Opal - or - The Secret Of Blue Waters!

by Edelwary

Summary

Keith has one job: get to Mexico, find a thing, bring back the thing. The one problem? The 'thing' is thousands of years old, probably mystic, of unknown ancient origin, and the worst? Keith is not alone on this case.

- or -

Adventurers digging for mysteries and adrenaline, blossoming feelings, historic and scientific funfacts and mysterious items! That's it, I broke this fic to its bare essentials!

Notes

Thanks a Lot Lot Lot to my betas whom are soon to be linked here (Malori and Sandy!) -
This fic is illustrated!
You can go find some stuff on my tumblr too, @edelwary!

Suggested Playlist (In order of scenes):

Red dead redemption - Born unto trouble
Discombobulate - Hans Zimmer
Game of Thrones: Season 6 OST - Light of the Seven

See the end of the work for more notes.
Mojito - or - Alcohol is not water, really.

It’s clouds of dust behind and clouds of water ahead.

The desert stretches out as far as one’s view can reach. Nothing else to see beyond dust, rocks and cacti. Dry land everywhere, scorched earth, dust. Dust, dust dust. It’s getting in the cracks of the seats, settling on the dashboard, on his hair. It makes the air tangible like snowflakes of heat and sand.

The sun used to make it glitter in the passing rays, but not anymore.

Keith grips the wheel a little tighter as the road falls apart under the tires of the jeep. It’s more of a dirt trail and less of an actual road now, and it’s getting worse by every mile. The jeep keeps going, though.

Something cracks under the front wheels, sends the jeep swaying. Annoying. Dangerous, too.

Ah, crap.

He knows he should release the pedals, but he doesn’t. The car keeps rolling full speed between the bushes and the rocks, never slowing down, even when it hisses under the rough treatment.

It smells like gasoline when the wind shifts.

The thunder of the storm coming echoes through the car, makes the metal shiver, and then dissolves in the roam of the engine. The sky is being torn apart by lightnings, the violence and the shock only lasting a fraction of an instant. Somewhere up there, gods are probably fighting to death.

The sound drags Keith back in reality and snaps him out of a trance he didn’t know he had sunken in. It has been hours of driving in silence, alone with his mind. And what a mind…

Passing and repassing, like a broken record, the full length feature film of the last week, a mashup of blue eyes, spanish scribbling and orange stones, peppered with adrenaline shots Keith surprises himself missing a little. A look at the bruises on his forearms, that only now begin to fade, remind
him not to wish for more than he can take.

Splashes drop on the windshield. He thinks about slowing down, after a glance at the wiggling needle of the speed dial, tiny demon caught between three digits numbers.

He doesn’t.

He inhales, and splutters. The clammy air sticks his bangs together. Heat and sweat finish to glue them to his forehead, a dark mass above his eyes mimicking the one outside.

The storm is coming for him and he’s speeding up.

Keith refrains from smashing his fist on the wheel. Something is creeping up in his back, like a pressing feeling telling him to turn around and never come back again.

But you can not do that. You never quit. Do you?

He looks into the rear-view mirror, catches his own eyes. Grey clouds reflect in them, and for a second he doesn’t realize he’s looking at himself in the mirror, and not his brother.

Stomach sinking low, Keith rolls down the window, in a desperate attempt to refresh the suffocating air filling the cabin. Dismay and treason, nothing but heat rushes inside.

That, and dust.

This thing is going to be the death of him. It has infiltrated his bones, hidden itself between his skin and the leather of his gloves, behind his ears and in his eyes. It’s irritating, in both senses of the term. Like a little voice in the back of his mind, telling him he might have made a terribly wrong choice.

His left hand leaves the wheel to grip the gear stick. Maybe he’s a little too rough and pushes it too hard, maybe he’s just stressed.

And the thunder keeps drumming above and the engine keeps howling.

And the dust keeps floating.
It’s just known for fact that Keith always messes with bigger than him. It’s not that he likes it, he just can't help being invested. Even if it would have been safer to stay low.

Maybe it comes from the fact that he can’t stand injustice, or because he’s just that reckless. But there’s also this flame in him, something that calls for adventure, no matter the risk.

His brother used to say he listened to this little voice way more than needed.

Keith could see it, now.

The guy was roughly twice his size, and probably three times his weight. He looked like a bull mixed up with a bear, frothing at the mouth. Honestly, Keith couldn’t deny he had asked for it. A little.

Okay, mentioning the intellectual quotient of someone, in front of this someone, when it’s not a compliment, may or may not be a good idea. But the guy was a dick, and Keith was tired of his remarks, every now and then, about his appearance.

They all sat in the lower room of the White Lion, Hackney, London. Famous for his very friendly bartenders, and three story structure, the Lion was banking mainly on highly overpriced cocktails and a couple of private rooms upstairs Keith would have preferred to stay as far away from as possible.

It had been about three years since Keith had ditched school and began taking shifts at the bar. Ever since taking the job, it has been nothing but problems after problems, bloody noses and police stations visits and other fun saturday night activities. Strangely enough, if the owners used to be very concerned about his late turns-in, they never much bothered to check his actual age, nor the client’s.

He was pretty sure if they started verifying ID’s they would lost half of the population of the bar anyways, so Keith omitted to ask about it every time a girl looking fourteen asked for a cranberry vodka, and no one batted an eye.

Being the one behind the counter had its advantages and its… Downsides. Keith used to love chemistry in high school. It was kind of like mixing paint, only far more dangerous.
Well, cocktail making was just a relative of chemistry. All he had to do was mix liquids and make sure the result could kill a man if he dared to drink it.

And they all did.

For some reason, Keith was confined to work his magic on the lowest story of the bar. Maybe the reason was that he kept trashing the place he worked in, but he chose to close his eyes on that. The underground cave had some fun to it.

First, smoking was allowed, which bathed the place in a smoky green atmosphere where edges were blurred. Second, no fourteen years old. Down there, it was a hellish mix of workers of the night and wolves of the streets, and Keith felt like he belonged in one or the other category. Or both.

Sometimes he would glare at the exploded neons of the jukebox and wonder when was the last time he’d see the sun.

The answer was beyond human health limits.

Keith had no interest in policing the customer base, and more than once had joined the poker table to round up his salary. He would basically spend all of his break times and last pennies on a pair of aces and a closed face, and to be true, he wasn’t so bad at it.

Like, ‘already made a thousand in one game’ not bad.

That’s basically where he was, praying for another queen to fall in his hands, when that random drunk dead dude has began to howl him across the room, chanting words that weren’t so off the place, but gently boiled Keith’s blood in his veins.

Yeah, downsides of the underground. Everyone was intoxicated beyond repair and Keith was the sober one supposed to keep them that way.

Unfortunately for Keith and his temper, the very night he should have stayed low was the one this guy chose to pick a fight.

Naturally, Keith talked back. Harsh, snarky words that pierced right through the imaginary armor of the man. The other responded, in the violent, typical way half-drunk oversized violent men would
lash out. He stood up, head nearly hitting the fake wooden ceiling, and growled at Keith, still sat on his stool.

Keith stared at the queen of hearts in his hand. He’d put down half of a week’s tips in this. If he ignored him long enough, the man would probably go and Keith could double those sweet coins and buy some subway tickets instead of walking home.

Apparently, the other decided differently. He picked at Keith collar and tugged it up, before sitting in one of the empty chairs around the table. The green carpet covered in coins reflected on his double chin, the grease on it reflecting the color in disgusting stains.

“You wan’a figh’ ?”

A hand massive like a trunk snatched the collar of his shirt, yanking him up instantly. Keith caught the lack of teeth in the dim lights of the bar. Black dots on a white tongue. The ones left were a sickening yellow, with angles teeth should not logically take. The guy caught his look in return, and licked what remains of his dentition. Disgusting.

Keith inhaled sharply as the emanations of alcohol, among other things, reached his face in a pestilential question. The guy was drunk as a skunk.

Repulsive.

Sadly for this overgrown human, he’d chosen the wrong kid to call out on his tiny size. For that kind of guy, Keith was just as short as his temper, and even so short on losing it.

“Do I wanna fight ?” Keith gripped the wooden edge of the table -“Like you’re giving me any other choice!”- and he flipped it up.

It flew up, and shattered on a bony chin, startling everyone in the room. The bar voices quieted in a matter of second. There goes the storm again.

Not much to worry about, though. Anyone sat here was willing and consentant. Or at least, knew about the minor inconveniences of sticking around in the underground pub, that being, in no particular order: clammy floor, clogged toilets, bar fights -courtesy of one Keith Kogane ; alcohol poisoning, blood stains, money loss, and so much more!

The establishment hung its shiny “Direction Gives Up ALL Responsibilities” sign fiercely above the
counter. The green and yellow neons lining the ceiling reflected strange hues on it; their glow lit the room in a grotesque way.

They tinted they eyes in their bizarre colors. Green. Yellow. Animal eyes.

A glint passed across Keith’s eyes. The table, angles ripped up in shards, hung in the air like the silence. The time had stopped for the excruciating second before the hurricane. Coins and cards equally floated in the air, propelled in the air like thousands of jewels.

When the wood finally exploded at his feet, so did the rest of the world. The guy lunged forward, arms stretched out to crush a man’s head. Keith dodged them, elbowing the man between the shoulder blades as he did so. The momentum and the push combined to enrapure them both in their movements. Keith escaped as he heard the guy crash down on the already fractured table.

Keith took a few steps back and stood his guard. The first few moves had been insane luck mixed with combat technique he had only so much experience with. That being said, no kid of his age should have ever participated in nearly as many bar fights, but that’s another story.

This was a 50/50 bet. Now that the first surprise had passed and the advantage of it was gone, Keith was left alone against the furious beast rising up from what once was called a table.

His eyes followed a massive hand that broke a wooden table leg and waved it around like a stick. Keith felt like time had not only stopped, but turned backward. This guy was straight out of prehistoric cave.

“This is not a fair fight.” Keith hushed.

The guy grunted something unintelligible for human hears and tapped the palm of his free hand with the stick. Keith breathed in.

What’s an alcoholic sack of flesh against an adrenaline-fueled junkie?

Well, add a broken table leg in the equation and you get a few bruises for one, because no one can escape a stick waving around; and a knock-out for the other, after barely a swing of fists and a well-placed kick. Keith's speciality? Swaying on himself to escape a smash, and placing a well thought nudge of the elbow right under the armpit. It hurt, it was nasty in terms of fairness, and most
importantly, it drove the guy down. His momentum sent him flying back, away from Keith, directly on what used to be the poker table.

Keith only snorted after his last hit. You just don’t keep beating up a dead guy, do you?

The fight had lasted a minute.

Keith stared at the body knocked down on the remains of the table. Drool dripped from his chin. Blood from his mouth.

Keith had been gentle, honestly.

The room went back to its usual whispered chatter after the last “thud” of flesh being hit echoed through the cave, and Keith jogged out of it without so much as a few judging looks. His steps led him to the street-level bar, a couple of stairs above. Too bad for his subway tickets.

“Mind if I sit?” Keith ragged as he took a stool, elbowing the wooden top of the counter.

Shiny bottles spread behind it, glinting in the happy golden lights of this room. The atmosphere of each level of the bar was so different Keith had always wondered if the stairs were not some kind of dimensional portal. After the ill air of the underground cave, the smoky room, with its vitrails lamps and copper details, seemed like a magical place.

The bartender of this one level was as diametrically opposed to Keith as possible. Never picked up a fight, always smiled to the customers and a real chatterbox if let free.

The only thing they agreed on, bartending-wise, was the fact that no cocktail has a defined recipe if you tried hard enough. And he tried way too hard.

“I’m not even gonna ask.” Matt turned to Keith with a frown. The smile lingering on his lips made his eyes lie. Keith had learned that at worst, Matt could be pissed, but most of the time, he was just amused, if not actively investing in the betting pool.

Keith had won him a couple of greasy dollars already.

Matt slammed a glass full of amber in front of Keith, and pointed his index at the chest of the boy.
“You should straighten that shirt. It’s giving you a bad look.”

Keith pinched the fabric. “So what? I can’t… straighten... anything right now.”

Underneath the shirt, he could feel blossoming dozen of bruises on his skin. This would hurt, later. For now, it only ragged his breath a little and tinted air of this red feeling. Not anything Keith wasn’t absolutely accustomed to.

Matt nudged the glass of whiskey a little further into Keith’s space.

“You sure?”

Keith peered at the liquid. Matt had never served him anything that color. Unless...

“Golden 1987?” Keith said. The question was more of a plaint.

“Yep.”

Keith gulped. His throat was humid from blood a second ago. It dried up as quick as socks under summer’s sun.

He dumped the first half of the whiskey down in hope to soaken it again. That... didn’t work very well. His lungs reminded him he just emerged from a fist exchange with a bear down there and had not recovered yet; the coating of the alcohol silenced them right after.

Matt glowed under the lamps. Keith licked his sore lips. Something whispered it was gonna be okay in his brain.

It lied.

“Come on, put that shirt back in where it came from. You don’t want to give bad first impressions.” Matt nodded at Keith, who executed. “You only give them once.”
Keith bit his lip. It stung.

“She’s waiting upstairs.” Matt continued. “You don’t want to leave her hanging...”

Golden eyes, golden amber, golden lights. Keith wondered if the light had any influence on people’s vision. Matt looked absent for a second before raising his eyebrows at Keith, finishing a sentence the boy thought already over.

“...Trust me.”

Keith took the silent advice. Whiskey worked its miracles on shutting a lot of things off.

“‘Kay.” He slurped the other half of liquid and let it sank his brain in a soft amber before jumping out of the stool.

Keith strolled to the other set of stairs. The wooden, polished one that led to an upper room he knew very well. Too well for his own tastes, but you only ever have the clients you deserve.

Matt had set a code for that ; the cheaper the alcohol, the cheaper the client.

*The better the brew, the richer the customer.*

Sometimes Keith would be bargaining downstairs and Matt would announce a Chateaubriand 92. Keith would jump out of his seat and run, coating his hair with saliva in a lame attempt of keeping it back in place.

Other days, Matt brought him a Pepsi and snickered. Keith didn’t even drink it.

Matt had kept the 1987 behind a glass window for over years now. It was already there when Keith had pushed the door of the *Lion* for the first time. A half-dozen of sealed bottles, dusted and locked behind the bar, a supreme shelf no one ever ordered from.

Keith had never thought he would see the day one those brew would be popped open. Even less drink from it.
Lost in his thought, Keith had forgot about the physical realm in which his body was actually evolving. He tumbled, tripping on his own toes. He walked over a ghost step and his heart sank lower. The feeling of missing a beat and he gripped the walls.

The stairs loomed behind him. His balance wasn’t good enough anymore to prevent him from shivering at the thought of falling back.

His feet had reached the upper floor far too fast to his taste. At least his head was feeling a little lighter than it would have been without that glass of liquid amber… It tasted gross anyways. Keith hated whiskey.

The first steps were usually the hardest. Apprehension shook him to the core, enhanced by the alcohol pulsing through his veins.

Keith passed by a couple of doors and stomped in front of the last one. The corridor stretched behind his back, dark alley. Darker door.

Everything’s going to be fine. You’re not obliged to accept anything. Don’t freak them out.

A minute passed, Keith pep-talking himself in the dark. Inside, nothing moved.

Here goes nothing.

The mahogany carved wood opened on a little salon when Keith pushed it. The oranges and red emanating from the fireplace cut out a silhouette away from him, sat in one of the giant leather armchairs facing the open chimney.


The client had silky black pants and crocodile leather dandy shoes. Keith always looked from down up, because shoes always told him more than wigs.

These were new.
"Bought specially for the occasion?"

The sole was a bright red. Matt was right. She was rich.

And judging by the point of the heel, she was dangerous. Black pants in silk? Fancy and class, but straightforward. Not your classic lady. Keith’s eyes travelled up as he made a few steps in the room. The gears of his brain were clicking so hard he could feel them.

_Fucking whiskey._

White shirt, tucked in, no labels. Classy, fancy and elegant enough not to show it conspicuously. A business woman, Keith concluded. And the of the higher ranks, reading by the absence of skirt.

He had his fair share of greedy secretaries here.

Deciphering the clients was parts of the job. Keith was already listing what the hell could she like to find based on her looks. He settled for a ring. Or a bracelet. In gold, probably, but with a twist, like, mandatory royalty origins, or something alike.

Keith stepped in, his shoes sinking in the red carpet.

As far as appearance was on the table, Keith was pretty late behind. He sported nothing but dark tee-shirts and unwashed jeans, all of them ripped in various places, and at best, a shirt that would get creased as soon as he would have touched it.

Once, his mentor and friend bought him a tux. “For special occasions”, he’d said. Well, the only ‘special occasion’ Keith had attended since then was an illegal contract signature meeting, and coincidentally, one of the last time they’d seen each other, so for now, the suit was resting at the back of his messy closet, between jackets of his old school and jeans two sizes too small Keith still hadn’t dumped out.

Keith thought tonight would have made a perfect ‘special occasion’.

London was cutting out in the night behind the window, gentle drops of rain reflecting the lit windows. Far in the distance, the bright neons of the City. The client surely had made the journey from here.
Taxi or private driver? Maybe both. Private until home, and taxi from there.

When Keith’s feet reached the chimney, he stopped his examination. Before looking at her eyes, he wanted to hear the voice. Croaky of the scared contractor, or languid tone of the regular?

Keith’s favorite was a mix of snarky tone and the fake assurance. Getting those kind of people out of their shoes was a rare pleasure.

Keith tapped the marbred stone. He waited ten seconds.

*Let them do the talking. They speak first, not you.*

He waited ten more. Nothing.

She was careful. Maybe not scared, but careful nonetheless.

*Screw this.*

Keith took the wheel, for once. He was used to be ordered around, this one was knew and he had to do something or else he would explode. He had the distinct feeling that this interview would not turn just like any other, and for some strange reason, this stirred something in his stomach.

That, or this whiskey was really being a bitch.

“I don’t think we’ve been introduced, Miss…?” Keith said. He expected a pompous name.

“Call me Allura. My… family name is not important.” Clear voice, short sentence. No time to lose. Keith was right, she really was careful.

He turned back from the wall and looked at her. Neutral expression, slightly pouting. Maybe she expected something more from him. A bow? Keith was not much a fan of the reverence. But what was supposed to strike him the most was the hair, he supposed. Contrasting vividly with her skin, the silver mass in a updo framed her face like a crown.
Keith had learned not to trust the hair. Too visual, too easy. You don’t look at the most obvious, never. Hands, shoes, collars. This mattered more than anything.

And this woman had the cleanest shoes, the most forthright collar, the most immaculate hands. Either she was really good at hiding, or Matt should have opened something even better than his 1987.

If he had anything in his possession topping that, anyways.

*Probably not.*

Keith hushed his heart to stop stammering his chest. He flopped in the free armchair, slopping his weight all the way down in the used leather. His hand gripped the edge of his collar, faking a natural gesture.

She lifted her chin up. At least eighty seconds had passed since Keith had pushed the door, and barely two sentences had been exchanged.

Her patience was wearing thin, judging by the discreet foot tapping she only *tried* to hide. Keith could wait hours.

Or, at least, he had learn to pretend he could.

She sighed.

Careful, but hurried by unknown circumstances.

“I’m looking for something.” Allura said. She stopped there, as if she expected Keith to take it from here and finish her sentence.

He played along. She wanted Sherlock Holmes, she wanted mystery? A business girl, self-made, but not starting from the bottom. Not familiar with his world, but not ignorant of it either.

This promised to be interesting.

“Aren’t we all?” Keith asked.
Matt would jubilate. Keith bit his cheek.

“I believe I’m seeking something more... specific than happiness.” She eluded.

Keith raised a brow.

Stay in character.

“Did I ever mention happiness, Miss Allura?” Keith was trying his best to come off as this self-assured guy he could only hope to fake. The conversation wasn’t going as they usually did at all. He needed to make her speak, and quick.

She blinked. Easy to confuse, but not easy enough for it to last. She clicked her tongue. “Just Allura.”

Keith nodded.

This is absolutely not answering the question.

“Listen, I don’t have… time… for all of this.” She pursued.

Keith caught her glance, a quick stare at the window. He tensed up. A business girl, rich beyond words, in a hurry. Looking for something, in Hackney?

Of course she was not alone.

Someone probably waited for her in a black berline behind the bar. Someone with orders if she wasn’t back safe and sound in twenty minutes.

And someone else surely waited downstairs. How many new strangers did Matt served today? Could they wait, or did she have a signal?

Keith desperately tried to reform the bar in his head, but the gleam of the whiskey coated the memory
and smudged the figures.

Nothing clear.

From master of the situation, Keith felt dragged back to trapped prey. He hated it.

He ran a thumb across his bruised knuckles. The reminders of his earlier fight started to spread in purple and blue. Bursted veins and teared skin. This too would hurt like hell, but not as much as a bullet in the head, if this woman was in the mood to leave it at that.

You knew she was dangerous. You read it in the heels. Focus, Keith!

“Let’s make it quick, then.” Keith crossed his legs.

She reached for a black briefcase. Keith had missed it, stashed in the shadows. He tensed up.

Second time tonight he missed something so badly. Unusual.

Something was up with this woman. Keith couldn’t even give her an age. Twenty… Twenty four? Go for twenty four, because he had literally no idea. His brain was a blank page at this point, waiting to be filled in by her own words.

“My name is Allura.” She started as she clasped open the briefcase. “My father was an archeologist.” She opened the case, peering at the insides. The top of it hid the insides from Keith.

He kept picking at his fingers. The sting grounded his brain, but a voice told him to stop.

Allura settled down a packet of photographs on the table. Keith stared. At her.

“He disappeared ten years ago.” She continued. Her tone was calm like the sea after the storm. A storm Keith had no desire to know about.

His hand burned to reach for the photographs. His eyes stayed glued to Allura’s.
This was a test. This was most definitely a test. Keith was all wrong. She was not new to this, nor was she stressed about it. She had everything under control. Red stole, crocodile leather, needle heels.

She wasn’t just dangerous, she was a snake. Keith, as good as he was, had fell right for it, his mind cluttered by the memory of the clumsy bear he’d threw up hands with down there.

*Oh god.*

This guy was new here, that’s why he picked up a fight. No regular *ever* picked fights. Not with Keith, at least, they knew better than to mess with the booted out military student. In the past year, he had built himself quite the reputation.

Keith sighed. How could he have been so blind?

He’d never been the master of the situation, at all. Now all he could do was adapt.

“This guy, down there. He’s with you, isn’t he?” He had given up on fake impressions and bad acting. If she was that good and that prepared, he stood next to no chance.

Allura scoffed. Keith spotted the slight smile in her voice.

“Yes, that is right.” She lowered her hand on the briefcase. As she relaxed, so did Keith.

“How long have you been planning this?” He asked. To be honest, he didn’t expect much of an answer.

“Long enough for me to get here tonight.”

Fair enough.

Keith nodded. Very well, he was the chosen one. Whoever was this mysterious Allura, he was at her mercy now. She shrugged, visibly comfortable now. Comfort from power.

Keith let out a hushed breath.
“Why me then? If you’re rich enough to follow me, why don’t you go and get this… Thing, you need so bad, all by yourself?” Keith said. He was asking sincerely, because the idea of being at someone’s mercy without a good explanation wasn’t much his cup of tea.

He didn’t even like tea.

“Oh, believe me, I tried. I tried. My father has been gone for ten years, and god knows I tried.” Allura flicked her eyes too many times. Tears? She hid them well, if this was the case.

Orange light of the fire on the blue of her eyes, glints of mystic colors. Flicking in the air. Her irises shined in magical colors, unreal. Animal, human and alien eyes, Keith had seen it all today.

He leaned toward her slightly. She pursued, unbothered by his intense stares.

“I’ve tried the regular way. I set up an expedition and searched. Nothing. Then I tried private detectives, and even private detectives. I went to the police, the national agency and a couple of friends. Nothing.”

“Why do you think… I mean… If Interpol can’t get you what you want…” Keith wondered out loud.

He had dropped out of military highschool a year ago, and even though he was clearly good at what he did, he wasn’t sure he could rivalize with any of the big names Allura had already went to.

He wasn’t a private, nor a detective, and even less of an international police officer. He was just… Keith.

“Oh? I’m not searching for my father anymore. I know far too well what happened to him.” Allura spat out. Keith recoiled. “No, now I’m not looking for this anymore. I’m looking for what killed him.”

Keith gulped.

“What do you mean, killed him?”
Allura flicked her head. The window, again.

All of these quick glances had made Keith nervous. He picket at his fingers again, his brain glossing over the obviously bleeding cuts. Allura seemed just as wary as he was.

“Before we go any further, I need to warn you.”

Keith gritted his teeth. Half of his brain, the one still awake and careful, was screaming him to stop. The other, fueled by ramen, adrenaline and whiskey, hurled over the first half. Sadly for Keith, it won.

“Go on.” Keith whispered.

“This could be very dangerous. Deadly, even. And I weight my words.”

Keith licked his lips.

“What else?”

“It’s personal. Once you’ll be filled in, there will be only two ways out. Finding what I want. Or death.”

Allura looked dead serious. Keith had seen worse choices. He leaned further.

“And?”

“It’s also highly rewarded.” Allura’s tone had shifted. She probably felt Keith was already in anyways.

This was significantly more interesting. “How much?” Keith dared to ask.
“Half. To share with everyone you’ll want.”

Keith choked on his own saliva. Half? Half?! “You’ve got to be kidding me.” His voice was raspy, his throat suddenly dry.

He was waiting for twenty percent, at most. Fifteen would have sealed the deal. Half was both unexpected and terrifying.

What could be worth so much that she was ready to pay half of its final price?

“I’m very serious. Half for me, the rest for you.” Allura’s voice was crystal clear.

Keith breathed in. The warm air filled his lungs. Despite everything, he trusted her, somehow.

“Wow. You must really want that thing to offer so much. Or be very desperate.” He pushed it, trying to find a crack.

Allura brushed him off. “Are you in, or not?”

Keith glanced at her nails digging into the leather of the briefcase. Her jaw contracted. Even a strike of white hair dared to escape from the updo, and balanced a second in front of her ear. Silence filled the room.

For once, he dared to turn away from his client and look at London. Past the greasy glass, the city, in its full splendor and dirtiness, was breathing in the night. Keith had been hitting its streets for the past year.

That was far too much, far too long.

His mind drifted on the last stream of alcohol remaining in his body. The conversation had killed the general dizziness of the Golden, and now his drunkenness was agonizing, filling his brain with memories in a last breath.

All the sleepless nights, all the trivial deals, the worthless chases, all the rainy days. The weeks spent
looking anywhere for something that would fill him with this buzz again, the afternoons wasted on useless runs to nowhere, the mornings melted in dreamless slumber.

A year spent on pause, like a movie stopped at the end of the first scene. Chasing ghosts.

He looked at the city. It probably did not looked back. Keith dreamed of the excitement again. His heart was aching to find that thrill again, the adrenaline, the gambling, the danger. He was lost, he had lost, something, someone.

But he knew where to look.

“Okay. Fill me in.”

Keith watched Allura. Tension slipped out of her jaw suddenly, her eyelids closing over a smile. For an instant, he thought she looked younger than what it seemed. And then she switched back into her business mode and Keith frowned.

“Perfect.” She said, satisfied.

And Keith knew there was no return. He felt it the moment it dropped, the word sealing much more than just a deal. This was a pact, a call for an adventure, the first step in something beyond himself he wasn’t so sure of embracing already.

Whatever she would ask for he would go fetch, because, first thing, he never broke his word.

And second thing, her voice, and everything in Allura screamed that she knew about something so unbelievable that Keith couldn’t even envision it, that people had died for it, and that he would probably do anything to grasp only a fragment of it, just for the sake of finally uncovering a truth he felt in his core was beyond him, and her, and everyone in this city.

Something so exciting, every bone and every muscle in his body started to jolt in enthusiast as soon as she continued, unaware of the sudden light Keith had been struck by, a glimpse of miraculous clairvoyance premoniting him far greater perspectives than the usual thief tricks he had gotten the habit of.
“As I said earlier, my dad disappeared ten years ago. I never stopped searching for him, but I’m basically assured now that he’s dead. So this is not my main concern anymore.” As she spoke, Allura emptied the briefcase on the coffee table.

Photographs, both in black and white and colors, journal articles, book pages teared up on the sides and excerpts of notes. There was also a couple of notice of acquisitions and, well, keys.

Keith stared at the contents. Allura clasped the case close after snatching one last page from it.

“I’m looking for this.” She stated, handing Keith a drawing.

Keith’s eyes went from the paper to the girl. A sketch. Untitled, but a bunch of scribbles on the side informed him enough.

“A statuette?”

He needed a confirmation.

“Precisely.” Allura answered, her olympian calm resting in her voice. Her eyes searched for Keith’s, looking for an emotion, a sign, a reaction.

He blinked.

So she wasn’t looking for a bracelet, after all.

Keith wasn’t sure of whether or not he was happy to be wrong about his intuitions on Allura.

He raised a finger, intimating her to wait while he read the whole thing. Spanish, English and French words blended at the bottom of the sketch, in the form of notes. It took him a while to decipher the whole thing.

“So, correct me if I’m wrong. But you’re looking for a statuette, made of, hum, shimmering stars? And your father believed it was hidden in Latin America, for… Some reason, and this, statuette…
Was the key. To open. Something.” Keith stuttered. If English and French were okay, the Spanish was a little rusty in his mind.

Allura pointed at the drawing of the statuette, a block of stone carved with eyes and ears, in the shape of an animal Keith had trouble defining. A cat? Maybe.

Keith discerned vaguely the mouth, but it could also be the shading.

“Exactly. My father and his… former associate, if I may say, found out about ancient ruins, before even the dawn of the Aztecs, in Mexico. There’s pretty much nothing about it, but he finally settled to be sure about one thing: this statuette was the key to everything.”

“Everything?” Keith parroted.

“I have no idea what he meant.” Allura said. She lost herself in the contemplation of the dying fire in the chimney. “His notes disappeared with him. This is the last thing remaining from his existence, along with… Some other things, but they’re no use for this mission.”

“Okay…” Keith exhaled. If he noted Allura was clearly hiding things from him, he was too absorbed in the current mystery to pay attention to the others. He glanced again at the notes and back and forth at the sketch.

“Keith.”

The boy jolted upon hearing his name. Allura inched closer to him.

“I want you… I need you to find this. Whatever the cost. I’ll cover everything.”

“Okay.” His breath was sharp.

The light flickered. One of the logs vanished in burning rubies, creaking in the air one last time. The air floated with the smoke.

“Keith. This is the single most important thing in your life now, starting this second, do you hear me.
You *have* to find this statuette.” Allura pressed.

“Alright. But…” Keith rubbed his temple with a finger that wasn’t already itchy, or at least not too much. The movement didn’t make the last clouds of alcohol go away, but he found the strength to ask Allura what bothered him so much. More than bothered, it troubled him. “If it’s so important for you, why didn’t you go yourself first?”

Allura breathed in. Keith watched her compose and recompose herself in a span of less than a second.

*Touché*.

“Oh trust me, I tried as well. I really did. But there are forces working here that I must fight on a whole different level.”

Keith felt that, despite the warm, suffocating atmosphere of the room, his spine was shivering. A cold, single drop of sweat ran down his back.

Allura sighed and leaned back in her seat. The flames of the chimney danced on her cheeks, piercing stars into her silver hair.

“My father used to work with an associate. But… Things heated up between them and how they should investigate. My father wanted to show the world their discovery and preserve it, while his partner… He was ruthless and restless. The quest had sucked compassion out of him. Eventually, they stopped working together.”

She lowered her head.

“This is the last thing he sent me, before departing for a ‘secret place’, as he said, in Mexico. The furthest my detective could find his tracks was up north of the capital. But my father kept moving and blended in quite well, if he wanted to. Then couldn’t find anything more. Eventually, five years ago, I quit looking for him.”

Keith glanced at Allura. Her lips were pressed into a fine line, her eyes looking nowhere for a second, before she went on with the rest of her story.
He knew exactly how she felt.

“At this point, his company was dangerously falling apart. I gave up on following in his footsteps of mysticism and treasures, and took up the reins of the society. All of the private detectives I have contacted since then have refused my offers, no matter how big. I figured that only a less... orthodox method would lead me the right way. That’s when i started digging the underground markets of stolen works of art and antiquities.”

“And that’s how you found me.” Keith completed.

“And that’s how I found you.” Allura agreed.

Keith scratched his nose.

“Well, that’s embarrassing.”

To say the least.

“Actually, I wasn’t exactly looking for you, per say, but it seems that you and I have in common the disappearance of a…”

“I’d rather not talk about it.” Keith cut her off.

Allura bit her lips.

“I understand.” She paused and drew a breath, glancing by the window again. “Anyways. Art fraud, museum theft, archaeological sites scavenging, sales of rare antiquities, disappearance of the police files for over three years, auctions tenancy… And I pass over many.”

Keith drew in a breath. Not his proudest moments, but not his worst either. And he made a million with a fake Mondrian, once, so this wasn’t even half bad.

A million for red squares and black lines. He could still hear his own laughter over the scam.
Allura wrinkled her nose, hiding her smile behind a cold face Keith deciphered as easily as one of these antique manuscripts.

“I couldn’t possibly find anyone with half of your… experience.”

“I’m not sure of whether I should take this as a compliment or not.” Keith answered.

“It is, indeed. I must say I was… Impressed, by your competences.”

“My brother’s.” Keith dropped. “I wouldn’t be here if this wasn’t for him.” He knew what Allura meant when she mentioned him not being the first choice. “Believe it or not, but he vanished too, much like your father.”

“And you haven’t stopped looking for him since.”

“No.”

Fire creaks. Glance at the window, tapping of the red sole on the carpet. Delicate burns of the bruises when he inhaled. Keith tightened his fists.

“Very well.” Allura said. Very professional. “I think if you’re still here, I assume you haven’t found anything then. Now, it must surely be a coincidence, but what if I was to say that the last mention of his name was in Mexico?”

Allura pushed an article toward Keith, her manicured nails wrinkling the paper. The photo depicted a group of people, in full exploration gear. The thing dated from five months ago.

Keith barely let his eyes settle on the text. There, in the corner of the picture, away from the focus, a figure he could bet his right hand on.

Shiro.

He was not properly his brother per say, but the guy had taught him basically eighty percent of everything Keith knew. They used to work together, Keith contributing in a lot of Shiro’s troubles,
but there anyways. Scavenging, looting and generally exploring was a discipline the guy had
amazing experience in, despite his young age, and the years they passed together were amongst the
best of Keith’s life.

But he disappeared and Keith, left alone, tumbled down to the shadier of the shady businesses.

The last thing he’s ever had of Shiro was the memory of a ruffle of his hair at the tarmac of a private
airplane. That was a year ago. He made it out alone since, and never stopped looking for intel about
his brother at heart. Alas, never found anything.

Until today.

“I’m not sure, I mean… It could be anything, but if he’s been led there, you might be able to find
someth-” Allura muttered.

“No. It’s him.” Keith felt his voice rasp against his throat. “He’s there.”

“I guess that’s another reason to fly for Mexico as soon as possible, then...” Allura left her words
hanging in the air. The proposition was tempting.

Keith reluctantly eyed away from the article. “What do you mean ?”

“Well... I might just have plane tickets for Mexico right here, and there’s no reason for me to believe
you’ll refuse a business class pre-boarding.” Allura flicked another paper at him. “It’s registered as
Keith Kogane, but i can change the name if needed.”

Keith was already clicking gears in his brain. He had at least five different passeports. Kogane was
the last name he used for auctions, thus logically being the one Allura found about. Cool with him.
For now.

He read outloud the informations under the barcode.

“Tomorrow, 18 : 04, Heathrow.”
“Mh-mh !” Allura approved. She looked radiant.

The atmosphere was shifting and a rift opened between her and Keith. Her happy smile faced a frown Keith had mastered over the years, a cold stare he’d gotten the master of.

“And that’s it. You send me off across the world with a note about a statuette and a grainy photo of my brother, and expect me to find both of them in an entire country ?” Keith scoffed.

If that was what she was going for, he really had no other choice. Besides, he wasn’t sure he had anything much to offer himself. And he had already given his word.

She waved a hand and shushed him.

“Of course not ! Your car will wait for you at Mexico’s airport parking. The tank is already filled up.” She twinkled the keys around her finger. “Here.”

She tossed the keyring in the air. Keith caught it with one hand, holding tight on anything classy he had left. Allura raised a brow.

“Is there anything else ?” Keith asked. He was already drowned neck-deep in the case, but awareness saved the cat. Curiosity, however…

Allura leaned back in her seat, uncrossing her legs and crossing them back right again. Keith was pretty sure he’d seen this in a movie, but he was incapable of remembering which one.

Unaware of what crossed the boy’s mind, Allura started to count on her fingers.

“My father disappeared, I want a mysterious statuette, your brother might be there and all of this is extremely confidential. I’ll cover anything if needed and do not expect you to be back before you’re done, so there is no deadline for this… This is really everything I have to offer.”

Keith seized his opportunity.
“And this?”

He pointed at all the other documents.

“Help yourself. They’re all copies anyways.” Allura gestured toward the coffee table. Keith grabbed the papers.

Copies. Trust wasn’t there yet, but if she let him go with the documents, it was already good enough.

Two notices of auctions signed by his own hand. Weird. A photo, visibly taken by herself, in a house. Keith recognized the painting, for that he made it himself. Copying masterpiece without so much as a brushstroke of difference was a skill he preferred not to divulge.

Well, she knew.

The million of that fake Mondrian was long gone by now, anyways.

There was a signed check too, and the copies of several works about archeological sites in Mexico. Prints of Toltecs and Mayans plates and samples too. Drawings, figures, visibly handmade, and covered in notes. Keith deduced them to be Allura’s father’s work, looking at the notes in three languages.

Nothing much about the statuette, except for a copied texts, a couple of symbols and the drawing. Keith was starting with next to nothing this time.

Allura was waiting, lounging in the armchair. Keith turned to her.

“Is that all there is?”

“I’m afraid so, yes.”
Keith pouted.

A bad habit he had to get rid of, for it divulged so much of his inner thoughts, but he was already past this with Allura anyways. He looked at the stack of paper, terribly scrawny and yet already huge, apparently.

“Well. Shiro… And me -we once found an entire miniature model of Christopher Columbus's caravel with only a scribble down a merchant’s ledger so… I guess I could do it again?” Keith stated.

“I know. I’ve read about it.” Allura said simply.

Keith huffed. This girl was… Truly something. She replaced a rebel strand of hair behind her ear, graceful.

“Well. If we’re done here, I must get going.” Allura extended her hand to Keith. He shook it, a little disoriented.

This ended far faster than it started, and Keith felt the stirring feeling settle back in his insides. Like he was rolling down a heel without any control over again, the same sensation of bright speed and floating heart.

“Call me if there’s anything you need. I leave you my card.”

A rectangle landed in his hand. Keith peered at the golden script on the glassed paper. *Altea Corps.*

*Oh.*

“You’re… !”

“On my way, yes. It’s been a pleasure, Keith. I look forward to hearing from you again.”

Keith stood up clumsily, watching in awe as she opened the door. His arms dangled at his sides.
By the time he recovered and chucked everything back into the briefcase, running down the stairs to catch her, she was already gone, silver hair nowhere to be seen in the bar. Keith jarred the front door open and only caught the headlights of a car vanishing into the Londonian night.

Behind his counter, Matt snickered.

“You missed her by a solid minute. I don’t know what you’ve done to her, but she looked even more beautiful than when she came in, if you know what I mean…” The bartender slurred.

“Matt. You’re the one thinking about it.” Keith hushed.

Brushing off Matt’s usual innuendos, Keith dwelled on his encounter. His hands were trembling from the missed chance. And even if he had managed to catch up, to tell her what?

That she could probably buy his life and he was impressed?

That really made no sense.

“So…” Matt settled a duo of glasses on the wooden counter. The bar was empty, if only for Keith and another guy, a weirdo named Steve. Or Pete. The point was, he was alone.

*Of course. All of her watch dogs are gone with her.*

Filling the glasses up to the brim, Matt glanced at Keith. He hopped on the counter and clinked his drink on the other, before downing it in a strong swig.

“So, pretty boy. What’s the plan?” Matt asked after wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Keith looked up from the transparent liquid, a finger loosely pointing at it.

“What is this? Don’t tell me you’re getting me drunk again.” He asked, and in a hurry; “And don’t
Matt bit in a lemon before handing it to Keith’s, all teeth out.

“Yes I am. This is by far the biggest command ever. And this - he pointed at the liquid- is tequila, since you’re headed to Mexico, you know ? To keep up the theme.”

“How do you know -I thought you were asking me the plan ?!” Keith inquired. Despite everything, he still closed his fingers on the fruit, pressuring it more than needed.

Matt shrugged, his eyes closed. The sweet bastard.

“Keith, if I was only listening to what people choose to tell me, I wouldn’t be here. Now drink and bite a bit.”

Keith obeyed. The lemon exploded in his mouth while the alcohol set fire to his stomach. The very last thing he needed now was to be hungover for tomorrow, but Matt had other plans.

Matt always had other plans.

“Well, agh, I’m flying tomorrow for Mexico, and I got a car already. That’s it.” Keith explained. Matt poured them both another glass.

“And for after ? You’ll need to ask her your passport, you know that.” Matt winked and pointed at the ceiling. Keith’s eyes followed his finger.

They downed their drinks.

“Yeah I- seriously, another one ? I know, but that’s everything I need. No cover up, no hacking, nothing. I go, dig up and leave. Simple and clean.”

Matt snorted. His hand slipped on the counter and he slumped on the wooden top. From Keith’s groggy point of view, it seemed like the alcohol was settling in his brain at speedlight, slurring his speech and fogging his eyes.
“Last time you said… Last time. You said that. And. It wasn’t… Simple and. Clean.” Matt pointed out.

Another. Glass.

“Matt. Matt stop.”

“Mhh.”

Keith felt. Something. Leave. Everything was so soft then? Even… Steve had left by now.

Matt held up the lemon for Keith to chew. He wasn’t sure. Nah. He shouldn’t.

He chewed anyways.

Matt left out a laugh.

“But really. What will you do. Once you’re. Ya know. Outta there. Cowboy.” He bit the lemon and drank. Wrong order, but, at this point, it didn’t really matter did it?

“I.” Keith snatched the bottle out of Matt’s hand and went for a full swig. “I’ll see there. Who-ah. This is. This hits.”

“Yeah. I’ve had this locked up too.” Matt pawed Keith’s hand. “I… think it’s. Enough.”

“Sure.” Keith felt his mouth escape him. It ran away with his consciousness. Probably to Vegas. He’d never even been to Vegas.

The soft blur of the parallel reality of his drunk self etched out all the edges. Matt laughed again. Keith closed his eyes. He really needed to work on his capacity to take alcohol without passing out after a mere handful of drinks. It’s really not water.
Illustrations of this chapter, in order of appearance:

Born Unto Trouble - Red Dead Redemption.
Discobombulate - Hans Zimmer
Game of Thrones: Season 6 OST - Light of the Seven
Mud - or - When you're in the blue, feeling blue, seeing blue, but nothing's clear

Chapter Summary

Keith arrives Mexico, and despite traveling alone, crosses paths with a very familiar, yet new duo. Blue eyes and warm smile, rings a bell?

Chapter Notes

Despite writing 200 pages in advance, i managed to be late ! Ahahh, sorry about that ! I haven't drawn as much as I wanted, but hhh i think you'd rather have something to read than waiting longer !

We finally get to meet Hunk and Lance!!!

“Hey ! Wake up, sleepy head. You’ve got a plane to catch ! And I need my countertop back.”

A voice hammered his skull. Keith could have sworn only a second had passed between the moment he had closed his eyes and the other moment, the current one, when he opened them over a shiny counter.

His first reflex was to shut them again, only to slowly, slowly try to getting used to the light.

Golden ray of sun radiated through the windows of the bar, the filth covering the glass cutting out the light in a myriad of rays illuminating the dust that floated in the air. They shattered on the glass, blinding. The bottle shone like new on their shelves.

Matt was standing just under them, already toying with his various instruments. Bartender at night, shady biologist during days !

No one had ever dared to ask him what floated in those vials and beakers, but Keith had his idea pretty well set. It was dangerous, or illegal, or a mix of both. And probably even worse than that.

Keith tried muttering something over his shoulder. Just moving his jaw made everything reel.

“What was that ? I didn’t get it !” Matt cupped a hand around his ear cheerfully, way too happy of
the disgrace that was morning-Keith, all sore and groggy from the hangover he had the full and entire responsibility of.

Well.

‘Morning Keith.’ Judging by the light, they were well into afternoon.

“I said ‘fuck you’, Matt.” Keith roared. His brain was melting back into his usual place. “You know. You know I can’t. Alcohol.”

The tinker of a glass beaker over another shot through Keith’s ears and pierced a burning hole into his skull.

“Yeaah, but the more you drink the better you get at it. Plus, you’re the one who downed the shots, not me.” Matt snickered.

Keith had zero energy left to fight back anyways. Matt was really, really being to loud.

“Sur-oh heck.”

Or maybe Keith was just that hungover.

Matt pushed a glass of water towards the inform shape that was Keith’s body. Keith peered at it. From all he could tell, the thing looked slightly white, but not so much. Like floor dissolved in water.

Whatever it was, it came from Matt. And Matt was currently… Playing the mad scientist. Keith licked his lips cautiously.

His throat was a dry parchemin.

“Drink up. It’s only aspirin, don’t worry. If I wanted you dead, you would be already.” Matt bragged. Keith eyed the glass.
At least Matt had had the taste to not put his medicine in a beaker. His humor was… Uncertain, at best, and Keith really wasn’t in the mood.

In fact, Keith was not in any mood.

Just moving his hands to grab the glass informed him about how death felt. His stomach was closer to the ceiling than it should be, menacing to empty itself at any minute now. The supplement of weird, grainy liquid Keith downed in a matter of second didn’t do it any good.

“How long does this… needs ?”

“You should stop feeling like a zombie in about…” Matt looked at a clock behind Keith, and raised a brow. “Fifteen minutes. I can’t do anything for your look, though.”

“I-”

“By the way, it’s 15:08. I think you’d like to go.” Matt toned.

The number glowed in red in Keith’s brain. It took him a few seconds to process the info. When it finally ticked, the sudden burst of stress and adrenaline hour washed out all remaining tiredness from Keith. There was nothing to do for the alcohol in his blood, though.

A cold shower, in numerical form. 15:08.

Shit !

Keith jumped out of his seat, kicking the stool in the process. Stumbling to get back on his feet and wiggling around for a second before sprinting. Keith was, as one would say, in a rush.

He tripped over his own steps twice before gripping the chairs in front of him -where they always that high ?- to steady the world. Or himself. Whatever was swaying around the most.

“PIDGE !” Keith screamed across the establishment.

Keith had already been stung by a wasp, once. It was a nice, breezy summer afternoon, and his ice
cream had attracted more than just friends. From the event, he only remembered a striking, burning bite, and his wasted ice cream. But mostly the fact that it hurt like hell.

Screaming at the top of his lungs felt like being stung by twenty angry wasps. At once. In the head.

The sound lacerated his brain.

Keith slammed a hand over his forehead, trying to contain the pain. It felt like it was directly running through it’s fingers despite his efforts, dripping down his arms and directly setting fire to everything his body held inside.

He was never, ever touching anything coming from Matt ever again. Especially Tequila.

Keith took a step ahead, then another, and the aspirin kicked in. Finally. He took his chance and ran upstairs as if hell was hot on his heels, flying up the stairs with only a relatively low wish of instant death.

Every step felt like cracking his head open. Neat.

The corridor was less intimidating in the middle of afternoon that it was at midnight. On autopilot, Keith crashed open the first door.

Something slapped his face as a welcome. Keith missed it and it felt at his feet, a blue rectangle on the floor. A passport.

From the depth of the room, a voice. “Here !”

Sat in the middle of a mayhem of wires, screens and keyboard, a small girl in green shorts. Pidge. Keith owed her half of his success, mainly because she somehow always found a way through the jungles he couldn’t walk in. Her domain was as mathematical and quantic as his was physical and solid.

“Matt told me for your newest mission. Neat, isn’t it ? I already knew of course, but anyways, here’s your passport. If you lose it again, I’ll personally come down to Mexico and shave your hair. Keep your phone charged, this time. Don’t be late !”
She waved her hand, dismissing Keith already. He hadn’t even stepped into the room.

“Huh... Thanks. I-”

“Come on! Go away! Don’t miss your plane! If you’re not in Mexico City in ten hours I’ll fling you myself over the ocean.” Pidge hushed. “Also you look like a zombie, but worse. Like a dead, then revived, and then killed again zombie.”

She paused. Keith blinked, kneeled and grabbed the papers. His blood was throwing the party of the century in his temples.

“Zombies smell better, though.” Pidge added.

Keith stared at her, the Aspirin finally killing the last effect of the tequila overdose. His brain was nowhere near good, but it was already 29% functional, and that’s all Keith asked for.


His steps echoed in his skull, his body was closer to the corpse’s than to the athlete’s, he could eat a steak, a cow and the butcher with it without blinking, and his breath could kill a man.

Keith was really feeling great.

He had two hours before the liftoff.

*Easy, peasy.*

///
Keith left off the plane in Mexico. The sun was already melting the metal of the tarmac when the leather of his boots stepped out. The heat was unreal. His brain was melting again for the second time in a day.

Not a pleasure.

The one good thing was that, with him sweating his insides out, the alcohol was leaving his system pronto. He smelled like a flambée, the alcohol evaporating off his skin visually, but at least he was able to walk straight. Or he could try to.

Allura hadn’t lied about the flight quality. Keith was pretty sure he could have enjoyed it, would his head not feel like mashed potatoes.

He exited the airport without any bagages but a black sport bag, a heavy migraine, and an industrial sandwich he bought for an amount of pesos he couldn’t tell either was a tourist trap, or a real deal. Either way, it tasted like plastic and nearly had the texture of it.

_I love mondays._

Around him, like the water of a stream, people left the airport in a compact mass, dodging him like
the river avoids the rock. Cars and cabs, taxis of all sorts where pressing themselves out on the road, to unknown places Keith had no time for exploring. The crowd was buzzing, another source of heat he was happy to get away from.

According to Allura and the keys in his pocket, his car was supposed to be parked around the airport. Apparently, she had decided that this was another trial of some sort, because Keith had around zero clues as to where he was supposed to actually find it.

The parking stretched over a mile.

“Well. If I’m supposed to find a secret cave, might as well be able to find a car in a parking, right?”

Right?

Keith clicked the keys and rose the chain up to his eyes.

First, a black, metallic one. Nothing on it, smooth and clean, like freshly printed. He had no idea of what could it open, if it was even meant to open anything at all. The other was black too, but dusty and covered in scratches and various stains. Keith turned it around.

“E E P.”

Metallic letters glued to the plastic. Jeep. It’s a Jeep. They parked a Jeep in an international airport and expected him to find it. Fuck this.

Keith reached for his phone and scrolled between the apps until he found the one. A small icon, a green face with spiraling glasses.

Pidge’s miracle.

Without thinking twice, Keith pressed it and started walking. The screen showed up a green rectangle filling itself. Loading. Over a dozen of seconds passed before it changed to a bunch of smaller screens.
Keith pressed a magnifying glass and typed Jeep in. As crazy at it looked, Pidge had just created an automatic hacking app; if there was no firewall or extensive protection, she did not even need to be there to sneak her way in the systems. And since Keith had no time to waste, she also created him a searching tool.

Google maps could go fuck itself.

The jewel of technology cost Keith nearly a month of salary he gathered at a crappy hot dog selling store, but it was worth it. And free hot dogs every day weren’t nearly as bad as they try to make you believe.

Keith scrolled down the security cams screens. Their number had reduced to half a dozen, as filtered cars disappeared. A jog between all locations while frantically pressing the lock-unlock button of the Jeep later, and Keith finally found it.

The Jeep.

Retro and greenish, the car looked like a discarded prop of a safari movie. Whatever, Keith liked it over the newest, latest technologic vehicles, much less reliable than a bunch of wires and pipes. Pidge was good with computers and Matt with microscopes, Keith had his mechanic talents.

Amongst others.

That was probably one of the reasons they worked together; they completed each other, one of them surpassing the others in each respective domain. In a way, finding these two had saved Keith.

After Shiro left, he had sunk back into a routine he used to have and thought they, him and Shiro, had killed long ago.

The first week after the silence on radar, Keith had barely made it out of the bed. The mute comms were turning him crazy. Nights were sleepless and days sunless.

He didn’t really recall the moment he started to use his fake ID to enter bars that didn’t care about his age anyways, but could still clearly picture the exact moment he cried his heart out in the darkness of a Londonian gutter, hunched over it like a drunken sailor, which he, by the way, wasn’t so far away from at the time.
His body had refused to let him drown in tears or alcohol, as if Shiro had slapped away the bottle from his hand and wiped his face from god only knew where.

By the end of the second week, Keith had drenched three fireball bottles and puked everything he could. His school had called more than once.

He’d never picked up, the strident beeping of the phone echoing in the too empty apartment.

That’s when Keith plunged back. He went to places he’d sworn he would never visit again and talked to people Shiro had helped him forget about.

