her eye as she went quiet and waited for him to answer spoke volumes. Enough for heat to creep across the bridge of his nose as he cleared his throat and finally said, “I guess I am…just a bit…well, I remember you calling it smitten.”

She huffed. “A ridiculous word, but a painfully accurate one.” Her hand landed on his forearm, giving it a squeeze. “I always knew you would find someone…special one day. I didn’t know what
to expect of that person, but I always hoped you would fall for somebody with a sharp wit. It seems you have.”

*Fallen* for her… since when was Dayak so sentimental?

She patted his arm as she drew in a deep breath. And that, it seemed, was that. “Well,” she said, nodding sharply. “I did promise not to overstay my welcome. And I’d rather not miss my flight.”

She leaned for the door handle, but Lotor blurted out before he could stop himself: “Dayak-” She glanced at him. Strangely… expectantly. “Dayak, I…ah… thank you.” She blinked. “For coming. For… for all your help. For everything.”

**His grip tightened on the steering wheel. Damn, when had he gotten so sentimental?**

When Dayak sighed, he expected a stern lecture about the merits of keeping a stiff upper lip, like she had told him when he’d fallen off his bike as a child and run to her with blood streaming down his knee. Or when he’d gone searching through old photographs and started to wonder why he didn’t have a mother around like the other children in his school. He expected her to remind him that he couldn’t forget his own strength, because he would need it, and nobody else could lend him theirs.

“Of course,” she said instead. “After all, if I hadn’t come I had no way of trusting that those friends of yours could have kept you from tearing your own stitches out.”

He managed a smile. “I could have managed on my own.”

“You’re far too stubborn sometimes,” she huffed, smacking him lightly on the arm. Now *that* seemed more like the Dayak he knew and loved. “I do hope Allura can help you finally grow out of that.”

He didn’t bother arguing. Now didn’t feel like the time. “I’m sure she’ll do her best,” he said instead.

“I’m certain,” Dayak told him, eying him carefully. He could *feel* that gaze boring a hole through the side of his head. “And I’m certain you’ll do right by her. Treat her well. For goodness’ sake, put some effort into *wooing* the girl – from what she’s told me you’re more than capable.”

“How… much has she told you, exactly?”

“Enough.” She glanced at the terminal – they couldn’t stay here in the car for much longer, judging by the way the parking attendant near the door was staring them down. Dayak’s nails tapped against the door handle for a moment before she let out a long sigh, and the next thing Lotor knew her arms were wrapping around his shoulders in a tight… hug?

Dayak… hugging him… he didn’t think she’d done that since he was five, and he wasn’t even certain that was a real memory at all. But here she was, holding him close and pressing her chin against the crook of his neck. The smell of her perfume and hairspray burned his nose and made his head spin.

“I…” She cleared her throat. “I am very proud of you, Lotor.”

“Th-thank you,” he choked. This couldn’t be real. He had to be dreaming. Or maybe he had died under anesthesia after all and this was some sort of strange purgatory where beautiful women kissed him and Dayak went around distributing hugs.

The moment ended as quickly as it had begun, and Dayak straightened her back as if it had never happened. “Well,” she said. “I can get my own bags without any trouble. I’d rather you not get a tongue-lashing from airport security on my account.”
“Right.”

“Drive safely – I don’t want to have to fly back here to nurse you back to health from a car accident.”

“I’d never ask you to.” But somehow he knew she would come anyway. Whether he liked it or not.

She opened the door, and turned to him just a moment later with an enigmatic hint of a smile stretching her lips. “And Lotor?”

“Yes?”

Then she did something that convinced Lotor that he had to be dreaming. She winked. So quickly he almost missed it. “I do think that girl is falling head over heels for you. So don’t you dare mess that up.”

And then the door closed behind her, and Lotor let his car idle by the curb until airport security threatened him with a ticket if he didn’t move it along.

Allura paused by Lotor’s door, her hand raised and poised to knock, and for a moment or two she just listened. What the hell was going on in there, she couldn’t quite make out, but it sure sounded… exciting. Pots clanging together, draws and cabinets slamming open and shut, and Björn Ulvaeus crooning “Falling in love with a woman like you happens so quickly, there’s nothing to do…”

Correction, Björn Ulvaeus and Lotor, and the latter wasn’t doing a half-bad job of carrying the tune. She forced back a giggle as she reached up to knock.

“It’s open!” Lotor called, just a moment before he went back to humming along with the music. She stepped inside and grinned when she got a good look at him, frying pan in one hand and a knife in the other. The latter of which he quickly handed to her hilt-first. “Your timing is perfect,” he said. “You can dice the shallots.”

She gingerly took the knife and glanced over at the cutting board set up on the counter. “Making me work for my dinner?” she asked him with a halfhearted pout.

“You can rinse the rice if you’d rather,” he offered, but she laughed him off. She at least had the sense of mind to put the knife down on the cutting board before standing up on her tip-toes to press a chaste kiss to his lips.

“I’ll dice whatever you want me to dice.”

His smile was warm, albeit a little hesitant. “Mushrooms too?”

“I think I can handle that.” She grabbed the knife again, if just to prove her point. “Will that earn me a place at the table?”

“You earned a place at the table the moment you agreed to come over,” Lotor promised as he got to work looking through his cabinets again. “Although–” He fished a bottle of olive oil out from behind a wall of cans and set it on the counter like a trophy. “we just might eat a little sooner thanks to you. And I promise not to make you stand at the stove stirring the rice while it simmers.”

“Ah, that torture you mentioned,” Allura said, barely managing to stifle a laugh.

He gave her a solemn nod, and stifling that laugh wasn’t much of an option anymore. “I’ll endure i
for us both.” His elbow caught her in the ribs as he gave her a gentle nudge. “Have a little faith in me.”

Oh, she had plenty of faith in him. It was herself she was worried about as she got to work dicing the shallots…trying to anyway. Baking didn’t usually involve a lot of dicing, and she owned a food processor for a reason. Trying to get a grip on the slippery little wannabe onions was getting on her nerves already, and she was barely one shallot in. And it looked more like she’d ripped it apart with her teeth instead of using a knife at all.

Lotor cleared his throat, and suddenly she was hyper-aware of him sidling up next to her. “Ah… would you like to know a trick?”

“Please.”

She was all too eager to hand him the knife. The farther away she could keep the business end of it from her fingertips, the better. “If you make a few cuts like this…not quite all the way down to the root, and then a few more on the other side…” She was enthralled watching his hands work, watching his tendons flex under his skin as he deftly flipped the bulb over on the cutting board and lined up his knife. “Then you just-“

It felt like she blinked and suddenly there was a neat pile of perfectly diced shallots in front of him. And she was definitely still staring at his hands…

Stop staring.

“How-“ She made a big show of studying his handiwork to try and hide the blush that had crept onto her face thanks to…well, his handiwork. And thinking about just what else those hands could do was not helping. “H-how do you do that? Dice it up so fast…”

“It’s all in the wrist, honestly,” he said, almost sheepish.

Oh, she bet it was.

“A lot of important skills in life are,” she said before she could stop herself.

If the double-entendre sank in, he didn’t show it as he pressed the hilt of the knife into her palm again wrapped his arms around her. Laid his hand overtop of hers. And oh god she was blushing so hard she could have cooked the rice right there on her face. “I can show you,” he said softly, lifting her hand up to the cutting board.

“S-sure…”

“Like I said.” God help her, she could feel his breath on the nape of her neck. “In the wrist…curl your fingers under like this-“ He pressed his other hand against hers, folding her fingers under so that the tips of her nails rested on the top of the shallot. “Keep you from cutting yourself.”

“Oh…”

“And then it’s nice and simple.” He guided her knife-wielding hand up and down in an almost circular motion – calluses rubbing against her knuckles, the muscles of his forearm – she had to remind herself to breathe – flexing against her elbow.

He was right – it really was all in the wrist. And he had very good wrists.

The shallots were done all too soon, and Lotor was all smiles as he pulled away. “Think you can still
“Handle the mushrooms?”

She wasn’t sure she could handle much more than keeping herself upright at the moment, but she nodded anyway.

The mushrooms were much easier – they sat flat on the cutting board and the blade slid through them with no trouble at all. Still, she forced herself to keep her eyes on the knife instead of letting her gaze wander over to Lotor as he rinsed the rice and got to work heating up the oil in his new cast iron pan.

Okay, her gaze wandered a little. But she was only human.

“Done with those mushrooms?”

“Hwuh?”

He finally looked up from the pan, and Allura whipped her gaze back to the cutting board and tried to look busy. It was a damn good thing she was done with the mushrooms, because if she had still been chopping she very well could have lost a finger from how she tensed up when he leaned over to inspect her work.

“Looks perfect!” he told her with a smile.

Was he wearing cologne? Or was that his shampoo? Or did he just…naturally smell this good?

She fought the urge to smack herself in the face. Instead of asking him if he always smelled like library books and oregano – did he even use oregano for the risotto? – she gave him a quick, almost frantic nod and stepped aside so he could pluck the cutting board from in front of her.

Into the pan they went, followed by a generous pinch of salt, and she took the liberty of rinsing off his knife while he got to work sautéing them. It gave her something to do with her hands, at least. And occupied her mind to help it mellow out again. But then it was way too quiet, even with Lotor quietly humming as he stirred, his wrist moving like it was on autopilot.

Suddenly she found herself blurting, “Did Dayak teach you to cook anything else?”

Lotor stopped humming in the middle of a bar, and he looked at her, his wrist stopping its gentle, steady turn around the pan. Just for a moment though, and then he was back at it. “First thing she taught me to do was scramble an egg,” he finally said, with an almost wistful little smile. “I was staying with her once…I must have been fourteen or so, and she caught me in her kitchen at two in the morning scraping a metal spatula against the bottom of her best pan. Eggs burned to a crisp, caked all over it…” He laughed, quietly. “She made me scrub it clean. Took me twenty minutes or so. And then she stood there in her bathrobe and told me the importance of learning when to cook on low heat.”

Allura stared, her hands dripping all over the counter before she had the sense to reach for a paper towel. “It seems like you’ve come a long way from that.”

“I like to think so.” He gave the pan a spirited little flip, sending the mushrooms arching up and back into it with a hiss.

“Do you…miss her?”

He didn’t look up from the mushrooms. “I have to admit it’s nice to have my apartment back again. Not that she was a particularly demanding houseguest.”
“She seems to care a lot about you.”

Lotar’s brow was pinched thoughtfully as he tipped the mushrooms into a bowl, juices and all. “Hand me the shallots next.”

Allura did, wondering if she’d said something wrong. He neatly scraped them into the pan next and got back to work coating them with oil before finally saying, softly, “She’s the closest person to a mother I’ve had in a very long time.”

He didn’t look sad, so Allura didn’t bother with overly sentimental comfort. He said it plainly, like it was just a fact of life. Like having blue eyes or being left-handed – Dayak was family.

After a moment, he smiled back at her and added, “She likes you by the way.”

She blinked. “She…does?”

“Yes,” he chuckled. “And believe me, that’s something worth bragging about.”

She had to admit it made her chest swell with pride, but she tried to keep it confined there instead of letting it reach her head. “She’s very…er…”

He arched an eyebrow her way. “Severe?”

That was one word for her. “I was going to say steadfast.”

“Ha!” He reached for the rice and added it to the pan, and Allura watched as it began to turn golden brown as it mixed with the shallots and oil. “Unflappable?”

She giggled. “Sophisticated!”

“Challenging a writer to a battle of adjectives, are we?” he said with a smirk that made her stomach flip. Without breaking eye contact, he reached for the bottle of white wine by the stove and poured in a healthy dash of it.

He didn’t even measure it – how…daring.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” she conceded, and suddenly she was painfully aware of just how breathless it sounded. She swallowed and forced a shaky smile to her face. “F-for all your talk of how torturous this dish is, you sure seem to be enjoying yourself.”

“Oh, we’re only five minutes in – the torture is just beginning.” His smirk turned into a wicked grin that made her feel every bit of heat coming from that pan, and it all gathered right in her cheeks.

Just how could the simple act of cooking turn someone into such a different beast? She’d gotten glimpses of playfulness and sarcasm plenty of times before, but now…all of this confidence was just shining through. Lighting up his eyes and smile. The way he hummed, the way he worked like he could have done it with his eyes shut – and he didn’t even seem to notice just how…irresistible it all made him.

Maybe that was what Ezor had meant – about him surprising her. If this was the same man who had agonized over how to ask her on a date and had planned an entire rooftop picnic just to orchestrate a first kiss out of a romance novel, then there was still plenty of him left to uncover yet.

No, no, no, she was not allowed to think about anything related to…uncovering him. Not when her hormones seemed to be running rampant tonight.
He was right about the dish taking a good long time to finish – he spent almost half an hour standing at that stove, stirring in the chicken broth bit by bit and carefully letting it absorb. The smells wafting around the apartment were enough to make her mouth water and her stomach growl. Well, at least that kept her mind off other things.

“You’re right,” she groaned as her stomach protested particularly loudly about being empty for too long. “This is torture.”

“At least your wrist isn’t cramping,” he said as he swapped the wooden spoon to his other hand and stretched out his newly freed fingers. The smile he shot her was an apologetic one. “Sorry – it’s almost done, I promise.”

“And I’m sure it’ll be worth the wait.” To prove her point, she leaned in to press a kiss to his cheek as he stirred. And there it was – that familiar and lovely blush that still crept onto his face whenever she pressed her lips to it. It made her feel weightless, like she could float away right there, and she wrapped her arms around his stomach to ground herself.

Oh…oh, that felt nice. Her hands lightly grazing his chest. Even over his shirt, it was heavenly, and when she pressed her nose to the nape of his neck she got a good long draw of his scent, mixing with the steam rising off the pan. She let her eyes slide closed with a hum…

“Could you-“ He cleared his throat. “C-could you…grab the butter from the fridge?”

Her eyes snapped open again. That strain in his voice, the tension in his back, the stillness of his wrist with the spoon still sticking out of the rice. She stepped back so quickly she might as well have hugged the stove instead. “Butter,” she forced out. “Right. Sure.”

She found it easily, resisting the urge to bang her head against the refrigerator door. She couldn’t push him, no matter how wildly her hormones were raging. That wasn’t an excuse. It didn’t give her a free pass to break past his boundaries when he wasn’t ready to let her pass.

As she handed it to him, she forced herself to mutter, “Sorry.”

“Sorry?” He turned off the heat. “For what?”

“For…I didn’t mean to get too…touchy-feely?”

“A-ah.” His face was even pinker than before, but maybe that was from the stove. He spooned out a healthy scoop of butter and stirred it into the still-steaming pan. “No, no. It’s fine. I don’t mind. I just…wasn’t expecting…and well, nobody has ever…”

Steam couldn’t make his cheeks that red.

“It’s an adjustment,” he finally said, and he smiled as he added in the mushrooms. “A good adjustment, I promise.”

Like he was trying to prove his point, he leaned down and pressed a quick kiss to her nose. Whether that’s where he was aiming or not, she didn’t know, but it made her giggle anyway. But the moment he straightened up again his smile faltered. “And I – I didn’t even ask if you like mushrooms.”

Her giggled turned into a full-blown laugh. She couldn’t help it, staring at him standing there with a spoon in one hand hovering over a steaming pan of risotto that he had just spent almost an hour slaving over, a look of pure horror spreading over his face. She grabbed a plate from the cupboard next to her and held it out with a smile. “If I didn’t like them, I would have told you,” she promised him. “But I’m starving, and that smells better than anything that’s ever come out of my microwave.”
He matched her smile, letting his own slide onto his face, natural and warm. “Good thing there’s plenty…I just didn’t have the heart to halve the recipe.”

All Allura could say to that, as he spooned out a beautifully generous helping onto her plate, was, “Thank God.”
The touching was…new. New, Lotor could handle, with enough warning ahead of time. But Allura’s hands on his chest – *that* had taken him by surprise. Enough to make him almost forget how to breathe altogether.

It was *nice*, like the kissing was nice. A *good adjustment*, just like he’d said. But there was no way to put that into words the way he wanted without seeming ridiculous. Prudish, even. And he’d had enough people call him that during his adolescent years.

Not that Allura ever would. But the thought of explaining terms to her over dinner just sounded exhausting.

At least his kneejerk reaction hadn’t ruined dinner. Allura seemed to enjoy every bite so thoroughly that it made his entire body thrum with pride. Oh, that *torturous* dish was well worth it, seeing the satisfied smile stretch across her face as she sank down onto his sofa once all the dishes were soaking in the sink.

“You,” she told him, her ankle brushing his as he sat down beside her. “Are a very decent cook.”

“Decent?” he chuckled.

She laughed exuberantly. “You expecting me to shower you with praise now? Don’t get me wrong – I will, if it means you’ll cook for me again sometime. Doesn’t have to be risotto. I wouldn’t complain, but I wouldn’t want to make you suffer *too* much.”

“Oh, it was almost *insufferable,*” he sighed, making her giggle. “But you made it…a little less insufferable.”

“More sufferable?” she offered.

“No need to sit around in the dark.”
She hummed in what sounded like agreement. “I’d definitely rather be able to see.” Her fingers laced with his. “You know, I didn’t think I’d ever find someone who was a better cook than my old friend Coran, but I think you just might have done it.” Her brow pinched as she caught her lip between her teeth. “I hope I didn’t…make you uncomfortable earlier. Before dinner.”

Before dinner. The touching thing. That she had already apologized for once – like it was something that she needed to apologize for.

“Allura…” When had his mouth gone so dry? “It’s really…it’s really fine.”

“Because I don’t want to…to rush you into anything-“

“You’re not.”

“And if I went too far-“

“You didn’t!” On a whim, like a reflex, he grasped both of her hands in his and held them close. They were soft under his fingers, but his thumb grazed against a callus on her palm. “Allura, I told you – it’s fine. I’m fine.” He couldn’t help but smile a bit as her fingers curled against his. “You just took me a bit by surprise, that’s all. I tend to get ah…in the zone when I’m cooking.”

Another easy smile slid onto her face. “I noticed.”

“And I wouldn’t be opposed to…” He swallowed – his throat was just as dry as his mouth. “Well…more of that.”

Allura’s mouth formed into a neat little “o,” her brows arching as she said. “O-oh.” And then a moment later, “Just…just how much is more?”

Ah, right. That was an important question. Because more had plenty of meanings, and there was a big difference between what amounted to a slightly more involved hug, and…

Well…

He did his best not to let the twist in his gut show on his face.

Instead, he gave her hand a squeeze, leaned a bit closer instead of pulling away. “Would you laugh at me if I said I’m really enjoying the kissing?”

She pulled a hand away just to slap it over her mouth and hide her laugh – poorly, but he couldn’t judge her for that. “Never.” Then she gave him a look – one that he couldn’t quite read. Her eyes were half-lidded, a playful little upturn at the corners of her mouth as she canted her head towards him. “I’d never complain about more kissing.”

Kissing he could do. Kissing was easy, relatively speaking. It felt natural, simple.

“Actually-“ Allura scooted a little closer. “There’s…something I’d love to try. If you want.”

“Try?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “O-only if you’re alright with it.” She leaned in, and that look was back, but he could also see her scanning his face for any hint of hesitation, any fear or anxiety. And obviously she didn’t find it – more than anything, he was curious.

“Just…tell me if you want me to stop,” she told him.
He didn’t.

He watched her closely, pursing his lips expecting a kiss. But she dipped down under his mouth, under his jaw, instead pressing her lips to his neck, and – oh.

_Ooooh…_

That felt…new and different. _Fantastic_. So much so that he actually let out a sigh, and he swore she giggled against his throat. “Good?” Her voice _vibrated_ against his skin.

“Goo-aaaahhh…” Well, that noise was certainly…involuntary. And that likely meant _yes_ anyway. He definitely didn’t want her to stop. So he nodded, as best he could with her head still tucked under his chin.

Her smile tickled a bit, and he leaned back against the couch cushions and let her press her body closer against his. She was so warm, almost hot, as she trailed kisses up along the side of his neck and across his jaw until she finally got to his lips. He barely had to think about kissing her back, his lips moving against hers as he sighed.

“You’re getting better at that,” she told him a moment later, pulling away just enough so that she could get the words out.

“I’m a quick study.” His lips grazed against hers as he spoke.

She hummed in approval.

For a few moments he let his hands wander, and Allura seemed perfectly content with them moving up one arm and cupping her cheek. She sighed at that, leaning into the touch, and something fluttered in Lotor’s chest. “Mm…Lotor…” Her eyes were barely open, a blush high on her cheeks when he looked at her. “Can I ask you something?”

Seemed like odd timing, but he sure wasn’t going to say no. But words were a bit out of his grasp at the moment, so he just said, “Mhm.”

“It’s about…something Ezor said. Well, not just her. I’ve been thinking about it too, actually.” Suddenly the blush didn’t seem to be just from the kissing and the close proximity. She was chewing on her lip again. “I was wondering about…making this a bit more…official.”

He blinked and finally managed to say, “Official?”

“When I was in the dressing room at the mall, I heard her call you my…my _boyfriend._”

His heart stuttered in his chest. “O-oh.”

“And I…I kind of like the sound of that.” Her thumb rubbed the swell of his palm. Almost soothingly. “I was wondering if you did too.”

“B-boyfriend.” He swallowed. “You…want me to be your-“

“If you want.” She pulled away to tuck a stray strand of hair behind one ear, clasping her hands together between her knees, like she was trying to shrink herself. “If you don’t-“

“I’d love to.” He blurted it out before he could help it, and Allura’s gaze whipped around to face him, her eyes wide. “Allura, I…I really do…like the sound of that too.”

Now it was her turn to say, “Oh.”
But God…there was something – a tiny, needling little voice in the back of his head – that made the next word out of his mouth turn into, “But…”

Her face fell. “But?”

It wasn’t right, doing this without telling her the truth. Maybe it wouldn’t be nearly as earth-shattering as his imagination had made it out to be, but he couldn’t stand the thought of keeping it a secret any longer. He couldn’t take this step with shame lingering over his shoulder. It wasn’t right.

“There’s just…” He let out a sigh. “There’s one small…just one thing…something I feel like I need to…to tell you first.”

He could see her brace herself. God, he hoped that would be for nothing. But her voice was calm and cool as she told him, “Okay.”

*I can handle it,* that word seemed to say. Well, he thought, no turning back now.

She wouldn’t care, he insisted. She wasn’t so closed-minded, and it was 2018 for goodness’ sake. And it wasn’t like he had a secret sex torture dungeon in his coat closet. It was *just a few books for God’s sake.*

“No, I didn’t…and it’s not because I don’t…I don’t trust you. It’s just…I wasn’t sure you’d want to – well, I didn’t know if you’d ever be interested in the…the kinds of…”

This was useless. Instead of embarrassing himself even more, he just held the books out to her with a sigh.

*Journey to Oriande,* volumes I and II – *The Exiled Prince* and *The Alliance Banner.* The unfinished trilogy that he was just now able to see coming to an end after so many years. There was no reason for him to feel ashamed, no matter how strange it seemed even to him that a twenty-eight-year-old virgin had spent nearly the last decade writing *space elf erotica.*

She took them, and after one look at the cover, her eyes went as wide as the plates they had eaten off of earlier that night.

“These…” She was breathless, her face flushing. “J-Journey to…Oriande…you…you…”

“Wrote them,” he admitted on a heavy sigh.
Suddenly she was standing, clutching the books to her chest so tightly her knuckles went white. “You’re L. Sincline?” she exclaimed, her voice cracking as she did.

“The pseudonym was my publisher’s idea-“

“You wrote Journey to Oriande?”

She said that like she…knew what it was already. “Well, I…yes.”

She was staring down at the books, pacing back and forth across his living room with them jammed so hard against her chest it looked painful. “You’re telling me…all this time…I’ve been living next to…next to you?” He blinked. “Well not…not you, but…but you! L. Sincline! The person who wrote one…one of my favorite-“

She stopped, both speaking and pacing, her face lighting up crimson. And in the painfully long few moments of silence that followed he finally managed to work out why.

Allura had…read his books. Both of them. Every word. Every carnal, salacious word. And he knew them too well, too intimately to even begin to pretend that there was any possibility she had skipped the more explicit scenes – they weren’t just carelessly tacked on as a bonus, but woven so intricately into the story that skipping over them would have been like ignoring an entire arc.

“You…” His mouth was so dry he could barely speak. “You’ve…read them?”

“Read them?” she huffed, like it offended her. Finally, she smiled. “Lotor, I…I adore these books.”

“A…adore…?”

Her eyes sparkled, bright and electric. “Of course I do! They’re incredible! The story, the characters…Arus and Drule, finding each other across lightyears of space, coming together to learn about their shared heritage, facing everything together…don’t you think that’s beautiful?”

Well of course he did – he wrote it after all. But to hear those words from her…he wondered if he was dreaming.

“And to think,” she continued, grinning widely, “What are the odds? I took a job in this city, I chose this apartment building, I moved into the unit next to yours.” She finally lowered the books, stepping closer to him and gazing up at him, beaming. “It’s incredible, isn’t it?”

“And you’re not bothered by it?” he hazarded, unable to stop himself. “You don’t mind the…the kind of…things I write?”

“As long as you don’t mind that I read them,” she said, that blush creeping back onto her cheeks again.

And of course, he would never.

She glanced down at the books in her arms again. “So…the book you’re working on now…is it…” When her eyes darted up towards him again, there was a hopeful eagerness shining there. “Are you…finally finishing it? The trilogy?”

He couldn’t help but let out a laugh. “It has been a while, I know…”

“Not that I mind! Of course I don’t – I just…well, I thought it was over, and I’ve been dying to know if they make it there. To Oriande.”
Hesitantly, he reached out to take her hand again. “Well, I can’t exactly spoil it, can I?”

She let out a long groan and leaned forward to rest her head against his chest with a dull *thunk*. “No…I suppose you can’t.” She dropped the books on the coffee table and wrapped her arms around him, and this time it was easy to lean into it. “I can’t believe it – it really does feel like some sort of crazy dream.”

“I know what you mean…”

“But a good dream!” she insisted, and she gave him a full-body squeeze.

When he exhaled, it felt like the first time he’d been able to do so in *weeks*.

Allura didn’t feel quite right going back home and sliding into bed that night. It was almost midnight by the time she did – after she’d cleaned off her makeup, brushed her teeth, and changed into her pyjamas, she’d tucked herself in feeling…different.

Lotor…L. Sincline…both of them one and the same. Lotor – her *neighbor* – had written some of the most *stimulating* erotica she’d ever seen in her life. Not to mention one of the most compelling love stories she’d ever read.

Lotor, who had stammered when he’d first asked her out, who had never been kissed before he met her, who balked at her hands against his chest…

She glanced over at her bookshelf, and even in the dark the two volumes that matched the ones he’d showed her – dog-eared and battered from use (and…*use*) – seemed to stand out like a beacon. It made her face heat up and her pulse quicken because now she couldn’t help but imagine…things. The scenes in those books, the tender touches and passionate kisses, all painted so vibrantly that she could practically *see* them – and Lotor had *written* them-

Arousal pulsed between her legs.

Did that make her a horrible person? Talking about respect and insisting she wouldn’t rush him and then…turning right around and *fantasizing* about him doing things he wasn’t ready for? Did it make her some kind of hypocrite?

No, it wasn’t him. Well, of course it *was*, but she wasn’t asking anything of him. She didn’t need to think about *him*, even. Just…well…

The books had always worked for her before – no reason that had to stop now.

As soon as she opened *The Exiled Prince*, she shuddered, tracing her finger down along the margin.

*Drule* was a vision as he stepped out of the arena, platinum hair spilling like water from his helmet when he pulled it from his head to reveal his face. Arus let out a gasp, eyes widening in wonder as she looked at him – truly looked at him – for the first time.

Supple lilac skin glistened with sweat, proof of his exertion in combat that he seemed to wear with pride. A wide smirk stretched across his lips as he extended one clawed hand and took her own, so much smaller than his, and curled his deft fingers around it. “Princess,” he purred, dropping to one knee, “It’s truly an honor.”

“P-Prince Drule…” Oh, how her voice shuddered on its way out, as if it was straining to betray the secret feelings that were twisting in her belly at the sight of him. “You…you fought honorably.”
His eyes flashed up to meet hers, fangs glinting in the light as his smile grew wider, more impish. “For you to say so,” he breathed, pressing a kiss to her knuckles, “I find every scrape and bruise truly worth it.”

Drule’s voice was so different now – deeper, smoother than she’d imagined it before. More familiar. She couldn’t help but squirm, her heart pounding. With one hand she flipped frantically through the pages until she found the one she was looking for, and her other blindly fumbled in her bedside table drawer for her vibrator. It buzzed to life with the press of a button, and she nudged it between her legs without even bothering to pull off her underwear.

The sounds of footsteps outside were quiet, but each one was like thunder in Arus’ ears – so close, so dangerous, and yet she couldn’t find it in her to stop. To do so felt next to impossible when Drule’s body was so inviting, the warmth of him so tempting as she leaned back against his chest, let her hold her up on her wobbly legs with his back pressed against the wall of the corridor.

“I’d thought my desires would go unrequited,” he huffed, and she could hear the smirk on his lips even with her eyes squeezed shut. His fingers wandered farther into her open flight suit, the length of one, callused and deft, pressing inside of her. “And yet I find you not only welcoming, but eager for me.”

She reached up and behind her, hooking her arm around his neck and letting her fingers tangle in his wild mane. “More,” she commanded. It was a quiet plea, but her body was screaming it.

“As my princess commands,” Drule hummed. He pressed his lips to the nape of her neck, curling his fingers within her and making her choke back a moan. “Ah, quiet love…as much as I would relish your sounds of pleasure, I’d hate for us to be interrupted before…well, before I have a chance to see that you’re truly satisfied.”

Her hand traced down along his forearm where it rested on her hip, tendons flexing beneath his skin, muscles bulging with every movement of his wrist-

“It’s all in the wrist,” Lotor had told her. Allura bit her lip and turned up the vibration intensity, her hand shaking.

“The guards,” Arus found herself muttering, breath hitching as Drule found a spot inside of her that chased anymore words away.

“They won’t find us, love,” he promised her. “As long as we’re quiet…and quick.” He nipped at the shell of her ear. Certainly not making it easy – being quiet, at least. Quick, on the other hand…

He leaned in closer, growling in her ear, “Would you come for me, princess?”

Muffling a curse into her pillow, Allura did.
There is YET MORE ART to be shared!


and brimful-of-giggles did an adorable illustration for chapter 18! : https://brimful-of-giggles.tumblr.com/post/179791106706/its-been-a-long-since-ive-done-this-but-here-it

Lotor watched Kova’s tail swish back and forth, back and forth, back and forth across his field of vision, like a fuzzy black windshield wiper that distracted from Acxa’s eyes drilling into his forehead.

“Stop staring,” he said.

“You told her?”

He let out a sigh. “Yes. And it went…well. Better than expected, actually—”

“And she’d already read them? All of them?”

“According to her…” He swallowed. Why the hell was his mouth so dry? It seemed to get that way every time he thought about Allura reading those books, about the wild twinkle in her eye when she had told him how much she adored them.

He wasn’t an idiot. He knew what that probably entailed. And that wasn’t helping his dry mouth situation.

Acxa laughed, and Kova’s bright yellow eyes darted around to follow her as she sauntered around the couch with a wide grin stretching across her face. “I just can’t…I can’t believe it. First you ask her on a date – you of all people – and then you kiss her, and then it turns out she was this secret super-fan of your books all along. It’s like I’m watching a Lifetime movie.”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic.”

“You gotta admit, it’s pretty damn sweet,” she said with a snort.

He shivered as Kova pressed her cold little nose against his knuckle, begging for more attention. If the alternative was listening to Acxa tell him just how sweet his developing relationship with Allura was, he was all too happy to go back to petting the cat. “If you really want to call it that—”

“Don’t you think so?” She nudged him, laughing. “Lotor, I’ve known you what? Almost ten years now? And I’ve never seen you like this. All…smitten and happy. I always figured you’d be a grump forever.”

He couldn’t help but pout. “A grump?”
“But look at you, dating this girl, gaga over her and everything.”

Gaga. Right. As if that meant anything. It certainly sounded like something that belonged in a Lifetime movie. But as for what it was supposed to feel like…

The desire, the attraction…it was all supposed to be connected, wasn’t it? Dating someone was supposed to feel different. Special. And it did. Just not in the way he’d been expecting. And not in the way Allura seemed to hope.

He swallowed. “I think she wants to sleep with me.”

Acxa’s hand froze halfway down Kova’s back, much to the cat’s chagrin. “What?”

“Allura.” He stared at Kova’s face, and something in the cat’s eyes seemed to judge him. So he studied his cuticles instead. “I think she wants things to…go further.”

Her brow rose. Slowly, insistently. “And just how…far…have you two gotten?”

God, she made it sound like they were in high school, discussing heavy petting shenanigans behind the bleachers at the homecoming football game. From the way she grimaced the moment the question passed her lips, he wasn’t the only one who thought so. “Kissing,” he finally sighed. “There’s been a lot of kissing. And she likes to…to touch. More than I was expecting. Not that I mind that either.”

“So you are attracted to her?” The question seemed to burst out of her, like it had been waiting for far longer than the start of this conversation to come out, and Acxa caught her lip between her teeth and let her shoulders slump. “I know it’s…complicated. But do you…are you?”

That was the million-dollar question, wasn’t it? And maybe he was. He certainly wanted to be, and not just for Allura’s sake. The intimacy, the closeness of it all – every bit of that they had explored so far had made sparks shoot down his fingers and heat burst in his chest, but without any way to compare, any other experiences to lean on…

“I don’t know.”

He hated those words. He hated admitting it. He hated not knowing. He’d gone far too long not knowing. For once he just wished someone could explain it to him, what this vague, shapeless concept called attraction really was. He needed a road map, a bright flashing sign that would light up to tell him. Hell, anything would be better than another person telling him he would just “know it when he felt it.”

Because Allura felt special. But special wasn’t enough.

He sighed, combing his fingers through his hair and lamenting the fact that he hadn’t thought to put it up. “I don’t know…I just don’t. I don’t know if I’ll ever know, and it’s driving me crazy the more I think about it.”

“So quit overthinking it,” Acxa told him. Like it was that simple. “You know how you get when you think too much.” She scooped up Kova and dropped her on the carpet, and the cat flicked her tail at them and sauntered down the hall toward the bedroom. “So…when you asked her out, you weren’t attracted to her then?”

“I was interested.” He plucked a stray strand of cat hair off his leg, rolling it between his fingers as he stared at it. “I figured that was what people do when they’re interested.”

“When they’re interested in having sex with each other, yeah.”
He shot her a look. “Not just that.”

Acxa just laughed, leaning back against the couch with her arms folded behind her head and stretching her legs out over his knees. Using him as a living footrest. Considerate. “Yeah, not just that. No lecture needed here, believe me.” She pursed her lips, her brow pinching like she was suddenly losing herself deep in thought. “Are you scared?”

He huffed. “I’m not scared of sex—“

“Not of sex, you dummy.” She nudged his leg none-too-gently with one foot. “It seems to me like you’re scared of the possibility that you might actually have a thing for her.”

He hated how quickly his face heated up at that. And the way Acxa smirked when she saw it didn’t help.

“God help us all if you do wind up being more than just interested,” she snorted. “If that day ever comes the world might just stop spinning right on its axis.”

“So—” Ezor panted, a bead of sweat rolling down her temple as they rounded the corner. “Then I told Zethrid…that if she didn’t stop leaving her damn protein powder all over the counter…I’d cut up her sports bras while she was sleeping.” She grinned back at Allura, eyes wild and face flushed with endorphins. “Never had a problem after that.”

Allura’s thighs burned as she fought to keep up. The apartment building was just in view down the block. Almost there. But God, Ezor was not making it easy on her. “And you…” Her lungs protested against her trying to talk as she put one foot in front of the other, every impact against the concrete shooting up her shins. “And you…you were…bluffing, right?”

“Hell no! I hate cleaning that shit up every morning.” She slowed her pace, but Allura knew damn well it wasn’t from fatigue. She was just taking pity on her. “C’mon, girl – we’re almost there!”

Allura just let out a groan and tried to focus her thoughts on the long hot bath that was waiting for her at home.

Ezor made it to the front steps a full fifteen seconds before she did, but for once Allura didn’t care much about the loss. She gasped for breath as she stumbled to a stop and sank down on the curb, hair drenched with sweat and breaking free from her ponytail. “God…” she finally managed. “I’ve gotten rusty…”

“Hey, there’s no shame in that,” Ezor giggled. “It’s nice having someone to run with. Zethrid doesn’t do cardio unless it involves hitting things or lugging sandbags around, and I don’t think Lotor’s ever woken up before ten in his life.”

Still didn’t explain how the hell he had those damn abs. She was starting to think she’d never know.

Ezor sat down next to her, probably out of courtesy more than anything else. “What’s with the sudden urge to go running anyway?” she asked. “Not that I mind, but…you always kinda struck me as a Zuma kind of person.”


“Everyone looks ridiculous doing Zumba.”

She had just enough of her breath back to laugh, but not quite enough to answer. And even if she
could, she wasn’t sure she wanted to, because the answer was more ridiculous than any dance aerobics class.

Running was an outlet. One she needed badly. It had been two full weeks since he’d cooked her risotto and turned her whole damn world on its head when it came to those books of his. And as much as she hated to admit it, her libido had only gone into overdrive since then. She felt like a hormonal teenager, horny and frustrated – though at the very least she had a better collection of sex toys than she’d had when she was nineteen.

And she had running. It was better than baking more cupcakes than she knew what to do with when a stray thought traipsed across her mind about Prince Drule sidling up behind Princess Arus and whispering filthy things in her ear in that deep, smooth, familiar voice…

“I just missed it,” she said with a smile that was way too wide for her own good. “And now that it’s starting to cool off I figured I should get a head start on my New Years resolution.”

Ezor threw her head back and laughed. “I can respect that!” She was on her feet again a moment later, thrusting a hand down toward her and pulling her up easily when Allura took it. Her eyes wandered up toward the door. “Oh hey – it’s the sexy handyman!”

Allura spun on her heel, wobbling on her feet just as she caught a glimpse of Shiro’s smile. “Hi Ezor. Allura.”

“You’re here early…please tell me that water heater isn’t on the fritz again. I need a shower.”

Again? Allura thought, horrified. But Shiro shook his head. “Nah, it’s just the elevator this time.”

She felt her poor legs screaming in dismay. “Old buildings – what can you do?”

Ezor pouted. “Please tell me you can replace that rust-bucket with something that I can actually use.”

“I’m not magic,” he said with a relenting shrug. “I can try and make it up to you though.”

“How, by carrying us both up the stairs like a true gentleman?”

He was already fishing in his pocket, pulling out a pair of what looked like…business cards? Allura was still floating on the edge of her runner’s high, reaching out to take them without a second thought. “A…Halloween party?” she muttered, and Shiro grinned as he scratched at the nape of his neck.

“It’s kind of tradition,” he said. “We do it every year, but this is the first one since Keith and I moved in together and I’m planning on making it extra special.” There was a strange lilt in his voice, a slight flush high on his cheeks that seemed to be from more than just the nip in the air. Allura blinked down at the card, staring at the bright oranges and yellows standing out against the black cardstock.

Ezor was practically bouncing on the balls of her feet. Where she got all that excited energy after that run, Allura had no idea. “Sounds so fun! Allura, you wanna go right? Bring Lotor! The more you can get him out of his cave the better.”

“Hell, bring everyone,” Shiro added. “Zethrid too, if she wants. It’s at Keith’s mom’s place, actually, and she’s got a whole acre. Just make sure you come in costume.”

Ezor snorted as she slung an arm around Allura’s shoulders. “You know, if you can get Lotor into a Halloween costume, I might just have to start believing in a higher power.”

Allura looked from the card to her and back again. “Does he…not like Halloween?”
“I think he thinks it’s beneath him or something,” she said with a roll of her eyes that quickly turned into a wicked smirk. “But if you invite him, he’s bound to go.”

An image bounded through her mind of Lotor dressed in Prince Drule’s form-fitting armor, red and silver rings lining the shell of his ear and black gloves pulled up over his skilled wrists-

“I’d love to!” she blurted, too loud and too quick. “Ah… I’d love to go Shiro…I haven’t been to a Halloween party since college…”

Shiro beamed. “Perfect!”

“But just what makes this one so…extra special?”

There it was again, that pink tint on his cheeks as he toyed with the edges of his pockets. “Ah… nothing I can – I mean, you’ll just have to come see for yourself. It’s kind of a surprise. Not a surprise for you, but…” He made a big show out of clearing his throat and checking his phone, scurrying past them before she could get another word out. “I’ll have the elevator fixed quick as I can! Promise!”

Allura had faith in him, but it didn’t do much good for her poor abused quads now. She supposed she was doomed to drag herself up to the third floor alone.

Ezor seemed to read her mind. “Want you to see if I can convince Zethrid to carry you?”

“No…” Though it was tempting… “No, I can manage fine.”

A hot bath and a nap. Surely a few flights of stairs couldn’t keep her from that.

She dragged herself up onto the landing of the third floor, groaning and cursing as she did, wondering if this was what it would feel like to grow old. Her legs felt like jelly, her shirt was sticking to her in all the wrong places, and her sports bra was starting to chafe. Though at least the run seemed to have quelled her raging hormones just a bit-

“Allura.”

She turned, key hovering just an inch from her door, and that familiar little flutter in her chest came to life again as she locked eyes with Lotor across the hall. His hair was a mess, his T-shirt hopelessly wrinkled, a pair of thick-rimmed glasses resting on the bridge of his nose. His fingers nudged them clumsily out of the way as he rubbed at his eyes and stifled a yawn. “You’re up early,” he said, his voice rough with a bit of sleep he hadn’t quite managed to shake off.