In his own illegal way, the guy had shaped him into a better kid. If the path was still the same, Keith had stopped limping on it the day Shiro had extended his hand so many years ago to pick him up, taking him under his wings in a way no one has ever did before.

His disappearance had pushed Keith again on the trail of little misdeeds and third-rate crooks. Something he had abandoned years before. Or at least, he thought he had.

Matt and Pidge had entered in his life at the very point of no return. A second later, and Keith would have been doomed.

The plan was breaking and entering, collection and extraction. Simple.

*Stupid.*

Before Keith had even set a foot inside the jewel store he was planning on robbing that day, Matt had tackled him to the ground, jumping out of nowhere. Keith had almost broke his nose in the meantime it took Pidge to explain how they used to know Shiro too.

By the moment Keith had heard the police sirens, the siblings had already put him back on his feet. He had stopped limping and started running, running toward his brother of heart.

They showed him the *Lion* and much more, and since then, he never stopped running after Shiro. Nonetheless, if he pursued in his somewhat illegal path, he stood on a side Shiro would have approved. And if he got drunk, he only did it under Matt’s golden eyes. And if he stayed late in bed, it was only for Pidge’s all-nighters spent searching in private websites and hacked airports security
cameras.

He stuck to what he knew. And to what he did best, to what Shiro would approve. To what he would have been proud of.

Matt, Pidge and Shiro had shaped him. They all had. And now, as he pulled the lock of the Jeep open, it came to his mind that Allura, somehow would shape him in a new way too, with her task suddenly weighting on his shoulders. Bearer of new responsibilities, Keith felt like he had finally took another step towards the higher grounds.

He wasn’t holding the world on his shoulders like Shiro, but he sure was already carrying his weight, a cowboy of a new genre.

And as every modern gold-digger, Keith had a ride-or-die relationship with his vehicle. Leaving his usual city meant he had to change his habits of displacement. Fancy words to say he hadn’t drove an actual car in years. He wasn’t even sure to remember half of the mandatory things listed in driving manuals anyways.

Keith only hoped for one thing as he jumped into the Jeep.

“Please have AC. Please have AC. Please have…Oh no.”

The car had slowly cooked under the sun. The air inside was probably above 30°C. Keith slammed his fist on the wheel in frustration, his hair already gluing to his neck.

He’d have to make do.

The key fitted all right. Keith pinched at the rearview mirror. It reflected him a pair of tired eyes and sweaty cheeks. No good looking.
Whatever, no one was here to witness. And Allura didn’t pick him for the looks either.

He stirred the breaks all windows down, engine roaring. As he bunked out of his parking spot, judging by the sound of the engine, Keith feared the retro feel of the Jeep was just not some fantasy but the actual age of the car. If he were to be right, he should really not push it that hard.

But a little excess never hurt nobody.

Could hurt a car, though.

He exited the parking and engaged on the road, driving at breakneck speed despite all common sense. He liked the feel of the sudden rushes of adrenaline, the underlying fear of ending crashing down in a pile of fusing metal and scraps exploding into the sunset. Some poetic ways of formulating his “job risks”.

He cut in the file and slammed his feet to the ground, accelerating again. Destination ? Highway to Northern Mexico.

Behind him, the violent horn of a Ford faded in the wind.
Ah, sorry. Not sorry.

Keith snickered all alone, smoothing his hands over the wheel, trying to accommodate to the heat. The blurry photograph of Shiro passed by in his mind, as well as notes in so many languages Keith had given up on counting.

His right hand left the wheel for his pocket. He fished his phone out of it, barely glancing at the road while typing a number graved in his heart by now.

The line beeped twice.

“Hey Pidge ?” Keith placed the phone between his shoulder and ear, holding the wheel with his left hand only and rummaging through the car with the other. A concert of various screeches flooded in the car. Not his own, though, but Keith had a very… personal, yeah, personal driving style.

One that involved major risks for anyone willing to drive ahead of him.

“Yeah ?” Pidge’s voice was croaky and buzzy from the other end of the line. A whole ocean separated them and yet, she still picked up.

“Your app’ works wonders.”

“Did you call me just to tell me what I already know or do you need something else ?” Snarky words, affectionate tone. Keith heard the clicks of fingers over two different keyboards. “How was the trip ?” Pidge asked.

“Hell. I didn’t slept at all and food wasn’t that great. Weather here is trying to melt me down. And I kinda want a cigarette.”

“I thought you quit smoking ?” Pidge sounded more inquisitive than surprised.

“I did. That’s why it’s a problem.”
Pidge hummed. A buzzing sound reverberated in London.

“What’s that?” asked Keith. He had finished rummaging through the glove box. Nothing much excepted for, well, leather gloves, a couple of tissues and a dusty CD of Johnny Cash.

Either Allura had very strange taste in regards of her appearance, either this wasn’t her car at all. He reported his attention to the road.

Pidge groaned into his ear.

“That?” Another buzzing sound. “Well it’s supposed to be a project I’m working on, but right now it’s just a pain in the ass.”

“Mh-hm, don’t make anything explode in the process then.”

A fakely offended gasp from London. “Fuck off, it only happened once.” Pidge snorted. Keith too, an hemisphere away. No matter how far, they still talked like they were in the same room.

“Twice actually, but anyways. Can you localize me right now?” Keith slowed down automatically.

“Dude, I’ve been looking at you from up here since you showed your nose in the street.”

Keith smiled at the thought of Pidge watching him from the heavens. A very sassy guardian angel, but who was he to judge? Besides, she was not completely wrong. “Cool. Can you give me a head towards, then?”

“On what? Are you seriously calling me because you skipped orientation class?”

“Not really.” Keith diverted.

“That’s half of a yes.”

Keith shrugged. “Can you help me or not?”
Over the line, something got thrown away in a loud clanking. Keith heard the slam of a keyboard and the unmissable click of a new screen switching on.

“Okay hotshot, gimme the damn thing so I can get back to-”

“Here’s the thing. I narrowed the zone down to three places but it doesn’t add up.” Keith eyeballed the road ahead. If he was really about to determine the localisation of the lost treasure, he might as well stop for it.

He jagged the car to the right, forcing himself a way to the road’s border.

“Keith…”

“The things is…” The car stopped abruptly on the emergency lane, while Keith ripped his bag open. “I can’t think of how to determine where to go.”

“Keith, do you really think-”

A pen between the teeth, Keith opened the map of Mexico. Pidge could yell all she wanted about new technologies, paper had never failed him. “An’ her’, her’ and her’, all thos’ lo’ations ‘orres’ond to-”

“KEITH !”

The line gresillated. Keith popped the pen out of his mouth and grabbed his phone from between his shoulder and cheek. A truck going five miles above speed limit stirred the air. Dust and heat mixed in an unbreathable mix.

“What is it ?” Keith furrowed his brows.

“Should you really tell it to me ?”
If he hadn’t been glued to the phone right now, almost crunching it in his fingers, Keith would have missed the words. Pidge was merely murmuring. His answer escaped his clenched teeth.

“What do you even mean?”

Pidge sniffed. “Maybe it’s sensitive information. You’re not supposed to be telling me.”

“Yeah sure, and how will I do when I end up lost in the desert? I don’t give a damn about instructions Pidge, they want their treasure? I’m going to get it. But it won’t be without my team.”

Silence on the line. Cars passed by Keith at unholy speeds. The Doppler effect messed with his ears, plugging and unplugging his remanent migraine. He reached for the glove box again, fetching the actual gloves. Rummaging through the bag, he found what he looked for in a silver box. A chiseled, beautifully crafted knife, all silver and amethyst.

The only thing left from his mysterious past. Not that mysterious, to be honest, but Keith had never felt at peace with his memories. So mysterious past sounded a lot better.

He kind of liked it both for its use and for its significance. Plus it made him look somewhat cool.

“Pidge? You there?”

Another sniff and a grumble. “Yeah, I’m here Keith.”

He put on one of the gloves, toying with anything to pass the time. The palm, large and thick, fitted him, but his hand was larger than longer and his digits barely made it to the end.

Cool. Fits me like I’m a five years old.

He stabbed the glove to the dashboard and reached for the pen again, along with a notebook. Allura had kept the originals of the letters, thus allowing him to write on his copies, doodling on them and adding a couple of witty annotations.
By witty, he really meant a doodle of a parrot, one of those S he learned in fourth grade, and a list of his favorite animals. He’d manage to traduce half of the notes, though.

He read them out loud for Pidge.

_Highly confidential, Allura, highly confidential._

“So far, I’ve got… Stone statue, Mexico, and this part is written french and I think it’s to indicate the size… Why the hell did he need to write the numbers in another language ? This one… It roughly translates to twinkling stars, but, set in stone ?”

“This is why no one lets you do the talking, Keith.” Pidge laughed. Her breath hitched over the line. “Wait wait, the treasure is a _statue_ ? They sent you, the tiniest guy I know, to go get a whole entire stone statue ?”

Keith frowned.

“It’s not a statue to properly say… More of a figurine. And I’m not- I’m pretty sure you know tinier people ! You’re smaller than me !”

“I’m still growing, so beware, infant. What kind of figurine ?”

“It’s supposed to be a feline, I guess ? I would say jaguar, as we’re in Mexico, but I wouldn’t bet on it.” Keith flapped the photocopy of the letter. The statuette sure looked feline, with its angled eyes and carved ears. The glassed paper glinted under the sun coming through the windshield.

“And I’m nearly twenty ! Stop calling me an infant !” Keith realized a second later after his pained yell that he needed to cut himself some slack with Pidge’s verbal jousting.

Heat was rising up slowly in the car, slowly but surely, toasting him alive.

Pidge laughed. Keith could picture her adjust her glasses before going back to serious. “Why did you went to Mexico in the first place ? Are you sure it’s there, or it’s just a mighty feeling of Keith the all-knowing nerd ?”
“Bit of both I guess, but you’re the one to speak.”

“I may be a Nerd, but I own it. You try to hide it, nerd.” Pidge cackled. Keith could basically see the glowing green of her lava lamp covered in NASA stickers lit up her smile. Yeah, Pidge was born in nerdland, somehow.

“I’m not hid…!” Keith muffled his offended tone behind a cough. “Anyways. Allura said that she was certain the statue was in a desert, and the letter speaks of her father going to Colorado once.”

“But ?”

“But he didn’t find anything.”

“What does this has to do with Mexico.”

“The statuette is described in ancient texts as ever-changing in color, like the tides apparently or something like that. Another description mentions spangles of sun trapped inside the statue, like some sort of magic.”

“Wow, that’s vague. You’re looking for a jaguar figurine, with sun trapped inside, and the only thing you know is that it’s probably not in Colorado ? Great, dude, great.” Pidge used irony as some use salt on their pasta. A lot, and it left a taste on your tongue afterwards.

But she was right.

“I’m- I’m trying, okay ! There, it’s in spanish. I think it’s about the location, but it’s not… Very precise.”

“Precise how ?” Pidge asked.

“It literally just says agua. Water.” Keith precised. “That’s the underlined word, so I think we won’t get more than that ?”
“Water? But she literally told you about a desert…”

“An oasis?” Keith raised.

“I doubt it… Ever heard of mexican oasis?”

Keith sniffed. “No. Let’s just… Forget about the oasis or whatever for now. There’s that and the twinkling stars in the stone. It’s not much. But the thing is, most texts that mention the statue before Allura’s father are at least a thousand years old, if not more.”

“You mean that thing is like, from BC?” Pidge’s voice pitched up. She stopped typing, somehow.

“Pidge, I’m talking about before we even invented writing.”

Silence on the line again.

The sun hammered the metal of the Jeep, turning the car into a giant oven of green iron and dusty air. Keith pushed away the map, the knife and dropped the glove. Less than a mile away, a rusty giant panel in the distance announced a gas station.

_Better than nothing._

At this point, a boiling shower would refresh him. Keith moved the car over, rolling to the nearest station. A cafe, a shop, anything. He needed to eat something properly and sit in somewhere under 78°C.

Over his shoulder, the typing had started back again, but not a word to be heard.

He wasn’t so surprised of her reaction, but was still proud that he made Pidge mute for a second. She always had answers and comebacks waiting, but this time, nothing.

Keith decided to gloss over it. The news were big enough.
He had spent the whole flight from London glued to his large seat, watching mannered stewardesses pass him by. His folding tablet was covered in Allura’s papers. He had copied half of them in his notebook with application. The sketch of the statuette, especially.

The more he had drew it, the less it cleared itself in his mind.

Most of the texts had been a funny game of mind to translate back, but some of the notes, much like the cyphers, had resisted thoroughly. But Keith was sure and certain that his translation was correct. Whatever was Allura’s father searching for, it was older than anything Keith had ever seen. And he had seen old things, had stole them and even sold them. But this...

“Pidge ?” Keith called out. He heard her type and type again on keyboards. She was probably looking for a piece of information he would have missed, anything. Usually, she found.

Keith was pushing back into traffic when it came out.

“The Venus of Hohle Fels.”

Keith blinked. The name evoked vaguely a woman-inspired carved figure. Nothing to do with a statuette in mexico. “What ?”

“The Venus of Hohle Fels is the oldest undisputed trace of man-made art. It is dated to between 35,000 and 40,000 years ago, belonging to the early Aurignacian, at the very beginning of the Upper Paleolithic”

“Are you reading me a Wikipedia page or…” The reading had given Keith this impression.

“Hold on, this is where it gets interesting. In terms of figurative art only the lion-headed, zoomorphic Löwenmensch figurine is older.” Pidge clicked. “Lion-headed... reminds you of something ?”

“My statuette ? Could it be like, a lion, and not a jaguar ?”

“Let me have a look on wiki and stuff, I’ll call you. Go eat something and rest, hotshot, I got your
“Thanks, Pidge.” The outlines of the station’s shadow were growing on the road. Keith turned right.

“Can you send me what you got already? I’d like to cross informations.”

“Sure, yeah.”

“Thanks. Later, Keith.”

“Later P-” The bip of the line ringed through his ear. Pidge was gone on path of research she loved to trek. Even Keith couldn’t hold her back there.

He parked the car on the side of the restaurant. Nothing provided shadow around, let alone for the roof of the station. The air was basically irrespirable there.

*Round one, over.*

Keith rested his hands on the wheel for a minute. London, Mexico, headaches and hungover. The migraine was a faint memory now.

A menu hanging in the sun. No wind. The echo of the cars passing over.

There was nothing to do but wait, for now.

He sneaked the knife into a secret hold in his boot, put back on both gloves and a pair of sunglasses, and abandoned the burning Jeep to the sun. Despite being covered from head to toe in black, Keith felt as naked as a newborn.

Nothing was less familiar than a mexican landscape after the londonian grey skies. Without a look back, he entered the restaurant.

Behind a wooden pearls curtain, the establishment revealed itself to be, if not fresh, a supportably
heated place. Tiles covered the floors and the walls in bright colors and a decrepit fan desperately tried to move some air around without much success.

Despite all the colorful signs and the reassuring dimness, no one around. Keith could barely tell if the restaurant was still open or not.

“Hey ? Excuse me… I’m…”

There’s another thing about Keith. No matter how hard he tries, problems always find him sooner or later. It had not even been a minute since he’d been out of the car and it was already back to bother him.

A loud crash resounded outside.

Keith jolted back and sent flying the beads of the curtain, strolling out to witness the front of his Jeep nearly getting crushed by a van. The bumper was wrecked on the cement.

Origin of the sound, solved.

“What the fuck is going on ?” Keith eructed.

A guy exited the van, hands pleading in front of him.

“Oh my god, I’m sorry. Is this your car ? Tell me it’s not your car. You look pissed, of course it’s your car…I’m so sorry !” The guy stammered.

Keith slammed his hand away and grabbed him by the collar.

“Of course it’s my car ! What did you think you were doing ?!”

Keith needed to stand on his toes to level his head with the other guy’s. Feeling the pressure increase exponentially and the situation slip away, Keith desperately tried to breath his anger down. It hitched in his chest.

“Man, man, calm down ! And leave Hunk alone !”
Another hand grabbed his shoulder. Keith slapped it away and turned away from Hunk to-

“Hey. Calm. We’re gonna find a way, don’t over react this okay ? It’s fine.”

Keith looked at the hand over his mouth. Long, tan finger, cleaned and polished. Alright. Whoever was the other guy talking to him, he had the nerve to shut him up, but at least he was taking care of his hands. His friend glanced at him, a sheepish smile fading in a worried expression.

“Lance, I don’t think-”

Keith looked at the hand over his mouth, and this time, he bit it.

“AIE ! ESTAS LOCO ?”

The hand jolted away and so did its possessor.

*I’m crazy ? You’re the one shutting people with own hands.*

Keith wiped his mouth with the back of his gloved hand and spat on the ground at the other guy’s feet. He made a couple of steps back and breathed steadily. Grounding. He needed to stay calm, he really needed to, because a fistfight in the middle of a highway parking lot wasn’t a really genius plan.

Plus, Pidge could call anytime soon now, and Keith wanted to be all ears up.

He glared at the duo facing him. Lance was massaging his hand, but Hunk had raised his hands in apology. His sheepish smile was back on his face, but he was frowning too. A mildly threatening contrast. Their names had sprung out of nowhere, and Keith wondered if he hadn't already heard them somewhere.

If there was anyone Keith would listen to in this discussion, it was going to be this one guy with the smile. He looked much nicer and chiller. Also a lot more dangerous.
Alas, it was the other that hailed Keith.

“Okay!” He shook his hand, like a dog would shake his fur after the rain. “I think we’re even here. I drove into your car, you bit my hand. Fair and square.”

Lance closed the distance between Keith and himself, and extended the hand he was still complaining about a second ago.

Keith looked at it as if it was alien.

“Come on, man, shake the hand.”

“And what? We go on separate ways and that’s it? I’m sorry, but I don’t think a couple of whining will get my Jeep running again.” Keith dropped.

Lance shrugged and smiled at his friend.

“That? Nah, don’t worry. Hunk is a mechanic, and I’ll offer the meal if you promise it’s the only thing you’re ever gonna bite again.”

Keith shot daggers at Lance and a glance at Hunk. The guy looked strong and friendly. A combination that designated him as someone Keith could trust. Probably because of something Shiro-like in him? Plus, he would notice if the guy tried to scam him. After all, he was supposed to be his own mechanic.

To be fair, Keith was just nervous. He really had no reason to explode at these guys’ faces like that. The Jeep was nowhere near that precious, and a broken bumper was nothing to him.

*You’re just tensed like a bow. Focus and breathe. You’re cool. No reason to blow up.*

“Unless you’re just like that, Bity McBite.” Lance continued, still moving his hand up and down for Keith to grab.

Oh yeah. That was why. This guy was annoying as hell.
“Fine.” Keith let go. Whatever, a free meal and a free repair could only help him out. He shook the hand. More like, touched it and immediately retrieved, but it seemed to make Lance happy.

“Really ? Noice. Hunk, would you park the van ? I’m starving, I’m gonna check inside !” Lance waved at the restaurant and started walking.

Keith turned to Hunk, dumbfounded. “Is he really gonna just… ?” His arms dangled on his sides, his palms vaguely open up to the skies.

Really ?

“Yeah. Sorry about your car, man. Lance isn’t really a good driver.” Hunk eluded as he hopped into the vehicle.

“Yeah, I noticed.” Keith murmured to himself as he followed Lance into the restaurant.

A minute ago, the place was silent and dead quiet. When Keith entered again, the whole thing seemed to have magically changed. The window had opened, and an old lady was discussing in spanish with Lance. Keith looked at them, unsure of whether or not he should join the conversation.

The guy seemed to know his way with the language. He spontaneously screamed in spanish, after all.

A local ? The van wasn’t registered in Mexico. Probably not.

By the time his mental debate was over, Hunk had followed Keith inside and pushed him to a table, inviting him to join them.

Lance pulled his chair next to Keith a second after they settled down.

“So. Are we gonna get your name, Terminator, or what ?”
“Terminator?” Keith repeated. He knew about the “Brat”, the “Kid” and other condescending nicknames, but Terminator. Didn’t sound much like anything. He remembered Bity McBite, too, and figured he would better tell Lance his name before getting yet another dumb surname.

“He says that because of… You know…” Hunk gestured at Keith. “Your look.”

Black leather from head to toes, black tee-shirt, black hair, sunglasses, mean pout and angry words. Keith could picture it too, now. Even though he could only dream of ever reaching Schwarzenegger’s height, and even more his body mass.

His choice balanced between fake names and his real name like a metronome gone wild. He finally settled on trust. Stop the paranoia for a second.

*No one’s waiting for you with guns at the exit.*

An entire ocean separated him from his past, now.

“It’s, hum, Keith.”

“Cool.” Hunk said.

“Well, you already know Hunk, my best friend, and I’m Lance. The coolest.”

“Yeah, I figured.” A pause, and then. “About the name, not the…” Keith had no idea what ‘the coolest’ was, but really not the first thing on his mind to describe the guy.

A silence settled for about a millisecond before Lance immediately covered it up.

“So, Keith. I ordered some fine specialities, but are you gonna tell us why are you here, in the middle of the nowhere?”

“I could ask you the same question.” Keith eluded. He was not in the mood to answer some stranger’s question, let alone if the stranger was Lance, and he was smiling too brightly and too close
to his face for Keith to be completely comfortable.

“We’re investigating!” Lance answered without an ounce of hesitation. He was too close for Keith not to notice the glint of amusement in his blue eyes.

“Lance…” Hunk warned. It seemed like it was more of an habit than anything, given the tired tone of his voice. Despite the size of his hands, Hunk was folding one of the tiniest cranes Keith had ever seen out of a paper towel.

“Did you know, Keith, that this part of Mexico is supposedly haunted by a legendary figure?” Lance continued, ignoring the warning.

“Oh, is it?” Keith deadpanned. Ghosthunters. Lucky him.

“Yeah, and we’re filming it! Once the public will know, it will be over for the skeptics like you!” Lance jumped on his feet all of sudden, startling both Keith and Hunk. “Going to the toilet! Don’t break anything while I’m not watching!”

“As if—” Keith stopped mid-sentence. Why even bother? Lance was not listening anymore. He turned to Hunk, sat across the table with his chin rested on his palm, the crane nested next to his elbow. “Is he always like that?”

“Mh? Yeah, most of the time.”

“Isn’t it… Tiring?”

“Well, once you get to know him, you kind of get used to it, and soon enough you’re addicted to it.” Hunk smiled. “He’s really a good guy.”

“Yeah. Sure.” Keith was sure of one thing; getting used to that kind of chatterbox was nothing he was capable of. “But really, what are you doing here? I mean, a mechanic, and a… Lance? Together in a van, investigating?”

Keith didn’t want to sound too curious, but he really wanted Hunk to answer him as well.
Apparently, if Lance was spilling the tea without anyone asking, Hunk was breaking dams as soon as you brought it up to him.

“Ah, I’m glad you asked. Well you see, I’m not just a mechanic. I made it to college and I’m on my way for a good a degree, but now we’re in some kind of gap year, and Lance being Lance, he found out about this weird legends across the world and set up a whole thing of filming it and investigating. He’s got in mind that if it’s as interesting and mysterious as it seems, our documentary could end up on national TV.”

“So that’s what you’re going for ? Ghosts ?” Keith deadpanned.

“Not really.” Hunk’s voice calmed down.

For some reason, Keith took it as a hint. The shift was sudden, and noticeable to even untrained ears.

_Careful, there’s more to it than it seems_.

“You see, Lance has this degree in people studies, and he took a minor in civilisations ; the astronomy course was complete, so he did it on the side. But, hah, that’s not what’s important !” Hunk shook his head.

Keith raised a brow.

“The thing is, apparently, there should be an ancient city undiscovered yet in Mexico. Something ancient. Lance noticed a change in some colonization patterns around the region, and thought we should investigate.”

“So you’re looking for Aztecan remains ?”

Hunk looked around as if he feared someone might hear them. Suspiciously, with a squint of the eyes. Instinctively, Keith did the same and lowered his head, despite fully well knowing the parking lot and the restaurant were both as desert as can be.
Hunk started fidgeting, toying with the crane as he developed. “Well, that’s what I thought. But I ran an analysis on the stone covering the bracelet Lance based his theory on. It’s much, much more ancient than Aztecs. Like, really old.”

Keith bit his lips. “How old?”

“Like, 35 000 to 40 000 years before today. Something incredible.” Hunk ended on a whisper.

Fuck.

“You’re kidding me.” Keith’s stomach made a flip. He wasn’t alone on this. Allura was not alone on this. And from all people who could have joined, it had to be two college boys in their gap year, thinking about ‘investigating’ ancient ruins as some sort of summer job. “Nothing has been found from that era.”

“That’s because they didn’t run the good tests.” Hunk puffed himself up. “I tried C14 and datation with rays and echography. I’m certain.”

Keith’s toes folded in his shoes. This couldn’t be good. If a random guy could find out about this, who else…

“There’s gotta be a mistake somewhere.” Keith desperately needed these two out of his way.

Hunk shook his head.

“Negative. Huh-huh. I’m one hundred percent sure. I’m right. That thing is old. Can’t be Mayan, can’t be Aztec. Not even Olmec. Much, much older. The stone inside is very cool, very blue, and very much 40 000 years old. Someone had to go and dig this. And if we find who? A nous la gloire.” Hunk pointed back.

This was bad. This was really bad.

“Hey, fill me in. What are we on?” Lance was back from the bathroom, bubbling. He slumped next to Keith. Hunk nodded.
“I was feeding Keith our theory about the *something* uncovered.”

“Uncovered *yet*?” Lance added. “Heh, what do you say about that, huh?” He shot a cocky half-smile at Keith, looking at him under lowered eyelids.

*Oh god, you have no idea.*

“I say that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.” Oh, it hurt to say that. But a good takes a bad thing to do.

“You say that because you’re alone in your Jeep. We have a goal. And I’m very good in front of the objective. Even if we don’t find anything, I’ll still post our vlog and make a ton of money. Hunk’s arms could easily bring us 10 000 viewers.” Lance countered. It seemed like their faith in their adventure was unshakable.

Keith respected that. And lowkey agreed about the arm’s thing.

He was about to retort when the chef came back with a plate full of red sandwiches, to Keith’s eyes. Lance munched in one before the plate was even settled on the table and corrected Keith as if he had read in his mind.

“Tortas ahogadas, Keith. Try and tell me.”

Keith extended his hand and took one. And *wow*, the first bite sent him right in god’s arms.

The three of them, late teenage boys, finished their plate in a record time, and before Keith could notice, they were back out in the sun, lighter of their money and heavy in the stomach. He couldn’t recall what they talked about after the first bite. Or even if they had talked at all.

After a passage by his van, Hunk settled in front of the open Jeep with a monkey wrench in hand.

“Okay girl, tell me where it hurts.”
Keith watched as Hunk dived into the heart of the car, while Lance waved a camera around, speaking gibberish to it from time to time.

The heat was back too, beating on Keith’s nape like a whip. He kind of wanted a cigarette. Pidge’s voice elevated in his mind, the childish accent of the question still refraining him from actually taking action.

“I thought you quit.”

As Hunk started to touch and bang on things in the car, Keith sat in its shadow. The asphalt was burning too, but heh, he had to sit somewhere.

By the corner of his eyes, he watched. Hunk sported his hair up in a bandana, and had removed his shirt for its own safety. White tank top over dark brown skin. The orange of his bracelet clashed against his skintown. The black oil left a mark on his forehead as he wiped the sweat out of it.

The guy was attractive. In a discreet, established manner. Not a supermodel worth turning back on in the streets, but as soon as you had ran your eyes over him, you couldn’t quietly forget about it.

“And this is Keith. Keith say ‘hi’ to the camera !”

Keith turned slowly to face Lance and the huge black camera body on his shoulder. He did not open his mouth.

“Classic Keith. Silent and broody !” Lance chirped. The camera glinted in the sun, catching its blinding rays on the black plastic.

“I’m not brooding !” Keith yelped. “You don’t even know me !”

“He says, broody, as he brooded broodingly.” Lance scoffed.

Keith sighed. As opposed to the physical presence of Hunk, the general aura of Lance. The guy was
a noodle at best, all bones under his shirt, and yet, it took efforts to get away from him. Keith watched him waltz around, swinging the camera over his slim shoulders as if it weighted nothing.

Both of them made a strange, comical enough duo.

Keith would never see them again.

He really wished he could take a cigarette now.

Half because he was stressed, half because - and he strongly refused to acknowledge this- he believed he looked cooler a cigarette in his mouth. Which he knew for a fact was half true, half wrong.

*Why do I even want to look cool anyways?*

Whatever, he had no cigarettes, but he did have a phone vibrating in his hand.

“Hey Keith ?!” Pidge asked as soon as he answered.

“Yeah ?”

“I think I’ve got a location for you.” She couldn’t help but let proudness peak through her voice. Keith smiled too.

“Cool. Can you give me a moment ? I’m not… Alone right now.” Keith eyed Hunk, who had visibly inched toward him. The guy was faking concentration, but like, not very well.

“You alright ? You haven’t moved for a while.” Pidge sounded a little concerned.

“Yeah. Just a meal and a meeting. Nothing particular. Wait, you know that ?”
“I know more than anyone, dude, time process this through that thick skull of yours. Anyways, cool. Well, call me back when you’re free then. And hurry up. I don’t think I need to remind you who and what you’re working for.” Pidge scolded.

“Yeah, I know- Aaand, she hung up.” Keith looked incredulously at his phone. Would Pidge ever do him the favor of ending a call properly or was that too much to ask?

Hunk rolled his shoulders.

“So… Your girlfriend misses you?”

The question was so out of the blue, Keith blinked twice thinking about it. Hunk sported a smile that told everything about his ideas. He couldn’t be more wrong.

“What ?” Keith snorted. “Nah, that’s just Pidge.”

Hunk only hummed in return. He clanked his wrench against something and slammed the hood shut, wiping his hands on a paper towel Lance graciously fetched for him in the back of the van.

“Well, whoever that Pidge is, you’ll be able to call her back in no time. I’m finished here.” Hunk explained. He looked proud of his job, and Keith didn’t doubted him for a second. This guy really gave off the good vibe.

“Thanks.” Keith was a man of few words. Also, he had no idea what to say.

“No problem, that was an easy one. However, for the scratches and the bumps, there’s nothing I can do.” Hunk gestured at the front of the car.

Keith ran a finger over the worn out metal.

“Well, it’s not like it was made to be pretty. Will it hold on ?”

“Assuredly.” Hunk stood his ground, firm.
“Then I don’t care.”

Keith stated the fact, and it somehow dawned on Hunk that Keith really didn’t care at all about the car. He awkwardly stepped back, the towel dangling in his hand.

“Cool, dude. Don’t push it too much, though. It’s not fresh out of the oven, I can’t promise it will hold forever.”

“Yeah, I’ll try.” Keith said, knowing very well he wouldn’t try at all to be gentle with it.

_Time flies._

Hunk slung his towel over his shoulder and went back into his van, storing the toolbox. Keith leaned against the open backdoor, trying his best to appear nonchalant. Just the way Hunk was terrible at spying, Keith wasn’t very good at being… well, friendly.

“So, hum… Where are you guys headed to?”

_This sounds more like a police interrogatory than a nice question, for fuck’s sake._

“I don’t know. Probably Puerto Vallarta. The mines’ museum is there, Lance believes there’s something to find it it.” Either Hunk was really chill, either Keith was better at this whole friendly conversation thing that he thought.

Probably the first option.

Keith folded his arms over his chest.

_Pidge, please, don’t tell me to go to Puerto Vallarta._

“Okay. Cool?”
Hunk slammed the van shut and raised his palms. The sun contoured his hair, blinding Keith for a second. “Well, yeah! I guess. I hope you’ll do fine, whatever it is you’re doing, though.” Hunk peering at Keith, making him shift awkwardly to the side. His arms over his chest unbalanced him.

“Yeah… Thanks.” Keith nodded. He felt a little clammy right now. He silently wished for the conversation to end. The sooner the better.

“Aaand, cut!” Lance jumped between them, shoving the camera into Hunk’s arms. “Keith, it wasn’t a pleasure knowing you!” He joked, extending a hand for Keith to shake again.

*At least the universe heard me.*

Keith grasped it and shook it firmly. “Same.” He wasn’t really good with backhanded compliments and irony. In Rome, do like the Romans.

Hunk went for the whole deal and briefly hugged Keith, tighter than he’d even been hugged, probably. When his boots touched the ground again, Keith was pretty sure his ribs had been broken back again.

“Was cool meeting you, Keith! Nice Jeep, by the way.” Hunk said, his words sounding like a conclusion.

Keith scoffed. “Yeah, huh, thanks. I mean, same thing. Cool.”

“Okay, ready Hunk?! Heh, hasta la later, Keith!” Lance winked and turned back, strolling to the side of the van. Hunk followed him, reaching for the handle of his door. Keith leaned on the Jeep, observing the duo readying itself for the road.

He watched Hunk carefully place the camera in its spot, gently strap himself and check the rearview mirror. He noticed Lance lips talking faster than light, his hands moving all around in the cabin. He saw Hunk turn the keys, laughing probably at what Lance just said.

Keith wished he could read on lips.
As the van rolled backwards, the engine purring, Keith waved discreetly. Truly, it was more of a spasm of his wrist, but the idea was here. Hunk was too busy looking behind to notice, and Lance was already absorbed by something resting on his knees.

Keith unlocked his own door.

He still caught Lance’s eyes on him one last time as their furtive glances crossed.

And then the van was gone.

When Keith dropped his weight on the seat, he wasn’t sure why would the heat suddenly make him blush so much more than it had done all day. And he needed to wipe his hands.

He struggled to get his phone out of his pocket.

“Pidge ?” Keith checked in. The ringtone had beeped way more than usual.

“Ah finally ! Hey, you alright ?” Pidge sounded ecstatic. Keith figured she had waited for the call for the past ten minutes without being able to do anything else. Waiting on the starting blocks. Refreshing the same pages. Locking and unlocking her phone, twice a minute.

He wasn’t ready.

“What ? Yeah, I told you so !” Keith sputtered.

“Yeah, but you sound weird. Anyways !” Keith fetched the map and the pen as Pidge pianoted on her keyboard. “I did some research. Nothing mentions the statue that early, but we did have populated areas back then. However, there’s a strange pattern of expanding population, the spreading of humankind doesn’t fit. I corroborated with some geologic patterns and the photo of the statue you sent me.”

Keith had only a vague idea of what she was talking about, but his mind bugged on something.
Pidge had the same starting point as Lance.

“It seems like the region was scattered by active volcanoes back then. Now that’s the interesting part. Some of them are still active today, but most are extinct.”

“Okay, so I’m looking for a dead volcano ?” Keith asked. He really just tried to extract the essentials from the mass of informations.

“Not exactly. See, look at the statue, that by the way, is actually way smaller than we thought. It’s roughly the size of a Wii remote controller.”

“That’s… Oddly specific, but okay.”

“I know, but that’s more relevant that random numbers. So, sun trapped inside, right ? It looks like sprinkles. Well i figured that one out. I think it could be a reference to plagioclases in it.”

“Mind if I ask you to develop ?” Keith was a little lost. Even if had the documents under the eyes, following Pidge was a difficult task.

“Plagioclases ? Well it’s a type of rock, to put it simply.” Pidge said, as if it was an evidence.

Keith fumbled with the map, looking for the mountains chains. Not so far, but stretching all over the country’s length. Pidge needed to bring more to the table, because he was not about to roam endlessly in the mountains to find one statuette the size of his hand.

“With the photo quality you gave me, aka shitty, i basically just base my reflexion on visual clues. The thing is, your statuette seems it could be either made of hielolite, labradorite, or andesite.” Pidge enumerated. “And looking at the silicate structure of andesite, it seems it could fit ; and I’m drawing a line here because it might be reaching, but helios refers to the sun.”

“As the sun trapped in the statuette ?” He pointed out. The mix of semantic and geology puzzled him.

Keith leaned back into his seat, cellphone glued to his ear. Another car drove in and parked across
the lot. Keith observed. Pidge chirped on the other side of the line. It was probably unholy hours of the night for her, as opposed to the hellfire outside Keith was experiencing.

Yet, Pidge was way more awake than he felt. The thought of closing his eyes was getting more and more pleasant by the second.

“Maybe. I kept labradorite in line too because it visually seems fitting but… I’m not decided yet.” Pidge dropped.

“I really don’t… Whatever. So now what?” Keith gave up on trying to follow. The actual directions would come soon enough.

“Well, plagioclases needs a volcanic environment to appear, and we know Mexico used to have active volcanoes. Still does, even. But none of the heliolite we ever found was in Mexico.”

Keith felt the rise and fall of Pidge’s theory. She exposed all of her research instead of giving him an answer. As much as it could seem like a waste of time, Keith was actually grateful she took the time to explain details to him.

Could always come in handy if he needed it later.

“So no heliolite?” Keith crossed away a line in his notebook.

“Yeah, but we still have to keep it as a back-up, in case I’m wrong. They could have moved the figurine from all the continent, I’m… Not sure.”

“Pidge, since when do you think you’re wrong?” Keith hushed.

“Since I’m working on a thousand years old statuette, Keith!”

Well, she was not wrong. Her tiny jungle of wires had nothing to do with the reality Keith walked through; decades of dust, aged wooden houses, stolen paintings. He had seen most of it if not all. And he knew better than to press Pidge on her concerns.
The other car was still parked. No one moved out of it. Keith peered at it, but the sun in his eyes prevented him from seeing the driver. Unless…

“Keith ?”

“Yeah, sorry. Okay, so… No heliolite.” Keith flipped through his notes. “And what about the labrador stone ?”

“Labradorite ? Well… same thing. It fits well, because it’s a silicated stone, but there are no mines of it anywhere near Mexico.”

“That narrows it down to… Andesite, then ?” Keith eluded.

He peered again at the glass across the parking. Tinted windows. On any other circumstances, that would be weird, but right now ? Extra weird. No one has an entire car covered in tinted windows and parks at random abandoned places for no reason.

Unconscious of his concerns, Pidge continued.

“Mh-hm. And that’s not everything. You remember the change in populated zone ? Well, they fit the formation of this stone, full of silicium. They keep decreasing around volcanoes, as opposed to the stones that flourish in those environments !”

“Pidge, I’m running out of time, do you have a city or not ?!”

“Wow, calm down, I’m getting to it ! I actually have three, and that’s the most narrowed down I have. First, the desert above Guadalajara seems pretty fitting for a secret cave, to me, as it was not inhabited for a prolonged period of time.”

Keith closed his eyes. So far so good.

“Then I crossed infos, and it seems the first mines of silicate stones where spread between two cities,
very close to each other. I send the data on your phone once we’re done, but it’s called San Juan del Río, the other is right next to it, Santiago de Querétaro. I think you should check out this one, it’s the state capital.”

“And for the other ?”

“Well, they did used to mine in La Trinidad near it, so there might be something to gather here. And if you can find anything on your statuette it would be neat. I can’t just work on sparkles of sun.”

“Will do.”

Keith tapped the leather of the wheel, impatient. Allura had visibly kept info from him, this was so much easier than he thought. He needed to find something, quick, for Pidge to give him a place to go. Keith was an extractor.

Collect and sell, easy.

Hunting down a carved rock was not really supposed to be part of the job. Investigating had always been more of Shiro’s favorite part. Keith had tendencies to run headfirst in the first place he heard about, more than once forgetting to check for deathly traps and other fun activities such as alarms and watchdogs.

Not the best of plans, he had to admit, but considering the results, no one had to complain. Not too much.

“And the last is much more based on geology and, ah… Intuition. The most beautiful stone of the region, according to various museums, is the fire opal. The mine is in Puerto Vallarta, they have one. If you stone is really made of this, and it could be, i’d say, up to 80%, then you should head here.”

Fuck.

“Well. Give me the other city. Vallarta is… A bad idea.”

The car bumped. Someone was moving there. Keith gripped the keys.
“Well… Okay. Querétaro City it is, then.” Pidge said.

“Perfect. How far ?”

“About a couple hundred of kilometers.”

“Well… Okay. Querétaro City it is, then.” Pidge said.

“Perfect. How far ?”

“About a couple hundred of kilometers.”

“Well… Okay. Querétaro City it is, then.” Pidge said.

“Perfect. How far ?”

“About a couple hundred of kilometers.”

Keith wanted to put as much distance as he could between him and shady cars. Nothing was too weird to put him in a paranoid state, not after what Allura said.

Pidge typed something over the line before reaching a last time for him.

“Oh, and Keith ? If this turns out to be a dead end, I think you should cross the city of Guadalajara, though, just to see. There’s a lake near it. Then head North, to the desert. If you give me some time, I could run a scan and try to find a cave or something there. Cool with that ?”

Keith ran a hand through his hair.

“Fine. Perfect. Desert is good.”

“Cool. See you then. Don’t die. Stay hydrated.”

“Copy that.”

He tossed the phone in the bag.

By looking at the map, he would reach the city before the night. If he was lucky, he could even look for a motel and try to sleep in a real bed.
Without a look behind, Keith crushed the pedals to the floor, burning the tires on the ground and exiting the parking all wheels rolling. He engaged the highway at maximum speed and slalomed between the cars for an hour before traffic jam forced him to respect driving decency.

Eyes glued to the rearview mirror, hair sticking to his neck, Keith reached for the knife in his boot and flung it on the passenger seat. The image of the tinted windows, stopped without anyone getting out, kept flashing in his mind. Keith had always had a good intuition. Something from his insides, a creeping feeling.

You can’t help but get paranoid about anything, can you?

He caught no signs of the tinted windows all drive long.

Even telling himself he was just like that because he was in a foreign country for yet another shady business still didn’t completely quieted down the little voice murmuring this event had been rather odd.

The cars were all packed up in the highway, congested by nothing he could see clearly. It just felt like the road had decided to tighten, leaving space for no more than two vehicles instead of the four of before.

Keith enjoyed the calm while it lasted. The soft hum of the slowed motors all around, a light lingering odor of gasoil in the air, the tuned autoradios mufflings five different stations all around.

His stomach was still full of the tortas.

He hadn’t even paid Lance back for the meal. Even though he offered it, Keith still felt bad about having a unpaid debt forever to a guy he would never see again.

The hot turmoils of air floated around his neck, nowhere near refreshing him. His head fell back, his thumbs tapping the leather of the wheel rhythmically. Ah.

“Guess this will haunt me forever, then.”

The sound of his own voice. Keith had never felt so alone.
The jeep made a couple of meters before stopping again. Keith let his eyes wander around, glancing at the trees, and the orange tint of the clouds. His mind drifted on the highest wind of the Mexican sky before tip toeing back on the statuette.

He was in a dark cloud of mystery. The only light ahead was so frail he feared someone would blow the candle before he could even hope to reach it. The discreet fear of failure that his sanity had kept at bay since Allura showed up was gently creeping on him again.

First the absence of destination two hours ago, then the discovery that other people did searched for the same thing as he was. And the tinted windows, shadows on a bright parking.

**Was this even worth it?**

Sat on the backseat of the car ahead, a little kid waved at Keith. His gloved hand answered, first hesitant, then firm.

*Hey.*

Another head showed up next to the first, smaller and rounder. A smile, minus two front teeth.

The line of cars moved. Keith lost the missing teeth in the traffic.

The fleeting moment washed over. Keith was looking for another kind of treasure up there in Mexico, too. A long lost brother, a name never mentioned but in notes and articles given by a strange woman in a shady establishment in downtown London.

After all, Shiro and the statuette had more in common than he thought.

And if Keith could find any, then yes.

It was worth it.

The jeep kept going on the road, taking Keith over miles and miles through the country. When he reached the state capital, night was dawning upon him.

Querétaro was a gamble. Keith knew as soon as he entered the brightly lit city. The town had major
advancements and active economy, and if it pursued in the future, Keith had no reason to find anything remotely related to a forgotten past. The center had nothing to do with an antique store, and even less of an archeological site.

If there was to be anything, he would find a lot of intel related to Mesoamerican foundation and Aztec history, indirectly related to his own hunt, in a way. The amount of universities and museums in town looked promising.

The jeep turned in the streets, Keith crossing the city with only a vague idea of what to look out for. He ended up in another district. By the building’s size suddenly shrinking, he guessed he either entered the old town, or just a pueblo of the external neighbourhoods.

Less metal and glass, more painted earth and bright flowers. Keith breathed.

The city could always withhold her hidden treasures inside. And if nothing was to resurface, Keith still had another place to go.

_Technically, two …_

But… He really did not want to take the risk cross paths again with Hunk and Lance. Not that they were enemies or anything, but Keith had the feeling that he better step off bonding with anyone, especially during that kind of trip.

The dangerous, deadly kind.

The Jeep got parked in border of the city. His eyes where basically closing by themselves. To make it even worse, his migraine had took over his head once again, his brain permanently aching.

Despite touring the whole town, Keith didn’t stop in any of the motels, guests house or charming hotels scattered around. He decided that sleeping in the Jeep would be just as good.

If Pidge could track him from London, who knows what could be running after him.

Or whom.

The black duffle bag got filled again to the brim with his stuff, and he hide it under the backseats. That, and a knife in the boots. Night would pass like a charm. Save it for the insanely cold air, the desert balancing its warmth at days with equally bold temperatures at night.
“Can it make its fucking mind.” Keith gritted.

Curléd up on the backseat, hugging himself for heat, the boy sighed. This was a Jeep. Why couldn’t it provide a safe environment under any circumstances? This thing was literally built for it!

Fuck it.

Keith rolled back. He was too tired for this shit, might as well sleep through it.

A sleep was full of dreams, but none of the limbo he walked during his sleep subsisted in his mind after he woke up. Only the cold, the humid night, and something blue.

Something blue.
Tapwater - or - Thirsty but not for the good things.

Chapter Summary

Keith manages to find the first clues on the road, and desperately tries to not think about a certain someone. It's not working very well, and he fucks up, too.

Chapter Notes

Hell yeah I'm late ! The playlist for this chapter could be a mix of Uncharted's songs and Diablo Rojo, by Rodrigo and Gabriela ! We're finally starting to go somewhere from there !

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The morning entered the Jeep with the silence of the snow and the exact opposite temperature. The sun was warming up the air with a feverish effort, slowly roasting everything inside the car. Keith woke up in a pool of sweat, the cotton of his clothes already glued to his skin.

Another perfect day in perspective.

He shoved away the remaining stiffness in his body, from the airplane, the hungover and the bad sleeping position. If he wanted to be efficient, he needed to be in full, entire shape. Just like a groggy cat, he stretched his hands as far from his head as possible, hissing when the movement asked for his back muscles to work. He rubbed a palm over his shoulder.

Last time he’d moved around that much, Shiro had commanded him a break every three hours.

Maybe I should bring that back too. Breaks.

In broad daylight, the parking looked uglier than last night. Cement was mixing with dirt, holes everywhere, the ground a patchwork of concrete and dry earth. Cables and wire sprung out of nowhere in places. The fence was only rounding half of the lots.

Would he have known, Keith would probably have driven away. Or not. He wasn’t particularly afraid of terrible conditions. In fact, if anything, it made him even more invisible, blending in the
dust. The only car parked around was rotting under the sun, all of its windows broken.

*Nothing to worry about on this side, then.*

The city was ahead, its outlines cutting out in the blue of the skies. Not a cloud to be seen. Weather update for today? Hot as hell, and maybe even more, if that happened to be possible. Keith muffled a groan.

He wished he could crawl into a bathtub filled with ice cubes. Or maybe just… Take a cold shower. Or just a shower. He hadn’t taken any in…

*Yesterday, and then the plane, and before that my shift, and before… Okay it’s been way too long.*

He raised an arm and reluctantly snuck his nose underneath. He sniffed. And immediately regretted it. His nostrils raised themselves, wrinkling his nose in offense and disgust. Stinky armpits.

*Okay, gross.*

Rolling over from the back of the car, Keith climbed on the front seat and positioned himself in front of the wheel, heels kicking the rug at his feet. The plastic was already burning hot. Impossible to drive. Keith clicked his tongue and reached for the glovebox, looking for something to cover his hands.

Even though the leather of the gloves was an inch too long, they protected him enough to be able to at least touch the steering wheel. He could still feel the warmth through the layers, though.

*Will do.*

Keith bit his lip as he mentally listed the program of the day.

*First, a gas station. Second, Museo Regional de Querétaro.*

Clear and simple. Just like he liked them.
Keith pressed the GPS function of his phone, and started the engine for the first time today. The rumble startled the local fauna. The scrawny figure of a cat popped up into the dust behind the Jeep. Keith felt it keep an eye on him until the parking lot completely vanished.

///

*Seems fine to me.*

Keith discreetly checked for stains on his t-shirt in the mirrors lined up on the walls of the museum gallery. The bathroom of the gas station had barely helped him rinse his face with lukewarm water, so it wasn’t like he felt clean, but at least he had tried.

He made eye-contact with himself. Accidentally.

Keith recoiled.

Seeing his own face had never been an habit. Keith had zero time for mirrors and hairbrushes, so watching his reflection move along with him, furrowing his eyebrows just as quickly as he did… It had something unnerving. He lowkey had forgotten what he looked like, somehow.

Pidge had a bunch of pictures of him, but he’d never really looked at them. She would print some of what she called ‘the best of the worst’ and paste them on her walls, and on the sides of her computer tours. If some madman crazy enough to turn on the lights in Pidge’s room existed, he would probably witness more of a scrapbooking work in progress than a geeky mess.

Such a madman existed, and his name was Matt. The very next day, Pidge had cut the wires of her room’s light system out.

Keith passed a nail between two teeth. Flossing.

In fact, just as much as he was hyper aware of his body, Keith had no concept of what his face really *looked* like.

Speaking of body… It was talking to him.
His stomach was angry, twisting in his belly, because despite being in full need of a proper meal, Keith hadn’t eaten correctly in days. Truth is, he really wasn’t thinking much about it and had... forgotten. Now it felt like his body was digesting itself in revenge.

Heck. Last time he really ate something, he hadn’t even paid for it.

Where are these guys at, now? Did they even reach Puerto Valwhatever?

A blurry video of Hunk’s van driving away started playing in his head. Keith’s stomach twisted again. Whole different reason.

Whatever.

Keith kept walking in the gallery. The museum was fully equipped with air-conditioning, a providential safe-zone from the heat. Most of the other visitors were either classes and their teachers crowding around one potery at a time, or europeans tourists looking for fresh air.

Despite being full of priceless works, the museum was almost empty.

Keith walked away from the thrilled squakings and the snickers of the middle-schoolers gathered around a huge mask of green stone, and left for the side galleries.

Novel-length printed texts on the walls explained in spanish how the ancient cultures viewed the world they lived in. A tree, crossed by repetitive circles, and three worlds depicted in fresques guided Keith through the halls. With his rusty spanish, Keith deciphered half of the legends of the Mayan civilisation.

The sketch of Allura’s statuette swirled in his mind.

Keith had no idea as of to why it seemed to matter so much to her. The parts Keith had traduced weren’t particularly mentioning anything worth connecting to the statue. Heck, there wasn’t anything about a statue!

This is like searching for a needle in a whole country. Or basically a statuette. Heck, that’s why no
one took the case. It's impossible.

Keith stopped in front of a reconstituted ceremony. Feathers and beads, animal skins and precious materials covered what seemed to be a mannequin of a priest.

The skin still had the head of the animal over it. Jaguar.

Clearly, the jaguar had an important role in the Mayan and Aztec mythologies, and the feline carved in the stone had more than a chance to resemble a jaguar, but... why would a single object matter so much? The rooms were all full to the brim of lookalikes of this statue!

Shiro had already sold plenty of ancient artifacts, but nothing had ever been so unique, so wanted, so needed by the buyers.

Once again, Keith felt like Allura had covered him a lot. Heck, it wouldn’t be surprising if she hadn’t told him half of the truth!

I'm the pawn in a game where I don’t even know who’s playing.

Keith twirled his pencil between his fingers, tapping his notebook repeatedly. The mess of notes from the museum’s texts was messing on the pages, the gray of the words swirling around and dancing with all the question marks he’d laid on the paper.

So many questions, and a single answer.

A blonde guy passed behind Keith, not even stopping for a second to pay attention to the printed text. His cologne polluted the air for a second. Keith wrinkled his nose.

French, no doubt.

Keith stared at the walls until the tapping of the heels faded away. Despite reading and re-reading the legends, nothing.

Dead end on the literary side.
Keith clasped his notebook close and wandered away, marching towards the displays of artifacts and objects waiting behind centimeters of plexiglass. In the dim lights of the museum, he could almost feel like the time had stopped here, for them, for him.

Millennia of history, separated of him by a mere window.

Finely crafted gold mixed with stones and jewels piled up for a while, before stones of a greater size started to invade the galleries. Statues extracted of temples centuries ago, sitting now in the shadows of a museum hall.

Keith felt a shiver crawl his skin. The dancers carved in the stone stared back at him.

It had always been a thing. Museums.

_Jail for things._

Keith was used to digging and extracting from the dirt what would be sold for thousands, even millions. He was used to the masks being clogged with mud, the diamonds to be stained, the vases to be chipped.

But in museums? In them everything was clear, neat, perfectly still. As if life had been removed from the works on display. An everyday vase, dug from earth by an underpaid teenager, was put on the same pedestal as a carved jewel made for a queen. Any item was preciously lit, named, cleaned, as if it hadn’t slept for years in the earth or been stolen decades ago from its original possessor. Everything put under locks, deprived of contact for another row of centuries.

Keith had troubles with that rigidity. History was meant to be learnt, not to be kept away from the very ones whom descended from it.

As much as he loved history, Keith hated museums. It distanced people from the things they came to see.

_And yet I can’t help but feel at home in there._
Between the silent masks and the numeroted poteries, Keith had always felt safe.

His breath hitched. In front of him, the carved outlines of a god from a nearly extinct time, limbs frozen in a perpetual kneeling. A statue. New and yet, familiar. Keith peered at the yellow, porous stone, cluttered by carvings and glyphes. The design had something familiar to it.

*Tepeyollot, jaguar form of Tezcatlipoca. Very well.*

Keith smiled in victory. Finally, something to follow the tracks of! After a bunch of pretty, but far too recent items, Keith had reached the heart of the museum. He took his time to copy a few interesting things about the general astronomy used by the Mayan for Pidge… And Shiro.

Anything that could feed her mind would be absorbed, and generally, Keith had a good time telling Pidge about his adventures. She wasn’t a gentle listener, but her quick tongue vividly colored their discussions and Keith was never more confronted to his own mistakes than when Pidge pointed them out in a snort.

In a way, she was the small voice in his head. The devilish one, telling him to fuck shit up! Pidge was the little sister Keith never really had.

On the other hand… Shiro. His brother. Fond of astronomy. A calling of the stars, a hobby? Keith had pinned it down to a bright fascination, powered by an even brighter mind open to anything new.

The first few times Keith had stayed at Shiro’s place, he would wake up in the middle of the night, sweaty, out of breath and wet from tears. He remembered getting out of bed, running around to find the guy looking at the sky far above, searching for something the Earth had failed to provide him.

Shiro had never missed an occasion to calm Keith down by telling him stories of space exploration, stars and planets he could only dream of, and universes humanity could only hope to find one day.

Maybe in another life, they traveled across the big empty void up there.

Whenever he felt like it, Shiro would drive to desert areas and stay for a night, bringing Keith with him.
In the museum, Keith felt his shoulders twitch.

Shiro had nearly cried when Keith had told him that, no, he had never really grasped where was ‘Regulus’. And how you could see animals in the sky, either. His father had tried to teach him, but… Stargazing had never been Keith’s thing. The lights of the cities always eclipsed the shining of the night.

Today, Keith missed the bright dots above his head. When darkness fell on London every night, he would inevitably already be shaking bottles behind a counter or playing poker with a few non recommendable acquaintances, and only get out after dawn, thus missing his chance to pay a look at the stars.

For once, Keith wished he could stop for a second and gaze at the constellations. Just for Shiro. Maybe he was looking at them too, wherever he could be.

*Ah ! This is not helping.*

Keith shook his head, and quickly turned the page of his notebooks. No need to lose more time on thinking about Shiro, back to actually searching him!

The museum was pursuing, and Keith forced himself to concentrate back on what was going in there. He passed by panels of printed Aztec cosmogony. Wheels of symbols paralleled constellations and events around the year. Although beautiful, the calendar stone engraved with so many symbols had nothing to do with his own little quest. The jaguar era, maybe ? Or a special day ?
The carved stone stayed silent. Her mysteries and treasures of ingeniosity laid down under centuries of oblivion, now.

Keith walked further down the galleries. Colored codexes were traduced in spanish, and, lower and smaller, in english. Keith peered at them. The overall systems of the civilization seemed far more peculiar than anything he had ever seen. Intricate systems that worked sufficiently well for the whole society to extend so far that it caused its own extinction.

According to theories, though. No one really knows how it felt downhill from there.

Shiro would have loved it. The mysteries, the stars. The very complex calendar system, too… A match up of dates and numbers, and symbols. Keith gave up after a couple of minutes, pacing down the alley instead.

His reflection looked at him in the glass protecting the items. Bright eyes, long hair. Something in the
look that said ‘do not talk to me’, too.

Mom’s eyes.

His steps echoed in the corridors, silence settling comfortably every time he stopped to scrutinize the tiniest details of statues. He could hear the critter of his pencil on the paper. Faintly, sometimes, the rumbles of the students reached his corridor. The rest of the time was utter silence.

Usually, Keith would have found that rather pleasant. Alone with history and his thoughts.

Today? Not so much. He once spotted someone moving at the very end of the room, but by the time he turned to them, nothing. He could feel the heat of a stare on his back. Some rooms didn’t even have a guardian.

Weird.

The temperature was rising, despite the air conditioner fighting its best fight against it. Just like the sun was climbing in the sky, inevitably, Keith walked the museum. The galleries stretched forever behind him.

This is pointless. There’s nothing remotely interesting here. If no one made a connection in dozens of years, why should I?

The intention was brave, but useless. It was high noon when Keith found himself strolling through the geology section, passing by dozen of carved bas-reliefs. And then he finally found it.

Another clue.

Or, to be true, the outlines of a clue. It didn’t even look like a clue. A happy, yet logical, coincidence, maybe.

Keith’s basic spanish had brought his attention to the bunch of tourists maps and flyers stacked up at one of the many doorways. Despite being more interested in jumping cliffs and diving in crystalline waters, Keith picked up an orange flyer.
Minas de Ópalo. La Trinidad.

Pidge had told him something about it, but Keith didn’t know the place was still open… If he could just grab a sample and send it to Matt, maybe that could help ! After all, the museum was a dead end. If Pidge hadn’t find the info on the net, it wouldn’t be in there either.

The only place he hadn’t investigated was the actual mine.

Getting my hands dirty. Alright.

Keith shoved the flyer in his notebook. From all the things he’d seen, this was the less unpromising, and that was one way to put it. He’d sketched everything anyways, and the museum had poured onto him all of its secret knowledge.

He would call London on the road. He’d rather get out of there as soon as possible. Even the students had quieted out.

///

Keith coughed in his fist, eyes closed to protect him from the dust. The car door slammed shut behind him. On a wooden panel, ten meters away, bright letters indicated that he had just parked in a ‘reserved area’.

La Trinidad, Mexico. 14h02. Weather ? Still hot as hell, no news there.
Pidge, somehow, had managed to get him a ticket for the visit of the mine immediately. As Keith could barely order a pizza on the phone, he thanked every god out there for her help.

Maybe Pidge herself was the god.

Keith turned around. He’d parked the jeep in front of what seemed to be a reconverted hacienda. The landscape contrasted vividly with the blue sky, orange and warm colors of the stone painted over the azur.

As always, sun was boiling his blood in his veins. Very different from adrenaline.

As much as he loved the fire coursing through his body when a rush kicked in, this heat was oozing energy out of him, squeezing in its warm, gigantic hands the tiniest sparks of life and shutting them off as soon as they sprouted.
Keith bit on his elastic while he tied his hair up, eyes discreetly roaming around. The mine was a private property, and tourists could tour around it for about two hours before exiting it, not without passing through a shop full of locally dug up rocks.

That left him 120 minutes to find anything remotely related to the statuette, whether about its localisation or at the very least what could it be fucking made of.

He strolled to the entrance, and spotted a group gathering on the sides of what seemed to be the first cave. If anything, Keith noticed the color. A bright, unmistakable orange.

His visit group was constituted of a couple of tourists traveling to Mexico from France, a family of five, and a group of friends. Keith was the only one there alone. His leather boots and all black look started to contrast tremendously with the mainstream look of the people around. He mentally noted to buy the most tourist-looking shirt at the end of the trip.

“Holà, todo el mundo puede verme ?” A voice chirped at the front.

The guide. A bubbly girl, waving at them all. Keith assumed she was the daughter of the family, even though he wouldn't bet on it. As she asked them to follow her through the labyrinth of orange and brown, Keith took the last place of the file.

She said something. Keith wasn’t listening. He checked his pockets.

The entered the natural caves. It wasn’t particularly dark, but the sun had troubles reaching that far under the corridors of stones, and somehow, the air was breathable here.

The incessant explanations of the guide blended in a musical background. Keith hummed to himself. The clicking of cameras escorted them through the mines. Sounds of tumbling stones. Sand on the shoes. Laughs ?

Keith had stopped paying attention.

The stone was really orange. It stained his fingers when he passed a hand over it. He progressively slowed down. As his steps reduced, the voice of the guide grew weaker and weaker.
Keith stopped at the corner of a huge arch, strates of oranges and red streaking repeatedly the wall.

*Nature is the first artist there is.*

When the group finally got out of view, he reached out for a phial in his pocket, and tapped some of the stone in it. It felt like a secret mission, but it really was just collecting dirt. When his little tube got filled, Keith shook it in front of his eyes. Sand, pebbles, and dust. Annoyingly common.

He stared at the phial for a second. Next thing, he was jogging to catch up with the visit group. Apparently, no one had noticed his little excursion, because not a single head turned back. The whole thing had lasted less than a minute.

“El ópalo se extrae generalmente de la piedra donde se haya incrustado, pero también se pueden encontrar en el suelo pequeñas piezas de ópalo.”

The guide was discussing the properties of the minerals. Keith pulled out his notebook, half as a way to blend in, half because his spanish only allowed him to translate a third of the explanations and he would need to look up later for the rest of it.

He leaned against the wall, and copied automatically. Significance and underlying text would be a later’s concern.

*“El juego de colores se produce por la disposición aleatoria de sus placas, que actúan como redes de difracción de la luz.”*  

Keith looked up. Diffraction. Light.

*Sun trapped inside…*

The longer the visit lasted, the less Keith could focus. Leaning on a pillar, he let his pencil roam free as he watched one of the kids reenact old mining techniques. Scratching on the paper had a soothing effect.

His mind wandered with his pencil. The statuette. Allura. London. It was only two days ago, and yet it felt like a week had passed since he’d been fighting with her handmen. The bruises on his chest confirmed that, nope, it was absolutely recent.

He skipped to the next part. Mexico. The other guys, their camera and their van. He skipped that too.

*They’re not part of your story. Forget about it.*

The museums, then. Empty yet full. Keith knew full well it was only a beginning, but still. The field always called him back to order in brutal ways. Last night had been far worse than he had expected it to be. He longed for a good night’s sleep in a motel.

Or a huge hotel. King sized bed. Sheets whiter than white and fresher than icebergs in december. Something classy and gigantic he could stumble in and walk out of a year later, completely renewed.

The actual program broke him out of his dreams. Tomorrow, maybe he could hope to pass by a crappy motel, on the way to Guadalajara.

No Puerto Vallarta for him. No need for that. What Keith needed was to discover the statue. He worked alone.

Desert, and caves. The agenda.

“Quién es esto?” The guide asked. She was looking at the notebook. Keith hadn’t seen her coming, too distracted by his own thoughts to notice her standing right here. He stared at the drawing.

“Maybe you’d rather speak English?” The guide proposed. She probably thought he was not able to answer to her in spanish. That wasn’t so far-fetched. Keith replied a ‘yeah, thanks’ and blinked.

There, on the paper, between notes about ancient statuettes, sketches of the mines and orange dust, a
pointy chin and a pair of bright eyes.

“Lance.” Keith whispered. The name fell like an evidence.

“He’s pretty. You’re good!” The orange walls reflected in her hair, making it shine like copper.

“Thanks.”

She chuckled and left, already chanting about the mines and stones again. Better not insist, as Keith looked like he’d been struck by lightning a second ago.

He really was rusty. One meal with a couple of strangers and this was the only thing in his mind for days. Shake it, Keith!

Plus they’re probably miles away now.

The visit was coming to an end. Keith could feel the waves of warmth radiating from the surface, even though they were walking behind a solid barrier of rocks.

The orange maze opened on a shop, row of glass shelves aligning themselves over and over in a cave. The other wall was covered in sunlit windows, light refracting in the thousands of stones displayed through the room. Souvenirs.

Keith watched the guide take place behind the checkout stand. Apparently, there was a lack of staff around.

The group split up. The couple went for the jewels while the kids looked for books about rocks and mountains. Keith wandered, all eyes open. Red and oranges, everywhere, and strangely enough, blue and greens, greys too.

Out of impulse, he took a bunch of gifts; green, orange. A big, smooth yellowish stone too, and a blue one, for some reason. He eyed the grey opals. Turned away. Left it there.

Keith still doubted he would ever find back Shiro, and his eyes as grey as the stones.
Stop thinking about it. You’ll find him. It’s just a matter of time.

The shelves were fuller than Keith had hoped. His hand caressed the notebook in his pocket, the image of the statuette vivid in his mind. He mentally crossed a dozen types of stones before stopping short.

There.

Just like Pidge said.

A cartel, black letters under an explosion of colors contained into a glassy vessel.

Sun trapped in stone.

*Opal - an amorphous composition of microspheres of cristobalite, SiO2.nH2O, precipitated from silica gel into layers or nodules in veins and cavities of volcanic and sedimentary rocks in numerous areas of the earth. Water is always present in opal, but the amount varies considerably.*

This shelve displayed an incredible amount of them. Tiny stones shining all colors, from bloody reds to bright greens. Keith hovered a finger over them.

The stone was cold and fresh, a drop of water in an ocean of heat. It covered his palm in reflections of all colors, a rainbow in solid form.

Keith nearly tripped to get to the checkout stand. The stone tinkled on the wooden counter. The guide smiled.

“Fire opal, hah? Very typical.”

Keith nodded, enthusiastic, borderline ecstatic. Encouraged, she kept rambling while checking the tickets out of a big register. Keith wished he could pull out his notebook and note down every single word, but feared to really look like a dongo.

Well, he was a dongo. But he didn’t need people to know about it.
“Aztecs thought the fire opal was a stone that represented life and was created in the heavens. Fire opal was known as the Paradise bird!” She said. Keith peered at the pebble. The sun flashed right through it, illuminating in thousand of shiny triangles the rest of the counter. “The reflection is beautiful, because it was made in heavenly waters.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Keith breathed out. He smiled to himself. Somehow, he was certain to finally have pulled a string. The thread was thin, though. It could break anytime, but for now, Keith was finally walking in the light.

“Do you need a gift wrap?”

Keith nodded. He exited the shop with a dozen of pesos less and a couple of stones more.

Worth it.

He crossed the parking under the sun hitting his neck, and ran to the Jeep. Without even paying attention to the burning heat of the seat, Keith dropped on it and reached for his phone, typing for Pidge without even looking. His eyes stayed glued to the rock, passing it endlessly in the rays of sun to make it explode in colors again and again.

The phenomenon was fascinating. Mesmerizing, in a way.

Suddenly, all the description, the poetry about the statuette fell into place. No one could resist the turmoils of color and life held in a single small stone, it seemed too absorbing, too alien even to dare lessening it.

Pidge yawned on the end of the line and called him back to reality.

“Pidge, you won’t believe it.” Keith blurted.

“If it’s about aliens, I sweat to-” She deadpanned. Keith did not even wait the end of her sentence to cut her off enthusiastically.

“I found the stone!”
“What… Really ?” Pidge exclaimed herself. Keith felt like she was just as excited as he was about the discovery. He heard a keyboard slam and the beeping of another computer turning on. “OK, I’m roger. Tell me everything.”

“First, I got your mandatory samples. One is for Matt too, make sure he gets it.” Keith declared. Pidge hummed back at him. “Okay, now, type fire opal.”

She obeyed and Keith heard a whistle, probably as the screen displayed photos of the stone.

“Whoah. That’s the thing ?”

“That’s the thing. I got one here and it’s amazing. But now, I found even better. This one is only mined in Mexico.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“Not even close.”

“You’re telling me, you wanted to go to Mexico, and it turned out to be the exact one and only location of your stone ?” Pidge sounded astonished.

“Well, I had a couple of reasons for choosing Mexico, but you got the spirit.”

“Lucky bastard.”

“Thanks.” Keith grinned.

“Now seriously, give me something to chew on. I’ve been working on the same project for a week now, it’s driving me nuts.” Pidge stammered. Keith heard her groan as something clanked over, back in London. He took the chance when he saw it.
“What, you’re trying to become human, instead of a goblin? Change isn’t that fast, little gremlin.”

“First of all, your hair sucks. Second of all, it’s a cybernetic project, thank you very much.”

“Woah, that hurt me right in the feels, Pidge. I made it through fire and stone, but don’t think I’ll survive this one.”

Pidge loudly stuck her tongue out for him to hear it over the phone. Keith chuckled, half the world away. Sarcasm over sarcasm, but he missed her anyways.

“No seriously, what am I supposed to do now?” Pidge went back to serious all of a sudden.

Keith refocused immediately, darting his notebook open.

“I got a couple of notes here, could you have a look a that? Plus I’ll need a complete analysis of the symbolisms across the world of the fire opal. And a destination, even though I’m still headed for Guadalajara. I’ll send you the samples once I find a post office.”

“Woow, wow, slow down, cowboy.” Pidge hauled. “I’m on you for the destination. You’re better than a google traduction bullshit for your spanish notes and you know I can’t read your chicken scratch anyways, so keep it for the road. I’ll give Matt the samples when they get here.”

“And for my symbolism analysis? I want a thirty pages long one, with sources and shit, Pidge. For tomorrow, on my desk.” Keith couldn’t help but to let his smile ring in his voice.

“Oh shut it! I’ll send you a best-of, genius.”

“You’re the best.” Keith meant it.

“I know, now roll those bones and get back to work, punk. I need time to process. Call you in the afternoon, okay?”

“Afternoon for me or afternoon for you?” Keith teased. He knew very well time was a long-
forgotten concept for Pidge. She hissed at him.

“Keith if I was within reach I would stuff your greasy hair in your mouth, you know that, right?”

“Pidge, I love you, but you couldn’t reach my hair, even if I was literally standing next to you!”

“I said work, punk!”

“Roger that, Captain Gremlin!”

The echoes of a laugh and the sudden beeping of a tonality answered him. Old habits die hard, even with long-lasting friendships. Keith smiled at the screen.

“And now, Guadalajara.”

As if it had heard him, the opal on the dashboard twinkled.
The road promised to be long. For lack of company, music. Keith tried to push the buttons of the radio, but nothing blurted out of the speakers. Either the antenna was broken, or the signals out. Silence on the waves anyways.

Keith sighed. Out of desperation, he pulled out the Johnny Cash CD from the glovebox and fed it to the autoradio.

The first notes of the somewhat… country, bouncy guitar elevated in the car. The landscape was undulating under the scorching sun. A warm voice filled the silence, invisible company for the lonely voyager.

“I can’t believe this is real.” Speaking out loud. Alone, in a Jeep. Keith had done worse, but surely heat was getting to his head.
The Mexican landscape passed in lengthy hours, to the timeless beat of the Ring of Fire. Keith stopped on the side of the road to finally, finally grab something to eat after a day of running around. The museum of the morning felt like ages ago, and yet.

One of the infamous tumbleweeds crossed his field of vision. He followed it lazily.

*Where the heck am I. This is worse than a movie.*

In his hand, the mess of tomatoes and half bitten bread was leaking on the ground. The Jeep was gently grilling under the sun. The afternoon was well set by now. The first clouds tinted of pink peaked up in the sky.

*Guadalajara. Lake, city, desert. Crossroads. I hope Pidge is right on that one.*

As much as one can love loneliness and big empty spaces, the perspective of getting lost somewhere in the middle of nowhere wasn’t particularly enchanting. He dusted off his pants.

*We’ll see.*

Keith caught himself humming along the music when he spotted the first road sign mentioning Guadalajara. By the moment the city was announced to be only fifty kilometers away, he was tapping his fingers on the wheel and singing his heart out.

The CD had already done two full circles.

“I keep my eyes wide open all the time !”

And the lyrics glued to his skin.

“Yes I’ll admit, that I’m a fool for you !”

And he blindly followed the road. The strip of asphalt unrolled under the tires for miles and miles. The guitar strummed along.
“Because you’re mine, I walk the line.” Keith was pretty sure he’d never sang that clearly in a year. It was nice to feel his chest empty itself along the notes again. Keep the mind clear. His heart was fine with that.

The night was upon him when the lake near the city came into view. Sun was setting fire to the skies and the waves, painting slashes of oranges and red all over the landscapes. Keith stopped the motor brutally and stumbled out of the Jeep for the sake of contemplating the horizon. The warm breeze whistling over the lake caressed his face.

The fire opal, as it answered the last cries of the celestial fire over the earth, burned of all its colors on the dashboard.

Sat on the hood of the car, Keith watched the nature get devoured by the flames of the sun, savoring the atmosphere and the last drops of heat as the sun set.

And suddenly, the night.

As if it was a signal, his phone rang. Keith returned to the car and pulled out his knife as he waited for Pidge’s instructions.

She didn’t bother calling him, and had sent a full length text instead. Actually, he had asked her to do it, but the fact that she complied was more than surprising. Keith suspected she was enjoying this more than she let it seem.

He punched the stop button of the autoradio. Johnny shut up abruptly. Keith toyed with his knife as he read the bullet points out-loud.

“The term ‘Opal’ originates from the Greek word ‘Opallus’ which literally means to make out a change in colour. Supposedly made in the heavens… And what, should I start searching into the sky?” Keith started out. His voice was a familiar sound to have around, by now. It filled the silence in place of the music, now.

He picked at his gloved hand with the tip of the blade. “Compared to volcanoes, galaxies, and fireworks. Well that’s a clue. I thought I was looking for a volcano.”
Keith blinked and licked the drop of blood he’d drawn from his fingertips. Careful.

“Admirers gave extraordinary opals poetic names like Pandora, Light of the World, and Empress. Used to symbolize love and hope. Well, I guess I could see a gem called Empress but Love?”

Keith rubbed away the blush on his face and peeled of the gloves, stabbing one to the dashboard.

“Are you kidding me? Opal is stated to be able to resolve despairs and to assist its wearer to discover true love. Really?”

Keith tapped his head on the headrest. He scrolled down Pidge’s text.

“Very fragile. Contains up to 40% of water, do no let it dry. What does that even means? It’s a rock, not a plant.”

Keith flicked the stone, chucking it in the air. It glowed a soft blue, in the nightlight. Changing colors. Blue ocean, sparkling. He’d seen eyes like this… Allura’s? No, not only.

Fuck, I’ve seen this guy like, what? An hour? Get over it, Keith.

His hand was getting clammy. Putting back a glove on this would be gross. Plus, they didn’t even fit right! Fuck this.

Keith grabbed the knife and slashed out the excess of leather on the gloves. When the whole set was only reduced to fingerless mittens, Keith slipped his hands in them, and mechanically flexed his digits. Without all the dark fabric on them, his hands breathed again.

Perfect.

Tossing the knife next to him and the discarded leather on the backseat, Keith pushed the accelerator.

He needed to focus on something, on the road. Driving had always calmed him down. The rumble and the repetitive rhythm of the white paint on the black ground had a soothing effect on his mind.
Keith slammed the play button, blarting music back into the car. Johnny was speaking about something beyond his comprehension.

Pidge had pinned a bright red dot on his map. The desert, a land free of cities. She had circled the volcano too, and traced a path from his position to both places. In both cases, it was too far to reach before midnight.

A wooden panel emerged from the dark.

*Atequiza, 15 km away.*

Looks like he’d found a stop for the night on the road.

///

Keith crashed onto the bed. His sports bag hit the ground in a mute sound. His breath caught up in his chest, slacked away by the scent of the flowers and the shock of the mattress against his ribs.

His eyelids closed by themselves, even though it was barely even 10pm.

The air smelled like the colors of the room. Orange and bright. It was invasive. Flowers, all over the branches, on the walls and even entering through the window. And the supper, served in the courtyard outside. Voices and echoes distilled the atmosphere. Pretty sure his head was aching a bit from all the sudden stimulations.

The host of the motel was a nice, old lady, and Keith had met all of the family when he passed through the establishment. The place was a reconverted house that bordered the road, and he had stepped in without thinking much, too exhausted to do so anyways. The notice said ‘free breakfast’.

Tiredness had caught him without a warning, a mile before reaching the town. Probably a side effect of the heat, the walks and the road. And a jetlag of hours, too.
He hadn’t slept a full night in days, anyways. Even back in London, life was a mess. Keith wondered if he’ll ever stop running once in his life. Running away, from trouble, taxes, social services and policemen. Running for cover, running on the roofs, running under the rain, under fire. The step counter could only go up.

That’s probably why it felt so good to lay there and drool a little on fresh scenting sheets, in Mexico, alone, and somewhat more free in there than in his own city, maybe than ever in his life.

Allura had given him more than the keys of a Jeep, but really the keys for some freedom, even for a couple of weeks.

Keith pushed a finger in the mattress. His hair fell over his eyes, darkening the view for a second, and he closed his eyes. Music was playing.

Everything was easier than anticipated. Pidge had led the way, whispering good words into his ears and pushing him where he needed to go. That, or someone else was pulling the strings in a favorable way he choose to welcome rather than confront.

Maybe too easy.

His brain fumed, while the night was blazed away by candles and guitars under his window. The whole hotel was outside, residents and foreigners equally sat on wooden benches for a good time and a meal.

Keith ran a hand through the tangled mess that had became his hair. He fetched his second, and last, clean tee shirt, to give the illusion and walked out to the bathroom.

The water ran with a chutty whisper. He tried to splash away the sleep in his eyes, but the mirror betrayed him.

You still look half dead.

Whatever. No one would pay attention to the grumpy tourist, and he wasn’t paid to look good. He was invisible. With a shrug, he left his room, lured down by promising smells.

A couple of stairs later, he stepped down to the courtyard, into the orange lights. People were
dancing around the table. Someone was singing. It smelled really, really good. His brain was tickled by fast tongues and laughing sentences he only caught words of, unable to focus on any of them. He twirled around dancers to reach the buffet table.

A plate full of tomatoes rested in front of him as he sat on one end of the bench.

He grabbed one and bit. The turmoil of life around him exploded in his mouth too. Music washed the roar of the engine still lingering in his head, the claims of the kids around soothing him. The dim light appeased his dazzled eyes after hours of non-stop driving and the moon had replaced the sun for a dance with the stars. His hands naturally moved from kitchenware to his notebook and pencil, in his back pocket.

He captured a little of the ambient softness on the paper, slashing the movements of the dancers in fluid lines.

Faces, too. The eyes here and there and the wrinkles in the smiles. The lips chewing and speaking and pouting and everything. People of all around, surrounding him but, like the eye of a storm, sparing him.

And eventually, one that could have blended in. Lance again, laid in the paper with his crooked smile. By the moment Keith realized what he was doing, the portrait was already polished.

What was up with that guy?!

Keith shook his head and blinked at the plates, serving himself to change his mind. He chewed on the meat a little too enthusiastically and bit his own tongue.

Seriously!?

“Hey. Is this as tasty as it looks, kitty?”

Keith looked up from his plate. Girl. Sat next to him. Big smile, bright eyes. He could have sworn to be alone a minute ago.
“When did you…” Keith blabbered.

“I think I’ll try it! Did you try the grilled corn?” She was ignoring him, in every possible way, and yet talking to him. It rubbed him the wrong way.

“But I-”

“Try it!”

She waved a hand and plastered a yellow vegetable in his face. Her ponytail waved as she laughed. Keith munched dubiously. Her bright eyes sparkled. She was pretty. Indubitably. She looked interested.

Keith was not.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think…”

“So, what are you here for? I’m studying around, personally!” Everytime Keith tried to place a word, she spoke over him.

It was irritating, in the way trying and missing five times to get in your elevator had to. Keith felt like he was pushing the buttons of every stories but someone, somehow, was interrupting him and keeping the doors open, and he was standing there, waiting, and with less and less enthusiasm for the situation.

“I’m…” Well, if you can’t beat it, might as well play along. “I’m… investigating.”

Ingenious. 

Dumbass.

She purred a “ooh” of surprise that set Keith off for good. She still had no name. Her lashes batted. Keith wrinkled his nose. The tomato juice was weirdly bitter.
“And tell me, Keith, what are you, ‘investigating?’” She winked at him, her canine exploding a red pepper. Her mouth got tainted red, her lips bloody from the juice.

“Huh… Nothing. What do you want?!” Keith was trying his best to remain polite, but the situation was slipping away.

*How can someone be so upsetting without even doing anything?*

She chuckled. Keith found the sound annoying. Fake, somehow.

“Me? Nothing either. And you?”

Returned question.


Keith looked around for an escape. This was getting uncomfortable, in the “I’m seating with a stranger I have no interest in without my consent and she keeps talking while I actively avoid her” way.

The music was twirling around. Keith hadn’t slept properly in days. He was still hungry. Figures blurred around, the details and patterns mixing in a nauseating mess of colors. The flowers smelled too strong, intoxicating, ravishing the fresh of the night.

Keith was on the verge of something. Couldn’t quite tell what. Something slipped out of his hand. Wet.

*When did I fill my glass? I didn’t even… I haven’t.*

Survival instinct kicked in. Keith felt the adrenaline fill his veins, like a dam breaking inside to flood his body with pure energy. Whomever was this girl, she’d triggered a violent fight-or-flight response from him. Not good. Even dudes three times his weight hadn’t left such an impression.
He scoffed.

“I have to go.” Keith stood up as fast as one could do, eager to get away. His stomach still cried to be fed, but he didn’t listen. The air, so perfumed before, threatened to suffocate him now. She was unbreathable.

The world took a second to get back in colors. It twirled.

Before he could run, she hammered her nails into the cover of the notebook Keith was dragging away.

“Oh, no, not so fast, kitty. You’re gonna listen carefully first, alright Keithy?”

Keith was pretty sure his ears were ringing now. Her voice, the music? Fuck.

“Whatever you’re doing, whomever you’re doing it for? I do not care. You’re not alone on this. Be careful. You don’t want anyone to step on that pretty tail of yours.” She licked her lips and flicked her ponytail.

Keith frowned.

“Wait a minute, how did you know my name? What do you… How do you…!” Keith started. His voice croaked low in his throat.

She was already walking away. Keith tried to stand up, to follow her steps, but the crowd of dancers swallowed her for a mere second. He lost her trace, pale dots fading the edges of his vision.

The world was swaying, off-beat. Keith blinked. Once, twice. His vision was crystal clear on focus point, and blurrier and worsening on the sides. The sensation was so strange it set his balance off. He grabbed the edge of a table.

What is going on. The hell.
He waltzed to his room and nearly smashed in another girl at the top of the stairs. He apologized by the corner of the mouth, barely noticing her cold stare in return. The first floor seemed like the Everest, distance wise.

Keith crashed his shoulder on the door. Leant over the handle, he fumbled with the key for a minute, trying without success to ram it inside the lock. Out of anger, he slammed his side against the door.

Bad idea.

The panel flung itself open, and Keith dived head first inside. The wooden corner of the night table had a very violent meeting with his eyebrow arch. The world bursted in pieces of black and white.

Keith felt his throat rumble, but he didn’t hear what he said. Better that way, probably, since it couldn’t be pretty things.

Holding his head like it was about to fall apart, and frankly, that could be the case, Keith emerged from the floor to roll on the bed. The world missed a beat. Refusing to let go his probably fragmented skull, the boy waited for the room to stop reeling, laid on his back, his chest heaving up and down.

_I wanna throw up._

He counted. It took the ceiling forty-six seconds to settle down. His blood was pulsing under his fingers, the adrenaline and nausea mixing and deserting his veins at the same time. The cocktail was terrible. His tongue was as humid as the desertic plains he could see by the window.

He pressed a finger over the bump above his eye. Nothing to bad. It just felt like someone was regularly hitting his head with a hammer, no biggie, yeah. At least the bone was intact.

It took a tremendous effort to sit. His inner ear was persuaded that above was below and his stomach was saying the exact contrary. The world had quieted, but every sound reached him through cotton. His hands needed loading time to move.

“What the fuck just happened.” Speaking out loud was both reassuring and painful as heck.
Keith moved the covers around him, wagging his way to the edge of the bed. His eyes traveled around the room. The window was still open, but only chatters reached him now. Ah, he’d forgotten to shut down the bathroom’s light. His tee shirt was on the floor, folded over his bag. The flowers had closed their petals for the night.

The last time Keith had folded a tee shirt, Shiro was behind him with a water pistol and a camera.

Forgetting about the headache, Keith threw himself on his backpack. His hands fidgeted with the clips, and he dived in, running frantically the insides. His blade sliced his finger open and blood dripped. He bit his lip to contain a pained cry.

“I’m tired of this!” Keith yelled. He jolted the bag upside down, scattering its contents on the floor.

A quick glance and he finished the inventory; blade, obvi-fucking-iously, here; notes, here; phones and keys too. Fire opal and packets. Fire opal?

Fuck, where are the-

A shine on the corner of his eye. The nightstand.

“That’s what I thought...” Keith whispered.

The tainted glasses. The car on the parking. The museum’s feel. The girl that kept talking, keeping him out of his room. Folding the tee-shirt was discreet, maybe, but the stone was a deliberate provocation.

Keith was being followed, and by someone who knew what he was after better than he did, apparently.

Keith slumped against the bed. At least, they hadn’t cracked his phone nor read his notes, since he’d
kept the notebook with him, and the phone was still alive -Pidge had setup a firewall meant to literally explode the device, would someone try to hack it.

Whoever was after him had carefully noted his possessions and warned him. They knew how much he knew, and he was kept in the dark. They had means to disappear and they had much more than he did. They looked for the same thing as he was.

And they wanted him to stop.

He needed to call Allura.

But before that…

He crawled to the bathroom. The sound of his stomach emptying itself filled the void. Tomatoes made him puke red. He prayed for it to be just the tomatoes.

///

“What do you mean, ‘I’m not the only one searching the stone’ ?!”

Keith yelled over the receiver, hunched in the glassed phone booth ; his pesos were disappearing in the device at lightspeed. His fingers trembled on the crack, metal chilly under his fingerless gloves.

“What do you have to tell me they don’t already know anyways ?! You never said there would be someone here trying to stop me !”

He was this close to losing it.

“Mr Kogane, this was not part of the agreement, I know full well, but you never mentioned nor asked for any precisions concerning others-”
“You said it was a long lost treasure! That no one even remembered its existence!”

“I said,” Allura dragged out the word, “almost no one besides my father ever believed in it, so no one expected to find it.”

“Well, YOU WERE WRONG!”

Snap. Keith had lost it.

Allura was not backing down, holding her positions. Her voice turned cold and icy, darting over the line to strike right at Keith. “Well, if a couple of chit-chats scare you away, then I’ll remove my offer and ask you to forget about any single details of this case.”

“I’m not scared by ‘chit-chats’! There’s someone behind me and he can reach for me, do you understand? I’ve… I don’t know what’s going on.”

“Then give up, throw away all evidence and come back to London. You don’t need to get involved more than you want to. I’ll find another way.” Allura was… irritatingly calm.

Keith glared at his reflection. The crude white light of the neon buzzing above the booth made him look even worse.

The incident had kept him awake for over hours despite the hunger and the fatigue. His hair was even more tangled, and even his so-called clean shirt could use a good wash; his whole body could use a wash, for that matter. He stank. Throwing up whatever he’d ate wasn’t helping either.

His reflection glared back. Wide eyes, angry flare burning in them. Hunger lingering at the bottom of his feet for a run into the wild. He wanted to scream.


He wasn’t scared. His legs and arms were covered in scars and bruises since he was a child, he’d
passed by death and loss, he’d fought through the night and the fire. He wasn’t scared, he was in the
dark. And if Keith didn’t mind swinging a fist back, he just couldn’t stand not even seeing his target.

What were they planning on doing? What if he persisted? Could they reach London, could they
reach Pidge?

His blood boiled, a sudden rush of heat setting ablaze his heart and soul. No. This wouldn’t do.

*Calm down, she would know before they even set a foot on the UK.*

And what if they could *not* do that. What if there was just another archeologist on the spot and he
just wanted all the gold for himself only?

What if the adventure was worth it anyways?...

Keith’s fist staggered over the metallic box. And slammed down, making the whole booth tremble,
as it feared another punch. The line was stuck in silence. He pushed another coin inside the box.

“Allura?”

“Yes?” Her business woman voice. She was already done, it seemed. Only politeness had kept her
over the phone. Good.

“Don’t call off. I’m finishing this.”

“Are you sure?” Her certainty had vanished. Poof.

Keith dropped the receiver. Allura could ask a detective for his answer, he was done with that.
Without a look back, he strolled out of the phonebooth.

“Yeah, I am.” The words lost themselves in the night.
He wanted to see the end of it. What kind of treasure was worth sending spies to anyone who remotely even just as passed by the country in which it lay?

Surely one of a kind.

The courtyard was empty now. The table was clean. Keith crossed the hallways wondering if anyone knew about what had happened there.

*Almost drugged to sleep. Who uses that kind of sick methods anymore?*

He did not sleep that night, turning and tossing in the bed, rolling over and under the sheets until the room was just as messed up as his mind. After hours of this, he banished all hope of getting a good night’s sleep and opened his notebook.

He still had Spanish to translate and vague notes to decipher.

Dim light of the lamp on his night table. Empty room. He kind of… wanted a cigarette? The air was suffocating him already.

Shoving away the thought, he dived into the literature, feeding his brain instead of his stomach.

Most of the notes written at the museum were of no help, as they mainly spoke of Mayan and Aztec traditions. As interesting as it was, Keith lost no time dwelling on it. He glared at the notes of the mines. Most of it was unnecessary, and the rest unusable, since Keith himself couldn’t read the dots and wriggles on paper. Drawings and doodles filled the empty spaces.

“What an absolute waste of time.” He concluded out loud.

He yawned and flipped to find a clean page, writing down neatly everything he had so far. Water and silicate, fire opal, Mexico. Ancient statuette, mysterious locations, unknown civilisation before the dawn of time. Allura, a rich, mysterious archaeologist’s daughter, and this other X in the equation, willing to keep him away from the treasure.

And as he flipped back for pieces of info, Keith stumbled in on Lance’s face. This was a thing too. This weird duo wandering around, somehow pursuing the same goal…
Keith gulped. What if the X tried to keep them at bay too?

He wasn’t sure Lance and Hunk would hold on much longer. Keith closed his eyes for a second.

Just a second.

He woke up when sun darted its rays over his face.

“Fuck !”

He’d slept through.

AGAIN ?!

His head fell first of the bed, his hands ramming for his phone. He burned his retina on the bright screen, determined to read the white number displayed in shockingly vivid light for such a small device. His bruise burned.

10 : 23.

Late, but not too late. Besides, it wasn’t like he had a train to catch. This thing had waited 40 000 years, it surely could wait for Keith to catch up some sleep.

His chest raising to breaking point, Keith breathed in. The night had passed in the blink of an eye - literally, and yet, he was still exhausted. The lingering taste of his dream caught up on his tongue. His mind wandered the edge of the memories of it, barely catching mist of the illusion.

Salty waters, glowing blue. A hand gripping his arms.

He shook it away. Dreams were a reality he had no time to explore today.
The night lamp was still lit. Papers and pencils were scattered all around him. He sniffed an armpit, discreetly, and wrinkled his nose. Okay, no surprise here, he smelled awfully terrible. That started to strangely look like a morning routine.

Step 1, waking up somewhere weird, from a nap he didn’t know he was taking. Step 2, realize his body was just one big, huge aching mass. Step 3 : he smelled awfully bad.

Looking at the mess around, Keith decided to add a fourth step : pointing at somewhere and fucking going there.

Keith yanked the map out of his bag, and spread it open on the floor. He picked up a sharpie and circled La Trinidad first. Then, Atequiza, linked to Trinidad by a dotted line. Mexico was crossed, and so ended up Santiago de Querétaro.

*Pretty long road trip, for a guy whose only CD is Johnny Cash.*

He took out his phone. Pidge had marked the lake of the city and a question mark was stamped over a volcano. Tequila volcano, a little above Guadalajara. Other than that, the desert was his last option.

*Puerto Vallarta has museums about ancient minings too. But we’re not going there, are we ?*

As much as Keith wanted to check the desert as soon as possible, the lake seemed closer and a more reasonable choice. And since a lake wasn’t suited for exploring on foot, Keith’s favorite investigation technique, he could just drive around and see. If nothing presented itself, he would try the desert.

Keith had never been much of an optimist.

Fire opal was formed thanks to the presence of water in volcanic soils. Theoretically, this was the perfect spot. A lake, surrounded by geologic movements. Science and statistics both pointed at the lake like big, bright neon arrows. Keith had learned to be wary of bright arrows.

Something whispered in his mind that it couldn’t be *that* easy. He’d found the fire opal too soon to completely be happy about it, anyways.
He packed back everything, stuffing his belongings into the black backpack as his mind balanced the infos. He had to think things through.

*For once in your life, try thinking first.*

If Shiro was there, he would have told him to calm down and take a step back to envision the bigger picture. He would point out every flaws in his plan, keep cool under the fire, watch out for the mistakes Keith couldn’t even imagine.

If Shiro had been there, he would never had let his guard down.

*But he’s not there, is he?*

Keith passed a hand over his face, sleep wearing out of it slowly. Okay, let’s recap.

Allura was rich. Super rich. And yet, she hadn’t find anything, or at least Keith *thought* she had nothing more. Which should have been a warning sign from the start. Spending ten years on a single case and only uncovering scraps ? Unlikely, even more when you had her means.

He was now certain she was hiding intel from him, secrets she could only tell once he would be neck deep in the adventure, and incidentally, in the shit it seemed to be packed with.

*Great.*

For now, as much as it kept nudging him forward, adventure was shy. His car was functional, his knife clean. This was rather comfortable. Keith had no problems getting his hands dirty but…

Speaking of clean…

He still had time for a shower.
Ripping the bag open for a shirt, Keith heard a tingle. The fire opal rolled at his feet. “Careful storage, fragile stone”, they said. Well, too little too late, the thing was already chipped.

Keith discarded his clothes while playing with it, tossing it in the air and catching it back again. The triangles of color kept going back and forth, up and down, like a magical yo-yo defying gravity.

“Ah, yeah. I need to hydrate you, or whatever.”

Loneliness did that to people. Keith was used to talking to cars, knives and lizards. Rocks were not entirely new to him either. Shiro had laughed a little the first time he heard him conversing with his hairbrush, but never again. In fact, Keith even handed him the habit.

Sometimes, in the deep of the night, when Keith would still smoke secretly at his windows, eyes glassy over London in the dark, he would hear his brother’s voice, actively asking inanimate objects stuff only him could hope to find an answer to.

Keith wondered if Shiro ever heard the objects talk back.

*I never did, at least.*

He stepped in the shower. Pushed the tap. Rain poured on him, warmer than he expected it to be. The steam coated the air, gently softening the edges of the world. Relaxing.

The humid air chased away his thoughts. Quieted the mind.

Carefully, Keith opened his palm, the stone in it. As water fell over it, it became more and more opaque. Changing, from crystalline to… milky.

“Is this normal?” Keith wondered. He wasn’t entirely sure, but might as well go big. He put down the stone at his feet, reaching for the complimentary soap on top of the shelf. Orange liquid dripping over his shoulders, Keith felt a little more at peace.

He stayed longer than usual, knowing full well this could be the last shower before a long, long time.
Next chapter will have some Lance and Hunk goodness hehe ; wait for it ! I hope this isn't too boring ? I'm sorry for being so late, i'll try to catch up!!! I hope you enjoyed reading :D
Chapter Summary

Keith meets a lot of people on the road, escapes some and wishes he could kiss others
ahah

Chapter Notes

wowowowo this was Long!!!! Have fun :D

Morning routine. Wake up, skip breakfast, pay for wherever you stayed last night and flop onto the
driver’s seat. Keith rubbed his eyelids. The checkout lady had offered the coffee. Keith wasn’t a fan
in any way, but the gesture was nice enough to plaster a smile on his face. For the first time since
Mexico was under his feet, he felt it again. The subtle rush of adrenaline lying under the
overwhelming feeling of being on the road again, hunting for mysteries.

Turn the keys, check the brakes, turn the wheel. Routine, routine.

“Mystery machine, here we go again.”

The engine roared fiercely, mirroring his mood. Instead of grilled bread or tea, Keith had filled his
stomach with butterflies. He pressed the pedals low. He should be at the lake in thirty minutes.

His foot pushed again.

Maybe twenty.

All it took was to follow the wooden panels. The road was used and old, but the drive was
enchanting. When it came in view, the lake mirrored the sky and its cocoon of mountains in bright
hues of blue and green. Keith blinked at the blinding shine of the surface. Sun was already resting
high in the sky.
Keith pulled the brake at a sightseeing spot overlooking the banks.

A wooden panel standing like an old guardian of the sanctuary carved with informations, as well as a rusty pair of binoculars. Pretty nice spot. If he’d anyone to go on a date with, he surely would have taken them here.

He flipped a coin and hunched over the mechanism of the binoculars. Rusty, but functional.

Unlike someone's spanish, am I right?

Keith pressed the button and paid his peso. The view stretched from one side of the lake to the other. Boats floated, people were walking the paths carved in the mountains around. A bunch of black birds were perched on wooden branches. Everything was peaceful.

Nothing breathtaking, but pretty nonetheless.

Keith snatched his phone and pressed the recording button as he passed it through the lenses. Might as well keep a trace of the place, just in case.

When the binoculars shut close, he took a few steps back and sat on the hood of the Jeep, notebook and pen out. Photos could never print a landscape in his mind as well as drawing it did. A sketch later, he was peering at the carved letters of the informative panel, half of the text being a mess of rotten wood.

“Lago de Chapala, más grande del país al contar con 1112 km². Well. Touring it isn’t an option, then, I’m not rolling 250km for nothing. Mhh-hmm, templado con lluvias en verano, well... there won’t be much rain now.”

Keith jumped on his feet and moved closer to the panel. Words were missing.

“En la época prehispánica, los viajantes desde Aztlán llegaron al laguna de Chapala. El lago fue llamado Chimalhuacán, que significa región donde se usa el chimalli. Los habitantes de Chapala eran Tecuexes descendientes de los Toltecas. Well, that’s more interesting… Aztlán from where came the voyagers…”
The panel explained the origins of the lake’s name and mentioned previous civilisations. Keith mentally noted to ask Pidge about it, and about Tecuexes. If there was any kind of ancient city around, he had to know about it.

The rest of the text was merely a mess of words, as the wood appeared too worn out to be readable. Keith nodded and sent Pidge his question while returning to the Jeep. Before entering, he held the door a little, absorbing the view one last time.

A flock of birds decided to take off. They twirled in the sky, black dots, silent and gracious. Keith smiled at the thought of their view. To them, he surely was nothing but a black dot too.

Speaking of black dots. Something passed by the corner of his eye. A moving chip, fine and silent. A car. With tinted windows.

“Oh, fuck, not again.”

Keith hurried himself in the Jeep and pushed the pedal to the metal, squealing the tires and making the engine scream. His mind was calculating, fast. He had about a minute left before the other car reached his spot, and there was only one road to drive down the hills to the bank. If he tried to escape by taking it, no doubt the others would catch up on him.

No road, no time, no car. Excellent, he was trapped on a sightseeing cliff.

But he had a Jeep. And fifty seconds left.

The spot was overlooking a stony slope, covered in bushes and branches. No path whatsoever crossed it, and it ended abruptly on a plateau of dust and soil. Going there was dangerous, deadly, and frankly stupid.

And I’m going to do it.

No time to look for another option.

Keith gritted his teeth and squinted in anticipation as he pressed the pedals. The Jeep accelerated at
full speed in direction of the void, tires screaming against the soil. The motor roared its loudest roar behind. The first wheels, propelled by the acceleration, left the earth and the Jeep jumped forward.

The edge of the cliff approached at a delicate speed of 88mph, the maximum acceleration of the old car pushed to the top. Keith was gripping the wheel tight, his nails entering the plastic as if it had been butter. The vehicle kept rolling, like a bull decided to impale that red fabric facing him, and suddenly, the wheels left the earth.

The Jeep, no different from the birds of earlier, had taken off.

For a second, it hung there, floating in the air, rocks and pebbles thrown in the air around. The view was amazing. Keith gripped the wheel tighter.

After the heavens, the descent. It came without a warning, gravity grabbing back its right on the metal of the car with violence. The nose of the car suddenly pointed down, and all of that sweet speed got converted into free fall velocity.

Keith felt his heart linger in his throat as the ride banged him down the hill, clanking metal slammed down by a gigantic, invisible hand. One, two, three jumps, and Keith was pushing all of his weight on the steering wheel to prevent the car from tumbling down and empaling itself in a bush, or worse.

The noise was deafening, and he was convinced he’ll need to change the tires after that. Rocks and plants scratched all the metal there was to scratch, and the mud still humid of the morning made sure to worsen that, infecting the cuts of the car like poison. The windscreen made a noise that echoed in Keith’s teeth.

Another bump, and another, and finally, adhesion. The Jeep was back on gripping that good old earth, and Keith slammed the brake pedal, urging the car to stop. Wheels kept on turning for a dozen of meters, propelled by their mad speed. The water was close enough to jump in, now.

Keith pulled the manual brake. The Jeep swerved on last time, and oscillated on itself.

Finally. Silence.

Keith stopped the motor and rolled the windows down. His heart was imitating the Jeep earlier in his chest, bumping and jumping all around, hammering his ribs and shortening his breath. Keith had
trouble concentrating.

Fifty meters above, on the other road he’d fled more by chance than by choice, the other car passed in a rush, the sound of its motor echoing into the morning air.

Startled, an egret flew away.

Keith breathed through the mouth in long draws, waiting for another sound, a branch to crack, a rock to tumble. A gun to click.

Nothing came back.

Keith started the engine again and began to drive, continuing his tour of the lake. Alive, somehow.

///

“So, cowboy, how is ya feelin’?”

“Huh. I’m alive, I guess.”

Keith poked at his arm. His fall down the slope had come within a hair’s breadth of total disaster, car crash and death in explosion of gasoline and metal. He wasn’t sure to know how he felt about it.

In the meantime, he had decided to leave the fuck away from the scene, and he’d drove to an open-air cafe-restaurant, barely serving anything but coffee and tortillas. The boy was starving, and had ordered a couple before installing himself over at a table.

The sun shining down over the lake informed him noon was soon to be rang. The reflection over the white plastic of the cheap tables was blinding.

Pidge had called as soon as he’d took the first bite.
“Wow.” She deadpanned. “Enjoy the moment while it lasts then. I’ve been trekking wikipedia for you a lot the past days, but I think you’d like to read the thing for yourself.”

“Okay. Just… Send it, I’ll read it around here.”

“You know, I don’t think Allura sent you all the way to Mexico just to read Wikipedia pages I sent you…”

Yeah, Allura didn’t do a lot of things.

“Well, maybe, but I’m following tracks of a several ten thousands years old thing. I gotta know.” Keith might have sounded to convincing, as if he wasn’t talking to a conquered public. Hah. He was really trying to convince himself. He took a mouthful of tortilla.

“Psh, like it matters.”

“It does !”

“Sure, sure Keith. Anyways. Matt got your sample overnight and sent me a detailed report and I read it and everything. To be short and polite, it’s boring as fuck and nothing in it is interesting.”

That wasn’t anywhere near polite, but yeah, short.

“What ? Seriously ?” Keith was bummed out. All of this for nothing ?

“Yeah. You basically just sent dirt. The fire opal is made under very specific conditions, and the earth probably moved away from its initial state.”

“Which means ?”

“Which means that it doesn’t matter where the stone was mined. The statuette could as well be hidden countries away.”
“But Allura said it was in Mexico.” That had to be the only thing she’d say.

“Yeah. But she never said where. And I’m pretty damn sure it’s not… You just don’t put a treasure at the same place you harvested it, Keith! No one does that.”

Keith closed his eyes.

Pidge was right. He’d been so obsessed by the stone in itself he forgot to care about Everything Else. Something clicked in his brain. Maybe the stone was not the key. Well, maybe it was a key, but you don’t find a treasure by searching the thing itself. You look for the pirate that sunk with it.

“Pidge, you said the patterns of human installation were…”

“Whacky? Well, I guess you could say that. No one seems to get along with anyone. There’s a dozen different theories about how the humans ended in South America. Most people go with the ‘people passed by Bering in Russia when it was still frozen’.”

“And?” Keith asked. The waves licked the banks. A random bird decided to scream its presence.

“Well, it would put the human’s first installations in around 14 000 years ago.”

“There’s a but to thi-”

“But!” Pidge chimed.

“I knew it.” After years of this little thing, Keith had picked up on her speech patterns.

“The Clovis site has been discovered in 1930 and got this theory taking off, being one of the first uncovered cities. However, and that’s where it gets interesting, we found a ton of things going against this. For example, the Tropper site.”
“What’s with it?” Keith hunched over his notebook, hastily scribbling Pidge’s words.

“I’m getting there! Stop interrupting me!”

“Pidge, we’re not in your youtube shows, just get to the point!”

“My ‘youtube show’ as you call it, is a very interesting channel about archeology and science, and a tons of other trivia. The guys that do this are very skilled and you should not reduce their work to—”

“Pidge.” Keith felt a droplet of sweat run down his neck, gluing a little more his shirt to his skin. The sun was beating him flat, high high high above his head. He wanted to go fast. Or else he would melt over the tortillas.

“Okay, okay. Tropper is an archaeological site that allows us to think humans already roamed America 50 000 years ago. Basically.”

*She drops the bomb just like that.*

“So… The statuette could be crafted from that time.”

“Yeah.”

“And it would have stayed at the last place it got put in.”

“Mh-hm.”

“Waiting for centuries.”

“Well, presumably. Millenias, maybe.”