Nevermind. Her hormones were winning again.

“Went for a run with Ezor,” she said. A run that seemed useless now, considering the way her heart was starting to pound. Though that also could have been thanks to those damn stairs. “Might not want to come too close. I don’t smell all that great.”

He laughed a little sleepily and nope – certainly wasn’t the stairs.

She fiddled with the keys in her hand. “What are you doing up? You seem like you just rolled out of bed.”

“I did,” he sighed. “Well, I did in a way…I was at Acxa’s last night until late. Then when I got home I started doing some writing and then… well I may have forgotten to sleep.”
“You forgot.”

“And then I may have passed out at my desk.” He looked downright sheepish. “Right on top of the H key. I woke up to a twenty page word document, and only about three pages was actual work.”

He stifled another yawn – badly – and Allura couldn’t help but laugh before she marched right up to him and pressed her hands against his chest. “Get in bed,” she commanded, shoving him through the door. “Right now.”

He didn’t protest. In fact, he let out a sleepy chuckle and let her push him right through his kitchen and into his bedroom. “If you insist.”

“I do,” she giggled just before his knees hit the mattress and he went flopping down on top of it. He turned, gazing up at her through half-lidded eyes and sighing as his head hit the pillow.

She stared at him for a moment. Standing above him. Above his bed. She swallowed.

Before she saw his hand move, she felt his fingers curl around hers. “Allura…”

“No-”

“You know I…I like you very much.”

It was such a strange thing to say that she almost wobbled on her feet. Maybe she could chalk it up to sleep deprivation. Still, there was something oddly beautiful about the flush in his cheeks as he squeezed her hand and fought to keep his eyes open to look up at her.

“I…” She had to smile, letting her thumb track over his knuckles. “I like you too.”

He hummed, almost pensively, then just as he seemed ready to say something else any words he had in mind turned into a wide yawn. Not stifled this time. She folded her other hand over his and gave it a pat. “Go to sleep, Lotor.”

“Mmf.”

She pulled his glasses off and set them on his dresser. “And once you’ve gotten some sleep and I don’t smell like a wet dog, let’s watch a movie together tonight.”

“Mm…you smell fine.” His words were muffled against the pillow, and she tucked his hand up against the sheets and pulled the comforter over his shoulders.

Halfway to his door, she paused, her fingertips brushing the edge of the party invitation that had gotten folded and crumpled in the waistband of her shorts. She glanced at it, and almost like an afterthought, left it on his kitchen counter.
“Are you ready?”

Lotor’s voice was muffled through her living room door, but it still made a smile creep onto her lips as she studied her hair in the mirror one last time. She smoothed it back off her face, extra careful of the blue crescents she had spent so long crafting on her cheeks. If she smudged it now she would never forgive herself.

With one last tug to adjust her top, she headed for the door. “I am if you are,” she called, excitement bubbling up in her chest and making her voice waver.

Though maybe that was also thanks to the noticeable draft against her stomach and shoulders. That was certainly…different than what she was used to.

“I guarantee you look at least ten times better than I do,” Lotor called. She swore she heard the smile there.

She fought back a giggle. “Just promise me you won’t laugh.”

“Why would I laugh?”

“It’s a little…” Her fingers tapped against the doorknob, hesitating. She tugged on her top again. “…revealing. Now that I’m…really looking at it.”

There was a brief pause, and then- “I could take my shirt off if it would make you feel better.”

There was no fighting back that laugh, and there was no way he didn’t hear it, even with the door between them. “No,” she relented. Though she certainly wouldn’t mind seeing him shirtless…again. “No, no it’s okay. I’m coming out. Just…no laughing.”

“No laughing.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

She resisted the urge to fidget with her hair as she turned the knob, and the moment the door opened enough for her to get a look at him, she grinned. “Oh…oh my God-” “His outfit was perfect, from the glasses and bow tie all the way down to the boots. “Lotor, you’re the spitting image of Milo!”

“Well that was the idea, wasn’t it?” He fiddled with his bowtie for just a second or two before he looked up at her, and she swore she could see the moment he really saw her. The way his eyes widened and his lips parted made a blush creep up over her cheeks, and she reached up to brush back her hair despite it still being securely tucked behind her ear.
“I ah…” Dammit, she couldn’t bite her lip. It would mess up her lipstick. “I know it’s a matching pair of costumes, but I swear I don’t remember Kida showing so much…skin…in the movie…”

“You’re-“ He grinned. “You look incredible.”

Her heart soared, hammering against her ribs. Damn the flush spreading down over her shoulders only made the draft even more obvious. “You think so?”

“Yes. You’re…it’s amazing.” Oh – there was a dash of pink high on his cheeks too, right under where the glasses rested against his skin. It complemented the bowtie in a way. Fitting. Endearing. “We should probably – Ezor is waiting, and…” He got an odd little smile on his face, accentuating the rosy tint along the bridge of his nose, and he let out a breath. “God, Allura, you really do look incredible.”

It caught her off guard, so much so that she was in the middle of pulling a strand of hair out of her earring when she froze. The smile on his face, the glint in his eye…it made her stomach flip and something flutter in her chest. He was looking at her – staring at her – like he couldn’t take his eyes off, but she didn’t feel the need to hide all the skin she was showing. It was a bit of a thrill, Though she wasn’t looking forward to the wind chill later in the night…

“You said Ezor was waiting?” she said.

Lotor looked like she’d snapped him out of a trance. “Right! Ezor…right…she’s been texting me non-stop for the last fifteen minutes…”

If she’d been texting her too, Allura had no way of knowing. Not like she had a lot of places to keep her phone in a costume like this.

She tucked her arm through the crook of his elbow, leaning against his side with a wide smile. “Come on-” She tugged him toward the stairs. “Before she leaves us behind and makes all this work on our costumes for nothing.”

Ezor met them halfway up the stairs, freezing in the stairwell the moment they rounded the corner and nearly toppling backwards. “There you are!” she huffed. “Thanks for making us wait, Lotor.”

“I told you we can’t be early to a party,” Zethrid sighed. “Haven’t you ever heard of fashionably late?”

“I don’t want Acxa and Narti to beat us there!” She hopped down onto the landing, turning and beaming up at them. “Lotor, what are you dressed as, anyway? You look like one of my old college professors. The really old one.”

Lotor pouted. “I’m Milo. From Atlantis?” He nodded back toward Allura just as she peeked out from around the corner. “She’s Kida.”

Zethrid let out a low whistle. “Kida, huh?”

“Damn…” Ezor sighed. “Allura, be honest, did you short-circuit his brain with that little number or what?”


“Says you.” She was up the stairs again in a flash, grasping Allura’s wrist and pulling her toward the doors. “C’mon already! The sooner we get to the party the sooner I can get a few drinks in you and
see how much fun drunk Allura is!"

She didn’t bother resisting – just let out an exuberant laugh to cover up Zethrid’s groan as Ezor tugged her down the stairs with a beaming smile.

The house was tucked back in the woods, off a dirt path that made Zethrid’s Jeep kick up thick clouds of dust behind its rear tires. The glow from the windows stood out in the dark as they rounded a corner, and Zethrid sighed in relief. “Thank God…I thought we took a wrong turn back at that other dirt road.”

“I told you we were going the right way,” Ezor told her.

“That’s why I was worried.”

Ezor pouted the whole rest of the way up to the gravel driveway, music drifting in through the windows over the sound of rocks crunching under the car’s tires. “Oh!” Allura breathed with a smile. “I think I see Pidge!”

Lotor leaned over her shoulder. “Is that her?” he asked, squinting. “In the…bird costume?”

Pidge waved at them from the porch, arm covered in brown and white feathers that fluttered in the wind. “At least she looks warm,” Allura offered with a shrug.

If only she could say the same for herself. She was thoroughly regretting her choice not to bring a coat. The moment she stepped out of the car and the cold hit her, she felt like she could barely breathe. “Geez,” Pidge said with a whistle from the porch. “Not even any sleeves?”

“It was seventy degrees two weeks ago,” Allura countered, teeth chattering as she pushed past her into the house. The heat felt downright heavenly. “Maybe yours was a better idea…all those feathers, and…what are you anyway?”

Pidge grinned. “I’m a Pidgeotto!”

She said it like it meant something.

“It’s better than Lance’s costume, at least,” she added. “He didn’t even try-“

“Hell-o, there!” Lance crooned as he rounded the corner, dressed in a T-shirt and jeans and clutching a box to his chest. “Love the costume. Atlantis? You know, I’m a Pixar fan-“

“Atlantis wasn’t Pixar, genius,” Pidge deadpanned.

“What…are you, anyway?” Ezor asked.

He looked downright offended. “Oh, come on! Nobody gets it!” He brandished an oversized plastic knife, making a big show of jamming it into the top of the box. “Knife? Cheerios?” Pidge rolled her eyes. “I’m a cereal killer-“ He huffed. “You all have no taste.”

“Uh, werewolf?” Pidge said, gesturing at Zethrid. And with a nod at Ezor, she added, “Mermaid? At least I can tell what they’re supposed to be.”

“No taste,” Lance insisted again.

“I think your cereal costume is…inventive,” Lotor offered.
“He gets it!”

“Alright, alright, you’re inventive,” Pidge laughed. “C’mon, Shiro and Keith are in the living room, and I’m pretty sure Hunk is manning the bar.”

“Dude makes a mean tequila sunrise,” Lance added. “And I make a mean vodka shot.”

Pidge nudged him in the arm, almost making him drop his costume. “Anyone can pour vodka.”

“Don’t stifle me.”

“I think I’d like some vodka,” Allura piped up as they followed him.

Behind her, Ezor chimed, “I’d definitely like some vodka!”

“Two vodkas for the ladies,” Lance sang as he bounced into the living room. “Hunk! Where’s the Skye?”

As cold as it was outside, two shots later, Allura quickly forgot all about the chill. She chased it down with a swig of lemonade as Lotor nursed his tequila sunrise – it did look awfully good – and turned just in time to almost run straight into an astronaut who seemed to have stepped straight off of one of the Apollo missions. He reached up and pressed his thumb under the edge of his visor and lifted it until Allura caught the glint of a familiar grin.

“You made it!” Shiro chuckled. “Kida and Milo, huh? Nice costumes.”

“And you’re ah…Neil Armstrong?”

He shrugged. “I rented it.”

“It’s better than Lance’s,” Keith said, sidling up alongside Shiro with his arms crossed over his chest. The hook over his left hand caught on the sleeve of his jacket as he reached up to adjust his eyepatch. “Cereal killer…seriously?”

“I think it’s clever,” Lotor said with a shrug and another sip of his drink.

Shiro nodded and laughed. “He does kinda have a point.”

“Fine. Maybe it’s a little clever,” Keith relented. “But don’t tell him I said that.”

“I won’t if you dance with me.”

Keith tried his best to cover his smile, but it only barely worked. “Fine.”

That sparked an idea in Allura’s head as a new song pulsed over the surround sound – one with an addictive, heavy bass that made her want to sway along with the rhythm. She turned on her heel and grabbed Lotor’s hand. “Have you had enough tequila to dance?”

He raised a brow at her. “My dear, I don’t need tequila to dance with you.”

“Is that a yes?”

He glanced down at his glass, tipping it back and downing the rest of its contents before tucking it neatly on the bookshelf and tugging her toward the dance floor. Well, at least it didn’t go to waste.

The music thrummed through her, mixing with alcohol and warming in her chest as she draped her
arms around Lotor’s shoulders. His body was hot, solid against her, making her shiver his metal belt buckle brushed against her bare stomach. His hands found her hips, resting just over her thighs. It was easy to sway against him, moving with the rhythm, breathing in his scent and smiling up at him.

Vodka always made her want to dance. She couldn’t help it. She didn’t bother trying.

Lotor extended his arm, letting her twirl underneath it and drawing a bright laugh out of her, and when her back pressed flush against his chest again, she felt like she could melt against him. She canted her head back against his shoulder, gazing up at him through the fringe of her bangs. It was so tempting – so easy – to push backwards, roll her hips back against his waist, against his crotch-

He stepped back, making her stumble. “Ah…I…I need…” He reached for his glasses, straightening them where she’d pushed them askew. “I need a little…air…”

And then he was gone, disappearing around the corner, and Allura’s heart sank.

_Dammit._

She strained her neck trying to see where he had gone off to, but it seemed like he’d disappeared into thin air. Her chest felt like a vice, her eyes burning with frustration and embarrassment. How could she _do_ that? What was she _thinking?_ Vodka or no, she felt like a complete idiot.

She made it to the kitchen, thumping her forehead against the side of the fridge and letting out a groan. “Fuck…” She didn’t want to cry at this party. That would just be the icing on the cake – turning into a drunken sobbing mess while everyone else danced and carried on without her. Like a flashback to the less glamorous of her sorority days. “Fuck.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

She barely managed not to whack her head on the spice cabinet as she spun around. “A-Acxa-”

“Sorry, sorry – I wasn’t trying to sneak up on you.” She reached for her own mouth, sticking her fingers past her lips and pulling out a set of pearly white plastic fangs, muttering, “Can’t talk in these fucking things…”

“Please tell me you didn’t see that,” Allura pleaded. But as Acxa dropped the fake teeth on the counter and looked at her with that _pitied_ glint in her eye, she already knew it was pointless. She let her forehead rest against the cool metal side of the refrigerator again. “I feel like a moron.”

“You’re not a moron,” she sighed. “I’m tempted to say Lotor’s the moron here, but it’s not really on him either. Not really.” It was odd – almost comical – watching Acxa try and comfort her with costume blood smeared all over her chin and bright yellow contacts gleaming as her brow pinched in concern. It almost made her smile. It probably would have if she could stop thinking of Lotor’s downright _panicked_ face as he’d pulled away from her.

She stared at the floor instead. “I think I had too much vodka.”

Acxa grimaced. “You’re not gonna puke, are you?”

“No! No, it’s not that. It’s just that…well vodka makes me…a little _handsy._”

“Got it.”

She finally forced herself to look up at her again, and Acxa was still standing there by the counter, hands on her hips, looking almost expectant. Like she was waiting for her to say something else. Or
ask her something. It almost seemed like she was daring her.

Allura swallowed. “Acxa…I…I don’t understand what I’m…doing wrong.”

One carefully shaped eyebrow arched up under Acxa’s bangs. “Doing…wrong?”

“Sometimes he seems so…receptive. All the kissing and touching…he says he likes it. It feels like he likes it. But then other times…”

She let that sentence trail off into nothing, let the end of it get swallowed up in the muted music drifting in from the other room. Acxa didn’t take the bait. Not right away. But she tapped her nails against the countertop, looking pensive. “Ya know,” she finally said, a strange little enigmatic smile tugging on her lips. “I’ve known the guy a long time, and I’ve never – never – seen him like this.”

“Like…how?”

“Falling for someone,” she said with a shrug. A little shake of her head. Like it still seemed so odd to her. “The guy’s always been emotionally constipated like you wouldn’t believe, but that’s not all his fault. Not yours either. But he’s not an idiot, Allura – he knows full well that you want to sleep with him.”

Allura’s face burned. “I-I-

“Hey, I’m all for it. He could use a little excitement, if you know what I mean.”

She did know what she meant, but it only made her cheeks turn even redder. “He doesn’t seem…all that interested…”

“You think?” The question was halfway to being a laugh.

“I kept wondering what I was doing wrong, but lately I’ve been thinking…” She paused, turning the words over in her head, wondering how the hell she was supposed to get them out. She’d been mulling it over for days, weeks, and a question had been nagging at the back of her mind without a good way out.

It scratched at the back of her skull, almost unbearable, and the way Acxa was looking at her…It almost seemed like she knew exactly what it was.

“Acxa…Lotor…is he…” She toyed with her hair, trying to hide behind it. Wishing she had more fabric covering her to make her feel like she had some kind of barrier. “Is he…asexual?”

Acxa’s eyes went so wide that they distorted the points of her eyeliner. “You…think he’s…”

“Can you really blame me for wondering?” she blurted, dropping her hands to her sides before she could abuse her poor hair any longer. “There’s no shame in him still being a virgin, Acxa, and if it was just nerves I’d more than understand. But it goes deeper than that, I know it, and I just want to understand.”

I just want to know if it’s me, she couldn’t help but think. But it went unsaid. Still, Acxa seemed to get the idea anyway, judging from the crease in her brow. And then she did something unexpected. Something that made Allura feel like she really was going crazy. She laughed.

She cackled at her, leaning against the counter to steady herself and wrapping her other arm around her stomach. “I’m sorry-“ Her voice wavered, still tinged with a giggle. “Shit, I’m sorry. It’s not you. I’m not laughing at you. It’s just…” When she finally straightened up again, with a deep breath and a
wide smile, she looked downright impressed. “Man, you’re smart, you know that?”

Allura blinked. “I… I am?”

“Look-“ Acxa reached for her, pressing her hand against Allura’s shoulder and turning her toward the door. “I mean this in the nicest way possible, because I really do like you, Allura. But for such a smart woman, you’re missing something pretty ridiculously obvious.”

Resisting the urge to pout, Allura asked, “What’s that?”

She jutted her chin out, nodding toward the back porch. “That question you asked…it’s not for me. So quit wasting my time and yours and go talk to the guy already.” A gentle shove later, and Allura found herself wobbling toward the door. “And for the love of God, be blunt, okay? No hints. No subtlety. He’s bad at those, so just… be straight with him.”

“Straight…” Allura mused, and Acxa gave her an approving nod.

“As straight as I’m not,” she said with a grin, waving her off and disappearing around the corner in a swish of black fabric and a waft of earthy perfume.

Dammit, it was cold outside.

Lotor tugged his vest closer to his body, pulling it tighter around his chest. Like that would help stave off the wind. But maybe it was better that way – if he was distracted by the cold, maybe it would help keep his mind from reeling over what had just happened in there.

Well… too late.

Now he was cold and ashamed.

He couldn’t stop thinking about it – the way she’d grinded against him, undulated against his body. It had been playful, flirty, sexual. He would have had to be an idiot not to see it, and he was many things, but an idiot wasn’t one of them.

The signals weren’t subtle anymore. They hadn’t been for a good long while. And the only one he could manage to send back to her was… well, to run off like she’d burned him. Like he didn’t want her. And he did.

He truly did. He just wasn’t sure it was the same thing she wanted from him.

The screen door opened just as he groaned, and he turned and choked on the sound as Allura smiled at him. The first words out of his mouth were, “Is that Zethrid’s coat?”

She glanced down at it, practically swimming in the thick faux fur that hung over her chest. “I just grabbed the first one that was hanging by the door,” she admitted, looking sheepish. “I won’t tell her if you don’t.”

She stepped a bit closer, and he managed a smile. “My lips are sealed.”

Her brow knit in concern as she leaned on the railing, staring up at him. “You have to be cold.”

“I’m fine,” he lied.

“Lotor-“
“I’m sorry.” His hands were curling around hers, and he was painfully aware of just how cold his fingers were as she blinked down at them. “Allura, I…I’m sorry for what happened.”

For a moment, she looked thoughtful – a pinch in her brow and a glimmer of light catching on her pursed lips. But then her expression relaxed, her shoulders rolling back under the coat, and she smiled. “You don’t need to apologize,” she said, softly, and her eyes met his from under a fringe of bangs. “You really don’t. I was…confused and worried that I’d done something wrong-“

“You didn’t-“

She pressed a fingertip against his lips, and he went silent. “I was,” she repeated, more firmly. “But then I ran into Acxa and she…said some things. Some things that made a lot of sense, and made me feel really…really silly, honestly.”

Allura let out a small, almost shy laugh, and the sound of it made his stomach do a flip. “Acxa…”

“I need to ask you something,” she said, holding his gaze. Determined. “And I just want you to be honest…and don’t take it the wrong way. Okay?”

It was his turn to stare, wordless, as she pulled her finger away and grabbed his hand in both of hers again. His heart skipped as he told her, “O…kay.”

“Lotor.” She took in a deep breath, giving his hands a squeeze. “Are you…are you asexual?”

His mouth fell open like it was expecting an answer, but his brain couldn’t come up with a single word. His jaw hung there, ridiculous and useless, as he watched Allura chew on her own lip. He could see it there on her face, the urge to backtrack, to fill the silence with something – anything – that didn’t feel so crushingly awkward. But she fought it back and let the silence stay instead.

Until he swallowed and finally managed to say, “Demi.”

Her brows arched. “Demi?”

“Demisexual. Not…not asexual. Though you’re not far off. You’re half right, even.” The next breath that left him rattled on its way out, making him feel deflated, but lighter somehow. Damn, it felt so good to say it out loud. To her. “How long have you been wondering?”

“N-not long!” she stammered. “I just thought – well, after you ran out like that, and considering how…how I’m your first and all, I wondered if maybe…” Her eyes were wide and shining, desperately searching his face for…what? Offense? Hurt? “Not that it matters! I mean, of course it matters, but not…I don’t want you to think that I-“

He couldn’t help but laugh at that floundering look, and he pulled her hands closer to his chest, trying to keep them warm when the wind started to pick up. “Allura.” She went silent. “Allura, it’s okay.”

“But I-“

“Allura, you have been nothing but incredible.” He leaned down closer, his voice quaking. From the cold? From something else? “You are patient and considerate and accommodating, even when you don’t realize it, and I…well I’m not oblivious.” Despite the chill, his cheeks were heating up fiercely. “I know you want…things from me.”

“And you…don’t?” she asked, anxiety stitching itself into her expression.
Lotor swallowed, his throat dry. “It’s not that I don’t want you, Allura.”

He finally let her hands drop, just barely leaving their fingers hooked together as he turned to lean against the railing again. Staring up at the night sky and trying to put the right words together.

Allura pressed her arm gently against his. “So…demisexual?” He hummed in affirmation. “I’ve…heard of it. But I don’t quite understand it. But I…I’d like to.”

He couldn’t help but smile at that, though it felt emptier than he would have liked. “I always thought it felt like…I was in a play. Standing on stage in costume with the lights shining on me and an audience watching, except everyone else knows all their lines perfectly and I was never given a script.” He shrugged, his shoulders heavy. “Dating and romance and…attraction…they seem to come so naturally to everyone else. Everyone except me.”

Allura’s arm slipped underneath his elbow, pulling him close. Grounding him. Making his chest clench in a way that wasn’t entirely unpleasant. He glanced down at her. “It all blurs together for me, Allura. These feelings…it’s hard for me to pull them out and name them. But I do have feelings. For you.”

She nodded, slowly, absorbing it all. Finally, she said, “But you’re just not sure if you want me. The same way I—” She glanced down at her fingers, her cheeks turning even pinker than they had from the cold. “…want you.”

“When I asked you on a date, it was because I wanted to get to know you better.” He fumbled for her hand again and found it, squeezing it tight. “I wanted to know about your family and your sense of humor and whether you preferred Picard or Kirk as captain of the Enterprise—“

“Picard,” she said, almost a reflex. “Though the original series will always have a special charm overall…”

The thoughtful pout on her face and the rosy tint to her cheeks made Lotor smile. “I wasn’t…I didn’t want to sleep with you. Not then, anyway. It wasn’t a…a physical attraction. But I still wanted to get to know you. And when I kissed you, when I touched you…it was because I wanted to.”

“I kissed you,” she reminded him, managing a smile of her own that made warmth swell in his chest.

“You’re right. Yes, you’re right. But what I mean is…Allura, it was never because of some sort of obligation, I promise you.”

She held Zethrid’s coat closer to her, pulling it tight and letting the fingers of her free hand roam through the artificial fur. “And…now?” She met his eye again, making his mouth go dry. “Now that you know me better…what do you want now?”

She looked at him – expectant, but not insistent. Anxious, but not upset. Patient, just as she had been this whole time.

Maybe it was always going to feel like a jump off a cliff. Like that tiny moment just before she’d kissed him for the first time. A leap into the unknown that ended so perfectly he’d wondered why he’d ever been nervous in the first place.

“I—“

“Holy shit!”

“Is this for real?”
“Oh my god – oh my god, oh my god, ohmygod!”

From the other side of the screen door, cheers and applause erupted as loud as a storm. It pulled their attention back inside, where they could barely glimpse the crowd in the living room.

“What in the world…” Allura mused, before grasping his hand and tugging him inside. “Come on – it’s cold as shit out here anyway.”

He nodded, his face too numb to bother saying a word as they stumbled in from the chill and into the warm kitchen. Just as the screen door smacked him on the shoulders on the way in, Ezor rounded the corner, beaming and flushed. “You missed it!” she squealed.

Lotor froze in the doorway. “Missed what?”

Ezor seemed ready to cry right there, her eyes shimmering as she clutched her hands over her chest and practically swooned. “Oh, it was so sweet…like it was right out of a movie! He got down on one knee and everything-“

“Who?” Allura insisted.

“The handyman!”

“Shiro?”

She nodded enthusiastically just as Zethrid poked her head around the corner and told them, “You missed the proposal.”

Allura’s eyes went wide, the kitchen light dancing off the whites of them as she gasped. “Proposal?”

“He said yes!” Ezor squeaked, and just as she did the crowd parted just enough for them to catch a glimpse of Shiro – his space helmet forgotten at his feet as Keith tangled his hands in his short-cropped hair and kissed him for all he was worth.

“Man,” Acxa sighed, and he swore he saw her wipe at her eyes. “Who ever thought Halloween parties could be so romantic, huh?”

“Come on, you,” Zethrid said as she hoisted Ezor out of the passenger’s seat and slung the smaller woman’s arm over her shoulders. “Up to bed.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Ezor slurried, but she didn’t put up a fight anyway. In the same breath she turned toward Allura. “Did I tell you how sexy you look in that costume?”

“Ignore her,” Lotor sighed.

But Allura giggled. “I think it’s sweet.”

“Even after the fifth time she said it?”

“Especially after the fifth time.” She grinned as she hopped out of the back seat and scurried toward the apartment building. As he followed behind her, Lotor regretted not bringing a coat. Offering his vest wouldn’t be of much help.

She let out a sigh of relief when they made it inside, and Lotor watched Zethrid unsuccessfully try and shove Ezor into the elevator-
“I can take the stairs, thank you very much.”

“Ezor, just get in the damn elevator.”

“It’s one floor~”

Only after she lost her footing and nearly faceplanted on the tile did she quietly relent and let Zethrid usher her into the elevator. As Ezor leaned against Zethrid’s arm, Zethrid shot the two of them a sympathetic glance. “Sorry,” she said. “Can you catch the next one?”

“I think we can manage the stairs,” Lotor told her.

“Tell your girlfriend her boobs look great in that top,” Ezor insisted, and Allura smothered a laugh into the palm of her hand as the elevator doors closed and left them alone in the lobby.

Allura sighed – a contented, sleepy sound – as she headed for the stairs. “Well,” she breathed, stifling a yawn. “I think tonight was…memorable.” She smiled around those words, glancing back at him half a flight up.

There was something about that smile, tired and tipsy as it was, that suited her face better than anything else could. It was warm and genuine, wrinkling the skin around her eyes and accentuating a smudge of lipstick on the corner of her mouth, and in the pit of his stomach he felt something shift. Like a tremble. A…tug. Towards her.

He took the steps two at a time to catch up with her just as she reached the landing between the floors. “Allura,” he called, and as she turned again, his hands found hers.

He stopped only when her back pressed against the wall, his body flush with hers from his knees to his neck, and he leaned in to cover her cheek with his palm and her lips with his own. She let out a squeak that melted into a sigh, her mouth moving against his, opening up, letting him in as her other hand slid up the length of his spine.

His fingers curled against her skin, nails brushing her scalp, warmth spreading from his nose down to his feet. She held him there, against her, so tightly that he couldn’t pull away even if he wanted to.

He didn’t. If anything, he wished he could get closer.

She wobbled a little as he finally pulled away, her breath shuddering as much as his, if not more. “Oh,” she managed to say, blinking up at him. “That was…unexpected.”

“I am,” he blurted, the words tumbling out of him before he could even think them through. “You’re…”

“You asked me at the party. Outside. On the porch. You asked me if I was attracted to. If I wanted you…” He swallowed, looking down at her. Getting lost in those bright blue eyes. “I am. I do.”

She swayed again, fingers gripping him for stability.

“At least I think so,” he added. “It’s all…complicated. I hate that it’s complicated. But I’m sure of one thing, Allura. I know that when I’m with you, I…” He couldn’t help but smile at how ridiculous it sounded. “I feel like I finally know my lines.”

A smile spread slow and sweet across her face, lighting up her eyes and making her cheeks glow. “Oh…oh, that’s…” She leaned forward to press her face against his chest, her shoulders shaking
with a muffled laugh. “Sometimes I forget you’re a writer, you know? And then you say things like that.” She pulled away, letting her hands linger on his arms just as her smile lingered on her lips. “Lotor, you can take as much time as you need. I can wait. Hell, even if you never-“

Something in his chest swelled so much it felt like his ribs were going to snap, and he leaned in to press a kiss to her forehead. “Thank you,” he said, and the words sounded choked. “Thank you…”

They took the rest of the stairs slowly, fingers entwined and arms brushing against each other with every step. When they finally made it to their floor, they lingered outside Allura’s door, and she only pulled her hand from his to fish her key out of her bag.

He planted one last lingering kiss on the corner of her mouth, smiling as he pulled away. “Goodnight, Allura.”

His fingers brushed against her palm as he stepped back, toward his own door, stopping only as far from her as he had to be.

“Goodnight,” she replied, smiling, unlocking her door and pushing it open.

“And-” She paused, looking back at him. His hand hovered just an inch or so away from the doorknob, his eyes locked on hers from down the hall. “Allura, it won’t be never.” He mirrored her smile, feeling light, excited. “I know that for sure.”

Even from this far, he could see the flush spreading across the bridge of her nose to the tips of her ears. “Okay,” she breathed, her voice airy and exuberant.

He got one last glimpse of her, light catching her cheeks as she stepped through her door and out of sight. He let out a sigh and stepped over the threshold.

“More…”

Her body was hot, soft, undulating against his as a soft mewl escaped her lips. She pressed her palm against the wall behind her, not seeming to care how exposed they were – anyone traipsing down the stairs could catch them, and yet she moaned as if that hardly mattered.

When her lips found his neck, Lotor realized he hardly cared either. Not when her hand was slithering down between their bodies, unbuttoning his pants, slipping inside and-

“Allura…”

“Allura,” he told her, and it was true. There was no fear, no hesitation. The heat roiling in his belly was strong enough to outweigh all of that. Her leg wrapping around his hips and pulling him closer, pulling him into her, was enough to chase everything else out of his mind.

Everything except her. The taste of her. The smell of her. The feeling of her around him – slick, warm, squeezing-

His bedroom was dark as he shot up in bed. His heart pounded, sweat dripping down his temple. Heat throbbing between his legs. His breath hitched as he threw back the covers and stared between his legs at the damn tent in his boxers.
He swallowed, thickly, letting his head fall back against the pillows, his lips opening on a single exhale.

“Oh.”
I just want to say how touched I am by how many people have told me they identify with Lotor and his experiences with demisexuality. Writing his thoughts and feelings on his identity has been mostly self-indulgent, since it's been a way for me to work through my own experiences and emotions about falling somewhere under the ace umbrella, so knowing that so many people see themselves in him as well means a lot. Thank you all so much for being so kind and open about it. I hope this fic continues to be meaningful to all of you. <3

Also, mistiqarts has done ANOTHER GORGEOUS PIECE OF ART for this fic that's currently set as my phone background. Everyone go shower it with love here: https://mistiqartsillustration.tumblr.com/post/180557156139/its-allcomplicated-i-hate-that-its

That being said...heads up for some extra spice in this chapter. ;)

The morning was...interesting.

Instead of jumping into a cold shower or fixating on the image of Dayak in a skimpy bikini, Lotor opted for the most...practical solution to his newfound situation. All things considered, it was quicker than the alternatives (almost embarrassingly quick if he was being honest), and certainly more pleasant.

And it was easier than he expected, recalling that dream. Allura’s chest pressed against his, her fingers tangled in his hair, the smell of her perfume filling his nostrils and making his head swim. And her voice – her voice – sweet and breathless as she said his name in a way that nobody had ever said it before.

"Lotor-

He’d dealt with inconvenient erections and random bouts of horniness on plenty of occasions. It was like eating a power bar between lunch and dinner or taking a nap after a night of poor sleep, and he’d treated it with the same tired obligation that he would any other physiological need.

But now there was a face to it. A smell, a taste, a pair of imaginary hands wandering up his back and scratching nails down over his ribs. A tongue darting out against his pulse point. Teeth grazing over his jaw – oh, God-

With a shaking hand he reached for box of tissues on his dresser, resigning himself to getting up early to clean himself up properly as he watched the sun start to spill over his windowsill.

Instead of sitting uselessly in bed for God knew how long, he hoisted himself up and got dressed. He cooked himself breakfast, which he left almost entirely untouched. He sat down with his laptop and watched the cursor blink on the screen without typing a single letter. He turned on the TV and stared at the “No Signal” screen for five solid minutes.
And the only image in his mind was Allura in that silky blue top, earrings gleaming and face paint smeared. Smiling at him from up the stairs.

The knot in his stomach. The tug in his chest. The rush of blood…other places.

He didn’t even bother turning the TV off before he made a bee-line for the door, rushing down the steps, heading for 204 and rapping his knuckles against the door.

Zethrid was mid-yawn when she opened it, and the second she did he pushed straight past her into their living room. “Dude.” She frowned as she pushed the door closed behind him. “Do you have any idea how early it is? What the hell are you doing up?”

“Thinking,” he said plainly.

She groaned. “Oh great…is this about that whole grinding thing at the party last night? Because I’m not-“

“No!” His heart was racing, but his thoughts were leaving it in the dust. “No, that’s not – what is Ezor doing on your sofa?”

Zethrid blinked, glancing over at Ezor sprawled out on the couch with a throw pillow jammed over her eyes and a quilt covering her legs. “She said she wanted to lie down last night and then konked out there.” She sighed. “And I just didn’t have the heart to move her. And speaking of which, if you wake her up, she’ll end you. And so will I. So keep it down.”

“Right…”

She sighed and tugged him by the sleeve into the bedroom, carefully shutting the door between them and Ezor. Then she turned, facing him again with her arms crossed and her eyes closed. Steeling herself, he realized. Did she think he was really in that much of a panic? “Okay – so what’s got you all worked up, huh? It’s gotta be big for you to get your ass up out of bed at-“ She glanced at the clock and groaned in disbelief. “6:30 am? Geez, who are you and what have you done with Lotor?”

“I’m not worked up,” he insisted, and Zethrid’s face morphed into a mask of total confusion. It took him a moment to work out why – until he realized he was smiling. Grinning like a madman. But he couldn’t help it. He felt lighter than he had in months – years – and he could barely contain it.

“Zethrid – it happened. It finally happened. I felt it-“

“Allura,” he breathed. “Last night, in the stairwell. I felt this…this…this tug. A pull toward her. This desire to kiss her – the touch her.” Zethrid blinked at him, and he let out a half-hysterical laugh. “Zethrid, don’t you know what that means?”

“You have eyes and a dick?” Zethrid said. “I mean I saw that costume of hers-“

Before he could help it his hands pressed against Zethrid’s shoulders, holding her there as he stared into her eyes, beaming wildly, his heart pounding against his ribs. “I’m attracted to her, Zethrid. I can feel it – I even dreamed about her-“

Well, maybe she didn’t need to know every detail.

He let his hands fall at his sides, pulling in a quivering breath as Zethrid looked at him like he’d grown a third arm. “I want things from her I never thought I would want. Do you have any idea what that feels like?”
“This dream,” she said, a knowing little smirk tugging back on her lips, and he could already feel heat creeping up to the tips of his ears. “Just what was going on in it, huh?”

Oh, she knew damn well already. She looked about ready to break down laughing as he cleared his throat and stared pointedly down at his shoes. “That’s…personal.”

Zethrid threw her head back and guffawed, so loudly that he could practically picture Ezor stomping in with a pillow at the ready to beat them both into the carpet in a hangover-induced rage. “Look at you!” she said, slinging an arm around his shoulders with a wide and exuberant grin. “You know, I thought this was just a little crush, but you’re really falling for her, huh?”

“I…I suppose I am.”

Her fist pressed against arm, not quite enough to hurt, but enough to make him wobble on his feet. “Hey, you deserve it. And if you ever need advice on giving her a good time—“

“I don’t.”

“You can always come to me, okay?”

He reached up and grabbed her hand where it rested against his shoulder and peeled it off. “Thank you,” he told her, voice more strained than he would have liked.

Then, from the other room: “Zethriiiiiid…”

She winced. “Dammit…woke the dragon.”

“Any chance of me getting out without facing her wrath?”

“Doubt it.” Zethrid was still smiling as she shrugged, resigned and content. “Just go back upstairs. And try to get more sleep before you start pacing or something.” Her mouth stretched around a wide yawn. “I wanna try to catch a few more Z’s myself and I can’t if you’re carving a footpath across your bedroom carpet.”

He fought the urge to pout and lost. “I don’t pace that much.”

“Yeah. You do. But maybe a few more…nice dreams and you won’t need to as much.”

That smirk of hers made his face heat up in record time. Dammit all. “Thank you, Zethrid,” he said. Or started to say at least, before the bedroom door slammed open. Ezor leveled them both with a glare that could have knocked anyone else off their feet. Even tempered by smudged eyeliner and messy hair it made Lotor wince. “Shut up,” she said, her voice like sandpaper. “Both of you.”

“Want some Advil?” Zethrid asked, unfazed.

Ezor pouted. “Yes.” She tugged her blanket closer and nudged her way past them before curling up on the bed. “And then quiet.” She turned her head just enough to catch Lotor’s eye again, her own narrowing threateningly. “And so help me if you play one ABBA song—“

“I’ll use headphones,” he promised, already edging his way toward the door.

“Good idea,” Zethrid told him, and she dropped her voice to a low whisper as Ezor jammed her face against the pillows with a muted groan. “We’ll talk later. You know, about you-know-what—“

No they wouldn’t. “Right.”
“I want details.”

“Goodbye Zethrid.”

“Stop talking…” Ezor pleaded into the pillow.

“Details!” Zethrid excitedly whispered.

Getting out the door was no easy task, but he made it in one piece. Somehow. He leaned against the door and let out a sigh of relief, combing his hair from his face. Still, he found himself smiling. Even Zethrid’s over-eagerness and Ezor’s hangover-induced foul mood could tamper the lovely floating feeling in his chest.

Maybe this really was what it was supposed to feel like. Attraction. Affection. Romance. Whatever he wanted to call it, he was finding he liked it very much.

The lightness in his step carried over into the afternoon, fueling a solid half a chapter in a single writing session. He had just made it to the moment where Arus and Drule finally got their hands on the compass stone that would lead them to the location of Oriande – a scene he’d been imagining for so many years it hardly felt real anymore – when his phone buzzed on the desk.

He’d been true to his word and plugged in his headphones the moment he’d sat down, so he doubted it was Ezor complaining about having to listen to Voulez Vous for the fourth time on loop. And he could have sworn Acxa had been complaining about her early shift at the party the night before. Zethrid preferred FaceTime and Dayak abhorred texting messaging in any form so that only left-Allura – 1:48 PM

>> Can you come over?

He wondered if his face was as pink as it felt as he stared at her name on the screen.

Allura – 1:48 PM

>> If you’re awake! ;)

Oh god, a winking emoticon? Was she trying to kill him?

Me – 1:49 PM

<< I am and I can.

He swallowed and took a steadying breath, already standing up from his desk as he pressed send. Whether his heart was racing from anxiety or excitement – or something else entirely that definitely didn’t have anything to do with that dream last night – he wasn’t sure, but it was pounding against his ribcage obnoxiously as he reached out to knock on Allura’s door.

“It’s unlocked!” came a muffled voice from inside, and he stepped inside and came face to face with a duvet piled on the living room sofa.

With hands poking out. And a lock of white hair peeking out from underneath its folds. Allura turned to smile at him from her makeshift cocoon, the light from her laptop illuminating her cheeks.

He was laughing before he could help it. “Chilly?”

Her smile turned into a pout. “I don’t handle cold well,” she sighed. “And I didn’t realize how drafty this building gets even with the heater running.”
“Far be it from me to judge you.”

She was already lifting the corner of her blanket as he closed the door behind him. “Come here,” she said. “I want to show you something.”

He couldn’t turn down that invitation. Especially not when she was all too right about this building being frigid in the winter months. He thought her unit might be even worse than his own, but at least that made it all the more pleasant when he slipped underneath the duvet and felt her wrap it around his shoulders, pulling him against her.

His heart fluttered in the bottom of his throat as he breathed in the scent of her shampoo, her soft well-worn T-shirt brushing against his arm. He glanced at her laptop. “Just what are you working on?”

The flush in her cheeks might have been from the newfound warmth. He couldn’t tell. But it didn’t matter much. It made her smile glow all that much more anyway. “I hope it doesn’t come off as weird,” she sighed. As if it could ever. “But I was thinking about what you said. Last night. About being demisexual.”

It made his heart leap all that much more hearing her say it out loud. “Mmhm?”

“And I wanted to understand it a little better, so I spent some of this morning doing some reading.”

He gaped at her. “You’ve been…researching demisexuality?” She nodded, her eyes shining. “For… for me?”

She nodded again, beaming at him as she did. And god, he felt like his chest was going to burst from the feelings swelling in there between his ribs.

“And I found this idea on one of the blogs, and it seemed like a good one and I figured…maybe we could do it together?” She snuggled closer, holding her laptop up for her to see. On the screen were three words, arranged into neat columns at the top of the page.

Want, Will, Won’t.

He read them over three solid times before turning to her and finding her smiling at him eagerly. Expectantly. “Is this…some kind of list?”

“A want, will, won’t list,” she said. “I thought maybe it could be a good way to talk about things. Things we might want to do…” She pinched her lower lip between her teeth, the pink in her cheeks turning darker, more vibrant. “…I know it can be hard to put into words. And I know maybe that’s frustrating. But we should talk about it, don’t you think? What you’re ready for…what you like…what you might want to try…”

Her fingers tapped against the keys as he studied her, watching that flush on her face travel up to the tips of her ears. What he liked. Well, he had an idea, certainly. A few ideas. But she was right – it was hard to put into words. Especially since he doubted he could just tell her the details of that dream he’d had and call it a day.

But that was all beside the point. The real point, which was that she had…done all of this. All this research – at least ten tabs’ worth from what he could see in her browser. All of it…to understand him better. To accommodate him. To learn what he needed.

He’d never had someone do something like that before. Not in any recent memory at least.
He felt a smile stretch across his face, breathing out her name almost reverently. “Allura…that-“

“Is it too much?”

“I love it.” Somehow he managed to find her hand under all those blankets, and he grasped it tightly. “I love that you thought of this.”

She shrugged. “I really just found it on a blog somewhere-“

“Still.” Gently, he took the laptop from her, resting it on the coffee table in front of them both. “I just have to admit I’m not quite sure where to start.”

“Well,” she giggled. “Maybe we could start easy…with things that you know you want. I happen to remember you telling me you enjoy kissing.”

“I do.”

“So maybe more of that?” she prompted. “Maybe…other places?”

He let out a thoughtful hum. Trying with everything he had in him not to think too hard about that dream. “I’d be happy to have you kiss me anywhere you like.”

Oh, he hadn’t expected that to come out of his mouth. And neither had she, judging by the way her eyes went wide. “That’s a…a lot of places,” she admitted.

He could imagine. He tried not to. “Even so-“

“Your neck?” she offered.

“Absolutely?”

“Your…chest?”

He swallowed. “There too.”

Her eyes tracked downward, so quickly he barely noticed. “And…maybe…other places?”

She was right – that was a lot of places. “I…wouldn’t say no to that,” he finally said. “If you promise to buy me dinner first.”

Allura threw her head back and laughed, leaning against him and pressing a hand against his chest. “I’m serious!”

“So am I.” He found her hand and squeezed it. Imagining how those fingers would feel wandering… He swallowed against the dryness in his throat. “Just where do you want to touch me?”

With her free hand, she tucked a stray strand of hair behind one ear, her blush deepening. “Plenty of places,” she said, looking sheepish. “Anywhere you’re comfortable with, really. All I really want is the chance to make you feel good.”

Good in a very specific way, he was sure.

“I want more…I want all of you.”

“And if I wanted to make you feel good,” he hazarded, and Allura lips parted as she stared at him, wide-eyed. “It should be mutual, don’t you think?”
“Y-yes.”

“I don’t think I’m ready for…for everything. How to make you feel as good as you say you want to make me feel.” The words felt clumsy and awkward coming out of his mouth, but Allura hardly seemed bothered. In fact it was quite the opposite.

“I’ve read your books, remember?” she said with a playful little smile. “You seem to know perfectly well how to make a woman feel good.”

“Academically, maybe. But practically, I’m a bit behind the curve.”

“So you want…you want to try…touching me?”

Was he really the first person to express that much interest? He couldn’t be – not as beautiful as she was. But if there was one thing he was determined not to be, it was selfish. “When the mood strikes,” he said with a smile. “I’d love to. If you’d let me-“

“God, yes,” she said, more quickly than he’d been expecting. “I…I certainly wouldn’t turn you down.”

Something about the way she said it - open, enthusiastic, and thrilled - made excitement bubble up in Lotor’s chest.

Monday evening, Allura came home to a frigid apartment.

Drafty was one thing, but this was ridiculous. Her living room felt like a damn freezer, and she could barely get out from under her comforter to go to the bathroom without imagining that she was braving the frozen wilds of Antarctica.

Alright, maybe that was overly dramatic. But not by much.

At the very least she didn’t have enough pride to leave her blankets behind as she made her way down the hall. She kept them snugly draped over her shoulders as she shuffled down to Lotor’s door and risked frostbite on her knuckles to reach out and knock.

He opened it a moment later, in a sweatshirt and jeans. Like that was enough to keep him from freezing to death. “Aren’t you cold?” she blurted before she could help it.

Lotor sighed, sympathetically it looked like, and ushered her in and over to his couch. “Damn heat went out again.”

Horror twisted in the pit of her stomach. “Again? This happens a lot?”

“About once every winter it seems like,” he told her. She was already getting comfortable on his sofa and tugging him down to sit with her. Like her own personal space heater. Within seconds she was breathing a sigh of relief as his body heat enveloped her like the scent of his toothpaste. Cinnamon. A warm scent. “But I’m sure Shiro is on it already.”

“As if that’s what he needs when he should be celebrating his engagement,” she groaned.

“In the meantime-“ He was already helping her get cozy in her blankets again, like he knew without even asking how desperate she was to keep the cold from creeping in. Thank God. “-I suppose all we can do is keep warm however we can.”
However we can. Did he have any idea how those words sounded? He had to. He’d written more scintillating things than that like it was nothing.

She hoped she could hide her blush in his chest as she nuzzled against it, wrapping her arms around him and taking in the warmth and the smell of his hair. She let out a hum, fingers curling against the fabric of his shirt as she pulled him closer and settled back against the arm of the sofa.

Comfortably pinned. Good and warm. Perfect.

She smiled up at him and he rewarded her with one of his own, easy and relaxed. He leaned in to press a kiss to the tip of her nose and she couldn’t help but giggle. “You missed again.”

One eyebrow quirked upward as he pulled back just enough to glance at her. “What?”

“That’s my nose.”

“I know,” he said, on the edge of a laugh.

Well that just called for retaliation – grinning, she hooked one hand around the back of his neck and pulled him down close enough to press her lips to his nose before he could pull away. Lotor let out an indignant snort and fired back with a kiss on her cheek, then her jaw, then the side of her neck as she writhed and cackled with glee. “That tickles!”

“I know.”

Well, at least she wasn’t cold anymore. And she supposed that was the point after all. But she didn’t have much time to dwell on how wonderfully ridiculous it felt having Lotor kiss the shell of her ear before his lips finally hit their mark and covered her own.

She sighed into it – in pleasure, in relief – and relaxed back against the throw pillow wedged under her shoulder blades. Lotor’s body was a solid wall above her, keeping the cold off as she parted her knees and let him settle comfortably between her legs. “Mmm…how long do you think it’ll be before the heat’s back on?” she murmured as she pulled away to take a quick breath.

“A day or so,” Lotor replied, equally unhurried and just as intent on getting back to kissing her as quickly as he could. His lips tickled her own as he spoke.

She tugged him back down, the words “We’ll just have to stay here until then” getting muffled and distorted between their mouths. But her point was clear enough. For now, at least, she was happy to go absolutely nowhere. Happy to stay here in her pleasant little cocoon of warmth and endorphins and kisses until the heat was back on again, and maybe even longer.

And then Lotor shifted, hips settling deeper against her, his thigh rubbing against the inside of her own and suddenly there was quite another reason that she didn’t want to pull away. One that made her break their lazily deepening kiss with a gasp.

Lotor’s brow knitted in concern, his voice breathless as he asked her, “Are you okay?”

“Y-yeah…” Oh God, he had no idea. He couldn’t tell that his firm, muscular thigh was pressing right up against her- “It’s just…your leg…it’s um…”

Instead of saying it outright, she let his eyes trail along her line of sight, following it down between their bodies until he could see it. His knee tucked against the cushions. And his thigh nudging firmly against her crotch.
His brows rose comically quickly. Almost as quickly as the flush spreading across his cheeks and nose. “A-ah.”

“Mmhm,” she said, clipped and breathless.

“Do you…want to stop? I could move.”

No, her body screamed. He was so warm and having him this close was so addicting…and every flex of his quad was sending pleasant little sparks of pleasure up her spine. But the thought of him just sitting there, pressing against her without doing anything more sounded like agony.

She drew a shaky breath and forced out with a placating little smile, “N-no…you’re…you’re fine.”

Maybe she could just grin and bear it. It was better than braving the cold. Metaphorical blue balls be damned.

But then Lotor leaned closer – so close she could feel his breath against the bridge of her nose. And his eyes darkened in a way she’d never seen before, half-lidded and fixed on her own through a veil of messy bangs. His voice was rough, low, almost a whisper: “Do you…want me to keep going?”

Allura’s heart almost stopped right then and there.

His meaning was crystal clear, and it made her face heat up so quickly and so ferociously that it could have kept the chill out of the whole apartment. She stared up at him, drawing a shaky breath as she bit down on her lower lip. And finally, after what felt like an excruciatingly long time, she managed a shy little nod.

She only barely managed to follow it up with a quick, “O-only if you want-“ before Lotor was leaning in with vigor, kissing her so hard it made her head spin and – oh, God help her – pressing his leg against her in a way that made all the air leave her at once.

His lips moved to her neck as he rolled his hips, and she let out a shaking moan, her fingernails dragging against his T-shirt and bunching it over his shoulders. “Good?” he mumbled, his lips tickling the underside of her jaw.

“G…good,” she forced out. And oh, it was the understatement of the century. When he nudged his knee forward just a bit more, she could feel him right up against her clit, and there weren’t enough words in her head to tell him just how amazing it felt. Having him against her. Touching. Pushing. Kissing. She’d thought about it more than she cared to admit, and even fully clothed this was better than she’d ever hoped.

He growled against her skin, and the sound of it made her head spin. Did he have any idea just how wild that sound drove her? How attractive he really was?

“Lotor,” she sighed, rolling her hips down against him, greedily. Unable to help it. “Can you…more…” She swallowed, her mouth dry and her face blazing hot. “I want…”

“Mnnhm.” He shifted his hips, pressing – thrusting – against her, making her squirm. Pulling a moan out of her. And that heat building in the pit of her stomach was almost too tantalizingly familiar for her to stand.

Christ, was there a chance he was actually going to make her-

He moved like a man on a mission, burying his face in the crook of her neck as he braced his hand against the arm of the couch by her head. And she could feel his arm muscles flexing against her
scalp with every movement, his jeans dragging against her calves where she’d hooked them over his rocking hips. All she could do was hold him, gripping his shoulders tightly enough to make her knuckles ache as she choked on a broken little moan.

“Mmm…Allura…”

She gasped. Her name…she’d never heard him say it like that. Hungry. Possessive. And just a moment later she noticed it – something hot and hard poking against her hip-

Oh.

“Can…can you do that again?” she pleaded.

He pulled back just enough to glance at her, his eyes half glazed over and his face stained with a deep rosy flush. “Again?”

“M-my name-“ Her breath stalled as she rocked her hips against his leg just so and felt herself drawing close to that tantalizing edge. So close she didn’t care how silly she sounded. “Can you… can you say my name again…like that…”

He hummed and nuzzled the side of her neck, a deep rumbling exhale puffing against her skin there. “Allura…”

She whimpered. “Yes…”

“Allura-“

His shirt rode up over his back until her fingers met skin – flushed and firm. Her calves trembled against the backs of his thighs. “Oh God, yes-“

Her eyes screwed shut, her next breath getting caught in her throat as she came – right there on Lotor’s couch with his knee pressed up against her legs. And for those blissful, floating moments, all she could focus on was the warmth of Lotor’s lips on her neck and the hot, coursing pleasure zapping down to her fingertips and toes. He held her, kissed her, nuzzled against her as she came down, and she collapsed – flushed and panting – against the arm of the sofa.

When she finally managed to open her eyes again, a lazy smile spreading across her face, Lotor stared at her, bemused. “Ah…” His voice was strained. She wondered if that had to do with the unmistakable poke against her lower belly. “Did…did you just…”

“Aha…” she giggled, and she managed a nod. Oh, she could melt right here into this couch. She stretched out her fingers, flexing them and running her hands up the length of Lotor’s spine. “And I’m much warmer now…”

“You look it,” he chuckled against her cheek as he pressed a kiss there. His voice wavered, but he was smiling when she caught another glance at his face. Beaming, really. “Allura…that was…”

“Mm…” She craned her neck, pressing her lips against the side of his jaw and smoothing down his hair with one hand. “I could repay the favor…if you like.”

To make her point, she rolled her hips up against him, pressed against him where she could still feel him hard in his pants. Lotor let out a choking noise, biting his lip and letting his head tip forward against her shoulder. “Ah…Allura…”

“Do you want me to?”
He sighed, a slow, shuddering breath. “You don’t…you don’t need to-“

“I want to,” she insisted, maybe a bit too eagerly. “I don’t have to of course…but I want to.” She let her hands slide soothingly over his ribs, holding his eye. “We can take it slow. Stop if you need to. But I want…I want to make you feel this good…”

Slowly, Lotor rested his forehead against hers, his eyes slipping closed, and he nodded. “Alright.”

“Oh?” She grinned, her heart soaring. It barely felt real – her hands shook as she let them trail down along his sides and wander down to his zipper. “Okay?”

Her palm pressed against his length through his jeans, and he let out a shaking, beautiful moan. “Ah – that’s-“

“Too much?”

“No.” He shook his head, and his hair tickled the tip of her nose as he did, making her giggle softly. “No, not at all.”

His voice was barely more than a whisper, but there was no hesitation there. She took a steadying breath as she unbuttoned his pants, reached inside, got her fingers around him, and God he felt hot and firm and incredible against her palm. And the length of him damn near made her mouth water. Her heart raced as he let out a gasp, mouth falling open, flush spreading all the way down to his collarbone – “Oh, Allura…”

And then a sharp rap on the front door shattered the spell in an instant. Her hand froze as a familiar voice called: “Maintenance!”

“Gnrk…”

“He…must be here about the heat,” Allura said, sheepishly. Her grip on him was loose and listless as she looked from him to the door and back, nibbling on her own lip. “We…we could ask him to come back…”

“No-“ His voice was clipped, rough. Probably thanks to her hand still resting against his erection. “No, it’s fine. We…maybe we could…nh…rain check?”

She pulled her hand away, leaning up to press a kiss against the tip of his nose with a smile. “Rain check.”

Well…maybe that was worth braving the cold after all.

Chapter End Notes

Side note: Want - Will - Won’t lists are a real thing that can be a super useful tool for sexual communication!
I've Been Waiting For You

The moment Allura opened the door, Shiro’s hand froze mid-knock. His eyebrows arched almost comically as he blinked at her. “Oh. Allura.”

She smiled – too wide and with too much teeth. “Hi.”

His gaze darted for a moment toward the number on the door and then fell on the blanket draped over her shoulders. Hiked up over her neck to hide the marks she suspected were already forming there. “I see you noticed the heat’s out.”

“Yeah.”

His lips curled back in a half-grimace masked with a placating smile. “Sorry.” She peeked over her shoulder the same time he did. “Is Lotor here?”

“He’s-“ Behind her she heard the distinct sound of the bathroom door clicking closed, and she had to fight the urge to blush even harder. “He just went…to the bathroom.”

“Ah.”

“Yes.”

The silence that followed was deafening.

He knew. There was no way he didn’t. No matter how hard she tried Allura couldn’t help but feel like she was emanating waves of “I just came less than five minutes ago” energy.

“Congratulations on your engagement-“

“I’m just here to check the radiators-“

They both stopped talking as simultaneously as they’d started, and Allura tugged the blanket closer to her chest, shifting a bit so that he could see her sweatpants peeking out from underneath it. Just so he would know she wasn’t naked. “Th-thanks,” Shiro finally said with a nervous little laugh. “I ah…I’m pretty glad it worked out. Would have been pretty embarrassing with all those people there if he’d said no.”

Allura smiled. “As if he’d ever say no,” she sighed. “Anyone who spends more than five minutes with you can tell just how in love you two are.”

There had already been a hint of a flush creeping across Shiro’s cheeks – probably thanks to the marks on her neck that she was certain he’d gotten a glimpse of despite the blanket. But now it deepened into a deep fuchsia color. “Yeah…yeah.”

“I just wish you didn’t have to be here fixing the heat when you should be home celebrating.”

Probably celebrating the same way she and Lotor would have been if he hadn’t knocked. Allura pulled the blanket up closer around her face, if only to try and hide the pink tint on her cheeks.

Shiro glanced down the hall, the dropped his voice low. “Um…you know, if I’m interrupting something-“

“N-no!”
“I can come back later.”

“No, really – it’s-“

“It’s fine,” Lotor said, and Allura spun around to face him so quickly the blanket flared out around her ankles. His cheeks were just as rosy as Shiro’s – if not moreso – and he couldn’t quite meet either of their eyes as he spoke. But he managed a smile as he tucked his hands into his pockets. “I think we can all agree we’d like the heat back on as soon as possible…”

Shiro coughed. “Yeah, I bet. Don’t worry – I already got the parts for the main water heater. Heating coils gave out.” He sighed sympathetically as he reached for his toolbox and sidled into the living room. “Landlord asked me to check all the radiators for slow leaks first. I’ll be ten minutes, tops.”

Allura chewed on her lip as she watched him make his way over to the radiator by the window, and she nudged Lotor’s arm. “Are you…um…”

“I’m fine,” he sighed, still smiling at her despite the strained undertone in his voice. “I figure the sooner the heat comes back on, the sooner you can stop wearing that blanket as a shawl.”

“This blanket happens to be very comfortable,” she pouted, and Lotor let out a laugh as he tugged her closer and wrapped an arm around her. Now that her afterglow was starting to wear off, she welcomed the extra warmth. “But I…am looking forward to my apartment just being drafty instead of a meat locker.”

“Your unit is worse than mine, believe it or not.” He paused, thoughtfully. “You could…always stay here if you wanted.”

Allura’s heart stuttered. “O-oh?”

“If-“ He cleared his throat, more forcefully than seemed necessary. “If you want…If you’d be more comfortable-“

She glanced toward Shiro, whose back was turned as he worked, and she scooted closer to Lotor and shot him a playful little smile. “Eager to cash in that rain check sooner rather than later?” she asked, low and sultry.

The same moment that Lotor’s brows arched to his hairline, Shiro’s pliers clattered onto the hardwood floor and he clambered to his feet. “No leaks!” he announced too loudly. “All good here, so I’ll just – get out of your way-“ He was at the living room door in record time, smiling a bit hysterically as he waved at them over his shoulder. “Have a good weekend!”

“Ah – right, you-“ The door was already closing before Allura could get out another word. Her face burned as she glanced back at Lotor. “Do you think he actually found any leaks?”

“Obviously nothing too worrying,” Lotor said with a muted laugh.

She reached out from under the blanket just enough to grasp his hands. “Well…now that we’re alone, did you…”

“Ah-“ His blush was back full-force, spreading all the way to his ears. “You don’t…I ah…” He looked pointedly at his own feet. “I…took care of it already.”

In all of three minutes in the bathroom, Allura thought. Maybe she ought to take that as a compliment.
She let her thumb stroke along his knuckles. “Then…maybe we could watch a movie?”

His shoulders seemed to relax, an easy smile slipping onto his face alongside the blush. “I can make some hot chocolate.”

Her eyes lit up. “With marshmallows?”

“Plenty.”

“I’d like that.”

It didn’t happen that night.

Lotor dumped half a bag of marshmallows into a pot of hot chocolate and they spent the rest of the evening watching Spirited Away wrapped up in every blanket he owned. It was quiet and comfortable, having her head tucked in the crook of his neck and her legs folded against his.

It almost didn’t feel real, what had happened on this very couch just a few hours before.

They switched to Howl’s Moving Castle somewhere after 9:30, and not half an hour in Lotor’s eyes started getting heavy. He glanced down and found Allura’s eyes closed, her breathing steady and slow, and her hair falling messily over her nose. He reached down and brushed a strand of it away with his thumb, smiling at the way she snuffled in her sleep when he did.

The rest of the movie watched them instead of the other way around.

It was still dark when he woke up with a jolt to the feeling of someone shaking him. “Lotor,” Allura whispered, urgently. “Lotor, wake up.”

“Mmeurgh?”

She looked apologetic as her face came into focus, her hair a frizzy mess and the blanket wrapped tightly around her shoulders. “I need to go get ready for work.”

Work. Right. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. “Oh.” He wondered if he sounded as disappointed as he felt.

Allura certainly looked it. “Can we finish the rest of that movie tonight?”

“Absolutely,” he said with a sleepy smile, and he was about the reach up and pull her in for a kiss when she leaned in anyway.

It didn’t happen the next night either. Or the night after that. The mood was never quite right for it, and somehow, that was okay. Lotor was content to spend the evenings curled up with Allura on the couch, lazily kissing and letting her hands roam across his scalp and under his shirt.

She let his do the same, which was new and different and interesting in a lot of ways.

More than once Allura fell asleep on his sofa or he on hers, and somehow she managed to make it to work on time every day despite that. Impressive, Lotor thought, and a relief – he would have hated to be the reason for her to get fired.

On Saturday night, they forewent Netflix altogether and sat with their legs tangled on the sofa cushions, Lotor with his laptop perched on his knees and Allura scrolling absently on her phone. The silence was comfortable. Soothing, almost. Until-
“Lotor…do you have any plans for Thanksgiving?”

He glanced up at her, fingers freezing on his keyboard as he blinked. “My friends and I usually spend it getting drunk and watching the reruns of the Puppy Bowl.” When she nibbled on her bottom lip as she laughed, he closed his laptop and leaned down to rest it on the coffee table. “Why?”

“O-oh, nothing, really,” she breathed, but he could practically see the gears turning in her mind. He watched her choose her words. Carefully, too. “My family never really did Thanksgiving. Not as far as I can remember. But my father and I always had this tradition…the morning after, on Friday, we would always get up early and make a huge breakfast.”

There was a gleam in her eye as she spoke, an almost wistful little thing. A shy smile worked its way onto her face as she toyed with her hair.

“I was planning to do the same thing this year. It’s been so long since I got to spend any time with him outside of work. And I…I don’t want to get in the way of your traditions-“

“You’d never be in the way.”

“-but I thought maybe…maybe you could…join me?”

Lotor blinked. “At your…father’s house?”

“Yes.”

“For Thanksgiving.”

“Well technically Black Friday-“

“You want me to meet your father.”

Instead of answering she let her fingers twirl around the short hairs on the back of her neck. Tugging and twisting. But she didn’t correct him.

She wants me to meet her father.

“It’s not as big a deal as it sounds,” she quickly added when the offer was met with radio silence on his end. “He’s one the least intimidating people I know.” That was easy for her to say – he’d raised her after all. “And I promise he’s not the type to come after you with a shotgun.”

He couldn’t help but feel intrigued at the idea…Meeting the man who had raised her almost single-handed piqued his interest, even if also made his stomach twist into knots. How could he not be curious about the person who had raised her?

He swallowed, trying to help the dryness in the back of his throat. “Does he…know about me?”

“I’ve mentioned you,” she said, face flushing. “But it’s been so long since we sat down and had a real honest talk that I…well he only really knows a handful of things about you. All good.” Her blush deepened, creeping across the bridge of her nose and up over her ears. “I ah…I haven’t mentioned the books. Not that he would care about that. He’s not one to judge anyone for their profession.”

Probably for the best. An erotic sci-fi trilogy wasn’t exactly standard Thanksgiving dinner conversation fare.

Allura was still looking at him, expectant and anxious. “Well…” she sighed. “What do you say?”
“You promise he won’t come after me with a shotgun?”

Her laugh punched its way out of her. “I promise.”

Lotor reached out and took her hand, his smile matching hers as she glanced down at it and then met his eye. With a steadying breath, he finally told her, “Then I’d love to.”

Allura’s smile lit up her entire face, bright and pink, but then a moment later she seemed to remember something and added, “Oh, and make sure you bring pajamas.”

He blinked. “Pajamas? To your…father’s house?”

“It’s tradition,” she giggled. “Just…trust me on this.”

“Alright,” he said with a smile. “I trust you, then.”

That was all well and good and easy enough to say with confidence until they pulled up on the curb outside a large brick house flanked by immaculately trimmed dogwood trees. Lotor stared at it from the car, his heart thumping in his chest as he studied the wide arching windows stretching underneath the sloped slate roof.

Allura reached out and squeezed his hand. “Relax.”

“I am relaxed,” Lotor lied.

“He’s not nearly as intimidating as you might think for man who built his own company from the ground up,” she said with a calming smile as she unbuckled her seat belt and climbed out into the crisp fall air. It was on the cusp of winter and felt every bit like it. Her breath puffed white in front of her lips. “And he’s an excellent judge of character. He’ll love you.”

He swallowed and reached up to push back his hair from his face for what had to be the thousandth time. “Have you…brought people to meet him before?” The front door of the house seemed to loom in front of them like an brick red obelisk. “Boyfriends?”

“A couple,” Allura muttered, cheeks turning a bit pink. “And he’s always been perfectly sweet to them. Well, most of them. Ian was the exception, but I have no idea why I ever wasted my time with him anyway.“ She tugged him up to join her in front of the door and reached up to knock.

Well, he supposed there was no going back now.

Especially not when the door opened, and the man standing there beamed at the two of them, wrinkles creasing around his eyes underneath a fringe of neatly trimmed silver hair. There was a beard to match, outlining the angle of his sharp jaw, and it would have made him look imposing if it weren’t for what he was wearing.

“I hope Allura told you about our tradition,” he laughed, glancing down at the polka-dot covered pajamas he was wearing. “Otherwise I’m going to feel awfully ridiculous.”

“Of course I told him,” Allura insisted before throwing her arms around his shoulders and hugging him tight. He returned it with vigor, chuckling as he patted her back with a broad hand.

He extended that hand out to Lotor as he pulled away, eyes tracking up and down his frame appraisingly. His smile never wavered. “You must be Lotor.”

Somehow, Lotor managed to thrust out his hand and give the man’s a firm shake. “Ah, yes…sir.”
He guffawed. “So formal. Alfor, please.”

“Alfor…right.”

He leaned in closer. “Nervous?” he asked with a smirk.

Allura nudged her father in the arm, giggling as she did it and rolling her eyes magnificently. “Stop torturing him.”

“Torture? Never.” He nodded inside. “Come on, come on – it’s freezing out here and I left my slippers in the living room.”

As he turned and beckoned them into the house, Allura turned and shot Lotor a meaningful look. A little tilt of the head and a raise of her brow that seemed to say, See? Nothing to be afraid of. And maybe she was right – but he doubted the squirming feeling in the pit of his stomach would go away completely anytime soon. Still, he let her take his hand and lead him inside.

The foyer was spacious and warm, packed full of house plants on every surface and flooded with yellow morning sunlight from the windows overhead. As they hung up their coats by the door Lotor caught a glimpse up the curling wooden staircase to their left, and Allura nudged him in the ribs. “I promise you’re not going to see my old bedroom,” she promised him with a sigh. “I keep telling him he can repaint over all that horrendous pink and purple, but he refuses to do it.”

“Let me guess – four posters of Jean-Luc Picard above your bed?” he said with a smirk, and she pouted magnificently.

“Only three,” she muttered. “And one of Kathryn Janeway.”

His eyebrows arched at that, but a moment later the smell of crashing pots and pans beckoned them to the kitchen. “Don’t make me do all the work myself!” Alfor called, poking his head around the corner with a frying pan in one hand. He pointed it at Lotor. “Fair warning – I’m going to put you to work. Allura tells me you know your way around a scrambled egg.”

“I could also do poached if you’d rather,” Lotor said before he thought better of it, and Alfor grinned at him.

“I might hold you to that.” He twirled the pan in his hand. “But first go get dressed. Both of you. Tradition is tradition after all. Lotor, you can get changed in Allura’s old room.”

Behind him, he heard a dull thunk as Allura dropped her forehead against the doorframe. It was a little odd, changing into an oversized pair of sweatpants and a horrendously faded T-shirt in Allura’s father’s house. In Allura’s childhood bedroom. The whole day was odd. He could still barely believe it – here he was meeting the parents and putting a metaphorical tick mark next to yet another relationship milestone he’d always thought was nothing but a rom-com cliché.

Allura was waiting for him in the hall, dressed in a nightshirt that came down to her knees and a pair of lavender yoga pants. “Here,” she said, thrusting a pair of slippers into his arms.

He glanced down at them. “Corgis?”

“Tradition,” was all she said with a playful little shrug, and he slipped them onto his feet without a second thought.

“You know,” he told her as they made their way down the steps again, “I spotted two posters of
Janeway on your bedroom wall.”

Allura seemed to fight back the urge to push him down the stairs as she giggled, “Shut up.”

Alfor was waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs, near the door to the kitchen, and a wide smile stretched comfortably across his face. “From the way Allura talked about you, it seemed like you two were getting along swimmingly,” he said, and the next thing Lotor knew a firm hand was knocking the wind out of him as it came down against his spine. “But it sure is nice to see it firsthand.”

“Don’t start,” Allura sighed, nudging her father’s hand away.

“Okay, okay,” was all Alfor said, like a surrender. “Lotor, you’re on egg duty.”

Lotor blinked at him. “Scrambled?”

“Surprise me.”

Alfor winked before sidling into the kitchen, and Allura’s hand slipped into his to give it an encouraging squeeze. Her lips brushed against his cheek, then his ear as she whispered, “You’re doing great.”

“Am I?”

“Yes!” She was grinning from ear to ear as she clung to his hand, practically bouncing and tugging him into the kitchen. “Now come on – I’m starving.”

She brushed past him and followed her father into the kitchen, and he watched as she joined him at the sink and leaned into his side, letting him pull her in for a hug. Alfor dropped a kiss to the top of her head, murmuring something that Lotor couldn’t quite hear, and something warm erupted in his chest, like secondhand contentment.

And here he was, in a T-shirt painfully past its useful lifespan and a pair of borrowed slippers, standing in someone else’s kitchen. Joining in someone else’s tradition. Was this what it felt like to step into someone else’s family? Was it supposed to feel this…easy?

He made his way a little numbly over to the stove, finding a carton of eggs and a frying pan already set out. “Time to show us what you can do,” Alfor said with a hearty laugh, flipping around a silicone spatula and handing it to Lotor by the handle. “No pressure.”

No pressure indeed.

“I’m unofficially putting myself on waffle duty,” Allura insisted.

“And leaving me stuck with making the fruit salad,” Alfor said with a relenting sigh, and something glinted in his eye as he turned to Lotor again. “You know, one year when she was no more than… oh, I’d say four or five, I turned my back for less than a minute and next thing I knew she had blackberries splattered all over her face, the walls-“

“It wasn’t that bad!” Allura squawked.

Alfor laughed brightly as he opened a box of blueberries. “You’re right, you’re right…” Then he leaned over close to Lotor’s ear and whispered – more than loudly enough for Allura to overhear him, “It was absolutely that bad.”

Lotor snorted on a laugh while Allura pouted. “I left the donuts in the car,” she sighed. “I need to go
get them before they freeze – I’ll be back. And no more baby stories! For pete’s sake, I’m twenty-six.”

Lotor glanced up just in time to watch her heading around the corner, stepping toward the front door and-

Oh. Suddenly the kitchen felt very quiet.

“Can’t scramble an egg without heat,” Alfor told him.

“R-right.”

He turned on the stove – low heat – and watched as Alfor got to work peeling bananas and setting them out on the cutting board. “So,” he said, “Allura mentioned you’re a writer.”

Lotor swallowed. “Yes.”

“What kind of writer?” He smiled warmly. “I’m curious.”

His spatula clattered into the hot pan – just for a moment before he grabbed again and narrowly avoided burning his fingertips. “Science fiction,” he choked. “Aliens, other plants, inter-dimensional travel-” Copious swapping of bodily fluids. “Things like that.”

Alfor chuckled, knowingly it seemed. “Now I’m getting an idea of why Allura is so fond of you… have you brought up the Star Trek reboots with her yet?”

“I know she prefers Picard over Kirk.”

“Good memory.”

“And she seems to really like Isaac Asimov.”

That still made his stomach do a tiny flip, thinking of the way her eyes lit up when she talked about the Foundation series. When he glanced over at Alfor again, he was smiling. Beaming. In a way that reminded him, almost strikingly, of Allura. “That’s good of you,” he said, “Paying such close attention.”

“I…do my best.”

Suddenly Alfor was very close, his hand pressing firmly against Lotor’s shoulder. There was a glint in his eye that made Lotor hold his gaze – so long that he almost forgot to keep the eggs working in the pan. “I’m sure I can trust you not to do anything to hurt my daughter.”

Had his voice been so…intimidating before? Lotor stared at him, mouth dry and eyes wide with the eggs sizzling away in the pan. “I…ah…I…”

Then Alfor threw his head back and guffawed, and he patted Lotor so firmly that he stumbled right there in front of the stove. “I’m joking!” He twirled a strand of his beard between his fingers as he stepped back over to the fruit again. “You don’t need the intimidating father talk, I’m sure. Allura is a grown woman after all, with impeccable taste. She likes you, and for good reason. You hardly need to convince me that you’ve earned it.”

Odd – he’d gotten so used to the urge to prove himself, and yet Allura’s father seemed to be last person who needed convincing.

The front door opened again, and Allura was all smiles as she came into the kitchen triumphantly
holding a box of donuts. “There may be one missing,” she said, licking powdered sugar off her fingers and not looking one bit ashamed.

Without looking up, Alfor hummed, “My my…I wonder how that happened.”

“It’s a mystery.” With a smile and a quick kiss to Lotor’s cheek, she set the opened box down on the counter and sang. “I’ll start on the bacon!”

“Turkey bacon this year, my dear,” Alfor told her, sighing. “Watching my cholesterol.”

She grabbed the pan from Lotor’s hands, scraping the eggs onto a serving plate and placing it neatly on the kitchen table. “I’ll start the turkey bacon then. As long as we can eat before too long – I’m starving and one donut won’t be enough.”

It had been a long time since Lotor had sat down to a true family dinner. Or breakfast. So long that it almost felt unreal. He scooted his chair up to the edge of the table, folded his napkin in his lap, and stared down at his plate.

Alfor even had cloth napkins. Lotor folded his in his lap at the insistence of Dayak’s voice echoing in his head.

“So-“ Alfor scooped a healthy portion of fruit onto Lotor’s plate, followed by eggs and bacon. “Do you spend any of the holidays with your family?”

Lotor’s hand hovered by his fork. His family…he didn’t think he could remember the last time he’d seen any of them during any holiday. The few Christmas dinners he could remember with his father weren’t particularly happy memories. “Ah…no.”

Alfor’s face fell a bit. Maybe he could tell it was a sore subject. “Well,” he said, his voice softer now. Not pitying, but sympathetic. “I’m glad you decided to come today. Not everyone would be so willing to embrace our quirky little tradition-“

“Quirky?” Allura said with a pout.

“Don’t you think so?” he laughed. “Sitting here eating breakfast in our pajamas?”

“I think it’s rather sweet,” Lotor offered, quietly, scooping a forkful of eggs into his mouth.

Alfor’s gaze softened. “We started this not long after Allura’s mother passed.” Lotor swallowed and looked at him, catching a glimpse of Allura’s face in the corner of his eye. Her bangs had fallen in front of her eyes, her lip caught between her teeth. “I was determined not to let the holidays be an unhappy time for our family. So instead of rehashing old traditions we made some of our own instead.”

Allura was smiling again as she pushed her hair back from her face, and Lotor let his pinky brush against her wrist under the table. “I think you’re lucky,” he said. “You’re lucky to have a loving family like this. Both of you are.”

“Oh, believe you me – I’m well aware of how lucky I am.” That playful glint in his eye was back again. “Now that Allura is grown at least. She was the fussiest baby I’d ever seen-“

“Dad!”

“Oh, she kept us up more nights than I can count.”
“Dad, stop!” Allura insisted, face blazing red as she choked on a laugh and mouthful of blueberries. “I swear—”

“Oh cut me some slack.”

She pouted. “No.”

Alfor let out a long-suffering sigh as he bit into a thick slice of bacon. “You got your wit from your mother, you know,” he said, a warm glint in his eye, and he turned to Lotor again. “She would have really liked you. Melenor.”

Lotor’s mouth hung open around his fork. Allura’s mother…He knew nothing about the woman. He’d never even heard her name before. “You…you think?” he asked. “That she would have…liked me?”

“I know she would have liked you,” Alfor corrected, grinning as he waggled his finger in Lotor’s direction. “Would have loved you, in fact. Would have wanted to know all about your books, I’m sure. She loved sci-fi.”

Beside him, Allura let out a snort. An almost imperceptible one. God, he hoped his face wasn’t as pink as it felt. “I…would have loved to…discuss them with her.”

The moment he got those words out, orange juice came splattering out of Allura’s nose onto the tablecloth.

After that, thank God, Lotor didn’t have to do any more explaining.

“Don’t be a stranger,” Alfor said as they made their way to the door around sunset. He pulled her into a tight hug, patting her between her shoulder blades as she grinned against his shoulder. “Sure, I see you at the office here and there, but you’re always working yourself so hard.”

“Am I not supposed to?”

“Of course you are.” With a kiss to the crown of her head, he let her go. “But there’s still room for fun too. Plenty of things outside of work. You’ve always been such a hard worker, Allura. That, I think, you get from me.”

He said it like he was sorry for that, an apologetic grimace on his face. But then he glanced past her, over her shoulder at Lotor, and he smiled. Widely. Warmly.

“You,” he said. “Come here.”

Allura couldn’t help but laugh at the way Lotor’s eyes widened. Like a deer in headlights. “Come on,” she urged, ushering him closer, and finally he stepped just close enough to her to take her hand.

Her father didn’t wait to grasp him and pull him in for a squeeze – so firm she heard the air rush out of his lungs. All things considered he handled it with aplomb. And that was no small task when it concerned her father’s hugs.

“You’re going to break him,” she said.

“I’m fine,” Lotor wheezed, and he wobbled on his feet as Alfor finally let him go. “Ah…thank you…for inviting me.”

“Look at him! So polite!” He grinned at her and brought a hand down hard on Lotor’s shoulder,
catching his eye and grinning widely. “You’re a good man. A very good man, son.”

For a moment, Allura saw Lotor stiffen, his breath stuttering on its way in and his shoulders tensing. He opened his mouth, like he was trying to reply, but nothing came out. Just silence. Until Allura took his hand and squeezed it.

“R-right,” he finally managed. Ah, there – the smile was back again. Allura let out a sigh of relief. “I should…I’ll…I’ll meet you at the car.”

There was a little wobble in his step, and she could hardly blame him. Her father’s hugs could knock the wind out of an elephant. And speaking of her father-

She turned to look at him, smiling triumphantly. Self-satisfied. “Well?”

“I like him.”

She’d seen that coming a mile away, but it still made her heart flutter. “Really?”

“Oh, yes.” His brow creased as he ran his finger thoughtfully along his chin. “And if he ever wants to discuss marrying you-”

“Dad-“

“Frankly I’m all for it.” Even if he couldn’t get anywhere near saying that with a straight face, it still made her face blaze hot. He dissolved into a giggle as he pulled her into one last hug. “You like him quite a lot too, don’t you?”

“I do.” She glanced over at the car where Lotor had settled in the passenger’s seat, chewing on the end of a pen as he fiddled with the air conditioning vent. “I really do.”

“Good.” A pause. “And you’re sure about the marriage thing-“

“Happy Thanksgiving!” she sang, already heading toward the car. Practically skipping as she went.
Kisses of Fire

Chapter Notes

Another spicy chapter this time.

PS this chapter is named after my favorite ABBA song. I hope it lives up to its name. :)

Allura was halfway out of her car when her phone rang. Just what she needed. If it was Merla from work telling her she needed to work overtime the next week – again – she was going to throw the damn thing off a bridge, and then possibly consider becoming a hermit to avoid any of the voicemails.

But it wasn’t Merla. It wasn’t work at all. In fact, she managed a smile as she answered. “Coran – you have some timing.”

“Do I?” She closed her car door with a bit more force than she needed. It was an outlet, at least. “Are you just leaving work?”

He sounded surprised. Like her working late was anything new. “Just getting home,” she sighed, and she made her way up the stairs. “It’s been a long week.” As she made it to the landing on the second floor, she paused, twirling a strand of hair that had broken free of her bun. “Ah…I’m sorry I didn’t call on Thanksgiving.”

“Oh please – you know I spent the day browsing the sales on Amazon. Made myself a turkey sandwich.” She could practically hear the smile in his words as he added, “Spoke to Alfor though. Tell me, did you make good on your plans to bring this new man of yours to Friday brunch?”

“I did.” She tackled the next flight of stairs with a spring in her step despite her aching feet. “And it went spectacularly, thank you very much.”

“Old Alfor didn’t chase him across the lawn with a machete, eh? That’s a good sign?”

“He did insist on telling some of his more embarrassing baby stories,” she sighed. “He stopped just short of breaking out the photo albums.”

Coran cackled delightedly. “And I’m sure this Lotor fellow enjoyed every second of them! I trust it wasn’t enough to scare him away at least.”

She made it up the stairs and glanced at Lotor’s door. A Friday night after an exhausting week…a good movie curled up on his couch seemed like the perfect way to unwind. And maybe if she got very lucky a little more would come of it…

But it could wait until after she finished talking to Coran. That certainly wasn’t something he needed to be privy to. So she unlocked her own door and kicked off her shoes, leaving them on her welcome mat. “So far,” she said, “He hasn’t gone running for the hills.”

“You know, I’d very much like to meet him.”

That made her pause as she dropped her purse on the kitchen counter. “I…’d like that too, actually.”
Maybe it could wait until after the holidays. Until both of them had had the chance to decompress. Another round meet the parents shenanigans might just be enough to send him running for those hills she’d mentioned.

And yet…

“I think he would like it just as much,” she found herself saying. “He…doesn’t seem to have much family of his own. None that he’s on good terms with at least. I think…I think he really liked joining in on our traditions.” She smiled as she lowered herself onto her sofa, pulling out her hair tie and leaving it on the coffee table beside the others from earlier that week. “He seemed really happy.”

“Who wouldn’t be happy to spend a holiday with you and Alfor?” Coran chuckled. “You get your hospitable nature from him, you know.”