“Pidge, I’ve been searching on the wrong side all this time! I’m not looking for cool stones, we want
The lead of his pencil broke under pressure. A grey line stroke the paper in half, clashing against the white. Hell yeah. Bye bye geology, here come Keith Jones, looking for the statuette of doom and its mysterious past. Keith shot a smile at the sky.

Enough with the rocks and the dust, welcome adventure and abandoned cities!

Pidge lost about zero second to break the boy’s dreams. “Keith, that thing could have been moved since then. It probably stayed as some kind of artifact in a place and then got moved or plundered to somewhere else. For all we know, it could have been acquired by a rich rando or broken and lost in a volcano.”

Keith glared at the moving waters of the lake, closer than ever. Wind brushed his hair, soft and warm.

“I refuse to believe it got lost. Allura’s father had a lead. This means it’s hidden. Probably.” Never had he ever been so doubtful about his own words but heh.

“Well. Could be in a temple, or something similar.” Pidge went along. The other possibilities were too demoralizing.

“Old enough to be forgotten, recent enough to be discovered again.”

“Yes. I like where this is going.”

“Me too.” Keith shoved away cutlery, plate and glass, and opened his map. “Okay, now if you were a, say, 13 000 years old priestess looking for a place to hide her ancient legacy, where would you go?”

“Mh… Probably somewhere linked to it?”

“Fire opal… It’s a volcanic stone. A volcano?”
“Nah, too unpredictable, and way too dangerous. They probably built something around it, if it held some kind of status.”

“Then what?” Keith groaned.

“Fire opal is, contrary to what one would think, highly made of water.” Pidge pointed out.

That had set him off, at first. Fire, made of water. Weird, but geologically, it made sense. He reached for his pocket, his fingers brushing a now familiar shape and getting it out in the sunlight. The opal. Keith dropped the tiny translucent rock on his map, out of ideas. It landed on his own position. Guadalajara.

“A lake then.” Keith whispered more to himself than to Pidge.

“Yes; but if it was around a populated area, say such as Guadalajara, it would have been discovered by now, wouldn't it?"

“Maybe it’s not in plain sight.”

“Four kids playing in the countryside discovered the Lascaux caves in France, Keith. It’s been at least 10 000 years, someone would have found out. No, it can’t be that easy.”

“Pidge, if it's not a city, not a lake and not a volcano, but it’s humid and secret, where is it?”

Pidge seemed to think the enigma through. She quieted for a moment, during which Keith stared at the map, as if a bright red X was going to appear out of the blue to finally put a real, obvious destination to this quest.

“I got something.”

Pidge was just as good.
“And ?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“On a scale from Neon yellow to Getting Stabbed in the Eye, how bad ?”

“I’d say, Alone in underground caves off in the Desert bad.”

“Piece of cake.”

“Sure thing, cowboy.”

Without any warning, as usual, Keith ended up in line with a tonality. Pidge had no reason to change her habits and even if she had twenty, she wouldn’t do it. Matter of honor. Loyal to herself, she sent a screen capture marked of a dot around five seconds later. Keith copied it on his own map and stared at it, waiting for it to miraculously teleport him there.

Nothing. But his phone buzzed one last time. He read the text out loud.

“Good luck.”

Well, thanks.

Keith munched at his tortilla. The sun was literally grilling him alive. Sweat was covering every layer of skin disponible and he was pretty sure his nose was sunburnt by now. His hands would sport very fashion tan marks of his gloves.

So, the lake had been a dead end. Despite having a destination, and a real plan -searching a statuette the size of a fist in the mexican desert, what a plan !- something in his stomach kept telling him to look closer. Look closer, between the waves. Under the surface.

Moving from his table, Keith went to crouch at the very edge of the lake.
He scanned the waters for a solid minute. Something was coming his way-

“FUCK !”

A giant fish emerged from the surface and bursted in the air, splashing Keith and exploding a vein in his heart. Seconds later, the animal was gone. Eyes round like saucers, Keith tried to catch up his breath.

*Scared by a fish. What are you ?*

He shoved the rest of his tortilla in his mouth, and his stuff in his backpack. A pressed walk and a wince later -the seats were super hot, like, super duper fucking hot- and he was driving off, watching the immense blue canvas disappear into the rearview mirror.

///

He’d drove full north. The landscape was changing ever so slightly that he couldn’t quite tell what was different from an hour ago, but it was widely different from three hours ago anyways.

After a particularly long section of uninterrupted asphalt, Keith stopped at a gift shop he’d spotted on the side of the road. Silly, but meaningful anyways.

The sign over the door said ‘Gift shop’, in english for some reason, but when Keith pushed the door and entered the ventilated interior, he questioned his notion of ‘gift’.

Shelves lined up in rows, full to the brim of diverse items Keith had trouble pairing together. What was obviously a collection of fossilised ammonites shared a place with gardening tools. Biscuits and dried food faced finely crafted jewelry, and old books in at least three languages overviewed boxes of potted cacti.

“Hello ?”
Human interaction. His best skill, of course. Since the very moment he’d stepped in Mexico, he’d either talked to weirdos or not talked at all. Usually, Keith had his own way to blend in. It fit in his back pocket, and whenever he needed to remember someone, he just had to open it.

An old man popped behind the counter. Or maybe he’d always been there but camouflaged in his cavern of objects, Keith had missed his tan, wrinkled face and weirdly striped shirt.

“Hey! American boy!” The guy had at least three thousand summers. His voice was so raspy it felt like you could blew on it to remove the dust in the vocal cords.

Keith was nowhere near american but he choose to nod politely. He grabbed a keychain and a bottle opener, and, thank god, a clean tee-shirt.

He really was looking for rope and a water bottle, but bought instead a ridiculously small dynamo flashlight and one of those clippers, along with a cactus shaped lighter. He completed his crafty attire with snap hooks, knowing full well they wouldn’t hold his body if he ever used them to climb anything.

The tour of the shop looked like a joke. Nothing was at the place you’d thought it was, and if there was something you hadn’t thought of, well, it was there. Keith even stumbled upon Eiffel tower keychains.

He dropped everything on the counter and waited for the entity that lived in the gift shop to manually add all of the price. Keith watched him get his little pencil in his wrinkled fingers and slowly, slowly, write down every number, one by one.

The old man counted the way kids did. He carefully noted every carried number and crossed each part he’d done.

Keith mentally calculated around 32 pesos. Since he had time, he pulled out his notebook too, and began to sketch. For a moment, the only sound heard in the shop was the scritching of leads on paper.

“Here, American boy.” The old man pointed at the total.

33. *Not so bad.*
Keith carefully closed the door behind him when he exited the shop, persuaded for some reason that nothing should enter it but lost kids of his type. He wasn’t even sure the shack would be there if he happened to take that road again.

When the sign became blurry in his rearview mirror, Keith realized he’d forgotten to get anything to eat.

Well, whatever.

His bag looked fuller on the passenger’s seat.

Games of the road. Keith liked that kind of thing. Gas stations open at unholy hours of the morning where Shiro would park to drink his billion dollars coffee, with extra creme on top. Local craft shops with deer head hung above the doors, bars where everyone would look at them, and once they’d ordered, no one would even remember their presence.

Drive-ins still alive on the side of the roads, french cafés in far east Asia, little houses alone next to driveways. They’d seen so much, and Keith had that special affection for all those peculiars and uniques places.

Too bad he was visiting them alone now.

Keith clenched his jaw. He discarded his stinky, wet old shirt on the Jeep’s back seat and rolled half naked for a while, letting the air that rushed into the car cool him down. He munched on a pencil for a while, short on cigarettes for a reason.

There was no one but him on the road, and it felt good. The needle of the speed cadrant was far, far beyond it’s supposed limit. The sun was reflecting on the hood. The mud had dried, and was crumbling away in the wind.

Nothing but speed and dust. Keith suddenly understood a lot of Mad Max’s aesthetics.

He eyed his phone. An essay, directly imported from London, popped in the notifications. Keith picked the cell and swiped to open the file, eager to discover what his favorite little brain had found out.
No driving and texting.

Pidge had looked up for legends and Aztlán facts. Apparently, the city was a mysterious island, uncharted and never found, where originated the Aztec people. The only indication remaining was that Aztlán was septentrional, compared to the lake. Even though the people tried to find it and eventually reached their destination, they never happened to place it on a map.

Keith headed north with the desert as a destination. So far, so good.

The rest of the text mentioned legends surrounding the entry of the city. Seven passages, hills and mountains combined in several texts, and theories succeeded it to try to find the real place people had designated as their origin centuries ago.

Keith decided to ignore that part, as theories weren’t going to help him much, especially since half of them explained the contrary of the others.

As the asphalt passed by in angry growls under the wheels, Keith decided it was time to finally get into the mood. He pushed the button of Johnny’s CD and waited. And waited.

“You’re mad at me because I said you sounded like a sick buffalo sometimes ?”

The radio stayed silence. The heat had surely melted something in the connexions, or Keith had hit it too hard last time. Whatever, silence was a friend now.

Heat was not, however.

Even if the sun descended in the sky, the afternoon advancing, the temperature was fixed on augmenting. By now, Keith was keeping the gloves more for the aesthetic than anything. His skin was soaked in sweat.

If his memory was accurate, and it was, it had been two hours, fourteen minutes since the gift shop showed up on his route. Keith converted mentally the distance. At a rate of a 100 km/h speed, it was now two hundred and twenty four kilometers behind. And he was still hungry.
It took the Jeep and its passenger thirty two more minutes before another interesting shop showed up. It was an old gas station, merely selling enough to feed a man. Kreith pulled off the road for a break, using one of the discarded leather fingers of the gloves as a scrunchie. His hair kept falling on his forehead anyways.

Keith filled his stomach and the gas tank, exchanging looks with a girl that giggled at him, blushing so red he suspected her to be driving very well past the alcohol limitations. He reached inside the car, and put his shirt back on despite the heat, embarrassed. She entered the store, he never saw her again.

Three bottles of water later and the Jeep was swallowing the road again. Pidge had settled his goal at the base of a mountain edging an archaeological site. It didn’t look far on the map, but hell, Keith wondered if he’d ever see the end of it.

Two more hours passed. Spent between relentlessly hitting the radio to try to get a sound out of it, to humming tunes to himself instead, to speeding up and down just for the hell of it. Keith was bored out of his mind.

And when Keith is bored, he thinks. A hand on the steering wheel, the other surfing on the wind, the boy drifted away in his thoughts.

Shiro. Where are you, seriously? It’s been a year. I’m alone, and I’m tired. And I’m working on this thing. Oh, you wouldn’t like it, per say, but I think it’s interesting enough to deem it worthy of the time. And there’s this woman, girl, alien… I don’t know.

She’s hiding stuff from me. People want me dead, Shiro. Okay, maybe not dead, but if I continue, surely they will. I won’t get hurt, don’t worry for me. But yeah. Things might not turn out great all the time.

The wind brushed a lock of hair out of his eyes, and back in. Keith blinked.

I hope no one will get hurt, though. I don’t care for a broken leg or a missing finger, if needed, but… I can’t… I can’t be you, you know. I can’t protect the others. I work alone, but I’ve met some people and, I don’t know. I hope I won’t see them again, because that would be a pain in the ass, but also… There’s this thing, I mean… Nevermind.

I miss you. I miss… your dad talks, and your gross food, and your ideas. I feel lost, like that one time
we went in the rivers without compass, remember? I mean, no, because I’m talking to myself, so of course you won’t remember! Fuck off, Shiro. You’re never there when I need you to be. Fuck.

Hair poked at his eyes. That’s surely why Keith was crying, heavy tears running down to his chin. Stupid hair.

The sun, just like the green, progressively got eaten by grey and dust. The surroundings of the road were getting dryer by the second. A growl elevated into the air, from the ground, from the sky.

Storm approaching.

A blink of an eye. It’s clouds of dust behind and clouds of storm ahead.

The desert stretched from as far as view could reach. Nothing else to see beyond dust, rocks and cacti. Dry land everywhere, scorched earth, dust. Dust, dust dust. It was getting in the cracks of the seats, settling on the dashboard, on his hair. It made the air tangible like snowflakes of heat and sand.

Keith scoffed, throat just as dry as the desert.

Keith gripped the wheel a little tighter as the road fell apart under the tires of the Jeep a little more. It was more of a bumpy path and less of an actual road now, and it was getting worse by every mile. The Jeep kept going, though.

He knew he should release the pedals, but he didn't and the car kept rolling full speed across the land. The thunder of the storm coming echoed through the Jeep, making the metal shiver and dissolve in the roam of the engine.

The dust flickered on the windshield and the first splashes dropped.

Keith inhaled, and spluttered. The clammy air stuck his bangs together. Heat and sweat finished to glue them to his forehead, a dark mass above his eyes mimicking the one outside.

The storm was coming to him and he kept speeding up.
The Jeep did not follow through. He’d been pushing the engines for far too long now, and as the white clouds gathered ahead, a dark one elevated from the back of the car. The Jeep scoffed, growling at the rough treatment and menacing to get revenge earlier than anticipated. Keith slammed the brakes.

“Fuck this!”

His palms hit the wheel, hard. The heat, the constant rumble of the world, the dust in his eyes, the driving, the loneliness, the hunger. Everything mixed up in his body like a malicious ghost haunting his trail up North.

At least there was no tinted windows to follow him.

His forehead rested on top of the wheel too, between leathered knuckles. His shoulders hunched too high. He was exhausted, sleep resembling a blurry memory now, and so was the freshness of the lake. Keith wanted fresh water rolling down his back, not sticky sweat.

“Fuck this.” He whispered to himself.

The Jeep answered with another hiccup and a smoky cloud. Keith stepped out, black leather against black asphalt.

“This can’t be much more different than a bike, can it?” Keith muttered as he popped the hood open, expecting something. He found disappointed. The Jeep’s insides were nothing alike anything he had ever come across. And he was not a bad mechanic per say, but when you don’t know, you don’t touch.

He tried to mess once with Pidge’s wiring and got an… Unforgettable reminder Not To Touch her stuff, both because he got shocked up to 100 volts, and because she was mad for over a week.

Speaking about Pidge…

Little genius could give him a hand right now, and a good one.
Keith climbed back into the Jeep as another drop of rain crashed on his neck. The phone waited on the dashboard. Keith’s hand loomed over it.

He unlocked the device and bit his lip.

No signal here.

The bright icon telling him to handle himself alone shined on top of the screen.

The door was still open. The air was dense and heavy to breath in. Didn’t stop a boy from filling his lungs with that, and so much anger he’d have choked on it. Keith screamed the loudest ‘Fuck’ of his entire life. The desert didn’t even answer back.

When his throat got sore, he just slumped on the backseat and closed his eyes a second. This time, sleep didn’t sneak up on him.

“You know what !?” He was yelling at the void, but it made him feel better. “Fuck this !” Jumping out of the backseat, Keith strolled all around the Jeep. After a staring contest he lost to the complex twirls and mess of wires resting in their nest, he shut the hood down. He stomped to the back of the car, ready to try his luck in the trunk.

Instead of luck, he found a black briefcase.

“What the…”

Black leather, greasy and moist. Keith tried to part it open. Failed. The thing was kept close by metallic clasps, and despite his efforts, they remained closed.

Ah.

A padlock.

Keith smirked.

He had just found the use of the other key.
Keith tossed the briefcase away and scrambled for the keyring. Kneeling on the road, knees in the dirt and elbows on the edge of the trunk, he could feel the adrenaline running again. Discovering something, anything, had always done that to him.

Learning about the depth of the oceans had sent his mind spinning. Passing 80mph on his bike had pumped endorphines into his blood like nothing else. Spending hours searching for new treasures with his brother…

Keith scoffed, grounding himself back into the present.

The unnamed black key, unsurprisingly, fitted perfectly into the lock. It clicked when Keith turned the key in it. In slow motion, a drop of water from the sky crashed on his hair, and another. The briefcase opened.

Keith felt his heart sink.

A single ray of light outlined the black Desert Eagle 5.0 and the silencer sleeping like a wild animal in its dark coffin. Keith stared at the metallic omen of death for a moment before daring to touch it. Even the storm silenced herself.

Keith had rarely ever touched guns. Only training ones, and occasionally Shiro would let him handle the weapons, unloaded and security up. He’d never thought the day where training would find its use would come. He smoothed his fingers down the grip, the feeling reminiscent of his own leather gloves. His nails reached under the magazine and pulled up.

Already loaded.

Keith gripped the Desert, his breath itching in his chest. It’s been a long time no shots had been fired. And as he usually was not the one firing…

Bringing both hands to the gun, raising them to shoulder height, Keith breathed in; he clicked the trigger guard down. The sound resonated through the air like a promise. Like a prediction. A warning.

Careful.

He turned on his heels to face the desert. His back pressed on the body of the jeep, his fingers against the too cold metal. The trigger was so well oiled he didn’t even realised he had pulled it.
Life commanding death to work its ways.

The bullet didn’t make a sound through the silencer, only exploding a rock a dozen of meters away from the car with a whistling of the air. Fireworks of stones elevated into the air for a frozen second before crashing back down. Far away in the storm, thunder rolled, filling in for the lack of noise like an odd joke.

Keith stared at the pebbles rolling in the dirt. The precision was weird. Not something he was used to. The simple thought of having a handgun preference at his age made his smile bitterly.

He went back into position, Shiro’s voice echoing into his head. He had nearly punched himself with the recoil and bit his lips for that kind of amateur mistake his mentor would not have let him live with.

*Check the mag. Grip with both hands. Press your thumbs. Take your stance, take it easy. It’s going to be fine, you just have to focus.*

Keith glared in the distance.

*Breath in. Prepare for the recoil.*

Lightning and wind brushed the land.

*Line up your sight.*

Thunder.

*And now shoot.*

The metal clicked as Keith locked back the security. He had no bullets to waste.
He stuffed the Desert and the ammo in the backpack, verifying twice the locket. The gun bumped the fabric of the bag, in the odd way weapon had to change the form of things.

Keith locked back the briefcase. Allura had prepared herself, but she’d forgotten to pass him the note. He wasn’t sure of whether or not he liked it.

Whatever. Keith was ready, geared, and now, *armed*. His Jeep was still fucked, though.

He slumped back into said car. He was losing time. The trunk had given nothing, the car was still jammed up and the storm was growling closer and closer. He was tempted to say things couldn’t be worse, but he knew destiny had a bunch of ideas in stock to make him regret those words.

He looked into the rear-view mirror to catch nothing but dust again. This thing was going to be the death of him. It had infiltrated his bones, hid itself between the skin and the leather of his gloves. It was irritating, in both senses of the term.

Keith smacked the back of his head on the headrest. Only one option left, then…

Wait.

Keith stared at the dust clouds. This was not the kind of rolling dirt he was used to see by now.

*Shit. This is a car coming.*

No time to hide the Jeep. Keith hovered his hand over the backpack, the thoughts of using his brand new Desert crossing his mind. He violently pushed them back, flexing his ankles instead.

If he was to run and hijack a car in the nearest future, better be prepared.

The dust cloud was getting closer, trapping him between the road and the storm.

Keith couldn’t distinguish anything but the edges of a large moving vehicle. Great.

Could as well be locals, going back home. He could pull a ‘lost gap year student’ card and ask for a ride.
But what if it’s not locals. What if they came to end you.

He glared again at the mirror. Nothing impressive, watching from here. Just a good old fashioned van, rusty on the sides, scratched on the angles. The thing had seen adventures… And Keith had seen the thing already.

“Oh, fuck no .”

He jumped out of his seat, slumping his backpack over his shoulder and pulling his thumb out for the driver to see. The van stopped at his height, crissing over the asphalt, the momentum pushing the metal on the shock absorbers. The window rolled down as Keith lowered his arm.

Hunk passed his head out in the square, a big grin plastered across his face.

“A problem here, cowboy ?” His voice rained like sunshine on Keith. Hunk raised his shoulder. “Need a ride or something ?”

Keith tried hard not to scream. “Maybe. My Jeep is dead and I really don’t have that kind of time.” He’d opted for a simple, evasive answer.

The wind was blowing little sand tornados at Keith’s feet. From the passenger seat, all Hunk must see was a disheveled, edgy guy wearing a mean look. Keith ripped himself a smile. He had no idea what was going on in Hunk’s head, but under his eyes scrutinizing him from head to toes, and back to head, he felt much smaller.

“Hop in, Lance will make room for you. Wanna throw something in the back or… ?” Hunk nodded at the back of the car.

Keith shook his head and his backpack. “No need. I travel light.”

Hunk raised an eyebrow. “Indeed.”
The storms howled, a titanesque reminder that the clock was ticking. Another reminder sprouted from the inside of the van, a blunt voice Keith shivered upon hearing once again, thing he thought… impossible.

“Hey, guys? Are we gonna stay here all day?”

Lance.

Just like an unavoidable must-see of the trip, the guy was here again.

*Stop fixating over him Keith! You’ve seen him like, what? Once?*

Hunk retreated his head into the van, and Keith bypassed the vehicle to climb inside on the other side. The cabin was a three seat comfortably washed out one, decolored fabric and stickers assorted to the bobble head hawaiian figurine glued to the top of the radio. The ceiling was stained and the overall thing smelled like vanilla and coffee.

Nothing, literally *nothing*, could ever top that moment, in Keith’s eyes. But he wasn’t sure why.

“Everyone aboard the Hunkymobile!” Lance cheered as Keith slammed the door shut.

“I’m in.”

“And, for her?” Hunk pointed at the Jeep.

Keith pressed the lock button. The lights beamed twice.

“It’s closed and empty. I think she’ll be fine.” Keith explained.

“Very well then. Gentlemen, here we go!”
Keith pushed his backpack at his feet, leaning on the window. Hunk wasn’t flooring it at all, and the
land passed by at an appreciative speed. The total three of them held their mouth closed for around
thirty seconds before the cabin exploded in questions.

“How are you there?”

“Why are you there?”

“What happened to your car?”

Keith stared in disbelief at the two other. Lance snickered and Hunk shook his head.

“Okay, guests first. Keith, what was your question?” Lance elbowed Keith in the ribs lightly.

Keith scraped his throat, glancing at him furtively. Being in two almost-strangers’ car was not an
habit at all, even more when they happened to be the same strangers that haunted his dreams just the
night before.

“I hum… Why… How are you two guys here? I thought you were headed to Puerto Vallarta.”

Lance clapped his hands.

“OH! I’m glad you asked, Keith. It’s Keith right? I mean, I know it’s Keith, but just to be sure.
Anyways, Keith.” Lance rolled on his tongue. Keith bowed upon hearing it so many times at once.
“Wanna see what we got at Puerto Vallarta?”

“Uh… Yeah?”

“Gr-EAT! Remember, we’re investigating for our channel of mysteries and stuff. Anyways… this
time, I think I found my way in for a secret ancient temple or something!” Lance pulled out a
smartphone. “Here. It’s not online already but, almost. If we found anything remotely interesting
tomorrow, this one will make a BANG!”
Keith waited for Lance to hand him the little screen. He pressed play, and a smaller, flatter Lance started to talk.

Keith watched him explain calendars and Aztec rituals at the camera before pointing at an artifact in a glassed box.

“*But this, guys, this! It’s nothing we’ve ever came across. No signs of anything remotely similar, no matching periods, no patterns of painting known as of today. This thing is a big fat shiny mystery.*”

The camera zoomed on the object. A golden disk, probably an astrolabe. Keith had never seen any with those signs, though. What he knew about, however, was the incrusted stone all around, blue triangles with thousands of reflections of all colors.

Opals.

He paused the video.

“Lance… How did you know this… *thing* was gonna be there?”

Hunk snorted. Lance waved his fingers in a ‘shush’ motion at him, leaning toward Keith.

“I *felt* it. Hunk believes I’m just a lucky bastard but you know where I stand.”

“You stumbled in the first and only museum we passed by and concluded this thing was pretty enough to be shown on screen, that’s what happened.” Hunk rectified, shooting a wink at Keith, who felt like the air was suddenly very much more heavy on his shoulders, thanks a lot.

Lance waved a finger.

“Yeah, it was my instinct kicking in! It eventually appeared that what I referred as pretty was not only that, but mysterious too.”

“Soooo your type.” Hunk snickered behind Lance.
“What ? I like mysterious pretty things, who doesn’t ?!”

“Yeah, sure.” Hunk dragged out the syllabes.

Keith stared at them, uncertain of the behavior to adopt. Should he laugh too, taking part in this, or should he wait for them to burst their private joke bubble ?

Lance nudged a fist into Hunk’s shoulder, making the van slightly shudder on the road.

“Anyways. As I was saying, we found this weird, whatever it is thing. And look !” Lance shook a keychain right in front of Keith’s nose. The astrolabe, or at least its plastical, tinier version, hung by the metallic chain.

“Cool.” Keith had a thousand of others words burning his tongue, but he’d dried out.

Lance noticed nothing of his embarrassment. “I know ! Anyways, the thing is, Puerto Vallarta was a real dick to us and we found nothing but this. But ! We crossed paths with this dude, I don’t know… He didn’t want to be on camera but he was like… I mean…”

“Hella buff, super swag.” Hunk completed.

“Thanks Hunk. And he was very interested by our researches. And he gave us a hand.”

Hunk snorted.

“Quite literally. Anyways, the guy gave us a little boost ; apparently, he used to be part of the excavation team, and was there when they got this stuff out !”

Keith stared at Lance.

“And ?”
“Well. We’re headed there now.”

Keith screwed his eyes shut, feeling a migraine. “Wait, you just followed this stranger’s advice, like that ?”

“Yeah ? That’s basically the only way you have to find cool stuff, most of the time. Locals and stuff.” Lance explained.

“Yeah, well, he wasn’t a local per say. But archeologists work just as fine.”

“Mh-hm.” Lance nodded in approval.

Well, either Lance was a fucking lucky guy, either Keith was destined to have him hanging around forever.

But that was the least of his concerns. If Keith was right and someone was working ways to prevent him from going further, who knows what would happen to two random college boys ? He had to find a way to ditch them before they reached the mountain.

Alas, it seemed like Hunk and Lance had a better idea of where to go than him, so it excluded the possibility of leaving them behind.

Fuck.

“Hey, Keith ?”

Said Keith jumped on his seat.

“Yeah ? What ?”

“You didn’t tell us what you were doing here. I mean, it’s pretty and all, but that’s not the most terrific corner of Mexico to hang around…” Hunk ended evasively, eyes glued on the road.
Keith weighted both of his options; either he lied, and would keep lying for a good moment, because it seemed like the three of them were headed in the same highway of fate. Either…

*Screw it.*

“I’m looking for archeological remains of an ancient forgotten civilization.” Keith blurted out.

A silence welcomed his sentence. Hunk pouted. “Dude, that’s not cool.”

“Yeah stop fucking with us!” Lance added. He shot a look at Keith, visibly disappointed.

“I’m not…” Keith blushed at the formulation. “I’m not fucking with you…”

“Yeah, sure, and I’m the queen of England. Last time we met you said it was stupid, why would you suddenly chan-” Lance shut up when a notebook got shoved to his face, startling him and nearly smashing his nose. “HEY! This face is insured for a thousand dollars!”

“Yeah? Well it won’t be anymore if you two keep going.” Keith groaned. “I’m serious. We’re looking for the same thing.”

Lance was not listening, diving into the notes of Keith and the newspaper articles. Highly confidential, Allura, highly confidential. If this didn’t end on the net, Keith would count it as victory. Hunk gripped the wheel tighter, though. Someone in the van had gotten the hint.

“What do you mean?”

“You two… And me, for that matter… We’re not alone on this.” Keith said, trying his best to keep his calm. It was too late to turn back now, as a chain of peaks started to pierce the grey clouds in the long distance.

“This is incredible…” Lance muttered, not listening for an ounce.
“And. Let’s just admit… We would meet the other ones looking for whatever…” Hunk asked.

“I’m not sure I could cover all of us, to be honest. But… I mean, you’re still going, are you? There’s still a way to turn back…” Keith knew full well this was far too late to turn back. He hoped they’d prefer to stop anyways. Hunk felt his anxiety approve.

Lance cut short the other two’s hope.

“This is fantastic. Hunk, this could be our best hit. We need to find something, anything, absolutely.”

His eyes sparkled. Keith bit his lip.

Well, that was one Desert Eagle and one knife for three now.

“Oh my god…” Hunk breathed out. “You’re telling me we’re still going even though there might be a possibility someone doesn’t want us to?”

“Yeah, definitely. Also, Keith, you might have the cutest-worst spanish I’ve ever seen. All of your verbs are in infinitive mode.”

“Ah…”

The van ragged, sparing Keith the need to find an answer to being called, somehow, cute. He’d broken ribs of guys three times his size, fired a gun and stole ancient artifacts for illegal money, but yeah, sure. Cute.

“I think I need to lay down for a sec'. Who’s with me?” Hunk loosened his grip on the wheel and the van started to slow down.

Lance launched his fist in the air. “ME! Nap queen on the way!”

Hunk, already opening the door, glanced at Keith. The guy shook his head.
“Okay then. If you wanna keep moving, which is progressively just moving us closer to an unknown dangerousness I can’t wait to be over with, then I won’t charge you, but keep an eye on this big girl, ‘kay?” Hunk ended his sentence with a pat on the vehicle.

Keith hummed. “Fine with me.”

The backdoors of the van slammed behind the two boys. A muffled chatter pierced through the metal separating the cabin from the back.

Keith took his place behind the wheel. The leather of his gloves raspy against it, he pressed the accelerator.

The road was just a line. He kept the wheel still and glanced at the front seat next to him. The black duffel bag that kept him company filled the void, looming under the heavy atmosphere, another dark mass around. The black, shiny grip of the freshly found pistol poked here.

A black dot in his field of vision. A dark reminder of the task he was on for.

No matter the cheerful yells of Lance, and the resigned smiles of Hunk as they went on the same path.

Keith was alone.

He turned on the windscreen wipers. Drops crashed, thunder rolled, fast as the van crossing the land at maximum speed.

*Sorry, Hunk.*

His hand left the wheel to grip the gear stick. Maybe he was a little too rough and was pushing it too hard, maybe he was just stressed.
The voices had quieted behind. Keith was alone again on the road, in the desert, in the world. His mind kept at bay all hope of finding Shiro. This was not the time, nor the good thing to do.

_Stay focused._

And the thunder kept drumming above and the engine kept howling.

The dust kept floating.


Rain - or - Toxic waters from unholy skies

Chapter Summary

"We're finally in! This is the part it gets interesting, folks!" "Lance, be quiet!" "Or what, they'll shoot me?" "Yeah they kinda will."

Chapter Notes

Whoohooo! Here we gooo, i've already written down everything up to the last chapter so from now on ? A bumpy ride of various adventures! Will they make it out in one piece, eh, who knows, but i hope you'll appreciate the trip!

The mountain was closer than ever, cutting out on the sky like the teeth of a mouth wide open, ready to eat them alive. The desert had turned into a bumpy field of accidented rocks and scrawny bushes. Keith repressed a yawn. His shoulders were tensed up over the wheel. His fingers kept tapping over the plastic, the only exterior sign of the boiling tension menacing to explode in his brain.

Impatience was gaining on him, followed closely by curiosity. This couldn't be good, as Keith had the bad habit of not thinking twice about what bothered him. The gloomy horizon, slashing contrast against the dull grey sky, promised more secrets than answers.

Keith exhaled.

He rolled the window down. Rain scattered inside the cabin, drops rolling down his forearms like kids on a slide. At least it gave an impression of refreshing him. The bobbing head of the doll kept bobbing. The rosary kept balancing on its chain. The radio was off.

Somehow, the silence was relaxing. Keith took his time to inspect the insides of the van, eyes lazily trailing away from the road from time to time. Added to the dangling pearls and cross attached to the rearview mirror, the boys had managed to glue plastic figures of ghosts and soldiers on top of it.

A typical scented pine tree hung in front of the ventilation system. A post it note with a skull informed Keith, to his disarray, that it was in fact dead. ‘No fresh air for you today, dude, XOXO’.

XOXO?
The dashboard was covered in stains and traces of shoes, mostly on the passenger’s side. A broken thermometer was glued next to the window. One of the outside rearview mirrors was very clearly duck-taped back on the car.

*God, this thing is a mess.*

The motor was still rolling, though. Keith understood why Hunk was so attached to the car. Having something yours, knowing every inch of it, by heart… This was a nice feeling. Thinking of it, he had something similar, back in London.

The speedometer needle was oscillating over 130 km per hour. The other, for oil level, was broken anyways. Keith repressed a commentary.

Old discarded cans of coke rested between the seats. He noticed a couple of CDs sitting in the glove box, perpetually open. A polaroid of Hunk, baby, was pinned to the inside of the sun visor. Another, way blurrier, was supposedly taken at the beach, and Keith doubted the chubby baby eating sand could be anyone but Lance.

Keith discreetly peered at the glove box again, looking for cigarettes. Alone in a wretched van on a mexican desert road. Perfect time for a last one.

Good. Apparently, none of them smoked.

Well, theoretically, Keith didn’t either.

As if Keith’s little tour of their intimacy was over, one of the boys woke up and knocked on the metal separating them from the cabin. The message was quite clear. Keith slowed down the van to the point it stopped, and jumped out of it to land in front of Hunk.

“Hey.”

Rain was already soaking his shirt, the yellow darkening to orange before his very eyes.

“Hey bud’. Thanks for the head start.” A hand as large as the world landed Keith’s shoulder. Hunk
striked a look at the back of the vehicle. “Go rest a little.”

“Thanks.” Keith would have liked to pretend he wasn’t exhausted, but since he couldn’t think of anything clever, he decided that a nap couldn’t hurt.

He strolled under the rain to reach the back of the car, arms folded over his chest. The door was still open. He slammed it behind him and got swarmed over by a lukewarm obscurity. The back window had been covered by fabric, and journal paper had been painted and glued to the sides of the van, thus keeping the insides of the vehicle out of reach from outside.

Keith’s view outlined a few piles and boxes, and he dodged most of them. A groan, and he choose to wiggle his way in. Safer. He crashed on the floor as the van started, rolling softly under his feet. As opposed to the cabin, where the sound was muffled, the body of the van very much conveyed the noise of the motor.

Keith felt like he could bet on Hunk driving much more carefully than he did. His hand touched the fabric of a mattress. As soon as his head hit anything remotely soft, he passed out.

Lights out.

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Keith woke up with the delicate snoring of a thunderstorm right next to his ear and the vivid sensation of having been toasted alive. His right arm was missing and his entire leg was crushed by a dead weight.

Furthermore, added to the pleasant sensation of his tongue having turned into cardboard, his eyes could only grasp a flash of his surroundings with alternative strikes of bright light that gently burned everything in his retina.

From 1 to ten, this lovely awakening was a solid -6.

A bony elbow smashed his ribs and finished to wake him up. Keith grunted, the memory of his fistfight days ago still printed in large blue marks on his torso.
With his operational hand, Keith began to move the mass crushing him. He stared at the black void around him. And the void stared back. And then it spoke.

“Mh… Keith ?”

It was like being flushed down back to reality. The storm roared all around the van, and lightning illuminated for a split second Lance’s sleepy face under Keith’s nose.

The road bumped and Keith, like a cat facing a cucumber, jumped to the ceiling. His dead hand hung at his side. He had probably slept on it.

“Lance ? What are you doing here ?!” Keith hissed.

The van shook under the thunder. The light printed on Keith’s retina showed him piles of books mixed with blankets and equipments of various use. He spotted a rope and climbing sticks, and a pair of boots.

Lance ran a hand through his hair and slumped back on the mattress of fortune in the middle of the van’s floor. Keith stared at him. Well, at the last emplacement of Lance he knew, as the cabin was dark again after the lighting.

“Well, correct me if I’m wrong but we’re still in my van, Keith…” Lance’s croaky voice sprung closer than Keith had anticipated.

“Well, yes, yes, I know. I was just… I was surprised, that’s all.” His own voice rang higher than he wished for it to do.

He heard the ruffle of fabric. Either Lance was undressing, and Keith preferred not to think about it. Either he was getting dressed, thus meaning he wasn’t previously. Let’s just not think about it either.

Quick. Thing of something to say. Anything...

Keith opened his mouth to ask Lance about the time, but got cut off by a cannonball hitting his head at supersonic speed.
“Fuck! What’s… Are you throwing stuff at- stop! Stop that!” Keith’s hand had finally recovered and he launched back the ball, which really was just compressed fabric.

As soon as the deaf “thump!” of the thing resonated in the van, a shriek elevated.


“Don’t throw your dirty laundry at my face like that!” Keith protested.

“It’s not… Oh my god, it’s for you! Get dressed, Mullet, you stink!” Lance sighed, his voice pitching up and down like he was on a rollercoaster.

In his hand, the bullet spalled and Keith palpéd the edges of a tee-shirt. He raised his head back, searching in the darkness for Lance.

“And what? I’m supposed to undress now? You want me to put it… on?” Keith stuttered.

“Duh, yeah, not eat it. Is there a problem or…?” Lance’s voice came from the opposite of the van.

Keith picked at his own shirt, discreetly raising his arm to sniff an armpit. Mhh… Okay. Admittedly, he stinkéd, but to his defence, he had spent the day in the desert. Most people would stink after that.

“Don’t try, Mullet, it’s an infection.” Lance snickered, as if he knew very well what Keith was doing.

“Wha- No, it isn’t!” The boy slammed his arm back to his side, his head hitting up. If blushing was fluorescent, he would be a red flashlight by now.

“It is, though.” Lance draged the words, and Keith sensed his voice moving around the van. That guy either had superpowers or night vision, Keith couldn’t decide. Either way, he was still an ass. “I could smell you from Patagonia.”
“You’re lying.” Keith frowned. He was getting too caught up in this.

“Am not.”

A hand slapped the metal separating the cabin from them, startling Keith.

“Hey, guys, you’re awake!” Hunk erupted from the other side. His voice was barely covering the sound of the rain on the metal. “I think you’d like to check this out!”

The vehicle slowly stopped, and Keith could feel the rumble diminish. The van swayed on his wheels and suddenly, light flooded the back. Keith’s face got washed by a wave of heavy, warm rain hitting him full force.

Hunk grabbed his arm and propelled him to the front of the car, decided to spend the least time possible exposed to the weather. As Keith hopped in, he heard the tapping of Lance behind him.

The doors slammed shut, muffling the sound of the rain in an instant. Keith poked at his hair, already dripping wet. He felt a sudden rush of heat by his side as Lance seated comfortably. The boy let out a smiling sigh, his fingers passed by the ajar window, nails barely scraping the sky and the pouring waters.

Hunk tapped the dashboard to get their attention.

“So, it’s currently 19:05, and all passengers are expected to listen to the pilot.”

“Hunk, come on! I’m the pilot, everyone knows this!” Lance yelled, a pinch of indignation mixed up to the joke of his voice.

“Yeah, but you were sleeping, so I’m the pilot know, as much as I hate it. I’m an engineer, a brain, I wasn’t made to hold the wheel!” Hunk blurted out. He turned to the road and calmed down. “Anyways, these big hands have driven you to the right destination!”

“There’s only one road…” Keith pointed out.
Hunk hummed in denial.

“Actually, for those of you who were sleeping, I might need to say we crossed a road and another car!”

Keith felt his jaw ready to crush his own teeth. “What… What kind?” He feared the answer just as much as he wanted it.

“Of car?” Hunk completed. He shrugged, eyebrows raising up. “Oh, something like a 4x4 crossover, I believe. Anyways.” He poked his chin out at the horizon, closer than when Keith had left it, a lot, lot closer. “Look. These are our mountains, guys.”

Lance leaned over the dashboard, his chest nearly crushing on it. “Fancy! When do you think we’ll reach the one?”

“I’d say in an hour, maybe less, maybe more. Depends on the rain. Shall I?” Hunk hovered his hand over the dashcam. Lance rolled up a thumb.

Keith bit his lip.

The van grumbled, squeaked, and started to roll again.

“How long since… The car…” Keith started. Sat between a driving Hunk, focused on the road, and a busy Lance, one hand up in the rain and the other tapping on a phone, the boy had nothing but his shirt to worry, torturing the fabric between his hands.

The thought of another car headed their way made him scrunch up his nose. This could just be anyone, but could as well be someone.

Hunk picked up on his concerns and shoved a shoulder up Keith’s side.

“A while. Don’t worry about your Jeep, it’s gonna be there when we get back.”
Keith held up all negative remarks and nodded. The Jeep -Allura’s Jeep !- really was the least of his concerns, by now. A pearl of rain, or maybe cold, cold sweat, rolled down his back. He shivered.

A hand patted his other shoulder. Lance, a grin plastered across the face, was pointing at the shirt.

“So… Are you gonna put this on, or should I force you into it ?”

“Why do you care so much about me changing myself ?!” Keith talked back. He gripped on the fabric, a dark blue, rough material. The contact was nice between his fingers.

Lance shrugged and crossed his arms behind his head, propping his legs up on the dashboard. He closed his eyes as he spoke, naturally chilling in his van. Keith had never seen someone so relax in front of danger, and for a bit, he envied the guy.

*Maybe he’s also just a big fool and doesn’t see what’s coming !*

“Mh, I don’t. ‘t’was just in case.” Lance still opened an eye to shoot a glance at Keith. “Dry your hair, though. You don’t wanna catch a cold during the cabañuelas.”

Keith glared at the shirt.

*Very well then.*

He reached for his collar and tugged down his own cloth, promptly threading his head through Lance’s. Tighter than his own, somehow, it fitted like a longer glove on a larger hand. Not very well, but it would do.

Keith turned to Lance.

“Happy now ?”

The other opened a lazy eye.
“Mh ? Oh. Hadn’t seen you changing. Well, yeah, blue looks good on you.” Winking his eye, Lance went back to his half nap.

Keith scoffed. Red rose to his cheek.

His cunning remark got struck in his throat. The slight shine of a metallic object had caught his eye under the lighting. The rain was pouring heavier than ever, raging its tears over the road, washing the land in a mist.

Still, Keith was certain of himself.

A car. Parked there, alone.

Or at least, Keith wished it was alone.

“Hunk ! Stop there.” His tone was pressing enough for Hunk to slow down, but not enough for the van to stop moving entirely. A tire whistled.

“What ? But we’re not-”

“Pull over, NOW ! ” Without more questions, Keith grabbed the gear shift and stopped the van. This time, all the tire screamed, and the slippery road threatened to send them swaying.

“Keith, are you-”

“No !” Keith had little time to discuss, alas, he was stuck between an anxious driver and a surprised napper. His mind was already gearing full speed.

If there was anyone willing to stop by, under this weather, they sure as hell weren’t tourists. And they hadn’t seen any signs of cities or villages anywhere in the past hours. The zone was empty as one can be.
And yet.

Parked car.

“Keith, mind to tell us what the heck is going on ?” Lance started.

“We’re not alone here, okay ?! And I don’t have the slightest idea of who’s car is this. Now, either you wanna find out and come with me, immediately, either you don’t and then move, and fast !”

Lance’s eyes opened all wide, his feet leaving the dashboard slowly. He raised his hands.

“Dude, I think you’re going a little-”

“Huh… Guys ?” Hunk muttered.

“Looney-toney, if you know what I mea-”

“Guys ! Shush ! There’s someone coming !” Hunk hissed over their bantering.

Lance shrugged and smiled, palms open.

“Yeah, whatever. He’s probably lost and came to ask for help. No biggy, I’m going to see what he wants.” He locked his eyes with Keith’s and stared all the while actionning the door’s handle.

“Lance, no-”

Too late. The guy had already left the car. Keith glared at the empty seat next to him, the rain already soaking it. Pulling his knife out of his boot, he started crawling out of the car. A large hand pulled over his ankle.

“Hunk, what are you-” Keith hissed.
“Hey. Be careful. I don’t trust this guy either. He’s weird.” Hunk whispered to him. His hand covered half of his face, and that, added to the rain, nearly faded his words enough for Keith to miss them.

He moved out of Hunk’s grip and took feet on the road.

“I’m going there, don’t worry.”

Keith placed an index over his mouth.

*Quiet.*

His boots stuck to the ground. He walked as silently as possible, flushed against the metal of the van. His head got instantly wet, and hair began to glue to his neck. The beam of a flashlight shined ahead. Keith poked his head out.

Lance was cornered between a dude in a dark coat and the back of the van. His face was bittersweetly crunched in a half-smile that said enough for Keith to get the whole idea.

This dude was *not* lost, his car was *not* broken, and Keith was *not* going to let him speak a second more. He lowered swiftly the pommel of the knife over the nape of the man, knocking him out instantly.

Lance recoiled.

Like a ragdoll, the man slumped down in a mute noise. His face hit the ground hard. Keith grimaced at the sound. Gross.

“Shit, man!” Lance sounded astonished.

“Yeah, I know.” Keith muttered. He relieved the guy of his coat and his glasses. Searching deeper, Keith found a lighter and a walkie-talkie. He removed the shoes and threw them in the land, as far as
he could.

Speed of the habit.

Lance was standing there, mildly horrified, mildly impressed.

Keith looked at him through half lidded eyes, trying his best to see between the drops. “Do you guys have rope? I don’t want him to wake up and run to his little friends.”

Lance pouted. “Well, you could have thought of that before throwing away his shoes, shoelace included, genius.”

Keith slapped his thigh.

Fuck.

“But do you have anything?”

Lance unlocked the van and disappear for what seemed like an eternity to Keith. The rain poured on his neck, on his chest, and his knees were already soaked to the bones of mud and lukewarm water. He turned to the mountains.

Thunder drummed above his head. The sound refracted itself in the desert, echoing in the void.

Lance finally showed up with a red thread.

“My best yarn. Use it wisely, Jason Bourne.”

Keith firmly knotted ankles and wrists of the man together. Even if this guy was going to go back eventually, this would buy them some time.
“Okay. Now, go tell Hunk that it’s not a game anymore. If you want to continue, meet me there in a minute, if not, I give you back your shirt and you two go, are we clear?” Keith’s voice felt raspy in his throat.

Deep down, he wished these two normal college guys would answer the call of adventure. Being alone against the universe was a feeling he had endured for so long. Shiro had altered the monotony of it, but when he disappeared, Keith had instantly fallen back into that melancholia of struggling with no one else but himself.

But above the longing feeling, reason won and he hoped they would give up. Worse than being alone was being alone, again.

Lance shot him a glare. He probably wasn’t envisaging half of the situation they had gotten into. Keith insisted, pointing his chin at the van. Frowning, Lance paced away to the driver’s window.

Keith waited for him to be absorbed away to remove the shirt covering the holster of the guy.

Mercenaries.

The dog tag only indicated a number. Keith ripped it away.

Whoever was after the same statuette as him had prepared a whole pack of wolves to back him up. Keith was alone, and at best, he would go with two sheep.

Not the best of plans.

He dived into the van to grab his backpack. How did he even forgot it there in the first place?!

For fuck’s sake, what if the first meeting had been less of a luck and more of a fight?

The walkie spluttered on his belt, cutting short on the alternate realities.

“Hey. Yo, you here, man? What was that? If there’s pretty chicks in there, you better share!” An unknown voice called, the accents unfamiliar to Keith’s ears.
His nails dug in the leather of his palms.

*Fuck.*

Either he answered, and someone would notice the change in tone of voice; either he didn’t, and someone would come.

*Between Charybdis and Scylla…*

He pressed the emitter button.

“Yeah, no. It’s just a bunch of dudes in a van. I’ll be here in a minute.”

A hot second passed. Keith saw a good chunk of his life pass by his eyes.

“‘Kay. Over.”

“Over.”

His thighs gave up under his knees. *Fuck. Fuck.*

*This was so close. And it was only the very beginning.*

He wasn’t even *in* the mountains, how was he gonna survive alone in this? Shiro would have invented a fabulous plan in less than a second, but besides exploding things there to run the other way, Keith had no field experience.

“Hey, Keith… Is everything okay?”
Keith’s heart jumped in his chest. He maintained a poker face though, and turned to Hunk and Lance, standing in the rain. Only the faint shine of the headlights outlined them. Keith thought they looked like a cartoon duo, one so huge and the other so scrawny.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“So, uh…”

The rain washed the sounds over, muting their conversation. Keith estimated at about a couple of minutes their limit, before someone would come and check. They had to do it fast, and-

“We’re in. Whatever’s going on in there, it’s the scoop of our lives. Plus, I don’t think I would love the idea of leaving you here and never know what happened to you. I couldn’t sleep on that, dude.”

Hunk finished his sentenced with a serious nod. Keith stared at him in incredulous disbelief. Lance backed his friend up.

“Yeah, this is gonna be the adventure of our lives! We’re a team now!” He yelled. “Let’s go!”

Keith blinked. Time was ticking in his head.

“Wait, wait…Take the strict minimal needed. Only, and I said only, the very least needed. Do you have talkies?”

Hunk was already rummaging through the masses of cameras and books stored in the van. Lance pointed at the bag hanging over his friend’s head. Keith detached the thing and found a mess of flashlights, goPro cameras and walkie-talkies, along with various items he didn’t bother to identify.

He shoved the talkies into Lance’s hands.

“Their frequency is 93.5, don’t talk on it, don’t use more that necessary.” He glued the device to his ear, turning the buttons to find a free frequency. The familiar white noise flooded his ears. “We’ll take the 106.5. If you hear anything weird on it, leave it, okay?”
Lance nodded, eyes wide. “This is so much bigger than breaking into abandoned houses…”

“You did that? No, whatever. Tell Hunk to park the van in the bushes, and meet me here in five, okay? Be quick, be silent, and if needed, just run.”

Don’t wait for me.

Keith stepped away from the van. A hand pressed his arm, stopping him blank. Lance’s eyes travelled up and down his face, and Keith felt the rain evaporate as soon as it hit his skin, so warm now. Good thing the night was crawling on them.

Lance pointed his chin at Keith. “Where are you…?”

“There’s a car ahead. I’m going to check it. If I’m not back here in five, just go, okay?”

Lance let go off his arms and his lips plastered in a single line. Keith was pretty sure he was about to say something. Rain dripped over his forehead and coated his eyelashes.

“Alone?”

Keith breathed in. “Yeah.”

Time’s up.

His boot left the van. He covered himself with the mercenary’s coat and started walking toward the other car. The sunglasses were too big for his head, but defined the edges of the world in a whole new manner. Now that he was at human’s eye level, the vehicle was slightly more impressive than the glimpse he caught in the van.

Like a sleeping animal, it waited on the other side of the road, rain hammering it relentlessly. A whole vehicle, created for the wild, huge wheels, dark green paint, reinforced bumpers.
Tinted windows.

Oh.

Keith peered at the glass. He could discern a head for sure, maybe two. Nothing more. The nearest environment was empty too. No guards.

No one called for him at all. He marched by the car, passing on the other side. If he had to run, he’d rather do it away from Lance and Hunk. The last thing he wanted to do was to drag them in.

Keith kept walking, boots now flooded. The tar was sticky from the mud, and every step made a disgusting sound. He gritted his teeth.

Now that the car was barely three meters away, he could count two heads for sure. If he knocked one out and went fast enough for the other, no one would ever know he was there…

Thunder teared apart the cryings of the sky. Keith surged forward and grabbed a handle, pulling it with the force of despair. It stayed stuck and clicked.

Shit. Locked from inside.

Here goes nothing, then.

He poked at the glass. The car unlocked.

Either these guys were really, really cheap; either, and that was the worst case, they’ve grown tired from being here for a long time.

The front seat dude started to talk as Keith opened the door.

“Hey, so how were th-”

Keith smashed his knee on the driver’s head. A crimson stain bloomed on his jean, immediately dyed by the rain.
“HEY ! WHAT THE FU-”

Yanking the backdoor of the crossover, Keith slammed the flat of his hand over the neck of the second guy. His head rolled back and hit the headrest flat.

The fight had lasted maximum eight seconds.

Keith passed a finger under the guy’s nose. Breathing. Hardly, but breathing. Following Lance’s idea, he tied them up with their shoelaces and removed their coat, as well as their talkies. Frisking people was an habit now.

The worst part was to move them out of the car. As fit as he was, lifting a human adult out of a seat was something no one could do without swearing it out a lot. And sweating a lot, too. Keith propped them on the side of the road after a painful minute.

Making sure they had the minimum necessary to survive and that nothing would blow their cover up, Keith sat in the crossover and locked behind him. As soon as he turned the key, the vehicle purred. Much more silent than the Jeep, even more so than the van.

Not perfect, but it would do. He went a dozen of meters ahead and spotted a duo of brown tufts.

So they’re really tagging along.

Keith was impressed. He didn’t know if it was by their courage or their total disregard of safety rules, but impressed.

He crossed the road and kicked the passenger’s door open. On the other side, running through the curtains of rain, Hunk and Lance. They crashed in the crossover and slammed their doors. Hunk huffed over his hands. Lance shoved his between his hands, desperate to warm them up.

Keith pulled at the rearview mirror, exposing the situation.
“Best case scenario, we have all day before they tour their teams. We get inside, find what we need and head out. We blend in and stay low, no one notices us, we go back to the van and leave.”

A silence floated in the crossover. Hunk finally dared to ask what burnt on their tongues.

“And… Worst case scenario ?”

“They tour the teams in ten minutes, find out we’re here, search for us, and find us.”

“And…?”

Keith started the car. That would answer.

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The rain was so dense now that the front lights passed only through the first meter. Lightning barely lighted the area from time to time.

Keith braked the engines and rolled for half a mile before metal glinted back to him, inches away from the nose of the vehicle.

“Is that another car or… ?”

Lance leaned on the dashboard, removing the sunglasses. Keith hit the direction wheel.

“I… Don’t know.”

“Looks more like a barriere. Why would they put up a barrier at this place ?” Lance pointed out. He sounded genuinely confused. Keith shared the feel.

“Huh, to keep us away from things they don’t want us to see ?” Hunk snapped at the back of the car. His camera hung from his hand, the black box glinting in the faint lights of the dashboard.
“Are you going to keep this up… I mean, is it recording or… ?” Keith pointed at the camera.

“This ? Of course. I gotta feed the minds of our followers, dude.”

“Your… Followers ?”

“We host one of the best mysteries hunting programs on youtube, available in spanish, english and samoan !” Lance retorted, grinning from one ear to the other. “We’re trying to find a french translator but it’s harder than it looks.”

Keith assented with a nod.

He glanced at him. The back coat, black sunglasses look was a good thing on him. Keith would die before admitting it, though. Rain still dripped from his hair, tracing wet lines on his tan skin. If Keith didn’t know any better, he could as well take him for a rockstar back from an open-air show.

In unison, the talkies spluttered faintly. Something was moving on the other side of the barrier. Keith got dragged out of his observation abruptly, the blunt reminder of their hazardous situation washing him cold. He spotted the rays of flashlights wandering in the mist elevating from the road.

It felt like the landscape was evaporating under the rain.

“Someone’s coming, everyone out !”

They exited the car and ran to the side of the road. The flashlights lit what was their seats a couple of seconds ago. Close, too close.

I need to be more careful. Stay focused, Keith !

“I count two of them-”
“No, three!” Lance extended his arm toward the road, far behind. “I saw another one.”

The talkie crackled.

“Hey, unit 67? Unit 54 here, we’re on our way. Send your positions.”

Keith glared at the device. He tried his luck once, why not twice.

“Unit 67 here. We got closer to the barrier. We can hang on, if you want.”

The voice in the walky paused, confused. “What? No you’re supposed to stay put in frontline.”

“The rain was flooding the road, we had to retrieve.”

The three silhouettes cut out in the rain like ghosts coming back to haunt what was once their mansion. The first guy opened the door of the crossover. Keith bit his lip. Their luck was out now. At best, they had a minute before all the mercenaries get the memo.

At worst…

“Unit 67, this is unit 54. Where are you?”

“Keith, what are you waiting for?” Lance hissed. “Do something!”

Keith watched the guy turn around, sweeping the surroundings with the lights. He bit his lip to refrain from lashing out at Lance.

Yeah, thanks! But what, genius!

“Unit 67, do you copy?”
The guy passed by them, and passed again.

“That’s it, there’s nothing here…” Hunk muttered.

Too bad.

“Hey !”

Boots started to clap toward them. The rain glittered like diamonds falling from the skies in the beam of the flashlight.

Shit !

“The reflection ! Remove your glasses !” Keith scrambled for his sunglasses, catching the light in the darkest of times. Hunk swayed his own.

“Lance ! What are you…!”

“I know !” Lance’s finger tangled up in his hair. The bows were stuck, hair caught inside. “Ah, shit !” He pulled on the thing ; too hard. The sunglasses flew over and on the asphalt, right at the mercenary’s feet.

“Hem, guys, I think you should come and check this out !” He dropped to the ground, and flicked at the crashed sunglasses. Too bad for him, he was so focused on the broken plastic that he didn’t notice Keith crashing his fist on his temple.

He slumped down, knocked out in one hit.

“One less, two left.” Hunk muttered.

Lance nudged his elbow into his friend's side. “Hunk, tell me you got this.”
Keith crushed the walkie under his feet. He didn’t bother tying the guy up. They had no time anyways.

The three of them reached the protection of the car. They could watch the other two coming up in their direction from the rays passing through the rain. And they straight up pointed in at them.

“And now?”

Keith glared at Lance and Hunk. As much as he could trust Hunk to slap a man hard enough to stun him, he wasn’t so sure about Lance.

“You two take down the right one, I’ll go for the left.”

“How do you want us to do this?” Lance whispered.

“Find a way. Just hit him as hard as you can.”

Keith was already moving, sweat mixing up with rain on his forehead. This mission was literally the worst thing he’s ever had to do. Nothing could go worse, and that time, he meant it!

He had no idea of where to go, was stuck with two civilians who couldn’t take a man down without help, and risked the life of at least the three of them in the meantime. The rain was soaking his brain down and melted his vision in a blurry haze.

In clear, everything was shit.

The flashlight was getting closer. Now or never.

Keith jumped out of the shelter of the car and slammed the pommel of his knife against a mercenary’s jaw for the second time today. Clear impact, cracking sounds. The man lost his balance. Keith followed him in his fall, hitting the macadam hard. His vision blacked out for a second while his breath caught up in his lungs, blown away by the sudden collapse of his chest on the road. His hands opened. Metal clanked, furthering away.
A hand gripped his hair and slammed his face down. Keith tasted blood before feeling it, hot on his chin. The guy had just busted his lip open. Eyes wide open, spitting and coughing, Keith tried to breath through.

The other refused him the time to do so and went for another hit. Keith tried to grip the arm of his opponent, but he only batted air before reaching the waxed feeling of the raincoat. His nails slipped on it. A hand pressed his chest. He pushed with sheer force, ejecting the weight away.

The guy gargled. Keith shifted on his arms, crawling out on all four. His hands automatically scraped the ground seeking the familiar cold of his knife.

There. His fingertips met something, cold and smooth. Not a knife, but good enough. Keith heard the tapping of boots closing the distance between them. He jolted back and, gripping it with both hands, swung the flashlight up like a baseball bat.

Shiro and him used to swing a couple of balls, before. Even if Keith never bothered to learn more than ‘home run’ as baseball idiom, he got quite the hand of it, and they’d spent a few afternoons looking for the balls more than throwing them. Seems like the training had left a trace in Keith’s muscle memory.

After the familiar swinging, the flashlight met a hard solid. A skull, definitely a skull.

Keith heard the groan and the ruffle of hair. A knee slammed his leg down. He pressed the button.

Light flooded the night, blindingly white.

Someone yelled.

Keith’s heel dashed up, met an ankle. He did it again, higher. The guy rolled down. Keith straddled him and swayed his fists around. One, two, three. Again. When his knuckles felt warmer than lava, and the chest between his legs stopped wiggling, he dropped it.
Rain washed his body, unforgiving. The flashlight blinked twice before giving up too. Keith threw his head back, face turned to the heavens. Adrenaline was pumping through his veins like a demential drug, setting his nerves on fire.

Thunder drummed, a god-like equivalent of the cannons blaring the end of a battle.

He mechanically passed a hand over his lips. It would smear and bruise, but it would be alright. A hand tapped his shoulder. Keith rolled on his knees, ready to fight again.

“Hey, it’s okay, it’s me, Lancey Lance !” Hands raised up, Lance nodded at Keith. He looked fine. Alright.

Keith sighed in relief.

“We got our guy down. He didn’t even got the time to move, we got him like yah ! Ah!” His hand sliced through the air vainly.

Keith wiped his mouth. “Sure.”

“Man, you should have seen Hunk !” Lance continued, “Amazing, he was like, whoah, yihah !”

“Yeah, that was… Frightening.” Hunk joined in.

Keith peered at them. No bruises, no blood. Good. He ran a thumb across his own knuckles, already pulsing red. He was the only one getting paid here, after all.

“Did you found a flashlight or something ? I dropped my knife.”

“Yes, we did ! We took a few liberties, hehe !” Lance lighted the area, switching on and off with every word. For a guy that just had his first fistfight -if we could call it that-, he looked radiant.
The edge of the blade shined in the corner of Keith’s eyes. He deemed the moment good enough for switching equipments. Slipping the knife back into his boots, he reached for his backpack. Most of it was useless now. He stored the notebook safely inside the black coat, along with the Desert and his phone. Who knows when would signal get back on.

He would love to have a little discussion with his employer.

He pushed everything left in the remaining free pockets of his jean and stood back up on his feet. If Lance and Hunk stared at his face, probably coated in red around the lips, none of them said anything.

“This is your last chance to give up and get back home safely. After these barriers, I can’t guarantee your safety anymore.” Keith sounded serious. Too serious for them to not recoil a little.

“Ooh, Hunk ! Keith is worried about us !” Lance cooed. Fake it ‘til you make it. “Don’t worry, Samurai, we can take care of our own !”

Lance’s bravado fell flat, but Keith got the idea.

“Well, then, here we go.”
Nytroglycerin - or - Better not take a sip of that one.

Chapter Summary

Lance is going on a mission, and Keith and Hunk have heartfelt conversations! All the while the bad guys are coming for them!!! Ohohh!!

Chapter Notes

We're at the miiiiddle of iiiiiiiit!!! i hope you're as exited as me because the best part is ahead,imo!!! There's gonna be a lot of action from now on, we're entering the Big Boom zones and i cant help but be sooo happy!!! i hope you'll stay tuned since ive written everything, so i should publish chapters relatively often!! Have a nice read!!

Also if y'all wanna share theories and stuff hehehe im all for it its super cool always!!!

Keith licked his lips. He’d been slammed against a few things in his life, but that was the first time he’d hit the road. His balance was shivering sometimes, and he silently prayed for his open lip to be the only collateral damage.

On the other hand, he was okay with that. He’d handled things like a stinky badger: badly. Terribly. At least one of them looked happy of the evolution of things.

“Let’s do this.” Lance pushed the metallic barrier, jumping in front place. His skippy pace and wide smile betrayed his amusement.

A total psycho or a major dumbass, can’t decide.

Either way, his behavior exasperated Keith. His fingers reached for the barrier, not nearly as cold as he thought it would be. He had only a vague idea of where the mercenaries came from, and started climbing in the direction.

The hill was undulating under his feet. Hunk lighted up the way, while holding the camera, Lance excitedly commenting everything, walking by his side.
“We’re now entering the domain of the mystery. What hides behind these mountains, and who’s willing to do everything to reach it? Will we make it out alive or does this adventure signs the end of them all? I guess you’ll have to stay with me to find out!”

Keith licked his lips. Copper stained his tongue. “Stay behind, you two.”

Lance shot him a glare. “This is our guide, by the way. You may have caught his pretty face already: it’s easy to spot: stupid hair, grumpy mouth, mean eyes. He’s just got it bad because we’re looking for the same thing.” Lance turned away from the lense. “But don’t worry Keith! We’re only here for the adventure and knowledge!” He shouted, hands cupping his mouth.

Keith slammed his hands over Lance’s, crushing the sound in his throat. Shush!

“Are you crazy? What if they heard us?!?”

Lance wiggled away from Keith’s hands.

“Ah, lose it, though guy! There’s no headlights lit up here, and no one called us on the radio to explain how screwed we were. This is fine! They’ll never know we’re here.”

As if fate just wanted to prove him wrong, the walkie talkie he just waved in his hand started to mutter, white noise equally audible with a deep voice:

“Attention, all uniksh. Intruders…ve been shrkshpotted inside the delimited area. Stay alert and signal any odd sight to the main chtkarters.”

If eyes could shoot tiny knives, Lance would look like a porcupine right now. His own face wasn’t any better, his mouth open wide and eyebrows reaching for the sky. He blinked at the talkie, incredulous.

“Seriously?”

“Well, now that we’re assured that’s they’re definately after us, can we get a move on? I’d rather not die in this weather.” Hunk pressed. His fingers gripped the edge of the camera.
Keith shook his hand and started to jog on the path up. This was most definitely a path, as the footprints and rarefied vegetation indicated.

“If we get up there and manage to find a map of the... We need to get a plan of the area. They’re probably searching the zone for the treasure, they should have excavating plans.”

Hunk pushed a branch out of his way, jogging right behind Keith. “How do you know they’re looking for the same thing as we do?”

“Well, if they’re not, this would be one hell of a coincidence, don’t you think?” Lance darted.

“I just know they’re here for the same thing as you, and me.” Keith replied. He wasn’t in the mood for tea and chit-chat. The night was progressively shinier. They approached the camp, for sure.

Dots of lights sparkled into the rain, scattered across the land. Keith counted three main groups, two further than the other, higher up on the hill. Could be the main camp, but could just as well be a higher excavating site.

He really had no idea, and missed Pidge’s magic a little.

The rain was nothing like London’s. Thunder echoed inside the mountains.

“That’s funny. There’s the sound, but not the light.” Noted Hunk. “Usually it’s the contrary.”

Keith distinctly heard the gears click in place in his brain.

*How did I miss that?!*

“That’s because it’s not thunder!” Keith pointed out in the distance. “It’s explosions. They’re blowing up the mountains.”
A large cloud elevated from the furthest campsite. At least Keith could cross this one out as the main base.

What did worried him a lot more was the fact that whoever wanted to reach the statuette was going there with enough TNT to blast up a whole city. If they got stuck in there and blocked by the explosions…

He turned back to Lance, watching intensely over the place, and Hunk, recording vehemently all the scene while the other whispered furiously on his side.

“Okay, Mission Blue Waters, part four ; The camps. We’ve reached the main site and if you thought we lied about the dangerousness of this, well you can pinch your left hand because you’re not dreaming at all !” Lance grinned at the camera and waved his hand over the land. “This whole thing is an excavating camp, but not the friendly one. Hunk and I are going to investigate and.”


“Yeah. What, you’re not looking for the secret of the Blue Waters ?” Lance asked, sounding off.

“No ? I was here to search for an ancient statuette, something left behind by a 40 000 years old civilisation.” Keith thought it was obvious. What else could be out there anyways !

“Hum, what the heck is going right now ? Do you think these guys are looking for something else too or… ?” Hunk dwelled.

The three of them exchanged looks.

“Okay. I’m not a fan of the idea, but I think we should share everything about this ‘mission’, right now.” Keith blurted out. “I’ll start. Allura asked me to follow the last traces of her father and find an ancient statuette, probably made of opal, hidden somewhere in Mexico. I’m looking for nothing more but this statuette. You ?”

Keith let air flood his lungs again. He’d emptied his bag all at once, and it felt good. Lighter.
“Well… We’re searching for what could be left of a 40 000 years old city, here in Mexico, because we got an old bracelet with jewels and a guy told us we would find something around here.” Lance explained, his eyes jumping from the camera to Keith.

“So why the blue waters ?”

“The stone, on the bracelet. It’s blue and transparent. *Bam*, blue waters’ secret. Plus, it’s very appealing.” Hunk completed.

Keith slowly nodded. From the start, they looked for the same place, but not the same object. Another explosion lit up the sky.

“And them. What do you think they’re looking for ?”

“Everything.”

Keith clenched his fists.

“Better move on before they blow up all of it. I’ll take the upper camp, you two go down and go check the-”

“Nope. No no no, nope. We stay together.” Lance cut him off. “Wanna go up ? Fine, but don’t think for a second you’re leaving us alone.”

“We’re too visible if we’re three.” Keith argued.

“Yep, but if anything happens, I think you’ll prefer having a Hunk nearby !”

Keith shook his head. “Whatever. Just… Follow me okay ? And be quiet. This one counts especially for you, Lance !”

The boy shrugged, his eyes glinting in the dark. “Sure.”
Keith stepped up. If they crossed by the land, they would be seen for sure. They needed to get around by the bushes. The rain was too heavy to distinguish any path there, but going freely in the dark wasn’t the best of ideas either.

“Oi, Keith !”

Lance was already a couple of meters higher, crouched down. Keith jogged to him, bent in half to avoid being spotted.

“What are you doing ?! I said stay behind !”

“Yes, but you weren’t moving, so… Anyways, I think we can get to the camp by here.” Lance pointed at the mountain ahead. The vegetation was denser than around. “There’s a lot of bushes here. Since we’re taking the lower side, we’ll be able to hide and stuff. We could reach it without anyone noticing.”

Keith ran a hand through his hair. Lance raised an eyebrow.

This was madness. But it wasn’t impossible. And, to be fair, Keith really had no better plan. His forte had never been quiet sneak-ins. He was already thinking of a way to blow up the whole thing anyways…

“So ? What do you say ?” Lance repeated.

“I say let’s go.” Keith engaged himself on the hill. “And, Lance ?”

“Mh-hm ?”

“That’s…” Good job. “Don’t grow bold.”

“Yeah you’re welcome too, asshat.”
Keith internally slapped himself.

The journey took longer than he expected, rain slowing down their feets and slipping the mud under their shoes. Hunk nearly tripped over a hidden branch and Keith ripped his coat on a bush.

They crawled out of the path after several more bruises and the remembered loss of Lance’s earring. Keith stared at the tents.

Grey and green tarpaulins tended over metallic skeletons, oil barrels and steel boxes large enough for the three of them to fit inside. Everything glistened in the dark under the white light of neons buzzing faintly.

It smelled industrial and cold. It smelled dead.

“We need to find the biggest tent. They must have a map in there.” Keith was already scooting out of the mud. Lance yanked him back by his coat.

“Wait. These guys surely have settled a mess for the mercenaries. This would be the main tent. We need to find the most covered up.”

“How’s that ?”

“Bee-caause, if you’re a mercenary getting paid to blow up mountains, you don’t care if some wind brushes your ankles. However, if you’re an archaeologist searching for extra old stuff, I think you’d like your stuff to be safely stored.”

Keith eyed the camp.

“Fair enough. Which one, then ?”

Lance pulled on his sleeve.

“This one.”
Of course, the most heavily guarded, well protected tent had to be in the center of the camp. Keith wrinkled his nose. No way they would get in like that. Luck had been on their side for too long, he didn’t trust anything anymore to work as smoothly.

By smoothly, he meant backbreaking.

“We’re going to need a distraction.”

“You know, this reminds me of this scene in the Lion King, when Simba and his friend arrive back at the rock.” Hunk noted, eyes wide open as if he was passing through an epiphany.

“What, you want me to dress into a drag and do the hula?” Lance quoted.

Keith glared at them.

*What the heck.*

“Guys, I’m serious. We’re going to need all these guards to get away from the tent, let’s say… At least three minutes. To be safe.”

“How would you do this?” Hunk asked.

Keith’s eyes swept the surroundings. If the camp was alerted of their presence, most of the mercenaries had to be tensed like violin strings. A single spark would set fire to the powder…

“I think I have an idea.”

As if the mountain had heard, lighting struck through the sky, illuminating for a mere second the whole zone in a silver flash.

Echoes of thunder and explosions roared in the air, deafening. Lightning and TNT.

Keith mentally visualized the mountains.
“This kind of explosives can’t be stored next to the using zone, that would be too dangerous. They have to keep them safe, and dry, somewhere else. We need to find that place. It will surely be less guarded.” Keith explained.

Lance’s eyes sparkled, a dangerous grin settling on his face. “And once we get there, BOOM. The whole guard will rush there instead !” He turned to Hunk, who slapped his fist on his open palm.

“And we’ll stole the map !”

“Easy, peasy !” Lance made a thing with his fingers, shooting the air.

Keith calmed the over enthusiastic apprentices pyromaniacs down.

“Guys, guys. The whole place is soaked wet, so this is gonna take some time before we move on. And if we make this thing explode, we’ll need to be far, far away from it.”

“What do you suggest ?” Hunk frowned.

“We split.” Keith dropped.

“What ?!”

“No ! Absolutely not !”

Keith raised his hands. “Stop ! I don’t like it either, but there’s no other way. I don’t have any retardant or timer at all, this is-”

“Bullshit.” Lance stopped him. “Hunk could build an helicopter with a screwdriver and a paperclip. We’ll make our timer. And we said no splitting the team .”

Keith stared at him. We’re a team now ?
“I don’t know about the paperclip. But if I get my hand on a wire and a little bit of metal…” Hunk muttered. “Or just a good old alarm clock. I could buy us an hour.”

Keith stared at him too. “Where the hell do you think I could find a clock?”

“I could just make a spark with two cables, but they would need to be powered. They have those in cars, and I could use the battery for electricity!” Hunk countered.

“Now you want to find a car?” Keith was distraught. “Hunk, every single one of these mercenary here has for order to catch you on sight, maybe even to kill you?! How do you think we’ll get a car?!”

Lance lightly tapped his shoulder, intimating him to slow down a little with a nod. After all, they had to stay quiet.

“Maybe we won’t need a car.” He lifted his chin up, pointing at something over in the camp. “They have kilometers of rope to hold the tents. We cut enough for us to make it one big fuse, throw it in the hangar of TNT or whatever, run back here and wait. How’s that for a plan?”

Keith and Hunk both turned to Lance. His face showed no signs of his usual humor, tensed mouth, lips sealed and eyebrows furrowed over his eyes. He was serious.

Keith weighted their options. Without surprise, Lance’s plan was both the easiest and safest.

“Okay. We’re doing this. I’ll go in and cut enough rope for us to hold a month. Lance, with me, you’ll back me up. Hunk, stay here, your camera has a better vision than any of us. Record, watch for the big picture. If anything looks odd, throw a rock nearby, count to three. If we haven’t reacted, throw another.”

Both of the boys nodded.

Keith felt like his heart was about to leave his chest. Same thing for his stomach, but it wanted to go the other way, compressing his insides in a turmoil of fear and apprehension.
He was one hundred percent scared. They had no visibility, nor any single idea of the shifts frequency. This was single handedly the worst thing he could wish for. At least rain would mutter their progression and blur their silhouette.

Keith checked one last time for his equipment. Knife, check. Gun, check. That was it. He had left Hunk with everything else.

_In case something happens._

Lance eyeballed the gun.

“You’re not… Actually gonna use this, are you?” His voice lingered on the words, hesitant to ask what really bothered him about the idea of a loaded gun.

Keith blinked. “Me? I’d rather not.”

Lance gulped. Keith figured that must be one of the first times Lance realized what was really going on.

“Okay, ready? Hunk, remember, don’t panic. We’re going to be fine.” Keith assured. _I mean, I hope so._

“Yeah dude, I’m gonna be awesome. Catch my best profile.” Lance hushed. His voice croaked.

Hunk didn’t even answer. He raised a thumb and crouched lower in the bushes.

Keith crawled up, all senses on alert. A single crack, a single voice, and his legs would teleport him back to the shadows. Lance’s breath was hot on his neck, the other glued to his feet. The first tent was merely ten meters away.

It took five minutes to reach it.
Keith was ready to flee at any seconds, and when the first guards passed, it took him all of his strength not to jump away. He wanted to puke.

“Dude. We need to move.”

Lance nearly only mouthed the words, but it felt like he was screaming.

They finally reached the first tent. The tarpaulin was tensed around metallic shafts. Keith waited for a hot minute, ears wide open, to check if the tent was really as empty as it looked. Then, and then only, he started to cut.

The rope was large and solid. It took Keith solid minute to slice the first end, and another to detach it from the frame.

He handed Lance the first fragment.

They moved onto the next tent at an even slower pace, back exposed to the wild and the dark. Keith went faster this time, unballasting another half-meter of the tarpaulin of its tension. The oiled fabric flapped in the night, free from its restraints.

Lance gripped Keith’s back suddenly, and his nails pierced through Keith’s skin when his other hand slammed on his mouth. Tears welled up in his eyes, Lance’s hand pressed right on the cut of his lip. That was the least of their problems.

A meter away.

Boots.

The dark leather glowed sinisterly, crushing earth under its dead weight. A flashlight swept over the bushes behind them, looking for a presence that wasn’t there. Keith’s stomach dropped to his heels.

The familiar buzz of the walkie talkie resonated like thunder above them. “Nothing here, over.”

If not for Lance’s hand on his mouth, Keith would have sighed of relief. Thus revealing their
position. Thanks, Lance.

They stayed still, like marble statues in a poisoned garden. Keith felt rain form pearls on his neck, drip on his hair and roll down his spine. He shivered. Lance’s nails left his skin, not his hand.

Keith burned under his coat. None of it was water resistant, and it weighted on his shoulders like a burden more than anything. Lance’s hand tightened the whole thing, compressing his chest even more.

If he hadn’t already, Keith would sure catch a cold tonight.

Lance finally relaxed his hand when he deemed their silence long enough. He pulled lightly on Keith’s coat. Let’s go.

Keith approved.

They fled the camp faster than they entered, caution trespassing as soon at the mission was complete. They crawled back to Hunk and flopped together at his knees, exhausted both emotionally and physically.

A large hand brushed Keith’s hair away from his eyes, softly.

“I thought my heart was going to stop, back there. I…” Lance murmured at his side.

“It’s okay. I mean, I thought I was gonna die, but everything’s alright now.” Hunk gently grabbed the rope from Lance’s hand and started to peel it to its core, before tying it back again in a long thread. Once the whole thing was done, Keith reached for the lighter he picked on the mercenary, back at the van.

God, it felt like days ago.

He lit the end on fire and watched the flame run along the rope.

“It went over ten centimeters in four seconds. How long for the whole thing?”
Hunk measured the whole length using his hands and divided it by four, before frowning at Keith.

“Around two minutes. A little more, but I wouldn’t bet on it.”

“That’s short. We’ll need to be fast.”

Keith closed his eyes. Rain pooled on his eyelids, curling on his lashes in cold dew. If it hadn’t been for discretion, he would have gone naked under the rain, instead of freezing in a roll of wet clothes.

Two minutes was far too little time. They would never run from the explosion quick enough.

*How do I tell them that.*

Lance chuckled next to him.

“Fast? Dude, I don’t know for you, but running from down there to up here seems quite impossible in under two minutes.”

*Well, there it is.*

Keith searched for the edges of Lance’s face in the dark. He wore a serious look, just like Hunk. They both started to come to their senses about what they’d gotten into. A pretty crappy mess.

“Guess we’ll make the impossible possible, then.” Rango Returns MUSIC

They collectively shivered. Hunk started the camera.

“What if we wait for tomorrow morning? The tent might as well be full of people sleeping, right now!”
“The rain shushes our noise, and we’re less visible in the dark. Under the sun, I give us maximum ten minutes.” Keith exposed. “It’s now or never.”

Lance stood up. Keith felt the wind and the rain take his place next to him, filling the empty space.

“Okay then. Let’s go.”

“Where do you think you’re going, exactly?” Keith muttered.

Lance was already jogging out, bent over his legs. Keith jumped, merely catching up.

“In case you missed it, we need to be fast. I’m going to lit up those mothercrackers.” Lance replied. Hunk joined them, camera in hand and precious rope in the other. As a good commentator, Lance smiled at the camera. “Hi everyone ! Ready to see me blast things up a bit ?”

“Seriously ?”

“People love puns, Keith. Anyways ! We’re headed towards the stocks of TNT secretly stashed in the big ass tent you see down here.” Lance pointed far below them. Keith peered at the second camp.

Lance was right. Exactly as Keith had described it to him earlier, Lance had spotted a huge tent, well covered to keep the explosive dry in case of rain, just like now. Stored in border of the rest, to prevent incidents.

They strolled higher up on the hill. From there, they had a wonderful view on the landscape, troubled only by the resonating explosions and the petroleum lamps. Sightseeing would wait. Hunk walked behind Lance, camera panning in and out.

“Just you wait, TNT, the bombs are on their way. Running on wet socks, sure, but still. Coming to blow you up !” Lance confided at the camera. “We’re the bomb.” He added as if anyone had missed the joke.

Keith kept an eye on the shifts. Guards were still patrolling the main camp. Every lit area was populated. Luckily for them, rain refrained any adventure calls, and mercenaries stayed inside the
safe heaven of the tents.

This cost him an ankle. As his eyes wandered over the land, his mind forgot to pay attention to his tracks. A root collided abruptly with his foot, and he landed on the side. Bushes grazed his cheek while mud covered his knees to his toes. His boots twisted violently, refusing to settle to the ground.

Keith pinpointed the very moment his muscle refused to follow the traction.

Snap.

“Fuck.” Through gritted teeth, Keith muttered curses after curses.

He poked at his ankle and tears pearled at his eyes. His toes still curled into the boot, though. Sprained, but he would live through it; he just had to warm the tendon again.

“Agh… Okay. Mh-”

“Hey, Keith? You okay, man?”

Hunk was right behind him. The red dot of the camera prevented Keith from focusing too much on the striking pain that crushed his entire leg when he put his foot back down, leaning his whole weight on it.

A large hand gripped his arm, balancing him.

“Keep… Let’s just- Hm! We don’t have time for this. Let’s go.”

Hunk nodded, too focused to dwell on whether or not Keith should really walk right now. Lance was already waiting for them, hidden behind dense bushes. The tent was right under them.

“The camp isn’t that large, actually. I think we’ll be able to run back there in two minutes.”
Keith crouched next to him, stifling a cry behind a gloved hand plastered on his mouth. His eyes betrayed him, eyes shutting close in a vain attempt to shush the pain with darkness.

Lance picked up on him. “Keith? Is everything okay?”

“It’s… Gonna be fine. I’ll make it.”

Lance pressed his lips in a line, not convinced for a penny. He asked Hunk for the rope anyways, and reached for his lighter.

“Oh. So, I light this on fire, throw it, and then we run? Just to be clear…”

Keith approved with a nod. Hunk sighed.

The dim flame of the lighter nearly died under the heavy rain. Keith cupped his hands above it.

After a few failed attempts, the rope finally caught, the red dot progressing along the rope at mortal speed. Lance moved away from the bushes and glared on all sides of the tent. Shifts were parting, everyone was gathered on the other side. It would last a second. Lance had only one chance.

Lance aimed for the tent in general. After all, this was highly inflammable material, he just needed to-

“Wait, Lance!”

Keith slapped his arm down, pulling him back behind the bush.

Odds had abandoned them again. The guard patrolling was touring the tents. Another showed up, on the other side.

A second ago, the trio was alone, and now Lance had to deal with two mercenaries, added to the quantities of dynamite stocked behind what happened to be merely anything but oiled fabric.
Hunk and Keith exchanged knowing looks, their hands talking more than their mouth. Lance glared at them incredulously. Since when did these two communicate so well?

Keith spoke up, talking to Lance without even looking at him, eyes glued to the mercenary hitting the pavement a few meters away. “Get ready. Once these guys are down, we’ll only have three minutes, top. And that’s a wild guess, so light this shit up as soon as they’re K.O., ok?”

Lance bit his lip. So that’s what they decided. “‘kay.”

Without a second of hesitation, Hunk rushed to the nearest man, clasping a hand on his mouth and slamming his fist on his temple. Quick, precise, efficace. The mercenary slumped in his arms like a rag doll, knocked out.

Keith waited for the other to turn around at the sound to deal him a swing of his fist. The other guy barely inhaled before Keith swung his pommel again. He was getting used to this technique, the guy didn’t stood a chance.

Softened by the rain, the fatigue and the isolation, none of the guards were alert so far. Good, because they wouldn’t be anymore. Lance lit up the rope again, incandescent dot in the ocean of darkness. He emerged of the bushes to toss the braiding under the tarpaulin.

“Now run!”

Keith hobbled back to the trail, quickly joined by Hunk.

Like a ticking bomb behind their back, the tent. Ahead, the map. Lance muttered under his breath.

“Cinquenta...”

Keith limped by Hunk’s side. His ankle was going to be okay, he knew for sure. But the time separating him for a painless walk and… this… was stretching over and over.
Hunk’s arm busied themselves with holding Keith and the camera. The footage was an endless dark pit anyways. He didn’t bother try to frame anything.

The first camp was back into view. Guards as usual. Keith spotted the central command tent. From this point of view, they had a clear outlook of its insides. Lance was right about that too… Maps, radios, and a camp bed, scattered over metallic crates and wooden boxes.

Empty.

Lighting lit up the skies. Keith thanked god human was not naturally looking up, because otherwise, most of the guards wouldn’t have missed the three silhouettes passing by. Keith’s heart was playing the solo drums in his chest.

Keith shushed him. The tent was into view, by any minute the TNT would explode…

Thunder rolled over their head.

“What ?!”

“It failed.”
“What do you mean?” Keith recoiled in the shadows.

On Lance’s cheeks, rain glistened, reflecting the lights of the camp. Distress, and worry. Keith wasn’t really good at reading people, but Lance was an open book.

“I counted. This is weird. It should have blown off by now, and by far!”

Hunk crouched between the two other boys.

“What do you suggest, then?”

Lance’s eyes glinted. Keith could barely guess the edge of his nose, the curve of his lips. Oblivious to the stare, Lance traced something in the mud with his finger. Two square, three triangles, and an arrow. Keith peered at the forms in the dark.

“This is the main camp. We’re here. This -he pointed at the other square- is the TNT storage. I’m going to run back there, lit the explosive, and distract everyone. You two, stay here, wait for everyone to move, and rush to the tent. Grab everything you can and run, okay? The meeting point will be-”

“Wait, wait, wait a minute. You think you’re going back there alone?”

Lance looked back at Keith. Surprise peaked in his voice.

“Well, yeah? It’s not like you can run, and Hunk’s much better at carrying stuff than setting up explosives. And I have a better aim, so… Yup.”

“No.” MUSIC Arsonist Lullaby

Keith point blank refused. Risking their lives, together, okay. He wasn’t sending Lance back there alone.

“Okay, try and stop me then. Hunk, remember that time we rigged the lighter at Ryan’s party and it
kept burning instead of just getting bigger?”

Hunk gulped, caught in an argument he had no envy to join. Rain battered on his shoulders.

“Huh, yeah ?”

“Well, I’ll need you to do the same mistake again.”

Lance flicked the lighter at his friend. Hunk, despite the rain, the mud and the dark, started to tear apart the small object. Keith felt tension pool up between his shoulders.

“What if you can’t run ?”

“I’ll crawl, then. It’s gonna be fine !”

“And if they bring new guards in ? What if it never explodes ? What if-”

“Hey, hey. It's gonna be fine. Okay ?” Lance shot a smile at Keith, grinning as if water wasn’t soaking his eyes and armed people weren’t actively aware of his presence.

Hunk clicked his tongue. “There ! If you pop the sparkling wheel and turn this one, theoretically, the flame should keep burning.” Refraining from demonstrating, Hunk handed Lance the rigged lighter.

Keith glared at the tents. It must have been really late now. Maybe even early in the morning. Soldiers, as armed as they were, started to sleep on their feet. Perfect timing to wake up everyone and surprise them with a little... bonfire.

Lance tied up the laces of his shoes again, securing them one last time.

“Okay, well, no need to retell you what’s the plan, I think you’ll get my signal pretty easily !” He cheered softly.
Neither Hunk nor Keith laughed.

“If anything smells fishy, just… Back up, okay? This isn’t worth the shot.” Keith bit his lip, and winced. It was still freshly cut.

“Sure, this thousands of years old city isn’t worth the risk. Try me. I’ll be careful, don’t worry, Cowboy!”

Keith wrinkled his nose. The surname sounded forced, on that one. Lance winked. Hunk breathed heavily.

Three, two, one. Set and go.

While Lance’s figure was swallowed by the dark of the night, Keith leaned over the camp stretching under the remaining duo. Most of the shifts were randomly assigned, it seemed. Despite the alarm earlier, most, if not all, of the mercenaries were taking things slow.

To be fair, Keith understood them. From the establishment of the camp, he deduced this thing had been up for longer than a month, even two.

He wasn’t so late!

But a month had faded the hunger for blood and gold. Heat and cold, rhythmically stammering the days, had crushed the militaries. Most of them just waited, now. Orders, choppers, anything out of the boring routine of shifts and dinners at the mess.

They probably already had their deal of intruders. Nothing was surprising anymore.

Keith understood. Inaction was by far the worst thing that could happen to anyone.

But today, he thanked the land for being so empty of threats. Taking down a few guards was something, a whole milice was an entirely different thing.

“Keith, we should move. Lance is going to blow stuff down here. If anything, they’ll head up there.
They could see us…”

He didn’t even answer, slowly just walking up the trail. His feet smashed the squares drawn in the mud earlier.

Shit.

He had forgotten to define a meeting point with Lance. He figured they would just run back to their first spot and wait there. Things would unroll from then. If they made it this far…

Caught up in his thoughts, Keith forgot about his actual, physical body, walking the edge.

Fuck it. He tripped again. He was practically sure it was the same root!

“Shit!”

Shit indeed. His yell echoed like thunder over the place. Hunk freezed behind him.

“Hey ? Who’s there ?”

The voices came from the camp. Keith felt his eyes widen as adrenaline flooded his veins. Now was the time to act, and fast.

“I said who’s there ?”

Grabbing Hunk by the wrist, Keith started to run, as silently as possible under heavy rain and in pitch black darkness. His ankle threatened to vanish under his weight.

Lance, if you’d like to speed things up a bit…

In unison, both earth and sky exploded, a thousands of drums battling for noise while light ignited the rain from above, white and blinding. Red and dangerous sparkles erupted from under.
Hunk and Keith stopped right in their tracks. Thunder roared with the explosion, a dark cloud elevating as an intoxicating aftermath above what remained of the second camp.

“Holy shit. He made it.”

The two boys exchanged a look, and as one man, started to roll down the hill. No need to be discreet anymore, the camp was in a rush. From all sides, mercenaries erupted out of tents and hidden spots. Most of the organisation had been thrown out the window, orders screamed at walkie talkies in anarchic panic.

Merely twenty seconds after the blow up, two dozen of men had already ran to the spot of the incident. Few were left back, but distracted by the raging fire propagating down there, none of the bothered insisting at two figures slipping in their back, even more while they wore the same black coat as everyone else.

To enter the den of the beast, wear its fur.

Keith pushed away the plastic sheet protecting the tent like a door.

Inside, orange lighted the place, contrasting with the green and khaki dressing the interior of the shelter. Maps, traced with graphs and circles, scattered all over a table. Keith spotted a picture, framed, by the edge of the desk.

Empty cups, piled up and crushed. Pencils, bitten at the edges. Crumpled papers and teared up pages. Whoever worked here was under so much stress Keith couldn’t help but feel a little bad for them.

However, what caught his eyes mostly was the rainbowish reflections on the paper coming from a couple of stones he knew far too well not to recognize.

“Opal.” Hunk mentioned, as he read in his mind.

“Yup, fire opal, even.” Keith ran a hand across the table and snatched the most scribbled map. Out of spite, he picked a stone too. His eyes roamed across the notes. Nothing he could instinctively link to his own works, but also coded notes, in glyphs he’d never seen before.
For someone so stressed out, working on such an intricate system of coding seemed rather excessive. Unless….

“Keith… I think we’re getting short on time.” Hunk was standing at the frontier between the sanctuary of the tent and the chaos of the outside.

“Just a sec” Keith examined the pages. Decided to decipher what the hell was going on, he glanced at the whole mess. There, this would do.

What seemed like a teared up page covered in graffiti joined the map and the stone inside Keith’s pocket. He strolled to Hunk. “Come on, let’s go.”

Marching fast, heads bowed, eyes low, they crossed the camp back. A crossover passed by them, nearly crushing Keith under its wheels.

It felt like Lance had set fire to an ant’s nest. Everything was buzzing around them, radios, walkies, energies. A tension rose from the soil, nerves burned on the explosion of TNT.

They made it out without so much as a call. Somehow, Keith still felt sick.

Hunk was the first to crash in the reassuring darkness of the bushes. Keith crouched next to him, the effect of adrenaline dissipating in his system, rekindling the memory of his twisted ankle to his legs.

For the most, it had passed. The whole thing was alright, but still… Climbing was out of question, now.

“I can’t believe… This has… Actually worked…” Huffed Hunk. Keith growled his approval.

They sat down for the first time in the night. Keith brushed a distracted hand over the notebook, warm inside his pocket. He rolled the opal between his fingers. He watched the smoke of the fire darken and darken. He wondered where he would be, right now, if Allura hadn’t chose to reveal him the existence of the statuette.

If he’d been just a little sloppier and had been knocked out by her lackey at the bar, he would still be back there, wrapped in the covers of his Londonian bed.
And all hope to find Shiro would be dead.

He ran a hand through his hair. Even the rain seemed to be tired.

“So… Why Lance?” Keith turned to Hunk, laid next to him in the bushes.

Under them, the fire was still expanding, although it was controlled by the mercenaries. Most of the camp was now ready to burst, and tension was palpable. Lance was nowhere to be seen.

On the good side, explosions in the third camp had stopped. Nothing was troubling the night and the rain anymore, excepted for the shouts of the commanders, from time to time. In about an hour, the sun would rise.

The night had passed faster than Keith had anticipated. The walk to the camp had apparently took around an hour, and so did their little touring of the place. This had led to a fatigue well settled in his bones, and an internal clock completely messed up.

After the hot, dry desert, the wet cold of the mountains felt like both a blessing and a curse.

Since they had nothing to do but to wait for things to calm down, and for Lance to make any sign at them, they had decided to hide further up the mountain. Keith was grateful for the break, his ankle slowly getting back in shape.

Even with that, his nails dug in his palms from worry. He had to physically restrain Hunk from running into the camp, at first. They had to wait. Running would just be the death of them. And yet, there was nothing Keith wanted to do more than crash in and shoot around.

Patience. Focus.

He was just living by Shiro’s words, by now. If his mentor had been there, he would be seriously disappointed. He had to keep his cool, somehow. One of them had to.
Keith wanted to do something, anything, but his brain refused to tell him what. The radios and talkies were silent since the explosion, so they had no infos on the situation down there. And since no mercenaries were scouting for them, they had assumed they would not come and look at all.

Something was off about that, something tickled Keith. But he couldn’t pinpoint what exactly. How come those mercenaries were so bad at everything, anyways ? Would the explosion had happened in an archeologists camp, why not, but that kind of panic was weird, for a group of trained soldiers.

Keith needed intel. He’d love to go there and blow stuff but he needed directions as to where should he blow what. And signal was still down. No Pidge’s miracle tonight.

Hunk was toying with his camera. They used to sit in silence for the past twenty minutes, but Keith felt like it was his duty to put Hunk at ease. Well, at least, the better he could.

And naturally, he had drifted to Lance.

*Naturally, huh ?*

“Why Lance ?” Hunk whispered back, returning the question as if it had made no sense.

Keith poked the grass next to his middle finger. “Yeah. Why him, why Mexico ? Why now ? What are you doing here exactly, what are you looking for like that ?” He looked at Hunk, catching his smile before his answer.

“Woah. That’s a lot of questions.” Hunk leaned back. “Lance is… He’s my best friend. We met years ago, and I’m thanking every deity out there for that. He’s brilliant, even if you couldn’t tell at first glance, but… He’s really something else.” Hunk swept the horizon with his eyes, speaking his mind without filter.

“He’s crazy, he’s fun, he’s… He doesn't care, he does what is right. He’s good, he is a good person, you know ? And, he makes people feel at ease too. I love that. Things used to be hard and then, well, they still are, but, Lance is there and I will never thank him enough for that.”

Keith understood. Lance was to Hunk probably what Shiro had been to him. A rock, a new home, this brotherly bond of safety when everything was going mad around.
What was *he* to Shiro, though.

*And to Lance?*

They met, and a day later, they exploded TNT together in the middle of the night. What kind of link is that? They weren’t friends, nor best friends, like Hunk and Lance. But this wasn’t acquaintances status either, because no one would do that for people they just met.

Well.

No one, but Lance.

Keith breathed out. Hunk answered to his questions one by one, never losing the thread of the conversation, as one-sided as it was.

“And, Mexico? We’ve been doing this investigation thing from as long as we’ve been roommates. So yeah, we wanted to see further, bigger. And we tumbled on that bracelet. Well, Lance had it since forever, but we never thought about taking a deeper look.”

Keith nodded. Hunk clicked his nails.

“He’s always had a thing for dangerous missions, and sneaking out. He’s kind of a daredevil, but a nice one if that makes any sense. For me, I’m nosy, that’s what it’s at. Things used to work out pretty good, and we made some crazy discoveries. And… I guess it’s fun? But we never… This is the first time we’re getting that much trouble.”

Hunk poked at Keith’s sides, making him turn around a bit. Keith blinked.

“And then we met you! We’re looking for the same thing here, bud’. I’m glad I’m not alone in this, though. I don’t know how I would have handled that.”

“You probably would not have passed the first barrier.”
Hunk tilted his head.

“Probably. But don’t underestimate us. We’ve done bad things.”

Keith snorted. Hunk clicked his tongue.

Somewhere along the way, it had stopped raining.

Keith felt the tension drop a little, like a wolf shifting prey. He was still afraid, but the night seemed less dark. They still missed a light, though. Lance wasn’t there.

“I don’t like it. It’s been far too long. He should be here by now.” Hunk muttered.

“Yeah.” Keith really hadn’t anything to retort. Lance was showing no signs of life. Keith passed over from canals to canals on the walkie. White noise. “It’s weird.”

“What if the lighter blocked and didn’t caught fire ?”

“Hunk, you saw the explosion. It went fine.”

“What if he got trapped in it ? What if he was injured ? And if he was…”

Keith stared at Hunk, watching his face slowly evolving from worried to absolute terror. He hovered a hand over Hunk’s shoulder.

“Hey. Stop, he’s fine, okay ? We just got to the wrong meet-up point. We should call him.” Keith blurted out.

Keith had turned and turned again the option in his head. He still considered it once again. Same result. It was a bad, bad idea. That’s why Keith knew he had to do it anyways.
Because as bad as it was, it was the only option left.

“If he’s hiding and they hear the walkie, he’s dead. We’re not calling him.” Hunk retorted.

“If he’s lost, and has fallen in a cliff, he’s dead. We’re calling him.”

“What ? No !”

Too late. Keith had already pressed the button, his fingers crooked over the black plastic, rigidified by the cold and the wait.

Whatever happened now happened, but he needed to move. He needed action. His knees hurt from staying crouched, his throat was dry, and his stomach was probably going to reach London if it kept sinking down.

He really wanted to throw up or something.

The radio sputtered. He held his breath.

Someone was already talking.

“...Working for- what’s that ?”

“Nothing, it’s nothing.”

*Lance.*
Gasoline - Something not to drink but to set on fire

Chapter Summary

Keith and Hunk, aka rescue team, go get Lance, meanwhile the entire camp is out after their asses.

Chapter Notes

I'm such a mess, everything is already written yet i keep posting late ??? Ahh sorry ! Anyways, here's the next chapter !

Keith had a few memories he was sure he’d never forget. One of them was the day he discovered what hippos were on national geographic. It was a cold day of november. He’d spent that afternoon rummaging through pages of encyclopedias and wildlife magazines. That day, something awoke in him.

Oh, not the hippos part, although he still cherish to these days those fat guys. No, what Keith discovered was his taste for adventures and discoveries, for the wild world outside, receling mysteries and treasure he couldn’t wait to reveal to the light.

A fire, a flame that had not ceased to light his path, on the good and on the bad days. Shiro had kept the flame alive, he’d even made it shine. And Keith had never let go.

He remembered vividly the day Shiro caught him red-handed and changed his life. His fifteen birthday was engraved in his mind. The day he won his first pay and bought his legal tutor a broom, added a note ‘to replace the one stuck in your ass’, and left.

Yeah, really, Keith had a bunch of memories he’d never forget. And he had just added another to his collection.

Lance’s voice ringing through the night, through a walkie talkie humid and buzzing. The air froze around his chest and Keith almost lost the rest. His ears started buzzing, his heart rising in his chest, menacing to shatter.
“I swear, it’s nothing.”

Lance sounded desperate. Keith was on the verge of vomiting.

“Then I guess you won’t mind me turning this off? Or maybe should I let you get the speaker?” Cold voice, harsh words.

A groan.

“If you won’t talk to me, maybe I could let you give them a message. Just, friendly talk, you know?”

A thud, the echo of flesh against flesh resonating into the night, and a single cry.

And then nothing, the waves sizzling silent.

“Keith…”

I know.

“What are we doing now?”

Keith’s gears were clicking slowly, rusty from the rain. His hands trembled and eventually he let the walkie escape, lost forever in the dark of the night.

I never meant… I didn’t want to… I warned you...

“Lance is…”

Lance is somewhere, and he’s getting hit for my mistakes.
Keith felt his insides revulse. This was a little too much. First, the mercenary down the road, then the explosion, and now Lance being caught by the other camp.

Fuck it.

This was far too much.

Whether he liked it or not, Keith had taken responsibilities, holding himself somehow accountable for the safety of the other two.

His ankle was stiff. If he hadn’t tripped, he would have been the one going back there. He would have been the one getting snatched, and… And…

His stomach said stop, and a sick liquid burned his throat. Keith dropped on all four, spitting on the ground like a wounded animal. Hunk placed a hand between his shoulder blades. The warmth spread over Keith’s scene like a healing spell. He convulsed again before wiping his mouth.

*Spit out the demons and get back on your feet, kid. You got other devils to hunt.*

“I think we should rest a little more.” Hunk whined. “You won’t make it.”

Keith peered at him, the mere orange glow of the camp lights barely even silhouetting his nose. The flames reflected in his dark eyes.

Keith had failed to protect a kid willing to put himself in danger for the sake of his own adventure. Hunk had let his best friend fall into the hands of their opponents, of the enemy. If anyone had to be frothing at the mouth, out for blood on the moonless night, it had to be him.

And yet, he suggested him to rest.

Keith couldn’t do. “No. We’re going to get him.”

“How? You can’t run and I’ve never… I’ve never…”
Keith grabbed Hunk’s hand, his own seemingly so small compared to it.

“Hunk. I’m not letting Lance down. For all we know, he’s just down there, ‘kay? And if they touch a single of his hair, they’ll get hell’s dropping on them, so we’re going to find one of these Jeeps, we’re going to get in it, and we’re going to rescue Lance! Are you with me?”

“That’s your plan? Steal a car, crash in and run away?” Hunk repeated, incredulous.

Keith gazed at the incandescent flickers, fifty meters away.

“Yes.”

Hunk cracked his knuckles.

“Sounds good to me. I just tried these guns earlier, and I feel like they haven’t had their dose yet.” Hunk flexed, bringing out the edges of his muscles in the light. A mountain, sheer strength hidden under layers of gentleness and polite curiosity.

Keith had no idea where did the guy got his surname, but it fit him like a glove.

He dug nails into the leather of his gloves and clicked the security of the Desert. The metal glinted in the red hues of the nights, too happy to serve, a mad dog lashed out on the world, barely contained in Keith’s hands.

The boy recognized the smell of his own violence. It was a smoky scent, full of promises and danger. Ashes drying blood in gasoline black. As much fun has the trip had been, the future of the adventure looked hazardous. Fine. He knew how to roll with the punches.

Primal, animal urge was soaking the two of them.

Keith’s boots stomped flat on the soil. He peeled the dark vest away from his shoulders, refusing to wear the enemy’s flag for a second more. The wet fabric slumped on the ground, and Keith offered his shoulder to the bite of the cold. His breath plummeted in clouds.
Hunk flicked on a red light.

Rec.

“Here goes nothing.”

This was probably the most reckless, stupid thing Keith could have come up with, and a little voice kept muttering it in his head, strangely sounding like Lance’s… It called them, invited them to stay quiet and low, to take it easy.

But Lance wasn’t there and this was very much the problem. No matter how nice Hunk would seem, and how detached would Keith try to appear, this was a personal attack. For the both of them.

Like a dangerous third companion, the Desert smiled in Keith’s hand.

“Are you really going to use this?”

“If I have to.”

Hunk swallowed and said nothing, placing his feet in Keith’s tracks. They walked in silence, each one musing on his own thoughts.

Keith’s mind drifted toward Shiro. Allura had mentioned him being here, but since the beginning, no trace of him had ever caught Keith’s attention.

Twelve months.

As short and as long as that. They should have crossed paths, by now, shouldn't they? Admittedly, it was highly unlikely, and yet, Keith felt himself losing sight of the real goal. Allura wanted her stone intact and well, and these guys were using dynamite to get it out of the ground.
How could two completely opposite sides get so tangled up in their destinations?

And what kind of destination? It felt like each one of them had a different view of what waited there. Furthermore, Keith found weird that any archaeologist, as morally grey as one could be, would hire a full camp of mercenaries to uncover a statuette.

*Who has that kind of money to waste?*

The more he thought about it, the more Keith smelled the trap. The same tickling feeling from earlier creeped back on his neck. Something was off, in all of this story.

He didn’t know all the truth. Neither did any of them all. It was a possibility that none of the gold diggers had any clear idea of what laid under their feet. Keith mentally reviewed the papers spread on the table of the camp. All those symbols, all those codes… Were they only codes? Or was he missing something crucial, something obvious?

Hunk pulled Keith out of his silence.

“Hey, we’re there.”

The camp was coming into view, vehicles and tent lined up methodically on the edge of the bushes. This was too easy to be true, but for once, Keith wouldn’t complain.

“Shit.”

Speak it and watch it go away. As soon as Keith started to approach the camp, a couple of militaries showed up. The fire and the night had drained them out, and Keith didn’t even bother counting them as threats. One of them was walking in zig zag, mirroring his own condition.

His eyes swept over the line of vehicles facing the borders of the camp.

“This one.”
Dirtier, parked like a stolen car, still humming from the patrol.

Keith had let his choice fall on the furthest 4x4, mud not dried yet, dust still hanging on. He walked toward it without minding his feet, his mind hyperfocusing on the keys on the contact.

Even Hunk’s steps, accelerating with his own, faded away.

Keith tackled the first mercenary and exploded his fist on the second’s jaw. A third one that tried to slow him down, running from in-between two vehicles, received a greeting from the handle of the gun, straight between the eyes.