She couldn’t help but snort. “Hospitable? That’s one word for it I guess…”

“Well, your cookies are miles above his, sure. But yes…yes, I’d like to meet this young man! Alfor said you seem positively enamored.”

Better than smitten, at least. But it still made her cheeks turn rosy. “I…I think I am.”

“All the more reason for me to meet him! Alfor got his chance – now I think it’s only fair for me to get the opportunity to really see what makes him tick.”

“No interrogations,” she insisted.

“I never said anything about interrogating anybody…”

But his tone hardly convinced her. She could practically hear him avoiding her gaze, even over the phone.

“What about Christmas?” he added, and Allura’s finger froze where it had been twirling in her own hair, tugging painfully on her scalp. “I have a chunk of time off. Need to use those vacation days while the getting is good, and I’ve been wanting to come visit you now that you’re all settled!”

“Ch-christmas?”

“Don’t you worry, I can get a hotel. Won’t intrude on your privacy if you and this new man of yours want a little…er…space.”

Now her face felt hot enough to keep off the draft from the poorly sealed living room window. “C-Coran!”

“What? It’s 2018! I’m trying to be forward thinking-“

“That’s not – that’s not what I-“ She stretched out on her sofa, head resting on the armrest as she hid her face in a throw pillow. “It’s not a problem. Really.”

She wished it was a little more of a problem at times. But that was besides the point.

“So…what do you say?” Coran offered. “I could come up a few days before Christmas…stay until the day after or so. I’ll treat you to a nice Christmas Eve dinner! Oh – maybe we can go to that Christmas Town place I’ve heard so much about! I hear it’s absolutely spectacular!”

It did make her smile, thinking about having Coran with her for a part of the holiday season. She’d been more than prepared to have it be a quiet affair. In fact- “I haven’t even bought a tree.”
“I have a spare! Perfect size for a corner in your apartment!”

She chuckled. “You have a spare?”

“Well, it’s an artificial thing. But at least it’s not one of those tacky pink monstrosities. Oh, we could decorate it together! Just like we used to when you were just a little thing! Though I suppose you won’t need anyone lifting you up to put the star on top anymore…”

She swore she heard him getting teary-eyed as she spoke, and she couldn’t wipe a warm grin from her face. “Sounds perfect,” she finally said. “I…I’d like that. I really would. Just as long as you promise no interrogations.”

“Cross my heart!”

“And no thinly veiled threats about what you’ll do if he breaks my heart.”

“Double-cross my heart! You have my word, Allura.”

“Perfect.”

“Now go put your feet up and have a nice cup of tea – you sound like you need it.”

She did, more than she’d realized before she’d sat down. Now that she had, she didn’t really want to get up again. In fact, ordering pizza and becoming one with her own sofa was starting to sound more tempting by the second. But there was something a bit more tempting. Or rather someone.

Tea and Netflix were a good way to unwind. A good healthy makeout session was miles better.

Lotor sat by his open window, watching smoke drift out onto the chilly breeze. It was oddly satisfying, seeing it swirl and dissipate in the glow of the streetlight. Beautiful, almost. Even poetic.

Maybe that was just the pot talking. It was helping about as much as he’d hoped.

“Dude,” came Zethrid’s voice from below as she poked her head out and glanced up at him. “How bad is your writers’ block that you’re hotboxing your own apartment.”

“It’s not hotboxing if I have my window open,” he told her with an easy grin, bringing the joint to his lips again. “Sorry about the smell. I didn’t have the patience for edibles.”

“Why am I not surprised?” She leaned on her palm. “Does it really help?”

“Write drunk, edit sober, my dear,” he said. “Or comfortably stoned as the case may be.”

“Write drunk, edit comfortably stoned?”

He couldn’t help but giggle. “You know what I mean.”

Zethrid pulled her head back in with a grunt, and a moment later a soft rap on his door pulled his attention away. He knew that knock. It made his heart stutter as he pressed the end of his joint against the windowsill and reached over to turn on his desk fan. “It’s open.”

Allura was all smiles, practically swimming in her sweatshirt as she let herself in. “You know,” she said, “For all the grief you give me about leaving my door unlocked, you sure don’t seem too paranoid about burglars yourself.”
“Are you here to steal my stereo?”

“Maybe.” He couldn’t hold in a loud snort, and a moment later Allura’s brow furrowed. “Why is your window open? It’s December.”

“I wanted some air.”

She sniffed. “Is that…are you…do I smell pot?”

Seemed his desk fan hadn’t gotten rid of the lingering scent as much as he’d hoped. He sucked in his lips, anxiety cinching in his chest. “Ah…”

But then she sat down across from him with a heavy sigh, her legs brushing his under his kitchen table. “Would you mind if I…”

He blinked at her. “Oh! You…”

“Long week.”

Wordlessly, he handed her the smoldering joint, the knot in the pit of his stomach unclenching as he did. “Be my guest.”

Allura took it with a smile of gratitude, holding it between her lips as he reached for the lighter and lit it with a flick of his thumb. She watched the flame quiver in the breeze for a moment as she leaned forward and let him hold it up to the tip as she sucked in.

She leaned back, eyes slipping closed, and a few moments later she let out a long exhale. A neat wisp of smoke escaped from her lips, the joint pinched neatly between her fingers over the windowsill. Lotor couldn’t pull his eyes away, transfixed by the way the smoke danced around her eyelashes, the glint of firelight reflecting off her lip gloss. He swallowed.

Then she coughed.

It turned into a laugh as she handed the joint to him again. “God, I haven’t done that since college.”

“To be honest, it’s not often I indulge in it.”

“I’m not going to judge you-“

“I know,” he said with a smile. Well, now he knew. “Sometimes I just need a little help getting the ideas flowing, and I prefer not to drink alone. Do you think that makes me a cliché?”

“That depends – does it work?”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t not work.” He reveled in the sound of her giggling at that. “Tell me about your day.”

Her laugh turned into a groan. “My day was just the tip of the ice burg. Don’t get me wrong – I like my job. But this whole week feels like it’s been dragging on forever, and I can barely stand it.” Her nails tapped against the table. “It feels like I’m spending all my time putting out fires. I’ve had at least one angry phone call to contend with every day this week. And-“

A flush crept over her nose.

“And…well…I might have some company coming for Christmas.”
His brow arched. “Company?”

“My old friend Coran. I just got off the phone with him…” She smiled. “He wants to see Christmas Town.”

“Christmas Town?”

“It sounded nice. And he wants to meet you.” She grimaced, looking sympathetic. “I know I just dragged you to meet my dad-“

“You didn’t drag me anywhere,” Lotor insisted, letting his thumb brush over her wrist. “I like meeting your family, remember?”

“Yeah…and if you make half as good an impression on Coran as you did on my father, they’ll probably want to adopt you before New Year’s.”

He chuckled. “Do you think it’ll be hard?”

“Wooing Coran, you mean?”

“Well, I certainly didn’t plan on wooing anyone-“

“He’ll adore you.” Her hand turned in his grasp, her fingers interlacing with hers, and she leaned across the table. Her eyes were half-lidded and adorably glazed over, a warm smile on her lips and a flush on her cheeks. “I just know it. But for now, if you wouldn’t mind, I’d rather spend my Friday night half-watching something on Netflix while you distract me from the plot.”

Well, if a distraction was what she wanted…

He extinguished the joint again and slid the window shut. “I’ll get out the extra blankets.”

“Bless you.”

While Allura made herself at home on his couch and got to work searching for his TV remote in the couch cushions, he threw a bag of popcorn in the microwave and tossed her an armful of fuzzy fleece blankets. At least the heat was back on, so a little draft was all they had to contend with. But she buried herself in the blankets like she was sitting in the middle of the Arctic tundra the moment she got her hands on them.

“Brooklyn Nine-Nine?” she offered.

She had already gotten it cued up by the time he sat down, setting the bowl of popcorn on the table while he inelegantly shoved a handful of it into his mouth. “Perfect.”

She pulled him in close. Her smile was an easy and playful one, and while the title music played, she rested her hands on his hips. “Still willing to distract me for a while?”

“More than willing.” He leaned in for an unhurried kiss. “Eager.”

She answered with just a hum and a sigh against his mouth. It tickled his lip and warmed him from his stomach down to his toes as he cupped her jaw in his hands. They kissed lazily, the TV already forgotten by the time she wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

Maybe it was the mellowing buzz of THC in his brain making him brave, or maybe it was the deliberate ease with which Allura pulled his body closer to her own, but Lotor was the one to press further. He let his tongue dart out against her bottom lip, making her giggle brightly when she pulled
in another breath, her fingers curling against the nape of his neck.

“You’re getting good at that,” she said a few moments later, flushed and breathless.

“Mm?”

“Distracting me.” She smiled, gazing at him through half-lidded eyes. “You really are a quick learner, you know that?”

“I try.”

She let out a quiet little contented moan, her words muffled against his lips as she added, “I could do this all night.” She tugged him closer, his chest flush against her body as his hands wandered lower – down over her ribs. “Could kiss you for hours…”

His heart stuttered in his chest, and he swallowed. Yes, he was feeling very brave indeed.

“And…if I wanted…a bit more?”

He let the question end there. Let it hang in the air between them. The anxiety curling in his chest was there, yes, but muted. Whether it was thanks to the pot or Allura, he didn’t know and didn’t particularly care.

She blinked at him, the words connecting in her mind before his eyes. “You…you want…”

“I’ve been wanting to try something,” he blurted. “Something a bit more…” He bit down on his lip. “If you’d let me-“

“Yes.” The word burst out of her like it had a mind of its own, and she nodded eagerly. “Yes, yes I’d love to.”

“You’re sure?” He spared a glance over at the window. “I know we’re a bit-“

She giggled. “What, stoned? I don’t know about you, but I still have my wits about me. As much as I’d like to anyway.” Her thumb traced along its jaw, leaving a bright, hot flush in its wake. “Tell me what you want. Please.”

Lotor let out a breath, his eyes slipping closed as his nose brushed against hers. He could feel his lips brush against hers as he quietly answered, “I want to make you come again.”

She swallowed – he could see it bobbing in her throat. She nodded again, letting his hair slid through her fingers. “Yes,” she said. “Yes, please.”

“I thought…with my hands…if that’s-“

“Absolutely.”

It sounded more like a growl than anything else. It made something tight and hot coil in the pit of his stomach. And before he knew it, her hands were tracing down the length of his arms, her fingers curling around his wrists and-

-pressing his hands against the hem of her leggings.

That was…a new feeling.

“Go ahead,” she whispered, coaxing him along with a gentle tug. She lifted her lips off the cushion,
her abdominal muscles flexing against his knuckles.

He hooked his fingers under the elastic, sliding it down over her hip bones, revealing a flash of pink and white. Allura let out a giggle. “Promise not to judge me.”

“Judge you?”

Her eyes darted downward, and he followed her gaze until he noticed-

“Polka dots?”

She pouted. “It’s laundry day.”

He couldn’t help but laugh, leaning in to press a kiss to her nose. “I like them.”

The smile on her face calmed him just enough to stop his hands from shaking as she guided his wrist back to her hips. “Here,” she said, pressing her hand overtop of his own and sliding it past the waistband of her underwear.

Lotor buried his nose in the crook of her neck, letting her lead, letting her push him where she needed him. Curly hair tickled his fingertips, then his fingers met skin, and then…warm – hot – slick flesh. Allura shivered.

Oh.

His head spun, and it didn’t have a thing to do with the pot.

“Good?” she asked him, her eyes still lightly closed and her face as pink as those polka dots.

He nodded. “Mhm…”

Her hand was a constant warm pressure against his knuckles, her knees falling to either side to let him sink further against her body. She guided his fingers across her clit-

“There,” she said on a shuddering breath.

Her meaning was clear. More than clear. He curled his fingers against her, and her teeth caught her lip as her brow furrowed. Slowly, her hand pulled away from his, finding a new home on the nape of his neck. Her hips rolled up against him, and something deep and possessive welled up in his chest. Pulsing and urging him forward.

Desperate to see her come again.

It was easy to find a rhythm, to lose himself in the feeling of her shuddering gasps against his neck, the sound of her quiet moans as her fingers tugged on the hairs on the back of his neck. Surprisingly easy. For so long he’d been worrying about doing it right, knowing exactly how to bring her all the pleasure she deserved, but with her guiding him exactly where she wanted him to go, well…

He’d always been good at finding his way when someone pointed him in the right direction.

He kissed along the column of her neck, along the curve of her jaw, and she let out a shuddering sigh as she rocked against his hand. The sound of it got caught in her throat a moment later, forming into a rough, half-coherent word: “L-Lotor…”

“Mm?”
“Could you – \textit{nh} – c-could…you…”

When words seemed to fail her, she reached down between her legs again and shoved her own hand overtop of his once more. Gently, she pressed his fingers back until they brushed against her smaller inner folds and then against-

She met his eye, as the pad of his middle finger pressed up against her entrance. “Are you sure?” he asked. She nodded.

He pushed inside.

Slowly at first, almost unable to believe the slickness of it – the \textit{heat} – the way her muscles \textit{clenched} around his knuckles. He gasped.

“How can…another…”

His ring finger slid in beside his middle easily, and for a fleeting moment the only thing to cross his mind how relieved he was that he had just filed his nails.

It wasn’t until Allura laughed that he realized he’d said as much out loud.

“I’m \textit{very} glad you did too,” she told him, and her chuckle dissolved into a contented little sigh. She pulled her hand back, and she felt her knuckles brush his wrist as her own fingers settled on her clit. She lifted her other hand into his field of vision, crooking her fingers in an unmistakable \textit{come hither} motion. “Like that.”

He mimicked it, and Allura let her neck stretch backward against the armrest. He took the opportunity – leaning in and pressing a sloppy kiss on the underside of her jaw and repeating the motion of his fingers. Carefully. Decisively.

Her free arm wrapped around his shoulders as she started to stroke herself. “\textit{Yes}…”

He could feel the word reverberate in her throat, buzzing against his lips – just as he could feel her inner muscles squeezing encouragingly down on his knuckles. And when he tilted his wrist and pressed his fingers inside just a \textit{bit} more her tone shifted. Deeper. More guttural. “\textit{O-oh, yes}.”

He was hard in his pants. Painfully so. But he barely cared. He barely noticed. His attention was focused on her – on the way she rolled her hips up to meet him, the way her breath shuddered on its way out of her, the way her nails scraped against his shoulder blade when he increased his pace. And when her own strokes became more erratic, more desperate, her brow pinching and her face flushing deep crimson, his entire body tensed in anticipation. Like it knew what was coming.

“Are you close?” he heard himself say.

Instead of answering, Allura insisted, her voice strained and rough and \textit{beautiful}, “\textit{Don’t stop}…”

He didn’t.

A moment or two later – though it seemed to stretch on forever – her eyes screwed shut and her mouth hung open in a wide and exquisite \textit{O}. He could \textit{feel} her orgasm before the moan made its way out of her; it rippled and clenched and throbbed around his fingers, slick and hot and \textit{perfect}, and all he could do was stare in amazement as Allura let it take her. Ecstasy flooded across her face, driving her fingernails against his skin and pulling his name from her throat on a breathless gasp.

She panted as she came down, the pulsing around his knuckles slowly weakening, and her hand
went slack under her elastic waistband. She stretched out her fingers to brush against his wrist in an unspoken request: Enough.

Gently, he pulled his hand out of her pants and grinned. “That was…”

She let out a sigh as her entire body sank back against the blankets. Finally she opened her eyes, beaming up at him. Glowing. “Awesome,” she told him.

Pride swelled in his chest as he looked down at her – smiling, flushed, sated. Thanks to him. It made his heart soar in a way he’d never felt before. A deep, almost primal sense of accomplishment that urged him forward to kiss her.

That was when she shifted, her thigh pressing between his legs, and he broke the kiss with a rough – and wholly involuntary – moan. But it only made Allura laugh brightly against his jaw.

“I still need to return the favor,” she whispered. “I’d still like to. If you’d let me.”

Biting his lip, Lotor nodded. Allura perked up, the glint in her eye gleaming through the haze of afterglow.

“Yes?” she prompted, grinning.

His voice was embarrassingly rough. “Yes.”

She licked her lips. “There is…there’s one thing I’ve been wanting to try.” As she spoke she pushed him back until their positions were reversed, his back against the armrest with her body resting on top of his chest. His heart thumped in his chest. “Just…tell me if it’s too much okay?”

Again, he nodded, and her lips pressed against his jaw, his neck, his collarbone. Her tongue darted out against his flushed skin, teeth grazing against him and sending a shiver down his spine. And then she was kissing along his chest, over his stomach, scooting down the cushions until she was-

Between his legs.

Staring up at him.

Her hands tickled his stomach just above his waistband as she met his eye. “Well?” she said, expectantly. “Want me to…”

“Y-yes.”

His blood was like thunder in his ears, the heat in his belly overwhelming. Even his loose sweatpants were so tight he could hardly stand it. And there she was, leaning down, inches from his crotch. When she tugged his waistband down, he could feel her breath against his skin, her knuckles brushing over his pubic bone, one hand sliding inside – fingers wrapping around him, giving him a squeeze, thumb brushing his slit, and-

His orgasm surged through him before he could stop it, before he could warn her, and her name getting lost halfway out of his throat and turning into nothing but a breathless moan. And when he came down, when he opened his eyes again, a little owlishly, she was smiling at him.

His face blazed hot. “Ah…s-sorry…”

She crawled up over his chest and muffled a laugh against his lips. “It’s okay,” she giggled. “Really, it’s okay.”
“I… I don’t normally—“

Her palm pressed against his cheek. “It’s okay,” she said again. And a moment later, her lips found that perfect little spot beneath his ear as her palm traced a soothing path along his sternum. “You know… you’re gorgeous when you come.”

He let out a breath, relaxing back against the pillows and letting her rest her head in the crook of his neck. “You too,” he quietly replied.

Though it felt like the understatement of the century.

“Can I stay here tonight?” she asked, her voice muffled and sleepy.

He leaned down to press a kiss to the crown of her head. “Of course.”

She hummed in contentment, but then—

“Ah… but first I…” She glanced up at him, and his blush returned again, even stronger than before. Lotor swallowed as he said, “I um… I need to take a shower.”

Her face melted into a bright and familiar smile. “I’ll be here when you’re done then.” She forced down another laugh. “Though… that popcorn might not be.”

As Lotor stood up on shaky legs, pressing one last kiss to her waiting lips, he figured he could handle that.
Lotor watched as Allura flitted back and forth across her living room. To the kitchen, then to the bathroom, then into her bedroom and back again – like a nervous little bird.

And he’d thought he would be the anxious one.

“Are you planning on giving Coran a tour of your bedroom?” he asked her as he watched her straightening her comforter for the fourth time.

“You never know!” was her answer, breathless and exasperated as it was as she fluffed her pillows. Her shoulders slumped a moment later before she trudged back into the living room and flopped onto the sofa. “Probably not.”

That pout on her lips, the springy strand of hair hanging in front of her face…he couldn’t help but wrap an arm around her shoulder and press a kiss to her temple. “Your apartment is spotless. I swear you’d put even Dayak to shame. If you’re worried about your uncle judging you-”

“I’m not worried about Coran judging me,” she scoffed. “But this the first time I’ve had my own place, and between that and introducing him to you…” Her expression melted into a warm, almost apologetic smile. “How am I more anxious than you are? First meeting my father and now this – I thought you’d be a nervous wreck.”

He raised a brow her way. “Maybe I still have a little pot in my system.”

“Stop,” she cackled. “Really, I’m glad you’re so cool and collected about this.”

“Am I?”

“You sure seem like it. Thank God. With all the weird little…nesting urges, I probably would have driven myself crazy by now if you weren’t.”

“Nesting urges?” He glanced around the apartment – the immaculately dusted shelves, swept kitchen, organized cabinets. She’d even de-greased the stove and wiped off the window sills. Lotor didn’t think he’d ever touched his own window sills. “Is that what all this is?”

“I guess.” She eyed him closely, her brow pinching. “And speaking of that…your hair is a mess.”

Before he had the chance to ask what that was about, she was reaching for him and combing her fingers through it, smoothing it back from his face. And oh – her nails did feel awfully nice against his scalp. Surprisingly so. He let his eyes slip closed.

She giggled as she pulled her hands away again all too soon. “Better,” she said.

“Mhm.”
And then one knock on the door later, Allura was on her feet again and frantically pulling him up too. “That’s him!” she insisted. “That’s him, that’s him, that’s him!” She rushed past Lotor, leaving him reeling as she threw open the front door. “Coran!”

“There you are!” the man at the door chimed as Allura laughed brightly against the fluffy scarf wrapped around his neck. It was almost the same color as the fiery red mustache under his nose – just a few shades darker and just as frayed. “Sorry I’m late – traffic was a nightmare. Backup on the sixty-four for so many miles that my blasted GPS re-routed me! Twice!”

Lotor hovered by the sofa as Coran stepped inside and perched his sunglasses on top of his head. His hand itched. Should he offer it to shake? Introduce himself? Coran barely seemed to notice him, turning a full three hundred and sixty degrees on his heel and whistling appraisingly. “My my, you’ve done some lovely things with the place, hm? You certainly didn’t get your eye for decorating from your father, that much is for sure. Poor man wouldn’t know feng shui if it bit him in the-“

Oh, now Coran met his eye. Lotor’s heart was thudding so hard he felt it in his throat as he wiped his hand on his jeans and extended it. Sweaty palms…had to nip that in the bud.

“Oh,” Coran breathed. “Is this-“

“Lotor,” both he and Allura answered in unison. Her hand was a warm and soothing presence on his arm a moment later.

“This is Lotor,” Allura breathed, and he could hear the smile in her voice even with his eyes fixed on Coran’s face. “The ah…the one I’ve been…telling you about?”

Coran was studying him, like he was studying produce in the grocery store for bruises. Leaning close, eyes narrowed, fingers twisting the edge of his mustache. Lotor swallowed. “Yes…” Coran hummed. “Yes, I see…this is the man, eh? The man with the jacket.”

Lotor blinked at him. “Man…with the…“

“So you’ve been dating Allura, have you?” Coran stepped even closer, hands planted on his hips. He was close enough that Lotor could smell his toothpaste on his breath. Close enough that Lotor felt like a lobster on display in a seafood restaurant. “I’ve heard plenty about you. Plenty indeed.”

Allura let out a sigh. “Coran-“

“Tell me, did you two really get into a bar fight? Allura tells me you were sporting quite the shiner after.”

Her sigh turned into a groan. “Coran!”

“It…wasn’t quite a bar fight,” Lotor relented. Though the black eye had been very real. And very sore. “And she fought much more than I did.”

That second part was barely audible. He hardly even realized he’d said it. But the moment he met Coran’s eye again he watched the man throw his head back and laugh. “I bet!” he sang. “Yes, I bet she did! Well it’s nice to meet you Lotor. Very nice indeed.” He finally reached out and took Lotor’s hand and shook it firmly, his other palm pressed against Lotor’s knuckles. “No need to be intimidated anyway. It’s not like I’m her father. And if Alfor didn’t bury you in the back yard-“

“Coran, for Pete’s sake!” Allura insisted, giggling as she did. “Nobody is burying anybody. Can we please be civil?”
“Civil is my middle name!” Coran twirled his mustache with a flourish and shot Lotor a wide grin. “Well, it’s actually Wimbleton, but that’s close enough!” By the time Coran released his hand again, Lotor felt like his joints were creaking as he stretched out his fingers. Seemed this man was stronger than he let on. “Quiet one, aren’t you?”

“Quiet?”

“Suppose that’s not a bad thing,” Coran was quick to add. “Introspective – that’s the word I’m looking for. Though I wouldn’t expect anything else from a writer. And a sci-fi writer no less!”

Lotor shot a glance Allura’s way and saw a blush spreading across her cheeks. Oh God…she hadn’t told him. That was the last thing he needed. It wouldn’t do his blood pressure any good.

“Aliens, faraway planets, intergalactic war…I’d love to pick your brain sometime! Though I’m guessing Allura’s already grilled you on your opinions of the Star Trek reboots. I could never keep up with those conversations when they came up…always left me in the dust.”

“D-do you have any bags?” Allura blurted, and Coran’s face whipped toward her. Thank goodness for her. “Anything we could help you bring up here?”

Coran shook his head and gave her a dismissive little wave. “No, no. I told you, I’m staying in a hotel down the road. Didn’t want to ah…intrude or anything.” Lotor didn’t very much like the way Coran cleared his throat after he said that. It sounded like he was trying not to think about…well…the very things that made a part of Lotor very happy he was staying in a hotel and not on Allura’s couch. Surrounded by paper thin walls.

He was cheery and enthusiastic as he pulled off his scarf and coat and laid them on the back of the sofa. “Anyway! Your place is looking fantastic. I want the grand tour! And you—” He turned to Lotor again. “Remind me to ask you about those books of yours. If you’re as talented as Allura says you are then I’m sure it’ll lead to some really riveting conversation!”

God, Lotor hoped not.

“R-right…I’d love that,” he said instead, and Coran’s face lit up with a wide, warm grin.

The second Allura stepped out of the building she couldn’t get into the car fast enough. The twenty feet between the steps down to the sidewalk and Coran’s car idling at the curb were chilly, breezy Hell, and she threw herself into the back seat with a sigh. “Thank God you already have the heat on.”

“Er…you know we’re going to be walking around the park outdoors right?” Lotor hazarded as he slid in beside her. “Are you sure you’ll be okay after dark?”

“I’ll be fine. That’s why I have this—” She unfolded the coat slung over her arms, getting lost in the feeling of running her fingers along the fleece lining the inside. “Figured I’d just put it on once we got to the park since Coran always keeps the heat cranked up to eleven when he’s driving—”

“I’ve never heard you complain!” Coran huffed.

“I’m not complaining! Besides, I have wool socks on too. I’ll be perfectly fine.” She tugged Lotor closer the first chance she got. After all, she was banking on his body heat to keep her warm if all else failed. “And isn’t the Christmas spirit supposed to warm me from the inside out or something?”

Coran grinned at her in the rearview mirror. “That’s the spirit!”
Lotor’s fingers wrapped around her hand as he shot her a knowing little smile of his own. “Are you trying to use me as your personal space heater again?”

“Well you make such a good one…”

He was already fishing in his pocket as she spoke, and while Coran pulled away from the curb and made his way toward the highway, Lotor finally managed to get a small rectangular…something out of his pocket with his free hand. “Reminds me,” he said, “I figured I’d give you your Christmas present a little early.”

Her stomach flipped as she looked down at it. It was small, gray – a box of some sort. But no wrapping paper or bows to speak of, and his hands were strategically covering the letters and picture printed on the side. “Christmas present?”

“It’s ah…it’s not wrapped…”

“You got me a Christmas present?”

“Well the cold always seems to get the better of you-“ She couldn’t help but pout. “-so I figured I’d try and give you a…fighting chance? For today especially. Frostbite doesn’t exactly mix well with all that Christmas spirit.”

“Not nearly cold enough for frostbite,” Coran insisted. “I spent a year in Greenland in my younger days. Now that’s cold-“

“Tell that to my fingers,” Allura huffed, and she beamed at Lotor, eying the present greedily. “Come on, tell me – what is it?”

Instead of answering, he just handed it to her, and for a half a second – less than that even – her heart nearly stopped because she swore the picture on the front looked like some kind of sleek purple vibrator. And with Coran in the car of all times. But then she saw the name above the picture: “Warm Welcome” Portable Electric Hand Warmer.

She could have kissed the life out of him right then and there.

“I already charged it,” Lotor told her, opening the top and dropping the bean-shaped device into her waiting palm. It fit there comfortably, the curving against her fingers as she curled them around it. “Figured you might need it for today. Can’t say much for the rest of you, but at least you won’t lose any fingers.”

Forget kissing him – she could marry him for this.

“And I didn’t even get you anything,” she whimpered as she stared at it like it was made of gold. It may as well have been. But gold wouldn’t keep her hands half as warm. “Not even a pair of gloves or a…a fuzzy set of socks or anything-“

“You could always win me a prize at the game corner,” he offered, and even if it sounded like a joke, Allura decided to make it her mission to find the biggest teddy bear in the place and bring it home as thanks. Nothing less would do.

The sun was already getting ready to set as they pulled up to the sprawling parking lot, and the lights in the far-off park cast a warm golden glow against the pink-purple backdrop behind it. It was enough to make Allura’s chest swell with delight as she scurried out of the car and zipped up her winter coat, her new hand warmer tucked safely in her pocket. “Oh, look at it,” she sighed. “It looks amazing even from here!” She spun around to smile at Lotor, who was taking way too long to get
out of the car already. “Have you been here before?”

“To Christmas Town?” he asked. “Ah...no. Ezor tried to drag me last year, but I wasn’t...well I’m not much of a Christmas person. Usually.”

And yet he’d given her a Christmas present on the car ride here. That didn’t seem like something a run-of-the-mill Grinch would do. No, there was a cheerful Cindy-Lou Who hiding somewhere in there. She reached for his hand, and not just to keep her own warm. “Well you’re going to be one today. Come on – I heard there are ten million lights up around this park and I intend to see each and every one of them.”

“Not much of a Christmas person, eh?” Coran mused as they walked. “Well consider yourself lucky – I’m a Christmas expert!” He glanced up at the wide arching entryway of the park, cutting through the twilight on the other end of the parking lot and studded with hundreds of glittering white and pink lights. “Maybe not a ten-million-lights expert, but I can decorate a tree with the best of them.”

And blow fuses with the best of them too. She’d spent enough holiday nights helping him fumble around in the dark for the breaker box to know that. And to know that Coran knew a downright impressive library of profanities in at least three languages.

Her breath puffed white in front of her lips as they stepped through the arching entryway, and she clutched her shiny new handwarmer between her palms and switched it on. “I love this already,” she said, grinning back at Lotor. “It might be even better than your hands at keeping my fingers warm.”

“Looks like you cheated yourself out of hand-holing duty, my boy,” Coran chuckled.

Lotor rose a brow, and she swore she heard the edge of a laugh rumbling in his chest. “You think?”

But she didn’t hear anything else – her attention was ripped away as soon as they rounded the corner and she was face to face with the largest Christmas tree she had ever seen. Larger than the ones Coran had always insisted on cramming under his ten-foot ceilings or the ones she and her father had gone to cut down every winter. It was easily forty feet tall, towering over them and glimmering with silver lights that stood out like stars against the quickly darkening sky. And at the top, a star that had to be at least as large as she was.

“Quite the tree,” Coran breathed with a soft whistle. “Quite. The. Tree.” And then his wistful little smile melted into something warmer, more exuberant. “I’ve got a perfect idea for a Christmas card! Both of you – get in here!”

“Get in – wah!” He was already pulling Lotor in – hard enough to make him nearly stumble right into that tree – and draping an arm around his shoulders. He pulled Allura close too, beaming with the tree lighting up his face.

“I’ve been upping my selfie game, as the kids are saying nowadays!” He fished his phone out of his pocket. “That...is the phrase right?”

She caught Lotor’s eye – well as much as she could with Coran’s head in the way – and the bewildered look on his face was so ridiculous that she couldn’t help but laugh. And it seemed contagious, because Lotor did too, his cheeks turning rosy. Right as Coran snapped the picture.

She was pretty sure he’d caught her with her eyes closed, but Coran was grinning as he stepped out from between them. “That’s a lovely little shot,” he mused, and Allura could see him smiling out of the corner of her eye.

But Lotor’s smile held her attention a little tighter. Something Coran seemed to notice.
“Don’t move,” he said.

Allura let out a laugh. “Coran-“

“Don’t move!” He spun on his heel, phone at the ready. “No, scratch that – move closer. The two of you. This tree, all the lights…it’s downright romantic, don’t you think?”

A hint of pink crept across Lotor’s cheeks, only getting darker when she reached for his hand. Sure, it wasn’t as warm as her hand warmer was, but it was warm enough. “I’ve never done a Christmas card before,” she said with a smile as she pulled him close. “Have you?”

“Never.”

There was a glint in his eye – she only caught it for a second before he pressed a hand on the small of her back and dipped her backwards. Like something out of an old movie. Well, not quite as graceful, considering the way she flailed in his arms when she felt herself tipping. And the undignified snort Lotor let out in response.

Yes, not nearly as picturesque as those old movies. But a thousand times better once Lotor leaned down to kiss her.

“What a charmer!” Coran cackled, red in the face and grinning as he snapped another picture. At least ten of them for good measure. “Okay, okay – don’t drop her now. Don’t want to end this night for a trip to the doctor for a sprained ankle or a busted tailbone.”

She didn’t care about or ankle or her tailbone or anything else as she stared up at Lotor. At those soft, clear eyes of his. Hair framing his face lit up silver by the Christmas tree. And a smile like THC – a warm, soothing anesthetic.

Her head spun as he pulled her up again, hands lingering on her ribs for just a moment longer than they needed to right her. She wished they would linger even longer.

Preferably without Coran standing there taking pictures.

But she could focus on that later.

For now she wanted three things: hot chocolate, a candied apple, and a trip on the skyride to see the lights from above. And judging from the smell of cocoa wafting from the air, one of those things was easily within reach right this second. Perfect. But just as she turned-

“Six bucks for a mocha? What is this, Disneyworld?”

“I have to save my money for the game corner.” She craned her neck, looking around the wide shimmering base of the tree just in time to see Pidge grinning, a steaming paper cup between her hands as Lance dug through his wallet and handed a ten to the cashier. “You just got your Christmas bonus at work. You can float that, right?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Lance was doing his best to look inconvenienced, but there was a smile tugging on the corners of his mouth. “But the first thing you win, I’m picking your prize.”

“Deal.” She took a healthy gulp of her mocha, and as she did she paused and tugged on Lance’s jacket hard enough to make him drop his change. “Hey!” she said with a wide grin. “Allura! That’s Allura!”

“Huh?” Lance hastily stuffed a handful of singles into his pocket.
“Come on, slowpoke.” Pidge laughed brightly, chocolate dripping over her fingers as she rushed over with Lance close behind. “And Lotor too! We’re um…we’re not interrupting a date, are we? That Christmas tree is like…a prime date location.”

“Is that old guy on the date too?” Lance asked – quietly enough that it sounded like he was trying to be discreet. Trying and failing.

Coran huffed. “Old guy?”

Failing spectacularly.

Lance’s face was a lovely vibrant red a second later. “O-oh…um…I…”

“Coran, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t rough up my friends before they have a chance to see all the lights,” Allura sighed.

That mustache was caught between his fingers again, a thoughtful furrow in his brow. “Friends, eh?”

“L-Lance,” Lance said, looking sheepish as he held out a hand, his other shoved in his pocket.

“And I’m Pidge,” the other said with a giggle. “Please don’t kill him. He’s my ride home.”

“We could give you a ride home if Coran decided to kill him,” Lotor offered, and Lance pouted.

“Why you gotta do me like that?”

“What are you two doing here?” Allura had to ask. She couldn’t help but look around for Hunk, or Keith, or Shiro. Did the park allow dogs in? Would she have to keep a lookout for an over-eager German shepherd?

But then she had a thought – one that made her cheeks flush as she looked at the two of them. Pidge and Lance. Here together. Alone. She smiled. “Oh – are…are you two…”

Pidge seemed to see the end of that sentence coming before she even said it, judging from how blazing hot her face looked a second later. “N-no! No no no – we’re not…we aren’t…” She laughed, a little hysterically. “We’re not like…it’s not like that. Not together together.”

Funny, Allura hadn’t even gotten the chance to ask if they were.

“Wait-“ Now Lance’s face was cherry red too. Almost redder than Pidge’s was. “Wait, you think we’re-“

“It’s a friend thing!” Pidge insisted. Loudly. “It’s – it’s tradition! All of us! It’s usually more than…than just us two…” She let out a sigh. “It’s been all of us the last three years running, but…”

“Hunk tried to make some weird recipe he found on a message board somewhere and slept on his bathroom floor last night,” Lance added, frowning. Allura couldn’t help but wince in sympathy. “And Keith caught the flu. So of course Shiro is home taking care of him. Which is sort of romantic and sweet in a way.”

“If you think plagues are romantic.” Pidge grimaced. “Anyway, we’re the only survivors. So…instead of letting the tradition die…”

“Here you are,” Lotor finished.

Lance shrugged. “Yeah. Spending six dollars on mochas.”
“Worth it,” Pidge told him as she took another hearty sip.

“Anyway, I think the lady promised me a prize at the game corner in exchange for that coffee—“

Pidge never even looked up from her cup as she turned on her heel. “I said you could pick it. I never said you could keep it.”

“What?”

“See you guys!”

“Pidge, c’mon, you’re not even gonna win me a keychain?”

“Have fun on your date!”

Allura could barely contain the smile that stretched across her face as she turned to look at Lotor again, hands clasped in front of her chest. She could hardly stand it, the way her heart was swelling in her chest. “Did you see that?”

“The coffee is seriously six dollars?” Lotor mused. “That’s borderline extortion—“

Her shoulders slumped. “What? No, not the coffee.” But she was still getting that hot chocolate, regardless of price. “The two of them! Pidge and Lance! Did you see what was going on there?”

“Ah, yes…flu season is especially bad this year,” said Coran.

“No! Not the flu, and not the mocha! They’re clearly…pining!”

Lotor’s brow arched. “Pining?”

“Pining!” She grabbed his hands, bouncing excitedly. She couldn’t help it. Not when she felt like she was standing in the middle of a Lifetime movie. One of the good ones. “Come on, you’re a writer! You have to know what pining looks like! And you have to know at least a thing or two about matchmaking!”

“M-matchmaking?”

“Oh, I happen to be an expert when it comes to that,” Coran told her. “In fact, you have me to thank for the fact that you’re standing here, missy! If it weren’t for me you never would have been conceived.”

Allura’s nose wrinkled.

“Allura,” Lotor choked. “Are you really planning on—“

“Yes!”

“Pidge and Lance?”

“Yes!”

“Tonight? Here? Now?”

“Well…” She smiled up at him. Feeling like she was on top of the world. “First I want one of those overpriced drinks. And a candied apple. But after that…”
Lotor’s smile was a small one, but almost as warm as his hands. “Matchmaking?”

She nodded. “Matchmaking.”
Chapter Notes

Once again, sorry for the long wait for this chapter. A lot of things going on. But I hope y'all enjoy it. :)

With a candied apple in one hand and a steaming six dollar hot chocolate in the other, Allura led her merry band toward the game corner on a mission. For the first time that night she didn’t even notice the cold. No, she had other things on her mind. More important things. Starting with a plan.

She could see it now – Lance sweeping Pidge up in his arms, their eyes slipping closed as he leaned in for the kiss under the light of the Christmas tree. Bells chiming in the background. Onlookers cheering-

Well, maybe that was overkill. But she could dream.

First they had to start somewhere. And the most obvious starting point was easy to spot – Lance was eyeing the entrance to Verbolten while Pidge counted out a handful of dollar bills for the game corner token machine.

“We need to get them alone,” she mused, licking her lips and tasting the lingering caramel from her half-eaten candied apple. “Separated.”

“I thought the whole point of this endeavor was to get them together,” Lotor pointed out, and she shoved the rest of the apple into his waiting hands so that she could think properly without worrying about caramel getting all over her face and fingers.

“We have to talk to them don’t you think? Both of them. Alone. We can’t exactly just force them to delve into their feelings right here in the middle of the arcade. That would just be awkward for everyone.” A long sip of her hot chocolate gave her all the time she needed to form her next thought. “No…we should split them up. Give me a chance to talk to Pidge and give you the chance to have a good man-to-man chat with Lance-”

Lotor sputtered. “Me?”

“You and Coran! Between the two of you I’m sure you can get him to open up-“

“Leave it to us!” Coran bellowed, arm hanging around Lotor’s shoulders and making the latter wobble on his feet. “I’ve had plenty of years to perfect the art of a good heart-to-heart chat.”

“And how-“ Lotor wiped a drip of caramel onto his pants with a grimace before Allura took pity on him and took the apple back again. “-how do you suppose we should get them apart to have this chat in the first place?”

It was a good question. One Allura was still pondering. But she didn’t need to ponder it much longer – not after she caught a glimpse of the brightly lit sign over Lotor’s shoulder. The same one Lance had been staring at so longingly before. She grinned and said, “Verbolten.”

“Ver-wah?”
She stuck her apple in her teeth, grabbed Lotor by the shoulder with her free hand and turned him around until he couldn’t possibly miss it. “Ferfolbfm.”

“The…roller coaster.” He sounded less than ecstatic.

“It’s a thirty minute wait,” she told him. At least according to the comically oversized clock by the entrance. “That’s perfect. Thirty minutes with Lance in that line, and while you’re doing that I’ll have some quality girl time with Pidge!”

Lotor looked a little green. Maybe it was just the light from the Christmas tree. Or maybe the sound of excited and terrified screaming coming from the end of the roller coaster queue was getting to him. But Coran’s arm was around Lotor’s shoulders a moment later. “Buck up there, buddy!” he chimed. “I was quite the coaster connoisseur back in my younger days – rode the Cyclone at Coney Island on its semicentennial!”

Lotor grimaced. “Sounds…exciting.” One steadying breath later, he added, “We can get Lance into that line and you can tackle your…girl talk?”

Allura felt like her chest was about to burst. Damn, all the excitement was warming her up already. “Girl talk!” With one last healthy bite she dropped her caramel-spotted apple core into the nearest trash can and marched toward the game corner with her compatriots in tow.

Lance held a water pistol like it was his only defense against the end of the world, hands steady, eyes locked on the target ahead. He barely seemed to notice Pidge standing beside him. Barely, except for the tiny smile stretching across his lips.

“When I win,” he said, “I’m gonna get me that Piplup.”

Pidge scoffed, the blinking lights glinted off her glasses. “When I win, I’m taking home the Rowlet.”