Like so many other this night, his body dropped on the floor with a limp sound.

Keith slammed shut the first door, turning the keys in without a look for Hunk. He was already on the backseat anyways. Both of them were getting used to stealing cars. Keith was glad they hadn’t needed to hijack it with that.

In itself, it was relatively easy, but they had no time to waste.

He had no idea where to go, but Keith plastered his feet to the ground anyways, pushing the crossover forward in a leap before screeching the tires over a dozen meters, the engine screaming with him into the dead of the night.

Contrary to his own, the 4x4 had an open backseat, only covered by a white fabric that wouldn’t hold long. Behind, Hunk was standing up, a watchtower analyzing all of the camp. He followed the traces of burned earth on the ground. That would lead them straight to Lance.

“Keith ! On the right !”

Screeching of the wheels. The vehicle swerved on the humid road and Keith accelerated again, defiant..

“Keep going forward !”
The tracks led to the second camp, without surprise. Larger alleys, smaller tents. Burnt coil still red from the fire.

“THERE ! I KNEW IT !”

Keith wished he could press up even faster. Lance, tied up on a chair in front the fuming remains of the explosive stocks.

The 4x4 cried as Keith hit the brake, circling all around the crowd of people standing around, staring at the impromptu duo like they had been a mad Santa and his very angry Rudolf, coming here, against all tradition, to get back their present.

Keith counted five unknown faces. Five targets.

The metal slowed down. Hunk slapped the front seat.

“GO ! GET HIM !”

Keith didn't need to be told twice. He jumped out of the car, boot first, hitting another plexus right in the air.

Back in the Jeep, Hunk grasped one of the weapons gathered in the boxes. A rifle, loaded. Well, for now, that would do.

“Honey, it’s me and you now.” Hunk muttered as he leveled the visor with his eyes.

On ground level, Keith swung around on his other foot, and sprinted to Lance. The Desert remained cold in his hand, but he elbowed a couple of times one of the mercenaries that had finally gotten their spirit back and tried to hold him back.

“LANCE !”

When he arrived at the boy’s level, his hand was already flying for his knife.
“Hm-hm. I don’t think so.”

The sensation of the cold gun in his hand suddenly doubled, copy pasting itself on his temple. Someone was holding him at gunpoint.

“Listen, I don’t know who you are, but frankly, it would hurt me to hurt a face like that. So, you’re going to listen very well.” Silky, smooth voice, liquid coating the fire of the moment. The voice of the talkie.

It spread like gasoline on Keith’s nerves, and from fire, his mind went to napalm fields under the morning sun.

Explosive pandemonium.

“No, I don’t think so.” Keith snapped back.

“Wha-”

The sound of an assault rifle firing in the air cut the sentence, and Keith took advantage of the confusion to grab the gun and slam it on the other’s throat, shoving his words back in it. A gargle escaped from his mouth, and Keith dragged him out of the way by the hair.

Go to hell.

On his chair, smiling bright, Lance demeaned like a mad devil. “Keith!” Lance chuckled out of joy. “Keith! Hunk! Guys!”

The knife sliced the handcuffs as easily as if they’d been made out of butter. Old-fashioned rope was, and would forever be, one of Keith’s favorite things to destroy. He dropped on his knees to get at the ties of Lance’s ankles when the ridge of a boot plucked his stomach, sending him across the dirt, away from Lance.

“KEITH!” Lance screamed. Too late.
Keith scoffed. His vision dotted.

Metal in his hand. Knife or gun?

Whatever, hands where around his throat. Keith rhythmically jagged his hand down over the back of his assailant, fighting for air and for survival.

His finger reached the trigger. Gun.

Pulling on both the last remains of oxygen in his body and the trigger, Keith closed his eyes.

The bullet fired. A glacing scream erupted above his head. The hands let go, and Keith crawled away from the body he just shot, nails ripping on the soil. His breath burnt in his lungs, scorching his insides like poisonous smoke.

He scratched for the knife, and slided at Lance’s feet, ripping open his knees over the ground. The Desert clanked on the ground as Keith used both hands to try and untie Lance.

“BEHIND YOU!”

He rolled in the dirt. Another fucking mercenary. Did these guys never gave up?!

While Keith dodged away from the swinging fists, Hunk caught the beams of headlights into the rearview mirror. Up from the hill, the other 4x4 were getting in motion, probably alerted by the screams of the lower camp.

The rifle in his hands jolted, like moved by a proper life. He shot a salvo into the nearest barils, sending metal across the road.

That would hold about three seconds. No, two.

“Keith! There’s more coming!”

Waltzing away from a deadly fist, Keith glared at him.
“I’M A LITTLE BUSY HERE !”

Hunk glanced at the battlefield. Four camouflage tunics, three laying face down, and the last one attempting to answer Keith’s rageful kicks with as much force. Another figure, hissing on the ground, although much better dressed than the rest of the company.

And rocking on his chair, tied by the feet, face contorted in a grimace, Lance.

Hunk jumped out of the back of the crossover. He was by Lance’s side in the blink of an eye, and without any of Keith’s concerns, just tore off the rope to shreds.

Lance’s eyes went wide and humid.

“Hunk. Buddy ! You here !”

Big hands carefully rubbed slender ones in them, brushing the edges of Lance’s nails as if he was made of porcelain.

“I’m here, dude. I’m here !” Hunk felt a soft breeze release the pressure inside.

Lance, despite a bruising jaw and a silky line of blood trailing down his left arm, was mostly alright. He smelled like burnt bacon, but nothing a good shower and a month of rest couldn’t arrange.

Both of them chuckled, caught in a moment Keith yanked them away from.

“GUYS ! HELP !”

Sharing a glance, the boys jolted at Keith, still grappling with the last remaining mercenary. Kicking his leg out, Lance unbalanced the man, just enough for Hunk to flatten his hand against his face, and Keith his heel to his chest.
His head made a mute sound when it hit the ground. K.O.

“Woh ! WHOOHOO !” Lance flung his arms in the air, excited like a child by a Christmas morning.

The festivities were cut short by the gentle reminder of the army coming their way. Like a thousands of angry bumble bees, the roars of the engines filled the air. Keith couldn’t see the cars, but the ground was already trembling under his feet.

Propulsed by the imminence of the end, Keith ran breathlessly to the crossover, Hunk hot on his heels. The keys chimed. Lance sprinted after them, jumping on the backseat just as Keith rolled away. The 4x4 rushed off like a shot, eager to get away from the mean wave of newcomers.

Lance risked a look back. The fifth guy was nowhere to be seen.

“He’s gone…” Lance furrowed his brows, fingers tracing the edges of his jaw. He owed him one or two punches.

No signs of the others yet, but the lights were already here. Hell broke loose just as Keith engaged himself on the path leading out.

“Huh, Keith, do you know where you’re going ?” Lance was massaging his jaw. His eyes were glued to the outside, the boy doing his best to distinguish the forms despite the dark. At least it wasn’t raining anymore.

Keith shrugged.

“Not at all, we’ll see along the way !” The road was splitting. Without hesitation, Keith jagged the wheel to the right, opposite to the road leading to the third camp.

“We’re getting the hell out of here, everybody okay with that ?!”

Lance furiously nodded. Hunk yelled a “Fine with me” as he watched the landscape roll around. Keith pushed the pedals down. If the motor followed, this could work, but everything was that close to burning in his hands.
A second after they drifted, the first pursuant made their apparition in the rearview mirrors. Keith counted six dustbins behind. One of them, wheels soaked wet from the mud, ended up crashing its nose on the other trail.

“Yeah, suck it!” Hunk cheered.

The headlights of the cars illuminated the mountains around. Keith turned his own off, to blend in the decor. That wasn’t much, but this could always save them precious seconds if needed.

On his side, Lance was almost out the window. He passed his head back inside, mouth twisting. Keith barely noticed, focused on the gravel menacing to rip a tire at any moment.

“How, Keith?”

The hill was going up and up, higher and higher. The crossover swallowed the road like an hungry wildboard, defenses out.

A salvo of preventive shots bursted behind them, exploding rocks from the mountain and splattering them all over the path. Keith swore a line and swerved the car around, his feet locked to the ground despite the furious turns of the vehicle.

If they slowed down, they were dead.

“What was that?” Hunk screamed. “Hoh, NO! They’re shooting at us! This is no good!”

Keith grimaced.

No kidding.

“Keith... Keith, you can’t.”

“Not now, Lance!”
“Keith !” His tone was pressing now. Scared.

Keith detached his eyes from the road. Sweat rolled under his bangs.

“There’s a turn up there. It’s impossible to take at this speed, we have to find another way !”

Keith furrowed his brows further.

“How far ?”

“What ?”

“The turn. How far ?”

“You want to… Oh. No, no, no-” Lance muttered, horrified.

“How ! Far !” Keith repeated, frantically struggling to keep the crossover rolling. The bullets echoed again on the rocks of the mountain. The road kept going up.

“Three hundred meters ! Maybe four, I-I don’t know !” Lance grabbed the handle of the window. “Keith, this is crazy, we’re never gonna make it !”

Slam on the right. Keith jagged the trajectory, slaloming between the rocks fallen on the road. One of the crossovers behind didn’t got so lucky, and crashed right in it. A dark cloud elevated from behind, obstructing the view. The edges of the rocks colored themselves in oranges as the fire started.

“Keith, for frick’s sake !” Lance yelled. He was fully turned on his seat now, sat perpendicularly to the road. If anything, this was dangerous, but not convincing enough for Keith to drop it.

Anyways, he wasn’t listening. The unmissable roar of a Kawasaki was catching up with them. He
glanced at Lance, whose face was getting paler and paler by the second. The boy was muttering something under his breath, a hand gripping the dashboard, the other clawing at the headrest.

“Do you know how to drive ?” Keith cut him off in his litany.

“Wha- Yeah ?”

“Great. Hold this for me.”

Without any further warning, Keith let go off the wheel, kicking the front door of the 4x4 open, Desert loaded in hand.

“WHAT ? KEITH !”

Free of human control, the crossover bumped like a mad horse. Lance jolted to catch the wheel. On the edge of the seat, waiting, Keith counted in his head.

*Three.*

The bike was closing the distance.

*Two.*

Keith hunched his shoulders, his toes curling in his boots.

*One.*

The wind rushed into the compartment, flying his bangs around.

*Go.*
Suddenly, gravity stopped working on Keith, and he launched himself on the open door of the car, held by nothing but his right arm, hooked over the window.

_You can do this. Don’t look down._

Because, down was the entire panorama unrolling itself as the vehicles kept going up. Keith blocked the way to the bike, the door of the car covering what was left of the road. Still, it kept surging forward. Keith breathed between his teeth.

_You’ve done this before._

Rising the Desert at chest level, Keith tilted his head. Oh, boy, this was going to hurt. The recoil would probably break his arm if he wasn’t careful. And even then, he would need a fucking insane amount of strength to get out of it intact.

_It’s going to be fine, you just have to focus._

For some reason, the voice in his head was Shiro’s.

Keith glared down the road. This was nothing like he’d ever practiced. Ever. The 4x4 was rolling at a good 100 mph, on a bumpy road above two hundred meters of rocks and cacti. He had only one free hand, no stance, and the target was a fucking bike rolling twice as fast.

Wind brushed the land. Far, far in the distance, the darkest hour was settling off, the night packing away to let the dawn rise. The pink dust fluttered over the horizon.

Time had stopped for a second. The stars twinkled, the moon laughed, and the despite the looming void and the silencing wind that dried his eyes and freezed his ears, Keith felt good. The adrenaline melted with the endorphine in his veins.

And the moment was gone and the next salvo from the crossovers chasing their jeep drove the peace away. Keith breathed in.
Line up your sight.

Lance screamed something.

Aim.

And now shoot.

Lance had jumped on the free seat the second Keith left it, slightly panicking. He’d only ever driven his mom’s 1968 chevrolet, and Hunk’s van. Which was, conveniently, a smooth sailing compared to the car chase up a rocky path in uncharted territory. The sensation under his body was entirely different. Terrifying.

Added to the fact that Keith was suspended over the void and that their car was actively getting shot at, and his mind switched on autopilot for a second.

Shot at.

Lance felt an epiphany shake his spine.

“HUNK ? ARE YOU FILMING THIS ?!”

Ah. Bad timing. Keith was screaming too.

“HUNK ? IS THE RIFLE STILL OPERATIONAL ?”

On the back of the crossover, hunched behind a metallic box, Hunk was covering himself the best he could.

From the beginning of the chase, Keith’s choice of going up instead of down had let him passably doubtful. But this got relayed to the back of his mind when their pursuants, out of ideas, started to shoot at their car.
First, they’d aimed for the road and the rocks, hoping the fall would stop the vehicle in motion. But, plan A failing, they decided that a bullet directly on the passengers would do just as well. That’s basically when Hunk noticed a slash of red on his forearm. He heard Keith scream something in the front, but the wind was so strong that any words got melted in it.

“WHAT ?”

In unison, Keith, hung above the nothingness, and Lance, fighting with the control, yelled back at Hunk, hidden on the backseat.

“START SHOOTING !”

“LIKE, THE CAMERA OR THE RIFLE ?” This was a legitimate question.

“HUNK !!”

“OKAY ! Chill, guys !” Hunk shook his head. Since both of them wanted him to shoot, he would shot.

Balancing the rifle under his armpit, and the camera on his shoulder, Hunk propped out of his hideout. Behind their crossover, a five vehicle deployment. Hunk had approximately five shots.

“Hum.”

This couldn’t be *that* difficult.

Keith was getting desperate. Despite him, the trigger kept clicking in the empty. The pistol was rigged, probably because of the rain and the too many shocks and fights of the night. It refused to spit any bullets.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

The motorcycle was close enough now that Keith could see the details of the painting on the body.
Hidden behind the pitch black helmet, the driver lunged forward, gaining another fifty centimeters on them.

“KEITH !” Lance called. His knuckles whitened on the wheel. Upon meeting Keith’s gaze, he nodded at the upcoming road.

Keith looked by the open window, gripping the door even tighter. Wind brushed his thighs. The drift was going to be deadly. They needed to turn at a 90° degrees angle, minimal.

Keith could barely distinguish what hid behind the rocks, if they failed to turn.

*This is going to be a matter of milliseconds.*

“KEEP GOING !” He shouted at Lance, his voice struggling to cover the howls of the wind.

“WE’RE GOING TO CRASH !”

“NO WE’RE NOT !” Keith shot a look at the Kawasaki. It was barely a meter behind, right in the car’s dead spot. From there, there was no way the driver could see the road. “DO NOT TURN UNTIL I TELL YOU SO !”

Lance locked his gaze on the road. Keith caught a glimpse of a resigned blink, and a defiant look. Great. Now he was really facing death and staring at it in the eyes.

Hunk, in the backseat, was running dry on ammo. Looking at the smoke that bursted behind them, dark clouds and angry ashes floating in the turmoils of the wind, and judging by the sound, the cars had been reduced to two, by now. Stayed the moto, hot on their wheels.

“OKAY, I’M OUT, HUNK OUT, GUYS !” Plopping down behind the box, the boy still kept his hand up, for the camera to keep turning.

Keith inhaled sharply. There was no try. It was hit or miss. And failure meant death, so Keith really counted on their coordination.
“HUNK, ON MY WORD, ROLL OVER !”

A thumb propped up.

“KEITH ! WE NEED TO TURN” Lance was on the verge of jarring the 4x4 away. The mountain was coming at lightning speed toward them, or was that the contrary ? “WE’RE NEVER GONNA MAKE IT !”

“SHUT UP AND TRUST ME !” Keith felt sweat dry on his nape. This was a victory or death matter. If he failed…

*Timing is key.*

The rocks overlooked them. The path turned in nothing but five meters.

“HUNK, NOW !”

Slamming all of his weight on the other side of the car, Hunk made it lose it balance. The front door, still open, began to tilt on its axis.

Using his last forces, Keith pulled forward.

The door of the crossover closed furiously on Lance, whose hands were still very glued to the wheel, going forward. He could already picture his body crushed in between metal and rocks.

But that didn’t happen.

Pushed by the momentum, the car began to roll on two wheels. Keith crossed the dashboard in a jump, gravity still on hold, and crashed on the left door, now dangerously close to the ground. Unable to stay close, it opened under Keith’s feet, finishing to incline the car on the side.

“LANCE, TURN !”
This was all he had ever waited for.

Stirring at the wheel with all of his strength, Lance propulsed the vehicle to the side. After Hunk’s push and Keith’s kicks, it was all it needed to swerve on its axis and take a 90° turn at full speed of 120km/h.

The roar of the engine exploded as the wheels bumped back on the road, all the passengers cheering equally loudly. Lance, ecstatic, watched the path defile again and again, higher and higher.

“We made it!”

Hunk, holding on to dear life to the metallic structure of the back of the car, teared up. Too much emotions in too little time.

“We’re not dead!”

Keith, hung again above the road they just roamed over, watched the motorcycle fly over the edge, and the first car crash on the rocks. The sound was deafening, but the view was worse. The explosion propelled one of the tires in their directions, brushing past Keith in a mess of burning plastic and crackling metal.

Okay, time to get back inside.

He stepped back in and flung the door close. Just for the joke, Hunk slowly pushed down the manual lock. Click.

Keith snorted.

Lance choked on a laugh.

“Seriously? Are these guys never stopping or what?”

The last car, somehow, had decided to follow them up. It was way further than it used to be, but
decidedly on their tracks. Keith swore under his breath. There wasn’t many options left, now, and their little circus trick was far too close to turn into a deathtrap to be an envisageable option.

Stayed the simplest solution of them all, as well as the less distinguished... Guns.

“Hunk, check if there’s anything left back there !” Keith asked. His Desert was still rigged, and would be until he took the time to dismantle it all and put it back together correctly.

A ruffling sound. Lance had slowed down a bit. If the engine gave up on them now…

“Mmh… I found something, but I’m not sure to know how does it works.”

Keith rolled around, hands clasping open and close, silently asking Hunk for the gun. The guy dropped it. A long barrel, an equally massive scope and basically no stock, all forged in black, threatening metal. This had nothing to do with the tough look of the Desert Eagle, or with the anger of the rifle.

This was an elegant, deadly Dragon Sniper .

“There’s no way we’ll use that correctly. I’ve never fired anything like this.” Keith deadpanned. There flew away their last chance to get away properly. He was out of ideas.

“I could try.”

Keith stared at Lance.

His hands had rediscovered color and his face was blushing. His eyes were glued to the road, too busy keeping the car on it safely to take the time to look at the weapon. Wind, engulfed like a stream into the car, brushed his hair out of his forehead.

Breathtaking, in the way people who just escaped death had to be.

The first rays of sunshine reflected on the thin layer of sweat that covered his cheeks, where bruises bloomed blue. Lance breathed short.
“Keith. I can do it.”

“This is our only chance.”

Hunk interrupted them, metal clicking into his hands. “Actually, there are like, four bullets.”

Lance blinked slowly. “Take the wheel.”

There was no discussion. His tone ordered something Keith had no control over, his decision already taken.

Keith gripped the metallic circle, while Lance jumped behind, joining Hunk. The last crossover was still far behind them. At least fifty meters, maybe more. Surely more. The road was bumpy, and none of the two cars rolled in straight lines.

Lance flicked open the magazine and pushed a bullet inside. This was a particular sniper rifle, as if they had modified some of the anatomy of the gun.

The balance of the crossover was unsteady. Hunk clasped a metallic bar to hang on. Lance kneeled at the back, aligning himself with the wheels trailing behind them.

He bothered to open the bipod and peek into the scope.

“Lance, if you miss, don’t worry, there’s plenty of other shots…”

His fingers clicked the trigger, removing the guard.

Keith was doing his best to keep the vehicle still and stable, but the others had finally realized what was up, and were slaloming on the remains of the paths.

Lance exhaled, and stopped his breath in between.
The tires were just lined with the markings of the lens. A black cross in the visor, and in the center, his target.

He pulled.

\textit{Bang !}

The shot resonated more than anything. The recoil sent Lance flying over, knocking his head on the metal of the cabin. Keith grimaced, his ears whistling like they never had. Hunk reached out for Lance, holding him close before he hurt himself again. The car bumped, nearly tumbling over.

Keith rose his feet from the pedals, eyes stuck to the rearview mirror.

Behind them, fifty meters away, the front tire of the crossover had exploded, and the driver was losing all control over the car. They watched, slowing down, as the first wheel detached, followed by the other, and gradually, the car drifted down, away from them.

The sight was unbelievable. After the explosions, the fires and the crashes, the agony of the last remaining car was too soft to be true.

When it disappeared completely, Keith almost pinched himself.

He drove in silence to the top of the hill, checking every second if this was really the last one. It was, indeed. No sign of any other vehicle emerged, at least not in the ten minutes it took to reach the peak. At acceptable speed, the road was far less bumpy and dangerous.

Behind him, Hunk was murmuring at Lance, still knocked out. He had missed the outcome of his own exploit.

\textit{Wait...}

\textit{“Hunk ?”}
“Yeah ?”

“Is the camera still recording ?”

A shuffle behind. Keith heard Hunk draw in a sharp breath, and a whistle.

“Well, it took a bad hit. Like, really nasty. One of the flashes is dead. But… Yeah. It’s still on. Wanna tell something to the people, Keith ?” Hunk pointed the objective towards Keith, who turned away.

“No, thanks. It’s just… I wanted to know, that’s all.”

Hunk passed a hand over the lens, a proud smile floating over his face. “This is gonna make one hell of an episode.”

“Sure will.” A croaky voice emerged from the floor of the car. Weak and groggy, but awake.

“LANCE !” Hunk exclaimed. He cradled Lance’s cheeks in his hands like a baby’s face. “You’re up buddy! Man, you really took a hit !”

Lance, shifting on one arm to hold himself, stroked the back of his head slowly, grimacing as the wound revealed itself. He shot an intrigued look at Hunk, who was hardly repressing his smile now. After all, they had just survived six armed crossovers.

“Yeah, I feel like my skull is in three different pieces right now, is that normal ?”

Hunk, unable to hold it any longer, bursted into laughter, and Lance breathed out a little weirdly. Apparently, even laughing was painful now. Hunk squeezed the boy against him, to happy to feel his heartbeat to think about the possible broken bones.

“Well, this is gonna make one hell of a concussion…” Keith could practically hear him winking at the end of his sentence. Lance clasped his arms behind Hunk’s back, a tight embrace.
Keith averted his gaze from the rearview mirror, leaving the two friends to their joy. His eyes wandered over the land. Now that he had all of his time, he started to appreciate his surroundings. Mexico was still a beautiful country, despite all the mercenaries Keith had met in it.

*If only I had a friend to celebrate… Right, Shiro?*

Somewhere, because he must have been somewhere, his mentor was waiting. And he would find him, and they would hug it out, like the first time they’d escaped out of a car chase, and Keith would find again that little, small piece of childhood he’d lost so many years ago.

*Yeah, just you wait.*

The car was gently humming. They had reached the top of the mountain, and the rocks and dirt had been replaced by short, dry grass. Keith checked one last time their surroundings. Never safe enough.

Finally, he pulled the break when the path disappeared under bushes and rocks.

End of the road, everyone please leave your seats.

Lance strolled out of the car, cautiously followed by Hunk, and they began to describe the car chase with exited voices to the camera, waltzing around.

Keith searched for a discreet place to park. They would probably need the car again once they figured where to go. He chose to hid it in the creak of a cave-in rock, under branches and leaves. No one should see a thing.

Keys swinging around his finger, Keith started to walk towards Hunk and Lance. Echoes of the story floated to his ears.

“…and then he grabbed me, and they dragged me around, to a tent. Then a guy, weird hair, mean face, you don’t wanna see him, believe me, well this guy, he kicks me in the stomach and he orders them to tie me up! See? Wild!”
Hunk’s eyes went dark for a second there, and they matched with Keith’s look. As much as Lance had enjoyed the outcome, if this weird-haired, mean-faced guy had to ever come across their path again…

“So I’m there, tied up in front a raging fire of TNT! And he asks me, like in the movies, I swear! He asks, ‘hey, who do you work for!’ and I said, ‘no one!’ because that’s, you know, that’s true!” Lance waved around and pointed at the bruises on his jaw. “And he asked a couple of times, like that, and then he goes ‘I tried to be nice’, and BAM!”

Lance mimed the punch in the air.

“And he punched me!” His tone skyrocketed.

Keith sat down on a rock. The mountain overlooked the whole valley. From there, they could see the three camps, the burnt hangar and the crashed cars along the road. Smoke still floated in the air, a dense reminder of what it took them to stand here.

Lance’s voice quieted down. Keith heard him step closer.

“That was crazy, right?” Standing tall next to Keith, arms open to the wind, Lance gazed at the landscape. The sun was rising above the furthest mountains clearly now. Most of the stars had disappeared with the dark of the night.

“Yeah. Crazy.”

“And that’s… That’s your job?” Hunk asked, cautious.

Keith flicked a pebble. “Yeah, huh… Not really- I’m more of a… treasure hunter. A thief, a fraud if you want. That…” He waved at the black smoke still coming out of the crashed cars. “That rarely happens. It never happened, actually.”

Not like that, at least.
Lance sat down on the grass, Hunk imitating him. The sun bathed all of them in its morning glory, somehow softening the cuts of the night.

“How did you got there ?”

“Well… I’ve always been… A troubled child. I used to pick fights a lot, and get into correction centers way more than needed. But I had this energy… I needed to do something, you see ? I needed to take action, to punch things, to break things !” Keith lowered his gaze. “I was angry.”

The wind, gentle now, brushed over the scene. The first bugs could be heard in the bushes. The land, soaked by the rain, was bursting of life, suddenly.

Keith passed a hand over his face.

“I still am.”

Am I really talking to strangers about my past ?

He peered at Lance, staring intently at the valley, his hair slightly burnt, bruises now fully staining his skin. He looked at Hunk, blood pearling at his arms, mud all over the legs and knuckles red.

They weren’t strangers anymore.

Keith inhaled.

“And so… One day, this guy came in. I had tried the army at that point. They kept telling me I was ‘wasting my potential’ and so- I skipped school more than needed.”

He wasn’t really proud of that part.

“Drug selling, small traffics, fraud and thief… I was doing a lot of bad stuff then.”

“You still do.” Lance pointed out.
Keith accused the hit. “Yeah. But that was different. I was actively trying to be bad. I… I don’t know. I was misguided, and alone. And one day…”

And one day Shiro came in.

“That guy came in. He wasn’t necessarily good, but at least he didn’t took me for scum, so that was it. And, hah… I tried to rob him.”

Hunk snorted.

“Yeah, needless to say, it worked out pretty bad. But, actually, not that bad. He saw my ‘talent’, as he called it, and he helped me on a healthier path. I was still robbing, and stealing and stuff, but… He taught me how to do it well.”

“How can you do that well ?”

Keith picked up a rock and swung it over the edge.

“I used to steal at local markets and stuff. He taught me how to lighten billionaires of their millions. He taught me how to trick the ones who had already betrayed, and to steal those who had already stolen.”

“Robin Hood, here you go.”

That time it was Keith’s turn to snort.

“Yeah, I guess. But I was alright.”

Hunk finished for him. “And that’s how you got there.”

No. He disappeared and I desperately searched for him. And that one woman made me believe he
would be there, but he wasn’t. And that’s how I got here.

“Yeah.” Keith simply said. That was enough life sharing for a year.

Lance nodded. Hunk hummed too.

The night was over.

“So, this guy, huh ?” Lance called again. His hand was picking at grass, tearing parts here and there.

“Mh-hm.”

“Mind if I ask, what’s he doing now ?” Way to go, Lance.

Keith jumped on his feet. Shortcut to the end of the discussion. He landed too fast, and his ankle reminded him abruptly that he was on temporary shock. He winced.

Ah, shit.

“Wow, sorry. I didn’t mean to overstep here…”

Keith turned away, fists too tight for anything to be ‘okidoki’ up there. Lance bit his lip.

“We don’t have much time to lose. Let’s find a way out of here.” Keith scolded. Whatever was the moment they shared, it was over now.

Lance stood up, watching Keith’s irritated stomps further away. Hunk landed a hand on his shoulder. His eyes told what Lance already knew.

We know nothing about each others. We’re still strangers.
“So, what do you want to do, now?” Hunk said. He was still staring at Keith, who was climbing up the crossover again.

Lance turned to him, eyebrows high.

“Are you seriously asking me this right now?” The boy shook his head. “Hunk, we nearly died like, five times tonight.”

Hunk stayed silent. Lance looked resigned, his serious look back in his eyes for a split second.

“I wanna see the end of it, now. It has become personal.” And the second was over, and a giant bubbly smile spread on his cheeks, half a mask, half a genuine expression. “Plus, buddy, this is by far the best and most interesting thing we’ve ever investigated? This is a golden scoop! We’re gonna be millionaires with this one!”

Hunk exhaled. “Fine. But if things get too dangerous, you gotta promise me to give up.” His tone was clear, firm and sincere. He’d said it eyes closed and hands rolled in fists of confidence.

Lance, already pacing toward the car, threw him a smile over his shoulder. “Define dangerous, big boy!”

Hunk’s shoulders dropped. Lance wasn’t listening at all… And, to be fair, he wasn’t completely wrong. Hunk whined a little. And he pressed the recording button.

Scoop of their lives.

Through the eye of the camera, things were a bit different; luminosity was a little higher, and contrasts a little more vivid. That worked on the simple, physical plan, as well as on a spiritual level.

Hunk watched Lance’s happy stroll end at the 4x4. The boy hooked his arms over the back sides, legs crossed in front of him. Relaxed. Keith, focused, had left behind his annoyed look, and was simply digging into the boxes, in search for god knows what. His eyebrows furrowed, he didn’t even bothered to look at Lance.
And yet, on camera, things were a bit clearer, a little more defined.

Lance wasn’t leaving Keith’s side, head tilted over the sides of the car to question basically everything. Keith, despite his lone wolf exterior, seemed to always answer him back, gaze fixed on whatever task he was doing. Shortly, but still.

And if he wasn’t asking Lance anything, by nature, his friend helped.

Hunk tried to repress his smile.

The crossover wasn’t the only thing rolling tonight, it seemed.

The sun was warming his arms, a welcomed feeling after the rain of the night. He could feel his hair already drying up. Sat at the back of the car, Lance watched his guide and companion, or whatever it was that Keith could be, break his gun into pieces and put it back together.

After the adrenaline shots his brain had been fed all night, the calm morning felt a little dull. His mind couldn’t focus on anything.

“And that?” Lance pointed at greyish packets, stocked up in piles and piles in one of the boxes.

“Probably rations. They planned this to be long.” Keith rolled up the barrel of his Desert. “There… This should do.”

Holding his gun at eye level, Keith tilted it up and down, checking for the last details. The bullets were neatly placed at his feet. Keith shook the gun.

“Okay, time for another try out.” While jumping above the crossover’s side, Keith glanced behind him. “Wanna give it a shot?”

“Yeah. You’re a far better sniper than me.” Keith pushed the gun. “I think you should have it. I don’t have the best aim, with those.”

Lance weighted the thing in his hand. “You’re certain it’s empty?”

Keith held up his hand over Lance’s, taking his wrist in. “Here, click this. Okay, that’s the mag. You basically push the bullets up there.” Lance gulped. “It’s empty, see?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay now…” Keith passed behind Lance, leveling his eyes with him, moving their wrists together to align the barrel with their sight. “Put it up there. Get both of your hand on it. I think you got a pretty good idea of what can recoil do, right?” Keith smirked.

Lance let out a nervous giggle.

Hunk repressed his own. His friend was redder than the tomatoes they ate in summer. Admittedly, Keith was murmuring in his ear, but the show was hilarious, because he had no idea, not the least, of his effect on Lance.

And Hunk was, to be fair, a little shit to his friend sometimes.

“Keith! I don’t think Lance grips the gun tight enough!”

Lance glared daggers at Hunk, but it was too late. Innocent as a sheep, Keith added his other hand around Lance’s. It the gun was not exploding today, Lance sure was about to do so.

“Like that, okay?” Keith reached out for Lance’s index, pushing it on the trigger. “And now I think you know the rest.”

Keith hadn’t forgotten the sniper. Lance, despite the adrenaline and the events, had remained calmer than Keith had ever seen him. And he had shot right in the bull’s eyes in the first try. Maybe he’d
missed his actual target and got lucky, maybe it was just beginner’s luck, but anyways… Keith had to admit, he was impressed.

“Shall we ?”

Lance nodded, his eyes still glaring at Hunk.

“Okay, now aim, breath, and shoot.”

Lance pointed at a rock, around there. Despite knowing the mag was empty, he still wanted to complete the exercise perfectly.

He clicked the trigger. The gun made an empty sound, but still recoiled a little. A placebo effect.

“Ah. Yeah. Without bullets, there’s no recoil. Sorry.” Keith shrugged, his hands freeing Lance’s.

Lance, still poppy red, blinking repetitively in the void.

Keith clasped his hands together. The sun was pretty high now, and they had a perfect view of their surroundings. Time to get a move on, and find that bloody statuette. Or, exactly, to find a way to find the bloody thing.

Shortcuts.

“Okay, guys, I’m gonna run and see what I can find. Don’t move from here, I should be back in twenty minutes.” Keith said above his shoulder, already jogging down the bushes. Hunk grabbed him by the collar before he made another step, and yanked him gently back into the car. Impacts of bullets decorated the backside.

“Nope, buddy, I don’t think so.”

“Why not ? We don’t have time to lose, nothing’s gonna happen to me, okay ?” Keith’s voice rasped against his throat.
Hunk was having none of it. He forced Keith to sit down, and removed his shoe. “Lance, look and see if you can find a med kit in there. Or fabric, or anything.”

“On it!"

“Now, Keith, if you’re okay with that, I’ll ask you to show me your face, please?”

Keith grumbled something inaudible. Hunk deadpanned and waited. Finally, the other gave up and pushed his hair out of the way, although reluctantly.

Hunk wiped his fingers on his jean.

“And that’s one two, three… Four cuts on the face and neck only. You’ve got a minor burn here too. I’m sparing you the bruises.” Hunk poked gently at Keith’s ankle. “And there? On a scale of one to ten? Ten is insufferable pain.”

“Like the one I’m experiencing right now because you’re wasting your time? I’m telling you, I’m fine!” Keith repeated.

“Let’s say three, then. It’s not swelled. I’ll admit it looks alright, but we’re still bandaging this.”

“Hunk! There’s no need for this!” Keith slammed his fist on the trunk. “Come o-"

“I FOUND A MED KIT!” Springing out of the boxes, Lance landed next to Hunk, radiant. A white chest, marked by the unmistakable red cross, laid on his knees.

“Thank you, Lance.” Hunk pushed on the *Lance*. Keith pouted.

“You’re welcome. I’m just like that, I find things!” Lance gloated.

“Well, we could be finding a whole lot of other things if we weren’t busy doin-AH!"

“See? Still not okay. I told you.” Hunk claimed. “Now let me do my thing, okay.” His other hand
went for the slender arms of Lance, whom was discreetly fleeing the back of the jeep. “And, you too. This is not a joke. I fix machines, and you both are just very complex machines, okay?”

Hunk tied up the band on Keith’s ankle.

“And if you two get rigged, like that damn gun or whatever, who’s turn is it gonna be to save the day? I’m telling you. Hunk’s! Hunk’s turn to keep everybody safe. I’m the mechanic, not the pilot, I told you.”

Lance pressed his lips together, nodding in agreement. Keith really had nothing more to add.

“Now you two stop moving, or nobody’s going anywhere, get it?”

As if he needed an answer, an alarm blared, down in the valley. The camp had awoken. Keith jolted on his seat.

“They probably finally noticed we stole the map!”

Hunk looked far more annoyed than anything. “Will anything give me the time to do my damn job?”

“Hunk! If you wanna patch us up, it’s now or never!” Lance yelled.

The echo of the alarm on the mountains made it far more harrowing than it probably really was. And yet, the trio began to speed up. While Hunk finished to clean up Lance’s wounds, the guy was already taking care of the mean bullet bounce that had sliced his skin.

Keith had decided he was fine, and was now extending his phone to the sky, in a desperate attempt to find some…

“SIGNAL! I GOT SIGNAL!!”

Almost immediately, the ringtone went off. Keith picked up with a beaming smile. “Pidge!”
“KEITH !” Oh, she sounded furious. “You haven’t answered from all night ?! What the fuck is going on ? Tell me you’re alive or I’ll personally come into hell and shove that mullet back INTO YOUR NOSE !”

Keith moved the phone away from his ears in a pitiful grimace. Pidge had never been in such a bad mood for a long, long time. He inhaled sharply, scraping for courage. It took more bravery to have Pidge over the phone than to take down three mercenaries alone.

“Yeah… About that…”

“Your position right now is two HUNDRED miles away from your last confirmed ! You better have some good explanation.”

“Mh, well…” Keith pinched the bridge of his nose. Oh boy. “You remember, the Jeep ? Well, figure it out, but it broke down on the road, and I couldn’t call you, because signal was down.”

“Since you’re in the middle of the fucking desert, genius ! Why didn’t you told me ? I would have linked you to a satellite connection.”

“Because I didn’t think it would cut off, or that the Jeep would suddenly give up on me !”

Keith heard Pidge sigh, back in London.

“Okay, fine. But what I can’t figure out, is how did you walk two hundred miles in one night ? I mean, why not, you’ve done worse. But you need a serious reason for that.” Pidge conceited.

“About that too…” Keith turned to take a look at Hunk and Lance, whom finished to loot the crossover and to unload any unnecessary packages. “Remember the guys I met, the ones who smashed my jeep, when I first arrived here ?”

“Vaguely, why ?” A silence. And then. “Oh, nooo ! You found them again !” Pidge exclaimed. She seemed more than enthusiastic about that. Keith squinted.
“Well… Yeah. And they were headed toward here, so… I joined them ?”

“You. Keith. Joined two random college dudes. While on a classified mission commanded by the queen herself ?” Pidge summed up, and she summed up pretty well, her inflexible tone sharing all of her suspicion.

“Well… Yeah. Basically. Excepted Allura’s not the queen. And… Actually, we’re not alone on that.”

“Come on, Allura’s almost a queen. And when did you think you would have told me ?”

Keith stared at the valley. The camp was moving. Tiny figures, hundreds of meters away, were all roaming the earth. Probably because of him. Pidge too, was roaming for him; the internet, the webs of numbers and the classified datas, sure, but still.

Of course she already knew.

“I thought you’d be safer…”

“Keith. I’m safer when I’m informed.” Her tone had shifted to a calmer, gentle one. It didn’t last long, and her snarky comments rushed back in. “Besides, you really thought using a phone booth would prevent me from knowing what was going on ?” She chuckled.

Keith joined her, amazed by his own gullibility. Pidge had built herself different identities for fun, what the heck was he thinking. Of course she knew. She probably knew more than him.

“Anyways. You’re in concurrency with Zarkon Inc., apparently. I looked it up. They possess a great deal of weapon technology, advances in the medical domain and nanotechnologies, but somehow, most of what we know about the man is linked to archeological findings ? He says that, I quote, ‘to see the future, you have to look at the past.’ He looks, well, old, and rich. Most newspapers only have a photo of him in front of tombs or something.”

Keith exchanged looks with Lance and Hunk. They had stopped removing the empty trunks from the car and were seated at his feet, listening to what they could. Hey, Hunk was not lying when he said he was nosy.
“Sounds logical. Allura told me about his father’s associate. That could match.” Keith’s gaze passed over Lance’s jaw. “Do you have anything about his associates, or people he engaged? We’re surrounded by mercenaries, here.”

Pidge’s keyboard clicked.

“Mh-mh, not much. Apparently, one of his best scientists is a woman, which is cool. There’s nothing linking them to Altea Corp., though. I’ll need more time.”

“‘Kay. If you find anything about a guy with weird hair, could you tell me, please?” Keith muttered.

“Huh? Sure, if that’s what you need.”

Keith searched for any other signalment. Oh!

“And, uh, a girl. Long hair, orange, somehow. She was strange and probably worked for them, but I don’t know to which extent.”

“You do realize I’ll need more than that, do you?”

Keith shrugged. “That’s all I got.” The girl of the motel hadn’t left her number or anything else.

“Well, you owe me a triple pancakes at Piccadilly if I end up finding them, alright?” Her gresillating voice chimed in Keith’s ear.

“Fine with me.” He was ready to pay a thousand of pancakes, because Piccadilly seemed like the furthest place on Earth right now, and reaching it back would only mean they had made it out alive. Which, considering recent developments, was less and less of a probability.

The alarm had stopped blaring. The camp was actively moving now. The wind had shifted, in both ways. His shirt was glued to his skin, the highs of the mountains exposed to the air. They came for their blood.
“Pidge, I don’t have much time. Do you think you could call Allura for me? And tell her… I don’t know actually what I should tell her. But tell her.”

“Roger that, Houdini. Do you actually have *anything* for me to work on, or should I base myself on your previous questions and try to find Bigfoot for you?” Pidge snarked.

“Leave Bigfoot out of this, please. No, actually, I’m just glad you’re back. We blew up the camp, and we need to move, so, if you have an idea, that’s now or never.”

Keith waited for the familiar sound of the keyboard.

“Pidge ?”

Maybe she was reading an article, or already on her Ipad.

“Pidge ? We’re running out of time here ! Pidge !” Keith felt something tickle his spine.

A hand tugged at his pant. Lance was tilting his head towards the camp, insisting on Keith taking a look.

The cars that had stayed back in camp were leaving. Most of the tents were already gone, packed probably. A detachment of vehicles, instead of going south like the rest, rolled directly to their position. And there was no ambulance in the group.

“They’re coming back to finish what they started. Pidge, it’s now or never !” Keith yelled over the phone. No answer. “Ah, shit ! Signal is gone. Fucking wind.”

What a timing.

“Okay, no matter what, now’s the time to do it. Where shall we go, cowboy ?” Lance said.
Keith overlooked the valley. And it came as an evidence.

“I have no idea.”

They had spent the night running around, but the actual thing he needed the most, beside a long, hot shower and a clean pair of socks, was time. Time to decipher the coded pages, to explore the map’s crucial points, to check on the progression of the diggings of Zarkon Inc.

Keith looked at the crossovers trailing up toward them. At best, they had… Nine minutes.

“The crossover is ready to go, right?”

“Yes, we’re just waiting for a destination. And since you have the map…”

Keith stared at Lance.

The map.

The map that had joined the fire opal and his notebook into the pockets of the black coat he’d stolen to their first mercenary. Black coat, that of course, he’d ditched back at the first camp, when a burst of heroism had boiled his brain.

“SHIT!”

“Actually… I have it.” Hunk said thoughtfully.

He waved his hand, in which laid both the map, Keith’s notebook and a torn off page of codes.

Keith felt his soul touch the clouds for a solid second or two.

“When I saw you removing the coat, I thought ‘heh, fine, he’s got a black tee-shirt anyways.’ So I
went to remove mine, in a spirit of solidarity.” Hunk unzipped his own jacket. “But, the thing is, I’m wearing a yellow shirt. So I can’t go in the night like that. And I kept my coat.”

Keith needed to sit down. Hunk grinned.

“The rain has stopped, at that time. But I thought ‘heh, it could always come back’, so I picked your coat up. And it was, well, somehow heavier than I thought it would be…”

“Cut it off, Hunk, you’re a genius and we know it! Come on, gimme the map now.” Lance groaned. Apparently, that kind of know-it-all speech was recurrent. Keith could picture it.

Hunk shook his head, too proud of himself to refrain a chuckle, and handed Lance the map. The other unfolded it on the floor of the trunk.

“Now. Where to?”

Keith scrolled down his phone. Lance snapped his fingers at his face.

“Oh! Hey! The Earth to Keith!”

“Shush! I’m trying to reach Pidge! We can’t decipher any of this without her help, no way.”

Lance hunched over the map. He pointed at something and elbowed Hunk.

“Yeah, maybe we won’t have to. This point here, that’s the excavation site.” Lance turned around and waved at the opposite of the valley. Down there, the mounts caved in, just like on the map. “I don’t know how they came to that conclusion, but they decided to dig here.”

“It’s like they went there immediately.” Hunk noted. “There’s no sign of any other searches.”

“Show me the codes.”
Keith tapped his foot while Lance shoved his face on the new page Hunk got out of his pocket. The codes. They’d snatched two random pages, Keith hoped it would be the good ones.

*Come on. Just a minute.*

“Hey, Keith.”

*Just send the photos already.* If Pidge cracks the code, we-

“Hey!” Hunk blurted. “The symbols are different!”

Keith blinked. “*What?*”

Lance slammed his hands on the pages. The symbols on the map didn’t match with the coded page, not at all. At best, they both looked weird, but nothing similar.

The roar of the engines trailing up started to invade the air.

“Whatever this is, it’s not the key of the map.” Lance waved the page. “And, honestly? I would be careful with it. It looks old as fuck.”

“So what do we do now?”

They exchanged looks. Keith glanced at the parked crossover. Another car chase was out of question. They’d barely made it alive the first time, and only thanks to the hazards of the environment. There was no trying out their luck again.

They could hide, but at this point there was so little options left, the mercenaries would find them in a matter of seconds.

Fighting back was out limit too. Keith knew how to count, and as reckless and determined as he was, he knew when to quit. Sometimes. Well, not really, but five mercenaries’ trucks loaded to the teeth would just *crush* them.
Lance was still staring at the map. Hunk was tapping all around, mumbling.

“We’re being hunted. We’re the prey. This is bad, this is really bad! This is terrible…”

“Hunk, shush it!” Lance blurted. “There’s something wrong.”

Keith peered at Lance. Sweat was rolling on his neck. The atmosphere was threatening to boil them alive. He kneeled in front of them. The map, like a wounded animal laying on the ground, with its red markings all over, laid in between them.

Last chance.

“What is it?”

“They went straight for the bottom of these two mountains, here. But I can’t think of anything to understand why? That doesn’t make any sense. Aztecs and, generally, most of the meso-americans civilisations… They used to make temples high. The divinities were worshipped at the top of huge pyramids.”

Keith shot a look at Lance. Concentration was frowning his eyebrows, gripping his face. His eyes roamed over the map, from the codes to the lines, and back and forth to the landscape.

“That doesn’t make any sense. We’re looking for a temple, aren’t we? Or something like, idols! Unless they were from the underworld, there is no reason to dig that low…”

Accompanied by Hunk’s whining, the motor of the fastest engine was noticeably clearer now. Keith jumped on the roof of the car, embracing the valley with his eyes.

Lance was right. The three camps were definitely too low. But he never assumed a single second the statuette was anything related to the underworld. Would it have been a neglect, his fault for not seeing it… Or maybe…

“It’s like they saw a map, and assumed it was there. They didn’t proofread their assumptions and just… Blew it up!”
Like they saw a map. An old, thousands of years old outline of a valley surrounded by mountains.

“Lance !” Keith jumped behind the boy and reached for the map, turning it upside down.

Bingo !

“The map is upside down ! They fucked up !” Keith gloated.

“They saw the outlines of the mountains on something, like an engraved wall ? But didn’t bother checking which was which ! They messed the upside-down !” Lance’s smirk creeped up on his face. “Wait, if this isn’t the south of the valley, then…”

Lance pointed at the red circle. Right across the valley, the dark, burned area of the TNT excavating site.

His finger crossed the map all over. The exact same outlines, but an inverted relief. The top of a mountain, up north.

“We’re here.” Keith breathed out. The exact opposite of the southern dip. The northern peak.

“Huh, guys, this is amazing but it would be cool if you actually knew where to go now !” Hunk yelled.

“Well… We’re not going far…” Keith jumped off the roof. “We’re already where we need to be !” He pointed at the rocks behind them. “We’ve always been on the good tracks !”

The air was filled with the scent of oil and smoke, now. It was a matter of seconds before the first wheels showed up.

Lance followed Keith’s feet and ran up to the rocks that towered over them for the past minutes.

“It was right under our nose.”
Hunk strolled behind them, camera in hand and running. Keith stepped up to the cave. The opening wasn’t flagrant, but if you knew where to look, it was there. Approximately three humans could pass in line. Three humans, or a 4x4.

“Guys, hop in! We’re taking the car!” Keith shouted. He was already opening the front door when Lance turned around.

“You want to take the car in that? Are you nuts?”

“Come on! If they find the car they’ll get it in five seconds! Move!”

The wheels rolled past Lance, who sprinted behind the vehicle before hopping in. As the rocks engulfed them, he caught the first glimpses of the others. Then everything disappeared in the dark, and Lance turned to Hunk.

“Well… I guess we’re in now.”

Hunk hummed in response.

Whatever was in front, they would have to make do, because there was no coming back.

As if the universe had heard this thought, an explosion resounded in the cave, twenty meters behind them. A flash of light, and then absolute darkness surrounded the three boys in its suffocating presence. At last, the familiar sound of rolling rocks, and then, nothing.

“Guess we really… Caved in, huh?”

Keith didn’t answer, turning on the headlights instead.
Cave waters - or - You're not sure you're swimming

Chapter Summary

Am I really gonna have Lance and Keith alone in a cave in the dark, half naked by the end of this? Yes, yes i am.

Chapter Notes

Yo its summer and i post stuff ?? ahhahaa enjoy it babes

“It’s really dark in there, huh.” Lance started. The camera, switched in a night-vision mode, filmed him in greenish tones.

The walls around them, monoliths of darkness and stone, were far enough to let Keith drive meticulously further and further inside the mountain. The path was exhausting. He had to keep an eye on both sides of the car, take care to never stop and yet, never go too fast, in case the path would end abruptly and chuck them over into a pit of pitch black void. The echo of the motor was deafening.

“We… Survived to an small army, a trek into TNT land and a car chase on wild tracks, to end up blocked inside a creepy cave. I love mondays.” Hunk followed up.

“We’re friday.” Lance deadpanned.

“Same thing. I hate dying, the day doesn’t matter.”

“Guys ! Shush it. I’m trying to concentrate.” Keith’s rasp yells stopped them short.

Lance passed his index over his throat, shooting glares at the camera. Hunk nodded.

‘Turn it off, bro.’
Passing a leg over the cabin’s border, Lance wiggled his way up to the front of the car, plopping in the seat next to Keith’s. The needle of the speed cadran indicated 3km/h. At this rate, they would go faster walking.

“So… Keithy boy. We haven’t talked much yet.”

Keith sniffed.

“Hey, drop it, Sasuke. We’re in this together, okay.” Lance extended his hand. In the front cabin, thanks to the headlights, the outlines of things were visible. He reached out for Keith’s forearm. “You don’t have to keep the walls up.”

“You don’t even know my last name.” Keith scoffed.

“Yeah, but I got beaten up for you. I’d say it’s rather more speaking than knowing your ID by heart. Plus, I bet it’s something terrible. Yeehaw McMullet.”

Hunk snorted.

“It’s not.” Keith countered.

“Then what?”

Lance was not giving up. The dark made people talk, usually. Being unable to distinguish the other’s faces tended to blur the edges, to soften the masks. If he was to die with Keith in this neverending cavern, he wanted to at least know the guy a little. Or more.

Keith gulped. It felt like his right forearm was radiating from the touch. Lance wasn’t even paying attention to that, and lifted his feet up on the dashboard. He looked… cool. Relaxed. Removing his hand from Keith, he crossed his arms behind his head.

“I got all day, you know.”
Keith glanced at the cold spot on his skin, where Lance used to be.

The car chase of earlier was nothing compared to *that* emotional rollercoaster.

*Keep it together, will you ?!* 

Behind them, Hunk closed his eyes and laid down in the trunk. His finger discreetly clicked the record button.

“So ? I’m going to keep calling you McMullet…”

Keith shrugged.

Lance nodded slighlty. He knew when to insist, but he also understood when to stop. Keith might have been ready to die for Lance, but not to give him his full name. What a weirdo.

Still… Silence was making things uncomfortable.

“Do you know how far this tunnel goes ?”

Another shrug. Lance barely discerned the edges of his lips.

“I’m not sure. Long enough, but… It’s thousands of years old. If it’s a natural trail, then it could go for miles and miles. If it’s man made, then we’ll know it soon.”

Lance had nothing to answer to that. Keith had a way to naturally shut the conversation… Not in a mean way, but... There was nothing left to say. If he wanted to know more, Lance would have to play it clever.

“So… How did you got into this business ?”
Keith sighed. “I told you. I used to smuggle stuff in schools and fight a lot. I met someone. He showed it to me, end of the story.”

“Yeah, I got that. But you got to admit, we’re not in Kansas anymore. What does the whole Trainspotting lifestyle has to do with being stuck in Mexico?”

“Hey, I wasn’t doing drugs! I sold them, that’s all.” Keith exclaimed. “But… It’s not as easy as it seems. When my dad died, I got scholarized into this military school. I left from there and then it tumbled down.”

Lance glanced at Keith. His eyes were fixed on the emptiness ahead.

“Shiro… The guy that found me. I still don’t know why he did it. But he raised me after my father, he took me under his wing. We traveled a lot. And we made a lot of money too.” Keith was vague and yet, Lance could picture it enough to understand. “He’s like, my brother? And he’s missing. We sold a good amount of antiques, in the past. Fakes, real ones, stolen, or looted even. He was abroad for a scavenging mission.”

Keith’s voice broke on the words. Lance hesitated.

_You’re not obliged to tell us._

“I thought he would be here.”