“What on earth are they talking about?” Allura muttered.

“Pokemon,” Coran huffed. “Get with the times, my girl.”

She opened her mouth to insist that she knew what Pokemon were – thank you very much – but before she could say a word Lance and Pidge let out a simultaneous battle cry. It drowned out the obnoxious carnival music and the pop and bang of their guns as they shot down the targets dancing across the kiosk.

They had good aim. Scary good. And all too soon-

“Hell yeah!” Pidge shot her fist up into the air, grinning widely. “That Rowlet is mine!”

“All I let you win.”

“No you didn’t.” She stuck her tongue out in defiance as she hugged a plush tan and green owl to her chest. One of those…Rowlet things, Allura wondered? “You’re too proud to let anyone beat you at a carnival game. But that just makes my victory even sweeter.”

Allura glanced back toward the entrance to Verbolten, Still bustling with activity, still the linchpin of her plan…She gave Lotor a healthy nudge in the ribs and he stumbled forward with an undignified yelp. “Ah…Lance. Roller coaster?”

Smooth.
Lance stared at him. “Uh, Allura…is your boyfriend broken?”

“I’m not-“ Lotor pouted. “Verbolten.”

She swore Lance’s eyes lit up as bright as that tree. “Verbolten?”

But Pidge grimaced behind her new plushie, its plumage pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “Why the heck do you like those metal deathtraps anyway? All the screaming and rattling-“

“It’s part of the thrill,” Lance insisted. “But yeah, I get it…you guys go ahead. I’ll pass this time.”

“What? Lance, you don’t have to-“

“This whole Christmas Town thin is supposed to be about…you know, family and friendship and all that stuff. I’m not just gonna leave you standing around alone.”

There it was – her opening. “I’ll keep her company!” Allura announced. “You boys can go ride that…metal deathtrap. And Pidge and I can have some…some girl time!”

Pidge looked thoughtful. “We could check out those claw machines in the arcade. I got a bunch of tokens just for the occasion.” Her smile stretched across her face until she was beaming at them from behind that little round owl. “Lance can get his roller coaster fix and I’ll stay here experiencing just one G of force on my brain while I sink some money into those overpriced arcade games.”

Perfect. It was all coming together. She just hoped Lotor could manage not to lose his lunch on that metal deathtrap.

For good measure, she gave his hand a squeeze. “Sure you’re alright?” she whispered.

Lotor swallowed. “Fine.”

That was a lie.

“I can…handle one single roller coaster.”

She hoped that one wasn’t a lie. As Coran and Lance headed toward the roller coaster, she drew Lotor closer, pressing a kiss to his jaw and letting her lips brush against his skin as she spoke: “I’ll make it up to you. Later. When we’re at home. Alone.”

His eyebrows arched. “Oh. You ah…you don’t have to.” That flush on his cheeks looked much better than the ghostly pallor he’d been sporting ever since they’d first brought the roller coaster into her plan. “But I…I certainly wouldn’t say no…”

That was the truth. Her stomach flipped.

“Did you just…seduce your boyfriend into taking Lance on that roller coaster?”

Allura spun to face Pidge the moment Lotor had left to meet his fate, and she offered her a disarming smile. “Um…no?”

But Pidge laughed, tucking her owl plush under her arm and making a bee-line for the arcade. “You’re kinda transparent, you know that? Not that I mind or anything. But c’mon Allura, girl time? I’m not really a…girl time kinda girl, you know?”

“I just thought we could spend some time bonding.” She combed her fingers through her own hair. She couldn’t be that transparent. “Whether you want to think of it as girl time or…or just gender-neutral time-“
“Girl time’s fine. Honestly. As long as I’m not on a roller coaster.” She shivered. “I don’t know why the heck Lance likes those things.”

Another opening. Perfect.

“You and Lance…have to have more in common, though.” She leaned on the claw machine as Pidge studied her angle of attack. The picture of casual. “You know…video games? Or shooting targets?” She blinked. “Or…I don't know, birdwatching?”

Pidge let out a snort. “Birdwatching?”

“Or video games.”

She shrugged and knelt to drop a token into the coin slot. “Video games, yeah. That’s actually how we became friends…” She nudged the claw across their field of vision, steadying it above a fluffy purple dragon with a pair of beady black eyes. “Mario Kart…It really helped me decompress from all my classes.”

She swore her voice sounded…wistful. If she were more poetic she’d almost say *longing*. And as Pidge kept her eyes locked on the claw as it dropped down and gripped that creepy dead-eyed purple dragon, Allura caught a glimpse of her face and swore she looked like she was daydreaming.

She smiled.

“You must really care about him,” she said.

Pidge stared at her like a deer in headlights, the dragon dropping into the prize chute with a dull thud. She reached down to grab it, moving sluggishly, a deep frown etching its way into her face.

Well…that wasn’t the reaction Allura had been hoping for. It didn’t look like a grand epiphany at all.

“So that’s what you were going for with this…girl time, huh?” she said quietly.

Allura’s stomach tied itself up in a tight and uncomfortable knot. “I-I didn’t mean…I wasn’t trying to-“

“It’s okay,” Pidge sighed, and a melancholy little smile took the frown’s place. Allura preferred the frown, odd as that was. “I guess you’re not the only transparent one, huh?”

“Pidge…”

“Luckily Lance is pretty oblivious sometimes, you know? Comes in handy in this case.”

This wasn’t what she’d wanted from their *girl talk* at all. And the conversation didn’t fit into the loud, blaring, blinking arcade surroundings. The bells and alarms going off around them seemed almost intrusive, intent on drowning out any sort of deep conversation. “Pidge…I didn’t realize you were so…”

No, she couldn’t shrink away from this now. So what if they were standing in the middle of a brightly lit arcade surrounded by screaming children? So what if her overpriced hot cocoa was going cold in her hands? She had a mission to complete, dammit, and Allura Altea didn’t leave things half done.

She took a breath and leaned against the claw machine. “How long have you had…feelings for him?” she asked, as softly as she could without her voice being drowned out by the DDR machine
thumping away a few feet to their right.

This really wasn’t the place for heartfelt conversations.

Pidge didn’t quite look up at her, studying the poorly sewn seams of that dragon instead. “A while,” she said. Well that was…cryptic. But at least she wasn’t denying it. That had to count for something. “But it’s not like it’s getting in the way of our friendship or anything. I mean, sure I freaked out a little about coming here alone with him and all because all the lights and music and everything has this whole romantic vibe to it and I thought I might do something stupid—“

“Stupid?”

“Like confess my dumb feelings,” she groaned.

Allura took a gamble and reached out to rest her hands over Pidge’s as she clutched that dragon to her chest. “I don’t think that’s stupid.”

For a moment or two, Pidge let Allura keep her hands there, pressed overtop of her own. But then she stepped back, without a word, and pulled away, her eyes hidden under a fringe of messy bangs. She knelt by the machine, silently dropping in another coin into the slot and tugging Allura over to the controls. “C’mon,” she said, her voice rough and betraying just how hard she seemed to be trying to hide whatever emotion was welling up there. “Try to win something for your boyfriend. My treat.”

Allura sighed. “Pidge…”

“I know what you’re doing,” she said suddenly. “Cause my mom and my brother and Shiro have all tried to do this whole…heart-to-heart thing before, but I don’t wanna spend my Christmas listening to people tell me that I should risk one of my best friendships over some dumb crush.” When Allura looked back at her again, Pidge was frowning down at both her Rowlet and her newly won dragon, her fingers digging into them like a lifeline. “He’s my friend. That’s the important thing.”

A sinking feeling in the pit of Allura’s stomach told her that maybe she’d bit off more than she could chew.

“That Hello Kitty plushie in the middle,” Pidge told her, leaning against the glass. “That’s your best bet.”

She didn’t even really want a Hello Kitty plushie. And she doubted Lotor did either. But she centered the claw over it and dropped it down anyway without bothering to argue.

“Dude…are you sure you wanna ride this thing?”

Was he fidgeting? He was trying not to fidget, but he felt like he was anyway. Maybe he could play it off as just the cold getting to him.

“Just a little cold,” Lotor said.

“We’re standing next to a heater,” Lance pointed out.

Damn.

Lance turned to Coran next, looking worried. “Is he gonna be okay?”

“He’ll be fine,” Coran promised, slapping a hand down on Lotor’s shoulder. Oh sure, that was easy
for him to say. He certainly didn’t feel like his stomach was trying to tie itself into a square knot more and more with every step they got closer to the cars. “Though let’s make sure he sits in front of us, eh? Don’t want to get any sick on this new coat of mine.”

“Nobody’s going to be sick,” Lotor insisted. God, he hoped he didn’t make himself a liar. “I’m fine. Let’s just…talk about something else.”

Something other than the metal death trap they were approximately ten minutes away from boarding. God, why did Pidge have to call it that? Why did she have to emphasize the word death before they strapped themselves into this damn thing?

Coran got a knowing glint in his eye, twisting his mustache between his fingers as he nodded. “Something else…sure. I know just the thing! That little lady you accompanied here. Pigeon?”

Smooth.

“Pidge,” Lance corrected him. “Just…Pidge. And what about her?”

They certainly were standing by a heater. But Lotor had a feeling that wasn’t the reason for the flush creeping onto Lance’s cheeks. Maybe Allura was onto something after all.

She better be, or he was about to get onto this damn roller coaster for nothing.

“Pidge…Piiiiiidge…” Coran looked like a mad scientist, twisting his mustache and squinting at the window as the roller coaster car rumbled by. “Seems like quite the lady. Yes, quite the lady—“

Lotor sighed. “What Coran is trying to say is…well…”

“Lemme guess.” Lance’s forehead thumped against the door frame, staying there until the line started to move again. “You’re gonna make some comment about how close we are, huh? Gonna try and convince me I should ask her out or something?”

Lotor swallowed. “Uh…no?”

“You’re really bad at lying, you know that?”

“I know,” he sighed. No use hiding it.

“My boy, what’s the reason for that long face of yours?” Coran asked, one eyebrow quirked. Another train left the station, the line urging them that much closer to their turn on the ride.

Well, maybe even a conversation as uncomfortable as this was better than stewing about the terror that still awaited him when they got to the front…

Lance groaned. “Oh c’mon, not you guys too. First Hunk, then my sister, even Keith – everyone keeps saying I should make a move.” He shoved his hands into his pockets and stared pointedly at the metal grating under his feet, leaning on the handrail that separated them from the track running next to the footpath. “Like she’d ever go for it. N-not that I have a thing for her or anything! I mean, that’s just…crazy, right?”

Was he really asking him? Like he knew a thing about how Pidge felt?

Coran nodded sagely, seemingly unfazed. “Nothing crazy about love, my boy.”

“Who said anything about love?” Lance sputtered, face burning bright red. The next train left the station, blowing his hair past his eyes, but he barely noticed it. “N-no! No, no, no! I—I’m not…I’m
not in *love* with her! She’s just…ya know…a good friend. Th-that’s all.”

Something knocked against the inside of Lotor’s chest, a lurch in his belly that made his nails tap against the metal handrail. “Have you ever thought that those things don’t need to be mutually exclusive?”

Lance blinked at him. Damn, he’d barely realized he’d said that much out loud at all. It wasn’t like him to get so deep. Maybe the anxiety twisting in the pit of his stomach was getting his wires crossed and making him more sentimental than usual.

“Mutually…exclusive?” Lance muttered, an enigmatic little smile slipping onto his face. “Guess you’re gonna tell me Allura is your best friend, huh?”

“Well…no. Not exactly. Not my best friend. All things considered we haven’t known each other as long as I’ve known my closest friends.” He leaned against the handrail, painfully aware of Coran’s eyes on him as well as Lance’s. Not to mention those damn roller coaster cars rumbling by like loud lumbering beasts. “But she is…a very good friend. And she’s also my girlfriend.”

God, that still felt so *strange* to say out loud. But the word still tugged back the corners of his mouth anyway.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is…she could be your friend and something else too.” He shrugged. “Not that I’d know anything about what that *something else* is for you. But…worth a thought anyway.”

“Quite the wise way of putting it,” Coran mused. “Seems like you’re a bit of an old soul, eh? Maybe that’s why we get along so well!” His hand came slamming down on Lotor’s back hard enough to knock the wind halfway out of him, laughing brightly as Lotor stumbled forward in toward the train car. “Oh, and would you look at that – looks like it’s our turn!”

“R-right,” Lance sputtered, though it seemed his mind was elsewhere.

Lotor’s, however, was painfully fixated on the here and now. And the here and now involved climbing into a damn roller coaster car.

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Lotor stared up at the tower looming above the, a ring of white blinking lights twinkling against the backdrop of the dark sky like neatly arranged stars. They slowly rotated at the top, the hum of the ride’s engine barely audible from so high up.

Next to him, Allura, held her hand warmer close to her chest, staring up at the ride car. “So…Nacht Tower is one of those drop rides, isn’t it?”

“Not during Christmas,” Pidge told her. “This time of year it’s just a sightseeing ride.”

Allura looked only half convinced. “No drop?”

Pidge nodded. “No drop.”

Though, that didn’t seem to put Lance’s mind at rest much. For all his enthusiasm about riding Verbolten, it was starting to look like Nacht Tower was going to be his downfall.

Metaphorically, at least.

“Uh…ya know, you really don’t have to come on this thing,” Pidge said, sidling up to him as the
ride car began its slow descent back down. “If you wanna just stay on the ground—"

“Hell no! We came here to see all the lights and I’m not gonna wimp out now.” He swallowed thickly, hands balled into tight fists like he was hyping himself up for a fight. “I can handle a little…a little dangling. Up there. It’s nothing!”

Allura’s arm wrapped around his, tugging him close enough to reach up on her toes and whisper to him: “So…anything promising from your talk?”

“It’s…complicated,” he sighed.

“That’s what I thought too.” He hated watching her face fall, the crease in her brow deepening as the ride car touched down gently in front of them. “I was hoping I could give her a pep talk and that would help things along, but…there’s so much more to it.” She caught her lip between her teeth, letting go of her hand warmer just long enough to twirl her hair around one finger. “Was it completely idiotic of me to want to spread a little romance tonight?”

“Allura, you’re nowhere close to an idiot.” He leaned in, pressed a kiss to her temple and offered a smile. “I think it was…sweet. And who knows? Maybe something will happen in its own time.”

Pidge pushed past them both with Lance’s arm tucked under her own and a grin stretching across her face, rushing toward the first empty seat the moment the gate opened. “C’mon,” she chimed, dragging a very pale and wobbly-legged Lance behind her. “Last one up has to buy me a cotton candy.”

Lance groaned as he sat next to her, already holding the restraint handles with a white-knuckle grip. “Don’t mention cotton candy right now…”

“Are you…sure you’re okay?” Allura offered. She took the spot next to him and pulled the shoulder restraints down over her head. “There’s still time to back out you know.”

“No.”

Sounded like he really wanted to see those lights from above. Like they could be any more beautiful from 250 feet up.

The restraints locked in with a loud metallic click, and the engine at the center of the ring began to whirl and hum. Lance’s eyes went wide, his body stiff as a board with his knuckles turning white against the handles over his chest. “Shit,” he hissed, their feet lifting off the asphalt. “Shit, shit, shit – I can’t look!”

He squeezed his eyes shut, shoulders quivering. “Dude,” Pidge said. “Hey, it’s fine. We’re barely even off the ground-”

“It’s high enough.”

Allura’s brow pinched in concern as they climbed farther upward. Higher and higher. “Ah…Lance, are you-”

“I’m not fine!” Lance groaned, feet swinging helplessly. “Dammit, I thought I could – hell no, this was a huge mistake! Why did I get on this damn thing-”

“Hey-” Pidge reached for him, putting a hand on his arm and giving it a squeeze. “Hey, breathe Lance. It’s okay, really.”
“F-fuck…” His own hand flew overtop of Pidge’s a second later, without a moment’s hesitation. Somehow, he managed a shaky, humorless smile. “Look at me, freaking out like a little kid…” He forced his eyes open, looking over at Pidge instead of daring to look down. “Thought I could contain this freakout until we were back on the ground at least. But here you are having to talk me down anyway.”

Pidge mirrored his smile, hand never leaving his arm as she laughed. “Talk you down…word choice, man.”

“Shut up,” Lance huffed. His gaze darted down toward his feet, and his eyes clamped shut again in record time. His other hand joined his first one overtop of Pidge’s knuckles. “Dammit, I’m sorry Pidge.”

“Sorry? For what?”

“For this,” he insisted. “For…for all of this! You just wanted to see the lights and I…I didn’t wanna get in the way of any of that—”

“There are lights, everywhere, Lance.”

“Oh come on, you know what I mean! I wanted you have fun. I didn’t want you to miss out on a single thing, even if it was just the two of us, because if anyone deserves to have a perfect, stupidly picturesque time here it’s you!”

When the ride car reached the top of the tower and began its slow rotation around the center pillar, Pidge stared at him with her mouth hanging open. Lotor’s brow arched almost as high as Allura’s as she turned to glance at him, wide-eyed and awestruck. Silent except for the click and groan of the engines.

Pidge blinked. “L…Lance…”

“Aw, screw it…” he muttered. “J-just screw it! I’m tired of pretending you’re not the most awesome girl I know! And if I’m gonna die here—”

“Nobody’s dying!”

“Don’t interrupt me!” Lance’s eyes were open again, blazing with determination that overshadowed everything else. He barely even seemed to notice just how high up they were. Just like Pidge had forgotten about the light display completely. “Th-this thing could drop us till we crash and burn on the damn asphalt! Or these restraints could pop right open and we could fall to our deaths!”

Allura let out an exhausted groan, glancing downward and regretting it the second she did, if her frown was any indication. “That’s…comforting…”

“Well it’s true! Or I could get hit by a bus in the parking lot! Or get food poisoning from a funnel cake! Point is life is short and I’m sick of pretending I’m not in lo—”

The ride jostled them as it started their descent again, and the rest of Lance’s words dissolved into nothing but a shriek that must have echoed through the entire park. And that was…impressive. In a way. Even if it must have been a bit terrifying to everyone on the ground below.

Their descent was slow and quiet, nobody saying a word until the soles of their feet touched down onto the asphalt again. The restraints rose up off of their shoulders, the next group of riders filing forward to claim their seats, and Lotor pushed himself up on unsteady legs.
Well…that was interesting.

Lance and Pidge both stayed put, frozen in their seats until the ride attendant ushered them toward the gate. Their eyes were fixed on the ground, neither of them saying a word until-

“Uh…” Lance cleared his throat, leaning on the side of the gate. “So, um…ya know heights make me pretty crazy…”

Pidge didn’t say a word to answer. She barely seemed to be breathing.

Lance’s face was turning redder by the second, the cold sweat from before making the light glint off his rosy cheeks. He scratched at his neck, shoving his hand into his pocket. “A-anyway…why don’t we just ah…just forget any of that ever happened-“

The first move Pidge made – the first thing she did after a solid minute of perfect, statue-like silence – was to grab Lance by the lapels and drag him down for a bruising, clumsy kiss.

“Shut up,” she muttered with a shaky little smile. “Just…for once, dude, stop talking for a second.”

Allura muffled a squeak against her palms. But even with her fingers in the way, Lotor could still see that grin of hers stretching across her face and lighting up her eyes.
They made their way down the colorfully lit path, meandering through the crowds and taking their time as music echoed around them from every direction. It had started to drizzle off and on, but Allura hardly cared. Lotor’s hand was keeping hers delightfully warm, she had a fuzzy Hello Kitty plush tucked inside her coat under her arm, and she couldn’t seem to stop giggling.

“Did you see Lance’s face?” she laughed. “When Pidge kissed him? It was like something out of a movie! And here I never thought she’d be the type to make the first move.”

“There’s something beautiful about young love,” Coran sighed, sounding wistful.

Allura’s stomach flipped as she gave Lotor’s hand a squeeze. “Young love…that’s sure one word for it. I guess I should thank you both for humoring me.” She shot him a wide smile. “And for braving that awful ride in the process.”

“Let’s not…talk about that roller coaster,” Lotor groaned, his face going a bit pale.

She tugged him closer. “No more roller coasters, I promise.”

But as they rounded the corner, a sound reached her ears, and suddenly a brand new idea blinked to life in her head. One that didn’t involve any roller coasters or rom-com-esque schemes. She grinned as that train whistle echoed from the end of the path and beamed at Lotor and Coran with newfound excitement. Aching feet be damned.

“I have a better idea!” she said. “A much better idea!”

Coran glanced down the path as the train, packed with passengers, chugged out of the nearby station, disappearing around the bend. “The train?”

“Are you sure you don’t want to try the skyride?” Lotor asked.

“I’ve…had enough heights for one day,” she admitted, and she swore she caught a flash of relief in his eyes. Well, that train would at the very least stay firmly on the ground, and couldn’t get up to speeds past fifteen miles per hour or so. A much less formidable foe than Verbolten. And with such a better view of all the lights.

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“Come on-” That train was calling her name. Glimmering lights, softly lilting music, a bracing winter breeze – well, at least she’d have Lotor to keep her warm. Between him and the plushie Pidge had helped her win, maybe she could handle a bit more of the December chill.

By the time they made it to the front of the line, Allura swore they had heard the same cover of White Christmas played over the speakers at least three times – enough to make her wish for Elvis’s version, if that were even possible – and the temperature had dropped by what felt like five degrees. She clutched her Hello Kitty plush closer to her chest, as if it would keep her warm. But all it did was stick out under her coat and make her look like she was wearing the world’s lumpiest bra.

“All aboard!” came a voice from the station, and she let out a sigh of relief when the line started moving forward again and they made their way under a well-lit overhang. “Fill from the front, three per seat! Fill from the front-”

The next thing she knew Coran was whizzing past them and heading for the front of the train. “Coran!” she called. “What are you doing-“
He cupped his hands around his mouth with a grin. “Giving you love birds some space!” he replied. “You’ve been stuck with this old third wheel all night – take some time to cuddle in peace!” The crowd pushed against him, ushering him toward the cars like an impatient tsunami. “I’ll meet you back at the station when you’re done…canoodling.”

Lotor rose a brow. “Canoodling?”

“Ignore him,” she insisted, tugging him toward the rearmost train car, her face pink from more than just the cold. All things considered, some canoodling might just help her warm up.

The train had only just lurched forward when Lotor turned to her and his eyes dipped down toward the fluffy white ear poking out from under her coat. “What is…that thing?”

She followed his gaze – it was fixed right on the Hello Kitty plushie peeking out over her belly. Almost comically, like it was poking its head out to say hello. Allura snorted out a laugh and plopped it onto her lap. “Oh – Pidge helped me win it at the game corner. From one of those claw machines.” She held it up toward him., tantalizingly. “I was thinking of giving it to you actually.”

“Me?”

“Yes!” She giggled. “Don’t you want it?”

There was a joke in there somewhere. A joke involving the strategic use of words like pussy cat and suggestive eyebrow wiggling. But instead of going that route with a gaggle of squealing children just two seats in front of them, she shoved the plushie into his arms and grinned. “Well it’s yours now.”

“O-oh!”

“Consider it payback for the hand warmer.” Well, it wasn’t a giant teddy bear, but it was something at least.

A frigid breeze blew through the open train car, and she snuggled up good and close to him to keep off the chill, hands tucked in the crook of his elbow, knees pressed tight against his. It was nice enough to make even the most obnoxious rendition of Jingle Bells she’d ever heard blaring over the speakers tolerable. Lotor pulled her closer, almost like it was a habit by now. She hoped it was, because his body heat had saved her from freezing more times than she could count. More of that was something she could get used to. “You don’t have to keep it,” she said, nudging the plushie tucked under his arm. “Give it to some little kid on the train if you want.”

“As ecstatic as I’m sure that would make them, no.” He propped it up on his knee, as if to prove a point. “I think I’ll keep it, thank you.”

Well that was sure a sight – her six-foot-two boyfriend clutching a fluffy cat plush toy to his chest like it was worth millions, lips pursed comically as he buried his face between its ears. It was cute. Downright adorable. Allura snorted against his shoulder. “Are you going to name it?”

“Maybe.”

The train rounded a corner, and the tracks lit up purple and blue as a giant wall of glistening lights stretched up on either side of them. White blinked down like falling snow, reflecting off the lake and lighting up the unused roller coaster tracks dipping and twisting above them.

Allura couldn’t help but grin, staring up at it as the music lilting over the speakers changed from Jingle Bells to an equally annoying version of Frosty the Snowman. “Oh wow,” she breathed, hands pressed over Lotor’s thighs, using him as leverage to push herself up and get an even better view.
“Oh wow, oh wow! Look at that! All those lights – it’s even more beautiful than that tree!”

She turned to look at him, and oh – this certainly was an angle. Faces so close she could feel him breathe, her hands tucked up against his upper thigh. A pink flush crept across his cheeks. Hers too.

Her smile melted into something a little softer. A little warmer. A little more…playful. She leaned in. So did he-

“Ewww, mommy what are they doing?”

_Canoodling._

Moment over.

She scurried back to her own side as the woman in front of them ushered the vocal youngster back into his seat, watching as Lotor’s flush went from pink to blazing red. “Oops,” she giggled. “Guess that’ll have to wait a bit.”

But Lotor was already scooting over, pressing his lips softly to hers as the train chugged its way along the edge of the water. Hands layered over her own, nails scraping her knuckles. He grinned as he pulled away again, but all that charm and confidence melted away a second or two later as his eyes darted up to the other seats. “Uh…sorry.”

Why in the hell was he apologizing?

Whatever the reason, he offered another little smile. “With the lights and that smile of yours, I couldn’t wait.”

She hardly minded. Quite the opposite. And a moment later he was pressing the soft black nose of that damn plushie against her forehead.

“Boop.”

Her laugh echoed up and down the track, drawing more gazes than she wanted to admit before she slammed her palms over her mouth. “You’re ridiculous,” she said. “Completely ridiculous.”

“You’re the one who got me a Hello Kitty doll.”

“If you don’t want it I’ll gladly take it back.”

He clutched it tight. “Never.”

Well, it wasn’t like she really _wanted_ it back anyway. She had enough pillows cluttering up her own bed, and it made for such a painfully adorable image tucked up against Lotor’s chest that she hoped he’d never let it go. Maybe he could display it on a trophy shelf or something in his apartment. Maybe for New Year’s she’d get a plaque engraved for it – #1 Mediocre Claw Machine Prize.

He wrapped one arm around her and pulled her good and close again. A good thing too because her hand warmer had finally run out of juice. “You know,” he said as she tucked her head under his chin. “I thought this Christmas Town thing was going to be nothing but flashy lights and bad holiday music.”

Allura glanced out at the blinking silhouettes of three reindeer lit up blue and white between them and the treeline while _White Christmas_ blared over the speakers.

“You’re not wrong,” she told him.
“No, but it’s been fun anyway.”

She glanced up at him. Not the easiest angle to get a good read on his expression, but she didn’t much feel like moving. “And Coran didn’t give you too much trouble?”

“Is it presumptuous of me to say I think he might actually like me?”

“Please,” she scoffed. “He does like you. Just like my dad did. You’re winning peoples’ approval left and right.” For good measure, she shot him a playful little smirk. “If there was a test, you’d have passed with flying colors already.”

Lotor’s brow arched. “You’re sure there’s no test?”

“My dad and Coran were testing you about as much as all your friends were testing me.” It was supposed to be a joke. And he was supposed to laugh and shrug and brush it off and insist that no, of course my friends weren’t testing you, don’t be ridiculous. But then he was silent for a moment or two too long, and Allura stared at him as that flush crept back over his cheeks again. “Lotor!”

“They weren’t testing you,” he insisted. “Not…not seriously anyway. And certainly not because I wanted them to—”

“Is that why Ezor keeps inviting me to go jogging with her?” She gasped. “Is that why Zethrid insisted on pouring me an extra shot at the Halloween party? To see if I could hold m liquor?” A beat later, she gripped his arm and bounced in her seat. “Did I pass? Well did I?”

Lotor’s hands cupped hers, warming them up and stopping her excited bouncing as he caught her eye. “Allura, my friends adore you.”

She blinked. “Really?”

“Of course they do,” he insisted with a smile. “Ezor admires your fashion sense, and Zethrid loves that confident swagger of yours that just so happens to come out a bit more forcefully after a few vodka shots—”

“You should see me after rum,” she snorted.

“And for the record Acxa thinks you’re witty. And that’s no small compliment coming from her. Even Narti likes you.”

She laced her own fingers together between Lotor’s palms, biting her lip. “Even though I can’t sign?”

Lotor caught her eye again when she glanced up at him, and the way he was looking at her was so warm and sweet that she almost forgot about the lights arching over their heads and that damn cover of Jingle Bells playing for the second time since they’d left the station. He squeezed her hands, a smile tugging at his lips, and she flushed all the way to the tips of her ears. “My friends adore you,” he said again, more insistently this time, as he dropped a kiss to her knuckles. “And all the things they love about you are the same things I lo—”

And that was where he stopped, right in the middle of that word that had made her heart flutter when she’d heard him say it. It was like he’d choked on it, and his mouth clamped down on it like he was trying to stop it from getting out.

“You ah…” He cleared his throat, letting her hands drop into her lap and wrapping his own around that plushie again. “You passed your test with flying colors too.” His smile was a little strained now,
a little more distracted.

The words echoed in her head.

Admire. Adore. Love.

Love.

She swallowed.

The cascading lights against the backdrop of darkness gave way to the overhead glow of the ride station, and the train came to a stop at the platform. Good timing too, because if she had to listen to Jingle Bells one more time she might go insane.

The moment she slid into the back seat of the car, Allura was out like a light. At least that was how it seemed. By the time Coran made it out of the parking lot, she was already snoring softly, her head resting against the glass and that Hello Kitty plushie of hers folded in her arms.

She’d insisted she was just borrowing it, but it didn’t look like he was getting it back anytime soon.

Still, Lotor didn’t mind. It was hard to find a single thing to complain about as he watched Allura murmur something unintelligible in her sleep and curl up into a tight little ball against the door. Her hair fell into her face, quivering against her lips with every slow breath, a lingering flush still clinging to her cheeks from the cold.

His stomach lurched. The same way it had on the train. When he’d caught himself nearly saying something he never thought he would say to another person.

“Seems she’s tuckered out,” Coran chuckled with a quick glance at Allura’s sleeping form in the rear view mirror. “Can hardly blame her. My feet have been aching something fierce for the last two hours or so.”

Lotor let out a quiet hum, barely hearing him. Allura looked so peaceful asleep like that, even crammed against a car window in the back seat. Somehow, she made drooling against her seat belt look beautiful, in a strange sort of way.

He caught himself smiling as Coran said, “Someone’s got a case of the googoo eyes.”

That snapped his attention forward again. His head whipped back around to the windshield so quickly it made him dizzy. “Googoo eyes?”

“Oh, yes! I’m very familiar with the condition – one of those things for which there’s no cure I’m afraid.”

Why was he talking about it like it was some kind of disease? Well, it certainly made him feel feverish at times, especially when Allura got to kissing his neck in that one spot he’d found he liked…

But he wasn’t focusing on that with Coran sitting two feet from him.

He turned his gaze out the passenger’s side window to hide any trace of the heat creeping onto his cheeks. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he lied. Badly.

Coran snorted out a laugh. “Please. Nothing to be ashamed about. I think it’s quite the good thing! Awfully sweet, seeing how much you’ve taken to her. And her to you too.”
His tone softened as he spoke, until the silence that followed felt…significant somehow. Like something else was coming.

Oh God…another talk. Lotor fought the urge to groan. He didn’t think he had the energy to handle it. Especially not when he was trapped in this car going sixty miles per hour on a darkened highway. No escape that didn't involve road rash and a probably head-on collision with a semi-truck.

But Coran left the comment there without another word. He let it hang in the air amidst the sound of the wheels on the asphalt and Allura’s soft snoring.

Lotor cleared his throat. “You’re not going to…give me a speech?”

“A speech?”

“About how you’ll murder me if I hurt her? Decisively and…creatively?”

Coran threw his head back and laughed. “Did old Alfor give you that speech? Threaten you with shovels and pickaxes if you dared to break his daughter’s heart?”

“Well, no. Not exactly.” He fiddled with the power lock by the window, staring at it as he tried to ignore how ridiculous he felt. “Allura said he liked me.”

“I’m sure he did. Alfor’s a good judge of character, you know. Like his daughter.”

He swore he could hear Coran’s eyebrows waggling as he said that.

“No, I’m not in the business of giving speeches or making threats,” Coran continued. “And not just because I’m sure Allura would give me a piece of her mind if I tried to. Well, if she were conscious at least.” Lotor glanced at him, finding the man cocking a tiny smile under that mustache of his. “No, I’d much rather just get to know you. I’d rather try and be friends, even.”

Lotor blinked at him. “Friends?”

“Of course! Why not, eh? I get the feeling we have a good deal in common. You know, I’ve written a couple of books myself.”

“You have?”

“Well you don’t need to look so surprised about it,” Coran said with a pout. “Used to help write textbooks back in my younger academic days. Ancient history, anthropology…not as exciting as erotic science fiction, mind you, but still—”

Thank God the door was locked, because he very nearly threw it open ramming himself against it as he tried to remember how to breathe. “Wh-what?” he squawked.

“Oh please, you thought I didn’t know, Mister L. Sincline?” He grinned, and Lotor swore he was going to see that smile in his dreams for the rest of his life. “Not to worry – your secret’s safe with me. Happened to see a package on your doorstep on my way in addressed to that name, and I thought it sounded familiar. A little light googling, and voila!”

He groaned, leaning his forehead against the glass and trying not to focus on the fact that Coran of all people had surreptitiously googled him. “I’ve got to tell my Acxa to stop sending me things addressed to my damn pseudonym, but she gets such a kick out of it…”

“Maybe I’ll recommend those novels of yours to my book club!” Coran chortled.
“Please don’t.”

“Would certainly be more exciting than reading Jane Eyre for the third time.”

“I’m begging you.”

“And I’m yanking your chain.” Coran patted him on the shoulder, his grip firm and friendly, with enough force to slap the air right from his lungs. “No need to take things so seriously, bucko. Lighten up a bit. You’re young and in love—“

Lotor felt like he was hurtling through the air at twice the speed limit of this stretch of highway. His mouth went dry.

*That word again…that damn word…*

He swallowed, glancing back at Allura and feeling Coran watching him out of the corner of his eye as he did. She’d nestled her head against her folded arms, face tucked against her elbow and hair an unruly mess, breaking free of her ponytail and falling all over the plushie clutched against her stomach.

“Yes,” he sighed. “You know, I think you’re right.”
So he loved Allura.

It was an interesting revelation, to say the least. It took him by surprise, but at the same time it made a good amount of sense. She’d awakened things in him he’d never thought he’d feel; she inspired him, astonished him, made him laugh, made him feel safe and comfortable and understood.

“Do you think the lipstick is too much?” she asked, leaning around the bathroom door frame. Her lips glinted silvery blue in the light from the hall.

“Looks very…futuristic,” he offered.

She pouted. “It was on sale at Sephora.”

“It looks good,” he insisted, and when she turned to look at herself in the mirror again another streak of silver caught his eye. “Though ah…you have a bit on your chin there-“

“Shit.” She got to work wiping it off, lips pursed and brows furrowed in frustration.

Yes, he definitely loved her. And that meant he had to tell her. Didn’t it? That was what people did when they loved each other, after all. He could handle that much.

He took a breath and stood up from the couch. No time like the present, he supposed. No reason to wait when he was so sure of what he felt. “Allura.” She glanced at him, mascara wand hovering an inch or so away from her eye. “I-“

There was a knock at the door, and suddenly Allura had a big black streak of mascara going across her cheek. “Fuck!” she hissed. “It’s only nine! People weren’t supposed to get here for another half an hour!” She flitted to the door, looking out the peep hole into the hall. “It’s Ezor and Zethrid – can you let them in? I need to fix-“ She gestured vaguely at her face – at the smear of mascara on her cheek and the glint of silver still lingering on her jaw – and she groaned. “…this.”

The bathroom door closed again, and Lotor let out a breath and went to let in his friends.

Ezor let herself in without waiting, two bottles of champagne and one of vodka clutched in her arms. “Where’s Allura?” she chimed as she set the bottles on the counter. “She’s the hostess! Isn’t she supposed to greet us and everything?”

“I’m in the bathroom!” Allura called from behind the closed door.

“Fixing her makeup,” Lotor finished for her. He eyed the bottles. “Did you…really bring all that for us?”

“The vodka is for Allura,” Zethird said brightly. “I like how she dances after a couple shots of the
Ezor grimaced. “And she can have all of it as far as I care. After the Halloween party I swore off hard liquor for a while. I’ll stick with the bubbly!” She leaned in close – closer than Lotor thought necessary – and quirked a brow at him. “You look...different. You’re kinda flushed. Are you okay?” Her eyes went wide, her grin even wider. “Oh God – did we interrupt something?”

Well that was doing nothing for his already anxiously skipping heart. “No,” he insisted, brushing away the finger that she’d poked against the center of his chest. “Honestly, why are you so obsessed with my sex life?”

“Because you have a sex life now?” Zethrid offered. “It’s kinda...cool, actually. Like seeing a one of those crazy mutant two-headed turtles from the Chernobyl site.”

Was that supposed to be a compliment? He didn’t have time to think it over, because before he could say another word the bathroom door swung open, and out came Allura – silver lipstick immaculately applied and mascara only on her eyelashes. “You’re early,” she said, smiling like she hadn’t just been cursing up a storm a few minutes before.

Ezor’s eyes sparkled. “Look at you! Getting all dolled up just for little old us-“

“Well it is the last day of the year,” Allura muttered.

“Is the lipstick from Sephora?”

She grinned. “From the sale bin – can you believe it?” Her skirt swished around her calves as she flitted over to the TV and turned it on. “I wanted something festive to watch the ball drop in a few hours!”

Zethrid’s elbow knocked against Lotor’s ribs. “And something to smear all over Lotor’s face at midnight, huh?”

The TV remote clattered onto the floor, pink splashing across Allura’s cheeks. And even though Lotor brushed Zethrid off with a half-hearted flick of his wrist, he couldn’t help but think to himself that he quite liked the sound of that.

The rest of their guests were fashionably late instead of early – Acxa and Narti arrived with a platter of brownies and yet another bottle of champagne, and Acxa groaned the moment she stepped through the door and saw Ezor’s bottles already sitting on the counter. “Seriously Ezor? You brought two bottles of champagne?”

“Well,” Ezor chuckled, swirling her drink in her glass. It was some concoction she’d made with champagne and grape juice that smelled dangerously close to cough syrup. “One of those bottles is mostly for me. Let a girl have some fun on the last night of the year, huh?” The rosy tint to her cheeks suggested she’d already gotten a healthy head-start on enjoying her night, as did the half-bottle’s worth of champagne already missing.

Acxa just rolled her eyes and plopped the bottle on the counter next to her brownies before pouring herself a vodka.

Shiro and Keith were next to arrive with Hunk in tow, and the latter blasted through the door with a wide grin on his face and rushed straight over to Allura and Lotor in the kitchen, almost bowling them both over. “Guys,” he breathed. “Oh my God I’ve been dying to talk to you! What did you do, huh? What kind of magic did you two do on Pidge and Lance-“
“Oh come on,” Keith said, tugging him backwards out of their personal bubble so he could reach for the plate of brownies. “It wasn’t magic – it had to be some kind of miracle to get them to finally pull their heads out of their asses.”

“Ya know, you still owe me that fifty bucks from our bet,” Hunk pointed out, and Keith froze with his teeth halfway into the brownie. “You didn’t forget did you?”

“Bet?” Shiro asked. “What bet?”

Keith’s face was blazing red, his gaze fixed firmly on the floor. “Dude, don’t-“

“I bet Keith fifty bucks you’d man up and propose before Lance got his ass in gear and confessed to Pidge,” Hunk said with a grin.

Now Shiro’s cheeks were just as red as Keith’s. “You guys had a bet going?” he sputtered, and then his blush deepened almost to the color of Keith’s jacket. “Wait, Keith – you bet against me?”

“Hey, Hunk had an unfair advantage! You took him ring shopping!”

“You still owe me fifty bucks,” Hunk reminded him.

“That’s insider trading-“

“Keith,” Allura giggled from behind her cup of vodka and sprite. “Sounds like you need to pay the man.”

“Allura-“

“Where are Pidge and Lance anyway?” Lotor finally asked, glancing at Allura. “You did invite them didn’t you?”

“Of course I invited them – they’re doing some…video game thing.”

“Pidge does a twenty-four hour stream every New Year’s for charity,” Hunk told them, reaching out and plucking the bottle of vodka from Allura’s hands and pouring a dash of it into his glass, followed by a generous portion of cranberry juice. “And Lance decided to join in this year. Because they’re dating and all.”

He took a long sip of his drink and glanced pointedly at Keith. “I know,” Keith groaned. “I’ll get you your money already-“

The next thing Lotor knew, Allura was sliding up close to him, a hint of vodka and citrus on her breath as she leaned in close and nuzzled his shoulder. “I can’t help but feel like our Christmas Town shenanigans led to something awfully good.”

“You shenanigans,” Lotor corrected her. “Is that why you decided to throw this New Year’s party? To try and see who else you can pair off?”

“Unless I’m planning to try and set up Hunk with our landlord, I don’t see many options here,” she muttered with a playful little smile. “But speaking of romantic gestures…you are going to give me that New Year’s kiss in a few hours, right?”

Of course he would. He loved her after all.

But instead of that, he said, “I can’t think of a better way to ring in the new year.”
Her smile was bright and warm, reaching all the way to her eyes, and heat spread all the way down to the tips of Lotor’s fingers. He wondered for a moment if he’d regret telling her here, sitting at her kitchen table listening to Hunk and Keith bicker over a fifty dollar bet.