Lance let go off the cool attitude and hunched down on his seat. “What? Here, in Mexico?”

Keith nodded. Allura’s printed newspaper surfaced back into his memory, Shiro’s face merely just a group of black dots on cheap paper. The closest thing he had to a clue.

“I wanted to find him. I want to find him.”

“You will.” Lance whispered.

Keith scoffed lightly, a smile peeking up a little on the corner of his mouth. “Yeah…”
The crossover and its passengers kept moving in the dark for an eternity, it seemed. Lance shifted on his seat. The noise of the car, a purr behind his ears, lulled him softly. Despite the accidented terrain, the crossover was only rocking them gently, thanks to Keith’s cautiousness.

Lance observed him. Focused on the road ahead, his eyes in the dark seemed to be two black holes, open on the infinite. Light was barely even caressing the silhouette of his face, and the rest of his body disappeared down, deprived of it.

As far as he was concerned, Lance would never had guessed Keith could be… Like that.

Four days ago, they had smashed his car, and offered him lunch. Keith was reserved and cold, and Lance hadn’t stopped talking, eager to fake a good atmosphere, maybe.

And two days later, they met again. Keith drove them through the desert, silent, observing. Lance didn’t remember what he used to think about Keith then.

It’s like every hour that passed, he changed his mind on the guy.

Keith had decided to blow up a whole camp. Keith nearly died. Keith shot at cars and Keith yelled at him, ordering him to take the wheel. Trusting Lance with his life.

Heck. Who is this guy.

Lance doubted they would ever know. At most, he would change his opinion a dozen times again, and then Keith and his halo of mysteries would disappear into the desert, just like they entered, just like a mirage.

If Lance’s jaw wasn’t furiously hurting right now, he would even doubt this to be real.

Hunk was snoring gently in the back. After all these emotions, he deserved the rest that offered their drive into the unknown. It was too dark to see a thing, but Lance still extended his hand slowly, until his finger met the soft sensation of Hunk’s hair. He stroked it a few times.

The contact was reassuring. They were alive. It was one crazy dumpster on fire of a mess of a night,
hell, but they were alive! What a victory.

“I think Hunk’s sleeping.”

“Mh-hm.”

“Do you… Do you want me to take the wheel again? You look exhausted.” Lance offered.

Keith considered the options. He was sure of himself and could keep driving for a good hundred of miles again, but…

The reminiscent image of Lance, kneeled at the back of the car, trigger unlocked and gun loaded, popped up in Keith’s mind. His eyes, despite their bubbly tingle that sparkled in them in most times, had reflected such an intense concentration…

To be honest, since everything was over and he had too much time on his hand to think, well now, Keith could admit it was kind of… Hot. In a way. In a way, it was!

Come on!

“Yeah, thanks.”

The car stopped, long enough for them to switch places. Lance kept moving as soon as his feet hit the pedals.

Keith flopped onto the passenger seat. His bandaged ankle down, he contorted himself to put the other next to his thigh, in a complicated position. Lance snorted.

“And that’s supposed to be comfy?”

Keith groaned. His head hit the window, his hair ruffling over his face. Lance watched his eyelashes flutter a little. The car nearly hit the wall.
“Jeez !” Lance cursed under his breath.

“Careful.”

“Yeah, sorry.” Lance reported his attention to the abyss expanding again and again before the wheels. “So… Crazy night, huh ?”

“Mh-hm.”

“I bet this isn’t in the contract of any archeologist around !”

“Yeah, surely not.” Keith’s voice was getting lower and lower. Merely above a mutter.

Lance tapped his thumbs over the wheel.

“Hey, hum… Keith ?”

“Yeah ?”

“Thanks.”

Lance heard fabric ruffle on his right. Keith’s head had shifted, his face now turned to the window entirely.

You’re welcome. Keith did not say it, but he thought it loud enough.

With Hunk snoring behind and Keith oscillating between sleep and grogginess, Lance got left alone with his thoughts.
I could have died. We could have died a million times. This dude straight up smacked me, and probably would have done worse. What am I doing here? I promised I would be there for the next holidays. I hope w-

An horrible scraping sound hurled into the gallery. Screeee-

Keith jumped on his feet, hands already on his boot to fetch his knife, ready to kill. Hunk yelled, jolting up in seated position and randomly throwing punches.

Lance froze. The car stopped, and so did the scream of the metal against the rocks.

“What was that?!” Keith shouted. His voice was still dusty and sleepy, his throat raw from the intermittent nap. His scream echoed around the car.

“I-I, I don’t know? I hit something. I think.” Lance blabbered. He pressed the pedals again, just to try…

Screeeeeeeeechhhh.

“AH FUCK !”

“Man, stop it !”

“Okay! Okay! I just wanted to try! I think it’s stuck.” Lance pleaded. He was tempted to push again, but Keith had a knife in his hand, somehow, and Lance wasn’t taking any chances. “Hunk, can you see if it’s something with the wheels behind ?”

A movement rattled the car. Keith swayed out of the front cabin.

“What are you doing?!” Lance asked. Uncertainty and exasperation pierced in his voice, but above all, emergency. This was not the time for one of his majestic twists.

“I’m checking the front.”
And he glided over the hood of the car before landing in front of them. The headlights illuminated his silhouette. It took Lance five seconds to reboot.

*Please never remove your shirt or I’ll die on the spot.*

“Lance ?”

*Oh no.*

“I’m going to need you to stop and turn on the car when I tell you, okay ?” Keith asked as propped open the hood. “You ready ?”

“5/5 captain !”

“Turn off !”

*Here we go !*

Absolute darkness engulfed them for a second before Keith clicked a button, and light flickered at the front of the crossover. The dynamo flashlight. He never thought he would use it, and yet.

Lance heard Keith pick at the wires in the front, and grumble about something. Finally, Keith stuck his head out of the hood and glanced at Lance. A greasy black fingerprint crossed his temple.

“Turn on the car !”

“ Heck, this baby’s not the only one gettin’ turned on…” Lance muttered.

The motor purred. Keith slammed the hood shut. Lance watched him wipe his hand on his thigh, staining forever the dark jeans he wore. The thing was doomed anyways, holes pierced in the knees, blood stains all over the fabric and a nice tye and dye of mud from the ankles up.
With his sweaty shoulders, grumpy look and dark eyes, Keith looked way too nice. Lance violently shook his head. They were rivals, destined to find treasures together and fighting for the best part of the goods! It wasn’t the moment to think of anything besides that!

He moved on to Hunk, still silent behind the car.

“Hey, bud’,” Lance started as he joined Hunk behind the trunk, “How is it doing?”

Hunk, in the faint light of his stolen flashlight, smirked at him. “I don’t know. How is it doing, Lance?”

“What?” Lance blinked. “What are you talking about?”

Hunk shook his head, sighing. Desperate cases.

“Nevermind.” He pointed at the wheels. “Everything is clear here, but look at the ground. It’s… Wet. Clammy.”


“Yep. Because the only way this could be wet is that this tunnel ends up on a body of water big enough to humidify the air inside…” Hunk’s eyes lit up, as his own discovery came to the light of his words, “And that would create a tunnel! This thing has an end!”

“Hey, Mullet, you heard that?!”

Silence. Lance looked at the front of the crossover. Nothing.

“Huh, Keith?”

Even the light of the dynamo was gone. Lance felt his heart start to pound into his chest.
“Huh… Lance… Where is he?” Hunk muttered. His voice flickered like a candle, weak and uneven.

Lance wasn’t much more assured. He grabbed Hunk’s biceps. “Come on, big guy.”

They passed over the car, Hunk grabbing his camera in the meantime. Lance scrambled vaguely for something to use as a weapon, and landed his choice on a metallic tube long enough to keep enemies at bay.

Keith was much more fit than them both. Passing over the roof of the crossover took them a minute, but when the flocked on the ground, headlights of the car behind them, Lance decided that either Keith had been abducted, and it was bad, either he had purposely chosen to go alone into the tunnel, and things were worse, because that boy was mad crazy to do such a thing.

“Damn.”

“Creepy.”

“Yeah.”

They both needed the comfort of breaking the silence.

Hunk placed a hand on the wall. His face was contorted in a grimace, anxiety creeping up his bones. Lance wasn’t any better, his stomach tormenting him. Heck, his kneecaps wanted to take a day off too. He was standing on jello.


They walked for a couple of meters, hands gripped on the other’s arm. The pitch black hole of the tunnel was growing bigger and bigger. Sweat rolled down his spine.

“Hold on!” Hunk gritted. “I see something!” His eye glued to the camera lens on his shoulder,
Hunk trembled. “And it’s coming towards us!”

Lance waved his metallic bar like a spear in front of him. The air swished around it.

“Beware ! I took the free fencing classes in high school !” He agitated his hand a little more.

Something sprung from the darkness. A figure, blurry and undefined, emerged from the shadow, a dark silhouette looming toward them. A rock rolled at their feet.

Cling.

Hunk lost it.

“NOT TODAY SATAN ! AAAAAH !” And... He ran away, his scream bouncing on the cavern walls.

Lance was frozen. Something had gripped the hand of his stick, and now that Hunk was gone, he had even less light to see. His heart was menacing to explode in his chest. It felt like the walls were tumbling on him, rarefying the air and suffocating him. Even thinking was on hold.

He felt the movement of the air, and the edge of the figure inching toward him. A whisper in his ear.

“Careful, you’re gonna hurt someone with this.”

“KIEEEITH !”

A screech in the abyss. Lance nearly lost it too.

“Yeah ?” Keith only replied in a breath.

“WHAT THE HECK, DUDE ? I THOUGHT I WAS GONNA HAVE A HEART ATTACK !”
The metallic sound of a mechanism, and suddenly, the dynamo flashlight brightened their faces. Keith’s eye were wide open, his brow arched high above them. If anything, he looked curious.

“Why? There’s only us in this tunnel.” He started walking toward the crossover.

“Oh yeah? Well, what if there wasn’t?! ” Hunk yelled.

Lance was frowning, frantically stomping behind Keith, while Hunk ran to him. By the time Lance arrived to their level, Hunk was shaking the boy’s shoulders with a surprising force. When his head stopped bobbing, Keith ran a hand through his hair.

“Hey, guys, calm down, okay?! No one is in this tunnel, you’re not going to die, and I need to get to the car.” He jumped on the other side, passing over the seat and the trunk with the lamp.

Lance was trying to calm his nerves, the adrenaline toning down in his system. Hunk and him had already spent a good chunk of their videos getting scared, in old asylums or abandoned churches, but this was by far the scariest thing they’d ever lived through. Besides the see-through dresses of their maths teacher.

When Keith reappeared next to him, Lance was learning to breathe normally again.

“Hunk, watch for you camera. And, Lance?”

“Yeah?” Lance lifted his gaze to meet Keith’s.

After the imperturbable faces of earlier, what a surprise to find the etching of a smile.

“Take this, we might need it later.”

Keith handed Lance one of the handguns he had found into the glovebox. Surely, he wasn’t the most confident about it, but sooner or later, they would have to come out of that tunnel. That, or someone would come in. Either way, they had to pack.
Lance stared at the gun in his hand.

“Are you sure about this…?”

Keith was not listening, already moving on, checking the walls around the front of the car.

The car wasn’t moving with them.

“Too tight, it’s not gonna pass.” Keith explained. “They kept narrowing as we drove.” He pointed at the ceiling, clearly lower than before. They entered the cave pretty easily, and now that he’d said it, the others noticed too. The walls were tighter.

Keith glanced at the car and mentally counted, making sure he was not forgetting the essential.


Camera, action.

“Okay, let’s go.” As he passed by Lance, Keith landed a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Thanks for the head start, Lance.”

“Ah, it’s my job, dude, I’m the pilot.” Lance brushed away, his hand passing over the burnt edges of his hair. His eyes closed, and he nearly walked into the nearest wall.

“Yeah, I’ve seen that.” Keith responded with a smile.

Lance watched him go for a solid second before remembering how to move a foot. As they followed Keith into the tunnel, Hunk snorted.

*That’s on tape!*
Lance was bouncing on his feet, pacing like a child in a field trip by Hunk’s side. Hunk smiled. He had to admit, seeing his friend so happy was pretty damn cool. Even more after tonight’s events.

That being said, Hunk couldn’t help but feel a pinch in his heart, some little voice telling him this couldn’t end all peachy.

After all, the next steps would led them to go separate ways, inevitably. Keith, whoever this guy was, would go back to his insanely dangerous life, and Lance and himself would get back to their usual, normal lives.

They probably would never see each other again.

“Hunk, can I make a confession?” Lance blurted out of nothing.

“Of course.”

“I think I’m going to quit college.” Lance stopped walking, staring at the camera instead. “I… I feel like this is my call. I don’t think I’ll ever do anything as fun as… Whatever this is.”

Hunk stopped using the lense to see, looking at Lance directly.

“You’re sure about this?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’ll validate my year and get the diploma and stuff but… I won’t go further.” Lance dropped.

They stayed still for a moment, the silence of the cave only troubled by the sound of Keith’s steps. Sensing the matter was serious, and overall private, he had prefered to take his distance. Give them a little air.

 Okay.” Hunk proceeded to mouth. “Well, in that case…”

Lance violently shook his hands in front of him. “No, no! I’m not asking you to quit with me!” His shoulders drooped. “I just wanted to tell you, that’s all.”
Hunk nodded gravely.

“I know. But, hey,” He turned away, looking nowhere precisely. “I think my moms would really love to have me over sometimes. We could take a gap year! I get my degree, you get yours, and we fly? I’d like to take a few independant classes anyways.” Hunk reached for Lance’s hand, stepping up to him. “How about that? And when we come back, you’ll decide what you really want to do with that sparkly mind of yours.”

“And you with your big brain!” Lance responded, tapping his index over his temple.

“Yeah, that too! So, what do you say?”

Lance mimed a reflexion, pointing a finger under his chin. His eyes rolled all around in the dark before finally settling on Hunk’s face with a smug.

“I vote for it!”

“Agreed!” Without a warning, Lance jumped, throwing himself into Hunk’s arms. He caught him last second, awkwardly balancing a human body and a camera. “If you break my baby I revoke the deal, though.”

Lance snickered. “You would never.”

Hunk lowered his head, grinning from ear to ear. “Heeh- you never know.”

Lance nudged his elbow in his side, and picked up the pace. Hunk stepped in his tracks.

“Mind updating the vlog? I think it’s a good mood now.”

Lance glanced at the camera. “Sure. It’s recording?”

Hunk pushed his thumb up. Walking backwards in front of him, Lance summed up the situation.
“Secret of the blue waters, part, huh, 6! After the Mad Max trials and the rooftop session, we’re now in the Cavern of Doom!”

“Oh, don’t call it that…” Hunk whined.

“There’s seemingly no way out, as the tunnel goes further and further into the darkness! The car got caught up in the rocks, and now, we’re obliged to walk. Is this cave leading us to a certain, terrible, tragic death? Who knows!” Lance threw his arms in the air. “Keith-diana Jones is a little further down there, and if you hear a scream, well that means we’re not gonna make it.”

Hunk raised an eyebrow behind the camera.

“He’s stronger than us two united, so yeah, if this guy can’t make it, no one will. Plus, he’s super good at all those circus tricks, and he’s always pulling stunts out of nowhere…” Realization probably dawned upon Lance, because he stopped gushing abruptly. “Anyways he’s down there.”

“He sure is.” Hunk confirmed. He tried to hide the smile in his voice.

Lance turned his head away. Hunk dragged him back into the conversation.

“Oh, Lance, wonderful Lance, marvelous Lance.”

“Stop it, you!” Lance chuckled.

“What do your beautiful eyes see?”

Lance whistled by the corner of the mouth. “Heck. I see… I see nothing. It’s all dark. I can vaguely see you, tho, because of the camera lights. That’s all.”

Hunk nearly tripped on a random rock, before going on. “What do your pretty ears hear, Lance?”
“I hear footsteps, ours. And my ears buzz a little, somehow? Guys this is weird. Also sometimes there are flick flacks.”

“And what do your hands feel?” Hunk repressed a laugh at Lance’s indigened noise.

Lance palmed the wall, brushing it as he kept walking. “It’s humid, gross! Wet. Like, clay, in pottery class? And it’s grainy. Like there was tons of tiny rocks licking at my hands.”

“Hah, weird.”

“Totes.”

Keeping the pace up, Hunk continued. “And what do you smell, Lance?”

“Oh. It smells like an old, old cavern, you know. Dust, and earth and soil and something else, very salty.” The boy winked at the camera. “That’s the smell of adventure!”

“Yeah, smells like… Like silverware.”

“Silverware?” Lance parroted.

“Yeah, silverware. Like, you know the feeling of an iron spoon on your tongue? That’s what it smells like.” Hunk nodded, bobbing the camera as he did so.

“Agree.”

The two boys kept walking for a little more, and then Hunk muffled a laugh, snorting suddenly.

“What is it?” Lance huffed. “Dude, come on!”

Hunk was shaking, caught up in a soft hysterical laughter.
“Hunk !” Lance nudged his palms into Hunk’s side, shifting him over. “You have to tell me now !”


Lance deadpanned. “You want me to lick the walls.” As soon as he dropped that, he stopped walking, his feet planted face to the tunnel’s side.

“Kinda ?” Hunk chuckled, slowly recovering. “We need to do the five senses !”

“Mh…” Lance wasn’t convinced. The thing smelled weird and looked like… Nothing. No way he was putting his mouth on that.

“Taste the rock. I dare you.” Hunk added.

Oh, there it was.

“It’s a dare ?” Lance jolted to face the camera, pointing at the wall. This changed everything.

Lance never backed down from a dare. Like, never. Sure, it got him into trouble, detention and the neighbor’s locked cabin in the woods. But he never cowarded out of a challenge, especially Hunk’s. Even more filmed.

He had to admit, that was a weakness. But he was a man of the people and aimed to please, so whenever there was something stupid, dangerous or funny, or all three, to do, he jumped on it as soon as the words had left their mouth.

D-A-R-E. Do it, Lance !

Hunk shimmied his whole body. Yes, it was a dare !
Lance ran a hand over the nearest surface. Nothing on it. He secretly hoped no spiders would crawl out and meet his tongue. He had no idea of what he was about to lick. Really.

“Very well, I hope your camera’s ready.”

“Hold on, I’ll try to makeshift a flash or something. I want to see that in full colors.” Hunk replied. He reached for the pockets of the coat and fetched a remaining cactus-shaped lighter. Keith’s… somehow.

Hunk approached the lighter near Lance’s head, bathing his face in an orange light. Their eyes whited-out for a couple of seconds, overwhelmed by the sudden luminosity.

As they progressively recovered vision, Lance and Hunk both walked away from the wall.

“Hunk…” Lance’s words died in his mouth, jaw wide open despite the bruises.

“Yeah.” Hunk muttered, bewildered. “It shines.”

Indeed, it was shining. The cactus lighter and its flickering flame had revealed to the light countless of tiny, sparkling dots incrusted in the rocks around them, like dozen of fireflies pinned to the walls, glinting forever.

“It’s like, tiny gold specks.”

“Wonderful.” Hunk approached his hand of the rocks, mesmerized by the effect. “It looks like someone sprinkled stardust on the stone. This is amazing.” He handed Lance the lighter. “Dude, light this up, I want to take good videos.”

Lance raised his arm as far as he could, enshrouding the nearest area in gold and sparkles. Hunk zoomed in and out of it, fascinated. The view was captivating.

“It’s like walking in space. All of these golden dots. They’re stars!” Lance started. “Why does this reminds me of something so much, though…”
Hunk chipped one of the jewels out of the walls, examining it in his hand before zooming on it. His gears tickled.

“Actually… That’s not gold. At all.” He tilted the crystal in his hand, looking at the sharp edges, the cubic formations and the strangely metallic reflection. “It’s a cuboid crystal. That’s pyrite.”

Lance flared his nostrils, glaring at Hunk dead in the eye. “Expand on that, buddy.”

“It’s the fool’s gold, an iron sulfide. Named “Fool’s gold” because during the Gold Rush, some people mistook the brassy looks of this little baby for gold. It was used to ignite fires too, some time ago.” Hunk explained. “It’s most likely of sedimentary or magmatic origin but we have found some in hydrothermal deposits. Or in certain meteorites.”

“Ouch!” Lance yelped. The flame of the lighter was getting on his fingers, a little too hot relationship for him to handle.

Oblivious, Hunk continued. “The slaty and clayey grounds of low-oxygen environments, because of the action of bacteria on some organic matter, are really rich in pyrite. Just like here, heh! The starting point of the mineralization is the production of hydrogen sulphide by proteolytic bacteria that degrade proteins and-”

Lance waved the lighter around. “Buddy! Hep! Hunk! I don’t understand a single word! I love you but… This is gibberish.”

Hunk raised his eyes to Lance, eyelids low in a smug expression. “Oh, you lo- Wait Lance!” The smugness left his face for a panicked look.

“What?” Lance tilted his head, his thumb toying with the lighter’s sparkle wheel and poofing out little sparks out of it.


The urgency in his voice made Lance drop the lighter, startled. The echo of the plastic resonated in the dark, somewhere at their feet. Back to the usual pitch black ambiance, yay!
“Well, that’s not ideal.” Lance deadpanned.

“Oh, you think ?”

Lance was about to snark back something very, very witty and humorous, but the racky echo of a voice stopped him from doing so. Far away, down in the dark, Keith had kept walking, eclipsing himself from their conversation. Apparently, he had stopped.

“Oh, guys ?!” Keith shouted. Through the echos, his voice sounded even deeper than it was. “I think there’s something over there you might like to see.”

Lance and Hunk exchanged quick looks, jogging a little up to catch up with Keith. Task easier said than done, because of the slippery floor and the rocks and pebbles scattered here and there. Soon enough, their steps began to echo much, much louder than they were supposed to.

Standing in the middle of the path, Keith was waiting for them, his silhouette cut-out on the dark by the light filtering through the dust of the tunnel.

“Here.”

Keith decided to ignore the little voice in his head telling him to reach for the hand that balanced by Lance’s side, focusing instead on… On anything else ! The warmth of the air. The salty odor that it carried, too.

Lance walked behind, his eyes fixated on Keith’s feet, and Hunk had his glued to the lens, focus made on the duo in front of him. The looked like clumsy birds, floundering in their own little heads.

When the dynamo flickered and finally died in his hands, both of the boys needed Keith’s snap of fingers to finally take a look up.

“Whoah…”

“Holy…!”
Keith had led them into the end of the tunnel. A giant circular cavern. The ceiling, higher than it had ever been since they entered the mountain, was a dome above them. But that was nothing compared to what was on the ceiling.

Lance had never seen anything remotely similar, nor as beautiful. The glinting pyrites dotting the walls were a pretty thing, sure, but this was on a whole other level of magnificent, and somehow, emotional.

The roof was covered in constellations, carvings and engravings. Humanoids figures dancing among stars he could recognize the places of, animal walking above his head. He spotted the Leo’s constellation right in the center. Regulus, or as his teacher kept repeating, Alpha Leonis, a blue-white double star, shined bright at the top of the vault.

*What’s his name again… Ah ! Yeah, the Little King.*

Lance felt his heart flutter. He could point at the stars, from under a mountain! Like a gigantic planetarium, hidden from the world, the cavern was hiding a wonderful treasure of art and nature.

And, above everything, Lance could see. Inside the holes and the chiseling of the rock, something glowed, lighting the entire room in a soft blue. Inside his heart, something told Lance he was safe. The twinkle of the azure was majestic, and the serenity of the everlasting rocks soothed his mind.

They had walked into space.

“What is this place ?” Hunk asked.

Keith only vaguely moved his jaw. He was just as surprised as them. Lance watched him softly blink at the magical ceiling.

“I don’t know. But it’s is amazing.”

*Yes, it is.*
Something cold reached out for Lance’s feet, interrupting his flow of thoughts by wetting his shoes.

“Ah!”

The floor of the cavern was entirely covered in a thin layer of water, reflecting the roof on the ground, like a gigantic mirror. Their steps troubled it, the waves shimmering the images on the ceiling.

“I think we’ve reached the end of the tunnel.” Keith stated the obvious.

Hunk approached one of the walls, camera in hand. “Wow. No way. My hand to cut if I’m wrong, but this is a bioluminescent fungi. They usually live down the ocean, but with the right amount of water, and under 20°C… Yeah that makes sense…”

Lost in his scientific ramblings, Hunk started to tour the cave.

Lance was still bewitched by the view. Looking at the engraved roof, standing on the silvered water, had made his head a little spinny. Keith nodded at him.

“So?”

“This is… Fantastic. I’ve never seen anything like this before.” Lance murmured, in fear his voice would trouble the peace of the cavern.

“I don’t know how they did this, but… It’s beautiful, yeah.” Keith agreed. “These markings are so elegant, so thin…” He furrowed his brows.

Lance watched his eyes fly from left to right, his lips mouthing words no one could hear. “Huh, Keith?”

Wait.

From squinted into thin lines, Keith’s eyes turned into round saucers with realization. “I’ve already
seen those symbols.” Without any explanation, he jolted to run towards Hunk, still filming the place on the other side of the cavern. “Hunk ! HUNK ! I need the page, the page we stole in the tent !”

“What ? I’ve left it in the car, I think.”

“Seriously ?! How could you- Argh!” Keith snapped. He huffed, and without a warning, sprinted toward the tunnel. His feet left angry prints on the water on his way out, somehow.

Lance watched him exit the room, shrugged and waltzed toward Hunk. “Pretty amazing, huh ?”

“Yeah, your friend is taking us places !” Hunk commented.

“H-he’s not my friend ! He’s not our friend at all !” Lance exclaimed. “He’s just…!”

Hunk deadpanned. “He’s just ?”

“Our rival !” Lance stuttered. “He’s just Keith, our rival ! We happened to look for the same thing but he’s competition material ! We need to beat him to the treasure, okay ? Do not befriend the enemy, you hear me Hunk ?! Plus he looks terrible. Have you seen his haircut ? Intolerable, Hunk.”

“Mh-hm.”

Sure thing, Jan.

Renouncing to broach the subject, Hunk zoomed on Lance’s face instead. The blue glow of the fungi brought out his eyes in a delicate manner, it would have been a shame not to record it.

Before Lance even got the time to find a snarky answer, Keith was back, waving the page into his hands. Pretty sure this was an olympic records to make the two-way trip that fast.

“I was right !” Keith was red and puffing. He breathed once or twice, his chest expanding beyond realistic measures. “The same symbols ! They never made up the code, it’s here !” He looked ecstatic, his eyes round and cheeks flushed from the run. His steps splashed all around him as joined
the boys, holding the page up for them all to see. “Look ! Same shape, same style ! This comes from the same source !”

Keith pointed at random patterns of the glyphs. They looked similar, some even being the very same than the ones on the page. Whatever that code was saying, it was saying it in a millenial language.

“I can’t believe we found it !” Keith yelled. “It’s real !”

Lance pouted. “Huh, found what exactly ? There’s only rocks here. I see no treasure nor anything.” His foot reached out for a pebble in the water. He kicked in it as a reflex.

“Maybe this is an enigma ?” Hunk started. “And we just need to-”

The echo of the stone rumbled on the walls.

“Lance… What did you do ?” Keith inquired, voice coming through gritted teeth.

Distinctly, something was trembling under their feet. The low growl of the mountain resonated in a way that couldn’t be any good.

“Nothing !” Lance raised his hands in protestation. “I swear !”

Keith gave a hint of walking towards Lance, and never got to touch the ground.

Since it vanished. Under their feet.

*What in hell-*

Lance felt the stone crumble and disappear, replaced almost immediately by that unmistakable sensation of floating. His body weighted nothing anymore.
“AAAAHHH ! AHH! Ah ! Ah ?” Lance’s voice died in his throat as he progressively realized…

“We’re… Not falling anymore.”

“Yeah, thanks, Hunk.”

Keith raised his eyes to the ceiling. The blue stars of the mountain still shone… Only now, they seemed unattainable, meters further than they used to be. Air had been knocked out of his lungs, and for a moment it felt like he could only stay there, watching up and waiting.

Looking down, he noticed the aspect of the stone all around. Humid, as if it had been repeatedly washed over… When his body finally came back to some senses, he batted his feet.

Water.

He was floating right in the middle of an underground natural pool.

“We fell into a cenote.” Lance pointed out loud.

Keith extended a foot. His toes could not touch the bottom of the pit. Waddling through the water more than swimming, he finally reached a tolerable depth, where he could stand without using his arms. He settled back on his stance, looking around for an exit. His eyes swept over the sinkhole they had fell in, from Hunk holding his camera up to Lance picking at his shirt, tongue out.

The soft glow of the stellar vault had been replaced by another. The water’s.

“Hunk, do you have anything about that ?” Keith asked, pointing at the weirdly illuminated liquid.

After all, they were the college boys, not him.

“Well, I might, but I’d rather do it out of the water. It’s kind of cold.” Hunk hushed.
Keith admitted it was, but his body had disconnected so many nerve endings today that the freezing bite of the water had not even hit him yet. He pointed at what seemed to be a bank, on the side.

“Let’s see if we can make it up there.”

Hunk didn’t need to be told twice, and rushed to the upper rocks. Keith had troubles moving, water engulfing him up to the torso. His movements were slowed down by the density of the liquid, and now that he had realized it, the cold was… Taking over.

“Hey, buddy.” Lance grabbed his shirt by the side. “Come on.”

Keith followed, his brain frozen.

Lance hooked his arm behind his back, hunching over so that Keith could pass his own behind Lance’s neck for support. The temperature was rushing lower and lower. Keith felt his head spin. He could not feel his toes anymore.

“Hunk, give me a hand. I can’t lift him up.” Lance had gotten half of Keith out of the water already, but still struggled.

A huge hand seized him by the collar, dragging him out of the waters to the safety of the rocks above. Keith collapsed on the floor.

Above him, the other two sat down. Lance had only been soaked wet up to the waist and fervently shook his shoes to get the water out. Hunk hadn’t been so lucky, and even the bottom of his shirt was damp.

“The camera’s still dry, so that’s a plus.” He noted. “Good reflexes.”

Keith, located more centrally when the ground fell, had plunged directly into the waters. His hair was glued to his nape, not from sweat but from icy water. He felt so sleepy. The cold was putting his system down, shutting off his concentration. Unable to focus on himself, Keith decided to focus on the voices around.
“Ah, that sucks.” Lance whined. “I cut myself open on those rocks.”

“Is it bad ?” Keith breathed out.

“Mh, nah. Could be w- hey, you okay, man ?”

If the definition of ‘okay’ was this indescribable sensation of progressively getting absorbed into the nothing, yeah, Keith was mostly okay.

“His lips are downright… Purple.” Hunk stared at the guy’s face, and like a spectator at a tennis match, went from Keith’s lips to Lance eyes, to Keith’s lips…

Keith put an elbow behind his back, trying to get back in a seated position. His body reluctantly accepted… Then refused, and he crashed on the stone, slamming the back of his head hard on it.

“Oof…”

This was like one of the worst of Matt’s cocktails, mixed up with the strongest sleeping pills of the market. Only much, much colder. And he was drenched in it. His brain was drowning in cotton.

“Oh boy.” Hunk passed a hand under his head, lifting it up.

“I think he’s in hypothermia.” Lance worded. He glanced at Keith’s shirt. “Coño, he’s soaked wet.” He reached for the hem of the fabric instantly, peeling it off Keith’s body. His skin was already pale, but now, it inched toward dangerously so. “I thought it was just the shirt’s color but no… It’s super wet, omg.”

Lance grabbed one of Keith’s wrists, pressing a thumb over them.

“So ?” Asked Hunk.

Lance’s look sufficed to answer him. Things were bad. Very bad.
Lance yanked his shirt over his head, palming Keith’s body with it, drying the last drops the best he could. Under his hands, he felt the other boy shiver and tremble, heat dropping a little more.

“We need to warm him up.” Lance said, passing his arms out of his jacket. “The shock of temperatures brain-freezed him and his system can’t compensate for the loss of body heat.”

Hunk had put down the camera. Lance was never serious unless things really needed his full attention. “Okay but, how ? We lost the lighter in the tunnel. And most of my vest is wet.”

“Remove it anyways !” Lance ordered. He was already wrapping Keith’s body up in his coat, gently rubbing the fabric in order to heat it up.

Hunk promptly obeyed and added his own coat to the package. Keith looked now like a very strange burrito, and while Lance was removing his shoes, Hunk managed to note that if not for the lips, this boy was entirely in black and white, now.

Black hair, white skin, sharp contrast, biting cold.

“Hey, Keith, how are you feeling ?” Lance asked. His voice sounded more like he was speaking to a five-years-old than to Keith, the amazing guy whom he gushed about not even twenty minutes before.

Keith scoffed as an answer.

Lance smiled and went for another heartbeat checkup. His smile widened after a minute.

“Well, you almost scared me there, buddy ! But you’re officially O.O.D. ! Out of danger ! I wish I could hand you a hot chocolate or pour you some tea, but as you see,” Lance said sheepishly, pulling on his collar, “we’re a little dry on it.”

Keith groaned. His face was finally gaining back some colors.
“What happened?”

Weak voice, but audible. A win.

“Hydrocution and hypothermia, I’d say. Short breath, weak pulse, body heat crashing down, loss of balance and of coherent speech…” Lance enumerated as he counted on his fingers. “I don’t think running a sprint to immediately jump over five meters into a crazy cold pool is very recommended by the handbook of the treasure-hunter.” Lance said. His tone was lighter.

As an answer, Keith lowered his gaze. He rested his head on the rocks as gently as possible, grimacing when it reminded him of the earlier encounter at supersonic speed of his skull with the stone. That was going to bruise too.

Finally, he settled in what could be the less-worse position. Not comfortable, but at least he wasn’t dying.

Hunk let out a sigh, promptly joined by the two others.

Ain’t no rest for the wicked, even in nearly magical underground cenotes.

For a moment, they laid there, stargazing under the mountain, Keith slowly recomposing his usual self. The shock of the fall and the cold on his worn out, overheated body, had finished to cut out all of his sensations. He was completely out of his physical form, his flesh turned to plastic.

If anything was broken, it would have to wait tomorrow. Now, he solely had one purpose in mind.

The statuette.

Somewhere, nearby, it was waiting. Keith could feel it, like a string pulling him closer and closer. Somehow, he knew it, the end was closer than he could imagine. He breathed out.

*I’m coming for you.*
A pebble rolled at his feet and flocked into the water.

“So… Now what ?” Hunk rose the question, unaware of Keith’s objectives.

“I guess we need to find a way out of here.” Lance stood up, hands on his hips, eyes roaming over the walls in hope to find an exit. “The water has to come from somewhere, doesn’t it ?”

“Not necessarily.” Hunk answered. “Cenotes like this are just the result of years and years of erosion. All that water might not have sprung from anywhere.”

“So… Where did it came from ?”

“Usually, the water infiltrates the rocks, and after years and years of caving in the limestone, a sinkhole appears. The stone caves in and if the ceiling breaks, well, boom ! Cenote.” Hunk waved a hand around. “That’s where we are.”

Lance had never experienced the feeling that came with the discovery of another of those hollow bubbles of the earth, filled with crystal clear waters. This one seemed different, in a way, but he couldn’t precisely explain why.

Well, apart from the glowing glyphs and the mysterious carvings, anyways.

“You mean there’s no way out ?”

“To be honest, I don’t know.” Hunk admitted.

“Why is it glowing though ?” Lance asked again, decided to break the silence. “The same thing than up there ?”

“Fungi ? Might be that. Maybe there’s some phosphore inside the water too.” Hunk replied, shrugging. Marine science had never been his forte, as he was more of a geologist. Metal and earth, stone and iron.
“It has to come from somewhere !” His voice was still croaky and deeper than usual. Keith remembered Shiro pushing him in the pools during summer, but never anything of that kind. He was still frozen, but more than that, he was confused. “Why would they even create this if it led to nothing ?”

“You know, Keith, sometimes people do things just for the hell of it.” Lance smirked.

“And the map ?” Keith insisted. “It led us right to here !”

“Maybe the treasure was the secret cave all along.” Hunk quoted, laughing at his own joke.

“NO ! There has to be something else !” Keith yelled, his breath short. They didn’t need anything but a cool mystery, of course they were chill about it ! He was desperate to one day find the damn statuette.

Silence fell on the cave, the gentle flickerings of the water only troubling the atmosphere. Keith clenched his fists, his teeth crushing each other. This could not be the end of it !

Both Hunk and Lance exchanged a look, eyebrows up and lips curled down. Uh-oh. None of them had any true will to discourage Keith, to be fair.

“Oh-kay then.” Lance started. “What do you suggest ?”

Keith buried his head in his arms, crossed over his knees. Hunk’s vest slipped down his back, flopping on the ground in a pathetic thump . Oblivious, Keith glared at the water licking the rocks in tiny waves at his feet.

Lance reached for the pockets of the discarded jacket, picking Keith’s notebook out of it. He flipped
through the pages carefully, some of them wet, looking for-

“There.”

The sketch of the statuette, and the notes, filled up one of the last pages. Lance waved it under Keith’s nose, eager to get his attention.

“That’s what you’re looking for, right? A mystical statue?” Lance asked.

“Yeah, so what?” Keith mumbled from under his bangs.

“Well. I don’t have anything about statues, but I did research ancient temples across South America for a paper, at school.” Lance said. “Believe it or not. Let’s admit you’re right, and the map was correct too, where the hell could this statue be? If anything, I would have put it up there in the star vault.”

“Listen, I don’t know more than you do, okay? Allura sent me there, she asked for her thing, I’m going to get it, point.” Keith hissed. “So, you, believe it or not, I’m going to find something, or die trying!”

At this point, Keith was leaning toward Lance, tensed like a bow’s rope. Ready to break. His nails raked over the stone. Out of anger, he grabbed the nearest rock and jumped on his feet to throw it into the water. The thing bubbled before slowly descending into the crystal clear abyss.

His shoulders trembled.

Lance glanced at the rock, at Keith, then back at the rock and at Keith again.

“Geez, calm down. We’re going to find something.” Lance used his most reasonable voice, decided to stick through thick and thin with Keith if this could really save their asses. Or just…

“Mmh, actually, I might just have.”
Both Keith and Lance bolted on their feet to look at Hunk, nearly snapping their spines. He pointed his chin towards the sinking rock.

“Okay so I know I said it, but this up there, it’s bioluminescent fungi. Which means, there are bacteria able to develop here. So like, I’m not always right, you know, but I knew it, so here’s the thing. I should have understood sooner but-”

“Hunk, drop it.” Lance ordered. Nicely, but still. They hadn’t all day. Besides, if this thing was really closed from all ends, oxygen would soon start to decrease, and that would be a whole new problem.

“Okay, okay! I thought this whole ‘glowing water’ thing was weird. But I might have another explanation.” He waved his hand, urging them to look at the pool. “Look at the water. It’s incredibly clear, despite the fact that a ton of rocks just smashed into it.”

“Huh, yeah? And so?” Keith pouted.

“Well, you’d think with all the rumble and stuff, this should be a bugg muddy gross thing, by now. But it isn’t. Any ideas of why?”

“Hunk! Enough with the riddles!”

Hunk blinked a few times, his head pushed back. “Wow, Keith, no offense here, but please never host a TV show. Here’s the thing. The water glows, but much less than what you think. Look at the bottom of the pool.”

They followed his gaze.

“It’s like… a mirror.”

“Exactly. Up there, we weren’t walking on water.” Hunk waited a pregnant second, raising up the tension. “It was mercury.”

He waited for a reaction, his smug smile spread across his cheeks. Sadly for him, the news didn’t hit any button.
“Guys. Mercury? Nothing?”

If anything, Keith frowned, and Lance raised his shoulders up to his ears. Nope, nothing.

Hunk sighed. He really needed a science comrad. Lance was brilliant in his field, and Keith was a quick thinker, but none of them shared his vivid interest in a way that could be triggered by the word ‘mercury’.

“Okay. Well, mercury is huh… Denser than water. Which means it doesn’t mix up with it, and instead stays in place like one big package of liquid metal.” He nodded at the reflection of the carvings in the pool. “Furthermore, it works like a mirror. That’s why the water’s so shiny. We have a double reflection, from the surface and the bottom. It lit the entire place up.”

Keith stepped up, folding his arms on his chest. “What does this have to do with an exit at all?”

“Well, you see, if there was, say, dust, in the water, it should have stacked above the mercury, and trouble the reflection. Admit it, it’s pretty clear from here, isn’t it?”

“I guess…” Keith granted.

“Dust is much more easy to move with flow. And, to keep up the argument, the water never stopped moving, even though we were already chilling out of it for at least five minutes.” Hunk raised his palm up. “Thus, there’s current in this.”

“And?” Lance deadpanned, impressed by the reasoning, but completely missing the point.

“Oh my god, do I have to do everything? There’s current! It means the water has to go somewhere! There’s an exit, at the bottom!” Hunk nearly shouted. “Come on guys!”

“Well why didn’t you say so sooner, then?!” Lance snickered.

“Hey, you didn’t thought about it either!”
“It’s okay big guy.” As he spoke, Lance ruffled the notebook, up to the end. He teared up one of the blank pages.

“Hey!” Keith exclaimed in a indiginated scream.

“You wanna get out of there or not?” Lance asked, twisting his mouth in a half smile.

Keith huffed.

Lance squatted down, knees hovering the shore of the pool. He ripped the page in small pieces, and flung them over the surface. Like a flock of birds, the papers started to cruise over the pool, following the current.

The three boys watched them drift across the water.

“Well, looks like we’ll have to cross the entire thing.” Lance dropped when the papers finally stopped traveling, to instead huddle over the furthest end of the cenote.

“Well?”

Both Hunk and Keith had yelped.

Lance was already picking at the hem of his tee-shirt. “Yeah, why?”

Keith closed the distance between them, a scowl on his pretty face. “I’m going down there alone.”

“Yeah, huh, I agree with Keith here, I’m not really peachy with swimming underwater in a mysterious cave.” Hunk added. A sorry smile twisted his lips, his fingers tapping the body of the camera. “Plus, someone’s gotta keep the baby safe, y’know?”

Lance deadpanned. “Huh, I guess Hunk’s got a point but Keith, seriously? If it hadn’t been for me, you’d be dead by now.”
Keith recoiled. He really had nothing to argue against that. He pinched the bridge of his nose, his fist opening and closing on air. He needed to find something to dissuade Lance. Anything. He couldn’t take the risk to come back with a dead body on his hands.

“You can’t be serious.” That wouldn’t hold Lance long, but at least Keith had a start.

“Why not ? I’m a surfer, I know how to handle current ! Plus, I literally saved you from drowning. And I can assure you, no one ever wanders in marine environments alone, that’s like, rule number one.” It was now Lance’s turn to close the distance between their noses. “I’m going, whether you like it or not.”

“This is crazy. You would risk your life in this ?”

“Yeah ? I risked my life every single second of the past three days, apparently, what’s the matter ?” Lance pressed a finger at Keith’s chest. “I’m coming with you.”

“No.” Keith growled.

“Or what, you’re gonna punch me ?”

Keith glared at Lance, instinctively clenching his jaw. The bruise of his short captivity was a dark mark against his neck, clashing with his skin in a way Keith could not deny. Instead, he leaned closer, nearly bumping into Lance, who’s nail was almost piercing his skin now. So close, he could almost see Lance’s flush spread across his face.

“It’s too dangerous.”

“Make me stay, I’d love to see you try.”

Their foreheads were touching now, the heat of their breath meddling in front of their eyes. The tension was palpable.

“OOH ! Okay guys, enough !” Hunk’s hands laid down on both Keith’s and Lance’s shoulders. “I don’t know what do you think you’re doing, but it’s stupid ! I even left my camera alone.”
Keith’s eyes shot daggers at Lance. He returned the favor by baring a tooth or two.

“Fine. But don’t you dare getting a single scratch out of it.” Keith snarled.

“Like you care.”

Keith inhaled sharply, biting his cheeks. Lance ran a hand through his hair, scratching his scalp more than necessary. Things were set.

“I don’t know what has gotten into you but I don’t care.” Hunk snapped his fingers between their heads, trying to get them out of their tension. “Now go! I’m freezing here.”

“Yeah, Hunk, you’re right. We’re going.” Lance dropped.

Keith shook his head. He’d have to do with it.

Lance tugged his shirt by the collar and passed it over his head. He threw it to Hunk and kneeled by the waterside. As he plunged his head in the water, a shiver shook his body from head to toes.

“It’s really freezy. My balls are gonna shrink so bad.” He snickered.

Hunk mumbled something about this being an all-audiences show, and Lance laughed harder. Water ran down on his back in droplets. Keith stared at the light blue bruises that were blossoming under the skin, but more importantly, at the red mark that extended from one shoulder blade to the other.

His mouth opened but before any words left it, Lance turned to him and shot him a surprised look.

“What are you waiting for? You don’t want to get another cold-water drowning, don’t you?”

Rather than answering, Keith simply tossed his jacket to the side. While they were getting ready, Hunk took a seat up the rocks, in an alcove of the cave. He waved at them when Lance put his first
toe in and shrieked.

“Good luck guys. Come back to me in one piece.”

“Sure thing, bud.” Lance winked at him, his fingers in a V.

“Here goes nothing.” Keith added.

And in a single motion, they dived into the pool.

Keith instinctively closed his eyes. Even if he was accustomed to the freezing bite of the cold, voluntarily jumping in was a totally different thing. Disregarding all of his natural instincts, he opened his eyes. His hair floated around his face. Within an arm’s reach, Lance was already moving on, crawling to the end of the pool.

Slower, Keith reached the supposed exit a short while after Lance.

*I guess he’s really that good at swimming.*

Only their head poked out of the water, their feet furiously battling it to maintain their mouth above the surface. Lance gestured at the bottom of the cenote.

“I already checked. Hunk was right! There’s something down there.” His eyes crossed Keith’s. He immediately averted his gaze, looking instead at the hole in the stone. “Thanks god, the water is shiny, because we don’t have any gear on. Did you ever went scuba diving, or snorkeling or anything?”

“No…” Keith had to admit. Growing up in central areas, he’d never really went to the beach. Even when Shiro and him went abroad, the water had never been a calling, and Keith had always prefered four-wheelers breaks to paddle afternoons.

“Oh my god, I can’t believe this guy. Okay, hum… Just…” Despite being actively swimming up, Lance grabbed a handful of his hair, yanking himself back to reality. “Wait here for a sec’, okay? I’m going to check if this thing is long or not.”
“What about the ‘never stay alone’ rule?” Keith argued.

“Laws don’t apply to Lancey Lance.”

He drew in a breath, locking his eyes with Keith’s. The other sniffed.

Lance took it as a yes, and plunged in the water. Thanks to it being crystal clear, Keith followed Lance’s progression without even trying hard. When his torso disappeared into the hole, a shiver shook Keith’s body.

Entering up to the knees into the underwater tunnel, Lance was taking his time. Keith was growing impatient, chewing his lips out of frustration.

What is he doing? It’s been forty seconds!

Finally, Lance’s head reappeared, and he broke the surface within seconds, a huge smile spread across his cheeks.

“Keith! We’re so lucky! The water level is a little lower than the tunnel’s height, there are some air pockets in there!”

Water shined down on Lance’s face, illuminating his nose. Up on the ceiling, the bioluminescent carving reflected on his hair, aureolating him of a blue halo. His eyes twinkled with joy.

Keith choked on his own saliva.

“Guys, is everything cool?” Hunk’s voice echoed on the walls from the other side of the cenote, where the guy was standing, camera in hand, probably zooming on his friends.

“Ice cold, baby!” Lance answered with a thumb up. Right after Hunk waved back at them, Lance grabbed Keith’s forearm, a burning heat in the icy waters. “I’m going to lead you, okay? I think we can make the first meters by breathing alternatively into the pockets.”
“‘Kay.” Keith wasn’t really thinking about anything besides the hand on his forearm, and he kind of forgot he was struggling to stay above the water.

“Alright, stay with me buddy. Ready ?” Lance began to breathe in, before blinking out of realization. “Oh ! And if something is wrong, press my fingers, okay ?”

“Your…” Keith never finished his sentence, choosing instead to quickly seal his mouth.

Lance’s fingers intertwined with his, and Keith felt air bubbles burst in his ears while Lance dragged him to the depth of the pool, like a siren drowning his pirate mesmerized by his blue eyes.
Phosphorea - or - I can't see you but it doesn't matter

Chapter Summary

Keith and Lance are stuck together, and they don't have shirts. That's all you need to know. Also they kiss...somehow

Chapter Notes

HEHEHE

As Lance dived, taking Keith with him, he laced their fingers together. Keith let out a bigger bubble than he’d wished. Sudden contact tended to do that to him.

Even more… Lance’s.

The water was even colder the lower they went. Keith felt the pressure increase in his ears and his chest was progressively crunched harder. Despite his sealed lips, bubbles escaped his mouth in a continuous flow.

Lance’s hand guided him, and he batted like a dead weight behind him more than he swam. A mere ten seconds later, Lance gripped the edges of the tunnel. Keith watched the entrance before him, a black hole ready to eat him alive.

Lance turned to him and raised a thumb. Keith nodded back.

They pushed on their feet, and Lance first, Keith second, left the brightness of the cenote to enter the passage. Would they have switched realities or took a magic tunnel, Keith would not even be surprised.

Lance seemed to know where to go. His confidence radiated in the water, and Keith only focused on the movement of his hand. There was nowhere else to go anyways.

Hunk, of course, was right. A gentle current was pushing him from behind, helping his body get along. That being said, the waters weren’t nearly as luminous as in the pool, and when his last toe
passed the entrance, he realized the passage was much, much darker than what he thought it would be.

The first air break was easy to reach. Lance dragged Keith with him and after a dozen of seconds navigating in the water, mindful of the scraping rocks all around, they burst through the surface in a great sounds of heavy breathings.

Keith’s chest was expanding and shrinking way too quickly for him to be comfortable. Lance let go off his hand to place it against the tunnel’s roof.

“So ?” An inhale, and exhale. “How did it went ? Want to go back ?” And inhale, and exhale. “Or continue ?”

“I’m fine.” Keith let out in a breath. He knew he wasn’t as peachy as he tried to appear, but he managed to keep his straightest face. No need to say he wasn’t really good at it.

“Okay.” Lance stopped to calm a little. Even if he was incontestably in his element, the cold seemed to have gotten to him. In the faint light, Keith could perceive his lips turning darker.

Lance left the roof to clasp their hands together again, and nodded at Keith, who nodded back.

*Let’s do this.*

Once his head passed under the surface again, Keith felt like he needed to learn everything again. The passage was narrower than before, and thus, darker. Lance was pulling him by the hand with force, his silhouette less and less distinguishable.

Keith could hear a low, dull drum shake his whole body. His heart was beating slowly, the water putting him in sort of stasis. Great news. His chest was getting achy, though.

The second break was further. *Noticeably* further.

Keith hesitated. Was the passage suddenly darker, or was his vision getting dotted more and more ?
His head was going to burst. His lungs were this close of giving up. A large bubble of air escaped. Dizzy mind.

Lance started to pull him up. Keith pushed the water with the last remaining forces he had. Thanks to the physics, his body rose up much faster. His head shattered the surface, and something warm stuck to it.

“OUCH!”

Keith was too occupied swallowing air to realize. The warmth left his head. When his eyes began to function normally, he glanced at Lance, who was licking at the back of his hand.

“What are you… Doing?” Keith huffed.

“Well, figure it out but… The ceiling is much more lower… In this one…” Lance responded, breath cutting his sentence here and there. “I nearly exploded my head on the rocks… I was right to think you would do the same…”

“You… Put your hand… To protect me?”

“If you hit this… Thick skull of yours… Now… We’re never gonna make it.” Lance eluded.

Keith tried to calm his heart the best he could. Lance grabbed his hand once again.

“We should go… The oxygen is a limited… Resource.”

Keith filled his lungs and rounded his cheeks. Lance smiled, and disappeared into the water again.

When Keith opened his eyes under the surface, he thought he had not. It was so dark, nothing was discernible. At least he felt filled up with oxygen. At best, he guessed he had about thirty seconds.
They waddled between the rocks. Keith scraped his knee, and it took him sheer strength to refrain from screaming. Lance’s hips pressed against his torso, pushing him back suddenly.

The passage was narrowing again.

The current was much more stronger now, due to the smaller opening. Keith felt crushed against the stone. Lance’s fingers pressed his own.

*There’s a problem.*

His hand went up and down. Lance was shaking his hand. Keith felt something bubble in his stomach.

*What’s going on.*

He felt fingers slip away from his own.

*Wait!*

Lance was gone. The water passed through his empty hand.

*Don’t leave me there!*

His stomach burned form an acidic anxiety. His throat ached.

*Please! Don’t leave me there!*

The current was pushing him forward. He thrusted away from the stone, surging forward.

*It’s too dark.*
His forehead hit something, hard.

_Please._

He felt something escape his mouth. His head got swarmed over by something warm.

_Please._

His vision dotted in white. In black. All the colors buzzed in his eyes.

He could not feel his body anymore.

And then everything went dark.

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There’s something weird about not being in your brain anymore. Is it floating? It’s a sensation.

Maybe he’s floating. What’s he? There’s no consistency. There’s nothing. And then there is a thing. A light maybe. And it passes.

It’s someone.