Then Ezor leaned in between them, champagne bottle clutched in her fist and beaming. “Aww, look at the love birds!” she sang, hanging off his shoulder, and the mood was decidedly ruined.

At a quarter to midnight, he stepped out into the hall. Hardly anyone seemed to notice him going – everyone gathered around the TV watching the minutes tick down, and he was perfectly content to slip out undetected. Just for a moment or two, to get some fresh (ish) air by the drafty window at the end of the corridor.

He stared down at the street, at the lights flickering down below, tapping his nails against the window sill. A thick blanket of clouds had rolled in overhead, promising snow.

He loved her. He knew he did. For once in his life, he knew without a shadow of a doubt just how he felt. So why was it so hard to say it out loud? Why did it never feel like the right moment?

Maybe that was just an excuse. Maybe he was just afraid, and this moment he was chasing let him avoid reality just a little longer with each time he deemed it unworthy.

He sighed, and the door opened behind him. “What are you doing out here?” Lotor turned and caught her eye. Allura smiled at him, her hair messily framing her face and her cheeks pleasantly flushed. “It’s almost time for the countdown.”

“I don’t plan on missing it,” he promised her. “Just needed some air. It was getting a bit crowded in there.”

“I guess it is a bit of a tight fit in there,” she admitted, twirling her hair around her finger. She made her way over slow and quiet, leaning against the window next to him and letting their shoulders bump up against one another. “I know this might sound a little silly, but I’ve always wanted to throw a New Year’s party. Even if it was a little last-minute and informal…I always loved New Year’s Eve. Maybe even more than Christmas.”

He couldn’t blame her. Christmas had been a nice, albeit quiet affair. They’d eaten donuts and turned Allura’s TV into a virtual fireplace with HD logs crackling away on the screen all morning. And Coran had dumped an armful of gifts into his lap when he had still been barely half awake and insisted that they were all for him.

He didn’t have much use for the neckties and cufflinks he’d unwrapped, but it was the thought that counted.

“Oh, and look,” Allura breathed, her eyes shining as she gazed out the window. “It looks like it’s going to snow on top of everything.”

God, her eyes shined when she smiled like that. And her smile lit up her face like the streetlights lit up the sidewalk below. He could stare at her forever, his stomach twisting itself into tighter and tighter knots as she leaned her head against his shoulder.

“Are you alright?” she finally mused, her voice soft now and tinged with curiosity and concern. “You’ve seemed…absent all night. Ever since Christmas actually.” She glanced up at him. “I can’t help but feel like there’s something on your mind.”

She was on his mind. But how was he supposed to say that?
“Nothing bad, I promise you,” he said, taking her hand. “No, it isn’t anything you need to worry about. I just–“

He swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. He could say it. It was just three little words, three simple syllables. He was a writer, dammit – he could manage that much.

He opened his mouth to speak, but the door slammed open again.

“Guuuyys!” Ezor drawled. “Come on, the ball’s gonna drop any second now!” Then she giggled. “Hehe…balls…”

Allura snorted. “Your friend’s drunk.”

“I heard that!”

“We’re coming!” Lotor promised, and when Ezor had relented and shut the door again he turned to Allura and offered a smile. “I do owe you a New Year’s kiss after all.”

“Yes,” she said, tugging him toward the door. “You do.”

He loved her.

He knew that much in his bones. Knew it so intimately that it hardly even felt like a revelation. So maybe he couldn’t say it out loud. Maybe he couldn’t get those three little words out quite yet. There were other ways he could get the message across.

He started by planting a long, firm kiss on her lips as the clock ticked over to midnight, tasting vodka and cranberries and chocolate and leaving him with silver lipstick smeared all over his mouth.

The year ended, and the new year began, and once the apartment was quiet again, Allura slipped out of her makeup and skirt and changed into a T-shirt and shorts and curled up on the couch to enjoy the early-morning silence.

At some point before midnight it had started to snow, and all the white outside made the late night seem lighter. She’d always loved that effect of a winter storm, power flickers and ice on her windshield be damned. And tonight was even better. Miles better. Curled up with Lotor on this familiar old sofa, she didn’t even mind how drafty her apartment was.

She was pleasantly exhausted, still just tipsy enough to fend off the bite of the chill. Well, maybe that had more to do with the arms wrapped around her than the lingering alcohol buzz. Still…

“That,” she sighed with a smile, “…was a halfway decent evening, if I do say so myself.” He hummed against her hair, sounding distracted. Sleepy. She leaned back against him. “Stay the night?”

His lips curled against her temple. “Would save me from having to trek all the way home in the snow.”

“You say that like you don’t live down the hall,” she snorted, nudging him in the side for good measure.

“And that hall is frigid and you know it.” His lips pressed firmly against her cheek, arms squeezing around her middle and sending a warm pulse through her belly. “I’d much rather stay here with you where it’s warm.”
She preferred it too. For more reasons than just the warmth. She leaned back against him, sighing in contentment, happy to stay right here for the rest of the night – hell, for the rest of the year they had just rung in with their friends. Right here on this sofa with him.

Was that what it was supposed to feel like? That big four-letter word she’d been batting around her head since Christmas Town? She’d felt it before, or at least she thought she had, but saying it out loud was another matter entirely. Still, this felt like the right time. The right place. Curled up with him on the couch, watching the snowfall, feeling his breath against her ear and marveling at how it made her stomach do excited little flips with each exhale…

Before she realized it, she found herself speaking: “Lotor…”

“Mm?”

“I…I think I might…”

He’d been trying to say something all night. Trying and failing. Trying and getting interrupted. Trying and losing his nerve. She could feel it – that anxiousness rising up off him like steam, and there was a part of her that wondered if he’d been trying to say the same thing. Her heart pounded.

“I…I think…” Dammit all. “I want to bake some cookies.” Dammit, dammit, dammit all.

Lotor blinked as she looked back at him, forcing herself to smile. “You…want to bake cookies?” He glanced at the clock. “At one in the morning?”

“One in the morning on the first day of the new year!” she insisted, turning and pushing herself up on her knees to face him with an exuberant grin. “It’s the perfect weather for freshly baked cookies, and I’m still just tipsy enough from that champagne to eat half a dozen or so without feeling guilty about it.” Before she could second guess herself, she jumped up from the couch and flitted to the kitchen. “What do you say? Want to bake with me?”

It didn’t take long for Lotor to match her smile with one of her own. “If you promise not to let me mess anything up.”


He rose a brow as he watched her gathering flour, sugar, eggs, butter, vanilla… “And do these cookies call for diced onions, I wonder?”

“Well we can certainly get creative,” she fired back, and Lotor muffled a laugh against the back of his hand.


She pulled out her stand mixer and got to work digging her cup measures and teaspoons out of the drawer. “Do you have a recipe?” Lotor asked her, and she giggled.

She tapped the tip of her finger against her temple. “Up here,” she told him. “I’d love to say it was passed down through generations of my family or that I found it scrawled in the back of some book in a thrift shop or something, but I got it off the package of Nestle cookie dough and never forgot it.”

“Nestle Toll House does make a good cookie,” he mused as she thrust a cup measure into his hands.

“Two cups and a fourth of flour.” She grinned, pressing up on her toes to kiss him on the chin.
“Let’s start from there, and don’t get messy with the measurements. Baking is an exact science.” She dropped a bag of chocolate chips on the counter with a flourish. “Except for the chocolate. That, you measure with your heart.”

Two and one fourth cups of flour, one teaspoon each of baking soda and salt. Two sticks of butter, softened and mixed the white and brown sugar and a teaspoon (plush just a dash more for good measure) of vanilla extract – two eggs beaten in one at a time with the mixer on medium. Just a sprinkle of nutmeg. And then it was time to add the dry ingredients-

“Not all at once!” Allura insisted, too late as a cloud of flour and baking soda rose up from the lip of the mixing bowl. Lotor muttered a curse that got lost in her laugh. “Lotor, I said slowly.”

He coughed. “All I heard was add the flour.”

“You really don’t bake much do you?”

“Not unless you count the brownies from the box, and I usually just wind up eating the batter.”

Was it possible for someone to have a refined pallet and the taste of a five year old at the same time?

“Cookies are forgiving at least,” she giggled as she opened the chocolate chips. Once the heaping mound of flour was incorporated – all of it that hadn’t wound up on her counter, at least – she pulled the bowl off the mixer stand and set it next to the stove. “Here…add as much chocolate as your reckless little heart desires.”

“Trust me with adding more ingredients?” he fired back. “Sounds like you’re the reckless one.”

She pouted as he popped a chocolate chip into his mouth and then dumped the rest of the bag into the bowl. Well…she had said to measure with his heart. And his heart, much like hers, seemed to call for extra chocolatey cookies.

She got to work folding them into the dough, and as she worked she was endlessly aware of Lotor’s body against hers. He dropped aimless little kisses to the back of her neck, fingers gently pushing her hair off of her nape and making her shiver despite the heat from the oven. He paused, just for a moment, his thumb lingering against the skin peeking out from under her T-shirt collar, and she was painfully aware of just how quiet her apartment was.

“Allura,” he murmured, suddenly sounding thoughtful. “I’ve been…I’ve been meaning to tell you…”

Beeeep!

She almost sent the bowl tumbling to the floor then and there. “Th-the oven’s pre-heated,” she choked out on a nervous laugh.

“Oh,” he said. “Right.”

Dammit, why was this so hard to say? It was just one little word, wasn’t it? A little four-letter word. A big four-letter word in the middle of an even bigger sentence.

She swallowed. “We…we should…get them baking.” Without waiting for him to reply, she reached into the bowl and grabbed a generous handful, forming it into a ball against her palms. Lotor pulled up his sleeves and followed suit, and they got to work lining them up on the baking sheets.

She should tell him. She should say it. She couldn’t keep wondering about when the right damn time
His hand brushed against the small of her back as he slid up alongside her and helped her get the sheets into the oven. She closed it, set the timer, turned around to look at him – to *say something* – and suddenly he was pressing his hands over her hips and gently pinning her against the flour-covered counter.

Getting flour all over her shorts in the process, no doubt, but she stopped caring about that the second he kissed her.

It felt like that day in the stairwell, when they were both tipsy and exhausted from the Halloween party, when he’d held her tight and kissed her right there against the wall until she could barely breathe. When he’d told her he was *attracted* to her, and said it in such an awe-struck tone that he’d made it sound like she’d performed some kind of miracle. And just like then, her heart pounded against her chest, her fingers curling against his shirt, and she melted against him.

She had no idea what brought this on. Champagne maybe? Or maybe chocolate was more of an aphrodisiac for him than she’d realized. In any case, she wasn’t in a hurry to question or stop it.

She tangled her fingers in his hair, holding him there against her when he pulled away to catch his breath before diving in again. He kissed her like he couldn’t get enough of her, and *God*, she certainly felt the same.

What was he doing to her?

How did he manage to make her feel so damn *adored* without saying a word?

She pulled back from the kiss with a shuddering breath, and before she could stop herself the words were tumbling out of her mouth: “Oh God…I really do love you.”

There it was.

That little, *big* four-letter word.

She felt like the world slowed to a crawl. “I…” She swallowed. “I-I…”

“Me too.”

The words seemed to explode out of him. He wobbled a little on his feet as he stared at her, eyes so wide she swore she could see a reflection of the snow in his pupils. His shoulders dropped, his hands finding hers and his fingers curling against her palms. “Allura…” he breathed, a small smile creeping onto his lips. “Allura…me too.”

Her heart pounded. No, it *soared*. “You too?”

“I’ve been trying to tell you all damn night,” he sighed. His eyes slid closed, his forehead leaning against hers. His blush was so deep that she could almost feel it radiating off of him, warm enough to keep off the draft. “Over and over, and I kept getting interrupted. Or losing my nerve. But you-“

His palms pressed against her cheeks, so much warmer than his blush.

“I love you, Allura.”

She tugged him closer, her voice shaking on the way out: “Say that again.”

“I love you, A-“
It was all she needed to hear before she tugged him down and kissed him so hard it made her dizzy.
The storm was picking up outside, driving thick sheets of snow and ice against the windows in the howling winds. It rattled the glass, piling up a blanket of white on the streets and reflecting the street lights until the sky was lit up like twilight. But the living room was dim, lit only by the lamp on the kitchen counter.

A lamp sitting by a platter of cookies that had been completely forgotten.

Allura held him close, her fingers tangling in his hair and tugging him flush against the soft curves of her body as she kissed him. He settled between her legs, shivering when her shorts rode up and let her thigh squeeze down against his hips. He felt her grin against his lips, her hand skirting down his arm and grasping his wrist. She pressed his fingers against her thigh, letting it linger there. “Feel free to let your hands wander,” she murmured, giggling. It sounded more like a request than just permission.

Well…he could manage that much.

Her skin was a warm respite from the howling winds and driving snow outside, keeping the chill away. The short hairs under his hand tickled his palm as he ran his hand down toward her knee, memorizing every little bump and dip. She let out a soft moan of approval, humming against his mouth. Her hands cupped his jaws again, leaving his hands to their own devices.

Let his hands wander. He was happy to let them do a bit more than that.

His fingers meandered down over her calves, and she groaned. “I didn’t even shave-“

“As if I care,” he scoffed, nuzzling the underside of her jaw. She had always liked that spot a few inches below her ear; it always made her sigh and whine.

She didn’t disappoint.

He could feel her muscles flexing under his fingers as his hands made their way back up the length of her thigh, thumb playing over the edge of her shorts. And then just a bit farther, up under the fabric…

She squealed and flinched. “Sorry,” she said with a breathless laugh. “Ticklish.”

That was news. He blinked. “Oh?”

“Keep going.” She was already pulling him down again, letting his chest rest against hers so he could feel it rising and falling with every panting breath. “Please…keep going.”

“Mhm…”

He didn’t need convincing. Her lips were too inviting. And not just her lips…
Her hands wandered down over his back, grasping at the fabric of his shirt until it rode up the length of his spine. The chill that hit his ribs made his shudder. Or maybe that was her touch on him. Maybe it was her breath against his lips, his jaw, his neck – oh-

Well…that moan was certainly…involuntary.

Allura was beaming up at him as he pulled away to take in a shuddering breath. “Keeping me warm,” she sighed. “You’re getting good at that.”

He managed a laugh of his own, though it was muffled against the side of her neck. “Give me some credit – I’ve gotten better at a few other things too.”

His fingers found her inner thigh, tickling it with the edge of his thumb. The beautiful flush spreading across the bridge of her nose made its way all the way up to her ears as she bit her lip. “Lotor…”

Oh God, I really do love you…

“Mm…”

“I have – ah-“ Maybe his hand was wandering a little higher than he’d realized at first. His knuckles brushed up against her underwear. The only thing between her and his hand. She swallowed. “I have…I have a box of condoms.” He froze, glancing up at her. She was staring at him, breathless and expectant. Eager. “In my bedroom. I could…get them?”

She phrased it like a question. And that meant it needed an answer.

It came easily.

He nodded. “Yes.” Allura’s eyes gleamed. “Yes, I’d like that.”

She popped up like a shot, grinning from ear to ear, her hair spilling wildly over her shoulders. “Really?” she gasped. “Okay! Right, I’ll-“ She jumped to her feet, hands clutched in front of her chest in excitement. “I’ll be right back! Don’t move! Stay right there! Just a minute!”

As if he was planning on going anywhere. There was nowhere he would rather be. And as he watched her rush into her bedroom, his heart thudded in his ears loudly enough to block out the howling winds and ice pattering against the windows.

So this was really happening…he never thought he’d see the day. It still didn’t quite feel real. His heart was pounding and his head swimming like it had in that dream of her rocking and panting against him. But he was awake. This was real. And here he was, sitting here on her sofa, hard in his pants and waiting for her to return with a box of condoms so that he could offer up his virginity to one of the most incredible women he’d ever met.

And there she was – emerging from her bedroom with a wide and welcoming smile on her flushed face and a small box clutched in her hands. “Found them!” she chimed as she sat on the sofa next to him again. She tucked herself against the throw pillows, facing him with a lazy grin and letting her legs fall to either side. Inviting him to settle between them again.

She crooked her finger in his direction. *Come here.*

He leaned in, her thighs giving him a squeeze and a giggle escaping her as her arms wrapped around his shoulders.

The windows rattled with the wind, snow piling up on the other side of the glass, and Lotor kissed
her greedily. With *lust*, even. He’d never even thought he was capable of as much, but here he was.

Her shoulders quivered. “You’re poking me,” she breathed.

So much for not being capable of lust. It was blazing in full force now. Hotly enough to drown out his nerves. He managed a chuckle. “Sorry.”

“No…no, don’t apologize.” Her hands meandered down to the hem of her shirt. He watched them go, unable to look away. “First, though…”

That was all she said. Or at the very least it was all he heard. Because the next moment her T-shirt was in a heap on the floor and she was smiling at him in nothing but her shorts with the dim kitchen light bathing her skin in a soft orange glow. And *oh*, there was a lot of skin too. The soft curve of her shoulders, the dip of her waist, the pink tint creeping over her collarbones, and-

His eyes darted back up to meet hers, and she let out a full and open laugh. “You’re allowed to look, you know.”

Allowed, yes. But he wondered if he’d manage it without combusting right there on the sofa. He gave it a shot anyway.

Her fingers curled around his wrists, her voice husky as she added, “You’re allowed to touch too.”

*Oh-*

Her skin was impossibly soft, pleasantly warm under his palms as she nudged his hands against her breasts and rested her own against the curve of his jaw. Lotor could hardly believe his hands weren’t shaking as he caught her nipple with the edge of his thumb. “Allura…”

She leaned back, stretched out beneath him and pulling him overtop of her. “Just kiss me.”

*Just kiss her*, he mused. *Don’t overthink it. Don’t hold yourself back. Just kiss her…*

He leaned in.

It was new and different and *addicting*, feeling skin against skin. His shirt had ridden up so much that his stomach brushed against hers when he settled down against her again. Warm, soft, sending tingling pleasure up his spine. Made him think…

He pulled away just enough to grasp the hem of his own shirt. Allura gazed up at him as he tugged it off and dropped it on top of hers, grinning at her and pushing his hair out of his face. “No fair that you’re the only one braving the draft, hm?”

Her face blazed red. “Good point…”

Her palms skimmed up his back, her breasts pressing against his chest, her lips on his neck as she sucked what he was *sure* would turn into a deep red mark into his skin. And her thigh, firm and warm, pressed up against his groin. He rocked against it with a muted groan.

She giggled. “Eager…”

“Mhm…” He nipped at her ear. That had always driven her wild.

“Mhm…” Her shorts were riding low on her hips, slipping down over her thighs and revealing a flash of pink under the white fabric. She kicked them off the rest of the way, leaving them hanging off the back of the sofa and hooking her fingers under the hem of her underwear. But a second later she seemed to
think better of it and glanced up at him.

“Care to take these off me?”

He let out a shuddering breath. Instead of bothering to try and answer with his throat as dry as it was, he layered her hands over hers and tugged the fabric all the way down the length of her legs. He pressed a kiss to her belly, making her squeak and squirm against the pillows.

“I told you I was ticklish!” she insisted with a pout.

His eyes flashed up toward her. “And what did you really expect me to do with that information, hm?” He arched a brow. “Not use it?”

“I’m naked, and that’s all you can think of?”

Naked.

She was naked. Well, aside from her socks, but as drafty as the apartment was it didn’t quite feel right to ask her to part with them. His hands trailed down over her ribs, feeling goosebumps erupting under his fingers, sliding his palms down over the swell of her ass and her upper thighs. She lay just the same as she had from the start – legs lightly parted and knees squeezing against his hips, giving him a full view of the patch of curly silver hair between them.

He didn’t think his heart had ever pounded so loudly, nor could he remember his pants ever being this tight.

Her thumb toyed with his zipper. “Fair’s fair,” she playfully mused. “Don’t you think?”

Well, if they were going to use those condoms sitting on the coffee table, he was going to have to get these damn pants out of the way anyway. It almost seemed silly that they were the last things to go, in the grand scheme. But if fair was fair, as she’d so lovingly reminded him, it only made sense that she give him a hand…

He pressed her hands against his own zipper, shuddering when they brushed his erection through the denim. “Be my guest.”

Her eyes flashed. He swore the sound of a zipper being pulled down had never been so deafening, even over the pulse of blood rushing through his ears.

And…other places.

It was almost surreal, shimmying out of them, trying not to kick Allura in the shins as he tugged them off and tossed them away. His underwear followed, and then suddenly he was just as naked as she was.

“God, it really is drafty in here,” he muttered before he could stop himself, and Allura threw her head back and laughed so loudly it echoed off the walls.

When she opened her eyes to look up at him again – a blue-eyed, dark-skinned vision gazing at him in the dark – she laced her fingers together with his and gave his hand a firm squeeze. “Let's warm up then,” she told him.

Just kiss her, he thought again, and he folded his body over hers.

Her free hand thumped ungracefully against the coffee table, blindly fumbling until she found the
box of condoms and dumped its contents out without a second thought. She grabbed one of the packets and tore it free. The foil edge scraped against his shoulder.

When she handed it to him, he just stared down at that little packet and blinked. “Are you nervous?” she asked on the edge of a laugh.

He gingerly plucked it from her fingers, studying it intently. “No more than I expected to be,” he offered before ripping it open. With his teeth of all things. The errant piece of foil he’d torn off got stuck on his tongue and then on his lips before he finally managed to spit it out.

Allura – bless her – hid her giggle behind her hand. For a moment her expression sobered. “And it’s not too much?”

Before she could carry on any more with that thought, he leaned in and pressed a kiss to the tip of her nose. A little chaste and cute for this sort of situation, maybe, but he couldn’t help it. “Allura,” he said, “If it were too much I would have said so about five articles of clothing ago.”

That seemed to put her at ease, relief flooding her face and letting her shoulders drop as he pulled out the condom, pinched the tip, rolled it on-

“Someone paid attention in health class,” she quipped.

Lotor snorted. “Shut up.”

“Did they make you roll them over bananas too?”

The snort turned into a laugh that almost made him drop the damn thing. “Don’t.”

Bless her. Bless her for making him laugh at a time like this – with his cock in his hand and covered in bright purple latex. With her flushed and giggling underneath him and her hand soothingly meandering up and down over his hip.

Well…time for the big event, he supposed. He pulled in a steadying breath-

Then the lights went out.

Allura let out a squawk, hand finding his arm and clamping down. “Did the power just go out?”

“Ice must have taken out a power line,” he sighed, glancing down at her. “Ah…should we…”

“If you’re going to ask if we should stop, don’t you dare.” Even in the dark her palm managed to find his cheek, thumb brushing against his skin. “I would have liked to be able to see you a little better, but we can manage just fine in the dark, don’t you think?” Her lips pressed against his ear. “Like Arus and Drule making love in deep space, with nothing but a few distant stars lighting up the cabin of their ship…”

Lotor blinked. “Did you just…reference my books?”

Forget seeing her blush darkening on her cheeks – he could practically feel it. Especially when he leaned in to kiss her. It made his heart race even more.

This woman could have him. She could have every bit of him.

He pressed against her inner thigh, tucking a hand down between his legs to try and guide himself, but his hands had started to shake so badly that it barely helped. The tip of him brushed the curly hair between her legs, nudging clumsily at the soft flesh underneath. Her hand joined his between their
bodies a moment later, fingers curling gently around his length. “Here-“ she breathed. “Let me…”

She pressed him against her, brow knitted in concentration as he rested his forehead against hers. Warm…she was warm. And slick. And clenching, like she had around his fingers the first time he’d really touched her. But this was different. Achingly different. As he pressed inside of her time seemed to slow down, the moment stretching out endlessly until he had bottomed out-

Buried deep.


“God, you’re…” His words died in his throat. There weren’t any he could find that fit. She was incredible, breathtaking, indescribable – but the only thing that came out of his mouth was, “…warmer than I expected.”

She laughed, and he felt it all the way down to his toes. “Am I?”

“Did I say that out loud?”

“You did.”

“Damn.”

She cupped his face in her palm. “I really do love you, you know.” Forget the draft and the ice and the wind – that warmed him up better than a space heater. She bit her lip. “But you…could you…you know…” Her hips rocked against his, making him bite back a groan. “Move?”

Move.

Right.

Things like this usually involved…movement.

He pulled his hips backward, bracing his hand against the arm of the sofa and pushing back inside, and the first hot slide back into her dragged a moan from deep in his chest. Allura let out a gasp that he felt against his neck. “S-slow,” she insisted, her fingers curling against the back of his thigh. Nails pressing against his skin. Her muscles squeezed around him on that first long slide and his head spun.

“That’s it,” she urged with a smile as he began to rock his hips in a gentle, easy rhythm. “Doing okay?”

“Nh…”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“Nnnnyesss…”

Why were words so damn hard?

But oh – there was something he was forgetting. Something important. It clicked in his brain a moment later and he fumbled a hand down between their bodies to press a finger against her clit, only to find her hand already there. He glanced up at her and found her lip caught between her teeth, a light sheen of sweat on her temples, a healthy flush on her cheeks. Her heels pressed encouragingly against his calves, her eager little moans mixing with the sound of wind and the rattling windows, and Lotor’s fingers dug into the fabric of the sofa as he tried to ground himself. Watching that
pleasure etch itself into her face was even more addicting than the feeling of her squeezing around him.

And speaking of that-

“A-ah-“ He choked on his words. “Allura…”

“Mm…” She opened one eye just enough to glance at him.

“I need…I need to stop…” He rested his forehead against hers, panting. “Just for a…just for a minute…is that…”

She let her hand skim down over his shoulders and back. “It’s fine,” she insisted. “Though honestly, you don’t have to wait for me.”

Lotor scoffed. “Please.” He dropped a kiss to her cheek with a shaky smile. “Of course I’m going to wait for you.”

That spot under her jaw – it always got her so beautifully riled. He rubbed her thigh, feeling those little hairs tickling his fingers as he palmed the soft swell of her ass. First time be damned. He wasn’t about to leave her wanting like a virgin stereotype. Not tonight. No, he had made her come before and he could do it again.

He took a breath and found his rhythm again, reveling in the way Allura’s eyes fluttered closed again when he did. Her knuckles brushed against his lower stomach as she eagerly stroked herself in time with his thrusts, chasing her own pleasure. He’d get her there.

Even if he had to stop and collect himself again to do it. Twice. She hardly seemed to mind, her legs wrapping around his hips and squeezing him tightly.

But even with all the stopping and starting, that coil in the pit of his stomach kept tightening, hot and insistent, and the feeling of Allura gasping and quivering underneath him was just too much. “I-I have to-“

“Don’t you dare stop,” she groaned, guttural, her fingernails digging into his upper arm. “Don’t stop, Lotor-“

“I’m-“

“Don’t stop – please.”

Her voice was high and breathless, her strokes erratic, her brow pinched. She was close-

The last thing he saw before the world went white was her head falling back against the arm of the couch as she gasped out his name.

Allura was floating. She was lost in a pleasant little haze, tucked under the softest blanket she owned with Lotor’s arms around her. Their legs tangled together on the couch cushions as they watched the snowfall slowly peter out on the other side of the window.

She reached back to run her fingers through Lotor’s hair and found his cheek instead. He nuzzled against it. “Mmf…”

“Still alive?” she asked with a sleepy little laugh.
“I think so.” He dropped a kiss to the back of her shoulder. “If not, it was a good death.” She gave his jaw a warm, firm pat. He deserved more than that, but she didn’t much feel like moving. Even just rolling over. He hummed against her skin. “Was it…was it good? For you?”

Well, that made her turn around and face him, looking at him incredulously over her shoulder. “Are you really asking me that?”

“Was it?”

“If course it was.” Fine, she could manage rolling over without messing up her afterglow. She tuck herself up against body, hands on his chest, glancing up at him. “You were fantastic.”

His smile lit up his eyes. “And you…”

“Yes,” she laughed and offered him a sheepish little grin. “I thought that was obvious.” Harder than she had in a while. She felt like her legs would never be steady again. She pressed her nose against the dip at the base of his neck and breathed in deep. “You?”

He chuckled. “I thought that was obvious,” he mimicked.

“No, I meant…are you…how are you…”

His hand cupped her jaw, his smile warming up and softening, his eyes half-lidded and glazed over with his own afterglow. “I’m wonderful.”

Happiness buzzed in her chest as she nuzzled against his shoulder, letting him pull the blanket tighter around her.

They dozed off and on until the snow stopped completely, and Allura woke up around four in the morning with a frown and a groan. “Lotor.” He murmured something unintelligible against the crown of her head. She squirmed her way out from the circle of his arms. “Lotor…I have to get up…”

“Mmmf…” His eyes slowly opened. “‘Lura…”

“I need to pee,” she said with an apologetic smile. “And as comfortable as I am, maybe we should move to my bedroom.”

“Mmmf,” he said again. He pulled his arms off her as he sleepily sat up, the blanket tangling and bunching around his waist.

The hard wood floor was cold underfoot as Allura stood, the draft tickling her naked body. She knelt to press a kiss to his temple. “Meet you there?”

Still half-asleep, Lotor nodded.

Finally, after blindly fumbling her way to the bathroom and then to her bedroom, Allura lifted her comforter and slid into bed with him. Whether he was even awake, she couldn’t tell, but his arms wrapped around her the moment she pressed up against him anyway.

She was asleep again before she knew it.
I know it's been a longer wait again for this chapter - I hope it's worth the wait. :) A lot going on in my life rn so updates are a little more sporadic than I'd like them to be. <3

It was still dark when Lotor woke up. Dark and chilly. A cool draft nipped at every inch of exposed skin outside the warm cocoon of blankets and made him burrow his way down farther into the sheets.

Allura’s sheets.

He opened her eyes and there she was, sound asleep half-buried in the comforter with only the top of her head poking out from underneath it. Her hair was wild and mussed up from sleep and…well, from everything else they had done the night before besides sleep. It fell over her lightly closed eyes like a messy silver curtain.

Lotor’s stomach flipped, like he was getting ready to board Verbolten all over again.

When he reached out to brush a bit of her hair away, just to get a better look at just how beautiful her sleeping face was, she let out a soft groan and nudged his fingers away. She pressed her face further down into the blankets.

“Nng…” she sighed, brow furrowing. She didn’t even bother opening her eyes. “Wh’time is it…”

He glanced up at the clock on the opposite wall, squinting to make out the hands through the dark. “Somewhere around five,” he mused, and Allura disappeared under the blankets entirely.

“Too early.” Her voice was muffled by fabric and down. “I’m off today. I refuse to get up before sunrise.”

That, he could understand. Respect, even. He followed her lead and snuggled down into the blankets again, scooting closer to her until her arms snaked around his bare waist. Her fingertips against his skin made him shiver in the best possible way. “Sleep in?” he offered.

“Sleep in…”

That sounded awfully good to him too. He let his nose rest against the crown of Allura’s head where it barely peeked out from under the blankets and closed his eyes again.

They dozed off and on until the sun lit up the bedroom, and Lotor woke up to the feeling of something soft and wet pressing against his shoulders, neck and jaw. It was familiar. Pleasant. He glanced down at her and found got a glimpse of her pressing lazy kisses to his skin.

“Morning,” she muttered. “Again.”

And what a lovely morning it was, waking up to Allura kissing along his skin.

It still felt a little like a dream, and not just because he was only half awake and hadn’t had any
coffee. Allura kissing him, her hands wandering over his skin under the blankets, her body warm and inviting and so close to his…it was all too enticing to be real. But it was real. She was here. She was next to him, touching him, without a thing between their bodies except an errant pillow that Allura quickly tossed onto the floor instead when it got in the way.

He really was much more…naked than he’d realized at first. Besides his socks. Which somehow made him feel even more naked than he did without them. He kicked them off and let them drop off the edge of the bed.

Allura’s voice was soft and inviting as she spoke up again: “How are you feeling?” He could feel the words against the crook of his neck more than he heard them, muffled as they were.

“Mmmarvelous…” he sighed, and Allura giggled against him. “Though…I’m just now realizing I haven’t gotten the chance to see you naked in the daylight yet.”

Her giggle turned into a full laugh. “You can fix that easily, you know.”

She was right – he could. And he did, gingerly pulling the covers up to glance down underneath it while Allura snorted in delight. It made heat swell in his chest, seeing their legs intertwined, the curves of her body draped in a soft shadow and just barely kissed by the morning light spilling through the window. Beautiful.

It gave him…ideas.

Instead of putting the covers down again, he dove down underneath them and pressed his lips to Allura’s collarbone, letting his fingers rest against her ribs. “What.” She let out a shaky gasp, still tinged with the edge of her laughter. “Where are you going?”

“On an adventure,” he quipped, and lightly kissed the top of her breasts. He waited there for a moment, letting his thumb stroke over the curve of her waist, looking for any sign of hesitation, but instead of pulling away Allura pressed her hand against the back of his head and let her fingers curl in his messy hair.

He trailed kisses down over her breast, carefully wrapping his lips around her nipple and drawing a quick gasp out of her. “An adventure,” she breathed. “What kind of adventure?”

Instead of answering he popped up from beneath the covers, leaning in to kiss her on those soft, inviting lips of hers. She let out a squeak that made him laugh against her mouth, her fingers tangling in his hair even more. When he pulled away to get his breath back her eyes were glossy and half-lidded, staring up at him from under a fringe of messy bangs.

“Last night,” Lotor breathed, “…was incredible.”

Her smile was wide and sleepy. “I thought so too.”

Lotor leaned in to kiss her again, pressing his lips against the corner of her mouth and letting them trail down over her jaw. Then her neck. He slowly slid down under the covers again, Allura’s fingers following him and staying pressed lazily against his scalp. Her nails scraped lightly against his skin.

His heart pounded as he made his way down across her stomach. It quivered when he brushed over a spot just below her belly button, and a muffled giggle reached him from above the covers. “I told you I’m ticklish.”

“Do you want me to stop?”
Excitement buzzing through every inch of him, he scooted down just a bit more and gently nudged her legs apart, settling between them easily. He paused there a moment, his eyes adjusting to the low light in the sea of blankets.

Well.

He’d gotten this far.

Part of him regretted not asking Zethrid for that advice she had offered him, because as much reading and writing and researching as he had done, it was all very different from sitting there between Allura’s legs, at eye level with the wisps of curly silver hair nestled at the apex of her thighs. Somehow it felt even more intimate than the night before. If that were even possible.

One step at a time, he figured, and he kissed along her thighs as he carefully pressed a finger against her clit.

She moaned – perfect.

He rubbed in slow and careful little circles, pressing gentle kisses against the insides of her thighs. Her encouraging little mewls, the soft skin under his lips, the slickness of her flesh beneath his fingers – it all flooded over him and made his head spin. Just how did another person’s pleasure have so much power over him? He’d never thought he’d understand.

But the noises she made, the way she rocked her hips lazily against his hand…he wanted more. So much more.

He dropped one more kiss to the apex of her thigh before diving in and pressing his tongue against her-

“Ah!”

That noise was different. More of a yelp than a moan. She recoiled from him, only for a moment, before she started laughing breathlessly and pulled up the blankets to look down at him. She reached down to give his arm a reassuring squeeze. “Sorry,” she said. “Surprised me.”

“Not good?” he asked with a grimace, and she shook her head.

“It’s good. It’s just— She caught her lip between her teeth, pink spreading over her cheeks. “Just…a little much. Sensitive.”

Was that not the point? He didn’t quite get the question out, but it must have been written all over his face, because Allura added, “A little too sensitive. Right there at least. Here—“ Her hand moved to his jaw, fingers curling against his skin as she guided him back down between her legs. He was all too eager to follow her lead, letting her tilt his head where she needed it. “Try there. Just a little higher. Not quite as…direct.”

She giggled on the edge of her words, hands pulling away and leaving him there between her thighs. He pressed forward, flattening his tongue against her again-

“Mmm…better,” Allura sighed. Lotor’s heart swelled. “Just keep…doing that.”

That, he could do.
He let his fingers curl against her legs, thumbs brushing her skin in soothing little circles as he hummed against her. Her thighs against his shoulders was addicting, the taste of her strangely pleasant, and *sounds* she made when he managed to find his rhythm were nothing short of incredible. So much so much so that he had to say something.

“Mmm hmm mmf.”

“What?” Allura said on a gasp, tugging the blankets up away from him just enough to glance down the length of her body and catch his eye. Her face was flushed and pink, the morning sun highlighting the deep rosy tint in her cheeks.

Lotor grinned. “You taste amazing.”

Her blush deepened. “I was worried I needed a shower…”

He dropped another kiss to the soft skin of her thigh and shook his head, catching a glimpse of her biting her bottom lip as he got back to work.

“L-Lotor,” he heard her gasp when he pulled away to steal another breath. Her voice was shaky. *Desperate.* Her fingers curled against the nape of his neck, nails digging into his skin when he got his lips around her clit again. “Ah – I want…nh…I want you to – oh!”

Her hand moved, pressing against the crown of his head and pushing him down and away. He popped up from under the blankets to find her panting and flushed, smiling at him crookedly. “You want me to stop?”

“No stop,” she sighed. “Just wanted…something else.”

He blinked, and Allura let out a breathless laugh as she tugged him in for a kiss, her arms wrapping around his shoulders and tangling in his hair. Her thigh pressed up between his legs and-

“Ah!”

Her laugh turned into a giggle as she gazed up at him demurely from under her lashes and bangs. “Condoms are still in the living room,” she told him.

Without a second thought, he replied, “I’ll get them.”

The cool air hit him like a full-body punch as he tossed off the blankets and made a bee-line toward the door, but he’d barely gotten to his feet when Allura let out a gasp. “Oh – *oh my God-*”

He turned, facing her. Naked as the day he was born with his eyes wide and curious. “What?”

“What is *that*?” She pressed her palms against her mouth, barely concealing a wicked grin. “Is that…you have a tattoo?”

Oh.

“On your *ass*?”

*Oh.*

As hot as his face got, he was surprised his erection didn’t deflate right then and there. “I…guess I never had the chance to mention it.”

Allura – bless her – choked down her laughter as best she could. “And I guess I was a little too
distracted to see much of it last night.”

Thank *God*, because he couldn’t think of many things that could have killed the mood faster than her seeing that haunting mistake: a pair of rosy red lips on his left cheek, like someone had plastered on too many layers of gloss and planted a kiss right there on his skin not thirty seconds ago. He sighed, his shoulders slumping. “There’s a reason I stay away from gin.”

“You got drunk and Ezor talked you into it?” she offered.

“No.” He turned on his heel and made a hasty retreat just as she snorted against her hand. “It was Acxa’s idea.”

Allura’s delighted cackling echoed through the living room as he quickly snatched the condoms from the coffee table and hurried back to the warm embrace of her bed. Her body shuddered against his with the last few peals of laughter as she caught her breath.

“I think it’s cute,” she told him.

“Liar.”

“Really!” She pressed her hands against his chest, rolling them over until his back hit the sheets. A wicked little smirk stretched across her face as she straddled him. “But if you want me to forget about that little kissy-mark on your ass—” Lotor groaned. “—you’ll just have to distract me again.” She planted a playful little kiss on the tip of his nose. “Like you did last night.”

He could see to that, Lotor thought, and for the next few lazy hours he made damn sure that Allura was *thoroughly* distracted.

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It was well into the afternoon when Allura made her way downstairs. Later than she’d realized. Probably because she’d been too busy wearing out her mattress springs with Lotor and lazily dozing between rounds to watch the clock.

Her knees felt like jell-o as she headed down the stairs, and even up in a haphazard ponytail her hair was a tangled mess. But she couldn’t find it in her to care. Not when she felt like her afterglow was *radiating* off of her like a beacon. Hell, anyone who looked at her could probably feel it from ten feet away.

They’d made a damn good dent in that box of condoms. After a morning like *that*, anyone would have floated down the stairs with a goofy, dreamy smile plastered on their face.

She let out a happy little sigh as she opened her mailbox and lazily thumbed through the envelopes inside. Even spam couldn’t touch her *spectacular* mood.

“Wow,” a voice chimed from the stairwell, “Someone’s getting a late start today.”

Allura turned, sluggishly. Like she was still drunk from the night before. Acxa smiled at her breezily and glanced down at the pajama pants and T-shirt Allura was still sporting. The first thing she’d found to throw on. Picked up off her bedroom floor.

A moot point considering that she was planning on taking it off the second she got back upstairs anyway.

“I…” She blinked. Forget drunk – she felt *high*. Whatever she was planning on saying got lost in a dreamy little giggle. “I guess so.”
Acxa’s brows rose. “Wow,” she said again. “Look at you…you get laid last night or what?” Her eyes widened to catch up with her eyebrows a moment later. “Holy shit – you did, didn’t you?”

She didn’t bother fighting back a blush, reaching up out of habit to brush back a loose strand of hair. Like it would make the truth any less obvious. “Well…”

“Don’t worry,” Acxa snorted. “I’m not gonna ask for all the intimate little details. I’m not Ezor. I have some restraint.” She smirked. “Though Zethrid does owe me fifty bucks.”

Seemed Hunk and Keith weren’t the only ones who made a habit out of betting on other peoples’ love lives.

“Did you…spend the night?” Allura asked her.

“Seems like every New Year’s Eve one of us winds up passing out on the other’s couch.” She stretched out her back with a groan. “Unluckily for me, Zethrid and Ezor don’t have a futon, and Narti beat me in rock-paper-scissors and won the rights to the couch. So while you were getting cozy with your boyfriend and his virginity, I slept on their floor.”

Allura’s stomach did an anxious little flip. “You ah…you didn’t…um…hear anything…did you?”

Acxa froze mid-stretch, staring at her for a solid five seconds before breaking out into a peal of laughter that echoed up the stairs. “God no! The walls aren’t that thin, even in this old place. Relax, whatever crazy stuff you guys got up to, it didn’t wake us up.”

“It wasn’t that crazy,” she muttered. Though she swore their last round had shifted her bed a few inches from the wall. Maybe that was all in her head. She just hoped she hadn’t cost herself her security deposit. “Just when do you plan on collecting on your bet?”

Acxa smirked. “For your sake, I can wait a few days for my money. Don’t want anybody knocking down your door and keeping you from getting any more of those-” She gestured at Allura’s neck, and suddenly Allura was wondering just how many hickies she had there.

She was going to have to be particularly liberal with her concealer before work in the morning.

“Go on,” Acxa insisted. “Don’t let me kill your afterglow.”

“Right-“ She headed for the stairs again, barely managing to get out a clumsy little “Thank you” before she rounded the corner.

Thank God Ezor and Zethrid seemed to be sleeping well into the afternoon after getting themselves thoroughly drunk the night before. She could only imagine the excited prodding and giggling she would have had to deal with if she’d run into them in the hallway on her way back up. Especially without anything to hide the darkening marks on her neck. But she made it back up to her door in record time and opened it to the smell of eggs and bacon sizzling on the stove. And coffee brewing.

“You made coffee,” she sighed, and she swore she was falling in love all over again. “You’re making breakfast.”

Lotor beamed at her from behind the counter. “Figured you’d be hungry.” God, had his voice always been that rough? Or was it just from…overuse? If his sounded like that, she could only imagine how her own was. “I hope you like over easy.”

“I’ll eat anything at this point.”
He had tugged on his shirt from the night before – a smart move when frying bacon – but he’d left his pants strewn on the living room floor, leaving his muscular thighs on full display. His underwear covered that tattoo, unfortunately. Or maybe fortunately. She didn’t think she’d ever be able to look at it with a straight face.

He looked like he could read her mind. “I lost a bet with Acxa,” he sighed. “I was young and stupid and broke. And drunk. I don’t even remember what the bet was, but I remember downing a gin and tonic and telling her to kiss my ass.”

Allura barely held in a snort. “I guess she made you eat those words.”

He groaned and dropped a few slices of bacon onto her plate. “Have pity.”

Allura barely held in a snort. “I guess she made you eat those words.”

The smell of freshly fallen snow filled the room, every muscle in her body so relaxed she felt like she could melt into the table. They ate in comfortable silence, knees brushing, gazes catching each other’s eyes every few bites and drawing out shy and playful little smiles. It was perfect. Everything she could ever have asked for.

Breakfast and sex. Lots of sex. With the very real possibility of more in the near future. Though maybe they both needed a break for at least a few hours. They were only human. And…

“I told you I loved you last night,” Lotor mused, quietly. He barely sounded like he knew he was saying it at all. A half-eaten strip of bacon hovered just an inch or so from his mouth as he glanced at her. “I really…did that.”

“So did I,” she reminded him, offering him a smile and reaching for his arm. “And I meant it.”

“I know you did.” His smile spread across his face, genuine and sweet. “I did too. It’s just…I’ve never really…said that to anyone before.”

She blinked at him. “Not anyone?”

“No,” he said with a shake of his head. “I care about my friends…but you’re the first person I’ve felt like this about. And the first person I’ve really said those words to.” He swallowed another small bite of his food, roughly. His hand found hers and squeezed. “You’re my first for a lot of things.”

A flush spread across her cheeks, her ears, the bridge of her nose – it heated up her face despite the draft. “I’m glad I am,” she breathed, choosing her words carefully. It was odd, being someone’s first. First date, first kiss, first lover. She’d thought it would come with too much added pressure for her to handle. But now she was starting to realize she didn’t mind it so much. In fact, it felt like something precious.

“I’m glad you are too,” Lotor whispered. "I can't think of anyone else I'd rather be snowed in with.”

He let his thumb stroke over her knuckles as he leaned in to press a kiss to the corner of her mouth.
They lingered there, indulging in the connection for a few moments before he pulled away and grinned. His eyes darted over to the window. “It’s funny…while you were downstairs I kept looking outside and wondering when the last time was it snowed this much here.”

Allura giggled. “It seems like the perfect day for snuggling under a blanket with some hot chocolate.”

“Or a good book.”

“Or a Star Trek marathon.”

“Or a snowball fight,” Lotor chuckled, and Allura shot to her feet, grinning widely.

“A snowball fight?” she squealed. “I can’t even remember the last time I made a snowball! Or a snowman! Or even a snow angel!”

Lotor’s chuckle turned into a laugh, low and warm. “Do you want to build a snowman?”

“I want to see how well you hold your own in a snowball fight,” she said, smirking and tugging on his arm until he stood up to join her. “And then we can build a snowman. And then after we get ourselves cold and wet we can come back here and figure out the best way to…warm up.”

For good measure, she pecked him on the cheek, pride simmering in her chest as his skin heated up under her lips.

“Alright,” he finally said, a crooked smile on his face and an excited little waver in his voice. “Snowball fight it is.” He leveled her with a wicked smile that got her legs wobbling all over again. God, when had he learned how to do that? “But I don’t plan on going easy on you.”

“Please,” she breathed as she tugged him toward the door. “When have you ever?”
Thanks for being patient as always y'all <3

Full disclosure, I went back and forth on this chapter a bit. I had it in my head for a while, but given certain...recent events I wasn't sure if it was the right direction to go in. That being said, I've updated with a new tag or two to be on the safe side, because making sure everyone is comfy is more important to me than spoilers.

Slowly, the snow melted into a few sad, dirty little piles by the side of the road, until the snowman they had built and the snow angels they had carved into the modest yard outside the apartment building were completely unrecognizable. It was usually Allura's least favorite part of the winter, when everything looked cold and wet and gloomy. But this year, she didn't have it in her to care. Lotor kept her far too distracted for that.

Distracted with kisses, with orgasms, with breakfast in bed. With tea and plain toast on Valentine’s Day when food poisoning ruined their plans to go out to a fancy dinner, and with a delicious homecooked meal to make up for it when she could eat real food again. She was gloriously, beautifully distracted, until the snow melted for good and she was finally able to put away her winter clothes in the back of her closet for next year.

"I think I want to paint my living room," she mused as she plopped down next to him on his couch, listening to the clack clack clack of his fingers flying over the keyboard.

"Mm," he hummed as he typed. His brow was furrowed as he stared at the screen.

"I think lilac would look nice."

"Mhm."

She glanced over at him, catching the glint of the laptop screen's reflection in his glasses. They were perched precariously on the tip of his nose, seemingly just a breath or two away from falling into his lap, but he didn't seem to notice or care.

She leaned over his shoulder to look at his screen, stomach doing an excited little flip when she recognized the names. "How far are you in your book now?"

That made him perk up, and he finally seemed to realize that his glasses were about to fall off and pushed them up to the bridge of his nose again. He smiled at her. "Further than I ever thought I'd get a few months ago." His smile slowly turned into a smirk. "They've finally made it to the gates of Oriande."

"Oriande?" She had to resist the urge to grab him. If she knocked his laptop onto the coffee table in her excitement she'd never forgive herself. "Really?"

"Really."

Finally, he turned to look at her, and she couldn't help but steal a glimpse at his screen. There it was
Lotor tugged the laptop away. “No peeking!” he insisted with a huff.

“Why?” Allura insisted, pouting. “Don’t I get special privileges as your girlfriend?”

Lotor tried very hard to cover his smile. He failed miserably. “No,” he told her nonetheless. “You’ll have to wait like everyone else.”

That just wouldn’t do.

“Pleeeeeease?” She leaned in close, eyes wide and pleading. It had always worked on her father, on Coran, on her roommates in graduate school when she needed someone else to do the dishes…She had had years to perfect her technique. “Can’t you please just give me a little taste of what’s in your book? I’ve been waiting so very long…”

Lotor sighed. “Don’t remind me…”

Alright, maybe the guilt-trip wasn’t the best route. She quickly changed tactics.

“Well…what if you read some to me? Out loud?” She grinned. “That’s supposed to help the whole process, isn’t it? Reading things out loud?”

For a moment or two, he looked thoughtful. Giddiness flared up in Allura’s chest. Maybe there was a chance this could work after all. She could hardly believe it.

He stroked his chin, brow furrowed like it had been when he’d been concentrating so hard on his screen before. “Well…it does help iron out the dialogue…and Zethrid and Ezor haven’t let me read anything out to them since halfway through the first book.” He reached up and straightened his glasses, eyes suddenly gleaming with excitement. “If you swear to keep it to yourself…I don’t want spoilers getting out.”

“As if I’m going to run to the tabloids with all the juicy details,” she giggled, and she drew a wide X shape over her chest. “Cross my heart and hope to be fed to the weblum.”

“Now that is an impressive reference,” Lotor laughed. He adjusted his laptop in his lap, letting her settle in against his side as he scrolled up to the top of the page. Allura’s excitement mounted until she felt like she was about to burst – like a child on Christmas morning.

The first taste of the final book…the culmination of the series she’d devoured over and over again for years before. And it was just for her alone. Nobody else. She felt like she was floating.

Lotor cleared his throat.

Arus stepped off the ship onto the soft, silver grass that blanketed the land before them, stretching out as far as they could see in every direction. It was a sea of sparkling white beneath the expanse of lavender sky, so beautiful that she nearly forgot to breathe. This was like her dreams, exactly as she had always imagined and more, as breathtaking as the legends said.

And even better still, because she had made it here with him at her side. Drule’s hand was a firm, ever-present pressure on her arm, grounding her even as he too let himself get lost in the ethereal beauty of this sacred place.
“Are we truly here?” she breathed, almost like a prayer. “Is this real? Oriande…here in front of us…” She turned to face him, taking his hands in hers and smiling brightly. The lilac skies reflected in her eyes, dancing there and lighting up her face until she was just as breathtaking as the horizon. “We made it. We truly made it! You and I, together.”

Drule’s fingers curled against hers, holding her tight. “I could not have done it without you, my princess.”

Allura nudged him, smiling. “I like that he calls her that,” she said. “My princess. It has a ring to it.”

“You think?” Lotor chuckled. “I had a feeling you might like it.” His eyes flicked down at her shirt…that damn shirt…bedazzled with those vibrant pink letters across the back of it spelling out her old college nickname.

She really ought to send this thing to Goodwill, but then again she doubted anyone else would want it.

Instead of lingering on it, she nudged him. “Keep going?”

“I still need to fill in some gaps…”

“It’s fine. Whatever you want to share.”

Truth be told, there was just something addictive about hearing him read the words out loud. It sent the best kind of shiver down her spine.

Arus tugged him forward, bidding him to follow her as she made her way across the gleaming expanse of grass. Before them, the temple of the ancients stretched high into the sky, its twisting spires and golden towers reflected in a pool at its base. The water here was as smooth as glass.

“No one has set foot on this place for millenia,” Drule sighed as he stared up at the tallest point of the spire. The sun was at its zenith just above it, as if speared by the point as it reached toward the heavens. “For so long I’ve dreamed of it...of walking where the ancients walked and learning all they had to teach. And yet...now that we’re here...there’s so much more that I want.”

Slowly, Arus turned to look at him and found him leaning close, his eyes wide and searching. Her heart leaped in her chest. “What is it that you want?”

His claws slowly blazed a gentle trail up her arm until he cupped her jaw in his palm, and for that moment, he let her see him. All of him. All of the uncertainty and fear and love that he so often kept locked behind his stoic, unbreakable walls. There was a softness to him, lit up by the swirling lilac clouds above. It was as if the light of Oriande’s sun illuminated the truest parts of him for only her to see.

“You, my princess,” he finally said. “I want you. Always. Does that make me selfish? To want you so deeply?”

Allura let out a shaky little breath and glanced up at him again, and she almost fainted right there on the spot when she found him looking at her. His eyes were gleaming behind his glasses, his hair falling into his face from his neglected ponytail, and there was a flush high on his cheeks.

Softly, she told him, “Keep going.” More of a plea than anything else. And before she’d even realized she was doing it, her hand wandered over her own thigh, settling down between her legs and pressing gently up between them.
Lotor’s eyes flicked down towards it for a moment, and then back to the screen again. He swallowed and did as she asked.

“No,” Arus said, her own hand mirroring his and flattening against the line of his jaw. “And if you are, then so am I for wanting you just as much.”

A smirk flashed across Drule’s face. “As if you ever could.”

“Do you doubt me?”

“Never.”

“Good.” Her other hand had joined her first on the other side of his face, and he turned to press a kiss to her palm, her wrist, her forearm. Finally, when her wanting boiled over and she couldn’t take it any longer, she tugged him close and he kissed her properly.

He kissed her with all the desire that had raged within him for so long – as if she was his peace, his victory, his Oriande. Everything he had ever wanted. He kissed her until the silver grass and swirling clouds and looming towers melted away, and he found that he could have been happy with just as much. If Oriande had faded and left them floating in space with nothing but each other, his heart could have been gloriously, blissfully happy.

She tugged him down into the grass, let him settle against the warmth of her body and held him tight until they were both flushed and panting as they broke away for breath.

“Mate me,” she pleaded, eyes half lidded and swimming with desire.

“Here?” He blinked.

“Here.” Her hands tugged at his belt. “Now.”

Here they were, on the cusp of finding everything they had spent their lives searching for, and she wanted him more than anything else. Perhaps they were both selfish. The thought made him smirk.

He leaned in to nip at her neck. “As my princess commands.”

Allura’s mouth had gone painfully dry. God, those last few words seemed to echo in her head and made her all too aware of how it was taking everything in her not to grind up against her own hand. “And then?” she prompted, so breathless it was embarrassing.

“I ah…” Lotor’s voice was almost as rough as hers. He cleared his throat and removed his glasses, folding them and dropping them on the coffee table next to his laptop. “I haven’t written any more yet.”

“But what happens?” She scooted closer, not caring how red she knew her face was or how desperate she sounded. She was desperate, dammit, and if Lotor didn’t take pity on her she was going to go crazy. “You must know. Even if you haven’t written it, can’t you just…tell me? You know…” Her face blazed even hotter. She felt ridiculous, but she couldn’t help herself. “Can’t you…describe it?”

Lotor glanced down at her hand where it was still pressed unashamedly against between her legs over her shorts. He looked up again to meet her eye, turning his body to face her and leaning in until she felt the heat of his body against hers. “Well…I have this picture in my mind of them splayed out in the grass by the water…Drule likes to be quite dominant much of the time, but he has a gentle side to him, you know? And more than anything he adores giving Arus pleasure…”
On a shaky exhale, Allura nodded. “Uh-huh…”

“So he’d probably start by…kissing along her jaw.” His breath was hot against her neck, and she could feel his lips moving there against her skin as he spoke. She shivered as he smirked. “Careful of his fangs…wouldn’t want to go leaving any marks on her beautiful skin.”

“Maybe she wants him to leave a few marks,” she challenged, and Lotor hummed appreciatively. His hand wandered down between her legs to fold over her own, pressing it against the elastic of her shorts until she finally threw her willpower out the window and slid under the band to get her fingers against her clit. “Keep going.”

He did. Thank God.

She got a good look at his face as he leaned back and stared down at her, eyes gleaming. “He’d probably say something like…’how may I serve you, my princess?’”

Allura damn near melted right then and there. “Please tell me you have a condom,” she groaned.

His face fell. “Oh…ah…no…I think we used the last one the other night.”

Dammit dammit dammit.

She pushed herself up off the couch, forcing her hand out from between her legs so she could stand and fumble with her shirt. “Well I’m going to get some.”

“Now?”

“Now.”

Lotor blinked at her, face flushed. He swallowed. “Can you make it quick?”

As if she was going to dawdle when she was almost too turned on to function. She leaned down, tugging him toward her by the collar and planting a long, messy, open-mouthed kiss on his lips. Hopefully that would answer his question.

God help her if there was a line at the pharmacy. She would shoplift a box of Trojans and deal with the fallout later if it came to that.

Allura must have looked as desperate and disheveled as she felt, because the moment she stumbled through the doors of the Walgreens down the street, the poor cashier standing by the photo printing desk looked at her like she had turned green and grown a second head. She couldn’t blame the girl – she hadn’t bothered brushing her hair. Hadn’t even put on a bra. She’d tugged on the first sweatshirt she found, no matter how little the warm evening called for it and headed out the door on a mission.

She wasted no time making a bee-line straight for the aisle she needed. The way her and Lotor had been going at it the past few months, she practically had the route to the condoms memorized by now.

It was hard to believe the man had been a virgin when they’d met. Demisexual or not, the man had given her more orgasms than she’d ever had in her life and seemed to love every damn second of it. And those thoughts weren’t helping her concentrate.

Here they were – just what she needed. She reached out, grabbed a pack, and started to make her way back to the front when-
“Allura!”

She nearly slammed right into Ezor’s beaming face when she rounded the corner, stumbling into a display of gummy worms and disposable cameras. “E-Ezor?”

“Small world, huh?” she grinned. “Here I thought I wasn’t gonna have anyone around to stop me from buying one of those big chocolate bunnies. Looks like it’s all you now.” She leaned in close, suddenly all business. “Don’t let me near those things. Zethrid will pitch a fit if I bring too much refined sugar into our apartment.”

“Er…”

“I’m kidding! Not about Zethrid getting pissy about carbs, but she couldn’t stop me from buying chocolate if she tried. Especially not now. A girl’s desperate here.”

That made two of them. Well, not for chocolate, but Allura was still seriously considering shoving the condoms under her shirt and making a run for it if it got her back to the apartment any faster.

Ezor didn’t seem to be in any hurry though – she tore open the chocolate bar in her hand and took a generous bite. “Want some?”

“Should you be…eating that?”

“I’m gonna pay for it anyway. What difference does it make?”

Allura wasn’t entirely sure about that, but she had gone to graduate school for business, not law. And the cashier seemed to have better things to do than stop her. But just before Allura tried to nudge her way around where Ezor was insistently holding out the bitten end of a Snickers bar, Ezor fell in step beside her.

“Ya know,” she said around a mouthful of chocolate and peanuts, “I think it’s gotta be some kind of fate that we keep running into each other.”

Allura rose a brow at her. “Fate?”

“Yeah!” Ezor snorted and smirked, giving her a pat so firm it almost knocked the condoms right out of her hands. “And don’t worry, that’s not a line. I’d never try and steal you from Lotor. Not when you guys are so disgustingly, tragically adorable together.”

“Tragically?” Allura scoffed, smiling before she could help it. “You make it sound like we’re in some kind of awful Shakespeare play.”

“Well to be fair, I did kinda figure trees would start walking before Lotor ever got a girl like you.” She took another greedy bite of her candy bar, and the cashier barely glanced at her before looking away again. “I always sort of wondered about him. Always acting like such a walking cliché with the whole…tortured soul thing.”

“I’ve never thought of him as a tortured soul,” Allura mused. “Sure, maybe he can get a little surly if he has a bad case of writers’ block, but—”

“I dunno, maybe tortured isn’t the right word.” She tapped the Snickers bar against her chin, leaving a little chocolate dimple there under her lip. Allura started to say something and then thought better of it. “But you know…between his dad and his mom and Dayak—" She shivered. “I guess it’s just kinda nice to finally see this patchwork family of ours growing again.”
Allura couldn’t help but perk up at that. “Family?” Her face began to warm, for a different reason than it had been earlier. It spread all the way across her cheeks and up to the tips of her ears, setting off a gentle little buzz in her chest. “You…think of me as part of your family?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Ezor messily rubbed off the chocolate she’d gotten on her face and finished off the rest of her chocolate bar before dropping the wrapper into her basket. “Maybe it really is fate, you know? Or cupid, or a guardian angel, or whatever you want to call it. Whatever it is, I’m glad you guys are joined at the hip the way you are.”

Finally, Ezor’s eyes tracked down to the box in Allura’s hands, and she smirked.

“In more ways than one, huh?”

“Oh! Ah…well…”

“Don’t let me get in your way. At least you have more fun plans for tonight than I do.” Sighing, she reached over Allura’s shoulder to grab a box of tampons and dropped it on top of the small mound of – yet unwrapped – chocolate bars sitting in her shopping basket. “Now where’s the damn Midol…Zethrid used the last of it…God, why do I love her so much? I don’t get it?”

Ezor wandered away with a sweet wave, muttering as she reached for a second candy bar. Hopefully she would make good on her promise to pay for those, or at least make it to the register before she ate the rest of them.

Come to think of it, though, Allura had been meaning to stock up on tampons herself too. Between work and Lotor and all of her spring cleaning she’d completely forgotten.

For…longer than she’d realized.

Longer than she should have.

Her stomach started a slow, sickening descent toward her feet. Numbly, she pulled out her phone. Flipped over to her calendar.

She almost dropped the damn thing. In fact, she did drop the condoms. No…no, that couldn’t be right. Her calendar had to be off. Or she was remembering wrong. Or she was dreaming. Something didn’t add up, and it couldn’t be-

“Allura?” Ezor called from the end of the aisle, a Kit-Kat bar hovering an inch or so from her mouth. “You okay?”

“F-fine!” she heard herself call as she shoved her phone back into her pocket, left the damn condoms right there on the floor, and made a bee-line for the doors. But something stopped her as she made it to the parking lot. A nagging little voice in the back of her head that made her freeze right there on the spot and go back in.

Back to the aisle where the damn condoms were still sitting there on the floor. She ignored them. On autopilot, she grabbed a pregnancy test instead and wandered up to the cashier. She swiped her card without looking at him and almost didn’t see Ezor’s eyes go wide.

“Holy shit,” Ezor breathed as her eyes jumped between Allura’s face and the box as the cashier dropped it into a plastic bag and handed it over. “A-Allura…is that what I think it-“

She didn’t say a word. She couldn’t. Her throat was too dry to get out a single thing, and she was worried that if she tried she’d either cry, vomit, or start laughing hysterically. Maybe some awful
combination of all three. So she ignored her, headed straight out into the parking lot and didn’t look back even when she heard Ezor running to try and catch up to her.

The second Allura was out the door, Lotor got to work in the bedroom – changing the sheets, getting the lighting right, putting on some music that he knew she would like, and even fluffing the pillows for good measure. No easy task with a hard-on tenting his boxers more and more insistently with every passing minute.

He didn’t know what had come over him, reading to her like that, talking the way he had…it had almost felt like he was really on Oriande with her, laying her down to make love to her in the silver grass under the swirling lilac skies.

He almost tripped over his own feet pulling off his shirt and pants. He left his boxers on, tight and constricting as they were. She liked pulling them off herself…

His heart leaped when the door opened again, and he settled back on the pillows, ready and waiting for her, grinning as she stepped around the corner-

Crying.

Why was she crying?

In a flash he was up off the bed again, rushing over to her. Even if it felt ridiculous in nothing but his boxers with John Legend playing in the background. She didn’t seem to care. The second he got over to her she sank against his bare chest, wrapping her arms around him until the plastic bag in her hand whacked against his back.

Worry cinched behind his ribs. “Allura, what’s wrong? What happened?”

She shook her head against his skin, sniffling and desperately trying to pull in a breath. “I…” She let out a sob. “I don’t…I think…I might…”

Carefully, he led her over to the bed, let her sit down on those fresh sheets and fluffed pillows. “Breathe Allura,” he told her, feeling supremely useless. “Are you okay?”

“No.” She groaned. “I don’t know – maybe. Or not. I have no idea. I was at the store and I saw Ezor and she had tampons and my calendar was off so I dropped the condoms and bought this and-“

It all came out in a desperate stream of consciousness, so rapid that Lotor could barely follow, but the moment his eyes followed her gaze down to the bag in her hands the rest of what she was saying didn’t matter. He may as well not have heard it at all. The second he saw a pregnancy test sitting on the sheets, the rest of the world went quiet.

He swallowed. “Oh…oh dear.”

“Yes.” She finally managed to take a steadying breath despite the tear tracks still streaking down her face. “Oh dear.”
I've successfully moved into my new place and hope to try and stick to a more regular writing schedule starting soon. That being said, there are probably only a handful of chapters left. No exact number yet, but I may have the final number before too long...

<3

“So you…” Lotor swallowed, or tried to at least. His throat was hopelessly dry, his mind racing so quickly that he could barely form a coherent thought, let alone a sentence. “You think…you think you ah…you might be…”

Allura just sat on the edge of the bed, staring at her hands like she had been for the last ten minutes in silence. Like both of them had. She finally let out a long, heavy sigh. “I don’t know,” she groaned. “It’s not like we haven’t been careful.”

That seemed like an understatement – they’d gone through condoms faster than they went through milk. And true, there had been a time or two when he had gotten a little over-excited, but neither of them had thought anything of that. Certainly not in the moment. Not when he was fretting over cleaning up her thigh or her stomach. Or one unfortunate time her face.

Before he could stop himself, he blurted out, “Are you sure?”

Her expression turned sour. “Obviously not – I haven’t even taken the test yet.”

“I know, but I just meant…well…you said you were only a week late-“

“Only a week?” she snapped. “Well maybe it doesn’t sound like much to you, but it’s sure as hell significant. My cycle is like clockwork, Lotor. The latest I’ve ever been is three days, when I was studying for my finals my last semester of graduate school. It’s not only a week!” As quickly as her anger had flared up, it fizzled out again, and hid her face in her palms and leaned heavily against him. Dead weight on his shoulder. When she spoke up again, her voice was small and quiet. “I’m sorry…I’m so sorry…I don’t know what to think or do or say or-“

“You don’t need to apologize.” His arms were around her a second later, before he had time to think. “You don’t need to…to say anything…or explain it.” He hesitated a moment, unsure of whether it was worth the risk of upsetting her again. Then he bit his lip and added, “But you…haven’t taken the test yet.”

“I bought it planning to take it before I came back over here,” she groaned. “I didn’t want to worry you until…until I knew there was something to worry about.”

“So there still might not be, a little voice piped in the back of his head.

The bed shifted as Allura slammed her fist down onto the mattress. “Dammit,” she hissed. “Dammit, dammit, dammit – I knew I should have gone back on the pill. I kept meaning to do it and kept putting it off and now-“

“Allura.” His hands rested on her shoulders and waited until he had her eyes on him until he
swallowed and went on: “This isn’t your fault. None of it. No matter what…” His tongue felt heavy and clumsy and so dry he could barely stand it, but he pushed on. “-no matter what that test says, or what you decide to do. I’m not going anywhere, Allura.”

Her eyes were wide and searching as he reached up and tucked a bit of her hair behind her ear, and her fingers curled against his wrist like she was weakly trying to find something to ground her. He let his palm rest against her cheek and felt her sigh. It shook her entire body, seemingly down to her bones.

“I should…take the damn test.”

Yes, he thought. At this point he was ready and willing to pee on the stick himself if it would do any good. Allura stood on unsteady legs, shuffling toward the bathroom like a woman walking to her execution with the box tucked tightly against her chest. She turned and cast him one last terrified glance over shoulder.

“Wait out here?” she asked, so softly he barely heard her. He only nodded. He couldn’t do much else. He worried if he tried to talk he’d wind up vomiting all over the bedroom floor.

And as awful as it was to see her normally bright and vibrant eyes so cast over and heavy with uncertainty and fear, the silence that followed after she closed the bathroom door behind her was about a million times worse. It was a stifling, choking kind of quiet that made him feel like he’d go mad if he didn’t get up and move. Twiddling his thumbs didn’t help. Toying with the hem of the sweatpants he’d thrown on – inside-out no less – didn’t help. So as a last resort he got up from the bed and started to pace.

Back and forth, back and forth, until his phone buzzed on the bedside table. Numbly, he looked at it. It was a text from Zethrid. Three simple words: You’re pacing again.

And then a moment later: What’s going on?

It would have been easy to lie, to tell her he was working on his book and the ideas just weren’t coming. It had happened about a hundred times before and she wouldn’t have given it a second thought. It would have been even easier to ignore it, but then again leaving her on “read” might just pique her suspicion and if she was bored enough she might actually come knock on his door.

He barely felt his own fingers moving as he started to type, not even thinking about the words coming up on the screen: Allura might be pregnant.

Delete.

Allura thinks she’s pregnant.

Delete.

Allura’s taking a pregnancy test.

Delete, delete, delete.

A lie wouldn’t work. He couldn’t quiet his brain for long enough to come up with anything. He could picture Zethrid watching the screen, seeing those obnoxious little typing dots appear and disappear and reappear and disappear over and over again. He had to say something. Anything.

Then her name popped up on his screen again. A call this time. His hand shook as he answered it
before he could think.

The first words out of Zethrid’s mouth on the other end, before he could get a single thing out himself, were: “Is Allura pregnant?”

He stood there in the middle of his bedroom, barefoot and shirtless in a pair of sagging inside-out sweatpants with a damn *Fresh Linen* scented candle burning on his desk, and for a moment all he could do was open and close his mouth in silence like a beached fish.

“Dude,” Zethrid insisted, sounding frantic. “Ezor just got back and she’s *beside* herself, going on about a pregnancy test, and now you’re *pacing* and leaving me on read? What’s going on?”

And then, in the background, like she was wrestling the phone away, Ezor shrieked, “Lotor, I swear if you went in bareback and knocked that girl up-”

“Nobody went in *bareback*!” he blurted, the first thing he’d managed to say through this whole exchange. He groaned as he sank down on the floor with his back against the foot of the bed and his head between his knees. Breathing in…breathe out… “She’s…taking the test now.”

“Holy shit.”

Whether that was Zethrid or Ezor he couldn’t exactly tell. Not like it mattered.

“Lotor-“ Zethrid now, her voice strangely level. “She thinks she might be pregnant?”

“I don’t know,” he sighed. “I don’t *know*. Neither of us do. Not until that damn test comes out, and I don’t even know how long that’s supposed to take. But her period is late. *Very* late, apparently…”

“Holy *shit.*” That was definitely Ezor’s voice, followed a moment later by a scuffle as she was shoved away from the receiver again.

“But you wrapped it up, right?” Zethrid said. “You’re not that stupid.”

“Of course I-“ He pinched the bridge of his nose in his fingers to stave off a growing headache. “We were careful. Of course we were. I didn’t even think this could…I never thought I’d be…that she’d be…”

The air was too thick, his lungs too small, and the carpet felt like it was on fire and ready to swallow him up. His breath shuddered on its way in, cutting and stabbing like a million little needles as it went. His heart was pounding so forcefully it drowned out everything else. So quickly it felt like a misfiring engine in his chest. Breathe in, breathe *out*, dammit – why was it so hard to just take a breath?

“Oh-“ Zethrid cursed to herself on the other end, but Lotor barely registered anything she said. “Shit, are you panicking? Is this bad? It’s bad isn’t it? Should I get Acxa on the phone-“

“No,” he forced out as his whole body shivered. “No, I don’t need Acxa.”

“Acxa is better at this than I am.”

“I don’t *need* Acxa.”

“You need something,” she insisted. “Lotor…what can I do? Anything. Should I come up there?”

He tucked his head lower between his knees, trying to visualize a rolling wave. Breathe in…breathe out…up across the sand and back out to sea. He stared at the carpet under his feet and silently
counted the pieces of lint in his shadow.

Ocean waves.

Counting lint.

Breathe in…

Zethrid sighed on her end. “It’s gonna be okay, you know. You guys…you’re both gonna be okay.”

He let his breath out in one long exhale. The wave rolled out to sea. He’d counted eighteen lint pieces in the carpet, and he silently chided himself for going so long without vacuuming. “I’ll be fine.” The bathroom door unlatched and his breath almost leaped into his throat as he scrambled to his feet. “I need to go.”

“Lotor-“

He hung up and left his phone on the carpet as he stood up and went to her. His legs felt numb, his eyes fixed on the tiny white plastic stick in her hands. Tear tracks still stained her cheeks, even though they looked like she’d been spending the last several minutes trying to wipe them away.

“Allura…”

She sniffled and let out a shuddering breath.

“Allura, did you-“

“Damn thing takes forever to develop,” she sighed, waving the stick in front of her in an exasperated arc. “Felt like I was in there staring at it for an eternity and it’s still not…” She trailed off instead of finishing her sentence, closing the distance between them and pressing herself against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her.

“So you…” He swallowed. “You don’t have an answer yet.”

“No. Not yet.” Allura glanced up at him. “I heard you talking to Zethrid. Is she worried about you?”

“I’m sorry…she called. I didn’t tell her – she already knew-“

“It’s okay.” Her voice was oddly calm and quiet, like she’d just gone numb to everything happening around her. She squeezed him tighter. “Ezor saw me at the store. Saw the test when I bought it. I didn’t stick around to talk to her after that. Probably freaked her out…Poor thing…”

In spite of everything that was going on, Lotor managed a smile. “Look at you,” he said as he stroked her hair, smoothing down the fly-aways curling up from her scalp. “Even with all this happening you’re still worried about someone else. Me, Ezor…”

“You’re shaking.”

Was he? Of course he was. He looked down again and found her gazing up at him with fresh tears prickling in the corner of her eyes. “I…I’m fine.” Strangely, his hand shook a little less when he reached up to press it against the curve of her jaw. “Really…I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not,” she insisted. “You’re scared. Terrified. Because so am I.” She sank down onto the edge of the bed again, wiping away the tears that escaped down her cheeks. “I don’t think I’ve ever been this scared in my life. I never thought I’d ever be in a situation like this. I always thought I was too smart and careful and cautious for that, but what do I know?”
He fumbled for her hand and gave it a firm squeeze. “Allura…”

“I know, I know it’s ridiculous to think like that.”

“It’s not ridiculous.”

“But it feels ridiculous! And do you know what’s even more ridiculous? What’s so absolutely crazy about this whole thing is that more than anything else right now I just want to talk to my mother…”

Those words hung there in the air between them for a few moments, and with each passing second they seemed to weigh Allura down more and more until she muffled a sob into her hands. The pregnancy test sat on the sheets between them, so small and unassuming that Lotor could have mistaken it for a forgotten piece of trash if he didn’t know better.

He didn’t say anything else as she cried, but he rubbed slow and careful circles against her back and let her sniffle and hiccup until she finally rested her chin on her palms and said, “She would understand, you know. All this. She went through it too. With me.”

Lotor blinked. “You…”

“I wasn’t planned. Not exactly. My parents wanted children, but not quite yet. They weren’t ready. And then I came along.” She let out a watery laugh. “I guess all things considered it worked out for the best. Got lucky, I suppose.”

Lotor let his thumb track along the soft material of her shirt. Breathe in…breathe out…

“My parents didn’t even think they could have children,” he finally said, and he felt her eyes on him before he saw them. “I guess that also makes me a surprise.”

“Fitting,” she finally sighed.

“Allura—” He found her hands again and held her gaze. “I meant what I said. If you are…” Breathe in… “pregnant. If you are, you have me. Whatever you want to do…” Breathe out… “You have me, Allura.”

She caught her lip between her teeth, staring up at him and squeezing the life out of his hands like they were the only things grounding her. Her phone alarm blaring from her pocket made them both jump, and he swore he could see Allura’s stomach drop the same moment his own did.

“That’s the timer,” she said, matter-of-factly, as her gaze shifted down toward the unassuming little test on the bed. She took a breath…let it out… “I…I don’t know if I can.”

“Do you want me to—”

“No—” She grabbed it. “No, I’ll—”

She held it up. Stared at it. Didn’t say a word.

Lotor felt like he was cresting the first hill of Verbolten, staring down into the darkness of the harrowing drop, wondering when it was coming. Hanging there in limbo. And then—

“It’s negative.”

“Wh…what?”

She turned it so that he could see, and there it was – right there on the easy-to-read digital display.
Not pregnant. He stared at it for a solid five seconds before Allura dropped it on the carpet and pitched forward against his chest to let out a heavy, wracking sob that shook her entire body and his. “N-negative…oh my god…oh god, it’s negative…”

She said that over and over and over, like a mantra. The whole time, he held her tight and let her cry and breathed in the scent of her hair to keep himself from floating away.

Neither of them slept much that night.

They moved to the living room floor and put on an episode of something quiet and British, and they let Victorian-era aristocrats bicker and mutter about each other in the background while they lay on a haphazard nest of pillows on Lotor’s carpet. Allura curled up against him, her head on his chest and his hand around her waist.

Like a sick, cosmic joke, her period had made its belated appearance right as she’d gotten up to throw that damn test in the trash. At the very least she was spared the cramps and breakouts that usually came with it – it was the least Mother Nature could do for her.

They barely moved or spoke for so long that Netflix paused the next episode right as it started to autoplay. Neither of them cared enough to click Yes when it asked if they were still watching. But when the quiet hum of tasteful music and flowery language was replaced with silence, Lotor finally spoke: “You know…I think you would make a fantastic mother one day. If you wanted.”

She curled her fingers against his shirt, staring at nothing and trying to think of even less. “You think?”

“Mhm.”

“I don’t know…”

“You would,” he pressed. “Really.”

She pulled in a breath so deep it almost ached and then let it out slowly. “Do you ever think about that?”

“Mm?”

“Kids.” She glanced up at him. “Do you think you’d ever…you know…want them?”

So this conversation was happening. It was as good a time as ever, she supposed. Or maybe the worst possible time. She was so frazzled it was hard to tell. Either way, Lotor took his time answering, instead staring at the ceiling like the answers were written next to the smoke detector.

Finally, he said, “I don’t know.”

“We don’t have to have this whole talk right now,” she backpedaled. Maybe it really was the worst time. “The kids talk.”

“It’s okay,” he said. “We can.” She tucked her head back down on his chest just in time to feel it rise and fall under her. “I guess I never thought about it much because I never figured I would have the chance. But I always assumed that…I wouldn’t.”

Despite everything, Allura’s heart sank a little at that. “Oh.”

“It’s not that I don’t want them,” he continued. He sounded like he was choosing his words

He trailed off there, in the middle of his thought. Like he couldn’t find the words. There was a furrow in his brow when she looked up again, a deep frown creasing the corners of his mouth. Allura matched it, worry pinching in her chest. “Lotor?”

His hand traced its way down her spine until he finally said, “I never told you…about my mother. Not really.”

“You said she died when you were young.”

“No, I said she was gone. That I never got to know her. That much is true, but it’s not…it’s not everything. She…she did die. Just a few years ago, though. Before that…”

She couldn’t tear her eyes away from his face, tinged with pain as it was. She hooked her fingers around his arm and gave it a squeeze, and he sighed.

“She had a brain tumor,” he finally finished, eyes closing. “Diagnosed not long after I was born. She survived, but it…changed her. Sapped her of everything that made her herself. Her memory, her personality, her mind – she was sharp before all that. Sharp and determined and kind. At least that’s what I was told. I never saw that side of her…By the time I was old enough to remember her, she couldn’t do much more than stare past me. Like I wasn’t even there.”

Allura stared up at him, numbly, wondering what the hell to say or do. Lotor spared her the agony of trying to figure out her next move by taking her hand and doing the impossible: smiling at her.

He pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “It’s okay,” he said. Was he really consoling her?

“It was a long time ago.”

“Lotor…”

“It’s okay,” he said again. “I’ve made my peace with it, Allura. My mother…whoever she was before that disease took her, I know I have a part of her in me. And I try to do right by that, as much as I can. But I suppose…” His smile faded. “I suppose I always wondered…if I did have children, what parts of myself I would pass on. And I’m not sure I like the idea of gambling with something like that.”

Finally, he looked away, and for once, Allura found what felt like the right words: “Nobody can know that for sure.” She reached up to tuck two fingers under his jaw, to coax him back over to look at her again. “And for what it’s worth, I think there’s much more good in you than anything else.”

That smile was back, shining in his eyes, warm and bright. Beautiful. He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her tightly. “We should go to bed,” he said. “It’s been a long day. We both need some rest, and not on this floor.”

“Your floor is comfortable.”

“I need to vacuum.”

“I barely noticed.”

That was a lie – she’d lost count of the dust bunnies under his couch.

“Still,” he said, slowly sitting up and taking her with him. “It’s late…let’s go to bed.”
They left the pile of pillows right there on the floor, stacked between the coach and the coffee table, and as they dragged themselves back to the bedroom, Allura said, “You know…I think you would make a very good father one day.” He paused and looked back at her. “If you ever decided to take that chance.”

He pulled her closer and kissed the crown of her head. “Maybe,” he said, and closed the bedroom door behind them.
It had been a long day, coming at the end of an even longer week, and taking off her shoes and bra and sliding into a set of clean sheets on her bed felt like heaven. Almost as good as Lotor kissing his way along her chest. And almost as good as him slipping his hand down the front of her pants-

“Missed you,” he sighed against her neck. “Barely saw you…all week.”

She giggled. “I was busy at work.”

“We live next door to each other.”

“You were busy with your book.” She tapped the pad of her finger against his nose. “Just how many times did you listen to Waterloo this week?”

Lotor paused, blinking down at her with a blush spreading across his cheeks. “You could hear that?”

Her giggle turned into a full-blown laugh, making her arch and squirm underneath him. “Clear as a bell!” She reached up and tugged him closer, muttering, “Keep going,” against his mouth as she kissed him, good and hard.

“Mmhm.” He pulled back, reaching over her to grab his phone. “Just one second-“

“What are you doing?” She craned her neck. “Tweeting or something?”

“God no – just want to set the mood.” A goofy, crooked smile spread across his face as he finished talking, and music drifted from his phone speaker. It was familiar – almost too familiar.

Allura snorted. “You know, Waterloo isn’t exactly the most romantic song in the world.”

“It’s first up in my heavy rotation.”

“I wonder why.”

He was already tugging her pants down her thighs and pulling his own down to match. He kissed along her neck, humming as her fingers trailed down across his ribs, and she heard the tell-tale sound of a condom packet being torn open. He shifted, prodding against her inner thigh. Guiding himself between her legs-

Something cinched in her chest, making her body stiffen just as he went to rock his hips forward and press inside. “Wait-“

Lotor froze with one hand still tucked between his own legs. He looked up at her, breath shuddering. “Something wrong?”

“No.” She didn’t sound very convincing. Even she could tell that much. Her voice was tight and wavering, giving her away even before he noticed the pinch in her brow.
He reached over and paused the music. “Allura.”

“It’s fine. Just um…” She glanced downward. “You’re…you’re sure you put the condom on, right?”