Something is a pressure. There is movement. The movement exists within and pressures the existence. What was before the pressure. What was before the movement?

There is no darkness. But there is no light either. There is probably a color, but they are too many to see clearly.

Something is there, something is warm.
The pressure is again. It exists and crushes everything. It wants to annihilate that state of nothingness. Does he want it to let it? Does he want?

Something is warm again and there is something in a body. Maybe it’s his body. He has a brain. He has a body. A shape. A form. He’s lost, but maybe that’s where he is supposed to be.

And then there is movement again. It’s inside. Inside his body, because he has a body now. He exists and he is something, he’s real and he feels the warmth, and the movement. The movement in his body, it’s there. It comes from his throat. His stomach. His lungs.

He wants to breath.

And now he really wants to know. Where is it. Where is he. What is going on… What is he?

Who is he?

And then he scoffs for air, and just like the water inside, his thoughts and his memories flow again, and he remembers.

He’s Keith.

And he was dying.

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“Hhh- Haah! Argh! Ghr, hgh, hah…”

Keith vomited everything he had got inside. The water hurt his throat and his chest, and burnt his lungs, and refused to get out without painfully stinging his insides, but it got out.

He took a gulp of air, and it felt like he was being born again. Same need to cry afterwards, because it hurt like hell. Same need to reach for the warmth nearby, a warmth hanging above his head, a gentle presence.
“Hey there, buddy. Coming back to me?”

Keith only let out a couple of coughs. Tears prickled at the corner of his eyes, but he blinked them away, wrinkling his face to hide the emotions that drowned him. Just like the water did.

“You really hit your head hard, down there.” Lance rested his hand on his thigh. “I’m glad you’re breathing again.”

Keith’s sentience clicked back on, and just like a dam breaking open, everything rushed back in his head.

Allura. Mexico. The statuette. The cave, the tunnel, the cenote, the water, the hole, the passage, the darkness, oh lord, the darkness. And Lance.

They were back into another plain, total, full pitch black zone. Keith could not see a thing. His jean was soggy, glued to his skin. He could feel the air through the holes at the knees. His back was wetting a cold, rough surface. Probably stone. His nails racked on it and traced the edges of puddles around him, until they stumbled over another wet jean.

Lance was… Closer than what he thought…

Keith let out another serie of coughs, each one softer than the precedent. He pushed an elbow back, scraping the skin on the coarse ground, trying to get in a seated position as fast as possible.

Too fast maybe… The top of his head collided with what seemed to be Lance’s chin.

A combined grunt escaped, and Keith heard Lance recoiling.

“Okay, we need to work on your thanking methods…” Lance groaned in the dark.

“Thanks ?” Keith parroted.
“You’re welcome !” Lance chirped back.

“Why should I thank you ?” Keith asked, and his voice dropped low.


“I didn’t know we were keeping scores of who saves who.”

“Of course we were.” Lance seemed too proud for Keith to try to counter him.

Keith rubbed his hands on his head, in an attempt to soothe it, and water dripped down his forearm to crash on his torso. It was cold.

So cold. He felt his skin getting goosebumps, and shivered.

Lance hadn’t said his last words yet. Keith heard a ruffle in a vague distance. “You’re a tough one. I lost a pound of skin to get back to you, that’s gonna scar, and this is payable.”

“You went… Back ? For me ?”

Lance clicked his tongue. His voice didn’t come from the same angle anymore, it reverberated in a different way. The boy had turned his head.

“Duh… Of course I did… Also I reanimated you, so…”

His voice trailed away. Keith felt a wave of embarrassment shower him.

“Like… With the…”

Oh fuck.
“Mh-hm.” Lance probably covered his mouth with his hand, because nothing more escaped his lips.

Keith muffled a pained whine.

They kissed. And he was unconscious.

Well… ‘Kissed’... In a way? Somehow? Their mouth touched so technically it counted… But it did not? Lance reanimated him… Should it count? It was not counting but that was the most intimate contact they’ve ever had though and…

Keith slammed a hand over his face. If he used to be cold, now he was literally burning hot. They surely had found a torch, because his skin could probably lit up in the dark at this point.

_Come on, Keith… You’ve been beaten up by three guys with a bat and drove away from a literal army, you can handle this._

Lance giggled, further in the darkness.

_Okay, but the drug dealers don’t have adorable chuckles, and they don’t halfway kiss you either…_

Lance’s laugh ended in a snort, and Keith heard the distinctive cracking of knees after too long in a seated position. The repetitive pattern of Lance step’s echo came closer, and Keith ignored his dizziness in favor of standing up. Shouldn’t have.

“Wow…” His head went for the left and his heart for the right. Something slipped and Keith knew he was yet again tumbling in an unknown directions, batting in the air for nothing, balance lost and senses in alert. Finally, he managed to grab something to hold on.

“Looks like you’re… Falling for me, heh?”

Lance.
His balance and the floor came back under Keith’s feet, probably set down by Lance.

“Come on. There’s gotta be a path or something.” Lance continued, imperturbable. Like his joke hadn’t plunged Keith into an internal turmoil. God, he was really tired, if this could get to him.

Keith stepped away, cautiously, taking the lead. Anything to put some distance between them.

At first, it felt like he had suddenly turned blind. And then Keith started to notice some things. Shadows. Reflections. The air was salty. And, when he turned back, he could define Lance’s edges, like a silhouette emerging little by little.

He had no idea of the direction he was taking, but he was going there, a hand firmly extended in front of him, in case that direction happened to be a wall’s. The more they walked, the more Keith was convinced they were headed toward the light.

The passage turned abruptly. Keith could now see it, the edges of the cavern cut out on glinting walls behind.

“Can you see that?” Lance asked behind him.

“Yeah. Seems like we’ve reached something.”

Indeed. They passed the wall and once again, Keith felt his heart expand beyond limit upon the view.

The cave had turned into a corridor, lit up by a myriad of crystals, glowing in the dark to show the way. Iridescent colors and reflection were trapped in the glassy stones, yet they all emanated a blueish light that colored the walls, the ground, up to their skin still shiny from the water of the pool.

Keith passed a hand over the cold crystals. The sprinkled rainbows, like forged into ice, looked too familiar to Keith for him not to instinctively breath the name of the stones.
“Fire opals…”

And they blossomed everywhere. Keith entered the corridor, hardly swallowing. The place was magical, in a way the vault could not quite be.

This was all a nature’s miracle. The pressure of thousands of centuries had crushed the rocks to turn them into sculptures of light and colors, hidden to the eye for years and years before once again, their beauty got to be admired.

Keith turned to Lance, who walked behind him.

His eyes wide open, lips curled into a dimpled smile highlighted by the soft glow on his skin, he looked like a piece of the decor, shiny and marvelous. Whatever Keith wanted to say, it got struck in his throat.

Gorgeous.

Lance’s eyes locked with his own.

Ah.

“It’s beautiful!”

Yeah...

Lance turned his palms upward, walking up to Keith, a giddy smile plastered to his face.

Keith had already felt like that, this pure emotion of joy and amazement. Something almost too much, that it made his heart light and heavy at the same time.

One day, Shiro had woken him up too early. They had took the car. Keith had groaned and
complained the whole ride, and he could not even remember where Shiro was taking him. However, he would never forget the moment his brother pulled the brakes and pointed at the sky with excitement, and had ran outside without a word.

Keith had followed him, mildly concerned, half annoyed.

“Can we get a move on already?”

And Shiro had said nothing. He’d only pinched Keith’s nose upwards, making him snort and wrinkle his face at the sensation. Keith had yelled at that, an indignated cry escaping him, caught off guard.

“Shiro, what the heck!”

And then his kid self had opened his eyes on the white clouds above. For the first time in his life, something was falling from the skies and it was not a greasy rain.

“It’s…”

“Welcome to your first snow, Keith.”

The sensation that spilled in his heart, years later, while he walked in the cavern, was very much the same. Exuberant, overflowing, pure joy and childish contentment. It’s pretty, and it makes my heart crazy. That was the sensation.

Lance passed by him. Keith blinked out of his memories back to the present, and followed the boy.

The glow of the rocks seemed to grow brighter and brighter, and the more they walked, the more Keith wanted to stop and stare and stay there forever. The light had soothed his head, pushing back his near drowning experience to the back of his mind, like a cool shower rinsing all of his troubles away.

“I wish Hunk could have seen that.” Lance finally whispered. “He would have loved it.”
“Who wouldn’t?” Keith said.

Lance snorted. “Yeah, if you put it like that.”

After all, the journey was worth the try. Okay, he nearly drowned twice, but still. It was beautiful. Keith felt calmer now. At peace.

His chest bumped into Lance’s back. They had reached the end of the corridor.

“Heh, why did you stop ?!” Keith rubbed his hand over his forehead.

Lance made no sign of moving. Instead, he pointed a finger outward, urging Keith to take a look.

*What the heck is that again.*

The corridor, as beautiful and magical as it was, was not the end of their surprises. In front of them stretched another round cavern. Not quite as romantic as the previous one, but just as fantastic.

The glowing opals were dispatched on the walls, like glitter over a birthday card. In the blue half-light, Keith discerned symbols again, although not on the ceiling, but on the ground. Large carvings, circling all around the room, like a giant mandala engraved in the stone.

“At this rate, if the next thing is a flying castle, I wouldn’t even be surprised.” Lance said.

“You would be.”

“Would not.”

“Wo-... Whatever.”
Lance sniffed.

For some reason, they both hesitated to step up on the carved floor. Maybe some amateur instinct.

Keith breathed in and pushed Lance aside, stomping once on the stone. Unlike the previous ground, this one was much more horizontal and smooth. Whoever had passed by there surely had spent a long time cleaning that.

His other foot joined the first. There. He was on it. Once his first burst of nervousity washed over, Keith walked to the center of the room, unbothered by Lance’s whispers behind him.

So, this was indeed a sacred temple… Or something like that.

Keith stopped. A round, massive carved stone took the center stage, like a jewel on a giant crown of the mountain’s god. He passed a hand over the carvings. Nothing near similar to the previous ones. Those, although incredibly impressive, had a different structure, larger, more… Solid.

“I wouldn’t touch it if I were you.”

Keith jumped, startled by Lance’s voice just above his head.

“Oh, and why so ?” Keith did not like that tone, and it shown.

Lance was absorbed, eyes looking beyond Keith, passing through him like he wasn’t even standing there. He designated the round block, large like a bathtub, high up to their thighs.

“It’s a techcatl.” Lance simply said, as if this was an evidence.

Keith raised an eyebrow.

Lance mimicked him. “What ?”
“You’re acting like it was obvious.”

Lance raised a corner of his mouth. “What? You’re the archeological hunter in Mexico, not me!” He waved a finger at Keith’s nose. “If there’s someone here who’s supposed to know about this, it’s you.”

“You’re majoring in this, Lance. Stop bragging.” Keith folded his arms on his chest, happy to find some warmth against his naked skin.

This guy…

“I’m not bragging! You’re just jealous. And I’m not majoring in archeology, just interested.”

“Whatever makes you feel better, Lance…”

“You’re the worst.” Lance said, shaking his head. He placed a hand on the carved stone. “A techcatl. It’s nahuatl, for human sacrifices. Some kind of altar.”

The stone was decorated by human figures running around all of its sides. Warriors. Lance circled them.

“Actually, it’s more than that. It’s a specific, hum… Rounder… techcatl. A cuauhxicalli. This one is huge, though. I’ve never studied anything like that.” Lance continued. He pointed at the hole in the center of the stone, a dark eye right in the middle of it, and coincidentally, of the room. “This is where we should put the blood, or a heart.”

The silence that followed his phrase chilled them both. It was like temperature had dropped of a dozen of degrees. Keith gulped.

“But. We’re not going to do that, right?” Lance huffed, an embarrassed smile curling his lips.

Keith palmed his chest, as is his body wanted to make sure his organs were still inside. “No, we’re not going to do that, Lance.”
“Cool…”

A comfortable awkwardness settled between them. Keith glanced at every possible direction, the further from Lance the better. His eyes roamed around the cave.

Opals glinted.

“That’s weird.” Keith noted out loud. “There’s no exit.”

Lance turned on his feet. “Yeah. It’s like we’re trapped here.” He passed a hand over the techcatl, nails digging in the curvatures of the sculpted warriors. “You think it’s the end?”

Keith left the center of the room to start pacing around, tempted to bite his nails. Heck, he’d do anything for a cigarette now.

Despite his best efforts, he couldn’t find anything. The cave curved around them, like a giant dome destined to keep them here forever.

He missed the stars.

“No…” Keith refused to believe it. All this trials, all this pain, to end up sacrificed on an altar? Didn’t make any sense. He toured the room again, desperate to find any exit. The opals mocked him, glowing above him, unreachable stars of cosmic light.

“NO !”

His knuckles met the stone in a brutal hit. His other fist joined the first.

“No ! No ! No…”

Keith kept punching the wall until his bruised skin begged for him to stop. Blood had smeared on the rock. He leaned over, resting his forehead on the humid stone.
“He felt his veins pump on his hands, his organism already working to patch him up, once again.

*I was so close.*

“Hey…” A hand landed on his own, warm and gentle. “Come on. I think I got an idea.”

Lance pulled on his closed fist. Keith wrinkled his face, reluctant to move. This was pointless anyways, they’ve made it this far for nothing but a carved altar and a couple of glowing crystals! Shit.

“Keith, come on!” Lance grabbed his wrist, decided to move him out of his crisis. “Stop it, man!”

Despite his lanky, relaxed manners, Lance was a decided guy, when he wanted. He pulled Keith by the forearm and yanked him back to the techcatl, decided to show him the center of the stone by holding his hand above it.

Keith glared at it.

“Now what?”

“Now, you shake your bloody finger over that hole, and we see what happens.” Lance hissed. “And stop brooding already!”

“I’m not brooding!” Keith lied very poorly. “I’m just…”

“Yeah, sure.” Lance deadpanned. “Just do it.”

Keith pressed his lips together.
Here goes nothing…

A faint pearl of blood fell from his hand into the dark hole of the altar.

Shiro had rented Pirate of the Caribbeans, once. Keith had spent the evening waiting for him to come back from a meeting to watch it. The first time he’d seen Will Turner, he’d understood life was much more than what it seemed. The zombie-pirates, the cursed treasure, the adventure! Oh, god, the adventure.

And young Orlando Bloom was just a treasure for the eyes too. He’d followed the adventures of the nice blacksmith with no feigned enthusiasm.

You should start to believe in ghost stories, Miss Swan; you’re living one!

The quote had stayed. But most of all, Keith had never forgotten the gasp he had let escape when Will’s blood had stained the gold. Somehow, the idea that a single drop from a random kid could change a whole destiny, if it happened to fall on the right cursed treasure in the right humid cave, with the right persons around…

You should start to believe in pirate stories, Mister Kogane. You’re living one. Can that work for you too?

Keith closed his eyes and waited for the low beat announcing they had lifted the curse too. Lance was holding both his breath and Keith’s hand, waiting. And they waited.

And waited.

“I think it didn’t work.” Lance announced. Another couple of blood drops had fallen into the altar, and yet, nothing was happening. “Maybe we really need to put a heart in this…”

Keith wiped his hand on his jean. Lance was livid in front of him, eyes wide open.
“We won’t have to.”

Pushing Lance aside, Keith walked to the corridor. He grabbed one of the biggest crystals, placing his hands at the base, and started pulling.

Desperate time, desperate means.

He heard Lance scoff, the echo of his laugh repeating on the walls.

“You’re trying to break that thing?”

Keith clenched his jaw. Sweat dropped on his nose.

“No seriously…” Lance’s voice was closer now. “You’re trying to break it?”

“Yeah… And a little help… Would be welcome…” Keith said through gritted teeth. Deep down, he knew this was useless, but he refused not to try.

Lance placed a feet up the wall. He gripped Keith’s hands, and began to pull too. A grimace contorted his face for seconds.

“Nghh…!”

“Hrgh…”

The boys could feel their muscles heat up with the effort, and yet. Nothing. The opal remained still on the wall, its glow reverberating in their wasted sweat. Finally, Keith gave up, stumbling backwards with the sudden momentum.

“This is stupid.”

Lance glanced at him, and at the stone, and back at Keith. “Well, maybe not. The idea is there, but the method is a bit… Keith-ish.” He forced himself to smile.
Keith shot him a glare.

“This thing is so translucent, it can not be much harder than glass, can it?” Lance said, while grabbing a rock on the floor. In the corridor, the ground was covered in tumbled stone. “Let’s see if this works better.”

With a swift movement, Lance slammed the rock on the opal.

*SHLACK*.

“Fuck!”

The stone had exploded. Well, not exploded, but it definitely had cracked for the most part, and shrapnels had been expedited out of it. Lance sported a long cut all along his forearm, similar to Hunk’s bullet bounce.

It did not took long before blood started to gather at the cut. Lance bit his lip. Keith stared at him.

“You okay?” He asked, out of guilt. And genuine concern, too… A little.

“I’ll live with that, if that’s what you’re asking.” Lance dropped. He raised his foot and placed a hand over the wall for support. “Brace yourself.”

His arm in front of his face for protection, Lance slammed his feet down on the cracked crystal. It resisted to a kick, not two. When Keith reopened his eyes, Lance was juggling with the broken stone.

“Catch it!”

Without a warning, Lance threw the broken crystal to Keith, who managed to catch it *in extremis*. After being used to the smallest opals in his hand, it was quite disappointing to hold such a heavy one.
“Let’s see if this works.” Keith said.

Lance smiled at him. They jogged up to the carved altar, and Keith carefully placed his hand above the entrance of the hole.

“Be careful. It’s fragile now.” Lance pointed out.

Keith glared at the hollow darkness under his hand. Even the glow of the opal wasn’t enlightening it. He passed his hand inside, the lingering fear of getting his hand crushed by whatever was inside still whispering in his head.

When his elbow it the edge of it, Keith dropped the crystal. Not worth losing an arm.

By reflex, he jolted his hand of of the hole. Good thing indeed, because the entrance slammed shut. A second later and his arm was shortened of a hand!

“What the…”

Before Lance could finish his phrase, the clanking of an old machinery resonated at their feet. The ground started to rumble.

“Oh, not again…”

“Lance, to the sides!” Keith yelled, grown from the experience.

Too late. The ground was already moving, preventing Lance from joining Keith at the bottom of the walls. At their feet, the mandala started to move in circles. Lance shrieked, climbing on the techcatl in a desperate attempt to save himself.

Keith’s nails raked over the walls as the sudden rotation of the floor pushed him out of balance. He fell on his knees, unable to stand on the wiggling platforms.
With a deafening noise, the rock was turning around a central axis. The altar. On which Lance was still screaming, adding a high pitched sound to the overall low growl of the structure. Keith hid his face in his shoulders.

In a loud clanking, as abruptly as it had started, everything stopped.

Keith sighed. Lance stood up, still on the platform.

“Well. Looks like it has calmed.” The boy placed a hand on his hip, his free fingers coming to brush at his chin. “Funny… I know these symbols…”

Keith brushed his scraped knees. “Do you?” His breath ragged on his throat. When was the last time he’d drank anything? Oh, yeah, right, when he nearly drowned about half an hour ago.

“Yeah. It’s Aztec.” Lance circled on himself, hands extended in front of him. “This is a giant cuauhxicalli! It’s a giant sun stone!” Lance yelled, his face lit up.

“Great.” Keith shouted. “And now what?”

Lance was an enigma for Keith. As all enigmas, he liked to solve them.

“I think we need to… Move the circles. They’re not aligned correctly.” He pointed at something Keith could not see. “There. The serpent’s tails. They should be in front of me.”

Keith jogged up to the place Lance had designated. At his feet, carved into the stone, huge curves interlaced themselves to form complex designs Keith had yet to decipher. Serpent’s tails.

He looked around. Much like the rest of the cave, the place was just rocks, stone and crystal. Nothing but minerals. How was he supposed to move that?

Placing both hands on the walls, Keith started to push his feet as far as possible, in order to move the huge ring of stone. Needless to say, none of his effort got rewarded. The circle remained still, and Keith stumbled on his knees. He really needed to eat something. Or to drink.
“It’s not… It’s not working !”

“Yes, I see that.” Lance jumped down the altar. “There should be a way, though… I mean, they had to build this ! And it still works ! There must be an hidden mechanism.”

Keith collapsed on the wall. His back collided with the fresh surface and shoved air out of his lungs. Hidden mechanism or not, he needed to drink something. His throat was scorched and raspy. Very displeasing feeling.

“I’m going back to the river.” Keith gathered his forces to stop stumbling and properly walk. Adrenaline was now completely washed out of his body, and the underwater escapade had drained him out of his last forces.

“Okay… What ? Keith ! No ! What if you get lost in the dark or something ?” Lance pleaded.

“I won’t.”

“Are you kidding me ? For all we know, it’s a labyrinth down there !”

Keith groaned. “If I found this place once, I can find it again.”

Lance was having none of it. If they separated now, this was the end. “We have to stay together. We already left Hunk behind, and it’s driving me nuts. No way I let you go like this.”

Keith looked at Lance’s firm grip on his arm, nails nearly piercing his skin.

“I’m going back to the river, and you can’t stop me.” Keith growled as he yanked his arm away from Lance.

The other boy recoiled, surprised. “What ? No, I meant… I’m coming with you.”
As if it was the most natural thing in the world, Lance passed by Keith and paced down the corridor. Keith sniffed, and ran after him.

On the way back, the glowing opals looked far less enchanted, and a little more wicked.

Lance had slowed down as the end of the tunnel. From then on, the cave looked like a dark void. Keith let his eyes accustom themselves the best they could, but even after two minutes, they couldn’t see beyond a couple of feet.

*Very well then.*

Keith stepped back and, imitating Lance earlier, grabbed one of the tumbled rocks at his feet, slicing another opal in half. One hit made do. The sound of dozens of tiny pieces scattering at his feet tingled Keith’s ears. Not one of his proudest moment.

A crystal the size of his flashlight now rested in his hand. It was far lighter than Keith had suspected, and he carelessly threw it to Lance, who yelped at the surprise package. Cutting another one for himself, Keith tried to mentally retrace their steps.

If they wanted to make it back to the river, they really had to play it clever.

Glancing at Lance, Keith stepped past the last gemstone. The blue atmosphere turned to black, and Keith felt his guts and his heart shiver before the call of the void. He wasn’t scared of the dark, per say, but…

“Wow… I’m glad we got these babies…” Lance mumbled.

That was the spirit.

Keith made a few steps on the right, intimately convinced this was their destination. Lance’s breath tingled his hair, the other boy short on his tracks. Understandable. Keith would hate to be alone in there.

Their two stones barely lit the path. If anything, they only prevented Keith from bumping into the
walls. Lance pointed at the ground, his fingers digging in Keith’s wrist.

*When did he…*

His thoughts faded back when he caught them. Tiny blue dots, serpenting on the floor of the cavern. The reflection of the glow in the water left from their first passage worked just like the little lights at the bottoms of plane corridors. The repetitive speech of the stewardess before liftoff ringed back in Keith’s head.

*Please follow the way, and in case of depressurisation of the airplane, oxygen masks will fall automatically.*

Keith made sure to follow the advice, and stuck to the trail with unfailing confidence. Soon enough, Lance’s fingers dug deeper in his skin.

“I can hear it.”

The echo of their steps resonated, and in the faded background, Keith too could hear the faint whispers of the river. It called them.

In unison, the two boys walked faster, eager to reach the entrance.

“Was it that loud before, though?” Keith said.

“Mh-hm… Don’t think so.”

The distant humming of the river had morphed into a massive howl. It filled the air like the anger of a storm and Keith furrowed his brows. Even if he had to admit he was pretty knocked up after emerging in the cavern, he was damn sure he had not heard anything comparable.

“Are you sure we’re on the right way ?!” Lance was practically yelling into his ears.

Keith chewed his lips. Doubt had crippled on him too.
The sound of the water was deafening, now. As if the pool had been replaced by a huge, raging waterfall. Thousands of waves were crashing nearby, and Lance and Keith were caught in the turmoil of their drumming.

“What the heck is THAT ?” Lance was basically screaming into Keith’s ear to cover the noise.

At their feet, thousands of crystals were reflecting themselves in the water, kaleidoscope of their glowing opals, announcing the end of the trail. They had made it to the entrance. But it was nowhere near anything they’d known before.

Keith followed Lance’s finger, pointed over his shoulder at the gigantic source of their audio problems. And, indeed, what the heck was that.

Spinning on its axis, a huge water wheel was getting actionned by the river flowing through it, seemingly throwing itself into the void. Titanic chains linked it to smaller gears -although smaller, when speaking of meters-wide ones, was not the most appropriate.

The ensemble rotated around the wheel, activating a complex mechanism that lost itself into the depth of the cave, the opals merely showing Keith and Lance a fraction of it.

The rumble of the machinery was deafening. Keith clasped a hand on his ear, while Lance nearly stuck his mouth to the other.

“I THINK WE’VE ACTIVATED THAT !”

Keith grimaced. Between the water pounding on the rocks underneath, the metal gratings, Lance’s voice and the thunder of the echoes, he was losing his mind.

He grabbed Lance’s hand too, and ran back to the tunnel.

When the volume finally became supportable, Keith planted his hands on his knees, breath short. Lance passed his hand through the short strands on the back of his neck. None of them dared to start speaking.
After a minute of silently catching their breath, Lance sat at Keith’s feet, juggling with his opal. Keith took a seat next to him, resting his back on the walls of the cavern. Against his skin, the cold, rough stone was grounding, especially after the disorientating experience of the machinery.

“So… What now ?” Lance kept his eyes on the crystals.

Keith glanced at him. They were completely lost in the dark. The only thing allowing him to see Lance was the dancing glow of the opals, shifting every second on his face and tracing his contours in blue light.

Sweat, water, dust and scratches, bruises blooming here and there. Burnt hair curling on itself. Torn jean, with stains undefinable in the dark. Turned-up nose, pointy chin and sharp cut shoulders. Blue eyes, but maybe it was just because of the light…

Keith felt his throat remind him of the reason they went back in the first place. When words left his lips, it felt like he hadn’t slept in five days, and had not drink in ten. The air rasped on his lungs.

“I’m gonna go back, and see where this thing leads.” He croaked. Wow, that hurt.

“Ah, and get crushed in the machinery ? Good one.” Lance said.

Keith frowned at the mockery. “I’m not going to get stuck. This is our better chance, the other road is sealed.”

“I can’t believe this guy…”

“What, you got a better plan maybe ?”

Keith darted his eyes on Lance, who had stopped juggling with the opals.

“The rings did not turn on themselves alone. I bet you a billion dollars it’s that… thing that activates them.”
“What, the water wheel?” Keith deadpanned.

“Yeah that.” Lance waved a hand. “If we can find a way to know which one is linked to the largest ring, we could move it and complete the circle.” He spun the opal on his finger. His eyes gleamed. “They keep repeating this circle pattern. The sun, the solar stone, the wheel. There must be something.”

Keith raised an eyebrow.

“That’s your plan? Going back and using it to our advantage?”

“Well… Yeah…” Lance smirked faintly.

“I guess that could work…” Keith had to admit. In moving waters, keep your head cool. Lance was in his element…

The first one to plop back on his feet happened to be Lance, excitedly holding the opals in both hands. He twirled around, alternatively bringing them close or punching his arms around, mewling as he did so.

Keith furrowed his brows, muzzling his amusement in favor of putting on a face. “What are you doing, exactly?”

“Paow, paow…” Lance turned around. He stuck an opal an inch under Keith’s nose, the other close to his head. “Ha, easy! Dual pistols. And they shoot lasers.”

Keith shoved his hand aside and shook his head. Whatever…

“Let’s get going.”

“Yeah!” Lance skipped past him. “I’ll light the way!”

The caverns started to become familiar enough for them to go on without so much hesitation. Lance
nearly jumped into a wall, but nothing more.

For the whole journey, something had tingled in the back of Keith’s head. Something he could not quite put his finger on, like a memory wanting to resurface but diving back each time Keith tried to take a closer look at it. Weird.

And he was too dry to try to keep up with Lance’s conversation. It wasn’t bothering him, per say, but when the babbling faded to let the thunder of the waterfall take over, Keith felt kind of relieved.

He had not had any human interaction that intense in years, yet alone with someone like Lance.

Thanks to the guy holding up both of the opals, Keith’s hand were free, and he slammed them on his ears before dashing to the river. If the growl of the water wheel was enough to drown everything else, Keith was still dehydrated as hell.

Without taking a second look, he plunged his head in the water and gulped it in long, refreshing sips.

After a minute, a hand shook his shoulder. Keith turned away to see Lance tilting his head toward the wheel. He wiped his mouth and followed him to the machinery.

Yeah, right.

From up close, the noise was even worse than Keith thought, and the dimensions of the engine even greater than what it seemed. Keith realized he could climb on it without even worrying about sagging it. He had no idea if this was a good thing or not. Probably not.

Lance’s eyes were wide with amazement. He lifted his hand to light up the highest points of the machinery, the glow of the crystals enhancing the edges of its parts. Keith discerned a row of gears, arranged from bigger to smaller.

...Six, seven, eight.

The rings.
Without a doubt, those gears were the key. If he could move the bigger one… The larger ring would probably move too.

“Keep your hand up. I gotta reach the upper ones.” Keith said as he stepped on the first spoke.

“What ?!”

Keith didn’t answer.

One foot on the wheel, the other in the air, he felt himself get lifted off the ground. Way faster than anticipated. The links of the chains came up to him. If he could just grab one and… Yes !

Now Keith was dragged by the chain, solely held by the force of his two arms.

Try not to think about letting go… Don’t look down, there’s nothing to see anyways.

One of the gears was getting closer. It was not spinning, contrary to what Keith had anticipated. He extended his foot, balancing on the chain. His toes rested on a crest, but before Keith could step properly on it, the push sent the gear rolling.

Shit.

He had less than a meter now.

Well, here goes nothing.

Waiting until the very last second, Keith let go off the chains and launched himself in the air. He landed on the gear with a ‘oof’ and a well founded doubt about his own sanity. A yelp came to his ears, but maybe that was just the metal squealing. Maybe Lance was also throwing a bunch of things at him too.

From the sound of it, not compliments.
Keith gulped. He’d landed in the middle of the row. On his right, the tiniest ones, and on his left, the size of the cogwheels kept increasing. Keith slowly moved to this side, careful not to spin the gear again.

He extended an arm toward the nearest spoke. His fingers barely grazed it. If he wanted to get there, he would need to let go his own bar. Great.

Lance seemed to have come to the same conclusion, because the flow of the waterfall wasn’t even covering his yells anymore.

Keith couldn’t discern the words, but he got the idea pretty well.

*It’s just a jump, five meters above the ground, in the near dark, on a very, very old wheel that could break at any second. No need to panic.*

Keith gathered everything he had left of courage and pushed on his feet. For an instant, his body levitated. His heart pounded in his chest, and for a split second, Keith really thought he had miscalculated the risk.

When the stoke scratched his fingers, he opened eyes he didn’t remember to even have closed. The water seemed to pound even louder on the rocks.

Reaching the third gear appeared to be just as easy as the second. By easy, it meant highly and deadly dangerous, but Keith felt the needle of adrenaline inject him more and more forces by the second, pumping directly into his veins.

Another jump, another serie of high-pitched screams from Lance, and Keith was finally on the last cogwheel. He climbed to the top of it, and secured his position the best he could before taking a break.

Down there, Lance was waving the opals to catch his attention.

Keith breathed in.
“WHAT ?!” He roared, hurting himself in the process. He coughed.

“What ARE YOU DOING ?!” Lance screamed equally loud. Good thing they had moved away from the waterfall because Keith was more reading on lips than anything by now.

“I’M ! GOING ! TO SPIN ! THE GEAR !”

“WHY ?!”

Keith cleared his throat. This one was going to hurt.

“TO MOVE ! THE LARGE ! RING ! IN THE CAVE !”

“What ?!”

Lance had no way to see him, probably, and couldn’t read him as easily as Keith was.

This is a nightmare.

Keith missed their talkies.

“RING ! MOVE ! GEAR !”

“No !”

What?

“What ?!”
“...” Lance muttered something to himself, and started pacing in the opposite direction to Keith. He waved his arms as far as he could to the other side of the gears. “SMALLEST ONE! BIG RING!”

Smallest one, big ring, what the fu- Oh wait.

If Keith had had any free hand right now, he would have slapped himself.

Years of mechanic fixing, and you forgot about the basics. Fucking genius, right?

Basic gear logic. If the biggest cog made a complete turn, depending on the proportions, the smallest would spin more than once. Up to, if needed, eight turns. For eight rings.

Simple math.

The solar stone rings had turned all at once despite clearly being different pieces. That obviously pointed to them being tied to different gears, and the slower one needed to be the central piece, as its rotation was much smaller than the largest ring, who would need to rotate more.

Thus, the larger the gear, the smaller the ring.

And Keith had forgotten.

For his defense, he was balancing five meters above a monstrously dark cavern, and he hadn’t slept in days. He saw a big circle, he associated it with a big circle, boom, done. He looked down at Lance, whose hands were on his hips now, waiting for an answer. Keith held up a thumb.

Got it.

He looked behind him, the row of seven gears separated by just enough to make him inevitably launch himself in the void, in hope nothing would break underneath his weight. And he had to go all, all back, to the furthest end.

Hunk was damn right, mondays sucked.
Moving his foot up the next stoke, and hauling himself up, Keith gritted his teeth. His ankle was severely reminding him he wasn’t fully operational. Another stoke, and another traction, and Keith was at the top of the cogwheel.

“Don’t give up on me, now, okay…” He had no idea if he was talking to himself, his ankle, Lance or the gear, which was weirdly too easy on him since he got there.

In a push, Keith finally dragged himself at the top of the wheel. A bad footing and the thing would spin around, and roll him down in the abyss. Great. He was walking on the outer part now. Lance’s opals weren’t even lighting a thing anymore.

The thunder of the water mixed itself with the pounding of his bloodstream, doped with anything it could. The come down from that high on adrenaline was going to knock him up, so he better make things count now.

On three… One… Two.

And he jumped on the next gear.

His foot knocked on the hard surface. Sweet! He’d made it.

As soon as a smile started to creep up on his face, Keith felt his body get dragged down. Moved by the sudden weight, the second gear had started to spin. Pushed by the momentum, the thing started to gain speed.

Keith was faster.

He jumped on the third cog with the same result. His ankle nearly snapped when it hit the edge of a crest, but he choked back his tears and leaped on the next one, and the next one, and the next one.
Everytime he pushed a cog, he would feel the wheel spin and clank, gaining velocity. By the sixth gear, a cacophony of clunking and creaking was playing behind him. All the gears were in motion.

The size of the gears was progressively getting smaller and smaller. He managed to reach the seventh wheel, but the thing was smaller than him, now.

*One more, just one mo-*

A centuries old machinery, especially when treated roughly, had tendencies to whim and let go at the worst moments, that’s common knowledge.

The gear brusquely went down. No warnings. Keith felt gravity give up on him.

*Shit!*

Down on the ground, Lance shouted something.

Reflex. Keith pushed, hoping to grab anything to lift him.

*The stoke! Come on!*

His hand sprung away. Hit and miss, he did not even brushed it. Dragged by the fall of the cogwheel going down, Keith felt his heart bubble up in his throat.

*This is how I die.*

Not yet.

To actually have an impact on the machinery, the cogs had to be linked to something… Luckily for Keith, the links were chains, strapped to the rest of the wheels. Around three meters of free fall later, they yanked the gear back up, and Keith bounced in the air, gripping the thing, and holding on for dear life.
When things stopped moving, settled, Keith made a mental sum up.

He was hugging a metal gear solidly, balancing in the air, and held up by two chains linked to a giant, ancient mechanism destined to spin rings of a carved stone the size of a tennis court.

“Everything alright ?!” Lance yelled over the waterfall, but not nearly as loud as before. His head was only a meter down. If Keith had wanted, he could have stroked his hair.

He kinda wanted.

“I thin-OW !”

The machinery hiccuped, and bounced again. The chains clinked and tinkled. It was like a christmas song, and the gift was getting crushed under two tons of gold. For once, Keith wished he really was on Santa’s naughty list.

“Hurry up, man ! This thing is NOT going to hold long !” Lance shouted.

Keith reached for the chains. Their fastening disappeared into the dark.

*Let’s just pray this will hold.*

He started dragging himself up, the gold slippery under his gloves. The first half went by quite easily.

*Come on. Come on, just a little longer…*

The last gear was a meter away now. Just a little more and…

Pebbles rained on his hair.
“Keith…”

He felt the chain tremble between his legs.

“Keith!”

Lance’s scream got covered by the rumble of something detaching from upper. The chain loosened up in his hand.

Too bad for hesitating. Once again, Keith bit his lip and hoped for the best -or at least, the not worst- while he threw himself at the eighth gear.

Something brushed past his head in a whoosh of air and Keith heard it crash and smash on the ground. The sound of crackling metal followed, and then, nothing.

Keith made a mental checknote of his own body. His feet dangled under him. He contracted his biceps.

Yep, he’d made it. He was alive.

After nearly crashing a dozen times, and globally destroying a treasure of ancient technology, he’d finally reached the eighth gear. And strangely, it did not start spinning like crazy like the others. Keith wiggled his arms. Nothing.

*It’s stuck. The offering was the only trial. This thing is just stuck.*

He passed on the side of the gear, gripping the crests of the cog to haul himself again. His abs cried despair and his arms threatened to give up under his weight. God, he really was tired.

The gear stayed in place.
“IT’S STUCK !” Keith yelled to Lance. The boy had been weirdly silent for the past minutes.

Oh no. He was underneath me, what if the rock-

“LANCE ?!” Keith felt his breath get stuck in his throat. Not now. Not this far. “LANCE ! LANCE ANSWER ME ! LA-”

“ALRIGHT ALRIGHT ! WHAT’S GOING ON ?”

Thank god.

“IT’S STUCK !”

“SO WHAT ?” Lance shouted back.

The waterfall was right under them, Keith’s ankles refreshed by the splashings of the water wheel. He breathed in.

So what ? So what ?! Well fuck if I know what.

“UNSTUCK IT !”

“Great advice, Lance…” Keith muttered. Easier said than done, he wasn’t the one hanging above a five meters high waterfall clutched to a single gold chain barely tied to the ceiling !

He reached up again. There had to be something… In the dark, it was hard to tell. He felt around, trying to see with his hands if anything unusual… There ! A rock. Probably detached from the ceiling, a stone the size of his head was jamming the whole gear.

“Stupid… Pebble… Ngh!” Keith groaned, pulling on the stone. It unlocked itself in a click, and fell forever into the depth of the waterfall.
Keith did not even heard it splash the surface.

*Here we go.*

He cocked a smile at the cavern. Take that, huh !

His celebration lasted around two seconds. Finally free, the gear did what every other gear had always done when Keith climbed on them.

It spun.

“AH ! FUCK !”

Keith lost his balance. His feet tripped on the wet metal, and sent him spinning with the wheel.

“LANCE !”

His only handle on the mechanism was his hand grasping one of the bars now. The metal creaked.

His legs were getting soaked by the water, suddenly much, much closer.

“LANCE !” Keith screamed at the top of his lungs. He spotted the guy tip toeing the edge of the hole, in which the river was pouring after its trip through the water wheel.

“JUMP IN MY ARMS !”

Keith considered for a second the offer, but came back to reality as quickly as he left it. If Lance tripped, they would both fall into the pit.

“NO !”
“WHY NOT ?”

Even in situations like this, this guy had to bargain!

“Just… Argh ! JUST LISTEN TO ME ! THROW A CRYSTAL IN THE RIVER !”

For once, Lance grasped the energy of the situation. Emergency dripped from Keith’s voice, after all. Lance obeyed.

Keith watched the arc of the glow of the stone, as it went up and promptly, fell down into the hole, sinking into the water.

*That’s at least a six meters fall…*

The opal sank deeper and deeper, reduced to a single spot of light in the dark pool. The water was deep enough for it to disappear almost completely, and soon enough the turmoils of the river hid it away from Keith’s eyes.

*Just focus on being rigid.*

His hand began to slip on the metal. The humidity and the soreness of his arm was getting the best of him.

*Don’t let your head out of the trajectory.*

A summer spent jumping in rivers bubbled up in Keith’s mind, images rushing in his head like the water pounding down the waterfall. He focused solely on the advices Shiro had yelled at him from the river, while he was chewing his lips in fear and anticipation at the top of the highest rock.

*Feet in the front.*
The metal creaked and jolted. He felt two finger slip up again.

*Just jump, Keith!*

He let go.

*See! I told you you could do it!*

Another fall. Another feeling of being suspended for everything else.

And then the shock of the surface.

The cold crashed his mind down. Despite having experienced it a first time tonight, Keith lost his breath again upon entering the water. From this height, liquid mixed up with solid. Liters and liters poured down on his head, preventing him from reaching the surface. His vision was completely blacked down.

*Where’s the surface?*

His legs had hit the surface first and were still sore from the shock, completely useless. His right arm had held him for so long that he could not move it anymore. The current was spinning him around and around. A ragdoll in the storm.

*Static noise.*

Everytime his head finally broke the surface, Keith could only open his mouth and get dragged down again, inhaling water instead of air. The constant movement was messing with his head… Was the surface above or below?

*Where was the air?*

*I need to breath.*
Something crashed in. Something blue. Something glowing.

An opal.

*This idiot-*

Keith, at the cost of an inhuman effort, surged his hand for the crystal, and by the occasion, Lance’s wrist.

Dragged up by the other, Keith gargled all the water in his system out. Lance was balancing Keith on his arm. The edge of the pool was only a meter above his head, and the current was washing his hair out of his eyes.

“Okay, on three!” Lance pressed his fingers, once, twice…

Keith batted the water with all his energy, while Lance, slowly but surely, pulled him out of the water. Once more than half of his body was out, Keith somehow recovered, and reached for the stones.

His nails ripped on the border, but he grabbed it nonetheless, and in a last exertion, they brought him back on the safe shore. Finally, his feet touched the cold, firm stone.

*Land.*

“And here you go-” Lance fell on his ass, visibly K.O.

Keith spreaded on the floor next to Lance, equally exhausted. He felt his chest rise and fall, and rise again, and he breathed the air of the cavern like a life potion… Which was not so far from the truth.

For about, say, ten seconds, Keith thought it was finally over, that he was safe and that the only thing they needed to do now was to peacefully stroll back to the solar stone and unlock the door to the treasure. From there, they would gently go back to Hunk and then to the Jeep and all three of them
would be celebrating by the next three hours in a nice road station with some hot coffee and, dear lord, a cigarette.

The eleventh second, something above them clanked, and the unmistakable sound of stone breaking rang up to their ears.

Lance whined. “Really?”

“Let’s not… Stay here.” Keith said. His breath was still short, but they really had to get out of there. And fast.

Lance dusted his knees, the last opal in hand. Something prickled down from the ceiling, dust and pebbles bounced on his hair. Keith peered at the vault.

“I don’t think it liked your little monkey tricks…” Lance toned.

“No kidding…”

Metal cracked louder, and the ringings of chains falling down resonated like bells of the afternoon. Keith squinted even more.

There’s something…

“LANCE ! DOWN !”

Before Lance even realised, Keith had tackled him to the ground, falling flat on him. A huge mass whooshed past them, the air brushing his hair out of his nose. The rest of the machinery rumbled.

Like an old god troubled in his slumber, the water wheel moved out of its axis, percuting another gear and sending splashes all over. The mechanisms screamed, angry warriors chanting the wake of their king.

Lance tripped over the wet floor.
“Come on! Let’s go!” A voice in the dark.

Keith was already up, a few steps ahead. Lance’s feet slipped on the puddles.

“I’m trying!”

Keith groaned and reached for his hand, before sprinting again. Lance had troubles following, tripping over rocks and stones appearing out of nowhere on his path. Keith squeezed his hand harder.

The ceiling was disintegrating over their heads, pieces of metal and gold fusing randomly past them. If the noise of the waterfall was loud, this was definitely ten times worse, now. The entire universe seemed to be roaring after them.

Lance saw Keith mouth something at him, but he could not even hear himself think.

Dust was rising up and up, flooding the path in it’s dry darkness, hurting their lungs and calling for tears in their eyes.

The ground was trembling. Every step was a bet to not impale their feet on a rock, and every second a struggle to keep balance. Lance’s nails dug into Keith’s palms a little further every time he tripped on something he could not see.

I have to…

Keith spun around and yanked Lance’s opal out of his hand. Lance plastered his fingers over his mouth, coughing between every breath.

The roar of the mountain was reaching above anything Keith had ever witnessed. His vision was darkening around the edges, the glow of the crystal merely lighting a cloud of dust in front of him.

His body was begging for mercy, his damp hair freezing his neck while fire burned into his lungs.
Despite nearly drowning a second time, his mouth was dry, and he was pretty sure he was losing blood from a thousands of cuts.

*This mess better be over soon, or we will be.*

Avoiding a rock falling on the path, Keith tripped on the ground and slammed into the wall, scratching his side. Air got ejected out of his chest. He gritted his teeth. Lance’s nails were probably digging for blood at this point.

*Come on, come on…!*

The thunder of the stone rolled over their head. It felt like running away from the wolves, if the wolves happened to be fifteen meters tall and hungry for years.

*It can’t be that far!*

Keith weighed up the opal in his hand.

*Last chance it is.*

He threw it like a base-ball, the crystal shooting by into the dust like a distress flare.

Keith followed it. The dust was denser than water now. A river of tears streamed down his cheeks, trying to make up for both the pain and the dryness. Around them, the atmosphere was tinting itself in blue.

*The corridor!*

They hurtled in the passage with an explosion of rocks, dust and noise, like two rabbits running away from the truck.

As they ran, the air became progressively breathable, and when Keith turned around, halfway through it, he witnessed the last massive rocks tumbling down the ceiling, and block forever the
entrance with their massive presence. Like a switch turned off, the mountain became silent.

Keith’s eyes were still stuck on the closed gate when the buzzing in his ears brought him back to reality. Lance was hunched over, leaning on a crystal, head low. His shoulders shuddered.

Breathe in, breathe out. It’s okay, Keith.

Lance was laughing. Keith couldn’t hear him because of the ringing in his head, but he could see it. Lance was crying from laughter, tears running down his face and knuckles white.

Something bubbled into his own chest.

The buzz fainted in the background, fading to leave the stage for nervous laughter and heavy breathing.

In a common, silent accord, they both dropped to the ground. Lance’s head fell back to rest on the opals, letting him laugh heartily all his content. Keith rested his forehead on his arm, knees up for support.

They stayed there until the remaining dust settled.

“Ah, I hate you.” Lance laughed. “You and your crappy plans.”

“Me neither.” Keith scoffed back.

“I think I lost my soles.” Lance poked at his toes. “I’m never running ever again, like, ever.”

Keith shot him a glance. Bruises, burns, scratches and scrapes apart, the boy looked fine. If he was still complaining, then things were good.

Lance caught his gaze and clicked his tongue, bobbing his head back at Keith.
“You good?”

“I’ve been better…”

Keith wasn’t lying. He had never been worse. His ankle had took all the shock from the jump, and running full speed right after had never been a good healing tip. His intempestive hug with the cavern walls had ruined his side. He was pretty sure he had at least one rib reduced to crumbs again after that, and that would be the better scenario.

No really, all in all, Keith was in the worst shape he’d ever had the displeasure to be in.

“Mh…” Lance did not seem convinced.

“I’ll live, if you’re that worried.”

“I’m not worried!” Lance protested. Like Keith would care, anyways… “I just wanted to make sure I wouldn’t need to carry you, that’s all.”

Keith didn’t answer. He averted his eyes and lost himself in the contemplation of the opals instead, the multicolor hues lulling his brain. After the incessant chases and runs and dives, a minute of silence was welcomed. By his side, Lance’s skin radiated warmth.

He risked a glance at the guy. So did the other, apparently, because their gazes met.

“Oh.”

“Hey.” Lance immediately batted his eyelashes, comically leaning on Keith to dissipate the awkwardness as soon as possible. “Come here often?”

Keith stared at Lance wide-eyed. “Do I- Huh, no?! Do you ?!” His offended tone pulled a chuckle out of Lance.

“Do I? Well, with you around, why not…”
Keith furrowed his brows so hard a wrinkle creased itself between them. Lance tried to remain calm, and failed miserably, exploding into laughter. Keith joined him shortly. The echo of their laughs resonated against the rocks.

“Ah, it’s good to let it out, right?” Lance asked, his eyes smiling.

“Yeah, I guess it is.” Keith fumbled with his brain, trying to untangle the mix of emotions that spurted out of him the second Lance decided to mess with his mind. Was that flirting or joking?

“So, what drove you by, Cowboy?”

Ah, the nicknames. Been a while. Keith pushed his head back, eyes gluing themselves to the ceiling pensively.

“If I say ‘the explosion of a millenia old mechanism’, does that satisfy you or do I need to develop?”

Lance didn’t miss his chance. “I have no idea what you mean! Go on, develop!”

“Hurh-” Keith let out an exasperated groan. He complied nonetheless. “I was followed by a bunch of mercenaries, ended up at the cave, we fell in a cenote and arrived here. Then we crashed the mechanism and ran back from the river. There, happy?”

Lance crooked a smile. “Mh-hm. Nope.”

“Oh my god! Okay, fine! You want the whole story? There, here it is!” Keith barked. Lance sat back against his opal wall. “When I was ten, I was entrusted to an orphanage. I went to military school and graduated there, barely even going to classes and spent half of my time driving at night.”

“I was a terrible student and went to the headmaster’s more than you can imagine. I picked fight with guys three times my size or my age or both! And one day, I tried to steal that guy’s wallet. No big deal, he wasn’t looking, he’d already downed like three tall glasses, it was supposed to be easy peasy.”
“I was like, sixteen. I hadn’t had the thing in my pockets for two minutes, his arm was already on my hand. He tutted at me and asked for his stuff back. I was… Terrified, but also ready to fight. I wasn’t afraid of the police, but I didn’t want to…”

Lance looked at Keith through lidded eyelashes. His lips moved continuously, like the stream if the river, and everything was exploding, gently, in the blue glow of the opals.

“I felt stupidly bad, not because I had stolen something, hah, but because, he’d caught me. And then…” Keith paused. Lance nudged his finger in his thigh, pressing him to continue. “Then he introduced himself. I will never forget it. He said, ‘Takashi Shirogane, former Tokushusakusengun member.’ and he shook my hand. At this time, I had no idea what that meant for me.”

Keith noticed Lance’s half smile and realized he was probably looking like an old man telling stories. “Anyways…” He shifted his position, embarrassed. “He taught me a bunch of stuff…”

“Like illegal smuggling and grave robbing ?”

“What ? No, it wasn’t like that ! We mostly investigated sites and archeological places. We robbed the owners of the places. Shiro scammed most of them in investing in fake agencies and ruined them, or we just basically took back the items directly from the museums or the private collections.” Keith shook his head. “It was mostly fake paintings and rigged auctions though.”

“He taught you how to shoot.” Lance pointed out.

“Yeah, but you knew how to fire a rifle so it doesn’t count !”

“Hah, sure, but that’s not the same. I learned at laser tag and intense Nerf afternoons.” Lance waved his hand. “I’ve only fired a real gun like, twice.”

Keith shrugged. “I wasn’t allowed to use it, but he wanted me to know. Anyways. Shiro and I did a bunch of things in two years. I sold a fake Monet for three millions.”

“Are for real ?!” Lance jumped on his seat.
“Yeah! And… About a year ago… He flew off for an affair. I didn’t know the details, but it was huge.” Keith lowered his head, sinking between his shoulders. “He never came back.”

Lance’s mouth stopped running. His hand hovered over Keith’s shoulder. “I’m…”

Keith shook his head. “I spent the last year searching for him. I drove in all London, and I got a job, at this bar… I couldn’t sleep. I had lost… My brother? In a way. He was a father figure in some ways, but honestly, he was the brother I never had. He used to guide me and when I needed him the most, he vanished…”

Lance landed his hand on Keith’s biceps. “That’s rough buddy.”

“But I don’t care. I’ve got a lead.” Keith turned to Lance, a fire in his eyes. “Allura, a… woman, I don’t know… She came by a week ago, in London. She had a picture, from a journal.”

“The archaeologist’s?” Lance interrupted. Keith blocked, and suddenly remembered he had given his notebook to Lance, back in the van. Oh what wouldn’t he give to be back in the van.

“Yes, that one. Shiro is on it, I’m sure of it. And I can’t help but feel… This statuette, Allura, Shiro… It’s gonna make sense, but I don’t know how yet.” Keith furrowed his brows, focused on something beyond his eyes. “I know it.”

Lance shot him a smile.

“That’s why I have to find this thing. Whatever it takes, I can’t give up, because somewhere, there’s my brother.” Keith looked decided, his fists closing themselves on his determination.

“That’s dope, dude.” Lance couldn’t think of anything spirited. “You’re gonna find him. We’re gonna find your brother.”

Keith stood up, pulling Lance with him.

“Then let’s go.”
End Notes

Heeeey ! Welcome to the end of the first chapter, finally online ! It's gonna be edited a little (add some pics maybe) !

Tell me what you thought of it !

And since it's the launching of the fic, the 2d chapter -you'll actually see Lance and Hunk, and everyone in this one !- is only in 2 days :D

Have a nice day !

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