He sat up enough for her to see for herself – a flash of neon pink between his legs answered her question for him. “Hot pink…hard to forget about when we keep buying the brightest colors we can find at CVS.” He chuckled, warm and disarming. She matched his smile with one of her own, or tried to at least. That prodding little voice in the back of her head remained.

“Which box did you get it from?”

“Which…box?”

“The bottom bedside table drawer, there was an old box I bought forever ago. I never wound up throwing them out.” She was already sitting up, nudging Lotor off of her to look for herself, rummaging through the drawer.

“Allura…”

“I just want to make sure they’re not expired-“

“Allura.” She turned to face him, and as she did his hand was already snaking around her arm, thumb stroking across her skin. He had that face – that worried face, and she sighed. She closed the drawer, lying back down and letting her legs part a bit so that he could settle between them again.

She smiled, even though a pinch of anxiety was still prickling under her skin. “It’s okay,” she said. “Still getting used to the pill, that’s all. Hormones a little crazy.” She leaned up to kiss him. “Keep going.”

“Are you sure?”

“The condom’s fine,” she said with a nod, to herself as much as him. “Keep going. I want you to keep going.” She sighed as he nuzzled her jaw, lips grazing her skin. “I want you.”

It had been so long since they’d done this. She had gone back on the pill as soon as she could after that pregnancy scare, but even ever since then they’d been tip-toeing around it, unable to relax the way they always had together. She’d kept thinking about sitting on his bathroom floor, staring at the pregnancy test as she’d waited for it to develop, and she hated that it was all she could think about. She hated that the feeling of him pushing inside of her made her entire body tense up like a taught wire, making her toes curl for all the wrong reasons.

“Should I stop?” he asked, voice rough and trembling.

“N-no.” Her fingers curled against his hips. “No, don’t stop.”

“We don’t have to do this tonight.”

“I want to do this tonight,” she insisted in a tone harsher than she’d intended. “I want to. It’s been too long since we did – I want to.”

But Lotor was still frowning, pulling out completely and sitting up. “I know that face, Allura. That’s your pain face. This is hurting you. I don’t want to hurt you.”

It seemed this was a lost cause tonight after all. Allura went limp against the pillows, staring up at the ceiling as Lotor lay down next to her. His hand meandered up her side, gently rubbing her stomach
and breast. It was soothing, grounding. She covered his hand with hers and locked eyes with him. “I keep thinking about that night,” she finally admitted as he wrapped his arms around her, letting her sink against his chest. “And I know it’s ridiculous, but I keep thinking about how even if it was nothing…what if it happens again?”

“We’re careful,” he said. “You’re back on the pill.”

“I just started. It takes time to work.”

“Then we can wait until it does.” His hand cupped her cheek. “Until you’re comfortable. If that’s what you need. If we need to wait-“

“I don’t want to wait,” she groaned. “I don’t want to make you wait even longer just because of me.”

Lotor laughed, softly, pressing a kiss to her nose. “As if I’d mind taking things slow. Lord knows you waited long enough for me.”

She sighed, smiling back at him. Slowly, as her body relaxed and her breathing slowed, that smile turned into a playful little smirk. “You know,” she purred, running a finger along his jaw. “There are…plenty of other things we could do in the meantime.”

“Oh?” His eyebrow arched.

She glanced over at the bedside table again. “Top drawer,” she said. “I bought an extra box of condoms. Grape flavored.”

Lotor made a noise – somewhere between a squeak and a groan – and Allura couldn’t help but laugh at the way his face turned as pink as the latex between his legs.

Allura yawned as she flipped her way through a pile of junk mail. It seemed so rare now that she got anything important in her mailbox that she often went days – or once two weeks – without checking it at all. Coran would have given her hell for that, but she had no plans to tell him, and the only thing she had missed out on was a coupon for free chips at the Chipotle near her office.

That one had stung a little, she had to admit.

She’d been better about it the last few weeks, checking the mail and cleaning out the spam every three days like clockwork. She hadn’t gotten any more coupons out of it so far, but maybe it did come with a mild sense of accomplishment – on par with what she got for changing her sheets or folding her laundry. Today, though, she paused when she got to the envelope at the bottom of the stack, tearing it open with one nail and reading it over then and there.

Had it really been almost a year since she moved in? It was so strange to think about, coming up on the anniversary of when a kind stranger had helped her move that blasted couch up the stairs on a hot late-summer day. It didn’t feel real. And yet the evidence was staring her right in the face.

The door swung open, and almost as soon as she looked up she locked eyes with Shiro. It took her all of two seconds to realize the poor man looked exhausted. “Oh God,” she groaned. “Please tell me you’re not here to announce the air conditioning is broken now.”

The exhaustion on his face morphed into confusion. “Princess?”

“You’re looking at me like you forgot I lived here,” she quipped, and Shiro seemed to shake himself out of a trance.
“No, I just – I ah…I just figured you’d be staying somewhere else this weekend is all.”

Allura blinked at him. “Why?”

“Did you…did you not get the flier?”

“Flier?” He grimaced. Allura did not like where this was going. “Shiro…what’s going on?”

He was already pinching the bridge of his nose. “The plumbing,” he said. “That’s why I’m here. The water leak under the building.”

“Water leak?”

“Yeah, a bad one. It’s fixable, don’t get me wrong, but it, ah…well, it’s gonna take some time. And that means no water for about three days.”

She felt her stomach drop to her toes. “Three days? With no water?” She almost crumpled her lease renewal notice right there in her fist. “What the hell do I pay rent for if not – shit…sorry…something tells me I’m not the first angry tenant you’ve had to deal with today.”

“Today? Yeah, actually. This week, though?” He offered a sad little smile. “Not even close.”

“And right in the middle of your wedding planning too.”

*That* made him laugh – truly laugh. It was nice to see, at the very least. “I think we’ll manage. Not for another six months or so anyway. Which reminds me, keep an eye out for an invitation.”

“Wait, are we getting invited too?” Ezor chimed, and Allura turned to find her descending the stairs with Zethrid close behind. Both of them were lugging duffel bags over their shoulders, but Ezor quickly dumped hers on Zethrid and made a bee-line for Shiro instead. “We’re practically family, right? Ever since you came over to unclog our toilet the day we moved in!”

Zethrid groaned, dropping the bags at the base of the stairs. “Ezor, for fuck’s sake…”

But Shiro didn’t seem to mind – in fact, Allura could practically see his spirits lifting, if only a little. “Relax, you’re both invited,” he said, and Ezor’s eyes lit up like the fourth of July. “Acxa and Narti too. And Lotor. Just as long as you promise not to bring up any clogged toilets at the reception.”

“Deal!” Ezor beamed, and she glanced back at Allura. “Don’t you have somewhere to stay this weekend? You know they’re shutting off the water for like a week right?”

“Three days,” Shiro insisted.

Allura sighed, tucking her lease renewal into her pocket and dumping the rest of the junk mail into the recycling bin. “I heard about five minutes ago.”

“Didn’t you get the flier?”

“Apparently not.” Though it may have wound up on her dining room table with all her junk mail. She wasn’t about to admit that though.

“And Lotor didn’t mention it?”

Zethrid groaned, tossing the smaller of the two duffel bags into Ezor’s arms again. “I swear that guy is the worst at keeping up with the outside world when he gets in the zone. Let me guess – he’s gotten into his writing groove again and it’s like everything else just poofed out of existence.”
She wasn’t far off. Lotor had been so absorbed in his writing lately that she’d practically had to drag him away from his computer to eat, but ultimately it seemed to be a good thing. He was racing toward the finish line of his new book, his eyes lighting up every time he finished a new chapter. She was delighted, both as his girlfriend and a fan. Just the thought of holding the final installment of *Journey to Oriande* in her hands within the year made her vibrate with excitement.

“He’s been…pretty focused lately.”

“Better than writers’ block,” Ezor snorted. “You know how he gets. All that pacing and grumbling. I’ll take hyper-focused Lotor over that any day of the week.”

“Does ‘no water’ really mean…no water?” Allura pleaded, turning to Shiro again. “As in…no showers, no flushing toilets, no washing dishes…”

Shiro winced in sympathy. “Maybe you ought to find a hotel for the weekend.”

“Hotel schmotel!” Ezor huffed. “We’re staying with Acxa and Narti – come with us! Both of you! Drag Lotor’s ass out of his cave and make him come be social for God’s sake!”

“You really think we should be inviting plus-one’s to Acxa’s place?” Zethrid muttered.

“It’s not like they’re randos wanting to rent an Air Bn’B. They have a pull-out sofa!” She fiddled with the zipper on her duffel bag, avoiding Allura’s eye. “It’s not the most comfortable thing in the world, but hey – at least you’d be able to take a shower.”

“I’d…rather not impose,” Allura half-heartedly argued. *Very* half-heartedly, if she was being completely honest. The last thing she wanted to do was be a burden, but it wasn’t like she had much of a choice. The idea of going three days or more without running water could be enough for anyone to turn their nose up at a few social norms.

Zethrid was already on her phone, scrolling through her contacts. “I’ll text her. She should have an extra set of sheets anyway. I know – I helped her pack all her bedding when they moved. She’s got, like, three duvets, and they got a fourth as a wedding present.”

“C’mon,” Ezor insisted, taking Allura’s hands and grinning at her. “Run upstairs, get Lotor to throw some extra socks and undies in a backpack and come with us! We’re going out for Indian food for dinner tonight. It’ll be fun! I’ll buy you a mango lassi!”

Running water and mango lassis? Allura’s resolve was crumbling. “Alright,” she finally sighed with a smile. “I’ll go get him.”

Zethrid waved her phone at her as Allura made her way back up the stairs. “And give him hell for losing that damn flier again.”

“I swear I never saw a damn flier,” Lotor grumbled, but it didn’t seem Ezor heard him over her own laughter in the front seat. “Who uses fliers anymore anyway? Doesn’t everyone tweet now?”

“You hate Twitter,” Zethrid pointed out, and she wasn’t wrong. But it was the principle of the thing.

He sighed, turning to Allura and feeling a fresh pang of guilt in his chest. “I’m sorry for…apparently…missing that flier.”

But Allura – bless her – smiled at him. “Well apparently I also missed the flier, but at least I’m getting a free mango lassi out of it.” She glanced pointedly at Ezor, then nudged him and laced her
fingers together with his. “I’ll share. Or maybe Ezor will be feeling generous enough to spot you your own.”

Ezor groaned. “What am I, made of money?”

“Well then I’ll buy you a mango lassi.”

What had he done to deserve her?

“You might feel different after sleeping on Acxa’s horrendous pull-out sofa,” he groaned. “Say a prayer for my back, Zethrid.”

“Your back wouldn’t be so bad if you didn’t spend all that time hunched over your computer like a gremlin,” Zethrid shot back.

“A gremlin who’s two chapters away from finally finishing his damn book,” he countered. “Forgive me if I’m a little distracted by the fact that the project I spent almost a third of my life working on is nearly done.”

Allura held her hands in front of her, almost like a prayer, a wide smile spreading across her face. “I can barely wait,” she said. “I’ve been looking forward to this book for ages.”

“I hope I don’t disappoint.”

“As if you ever could.” She gave his arm a solid nudge, and he had to admit that it did boost his confidence more than his publisher could ever manage. The nudge turned into a poke as she jabbed her finger against his ribs. “Although I still can’t believe you won’t give me any sneak peeks of the ending.”

“Spoilers?” He smirked. “Never.”

“Spoiler alert,” Ezor huffed, turning to face them from the front passenger’s seat. “Both of you quit flirting up the back seat or nobody is getting a mango lassi!”

He was about to argue that they weren’t flirting, but he closed his mouth a moment later. He didn’t make a habit of lying to his friends. Allura’s hands closed over his, thumb stroking his knuckles as she shot him a warm, soft glance and a smile. “We’ll just have to flirt over dinner then.”

Ezor groaned again.

They kept the flirting to a minimum over dinner. As much as they could at least. Sharing a mango lassi with two straws, it was hard not to feel like she was back in high school, resisting the urge to nudge him with her foot under the table while Lotor scooped the last of his chicken tikka masala into his mouth with a toasty piece of naan.

“So you seriously didn’t see the flier?” Acxa asked, one eyebrow arched, and Lotor rolled his eyes. A full mouth kept him from putting up much of a fight.

“To be fair,” Allura relented, “Neither did I. Well, I saw it, but all I saw was that they were going to be doing some plumbing work and I dropped on top of my pile of junk mail and forgot about it.”

She hid behind the half-empty mango lassi glass while Lotor shot a wide-eyed glance at Ezor and Zethrid, mouth still full and face glowing with what looked like victory. Or maybe it was vindication.

It made her feel a tiny bit better for leaving that damn flier on her kitchen table.
Narti’s mouth opened in a quiet laugh that was quickly drowned out by Ezor’s howling. “Two of the smartest people I’ve ever met,” she wheezed, “And neither of you can read a damn flier?”

She felt her face heat up behind her glass. At least they had a place to sleep so they weren’t paying for their mistake with a weekend without running water. And speaking of that… “Let me buy you dinner, Acxa.”

Acxa smiled at her as she polished off the last bite of her curry. “I won’t say no to that.”

It was a small price to pay for a good meal and a warm bed. Well, a warm futon. And even if a fresh set of sheets couldn’t cover up how lumpy it seemed to be, she wasn’t about to complain.

"There you go," Acxa said as she dropped a freshly-fluffed pillow on the futon. "Bathroom's down the hall, and feel free to raid the fridge if you need a midnight snack. Lord knows Ezor clears out my ice cream stash every time she's here." She sighed as Kova hopped up on the sheets the moment she moved out of the way. "Just ignore this one. He'll probably wake you up at five in the morning begging for his breakfast."

Lotor was already grinning, scratching the cat under the chin, behind the ears, and anywhere else he could reach. "As if I could ever ignore you, you adorable thing. Who's a good kitty? You are! Oh yes you are…"

"As long as the bathroom has a flushing toilet, I couldn't care less who's waking us up," Allura said as Kova rubbed against Lotor's face, leaving a tuft of black hair on his lip. Lotor picked it off, sputtering. "I wish I could have given you more of a heads up we'd be coming-

"I think my schedule will recover from taking an extra fifteen minutes to pull out the futon." She plopped a folded comforter in Allura's lap. "There you go…extra blanket. Living room gets a little drafty at night, even when it's warm out." She glanced over at Lotor, who was already sprawled back against the pillows with Kova kneading his chest.

Lotor met their gazes and pouted. "What?"

"Should I be jealous?" Allura giggled.

"Of Kova? Please. We're just friends, Allura."

Acxa was already halfway up the stairs. She turned off the hall light as she went and waved to them from the landing before disappearing around the corner. Not a second later, Kova hopped off the bed and followed, leaving Lotor covered in a generous layer of cat hair with an incredulous frown leaving a crease in his brow. "I've been abandoned," he sighed.

"You'll be fine." Allura tucked herself under the sheets and reached over to turn off the light, but she hesitated, just for a moment. She stared at her bag under the coffee table, thinking of the envelope she'd shoved into the front pocket.

Lotor's hand rested on her arm. "Everything alright?"

"Fine," she insisted, but it wasn't quite the truth. Not quite a lie either. Maybe it was half of both. "I was just…thinking…"

"About?"

She turned over and faced the ceiling, hands resting on her stomach with Lotor tucked comfortably against her side. "I got my lease renewal in the mail today."
Lotor blinked, the said breezily, "Oh."

"And it made me think…well…" Her heart pounded. Why was it racing like this? "I mean…we're over at each other's places more often than not lately, aren't we?" She turned again, onto her side, facing him just in time to catch him chuckling. "What's so funny?"

"You got me thinking too," he said, warmly. His hand moved to rest on her hip, over the blankets. "Do you remember when Dayak was here? When she insisted on taking care of me after my surgery?"

"You needed someone taking care of you," she insisted.

"I know, I know. But even so…even as…important as she is to me – don't you dare laugh."

"Allura covered her mouth, biting her cheek to hide the giggle that had bubbled up. "Even so, it's not easy, having someone else in my space for so long. I never thought I could stand having another person so close for so long. By the time Dayak packed her things and left I couldn't imagine anything better than an empty apartment."

"I…do hang around your place an awful lot…"

"But that's just the thing," he said. "I like having you around. I sleep better with you in bed with me. Well…when you're not hogging the blankets or kicking me-"

She jabbed him in the chest. "That's what you get for sticking your cold toes where they don't belong!"

In a flash, he plucked her hand from where it was pressing against his ribs and gathered it up in his, squeezing tight. "You already left a toothbrush at my place," he said, like that was significant somehow. And oddly enough, it felt like it was. "I have a bottle of your favorite shampoo in my shower."

"You leave your laptop charging in my apartment more than it's at yours," she fired back. "And if I remember correctly, that bottle of hair gel sitting on my sink isn't mine."

"Not to mention we both have keys."

She chortled. "For all the times you remember to actually lock your door."

His thumb stroked against her knuckles as her laughter died down, his gaze so soft and warm it made her chest tighten. "Seems a little…wasteful…to keep paying rent on two places, don't you think?"

Her heart leaped. "It…it does. A little."

"And moving a few things down the hall would be child's play compared to hauling everything up the stairs. So I think we could manage."

She smiled, so wide that it almost hurt. "I think we could too." Her arms wrapped around his shoulders, legs playfully nudging against his under the blankets. "As long as you promise not to get sick of me."

Lotor threw his head back and laughed. "Darling," he said with a wide smile as he pressed his forehead against hers. "I could never get sick of you."

He'd waited long enough, she figured, and she tugged him closer to kiss him. His hands found their usual places against her waist, pulling her flush against him, and she swore he had to be closer
enough to feel her heart pounding with excitement in her chest. She couldn't stop smiling, couldn't stop kissing him, didn't want to stop doing either.

Lotor pulled away, just for a moment – long enough to reach over her and turn off the living room light. A second later he went right back to kissing her again, sliding under the sheets with her letting his fingers skim up under her T-shirt-

Allura paused with a gasp, looking up at him and barely managing to make out his face in the dim glow from the porch light outside. "I can't believe I'm saying this," she breathed, "but…what are the chances of someone interrupting us if we…"

Even if she let her sentence trail off, Lotor didn't miss a beat. From the way his hips were pressed so firmly against hers she had a feeling he had been thinking the same thing. "Acxa sleeps like the dead," he said. "Ezor wears a mask and ear plugs to bed, and I'm pretty sure Zethrid popped a melatonin pill not long after dinner."

"And Narti?" She bit her lip, glancing up the stairs. "She's mute, not deaf."

"She's also very good at keeping secrets," Lotor said with a chuckle and a wink, and Allura couldn't help but laugh too.

Throwing caution to the wind for the moment, she pushed Lotor over onto his back and neatly threw one leg over to straddle him. She leaned down to kiss him until she could barely catch her breath. It was almost exhilarating, letting her hips settle down against his, like it hadn't been almost a month since they'd done this, and for the first time in a long time – too long – she didn't have that obnoxious little voice sending anxiety pricking up her spine.

There was nothing to be afraid of. He was nothing to be afraid of. Quite the opposite. The feeling of him poking insistently against her inner thigh made her feel hungry in all the best and most familiar ways.

"Condom?" he breathed, staring up at her.

Right. Condom. Important. She nodded toward her bag and laughed when he almost launched her off of him to grab it and pull it close. "Side pocket," she gasped out between fits of giggling, and he had it in his hand just a second later. She didn't waste time waiting before she pounced on him and pinned him down against the fresh sheets again and wriggled out of her sweatpants.

Lotor watched her peel them off, his chest rising and falling at a rapid pace under her as she dropped them and her underwear on the arm of the futon. She left her T-shirt where it was, letting Lotor's hands wander up to cup her breasts underneath it instead.

"When did I leave that toothbrush at your place?" she mused as she tugged his pants down enough to tug his erection free of them and roll on the condom.

"A few – nh – a few weeks ago, maybe?" he offered. His voice wavered a bit. "To be honest, I think it was a happy accident."

She grinned when she finally remembered. "I thought I was going crazy when I couldn't find it in my own bathroom. Who the hell loses a toothbrush?"

"Well clearly the only way to remedy the situation is to lose the rest of your things in my apartment too," he told her with a smirk.

Clearly.
She hesitated only for a moment, hovering on her knees above him with his tip pressed against her entrance. Lotor's breath shuddered, his fingers curling against her thighs as he looked up at her. Watching for any sign of hesitation, she wondered? She couldn't blame him. She'd been hesitating a fair amount lately.

No more.

It was a relief, realizing how easy it was to sink down onto him. No more nerves getting in the way, making her clench and seize up. It was as easy as ever to relax, let out a breath and feel him slide right in, until her hips were flush with his and his head was tilted back against the pillows.

"Ah…" he sighed, hands skimming up and down her bare thighs as she braced herself at arm's length against the fold-out mattress. "You alright?"

"Never better," she answered truthfully. Well, half-truthfully. What was even better was when she rocked her hips and felt a long-overdue jolt of pleasure bubble up her spine. "Fuck…" She bit her lip to keep a moan from escaping, not that it stopped Lotor from letting out a groan as his grip tightened on her hips. She grinned down at him. "Think you can manage to keep quiet?"

His laugh was strained as he opened one eye to look up at her. "I can make a noble effort."

Any other time she would have told him not to bother. There was nothing she loved more than hearing him moan. Well, nothing besides hearing the way he said her name when he came. But all things considered, it was probably for the best that they didn't wake up the whole house.

That didn't make it easy, though. Nowhere close. Not when Lotor's hand skimmed down along her hip bone and nudged its way between her legs to stroke her clit and oh, God – between that and the angle she found grinding down against him, it was hard to think about anything else.

Lumpy and stiff as it was, it seemed like this old futon had found its calling helping Lotor hit her g-spot. Who could have guessed?

God, she'd missed this. She'd barely realized how much she'd missed this. Not just the feeling of him inside of her and his fingers against her clit, but Lotor. The look on his face as he stared up at her – brilliant blue eyes half-lidded and gleaming, cheeks flushed, brow knit with pleasure. The sound of his choked back moans and gasps. The way his fingers tightened around hers in a heartbeat when she pressed her palm against his waiting hand to ground her.

Good things come to those who wait, she supposed.

And speaking of coming…

She knew that look on his face by now, and it made her laugh as she leaned down and dropped a kiss to his earlobe. "Go on," she whispered, and the next thing she knew, Lotor's hands pressed hard against her thighs, his body arching up underneath her as he groaned.

Louder than he probably should have.

But she didn’t care much at this point.

She muffled a curse into the crook of his neck, and by the time she was done coming herself, her arms gave out underneath her and she collapsed on top of his chest. His heartbeat thumped loudly in her ear as he gasped for breath.

Slowly, his arms encircled her, holding her close against him as she shifted and let him slip out of
her. “Guess we both needed that,” she heard herself say, and a laugh rumbled in his chest.

“Would have preferred somewhere other than my friend’s futon,” he answered. “Could have used candles, music…”

“Next time.” She patted him on the arm. She had to get up sometime, if only to throw the condom away somewhere their hosts wouldn’t find it the next morning. But for now, she let herself revel in their shared afterglow.

She’d missed this more than anything else.

She stared at the front door leading out to the porch, watching the light trickle in and listening to the faint sound of a windchime moving in the nighttime breeze on the other side. It was oddly picturesque, resting her head on Lotor’s chest, listening to his breathing even out and thinking about what it would be like to share an apartment. Or maybe one day a house, with its own front door and its own windchime.

Her fingers curled against his collarbone.

“Lotor?”

“Hm?”

Barely awake. She wasn’t far behind. Not the best time to start talking about windchimes and porches and mortgages. They’d made enough big decisions for one day. But still…

“Have you ever thought about…living somewhere without a cramped elevator or draifty windows or water leaks in the basement?”

He let out a tired half-laugh. “You get used to quirks like that with time.”

She bit her lip, wondering if she should just drop it for now. It was a conversation for another day. Three or for steps ahead of where they were. It was silly to even be thinking of something like that now.

Wasn’t it?

But before she could think about it much more, he leaned down to press a kiss to her temple. “One day, though,” he said. “I think I’d like that. With you.”

Her heart soared. “You think?”

She felt him nod, and she let her eyes close and listened to that windchime outside mix with the sound of Lotor’s soft breathing.

One day, she thought, she’d very much like a front door of her own too.
"Have you seen my other earring?"

Allura stared at the carpet as she meandered out of the bedroom. Blasted thing. Why had they decided on this navy print? How could anyone find a sapphire stud against it? Of course she'd decided on a pair to match her dress, and of course it had slipped out of her hand as she'd tried to fix them in place on her way to grab her bag from the kitchen counter. And of course now they were going to be late.

Lotor barely seemed to hear her. He looked like he was in a trance, staring out of the living room window with a far-off look in his eye. She huffed. "Lotor."

"Huh?"

"My earring." She sighed as she dropped to her knees on the damn carpet, dress pooling around her like a melting pile of indigo snow. "I can't wear just one earring to the wedding."

"Oh!" In a flash he was kneeling next to her, bending down to look under the sofa. His ponytail brushed against the floor. She stifled a giggle and drew his eye. "What's so funny?"

"Look at us," she chuckled. "Dressed to the nines and crawling around on the floor like a couple of kids." He smiled back at her, but there was something behind it. Like a weight keeping it from reaching his eyes. She nudged him. "What's going on with you?"

He quickly turned back to his search, crawling forward to skim his hands along the carpet under the coffee table. "Nothing's wrong."

That was a lie. She could tell easily enough. Six months of living under the same roof since signing their new lease together had made her so finely attuned to his moods and mannerisms that it was impossible not to pick up on it when something was bothering him. She frowned and sighed. "Lotor…"

"Aha!" He lifted his hand triumphantly, her earring pinched between his fingers. "There you are, you sneaky thing."

She accepted his hand when he offered it to help her to her feet, and she quickly got the earring into its rightful place opposite its mate. But as she watched Lotor pull on his blazer and tighten his shoelaces, she couldn't help but notice the way his hands fumbled with the strings. He paused when she pressed her hand against his arm. "What's wrong?" she asked, more firmly this time, and he finally sighed.

"A lot on my mind, that's all." He straightened up and squeezed her hand. "Nothing bad. Nothing's wrong. I swear. I just want to have a nice evening, enjoy the wedding, have a few drinks at the reception and dance with you to whatever slow, sappy love song they put on."

She liked the thought of that. "My money's on I Can't Help Falling In Love With You," she said as she reached for her bag and they headed for the door. "Can't go wrong with Elvis."

He grinned, hooking their arms together at the elbow. "I'll take that bet. I think it'll be At Last."
"You really think Keith and Shiro are fans of Etta James?"

"Who *isn’t* a fan of Etta James?"

As they descended the stairs together, Allura squeezed his arm tight, shooting him a warm smile and feeling him relax against her side. "Is it ridiculous of me to hope for ABBA?"

He smirked at her, almost wickedly. "Never."

The ceremony was short and sweet. Allura cried. Lotor cried. Lance and Hunk and Pidge cried. Ezor sobbed into Zethrid’s blazer while Zethrid tried and failed to hide the fact that she was getting misty-eyed herself. It seemed like the only dry eye in the house was Kosmo, who managed to make it all the way to the end of the aisle with the rings strapped to his collar before knocking over one of the floral arrangements with his excitedly wagging tail.

Nobody had it in them to care about the flowers. Hunk brushed them to the side and out of the way and left them there for the rest of the ceremony while Pidge dutifully kept Kosmo from chewing on them.

It had been cloudy when they’d arrived for the ceremony, and by the time the reception started the skies had cleared but there was a generous blanket of white snow covering the ground outside of the reception hall. Allura was right where she wanted to be, sat comfortably by the window with a glass of champagne in her hand and a slice of cake on the table beside her while she watched Shiro and Keith sway to their first dance together as a married couple.

“This might be the most beautiful wedding I’ve ever been to,” Ezor sighed as she swirled her champagne and knocked back the last of it.

Beside her, Acxa arched one brow. “You were at *our* wedding,” she reminded her.

“And you had a cash bar,” Ezor fired back with a smirk, and Acxa seemed to know when the battle wasn’t worth fighting and turned her attention to her cake instead.

Allura reached for hers again, but hesitated for a moment when she caught a glimpse of Lotor standing by the far window, head bowed low as he spoke to Narti in hushed tones. She was signing back to him, but even with the few signs Allura had picked up over the last few months, she couldn’t get an idea of what she was saying. Lotor nodded though, managing a tight-lipped smile and saying something that Allura couldn’t make out.

She frowned, scooting closer to Ezor. “Does Lotor seem…off to you tonight?”

For a split second, Ezor and Acxa shared a glance. It seemed *meaningful* somehow, like a whole conversation happening in a split second, and then Ezor grabbed Acxa’s half-full champagne flute and dropped into her own lap with a flourish. “Oops! Clumsy me! Looks like I have to run to the bathroom to clean up!”

Before Allura could get another word in, she was gone, and Acxa rolled her eyes as she watched her go. She finished off the last of her cake. “I was going to finish that,” she said to nobody in particular. “He’s fine. Probably just tied his tie too tight or something.”

“I’m not worried,” Allura sighed. “I just can’t stop wondering…he’s been so absent the last couple of days, and—”

“Probably thinking about all this—” She made a vague gesture around the reception hall – at the
flowers, the remains of the cake, the dance floor where more couples were joining in as the song shifted to something else slow and saccharin. “-and about how it might be you two sometime.”

Allura’s face blazed hot. “U-us two?”

“Haven’t you thought about it?” Acxa smirked. “Tying the knot?”

Of course she had. She had a Pinterest board dedicated to obnoxious DIY centerpieces she’d never have the patience to make and wedding dresses she’d never be able to afford. Who didn’t? She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and said, “I…I guess.”

“If he asked,” Acxa continued, licking a bit of frosting off of her fork. “Would you say yes?”

Quietly, Allura folded her hands in her lap and twiddled her thumbs. “Of course I would,” she said, barely realizing she was speaking at all. “There’s no way I wouldn’t.”

Something flashed in Acxa’s eyes – something wildly excited, but it was gone a moment later and replaced with an easy smile. “Or you could just ask him instead. It is the twenty-first century after all.”

Well, she wouldn’t know the first thing about what kind of ring to get him, but that thought barely took up any space in her head at the moment. She didn’t have time to linger on it either, as a moment later Lotor’s hand rested on her arm.

“Care to dance?” he asked with a warm grin that made her heart flutter, and she took his hand and put her racing thoughts to the side.

“I’d love to.” For a moment, she caught a glimpse of Acxa grinning at them from behind her folded hands, saw her whisper something to Narti as they sat close together at the table. Narti giggled, and signed something to her that made Acxa throw her head back and laugh.

Allura didn’t ask what she and Lotor had been talking about. She didn’t need to. She rested her head on Lotor’s chest and swayed to the music, thinking about how nice it would be to do this again someday. Maybe on the other side of it. In a white dress with flowers in her hair. When it came down to it, she really was a sucker for tradition.

They got home at a quarter to ten, and Allura was ready to take off her heels, wash off her makeup, and curl up in bed with an episode or two of whatever popped up first on her Netflix playlist. She tugged off her shoes the moment they were inside the building, groaning in delight as her bare feet touched the cool, worn wood floor and not caring in the slightest how dirty they’d be by the time they made it up the stairs. She could wash up later. For now she was content to savor the feeling of wiggling her newly freed toes.

"Every time I wear heels for more than an hour I swear I'll never do it again," she sighed as she hooked them over her fingers. "And then I go and get an office job and my friends get married and I have to keep breaking that promise to myself over and over."

She was halfway up the stairs when Lotor took her hand, tugging her gently back onto the landing and holding tight. She stared down at it, then up at him, blinking. "Lotor?" She smiled as she put her shoes down on the step next to her and wrapped her other hand around his for good measure. "What's the matter? Too much champagne?"

His face was unreadable, his cheeks slightly flushed and his eyes wide and searching when he looked at her again. Like his mind was racing a mile a minute. He’d looked the same all night, with
that far off look in his gaze.

Finally, he nodded down toward the wall with an enigmatic little smile. "Scuffs are still there," he said. "From that damn couch of yours."

Allura snorted. "Think I'm going to lose my security deposit thanks to that?"

"As if this building hasn't been through worse." She let her thumb trace the bones in his wrist, feeling his own brush against her knuckles. "Allura…there's something…I've been wanting to say for a while." He swallowed. "There's something I want to give you."

For some reason she couldn't place, her stomach did an anxious little flip. "Oh?"

"Can you wait here?" he asked her, already bouncing toward the stairs like he was suddenly filled with more energy than he knew what to do with. "Just for a second. Right there. Don't move."

As if she had much choice. She tucked her dress down over her knees and sat down on the step, looking out over the lobby. There were more scuffs on the old hard wood than could ever possibly be thanks to her and her furniture, but she imagined which ones could have traced the path of that couch up to the base of the steps. Maybe that dent in the railing had been her. Or maybe that gouge in the molding by her ankles.

She'd certainly left a few marks on this building. Then again, maybe it had left even more on her. Lost in her thoughts, she barely noticed Lotor coming down the steps again only a minute later, and he paused when she turned to look at him. There was something clutched in his hands – a book.

She shot to her feet. "Is that-"

"Yes," he chuckled. "Came in the mail the other day. I wanted to surprise you with it."

She stared down at it as he handed it over, heart racing like he was giving her a block of solid gold. It was finally here, the final installment in *Journey to Oriande. The Trial of the Lifegivers*. She could barely believe it – it didn't feel real. And yet here it was in her hands.

Lotor took a shaking breath and said, "Open it." He laid his hands overtop of hers and helped her flip to the right page – the dedication. It was short and simple. Just three words. But when she saw them, she could barely breathe.

*To my Oriande.*

She felt like she was floating, falling, like all of the air was suddenly gone and she was going lightheaded. Tears gathered in her eyes as she looked up at Lotor again, his face blurring. "That's…"

"I couldn't have done it without you," he blurted, like he'd been dying to say it for so long that he just couldn't wait any longer. His hands were warm and steady against her wrists, holding her fingers against the book's binding. "This book…and so much else. I wouldn't be where I am without you. I was treading water, just going through the motions and waiting for something to change, something to give. And then you showed up in this stairwell with that damn couch-"

She let out a teary laugh, leaning into his hand when he pressed his palm against her cheek.

"You made me better, Allura," he told her. "All that time, I was looking for you, and I didn't even realize it. You're…my Oriande. You changed everything, and I never could have thought I'd be so lucky to have you."
Allura sniffled. "God…” She reached up to wipe her eyes, not giving a damn about her eyeliner anymore. It was a lost cause anyway. "You really are a writer, saying things like that…”

"There's…one other thing," he finally said, voice wavering. "Page 227. I want you to read it."

There it was again – that little flip in the pit of her stomach. For the life of her, she couldn't place what it was for. She offered a lopsided, watery smile. "Spoilers?"

"Just a bit."

"You're asking me to spoil your book already? When you just got it?"

"Humor me," he insisted, laughing. "Just…turn to the page. I highlighted it."

Her heart pounding, she did as he said, and read:

"Arus," Drule whispered, voice shaking as his hands found hers in the dark. "This place...this marvelous place...I could never have made it here without you." His lips curled back in a slight playful grin, but his eyes were glazed over and lost in thought. "It seems you've put me in quite the difficult position, love."

"Difficult?" She stared up at him, watching as his face was lit up by ancient light – quintessence reflecting in his eyes and the marks on his cheeks. "And why is that?"

"Because I can't seem to imagine doing anything else in this life without you now."

*She opened her mouth to speak, but her words died in her throat as he dropped to his knee.*

"Would you be my queen, Lady Arus?" he breathed, reverently. "Would you rule by my side in this newborn universe?"

"Will you marry me?" Lotor asked, as her eyes fell on the same line on the page, and she pried them away from it to stare up at him. *Down* at him. On one knee in the stairwell with a ring box resting open on his palm. "Allura...will you marry me?"

Numb, she shut the book.

He couldn't be.

This couldn't be.

She opened her mouth to say something – *anything* – but the only thing that came out was: "Spoilers."

Lotor managed a laugh. "I'll try and make it up to you."

With a ring, no less.

When she managed to breathe again, the tears came with it. "I'm crying off my makeup."

"You look beautiful."

She dropped to her knees, the book falling open on the landing, and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, no doubt smearing eyeliner and foundation all over his shirt collar. There wasn't a single other thing she could say, so instead of saying anything at all, she nodded against his shoulder.
"Is…that a yes?" he asked, sounding almost as shell-shocked as she was.

She pulled back enough to look at him through a haze of mascara-stained tears and nodded again, firmly, and a grin spread across his face like a sunrise on the horizon before he threw his arms around her and hugged her back just as tight.

1.5 Years Later

"Did you get the vacuum cleaner out of the hall closet?" Allura asked as she finished a generous swig from her water bottle and sat down on the edge of the cargo bed. She wiped her brow, but it seemed like a futile effort. The August heat was unrelenting, even if there was an occasional breeze to save them from melting into the sidewalk.

Moving was hell.

But many hands made light work, as people wiser than him were fond of saying.

Zethrid held up the vacuum in one hand, like a trophy. "Got it!" she announced. "And this box of Swiffer dusters."

"Like you dust enough to buy those in bulk," Ezor snorted with a solid nudge to Lotor's ribs.

He huffed. "I dust, thank you very much."

Allura was already reaching for the vacuum. "Here, let me put it in behind the couch-"

Zethrid turned to keep it just out of reach. "Oh no you don't – you're not supposed to be lifting anything heavy, remember?"

"Well give me the dusters then," Allura said with a pout. "I want to be useful, dammit."

"You're plenty useful," Shiro chimed as he took the vacuum cleaner from Zethrid instead and pushed it back against the side of the truck. Then he took the box of dusters too for good measure. They seemed to be in the home stretch – just a handful of boxes left to load up and then they'd be on their way.

Then they could start unloading everything when they got to the house. Lotor fought the urge to curl up in the middle of the street.

Allura was already heading inside, reaching up to adjust her ponytail as she went. "I'm going to do one last sweep of the apartment. Since I apparently can't be of much help here."

Lotor waited just a moment for her to get through the front door before he followed.

He found her standing in the doorway of their apartment – the one they had shared for a good two years (officially), though all things considered they'd been sharing much more for longer than that. Sharing a lease hadn't changed much in the grand scheme, though it had certainly made things a little simpler.

It had been the last simple thing to come along in the last two years. But oddly enough, it didn't bother him. Quite the opposite.

She was sniffling as she looked over the threshold at the empty apartment, watching dust motes floating through the afternoon sun streaming through the kitchen window. He silently wrapped his
arms around her middle and dropped a kiss to her shoulder. "Getting homesick?"

She reached up to wipe her tears, laying her hands over his. "No," she said. "Maybe. I don't know. It's just so strange, seeing it empty."

He could relate – after all, he had lived here much longer than she had. And yet he'd never felt attached. His apartment was just a place where he slept and ate and wrestled with his muse. But Allura had made it more than that. Now he felt much more like he was leaving a home.

But leaving it for another one. Hopefully a better one. Certainly a bigger one, he mused as he rested his hand on her stomach.

She let out a bitter little laugh. "I'd be crying no matter what. Hormones making me feel like I'm on a damn roller coaster. I'm surprised I haven't bitten off anyone's head yet today."

"I'm a willing target if you need one."

Her laugh became lighter and sweeter as she turned in his arms and looked up at him. "I don't need you to be a punching bag." Her hands rested on his forearms, her forehead pressing against his chest. She relaxed against him as he rubbed her back in soothing little circles.

Suddenly, she asked, "Aren't you scared?"

"Scared?"

"There's so much changing so quickly. Last year we were arguing over whether to buy a new rug for the living room, and now…"

A house waiting for them. A wedding just two months away. A baby three months after that.

"Are you scared?" he asked.

"I'm terrified."

"Me too." When she looked up at him again, he leaned down to kiss her, not caring that she smelled like sweat and dust. He probably smelled twice as bad, and she hadn’t said a thing about it yet. "But we'll be fine. We got that couch up the stairs together, remember? We're unstoppable."

Allura snorted, whacking him on the chest. She pulled back just enough to wipe her eyes properly and hold out a key. "The drawers are empty," she said. "The closets too. And the bathroom cabinets. Ready to lock up?"

He nodded.

They left the key in the mailbox in the lobby, and Zethrid was closing up the back of the cargo bed just as they made it out the door. "This baby’s all loaded up," she announced, giving the truck a solid thump. "Shiro and I should have our own moving company. Probably good money in it."

"I can pay you in cupcakes," Allura offered with a smile as she climbed into the passenger's seat.

"Deal!" Ezor sang.

"I’d prefer a check," Zethrid muttered.

Lotor patted her on the arm as he slid into the driver's seat of the moving truck. “I’ll buy you a drink next time we go out.” He turned to Allura, giving her hand a squeeze. "Are you ready?" he asked
her, and he watched her eyes flick to the rearview mirror. He could see the reflection of the building there, and if he craned his neck he could catch the edge of his window on the third floor. Curtains packed away and blinds drawn.

She took a deep breath. "Here we go."

They pulled away from the curb, watching the apartment building shrink into the distance and eventually disappear around the corner.

Moving was hell.

But moving on to something new - with Allura - was nothing short of breathtaking.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your wonderful supportive comments and contributions to this fic of mine over the last 34 chapters. This fic has truly been my happy place for a long time, and the support I've gotten for it has been nothing short of astounding. I love all of you guys, from all the peeps in the lotura discord, to the artists who have been unimaginably kind enough to make art for this fic (!!!), to people who just happened to stumble upon this fic by chance and enjoyed it. Your comments mean the world to me, and I'm so happy that this fic was able to make you guys happy.

I still have some plans for a few shorter fics in this AU in a little while, because I love these dorks too much to let them go. <3

End Notes

Feedback/suggestions/general screaming is always appreciated and encouraged.

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